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**Review of *Intractable Conflicts: Socio-Psychological Foundations and Dynamics*, by Daniel Bar-Tal**

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Intractable conflicts are of special interest to political psychology, due to their very capacity to persist in a mutually destructive cycle of violence that blocks the institution of alternative social and political relations. They resist political negotiation as they generate and, thereafter, reiterate the intense political identifications upon which they rely. They become the scene of a zero-sum, vicious cycle. Hence, a crucial question for political psychology is the following: what psychic and cultural processes generate and entrench such intractable conflicts and how might these be displaced, eventually, by other psychic and cultural formations that support peace and the emergent possibilities that a peaceful co-existence, whether fraught or fulsome, releases?

In his recent book *Intractable Conflicts: Socio-Psychological Foundations and Dynamics*, Daniel Bar-Tal addresses these complex issues in an extremely detailed and comprehensive manner. Bar-Tal recognizes that intractable conflicts “which may last decades and even centuries, involve disputes over real issues, including territory, natural resources, power, self-determination, statehood and religious dogmas”. (1) This acknowledgement of the “real”, if disputed, issues that give rise to conflicts is an appropriate starting point for an analysis of conflicts that become intractable. Indeed, many analyses restrict themselves to such “real” issues. However, political psychology highlights that something else is also in play in such situations. This book explores that something else in great detail through the development of a very interesting and productive set of concepts, concepts that address both psychological and cultural

processes as they interact to generate political effects. As Bar-Tal puts it, "Almost all conflicts, however, are accompanied by intense socio-psychological forces which make them especially difficult to resolve". (1)

Along with an Introduction and an Epilogue, *Intractable Conflicts: Socio-Psychological Foundations and Dynamics* is organized into four parts that address the "evolution of intractable conflicts", their "societal psychological repertoire", their maintenance and the prospect of their dissolution through "de-escalation and peace building". In all, this book contains a vast repository of research and systematic thinking about intractable conflict and its potential resolution and it discusses several societies that have experience of intractable conflict. While the Israeli-Palestine conflict constitutes the central reference point that recurs throughout, other conflicts referred to in some detail include those in Northern Ireland, former Yugoslavia, Sri Lanka, Cyprus and South Africa, along with the Chechen-Russia conflict, the India-Pakistan conflict and the Turkish conflict with the Kurds. Rather than presenting an indicative case study in its full complexity, aspects of these various cases are drawn into the discussion and matched with social psychological research that further explains and elaborates certain features of the case and the broader argument. This approach has certain virtues as it facilitates a very detailed cataloguing of the pertinent social psychology literature that is matched with appropriate case details. However, it does avoid confronting the over-arching theoretical argument with the full complexity of any particular case.

One feature that Bar-Tal highlights, and that greatly enhances the relevance or pertinence of his work for a truly *political* psychology, is his emphasis on the societal or collective character of intractable conflicts and the role that a shared political culture plays in their genesis and reproduction. As he explains in the Introduction:

“Human beings begin the conflicts, carry them out and then decide to terminate them. Although leaders often make the decisions, society members are an inherent part of these conflicts, as they have to be mobilized for participation and then for the conflict’s peaceful settlement. *Leaders and their followers thus form a socio-psychological repertoire composed of beliefs, attitudes, values, motivations, emotions and patterns of behaviors that lead to conflict and their escalation*, and both must change in order to deescalate and terminate the conflicts before pursuing a peacebuilding process”. (3, author’s emphasis)

This long quote nicely summarizes the scope of the study and introduces a major concept that organizes the discussion, namely the “socio-psychological repertoire”. The formation and reiteration of such a repertoire by political leaders and followers is explored further through some related concepts that are illustrated at length in the discussion; namely “collective memory”, “ethos of conflict” and “collective emotional orientations”.

While all societies generate collective memory as a selective, biased and distorting way of achieving a degree of social integration and common purpose, Bar-Tal argues that this selectivity is greatly magnified in the case of those societies involved in intractable conflict. For such societies, collective memory, which is

communicated by preferred and resonant narratives regarding the nation or the group, is entirely functional. It provides a “black- and-white picture, which enables parsimonious, fast, unequivocal and simple understanding of the “history” of the conflict”. (163) This is, then, an account of a collective memory that is organized by the friend-enemy distinction and transmitted via narratives of the nation or the group. While reproducing the conflict, this form of collective memory justifies and reassures group members of the rightness of their cause. We might reflect that it supports the ontological security of the individuals living through the *longue durée* of an intractable conflict, even as it entrenches the conflict itself.

Such an account of collective memory fits well with some additions that Bar-Tal makes to Kriesberg’s well-known depiction of intractable conflicts as ones that are “protracted, involve violence, are perceived as unsolvable, and demand great investments”. Bar-Tal’s additions are particularly valuable as they underscore the psychic and cultural aspects of such situations. Hence, for him, intractable conflicts are also “total” as they relate to the survival of the group, which fears extinction if it compromises with the enemy. Likewise, they are “central”. That is, they color and affect multiple aspects of daily life and they routinely saturate newspapers and news programs. Northern Ireland is used as an example of how the conflict, over a sustained period, leeches into everyday life. For instance, the playwright, Brian Friel, is quoted as a witness to that effect: “The Troubles are a pigmentation in our lives here, a constant irritation that detracts from real life”. (46) The third addition, “intractable conflicts are perceived as zero-sum contests”, nicely complements

and, as it were, completes the prior two additions. For Bar-Tal, how people perceive the situation is central to this zero-sum characteristic of intractable conflicts. It is, then, both “socio-psychological”, as he terms it, and psychological. Zero-sum also captures other significant aspects such as anxiety in the face of any loss, refusal to compromise and determination to persevere, no matter how mutually destructive. And it anticipates the denigration or dehumanization of the other that Bar-Tal goes on to discuss later.

If collective memory already “functions as an obstacle and barrier to a peace process because it crystallizes a self-righteous and ethnocentric narrative that not only hides one’s own misdeeds and deficiencies but also blocks information about the humaneness of the rival group and especially about its just needs and goals” (163), this task is carried further by both an ethos of conflict and collective emotional orientations. The ethos of conflict is a narrative that condenses in a comprehensive way the variety of beliefs that bind the embattled group or society together. It is a refinement of the collective memory that integrates and promotes a holistic and would-be hegemonic account of the prevailing conditions and that establishes future goals and aspirations. Its supporting narrative contains various themes such as the justness of one’s own goals and the de-legitimization of the opponent. Bar-Tal nominates eight such themes in all. For instance, he discusses how the concept “enemy” arouses extremely negative associations that serve the delegitimizing function and thereby generate internal cohesion within the group or society.

In developing this discussion of de-legitimization as one of the eight themes of the ethos of conflict, Bar-Tal weaves together his own argument with other research in political psychology and social psychology that further illuminates or validates various aspects of the argument. For instance, he cites Kelman on the stability of the label “enemy” and he cites Szalay & Mir-Djalali on the associations the concept of “enemy” arouses, “such as war, destruction, killing, hatred, anger, evilness, danger, or aggression”. (182) These and other delegitimizing concepts or images such as “monkeys, snakes, worms” or “demons, monsters, devils” (181) provide psychological legitimization for enacting violence against and harming the rival group. I mention these details, as the approach Bar-Tal takes in his account of de-legitimization is entirely characteristic of his discussion throughout the book’s 572 pages. Discussion, argument and the development of his overarching theory of intractable conflict proceeds in a binocular fashion, as it were, in which a vast array of pertinent research is summarized and integrated into the unfolding elaboration of the argument and the specification and development of its leading concepts; such as “socio-psychological repertoire”, “collective memory”, “ethos of conflict” and “collective emotional orientations”. This achievement is a real *tour de force* and renders the book an invaluable guide to the social psychology and related political psychology literature, as well as a sophisticated elaboration of a powerful socio-psychological theory.

This binocular integration into one coherent and, as it were, clearly focused argument that inter-twines both a very comprehensive survey of pertinent social psychology research and

an overarching theory of intractable conflict is valuably displayed in the chapter that discusses “collective emotional orientations”. As anyone who has ever lived in or conducted extensive field-work in a society marked by intractable conflict knows only too well, emotions are central to the organization and reproduction of the conflict. While this was always readily apparent, it was not always given the attention it deserved in the political science literature. Bar-Tal’s chapter usefully distils the relevant social psychology literature of the past three decades, along with some notable earlier work, such as that by Dollard and others from 1939 on frustration and aggression. Some other relevant literatures, such as neurobiology, are also discussed and the distinction between primary and secondary emotions is usefully outlined. The pay-off from this latter discussion, for example, comes with the argument that primary emotions, that are typically aroused by external stimulation, may also be triggered in intractable conflict settings by “the societal beliefs of collective memory and the ethos of conflict”. (216) In this way the concern with collective processes and their political implications is extended to the discussion of emotions. Shared psychic states, such as collective fear, collective hatred, collective anger, collective humiliation, collective pride and collective hope are discussed in detail. Significantly, Bar-Tal develops the argument that, as with individuals, “who may be characterized by a dominant emotion, societies too may develop collective emotions”. (219)

After 320 pages of immersion in the manifold features of violent conflicts that are routinely reproduced over lengthy time periods, the final part of the book focuses on how such vicious cycles

may be broken. This is a welcome relief! As might be expected, the great task is to transform the socio-psychological repertoire, turning it into one that no longer constructs the intergroup relationship as a zero-sum relation and that, instead, supports compromise. The requirements of the new repertoire include “a new view of the rival”, perspective taking and empathy, the building of trust and hope and healing and reconciliation. Along with a consideration of transitional justice these and related themes are explored in some detail and, again, present both a valuable guide to the literature and the incorporation of that literature into the broader conceptual argument. Northern Ireland, which has moved through a very significant, if halting and fraught, transformation since the Belfast Good Friday Agreement of 1998, is a very relevant case through which to view and assess these transformative attempts and processes. As Bar-Tal comments, with Northern Ireland, amongst other cases, in mind:

It has become evident that even when the formal peaceful settlement of the conflict is reached, it may fall far short of establishing genuine peaceful relations between the former adversaries. The repertoire that fed the conflict does not change overnight even when the groups’ leaders resolve the conflict peacefully and sign a peace agreement. What is needed is a long process of peace building, which does not take place unintentionally but requires reciprocal planning and active efforts to overcome many obstacles and to reach its solidification. (366)

In all, this is an excellent book that, at once, develops a powerful set of concepts and an overarching argument about intractable conflicts and their potential displacement. Most impressive is the way that its leading concepts produce a political psychology that can address both individual and collective psychic states and their mutual imbrication. This is distilled in its master concept of the socio-psychological repertoire. At the same time it is an invaluable guide to vast tracts of the most pertinent research literature, especially in social psychology.

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