

Analyse and discuss
the concept of
structural violence
politics essay



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to what extent it explains international conflicts. Although “ structural violence” does lead to conflict, it has had minimal effect on international conflicts. Structural violence has been a major factor in numerous internal or regional conflicts. The genocide in Rwanda and the Maoists Movement in Nepal are examples of structural violence that has led to an internal conflict. Another example is the Chinese suppression of the Tibetan peoples. Any attempts by the Tibetans to protest or challenge the rule of the Chinese in an attempt to gain independence from Chinese rule is met with swift violent retaliation. (Walsh, J. 2007) The two truly international conflicts were not started by a system of structured violence, but by deliberate planned actions of countries and their leaders to go to war. As a result of these wars systems were put in place that were structural and designed to suppress and repress social groups as well as the wholesale murder of people. Although conflicts between neighboring countries are considered international conflicts, I have classified these as regional conflicts and used the First and Second World wars as examples of truly international conflicts.

Structural violence was a term first banded around in the 1960s by liberation theologians and in particular by Johan Galtung, who used it to describe social, economic, political, legal, religious and cultural structures that stop individuals, groups and societies from reaching their full potential. (Farmer, P, 2006) Staugstad goes further when he explains that “ Structural violence is violence that does not hurt or kill through fists or guns or nuclear bombs, but through social structures that produce poverty, death and enormous suffering. Structural violence may be political, repressive, economic and exploitative; it occurs when the social order directly or indirectly causes

human suffering and death'. (Staugstad, A. 2001) These are two examples of the definition of structural violence. To better understand we need to dissect the term " structural violence" into its two separate parts. In this context the word " structured" relates to the social structures that are imposed on peoples, societies, religious groups and others causing them to be discriminated against and forced to live as second class human beings. These structures can take many forms but all suppress one particular group, for example a religious group, an ethnic group, or a group based on gender or sexual orientation. (Staugstad, A. 2001)

The word violence when used in this context does not mean a physical form of violence but describes the imposition of rules and regulations and social structures that lead to all forms of abuse and poverty which in turn can lead to humiliation and death. Structural violence is systemic, it is not directly violent yet imposes such discriminatory rules and regulations that forces people into poverty and lives of extreme hardship, which can lead to death.

Sometimes the social structures that are the root cause of structural violence can be age old traditions or rules or acts of legislation that when introduced may not have been seen as harmful by those who imposed them except to maintain control over the populace. When they were introduced those who imposed the legislation had ultimate control or power over the peoples through various means, such as slavery, bonded labor, debt, and education to name a few. (Gilman, R. 1983)

Structural violence can also be viewed in two different ways, both vertical (political repression and economic exploitation) as well as horizontally

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(distance and alienation). The institutionalised structures of a country can enforce structural violence, by causing a gap between those that have or hold power over others and those that do not, as well as a social structure (classism) that separates the groups and creates a social distancing. This social distancing maybe because of economic separation, religious, ethnic or cultural, all of these factors create or reinforce structural violence. (Galtung, J. 1995) The vertical aspect of structural violence highlights those political policies such as segregation which lead to repressive measures designed to force a group in society to become second class citizens. Economic exploitation works hand in hand with political repression when certain social groups are barred from holding jobs of influence and status.

I intend to break “ Structural Violence” down into component parts and explain each one and how they have the potential to lead to conflict.

Racism is an example of “ structural violence” as it can be the result of discriminatory practices and entrenched legislation that place one segment of the population as a lower class citizen than the others and enforces rules and regulations on them to ensure that they stay as second class citizens. One of the most visible faces of racism was in the United States where until 1866 slavery was an accepted way of doing business for a large portion of the population. This racism was not only confined to the enslaving of Black Africans but also included discriminatory practices against the native American Indians, African Americans (slaves or decedents of) Asians, Italians and Mexicans to name a few. The 1964 Civil Rights Act made racial discrimination in public places, such as theaters, restaurants and hotels, illegal. It also required employers to provide equal employment
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opportunities. Projects involving federal funds could now be cut off if there was evidence of discriminated based on color, race or national origin. This Act was the cornerstone of the bid to completely eliminate segregation and other discriminatory practices in public places. (United States Department of Justice, 1964) Although the Civil Rights movement who were advocating for a change in the law which would allow equal rights to all, was at times violent it never evolved into fully fletched internal conflict. This example shows that policies in place at the time contributed to structural violence, however as large as the problem was it never expanded to an international level of conflict, the conflict remained low level and internal.

South Africa is another and more visible country to be recognised for its racist policies. Laws were introduced in 1948 which segregated inhabitants into four racial groups, white, blacks, colored and Indian Residential areas were segregated, a segregation which at times was achieved by forced removals of non whites. From 1958, Blacks were deprived of their citizenship of South Africa, legally becoming citizens of one of ten tribally based self-governing homelands called Bantustans, four of which became nominally independent states. The government also segregated education, medical care, and other public services, and provided black people with services inferior to those of whites. South Africa used harsh measures to suppress the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa with the police and the armed forces in an armed struggle with movements such as the African National Congress (ANC) as they tried to enforce and maintain white supremacy in South Africa. (Fredrickson, G. 2003) The South African military were also prominent in several neighboring countries trying to fight the spread of

communism in Angola, which was another example of structural violence where conflicts arose due to political ideologies. Although at times the racial tensions created by the practice of apartheid were extremely violent the, conflicts were internal or confined to small scale regional conflicts. They never developed into a wider international conflict. Although the anti-apartheid movement had a huge global following which used actions such as trade embargos to try to pressure the South African government into ending its apartheid regime. It was not until 1994 that an open election was held that allowed all South Africans to vote regardless of color, or race. The legacy of the apartheid period still influences South Africa today especially in the areas of economics and trade. (Thompson, L. 1996)

Another example of structural violence that is not as visible and recognised is the “ caste system” found in several East Asian countries like India, Pakistan and Nepal. The caste system was described in Hinduism’s ancient sacred text, the Rig Veda, as a social order intended to maintain harmony in society. “ It divides people into four main castes, but there also are those outside the system, the “ untouchables,” who now call themselves “ Dalits,” literally “ broken people.”” (George, N. 2010) Though discrimination based on caste has been outlawed since India’s constitution was adopted in 1950, the practice pervades society today. The caste system is an example of your place of birth dictating your social and economic standing.

The caste system segregates a section of society from other and denies people their rights to be treated as equals in all areas of life. However although in the countries mentioned above racism and discrimination have

led to violence and internal confrontation and conflict, it has not been influential in creating an international level conflict.

Galtung defines “ cultural violence as being “ those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence, exemplified by religion, ideology, language, art and empirical science”. (Galtung, 1990, pg 291) He goes on to explain that these structures can be used to justify direct and structural violence. Galtung tries to illustrate that society’s norms of behavior can be used as structured violence. Things that are seen as wrong can be “ colored” to make them look normal or socially acceptable in that society. He uses a mathematical formula to demonstrate that the higher your social status the greater your life expectancy, the lower your social status the shorter your life expectancy will be. In most cases this is because the structure is weighted in favor of one particular race or group of peoples. Because of this those that have greater access will benefit from the services that the social structure provides (affluent) where-as those that do not enjoy such access are not able to benefit and there-by suffer. This suffering leads to poverty and suffering which brings with it the potential for diseases and other problems that affect the poor or repressed.

When conditions like this exist it then leads to disharmony amongst the repressed and becomes the breeding ground for dissent and resentment of those who are seen as benefiting from the social structures. (Galtung, 1969)

An example of this can be seen in those post colonial countries such as Sierra Leone and Liberia, where once the slaves were returned to these countries from the USA and Great Britain and told they are now free, set up

cultures and structures where they were the masters. They copied what they had only ever seen which was the way their masters had lived and ruled the freed slaves copied these ways and adopted them as their own. These returned slaves were on the whole not from either of these countries and both countries had existing indigenous populations, whom were force to accept these freed slaves into their country. As they were not from either of these two countries they brought with them their own beliefs and culture that differed from that of the indigenous population. This imposition of outside cultures and beliefs only adds to any resentment held by the indigenous peoples.

As mention above the freed slaves copied the ways they had observed from their masters and began to see that this way of living and doing things was the norm or accepted way (affluent).

This in turn caused friction with the indigenous population, (repressed) which after a period of time led to small scale conflict and later to a larger internal conflict which have until recently was still being fought. (History World, 2010)

Although the USA and Great Britain had good intentions, when they repatriated ex - slaves the consequences have been terrible for both countries. It also highlights what Galtung was eluding to when he wrote about cultural violence as a form of structural violence. The freed slaves took on the role of master in both countries and the indigenous population became the repressed citizens in their own country. This led to discontent and finally to conflict. The conflict in each country was internal to both

countries with limited involvement from neighboring countries, and although humanitarian support was provided by the international community the conflict remained localised.

In recent years “ food security” has been identified as a potential flashpoint for conflict. When he wrote in the Journal of Peace Research in 1990, Galtung introduced the topic of violence against nature as a form of structural violence. He may have been musing about the future, however twenty years later the structured systems of countries that have seen vast tracts of land slashed and burned in the name of “ sustainable economic growth” (Galtung, 1990, pg 294) has caused the depletion of non-renewable resources. Large areas of land are stripped of vegetation to allow for the expansion of agricultural land and for mineral resources such as timber, oil and gas. These actions by governments have marginalised those groups whom have traditionally worked these lands or lived in the forest areas. These groups are now forced to abandon their traditional ways and be moved into makeshift towns where they are denied their rights to hunt and fish on their ancestral lands. An example of this is in Brazil and other countries where the Amazon forest stretches across their borders. This forest is rapidly being cut down to make way for mineral exploration and the expansion of agricultural land. By doing this the government are forcing the indigenous peoples to withdraw further into the forests or forcing them to live in makeshift shanty towns which impose on them a lifestyle they are not used to or adapted for. Because of the size of the Amazon forest and its influence on the global environmental system, any interference with the forest will have environmental effects globally. This combined with at times contested idea

that global pollution has influenced the global weather patterns and led to “global warming”. This global warming has interfered with the traditional weather systems and affected crops and animal production to such an extent that it has created a whole new group of disadvantaged peoples. (Rainforest Action Network, 2007) When examined what is happening as a result of planned government and global initiatives in industry and in the name of “sustained economic growth” is a form of structured violence. This can be further explained at country level as well, with those countries that have mineral wealth or those countries that are able to afford access to the mineral wealth and those countries that cannot afford access to minerals or as a result of exploitation are drifting further into poverty and deprivation. Galtung’s observation twenty years ago has proven to be valid today and could possibly be the catalyst for conflict in the future.

If we examine the origins of the only two truly international conflicts the First and Second World Wars we will see that it was not due to systematic structural violence. The events that led to the commencement of international conflict were not as a direct result of structural violence.

In the case of the First World War, an assassination of an heir to the throne of the Austria-Hungary empire by a group of student idealists whom at the time of the actual assassination not intending to kill the Archduke Ferdinand, but were instead more focused on the assassination of Governor Potiorek and only at the last moment did the target switch to the Archduke. (Sowards, S. 1996) Although the assassination was politically motivated it was perpetrated by a small group of idealist young men. The months between the assassination of the Archduke and the declaration of hostilities which led <https://assignbuster.com/analyse-and-discuss-the-concept-of-structural-violence-politics-essay/>

to a rapid chain reaction of events as countries were drawn into the conflict through existing alliances. (FirstWorldWar. com) This lapse in time shows that it was a more deliberate action to go to war, than an immediate reaction to the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand. (Sowards, 1996)

The event that sparked the start of the Second World War was the German invasion of Poland, whom was an ally of both Britain and France. Prior to the invasion of Poland, Hitler and the Nazis had for many years previously articulated in speeches and propaganda of the need for 'race and space' These concerns centered on the importance of racial purity (Aryan race) and on the need for a nation to be prepared to compete with its neighbors in a brutal, uncompromising and ceaseless struggle to survive and to expand. (Henig, R. 1997) Why Hitler hated the Jewish population so much still remains a mystery. What led him to order the extermination of millions of Jews is still open to debate. Hitler and the Nazis were racists and persecuted many different groups in societies such as homosexuals, which led to the killing of homosexuals regardless of their race or origins. The drive for a pure Aryan race was before the war only rhetoric, it was not until the war started that structures were put in place to suppress and kill millions of Jews and others. It was not structured violence that led to the Second World War, as the structures were put in place as the war started. (Minorityrights. com). As horrific as these wars were they were not started as a direct of structural violence, however when conflict started the policies and regimes that were put in place ensured that millions suffered. These events are examples of structural violence.

Structural violence as has been indicated above has been and is still a major part of today's societies. Not all structural violence ends up in conflict, such as the rules in countries such as Saudi Arabia, where it is forbidden for women to drive a car. This type of entrenched structural violence continues today in many different parts of the world. Racism and Cultural violence are two of the more visible forms of structural violence we see or hear about. These forms of structural violence have their roots in the past in areas such as slavery and ethnic divisions.

A new area of structural violence offered by Galtung was that of the structural violence against nature or the environment. This concept although new has gained new importance in the modern era when areas such as food security and environmental degradation are gaining global importance. Although environmental structural violence has not led to global conflict it is responsible for many small internal conflicts as the indigenous inhabitants of the lands or forests fight to keep their lands and waters from being taken from them in the name sustainable economic growth.

As demonstrated above structural violence has led to many internal or regional conflicts, but has not been directly responsible for the starting of major international conflicts such as the First and Second World Wars. The extent that structural violence has had on international conflict is small. Structural violence is responsible for many internal or regional based conflicts, but they have not spread to a truly international conflict.

“ I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use.” -

Galileo Galilei. Italian astronomer, mathematician, and physicist (1564-1642)