
The media report on violence but offer shallow explanations, telling us that bad people do these things for bad reasons. They do not see the invisible structure that propels this behavior. Marc Pilisuk and Jennifer Achord Rountree lift the veil on *The Hidden Structure of Violence*. I have admired Pilisuk’s work for decades. I appreciate him even more in my current role as Adjunct Professor at Saybrook University in California, where I work with him in Saybrook’s program on Transformative Social Change. The book surveys the large-scale violence that has troubled human relationships since time immemorial. War and environmental destruction, though obviously harmful, are not the results of simple mistakes. It is important to understand that such harmful actions persist because those who perpetrate such actions reap the benefits, but others reap the harms.

We commonly talk about hunger and poverty in the world as if all of us want to see them abolished. Why are they so persistent? The basic answer is that hungry people work cheap, and those who are powerful do not care much about their well-being. Hunger and poverty are useful to many people, enriching employers and ensuring that consumers can buy goods at low prices. Hunger and poverty persist because the people who have the power to solve these problems are not the ones who have the problems. Decision-makers who launch harmful actions must anticipate net benefits to themselves, even if the actions result in deep harms to others. In warfare, it may be that for foot soldiers “the potential gain for any of the participants was small compared to the costs,” but for the commanders who send them to battle, the expected gain outweighs the expected harm. The powerful enjoy most of the benefits while the weak suffer most of the harms. Both war and economic exploitation enhance the power of the powerful at the expense of the weak.

Of course, as Chapter Two points out, the gains from war are questionable. But it is by understanding leaders’ anticipation of benefits that we understand why they go to war. Their action is not explained by actual outcomes. Like gambling casinos, wars are about the triumph of optimism over experience. In some contexts, the anticipation of benefits tends to be accurate. There is little reason to doubt that economic exploitation leads to increasing wealth for the powerful. As Pilisuk and Rountree observe, “Wealth has flowed upward
from the poor countries to the rich, and mainly to the upper financial levels of the richest countries.” It is not just money that flows upward. In food trade, for example, on balance the poor feed the rich. Generally, goods flow upward, and bads flow downward.

The authors cite Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* (2013) and his argument that “when the rate of return on capital rises faster than the rate of growth of output and income, then capitalism automatically generates arbitrary and unsustainable inequalities.” That is true, but as part of a larger and simpler proposition: Unregulated capitalism and free markets *always*, by their normal operation, tend to widen economic gaps between rich and poor. If the gap-widening does not happen it is because forces outside the market system counter its tendency to widen gaps. Increasing inequality is not due to market failure. When free markets operate as they are supposed to operate, increasing inequality should be expected.

For those looking for a deeper understanding of violence, the book’s payoff comes in the concluding chapters. Chapter Eight argues, “military and economic violence in the global era is a reflection of the increasing concentration of wealth and power among a few dominant players to the exclusion of others.” This now operates on a global scale. The concentration of power feeds on itself, in a process that is not easily reversed. The book surveys the dark landscape of violence and grasps for a sliver of light and hope. The hope is to be found locally, in communities where people really care about one another’s well-being. In closing, Pilisuk and Rountree see a groundswell of humanity moving toward “creating a caring society and preserving a planet suitable for our long-term viability.” There are ways to cultivate caring locally, as shown in Pilisuk’s 1986 book, *The Healing Web: Social Networks and Human Survival*.

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