

Reaction paper 1

American society places a high value, indeed a premium, on competence. This value is tied into another American value – proof of competency. In the United States to merely claim, and even demonstrate, one's competency is not enough, one must possess proper credentials. Jesus Christ was a healer but in the United States today he would be prosecuted as a quack, his spiritual message notwithstanding. Louis Pasteur developed the germ theory of disease but today his findings would be challenged on the grounds that he was “only” a microbiologist and not a medical doctor. The Wright Brothers constructed the first operational airplane but today their work would be marginalized and probably co-opted because they were bicycle mechanics, and not engineers.

In American society, lack of proper credentials, duly issued, certified and approved by competent legal, educational and political authority, means lack of competence and cause for society to deny recognition of said competence along with the status and power that such recognition affords. Since possessing proper credentials is critical for facilitating upward social mobility, the process for obtaining credentials has become politicized, creating a meritocracy which is a sham. Who gets selected for entry is based not on what you know, but on who you know inside the “in” group whose prime interest is to perpetuate itself and its power. The result has been the emergence of a smug and insulated social elite, propped up and protected by money, which has become entrenched in the social fabric of the country and uses its influence to corrupt the democratic process.

This meritocracy is evidence of what Talcott Parsons describes as the “new pattern of stratification (212).” What are its implications for the future of American society? Can American society maintain its social cohesion or will the gulf separating the “meritorious” from everyone else widen to the point that the fabric of society unravels?

If it does unravel then how would the US government react? Charles Tilly writes, “In most of the world, the activity of states has created startling contrast between the violence of the state’s sphere and the relative non-violence of civilian life away from the state (68). Will the US government one day need to employ state-sponsored violence against its own constituency to preserve the unity of the nation? Perhaps such an outcome seems farfetched, but it would not be unprecedented. One hundred fifty four years ago, when the country fractured along political lines, the US government reacted with, at the time, unprecedented force to preserve the political unity of the nation. In terms of lives lost and damage inflicted, the results were catastrophic. Is there any reason to believe that, if sufficiently provoked, the US government would not employ such violence again?

Reaction paper 2

During a discussion in class on February 17, 2015, concerning the viability of comparing Hitler and Stalin, I informed the class that I had written a thesis comparing Hitler and Stalin. When asked about my findings, I said I had concluded that both Hitler and Stalin were nasty. That one single word, which to me succinctly and accurately summed up the personalities and careers of both men, may have sounded like a trite and ridiculously simple understatement, a cliché unworthy of serious consideration, but it was the truth.

So why investigate and analyze what seems to be a moot point? Two reasons: first, comparing Hitler and Stalin is a legitimate area for historical and social research; and second, to call attention to the violent nature of both men and their respective regimes. Just as there are those who may not fully appreciate or even be aware of the significance of, for example, the date May 8, 1945, the date Nazi Germany formally surrendered ending the war in Europe, there are those who may not fully appreciate or even be aware that Hitler and Stalin were in fact nasty men. Indeed, there are those who may sincerely believe that Hitler and Stalin, far from being nasty, were actually good (or at least not all that bad), their excesses overstated and careers, if not unblemished, misinterpreted.

Yes, Hitler and Stalin were nasty men. Researching their respective careers confirmed that conclusion. Yet it also gave reason to wonder what societal features Germany and Russia shared that would cause them to repudiate their respective liberal democratic forms of government (the word “liberal” used in the generic meaning of the word), flawed though they were, in favor of especially repressive totalitarian models.

Reaction paper 3

In reference to certain comments that were made in the March 3, 2015 class equating military service to a 9-to-5 job, please permit me to share certain thoughts I have on the subject. Military service is not the same as working a "nine-to-five" job (the term "nine-to-five" meaning civilian). To compare the two is like trying to compare not apples and oranges but oil and water. Both are liquids, but that's where the similarity ends.

Military service is unique. It has its own code of justice and its own medical care system, unique to it alone, and is vested with a responsibility also unique to it: to defend the country through the use of armed force, which as Tilly discusses, is the monopoly of the state. Thus, the military is a projection of state power in the international arena. The civilian sector can produce the logistical resources necessary to create and strengthen a nation's national defense, but it is the military alone that is vested with the responsibility for using those logistical resources in a manner in which commercial considerations do not play a part, and which require personnel specially trained and available around-the-clock to operate in a manner that will ensure victory. This may necessitate personnel having to work according to schedules that do not conform with civilian rules and regulations. A factory may manufacture a million rifles, but it requires specially trained personnel, called soldiers, to operate those rifles, and do so at times, in locations, and under circumstances that may violate civilian rules and regulations, hence the need for a separate code of regulations applicable to soldiers.

What does this mean in terms of furthering our understanding of social processes? It means this: You can't judge a social system by its structure. Its place in the social scheme of a society can be ascertained only by understanding its purpose. The US Army and the Waffen-SS had similar organizational tables, yet the former is a defense force while the latter was a militarized political police force. A B-52 bomber and a Boeing 747 are both aircraft, yet the former is a weapon while the latter essentially a flying bus.

Thus, although the civilian (by which I mean commercial) and military sectors may share certain similar structural features, it is in the nature of their respective organizational goals that differences emerge. For the civilian sector, the goal is profit; for the military it is the application of force, no matter what the cost, to achieve tactical and strategic objectives. During World War Two American industry produced military weapons at a prodigious rate and quantity that today is legendary. Yet it required a vast military organization, also equally legendary today, to use those weapons according to rules and regulations that went way beyond the "nine-to-five" paradigm.

Reaction paper 4

Culture of violence. What does that term mean? It means a culture in which violence is a normal feature of social interaction and which routinely occurs on a consistent basis. It means a culture in which conflict resolution is achieved (or imposed) through non-pacific means. It means a culture that places a premium on war over peace, on intolerance over tolerance, and on confrontation over compromise.

Then the question arises: does the United States have a culture of violence? The answer is: no. A preoccupation with violence? Yes. A fascination with violence? Yes. An Obsession with violence? Yes. But being preoccupied with, fascinated by and obsessed with violence is not the same as actually being violent. Americans, as a rule, do not use violence as a method for resolving conflicts and when they do, such behavior is subject to severe legal sanctions.

What the United States does have, however, is a culture that is vicariously violent. Instead of acting on their violent impulses, Americans displace their violent urges onto others duly authorized to act on, or simulate, those impulses. This displacement is necessary to maintain social stability. Without it, American society would disintegrate. Hence, American society has created institutions, such as the military, sports, and theater (and its modern derivatives movies, television, and the internet) through which violent wishes can metaphorically be actuated in ways that render it controllable, useful, and profitable, and, most importantly, emotionally gratifying to the public, while simultaneously preserving the veneer of civilization that enables the society to function.¹

Norbert Elias is correct in his description of the relationship between social environment and personality development (408-410). The id, ego and superego do not develop in isolation. Just as environmental factors can effect physical growth, either

¹ An army engaged in combat is a social manifestation of the collective violence of the society for which it is fighting.

positively or negatively, so too can social forces assert an equally profound effect on psychological development including behavior.

Social conditioning starts immediately after birth (and maybe while *in utero*). We are taught to repress our violent impulses and defer gratification so as to enable us to function cooperatively within a social context. But repression of violence urges does not mean its extinction. The violence is still inside of us; it is merely internalized.

When social conditions destabilize, cracks form in our psychological make-up allowing the violence to emerge. The ego and super-ego fragment, giving the id, now released and wildly enflamed, free reign.² Efforts at blunting the violence through displacement become futile and what we call “civilization” fails. Civil rules of conduct are swept aside and violence, heretofore repressed and only vicariously experienced, becomes, at least for the time being (which can last for years and even decades), the norm.

With violence now unrestrained, social structures such as concentration camps, detention centers, peoples’ courts, troikas, ghettos, gulags, posses, lynch mobs, private self-defense forces, street gangs, vigilante committees, *Einsatzgruppen*, public safety committees, and other ad-hoc, pseudo-legal, and arbitrarily contrived social instruments of coercive control emerge and, employing half-baked ideologies that rationalize the need for violence, claim political legitimacy, thus cynically cloaking their brutality and terror in a mantle of civility (which, of course, is the ultimate sham). Only after the violence is spent can civilizing forces re-impose control, but by that time the damage has been done: society is in shambles, its institutions discredited, its structure torn asunder, its ideology trashed, and its victims mourned (if they are remembered). All that remains is to clean up the mess and start over again.

² Although instinctually based, the strength of the id is far from being a fixed quantity and its manifestation can vary greatly in intensity.

