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Judd Marmor

## Psychosocial Aspects of Urban Violence

VIOLENCE IS A FORM OF BEHAVIOR intended to injure or destroy an object that is perceived as an actual or potential source of frustration or danger, or as a symbol thereof. Much controversy has raged for many years over the question of whether violence is rooted in an instinctual aggressive urge that is inherent in the nature of man. Many classical psychoanalysts, following the lead of Sigmund Freud, tend to believe that it is. They hold, moreover, that this urge is of autochthonous, spontaneous origin, requiring some external outlet if it is not to be "turned inward" with resultant psychopathology. According to this theory, all assertive behavior, even that which is creative and adaptive, is a form of aggression, although in such instances the aggression is assumed to be "fused" with positive, libidinal drives which enable it to have constructive rather than destructive goals.

Most behavioral scientists, however, are of the opinion that although man, like other mammals, is born with an innate capacity for violence or aggressive behavior, whether or not this capacity finds expression depends almost always on some external factor rather than on a spontaneous inner urge.<sup>1</sup> To put it more succinctly, the fact that the capacity for violence is innate in man does not mean that the expression of violence is inevitable.

A distinction needs also to be made between violence and conflict. Conflict in one form or another will always be part of the human scene. The modes by which conflict is expressed and pursued, however, are highly variable, responsive to pressures for change, and amenable to controls that can limit the degree of destructiveness involved.

The sources of most violence can be found in man's life situation. Indeed, the fact that in all societies rates of violent behavior can be demonstrated to be clearly correlated with certain types of social patterning (e.g. poverty, urbanization, social class, etc.) is an effective argument against the assumption that human violence arises spon-

taneously on the basis of biological needs or simple idiosyncratic propensities.<sup>2</sup> The common tendency, moreover, to assume that violent behavior is always correlated with anger or hostility constitutes a considerable oversimplification. In today's world there is at least as great a danger that violence will result from the effects of fear as from hostility. Clinical experience has demonstrated that panic is a potent trigger for violence; and extreme fear of an adversary is just as likely to provoke an aggressive act against him as is hatred of him.

Actually, a great deal of contemporary violence takes place without either anger or fear in relation to the intended victims. This kind of violence, sometimes called "instrumental aggression," is in the service of "just doing a job," á la Eichmann. Much of modern warfare—the dropping of bombs or napalm on faceless, distant, dehumanized dots, or the firing of shells at invisible enemies beyond the horizon—is of such instrumental nature. Indeed, the ultimate achievement of modern war technology, the mathematically precise triggering of intercontinental missiles with nuclear warheads capable of devastating total continents thousands of miles away, is one in which neither anger nor any other passionate emotion has any functional value at all. Thomas Merton, in an essay ironically entitled "A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolph Eichmann,"<sup>3</sup> has recently pointed out that one of the most terrifying aspects of international warfare and genocide is that so much of it takes place on the basis of cold, planned, precise, and deliberate action. As he puts it: "We rely on the sane people of the world to preserve it from barbarism, madness, destruction. And now it begins to dawn on us that it is precisely the sane ones who are the most dangerous . . . who can without qualm and without nausea aim the missiles and press the buttons that will initiate the great festival of destruction that they, *the sane ones*, have prepared."

However, another kind of social violence, quantitatively less massive and less destructive than that of modern warfare, is assuming more distressing and frightening proportions for contemporary Americans—because it is close at hand and because "enemy" and "victims" are both highly visible. I refer to the violence in our urban ghettos, which has reached climactic proportions in recent mass riots and which has been dramatically brought home to millions of Americans via television.

In considering the sources of this phenomenon it is useful to distinguish between its basic underlying roots on the one hand and the

*trigger mechanisms* that set it off on the other. At first glance it would seem to be an obvious truism that the source of much of the contemporary violence in our urban ghettos is rooted in the poverty, poor housing, inadequate education, and generally degraded living conditions with which the residents of these ghettos are confronted. Although no one would deny the relevance of these factors, the question still remains, however, of why these outbursts are taking place now with greater frequency and intensity than in the past. One might point out, for example, that the lot of the Negro under slavery was certainly worse than it is today; or that the lot of poor immigrants at the turn of the century in our urban ghettos, with their sweatshops, twelve-hour day, child labor, etc., was worse than the lot of the poor today. And yet there was not as much violence in terms of organized mass riots then as now.

The significant difference between these earlier situations and those of the present lies in what has been called the "revolution of rising expectations." Only when people have been stimulated to hope that their unhappy lot can be changed does it really begin to feel unendurable. As De Tocqueville, referring to the French Revolution, pointed out, "A people which has supported without complaint, as if they were not felt, the most oppressive laws, violently throws them off as soon as their weight is lightened. The social order destroyed by a revolution is always better than that which immediately preceded it. . . . The evil which was suffered patiently as inevitable, seems unendurable as soon as the idea of escaping from it is conceived."<sup>4</sup>

What has happened in contemporary America to account for this revolution of rising expectations, and for the sense of unendurable frustration that many of the masses in our urban ghettos, particularly our Negro masses, have begun to feel? It seems to me that there are four major factors that account for this change.

The first has been the heightened affirmation of the democratic ideals on which our nation was founded. Two world wars have been fought, presumably to make the world safer for democracy, and a succession of American presidents have emphatically publicized these aims. The eloquent idealism of John Kennedy upon his accession to the presidency was particularly influential in raising the hopes of millions of young people that we were finally on the verge of bringing the American dream of equality and security for all to a living reality. The drive to end discrimination took a new lease on life, and American

students who, for a generation, had been "playing it safe" began to become politically active again through the medium of the Civil Rights Movement. Despite Kennedy's tragic assassination, these hopes for a "great society" received further impetus during the first year of the Johnson administration when new civil rights legislation was pushed through Congress in a way that Kennedy himself had not been able to accomplish. The nation's poverty programs, Operation Headstart, new housing laws, and apparent progress in desegregation of schools and other public places, all seemed to hold high promise for new and hitherto unattained levels of American democracy.

The stimulation of these hopes has been enormously heightened by the communications explosion growing out of modern technology. There is hardly a house in America today which does not have a radio set and more than 90 percent of all households are now reported to have a television set. This has meant that the message of democracy is being carried into every community and home in the United States, and can be comprehended even by the totally illiterate. "Madison Avenue's" visible demonstration via television, slick magazines, and other mass media, of better ways to live—with constant tantalizing offers of beautiful homes, tempting foods, attractive clothes, and luxurious holiday resorts—offers increased tangibility and substance to the great promise, in a manner that had never before been possible.

The progressive dissolution of colonial empires (at least in their traditional form) in Africa and Asia after World War II, with the emergence on these continents of many new nations whose representatives are accorded full diplomatic respect in the forums and councils of the United Nations, has lent additional strength and impetus to the expectations of our own black population. It has given them renewed pride in their historic traditions, made them less ashamed of their black skin, and heightened their impatience and resentment at the residual manifestations of discrimination which they continue to encounter in their own country.

Given these three factors and the rising hopes and expectations which they have stimulated, it is inevitable that the steady and inexorable escalation of the war in Vietnam, with its inhibiting effect upon the social welfare programs of our country, has tended to create a sense of mounting frustration in our urban ghettos. Poverty programs have had to be curtailed or eliminated, civil rights advances have ground to a standstill, and the massive financing which is needed to rehabilitate the ghettos is no longer available. It is in this context that

much of what is going on in contemporary America can be understood. The growing disaffection on our college campuses, the rise of the hippie movement with its rejection of conventional middle-class values, and the mounting anger and frustration of our black populations are all related to the factors described above. Hopes have been stimulated and are not being fulfilled. Among blacks, the intense frustration they have experienced has led to intense anger at the whites who have failed them, particularly white liberals. This apparently irrational focussing of their anger on those who have tried hardest to help them is not quite so illogical when we realize that these whites are perceived as the main instruments who have stimulated their hopes and then failed to carry through.

Other factors must be considered also. Violence is rarely something that takes place totally unilaterally. It is almost always a transaction involving two parties. The mounting anger on the part of the deprived black, and the growing insistence of his demand for equality now, has stimulated much anxiety, particularly among the lower middle-class white population, who have then responded with counter-aggression and renewed prejudice—the so-called white backlash. This, in turn, has intensified black nationalism, and the chasm between the two groups has grown deeper and wider, with greater polarization of feelings and a greater predisposition to violence on both sides.

Moreover, although the negative aspects of violence are quite obvious, the constructive aspects of violent behavior are often lost sight of. Violent behavior on the part of masses of people represents a kind of crude signalling device or communication to the body politic that something is wrong. Thus, riots or acts of violence serve as a means of opening channels of communication between the ghettos and the power structure, channels that in many instances have never existed previously. Also, as has been thoroughly documented in some of the descriptions of recent riots, they provide a release mechanism which gives a sense of power and status to people or groups who have been feeling inadequate or humiliated. This explains the sense of elation among riot participants that has so frequently been observed, particularly in the early phase of the rioting, before the suppressive weight of control measures has had a chance to take effect.

With these underlying factors, what are the triggers that have set off mass outbursts of urban violence? Not surprisingly, most of these riots have taken place at the height of summer when the unbearable heat in the central-city ghettos has lowered the threshold of irritabil-

ity of their teeming inhabitants to dangerous levels. Given the basic setting of chronic anger and frustration and such a lowered threshold of irritability, any police action which seems unwarranted, inconsiderate, or insulting can become the incendiary fuse, as the recent report of the Lemberg Center for the Study of Violence at Brandeis University has pointed out.<sup>5</sup> An unjust arrest, or rumors of a black person being injured or unfairly handled by law enforcement agencies or by some whites, can suddenly release the pent up anger in the group, anger which then spreads by mass contagion to explosive proportions.

THE "TREATMENT" of mass urban violence needs to be dealt with at two levels. The immediate, short-term need is to reduce and eliminate such triggering mechanisms as much as possible. This calls for better police relations and communications with the members of the urban ghettos, for greater use and employment of black police officers, for a greater degree of local rule wherever possible, and for the elimination of the kinds of patterns of behavior that intensify the sense of degradation which the members of these ghettos feel. Thus, while one can appreciate the tensions under which white police officers operate within a black urban ghetto, certain actions that traditionally are often taken by them seem psychologically indefensible. For example, the common practice of "spread-eagling" a black suspect over the hood of his car while he is searched is a "castrating" procedure that arouses deep feelings of humiliation and resentment among black men whose masculine self-image has already been rendered deeply vulnerable by chronic unemployment and racial discrimination.

On a more fundamental basis, of course, the deep sources of frustrations in our central cities have to be dealt with. Although it might logically be argued that if one could eliminate the expectations of our poor, they would be better off, this is no longer possible in today's world. Hopes brought to life are not easily stifled, and the American commitment to a democratic ideology is now too deeply rooted in our traditions to be eradicated. It therefore becomes a matter of urgent necessity to tackle the basic sources of frustration of our poor so that their hopes can again acquire the potentiality of realization. In today's explosive urban situation gradualism or tokenism will no longer suffice. To the underprivileged blacks "gradualism," through long and bitter experience, has come to mean "never." Only a crash program of massive proportions that will enable them to see results rapidly will have

any effect in lessening their level of frustration. Unfortunately the tragedy of present-day America is that so long as the war in Vietnam continues, there is no prospect that such a crash program will be or can be undertaken.

Finally, there are certain other long-term considerations that are relevant to the prevention of violence in American society. Perhaps the most important of these is the need to alter some of the social institutions and basic values of our present-day culture which subtly tend to glorify violence and, not so subtly, to desensitize people to its manifestations.<sup>6</sup> Our history books glorify wars and generals; the millions of victims of war are treated merely as ciphers, and, as Arthur Koestler has so aptly put it, "statistics don't bleed." Our movies, our television stories, our comic books, and our newspapers all "sell" violence in huge doses to our children, our adolescents, and our grown-ups. War games and toys grow ever more realistic.

The issue here is not whether such marketing of violence "creates" aggression in people. The roots of aggression, as we have seen, are of a deeper sort. Moreover, to argue, as many psychologists and psychiatrists have, that war games and toys, and violence in communication media provide "an outlet for hostility" is completely to miss the essential point. Granting that they are indeed such an outlet, the question is whether this is the kind of outlet that is healthy either for the individual or for society. The insidious fact about such marketing of violence is that it *desensitizes* people to the spectacle of human brutality and killing and *teaches* them techniques for encompassing such ends. Our society needs institutions that will strengthen the dignity and sanctity of human life, not degrade it. "Outlets for hostility" do not have to be directed at goals of death and brutality. There are "moral equivalents" of violence, to adapt William James's well-known phrase, that serve such psychological purposes equally well. Cheering for one's side in an athletic contest, or participating in one, is also an outlet for hostility, and a much healthier one, socially and individually. There is a crying need in our society to identify the various acculturation processes, subtle and not-so-subtle, that abet patterns of human violence, and to try to modify them. Not only can war no longer be considered a rational political instrument in an age of nuclear weapons; the patterns of socially sanctioned violence and brutality in any form need to be eliminated if man is to survive the challenges that face him in the decades ahead.



NOTES

1. Judd Marmor, "War, Violence and Human Nature." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March 1964, pp. 19-22.
2. L. A. Coser, "Violence and the Social Structure." *Science and Psychoanalysis*, Vol. VI (New York: Grune and Stratton, 1963), pp. 30-42.
3. T. Merton, "A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolph Eichmann," *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions Publishing Co., 1966).
4. Alexis de Tocqueville *L'Ancien Regime*. Trans. by M. W. Patterson. (Oxford, England: Basic Blackwell, 1949), p. 186.
5. *Six City Study*. A survey of Racial Attitudes in Six Northern Cities: Preliminary Findings. A report of the Lemberg Center for the Study of Violence. Brandeis University, Waltham, Mass., June 1967 (Mimeographed).
6. Judd Marmor, "Psychological Problems of Warlessness." In A. Larsen (ed.), *A Warless World* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1963), pp. 117-30.