

## BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

**Pawlett, William**, *Violence, Society and Radical Theory: Bataille, Baudrillard and Contemporary Society*. Surrey and Burlington, Ashgate, 2013. 163 pp., \$100.00 hardcover (9781409455424)

**T**his is a short book, but it can be read as two distinct works, one of which is significantly more useful than the other. The first two chapters explore the conceptualization of violence in the writings of Georges Bataille and Jean Baudrillard and demonstrate the relationship of their ideas to the work of Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss. Readers with an interest in 20<sup>th</sup> century French social thought and particularly in the history of the influence of Durkheimian concepts will enjoy this part of the book. Though he has apparently read Bataille and Baudrillard only in translations, the author is a more than adequate guide through the basic contours of their often highly obscure musings on transgression, excess, and symbolic exchange.

In the remainder of the book, an effort is made to use the ideas of Bataille and Baudrillard to examine various forms of extreme violence, but the results are not compelling. The author's vision of the cause of the forms of violence discussed in the book is overly simplistic: they are essentially an effect of capitalist social order, which denies legitimate and ritualized expressions of transgression and symbolic exchange and thereby provokes murders, terrorism, and other spectacular forms of violence. We are repeatedly told that existing sociological and psychological theories of violence are "woefully inadequate" (94), yet little effort is made to show precisely how this is so or why the ideas of Bataille and Baudrillard are superior. The skimpy literature review inexplicably includes novels and personal memoirs (49). It is claimed that violence is on the increase in the modern West (x), but this is asserted without argument and no mention is made of the great amount of empirical evidence to the contrary. Steven Pinker (2012) has recently made a strong historical case that rates of violence are declining, and large bodies of supporting national and international data on this are readily available.

The author sees it as unhelpful in understanding serial killers to focus on their psychopathology in sexual identity and expression (85), yet the very cases he has picked to illustrate the point betray the weakness of his position. Aileen Wuornos and Rosemary West were victims of vi-

cious childhood sexual abuse who acted out sexual violence as adults in response to that experience, while Jeffrey Dahmer had a serious personality disorder based in large measure on his inability to achieve full sexual gratification unless his “partners” were unconscious or dead. It is claimed that serial killers are indistinguishable from the general population in psychological profile, but every example described shows profound mental illness, and a glance beyond these cases reveals how commonly such offenders use violence in response to “deficient or damaged identities or...deep-seated complexes” (83). No explanation of serial killings is offered beyond vague gesturing as to how these acts “confirm the worst excesses of the existing system” (96).

“Spree” killers are envisioned as rebels struggling, ultimately ineffectively, to escape “control by modern rationalities” through their acts of “defiance” (99). It is unclear where a Baudrillardian reading of such killings as “poisonous [Mausean] gifts directed along the media arteries of the system” (117) could reside, but it is likely neither in the heads of the killers themselves, who often leave messages indicating that they are simply pursuing power over those they feel have hurt or denied them, nor in the consciousness of the general public, as they most frequently view such individuals as mentally ill, morally evil, or both.

The last chapter examines “fascism, terrorism, and hatred”; the last of these indicates the various kinds of animus directed at individuals due to their membership in some Othered group. Fascism is seen “not as a competing ideology” to capitalism but as a product of capitalist order, and it is claimed that there is no meaningful difference between “capitalist violence and fascist violence” (126, 125). If the reader is to find this thesis convincing, it will be helpful to know relatively little about the history of fascism, as the collectivism, irrationality, and anti-Semitism of this political ideology were motivated in large measure by contempt for market economies and democratic political institutions.

Terrorists, too, are envisioned as challengers of the symbolic order of capitalism. The entire account of this phenomenon is strangely bloodless, perhaps because Baudrillard largely addressed now dated examples from the revolutionary left that preferred methods demonstrably less monstrous than those that have become the stock in trade of today’s Islamist terrorism.

Hatred is claimed to be on the increase as the capitalist order grows stronger, and this despite the fact that tolerance is a core value in the West (141). We are presented with no data to support the claim, and there is no mention in the author’s bleak account of the massive advances that have been made in every Western society over the past century or so by virtually every disenfranchised minority group. Given the magnitude of

the problem the book alleges we face, it concludes on a peculiarly meek note as to what can be done to reduce spectacular violence: it is only by “acknowledge[ing] our complicity in social injustice and the humiliation of others” that we can hope to move forward (152).

The disappointment of the second part of the book follows perhaps inevitably from the author’s ill-advised attempt to read two largely impressionistic writers as systematic theorists of violence. That Bataille and Baudrillard were creative and provocative thinkers is undoubted. That what they wrote on this particular topic is helpful to producing accurate knowledge about violence and a strategy for further reducing it is much less certain.

*Bucknell University*

Alexander Riley

#### REFERENCES

Steven Pinker. 2012. *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. New York: Penguin.

**Alexander Riley** is the author of *Angel Patriots: The Crash of United Flight 93 and the Myth of America* (2015, New York University Press).

