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Johan Galtung's Structural Violence

August 9, 2014: Ferguson, Missouri, police officer Darren Wilson fatally shoots an unarmed black teen named Michael Brown. The grand jury does not indict Wilson on murder charges, but following the trial, the Justice Department ruled that the Ferguson Police Department had, on multiple occasions over a period of time, engaged in racist actions and constitutional abuse (Buchanan et al, 2014). August 29, 2005: Category 3 Hurricane Katrina makes landfall in New Orleans, Louisiana, resulting in the deaths of nearly two thousand people, most of whom were poor and/or African American and simply could not evacuate (Shapiro and Sherman, 2017). 2016: a report finds alarming racial disparity among state prison populations: 25% of inmates are white, while 59% are African American or Hispanic. Regardless of who's committing the crimes, the question becomes *why* people of color might be in such a position that crime seems the only viable answer. *Why* are white people targeted less? *Why* were the poor unable to evacuate as Katrina bore down on them? *Why* did Officer Wilson supposedly feel threatened by an unarmed teenager, and *why* was he not held accountable for his actions? The answer to all these questions is a phenomenon described by Johan Galtung in his 1969 groundbreaking article "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research": structural violence.

Johan Galtung, a Norwegian sociologist and mathematician known as "the father of peace studies" ("Johan Galtung," 2019, n.p.), is the founder of the Journal of Peace Research and a prolific writer and scholar, having published more than 150 books and more than 1500 articles about peace, violence, and equity ("Johan Galtung," 2019). He is responsible for contributions to his field such as the conflict triangle, the terms "peacekeeping, peacemaking, and

peacebuilding," the "rank concordance and rank disequilibrium theory," and the "structural theory of imperialism" ("Johan Galtung," 2019, n.p.). This paper aims to provide, through definitions, explanations, and examples, an understanding of Galtung's research and theoretical work about peace and violence, particularly the distinctions between physical violence and structural violence as presented in his 1969 publication "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research."

Galtung starts with a simple definition of peace: attainable "social goals" a majority of people agree upon, and the absence of violence (Galtung, 1969, p. 167). He quickly moves into an examination of violence: what constitutes violence, what types of violence there are, its features, and examples. According to Galtung, violence is when people are "being influenced" in such a way that their physical and mental potential is compromised; it is the "cause of the difference between the potential and the actual" (Galtung, 1969, p. 168). In other words, structural violence denies people the full expression of themselves as unique individuals. Further, violence is something that is avoidable. For example, if a person got tuberculosis in 1850, their death would be unavoidable and therefore accidental. Today, tuberculosis is preventable and treatable, and no one should die from it. If they die from it, that's a form of violence.

Galtung presents several terms related to violence. First, he makes a distinction between physical and psychological violence. One type of physical violence is somatic (or biological) violence: the "deprivation of health" (Galtung, 1969, p. 168). Somatic violence includes anatomical assaults like "crushing, burning, or poisoning" and physiological assaults like "choking, starvation, or body constraint" (p. 174). Psychological violence includes "lies, brainwashing, indoctrinating, threats" and the like (p. 169). However, if physical and psychological violence were the only types, so-called peace could be achieved even if other atrocities were happening.

Galtung asserts that violence has three parts: *subject*, *object*, and *action.* The subject is the person or thing causing harm; the object is the person or thing receiving harm; and the action is the mechanism of harm. Galtung theorizes that violence can occur even if this construction is truncated. For example, a subject can direct action toward no object: for example, testing nuclear weapons doesn't necessarily hurt anyone, but they are a threat. Or, action can be inflicted on an object by no clear subject. This truncated kind of violence is what Galtung calls *structural violence.* The harm is built into the system and not specifically caused by one subject at one point in time.

When one tries to think of examples of either physical or structural violence, one may find it difficult. For example, in a country that refuses to or cannot pay for widespread sewage treatment (structural violence), people are dying of typhoid (physical violence). A legacy of racism in America (structural violence) has caused black men to be feared, resulting in police brutality and racial profiling (physical violence). A husband who rapes his wife is committing an act of physical violence, but the lack of laws prohibiting marital rape is structural violence. A key distinction between the two types is that with physical violence, the object usually knows they've been violated, while structural violence is sometimes silent and the object doesn't know they've been violated (Galtung, 1969).

Galtung arrives at the conclusion that while physical violence and structural violence are two different phenomena, one of them cannot dismantle the other. They will both continue to exist; in fact, they often occur concurrently. He also contends that it's impossible to calculate which type of violence causes the most damage, partly because of the silent nature of structural violence, and partly because physical and structural violence often overlap (Galtung, 1969).

In the last section of his article, Galtung proposes that we fight structural violence and physical violence using what he calls the "two sides" of peace (p. 183): the absence of physical violence and social justice through the use of nonviolent action. Nonviolent action means advocating for social justice (the absence of structural violence) without the use of physical violence (Galtung, 1969).

While Galtung's theory of peace and violence and its resulting call for nonviolent action have informed advocacy for fifty years, his article relies on the reader to make a leap of faith here and there. The very act of defining peace and violence is bold and positivist. Galtung leaves little room for other interpretations or definitions of peace and violence, lest his theory fall apart. He calls peace a "one-word language in which to express values of concern and togetherness because peace is one everyone's agenda" (p. 167). He does say "nobody has a monopoly on defining peace," but in another sentence he says, "leaving this major argument aside for the moment" (p. 167), suggesting that he can pick and choose whatever he wants to inform his definition. On the next page he says that defining violence is "a highly unenviable task" that many readers will disagree with (p. 168). This combination of hedging and dictating continues for the first several pages of the article. He also poses questions to the reader, such as "Is destruction of things violence?" (p. 170), which may seem to the reader a helpful rhetorical question or Galtung's uncertainty about his own claim. Still, a theorist must start somewhere, and the body of work that followed this article is most likely enough to make up for these slight limitations.

Implications of Galtung's 50-year-old theory can be seen in many aspects of life today. The strategy of nonviolent action has informed programs such as Title IX and Head Start. Both of these programs level the playing field for at-risk students in a way that seeks justice for them.

Bill Gates has sought a nonviolent, justice-centered solution to the enteric and diarrheal disease problem in Asia and Africa by providing life-saving vaccines and inventing a waterless toilet ("Enteric," 2019). For more than 170 years, women and supporters of women have been advocating for equal rights. Women have suffered structural violence in the form of unequal pay, the lack of voting rights, sexual harassment, exclusion from certain jobs and the military, and discrimination. The Equal Rights Amendment is a nonviolent measure aimed at remedying these acts of structural violence ("Equal," 2018). Despite the limitations described earlier, Galtung's theory has stood the test of time and has provided an avenue through which we may examine how systems stunt the potential of individuals in the margins.

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