

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

***Vamik's Room*, a film by Molly Castelloe. World Premiere, New Haven Documentary Film Festival, 22 August 2020**

Molly Castelloe's hour-long documentary about Vamik Volkan could hardly be timelier. Volkan is a major theorist of ethnocentrism, which is resurgent in our era of state failure and civil society backlash against corporate globalization. This film provides a primer on his ideas and work suitable for courses in political psychology, anthropology, psychohistory, peace and conflict studies, international relations, and more.

Castelloe has identified the core elements of Volkan's thought—large-group identity, shared trauma, group mourning, and the role of leaders in either healing or exacerbating intergroup conflict. Through interviews with Volkan and Jerry Fromm, Director of the International Dialogue Initiative, she unpacks these ideas as part of a coherent narrative illustrated with case material from around the world including Cyprus, Serbia, Georgia, Nazi Germany, and the United States. *Vamik's Room* combines an overview of key psychological concepts with visuals, sound, and human-interest content that convey the real-world relevance and potential of Volkan's approach to International Relations.

As part of its world premiere, the film was paired with a 20-minute video interview with the filmmaker conducted by Cassandra Roos, a member of the New Haven Documentary Film Festival Program Committee. At one point, Roos asks a question that encapsulates both the innovative nature of Volkan's achievement and its limitations. How, she wanted to know, does this work relate to mainstream International Relations theory, especially the realist school? Castelloe answered that Volkan deals with unconscious dynamics in International Relations, something neglected by the realists. That response is valid as far as it goes, but Roos's question raises big issues that merit further discussion. In the remainder of this review, I address some of these issues.

Vamik Volkan makes a foundational contribution to two areas of research that are indeed neglected by the realist school and yet are immensely important sources of political behavior. The first is how large groups (e.g., ethnic groups, nations, and religious communities) process shared historical trauma, and the second is how leaders can either help heal such trauma or manipulate it for their own political gain at the expense of international peace and security. These concepts illuminate important aspects of war and militarism and bring many diverse political phenomena into a common frame of reference. Examples include Hitler's manipulation of traumatic memories of German defeat in World War I to mobilize the population for genocide and war; the trauma of September 11 and the G. W. Bush Administration's subsequent interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq; ethnic cleansing in the Balkans and Myanmar; and militarized conflicts in which large-group identities play a major motivating role for both sides, such as the Arab-Israeli wars, the India-Pakistan conflict, and various civil wars on the African continent.

That said, large-group identities are peripheral to other forms of political violence. For example, leaders of the United States undertook territorial expansion in the 19th century, dispatched marines

to Latin America as early as 1852 in the service of business interests, built a navy to dominate the Pacific, fully emerged as a great power after intervening in World War I, inherited the mantle of global hegemony from Britain after World War II, and held this mantle into the present century. This history is not adequately explained by the kind of large-group trauma and intergroup conflict studied by Volkan; to understand it requires other concepts as well, including “realist” theories of geopolitics.

Nor is American imperialism an isolated and atypical example. Beginning in the 16th century, a series of great powers—first Spain, then France, and then Britain—have also taken their turns at military hegemony (Kennedy, 1987). Similar projects of imperial domination (though on a less than global scale) can be found throughout history, for example, in the empires of Alexander, the Romans, and a succession of Islamic polities in the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and Central and South Asia (Stearns, Adas, Schwartz, & Gilbert, 2014). In all these cases, imperial elites employed military force in the service of their own power and wealth, and not generally for the psychological reasons Volkan studies. Moreover, the overwhelming bulk of resources spent on war and war preparations worldwide has historically gone to geopolitical contests of this sort; that is still the case today, as in the military competition between U.S. and Chinese ruling elites for control of the Pacific.

None of this is to minimize the value of Volkan’s approach to International Relations, only to note that it applies to some forms violent conflict much more than others. Where it does not apply, other tools are needed, such as an analysis of geopolitical systems (especially how they work today in the context of a global capitalist economy) and strategies for transforming the United Nations Security Council into a more effective instrument of global governance. Where it does apply, his concepts break new ground and open new possibilities for healing and transformation.

Further, while Volkan works with large-group identities in the context of mass psychology, unconscious processes also operate in geopolitics and the policymaking process. For example, Beisel (2004) examined the role of national identities and irrational dynamics in great power diplomatic communications leading to World War II. Similarly, a survey of the Council on Foreign Relations suggested that military power has unconscious symbolic meanings for many in the U.S. policymaking community (D’Agostino, 1995, 2019).

All theories and methods have domains of applicability; Vamik Volkan’s domain is the pervasive role of large-group identities in politics and international relations. His work is highly relevant in a world of resurgent ethnocentrism and identity-driven political violence, making *Vamik’s Room* a most timely resource.

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