



## Book review

**Donald Black. *Moral Time*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 288, ISBN 978-0-19-973714-7 £21,99**

VALERIA VÁZQUEZ GUEVARA\*

Donald Black is an American sociologist who has extensively written on law, morality, the role of law in society, forms of social control, and current issues on violence manifestations such as terrorism or crime. The underlying topic and focus of Black's work has been *conflict*. *Moral Time* is the culmination of the author's academic research experience, as he presents a sociological conflict theory, which he expects will explain why conflicts occur and how to prevent them. The theory of moral time, according to Black, aims to give a scientific explanation to conflict, by using the concept of time and space from a sociological perspective, which he calls social time and social space. Scientific concepts such as degree, deviation, and distance, are applied to measure and explain the dynamic of social space and social time. Black argues that the dynamic between social space and social time is fluent, therefore causes movement, and thus conflict. However, this movement and changing distance between social space and social time is rooted in moral judgements: wrong or bad, illegal or legal, moral or immoral, proper or improper, and so on. In sum, moral time is what determines the social scope of a conflict.

The clarity and preciseness, with which Donald Black explains the evolution and different dimensions of morality and conflict along time, are helpful to understand current conflict trends. For those interested in conflict as a field of study, and for those who already are in the field and wish to give scientific explanation to present challenges, *Moral Time* might provide the analytical tools needed. In this sense, Black's work is faithful to its goal 'although the theory is not perfect or final (...) it clearly and simply explains the vast majority of the conflicts I have examined over the years (...) it tells us when conflict is likely to occur and when one conflict will be more serious than another' [p.xii]. Regarding the method, Black bases his theory on classic philosophers, sociologists or legal philosophers. For example, to explain a key notion of the moral theory, such as the movement of social time, Black cites Durkheim and Heidegger [p.4. and p.154 note No.10], and the legal philosophers Kelsen or Hume [p.11 and p. 156 notes No. 45 and 47]. To illustrate the practical dimension of moral theory, which is 'the evolution of conflict and morality from tribal to modern age and beyond' [p.17], Black briefly or in detail, addresses controvert issues, such as the meaning of public nakedness or overintimacy. For example, he states how 'as the closeness of communities declines with modernization, the unconcern in showing oneself naked disappears, as does that in performing bodily function before others the unconcern of others disappears as well, and nakedness becomes indecency' [p.38-39].

\* [valeria.vazquezguevara@gmail.com](mailto:valeria.vazquezguevara@gmail.com)



The essential and underlying aim of the book is to disclose how conflict is part of human experience in community, and why current social phenomena might occur. For this purpose, Black develops the argument of the moral theory strategically portraying the different phases of conflict, and creating a connection with the reader. The author starts by explaining the origins of conflict, providing basic notions and introducing morality elements to take into account. Regarding the natural dynamic of conflict, Black engages the reader by introducing the relational elements of conflict (Part I); in other words, those that arose due to social interactions or even with oneself. For example, the author uses *intimacy* as a concept that is both personal and social. On this point the reader might be invited to reflect on her or his own understanding of intimacy. To illustrate this, Black draws different examples of how humans have historically dealt with rape issues [p.23 last para. and p.24]. In the same sense, Black finds in historical facts a solid foundation to explain the process of evolution of morality and conflict. This historical approach allows the reader to notice in a clear fashion, how in everyday life conflict arouses. On this point, Black's work complements academic work on conflict theory—like Johan Galtung (1996) and John Paul Lederach (2009)—which at times part from the notion that 'conflict is neutral' as a fixed concept. On this respect, Donald Black remains that nothing static causes conflict; for example on crime he points out: 'something must happen before any crime will occur: the cause of crime is always a movement of social time' [p.7]. Black's position might be accurate when he criticizes those who characterize conflict as neutral and static, because this affirmation could go against a conflict's inherent fluency and dynamism. However, Black doesn't attempt to explain why conflicts occur in a strict sense, he rather tries to provide tools to understand each conflict, to dig deeper and get to the root cause.

Moreover, with the moral theory Black gives dynamism to sociological concepts like inequality, lack of opportunity, existence of subculture, and absence of social bonds. Black's distinctive perspective could be appreciated along the book in statements such as, '[t]he theory of moral time thus tells us why crime is criminal, why one crime is more serious than another, and why crime occurs. It's all a matter of social time.' [p.9].

Once the book covers general aspects of conflicts and how it affects daily lives, in a major or minor level, Black explores what he calls *vertical time* (Part II). The main concept is *inequality*, which is understood as a reference point to measure the upward or downward distance and degree in relationships. Black breaks down this argument with concepts such as hierarchy, superiority, equality, or success. In vertical time, probably to the reader's surprise, there could be positive strata in relationships. A change between the relationships (social space) causes a movement in social time. In this case, it would be called overstratification. When these relationships move to an upper extreme of a given vertical position, the conflict's impact is stronger. This vertical position is measured through equality and two dimensions of it: superiority or inferiority. Conflict comes when relationships turn 'over': above or below. It's a vertical dynamic. Donald Black's writing style and clarity at exposing his theory, encourages the reader to reflect and analyze this fluctuations in social space and social time. This could be especially appreciated in the overstratification section [chapter 4].

By using success as key concept, Black describes very simple things of life such as personal or professional success, to international conflicts. He provides a scientific explanation to everyday issues or international situations, with the oversuperiority dynamic and its principles of movements above or below equality [p.60]. For example, Black explains human feelings and attitudes by using sports competitions. He writes 'because all competition has winners and losers, all competitions cause conflict. Every game is more than a game: it creates inequality'; adding Levi-Strauss' illustration, who said sports games 'symbolically kills one's opponent' [p.60]. Moreover, Black is true to the book's spirit and to the creative aspect of his

theory, by bringing unfrequent topics like *witchcraft and sorcery* and their social consideration as sources of success and possibly, the reason why they were criminalized [parra.2., p. 62, parra.4., p.83 and parra.4., p.84].

The reader might also find enriching the variety of anthropological examples that characterize the book. These examples might indicate that the book is written for a Western audience, to which tribal social dynamics and lifestyle are mostly unknown. On this respect, Black breaks down the key concept of *equality* by highlighting how essential for Botswanan Bushmen is to share whatever they hunt, and if a tribe member doesn't want to share it is considered as disloyalty toward the community [parra.3., p.63 and parra.3., p.64].

This book might assist the reader to have a deeper understanding of international affairs trends; such as the situation of Russia and the Ukraine and Crimea, or the Islamic State terrorism in the Middle East. As Black explains in his theory using the *undersuperiority* 'the more inferiors threaten the superiority of superiors and the faster they do so, the more conflict they cause: conflict is a direct function of underinferiority' [parra.2.,p.89]. Finally concluding that '[w]orld peace seemingly requires a stable stratification of nations, or no international stratification at all' [parra.4. p.89].

In Part III, the author addresses how human beings express and channel communication within their communities, or what they would consider as outsiders. In Black's words 'societies have their own patterns of culture, and so do ethnicities, social classes, genders, and smaller groups' [parra.1., p.101]. Using *diversity* as key concept, the author measures the cultural distance between persons and/or groups [p.101]. According to Black, diversity introduces a dynamic element in social space, causing movement and conflict; which he calls *cultural time* [p.101]. The analysis made in this section, might be helpful to understand and give some explanation to actual social conflicts in a globalized world, societies and relationships. Multiculturality is present almost at every level: micro, meso macro. Black points out '[t]he greater cultural difference and the faster it appears, the more conflict it causes. Hostility toward culturally different people might range from subtle and passive behavior such as rioting or mass killing' [parra.3., p.102]. Perhaps this dimension of the moral time theory could help to draft responses to current concerning situations, such as the recent Paris shooting on January 2015 (Charlie Hebdo and Jewish supermarket).

Donald Black supports the cultural time argument by working with two opposite key concepts: *tradition* and *innovation*. The greatest strength of this section is how the author describes opposite cultural lifestyles and how their coexistence in the same social space can create conflict. Perhaps most importantly, for example, how and Indigenous might consider an American as savage as the American considers him. As Black expresses it 'people who are culturally distant are often viewed as morally inferior, prone to various kinds of wrongdoing if not evil. Some tribes regard literally all foreigners as savages, if human at all' [parra.7., p.102]. Once again, the author brings vivid examples, such as the Navajos (in the American Southwest), or the Chewong of Malaysia. Coincidentally or not with this section, Donald Black is innovative and creative, as he discusses topics that bring a new perspective. For instance, he considers that there is no racial conflict, but cultural conflict, contrary to common sociological theories [parras.2-4, p. 106]; addresses heresy as religious innovation [parra.5, p.109]; or how artistic and scientific innovations received initial disapprovals (conflict), which were paradoxically necessary to be preserved in time.

The book's richness in historical, anthropological and current facts, despite of being an asset, it also reflects missing elements. In the first place, the author uses generalizations that could lead the reader to misinterpret a culture, a community and sometimes, a country. This was the case whenever Black referred to Andalusia in southern Spain. His appreciations were mostly based in an anthropological study

of 1990 conducted by David Gilmore. Andalusia is one of Spain's most culturally diverse regions, with a population over 8 million people. Diversity in Andalusia means that people from different ethnicities such as Roma, Spaniards, British, Moroccans, Germans, Romanians, Latin Americans, Chinese, and many others, coexist and bring their cultural background in the same social space. Thus, making general statements such as 'women in modern Andalusia are also required to cover their bodies' [parra.2.,p.39]. Anyone who researches on the Internet, or who has been to Andalusia or Spain, could easily refute this affirmation. The Andalusia and the Spain Donald Black depicts here, is out of context.

Another risky generalization could be appreciated when the author briefly analyzes and states the root cause of the 9/11 attacks in the United States, was jealousy for its position as the world's most powerful nation: 'the success of the United States also partly explains the emergence of a radical Muslim campaign of terrorism (which the Muslims considered a 'holy war') intended to kill American and other Western civilians (...)' [parra.5.,p.70 and parra.1.,p.71]. It's comprehensive that Black, as a United States citizen, is prone to stand for his country. However, portraying that the United States' governments and leaders do not have political interests is a risk. Every country has interests in other countries, even in those ones where the United States is a development aid force (e.g. Latin America). In addition, writing 'after Muslim Arabs killed thousands in (...) 9/11 attacks' [parra.1.,p.71], might be disrespectful toward those Muslim Arabs who do not support the 'holy war', but who belong to the Arab ethnicity, and profess Islam as their religion. Finally, there's no scientific reason why the author decides to refer to several indigenous communities as 'Indians' [parra.3,p.84; parra.7., p. 102; parra.2., p.102; parra.4 and 6., p.104; parra.1., p. 123; others], when since the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention in 1989, the term 'Indian' has been progressively out of use for Indigenous peoples.

These generalizations might call into question the rest of the author's examples along the book. Perhaps, at some level, generalizations might be necessary or irrelevant; however the ones mentioned above, could go against Black's own theory of understanding the different dimensions of culture and relationships. Thus, they might not help to understand a conflict or why it occurs, and in consequence, against the purpose of the book.

As for the book's structure and organization (table of content, notes to pages, and references), are helpful to understand and connect with the author's theory development.

In conclusion, *Moral Time* is a good guide for those new in the conflict field, and a valuable tool, which will challenge those already in the field to think in depth about current conflicts. Donald Black, stays faithful to his work's goal, by providing the reader essential notions to explain why conflicts occur and how to prevent them. The author does this by introducing mathematical and geometrical concepts, and merging them with sociological ones. In the end, he created a social science theory, which could be applied to any given conflict. As the last sentence of the book states: 'conflict is everywhere' [para. 2., p.152].

## References

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