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BOOK REVIEW OF J. ARCHER (ED.) MALE VIOLENCE


Reviewed by Johan M.G. van der Dennen

Violence is, universally, an integral part of the masculine mystique. Paul Gilbert aptly remarks in the concluding chapter: “Male violence may outrank disease and famine as the major source of human suffering”. Male violence is not a typical product of our (Western patriarchal) civilization, nor our (capitalist) mode of production, nor is it a male conspiracy in order to suppress, terrorize and exploit women. Barry McCarthy notes in his chapter that also in ‘traditional’ cultures there is an almost universal, intimate bond between warrior values and conventional notions of masculinity.

Because, as evolutionary biology predicts, in sexually reproducing species one sex (mostly the males) competes for the ultimately limiting reproductive resource (mostly the females), armaments, vigor, strength, and fighting capabilities are in many species confined to, or more conspicuous in, the males. Agonistic behavior and its morphological paraphernalia are almost universally sexually dimorphic, and can be understood as reflecting the different optimal reproductive strategies of the sexes. This is, ultimately, the evolutionary rationale of all sexual dimorphism; not only in human societies are violence and aggression ‘gendered’ phenomena.

These, and similar, observations have led the editor, John Archer, to take as the starting point of the book not the generality of aggression in the human species, but the predominantly male nature of most acts of violence.

The volume Male Violence contains 18 chapters divided into four sections: (1) Aggression in childhood; (2) Inter-male violence; (3) Violence towards women and children; and (4) Explanations and theoretical perspectives.

Most of the contributors to this volume are not unknown among students of aggression and violence.

Michael Boulton (“The relationship between playful and aggressive fighting in children, adolescents, and adults”) outlines the difficulties in distinguishing between rough-and-tumble play and ‘real’ aggression. In both cases there are profound sex differences, which are also found in other mammals and have commonly be attributed to biological differences, notably those in prenatal hormones (especially testosterone). Rough-and-tumble episodes and ‘horseplay’ may form part of the various ways in which older boys work out physical dominance relations.

Adopting a perspective derived from studies of dominance in other social animals, particularly primates, Glen Weisfeld (“Aggression and dominance in the social world of boys”) argues that boys compete so as to form dominance orders or hierarchies. Weisfeld discusses the ways in which boys’ dominance relations are similar to those of other primates, and their importance for providing access to resources (and hence ‘fitness’ defined as reproductive success) in social animals generally. Weisfeld also discusses the stability of the hierarchy over time, and the correlates of high dominance rank with other (personality)...
attributes. Finally, he outlines the association of aggressiveness and dominance position with social problems such as delinquency.

In chapter 4 (“Bullying in schools and the issue of sex differences”), Yvette Ahmad and Peter K. Smith describe their research on bullying, which was built on earlier research by Dan Olweus in Norway. For male victims, it was usually other boys who were the bullies. For girls it depended on age: at 8 and 11 years, they were more likely to be bullied by boys, whereas at 13 and 15 years of age it was other girls who were the most frequent bullies. Girls were more likely to use and experience indirect forms of aggression such as having rumours spread, etc.

Part II is concerned with male violence towards other men. Arnold Goldstein (“Delinquent gangs”) discusses the male gang, concentrating on studies carried out in North America. Gang members appear to be mainly males from 12 to 21 years of age, from poorer areas, with Afro-Americans and Hispanics highly represented. The gang provides an alternative way of obtaining resources and social status for young males from poor and educationally disadvantaged groups.

Barry McCarthy (“Warrior values: a socio-historical survey”) adopts a historical and cross-cultural viewpoint in considering the values behind men who adopt the warrior role. He shows that the warrior ethos (notably courage, endurance, strength and skill, and ‘honor’) are closely linked with concepts of masculinity. Ethnographers’ reports, across a wide geographical and ecological range, suggest strongly that participation in successful warfare by young men is a key to status and prestige within the group, including access to valued privileges and perquisites, and especially access to (nubile) women.

In politically and socio-economically more elaborate societies, a distinct warrior caste of high status or a military elite has developed, mostly characterized by strong in-group sentiments (loyalty, esprit de corps) combined with a dehumanizing ideology toward out-groups.

In the next chapter (“Violence between men”), John Archer considers violent disputes between pairs or small groups of men. Various sources of evidence indicate that the most severe forms of within-sex violence occur between young men (teenagers and young adults). The typical precipitating act or event involves violation of perceived social rules reflecting on status and self-esteem. Alcohol and the availability of weapons also play crucial roles in the escalation of fighting.

Part III is concerned with male violence towards women and children. Robin Goodwin (“Putting relationship aggression in its place: contextualizing some recent research”) uses the term ‘relationship aggression’ instead of the commonly used term ‘dating violence’, and includes both physical and sexual aggression in his discussion of the importance of the cultural background for understanding the significance of such acts.

In Chapter 9 (“Marital violence: an interactional perspective”), Neil Frude specifically concentrates on marital violence, viewing it from an interactional perspective – that is, as the outcome of social interactions placed in a cultural and societal context. Influences such as social class, characteristics of the relationship, and personal attributes of the individuals involved, all form a background to the violent incident itself, which is commonly sparked off by quarrels about sex or money. Frude’s interactional view does not imply that both protagonists are equally responsible; it is usually husbands who are the violent partners.
Paul Pollard (“Sexual violence against women: characteristics of typical perpetrators”) is concerned with the characteristics of males who commit sexual violence towards women. He reviews studies which indicate that rape and other forms of sexual assault are far more common than is generally supposed and that the typical rapist is not the convicted criminal who rapes a stranger, but an acquaintance of the victim who does not have a criminal record and who is generally not reported to the police. Although rape proclivity seems to be a continuous attribute within the male population, “the ‘macho male’ whose sense of self worth is bolstered by the pursuit of dominance and exploitation of the opposite sex, is particularly likely to translate his basic misogyny into sexual violence” (Pollard).

In Chapter 11 (“Family violence in a social context: factors relating to male abuse of children”), Bernice Andrews describes her research on both physical and sexual violence by men towards children in a domestic context. She concludes that in the case of physical abuse, although previous research has tended to focus on the mother, men were implicated much more frequently than women in her studies. Of course, in the case of sexual abuse it is men who are nearly always the perpetrator. Examination of the contexts in which such violence is likely to occur suggested that a maternal psychiatric condition, particularly depression, or poor mothering, increased the chances of both forms of abuse.

In the next chapter (“Child sexual abuse”), Kevin Browne provides an overview of current research on the sexual abuse of children. Most offenders, unsurprisingly, are male, the most common age being 35 to 40. They are usually known to the victim, though not from her or his immediate family. There is no agreed profile of the typical abuser. There is also evidence for the intergenerational-transmission-of-violence hypothesis: one generation’s victim may become the next generation’s offender.

The final part of the book is concerned with explanations of male violence from a number of different perspectives. Angela Turner (“Genetic and hormonal influences on male violence”) considers the genetic and hormonal evidence. She concludes that there is at most a small genetic component underlying delinquency, aggression and violence, but a greater one for the personality traits underlying these, such as sensation-seeking and impulsiveness. The evidence also supports a moderate association between testosterone and aggression. Thus, while there appears to be some neuro-endocrinological basis to greater male violence, this potential can be reinforced or diminished depending on socialization.

Martin Daly and Margo Wilson (“Evolutionary psychology of male violence”) present a Darwinian perspective on male violence. The ultimate, evolutionary view provides an understanding of why males and females have come to have different reproductive strategies, involving greater competition and risk-taking between males than females, and conflicts of interests between males and females. Most male violence – to other men, to women, and to children – can be understood in terms of these two principles. Daly and Wilson go on to consider the evidence for male violence having its origins in evolved adaptations, and they highlight its association with reproductive competition. This chapter is necessary reading for mainstream social scientists who want to understand the how and why of the ‘young male syndrome’, the masculine mystique and the culture of honor.

John Hoffmann, Timothy Ireland and Cathy Widom (“Traditional socialization theories of violence: a critical examination”) critically examine traditional socialization explanations of aggressive behavior, with roots mainly in psychoanalytic and social learning theory.
(especially Bandura’s version). The authors point out that, although social learning theory is supposed to apply to learning aggressive behavior in general, it has been applied almost exclusively to males. Although it provides a basis for understanding the transmission of aggressive actions to individuals from their family, peer-group and media backgrounds, there remain a number of outstanding issues, such as the need to consider the sex of both the perpetrator and the victim in this, originally ‘gender-free’, theoretical perspective, which the authors consider in their chapter.

In the next chapter on power explanations (“Power and male violence”), John Archer considers first the feminist argument that male violence towards women forms part of wider societal and historical system often called the ‘patriarchy’. This structural power explanation of marital violence can be contrasted with an interpersonal status explanation for inter-male violence. The two explanations can be linked in terms of a common set of masculine values which endorse the use of violence to attain status in the eyes of other men, and as a way of keeping women in a subservient position to men generally. Archer also seeks to place the origin of these two forms of male power in an evolutionary context, arguing that the first has its origins in the conflict of interests between the optimum reproductive strategies of males and females, and that the second is the is a consequence of inter-male competition, arising from sexual selection.

Anne Campbell and Steven Muncer (“Men and the meaning of violence”) consider the ways in which men and women think about aggression and violence, and advance their hypothesis, supported by a growing body of empirical evidence, that this is fundamentally different. Men consider violence in instrumental terms, connected with obtaining tangible or abstract benefits, whereas for women it represents a discharge of emotion, a sign of not coping. The authors argue that the different meanings attached to aggressive acts by men and women lead to mutual misunderstanding which may compound the original source of (marital) conflict.

In the final chapter (“Male violence: towards an integration”), Paul Gilbert first provides his own integration of explanations for male violence, ranging from sources as diverse as psychoanalysis to evolutionary biology. He views physical aggression as a strategy for a variety of ends in a variety of situations. Principally, human conflict concerns issues such as coercion of others and with self-representation and achieving status in the eyes of others. It is either directed to the intimidation of others or to gaining their admiration. The two tactics often go together in a single act of violence.

In the second part of this chapter, Gilbert examines the cultural context (capitalism and the major religions) which promote ruthless and competitive masculine values, and devalue attributes traditionally associated with femininity, such as empathy, affiliation and compassion. These values, he argues, help to perpetuate male domination and condone both inter-male violence and violence towards women.

For those who wish to get familiar with evolutionary thinking or ‘selection thinking’ in relation to human social behavior, this book is a good place to start. But it is also recommended to ‘mainstream’ social and behavioral scientists.

Postscript
In Anglo-American circles there is a tendency to pay lip-service to the distinction between the terms violence and aggression. But more often than not the term violence is applied to the extreme end of a dimension of aggression: physically aggressive behavior that potentially causes injury or death. This is also what Archer (“Introduction: Male violence in perspective”) endorses; the emphasis on the damage caused is, according to him, the crucial distinction between physical aggression and violence: “The first concentrates on the act and the second on the consequences”.

Such reasoning contains a number of problems, however, as I have tried to show some time ago (Van der Dennen, 1986).

The inability to discern aggression and violence – an unfortunate residue from the worst behaviorism to conflate these terms – and especially the rather weird idea that warfare is a form or manifestation of ‘aggression’ – will hamper and impede both theory formation and research for decades to come.

Many ethologists, impressed by the behaviorist dogma that aggression should be defined as behavior, formally define it as behavior, but actually use the term to refer to a motivational construct or a behavioral strategy.

Violence and aggression are different phenomena altogether. In general, we call violence whatever violates some rule or expectation. For example, physical violence violates the rights of the individual to corporal integrity. But whether this violence is perpetrated purposively or accidentally (as in a traffic accident), intentionally or agentively (as in the case of the soldier who kills out of obedience to authority), or for bad or good reasons (as in the case of a surgeon cutting open a patient), and whether aggressively or non-aggressively, has to be determined in every single case. In other words, in every case we have to ascertain empirically how much aggression is ‘behind’ the violence. I hold as a general rule-of-thumb most violence is not (and not necessarily) aggressively motivated, and that most ‘aggression’ (aggressive or agonistic behavior) is not (and not necessarily) violent. Roaring contests of red deer are part of the agonistic repertoire of the species, but cannot remotely be qualified as violent.

‘Violent’ hurricanes and earthquakes kill and destroy, but we do not generally attribute an aggressive intention to nature.