A Theoretical Perspective On Violence Against Governmental Authority

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Abstract

The ultimate sources of some anti-authority violence lie at the societal level and these cannot be remedied easily by public policy. Therefore, to understand anti-authority violence it is first necessary to address the sources, the justifications, and ramifications of violence in American society. This paper identifies some factors that are particularly associated with attacks on governmental authority figures.

Introduction

Murders and assaults are still rare in some other countries, so rare in fact, that until recently the British police did not think it was necessary to carry firearms. In contrast, the United States of America has always been a violent nation, and today America is one of the most violent countries in the world. In just a single year, a small U.S. city may have as many murders as some medium size nations. Recognizing this, our concern with attacks on US authority figures quickly lead to a more general examination of the sources of the violence that is endemic in much of American society.[1]

As James Q. Wilson (*1977*) has so eloquently explained, only some of America's problems can be addressed by the government in the short-run; the solutions to others lie in long-run policies; and still others are so far beyond our abilities to deal with them that they can never be fully resolved. Therefore, any comprehensive study of American anti-government violence

must begin by examining the root causes of US violence to see how they are related to anti-authority violence. While certain types of murders and assaults of governmental authorities probably have many important characteristics that distinguish them from the other sorts of violence that are so common in contemporary America, that remains unclear because the literature has not focused on searching for such distinctions.

Undoubtedly the ultimate sources of some anti-authority violence lie at the societal level, and these cannot be remedied easily by public policy. So, to understand anti-authority violence it is first necessary to address the sources, the justifications, and ramifications of violence in American society. This paper identifies some factors that are particularly associated with attacks on governmental authority figures.

An Historical Perspective

Extraordinary as we might wish it to be, violence has been an important element in most of human history. One of the fundamental Western allegories about violence recounts the killing of Abel by his brother Cain. Indeed, most of our history is so full of descriptions of violent people and violent societies that a visitor from another world might conclude that the human experience is largely the story of experimenting with various strategies for using physical force in order to find which of them are the most effective.

In historical accounts, group-level violence is most often recorded in terms of civil and inter-state wars, but once cities were established the ancient chronicles indicate that other forms of violence became commonplace, including programs against minority groups and anti-government riots. Despite its periodic recurrence, such domestic violence is treated today as an extraordinary form of behavior by most modern societies.[2] This likely is because our traditional ethical values often condemn violence within our own group, while praising our neighbors who are willing to kill foreigners during war.

With the decline in historical knowledge among US citizens, it increasingly seems paradoxical to many Americans that certain types of killings are praised, while others are condemned. At the very least, this apparent paradox indicates that all violence cannot be dismissed out of hand

as simply good or bad, right or wrong. As we will see, the reason for this is because different people can view the use force from quite varied perspectives, and so they evaluate the same violent actions quite differently in terms of their morality, reasonableness, and effectiveness.

Trying to control the various sorts of violent mischief that humans can cause provides one of the most important justifications for organized governments: Without a police force to ensure that the violent members of society do not get out of control, it would be impossible for even primitive cities to function. Providing the police function in America , however, often has been a deadly experience. As Table 1 shows, Federal Bureau of Investigation reports reveal that over l,673,000 police were assaulted and 297l were murdered from 1960 to 1995.

Nevertheless, the problems caused by violence did not begin with urbanization. Many prehistoric societies faced the continual threat of war with their neighboring clans. To increase their own survival chances these groups developed value systems that condemned murder, stealing, and others acts of violence that could destroy a society's internal unity. But the same acts that were prohibited among clan members for thousands of years were permitted without restraint when committed against outsiders. While there are similarities among many of these early and primitive value systems, none of the groups adopted identical sets of rules, which differed in details and occasionally on major matters such as the justifications for the use of force. This remains the pattern today.

Most contemporary societies try to develop detailed sets of guiding principles and justifications that inform their members about the sorts of situational circumstances where violence can legitimately be used and who can use physical force. These are often set down as legal codes, but if one looks closely at these various guidelines, they usually are internally contradictory on some issues and contain large gray areas of ambiguity. They also unknowingly rest upon different fundamental assumptions about how people and governments should deal with their violent neighbors who do not follow the norms of behavior that most people accept.

We still sanction unlimited violence against outsiders in certain situations, but the circumstances that justify a person's use of violence against a member of one's own society vary culturally and geographically in the US. What is a legal justification for killing a person in Texas may not be considered such a justification in Massachusetts. Similarly, the level of

force that police officers can legally use varies among the states depending on the exact situational context.

One of the most hideous forms of violence is killing another, which has become common across the US, but if pressed, Americans disagree both about when such violence is a useful strategy and when it is a moral action. Such differences of opinion are related to one's social background, economic circumstance, religious beliefs, and a host of other important characteristics that vary widely across the country. Consequently, Americans do not always agree about when violence can be used appropriately, and this dissension is a one reason why the jobs of many authority figures are becoming increasingly difficult.

Why do some Americans engage in violent behavior while others respond peacefully when faced with the same situation? What function and role do violence play in common social, political and economic relationships? Unless we can better understand these matters, any conclusions that we might draw about attacks on governmental employees will be quite restricted. Unfortunately, the literature on such matters is vast and wide ranging, and a multitude of varied theories have been proposed to explain the sources of anti-authority violence.

The Legitimacy of Violence

In grappling with understanding the concept of violence, the first question to ask is whether the justifiable—or legitimate—use of physical force can easily be separated from other sorts of violent . Most people are surprised to learn just how difficult this can be since most of us were taught as children that there are universal standards of right and wrong, which are relatively easy to apply. So it comes as a shock to discover that even among Americans from similar backgrounds, there often is no generally agreed upon definition of what constitutes the legitimate use of force.

The belief that using force can be justified in solving disputes varies greatly in content and in degree among cultures, religions, ethnic groups, and even among fellow citizens with different careers. While the latter fact may be the most surprising, examples of it are obvious as soon as one goes looking for them. We all know of cases where soldiers and police officers used force in a way they thought was perfectly legitimate, only to be

second-guessed after the fact by a religious leader, a social worker, or a critic of the status quo who argued that their actions were imprudent, unwise, or immoral.

But even dividing Americans into liberal and conservative camps regarding the legitimate use of force is not as helpful as one might think. This is because the legitimacy of using force to solve individual and group problems is not just a matter of liberals generally opposing the use of violence and conservatives being more accepting of the use of force. Upon close inspection, most groups in American society disagree to a greater or lesser extent on two basic issues regarding physical violence.

First, and at a very fundamental level everyone must decide for themselves: What is the general legitimacy of using physical force to solve problems? Should it be used at all? If so, how much force should be used? Is there a limit to using physical force beyond which one cannot go? Is it all right to attack a person, but not to kill them? At a secondary level, what are the specific situational circumstances that can justify the use of force? Can only governmental agents employ violence, or are there moral and logical arguments—such as self-defense—that give anyone the right to use force under certain circumstances? If so, who should be the final arbitrator of these matters? The reason that these distinctions are not obvious to everyone in day-to-day affairs is thankfully because extreme disagreements about the application of force occur so infrequently that it is still possible for most people to believe there is a general consensus among "right-minded people" about the use of physical force, even though it really does not exist.

Furthermore, the concept of *legitimacy*, itself, can be operationalized in a number of ways depending on who uses the term, what actions they want to consider justifiable, and what actions they want to condemn. Most modern nations argue that as formal governments they are the only legitimate source for the use of force. Only a government is capable of deciding what is right and wrong, good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable when physical force is involved. But as we will see, there are many reasons that this absolute claim is not widely accepted, and alternative definitions of legitimacy include actions sanctioned by custom, derived from religious beliefs or ethical values, or actions that are logically consistent in trying to achieve a reasonable goal.[3]For example, the American government strongly opposed the physical use of force by workers when labor unions were first organized, but those same actions are

now looked upon as having been legitimate because they were a logically necessary step to achieve the valued goal of worker rights.

When push comes to shove, people often use some other definition of the legitimate use of physical force other than it has to be authorized by governmental officials. This can put thoughtful civil servants on the horns of a dilemma that has no easy resolution. They often are charged with keeping order while sometimes having to enforce immoral rules (e.g., racist laws) or contradictory policies (e.g., protecting the right to peacefully protest except if the protesters are protesting against leftist causes when leftists hold political power).

In many parts of the American South, lynching was once virtually a state-sanctioned activity, which the police were expected to ignore or gleefully support. The recent release of Civil Rights Era documents of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission shows that some Southern officials continued to conspire to harm Blacks and their Northern sympathizes well into the sixties. From a White Southern perspective this was a legitimate use of violence because it was not aimed at other members of their local society, but against people who were not covered by the Christian "love thy neighbor" ethic for they are not really one's "neighbors."

If a police officer defended the Blacks in his community, he risked becoming just another target for violence because his White neighbors would no longer see him as a true "neighbor" who was protected by the norms constraining the use of violence among members of one's own community. Consequently, the strategy of "doing the right thing" was easily defeated in much of the South where the most vocal opponents of racism were assaulted or killed until all the potential applicants for government jobs came to realize that racism was a prerequisite for employment. This historical perspective on a time not all that long ago reinforces the point that to understand the potential for anti-government violence in the United States it is sometimes necessary to understand the conditions when violence is viewed as a legitimate activity.

Capital Punishment

The deep seated conflict about the way that people view the proper use of violence is no more evident than in the contemporary debates over capital punishment.[4] These discussions are so acrimonious because the arguments often do not rest on the anticipated benefits of executing convicted murders, but unknowingly rest on much more fundamental issues. And since most people seem to think that discovering what is right and wrong is a relatively easy matter, the viciousness of such disputes is magnified when one's political opponents steadfastly refuse to convert to the clear rightness of one's own position.[5]

At the level of fundamental moral sensibilities—as opposed to the policy effectiveness of using physical force—some people believe that the Biblical injunction "Thou shall not kill" applies to all people, even mass murders. This is why many nations have outlawed capital punishment.[6] Others argue that it is impossible to "kill" a murderer since only an "innocent" person can be killed. By murdering an innocent the murderer has lost his claim on life. Since the murderer can no longer be "killed" in an ethical sense, he can legitimately be executed by the state for his crime. Therefore, taking the life of a murder does not violate the Biblical injunction against killing, which only applies to innocent parties.

Going further, some conservative commentators argue that by failing to execute a convicted murderer the State violates the basic spirit of Judeo-Christianity by failing to protect innocent civilians from the potential future violent acts of the guilty. Or in terms of democratic political theory, the State has broken its social contract with its people by imposing upon them an unacceptable risk of future criminal actions by the already convicted. This is how such nations as Singapore justify harsh penalties for even relatively minor crimes as being an effective way to prevent escalating crime. Those on the other side of the debate argue that strict punishments can never be justified because in order to be good persons we must "judge not" and always "forgive our trespassers." Consequently, no one should ever be executed.

Policy Debates over the Use of Force

Now we can begin to see the distinction in the study of justifications for using violence between positions that are based on fundamental values: "What is the definition of killing?" And policy effectiveness: "Is the use of violence by the State a real deterrent?" In this distinction we can also see that people are not going to agree in all circumstances about when force may be used in a legitimate manner, which can put the police, correction officers, social workers, etc., in the middle of policy debates that are not of their making.

In other words, the debate about capital punishment—and all other debates over the use of violence — has two major components. First, one's basic values largely determine what sorts of violence are believed to be acceptable or legitimate. Second, one's understanding of how the economic, political and social systems operate determines one's view of what are likely to be the most effective policy alternatives given the constraints imposed by one's basic values. By way of a recent example, while a pacifist would never support using live ammunition to control a rioting mob of drunken students, for certain civil servants, like the police chief of Boulder, Colorado, such a decision is a matter of policy effectiveness rather than fundamental values. How much damage are the students likely to do? Is there any real chance that they might kill a police officer while rioting? Is this a recurrent problem, which might be resolved if a few students are killed in a show of force?

There is one particularly important revelation from understanding that the various definitions of what constitutes the legitimate use of violence differ among Americans: Such differences do not necessarily reflect different levels of moral virtue, violent intent, or even a person's tendency toward being an authoritarian personality. Indeed, they can have a wide variety of other sources.

While most Americans would agree in principle that mass murder is a very bad idea, it was viewed as a legitimate and even a morally required act by John Brown, who tried to start a slave rebellion shortly before the Civil War. Today it is viewed as a legitimate and moral act by the Oklahoma City bombers and their supporters, who see the contemporary national government as just as great an evil as John Brown saw the Antebellum South. Similarly, some Right-to-Life supporters so ardently believe in the virtue of their position that they reason it is better to kill a few thousand abortionists than allow the death of one more innocent child. Likewise, America's Founding Fathers killed many British troops with

sniper attacks because they felt their cause was sufficiently just to make their actions legitimate. For such righteous people, it can be a mortal sin to lack the moral strength to kill a person who is engaged in an evil that you oppose. This is because the dictates of God or morality sometimes require you to act against those who are threatening the lives of innocent others.

Put in a different context, this is also the justification of police officers who kill violent criminals in the line of duty to protect themselves or innocent civilians. The only distinction in these various examples concerns who can legitimately be the target of such violence. The group targeted by today's authorities as criminals may be the legitimate government of tomorrow, for example: America's Founding Fathers.

When a police officer occasionally gets in the way, as happened at the bombing of an Atlanta abortion clinic, his death is seen by the righteous as a regrettable circumstance, but truly committed people will still see their use of violence as a rational and reasonable response to an unacceptable situation. If this at first seems outrageous, the logic is an exact parallel to the American military's concept of collateral casualties. When the US military happens to kill innocent civilians in a foreign country, it is justified as a regrettable, but unavoidable consequence of pursuing a just end.[7] In a letter to the press after his conviction for the Oklahoma City bombing, Timothy McVeigh made exactly this argument to justify that act of "terrorism". In other words, one person's terrorist is another person's patriot.

So as strange as it might first appear, often times when particular sorts of violent behavior are condemned, their condemnation is only a rhetorical tactic. At the heart of many disputes over the use of physical violence is not the means that are used to achieve an end, but the end, itself. If one experiences a gestalt shift and comes to see that a particular end is legitimate, suddenly the means that you have been condemning as immoral when used by your opponents become legitimate, as well.

While we might disagree about the use of violence in many circumstances, few of us would avoid using it in the most extreme cases. Suppose we could travel back in time and assassinate Adolph Hitler before the Second World War. If you agree to the legitimacy of this action—which none of the legally authorized governments did in the late thirties—then you have come to understand that the legitimate use of force is sometimes a matter of one's perspective. Therefore, we cannot hope to reach universal

agreement on its use because of the different perspectives that Americans bring to life's practical problems.

Three American Political Cultures

Issues regarding the use of force against governmental employees are related to certain very basic attitudes that vary among the three major political cultures of America. These roughly parallel the historical and geographical regions of the United States.[8] The first is the North, whose political culture is called moralistic. It consists of the states east of the Missouri and north of the Mason-Dixon line. Many of the original settlers of these states were from religious groups that stressed moral and ethical values, good government, and non-corrupt politics. Their initial impact was so great that these states still retain such characteristics many generations later and even after their ethnic composition has changed. The second political culture is that of the West, whose citizens stress individual values and *laissez-faire* public policies.[9]

The third region is the South, whose political culture is particularly important to understanding many sources of violent behaviors, particularly violence against the police and by the police against civilians. The Southern culture is largely a legacy of slavery and an almost feudal economic system where only a few people were very rich and powerful, while most of the people were poor and powerless. Its political culture is called *traditionalistic*, and the sorts of power relationships that commonly still exist in the contemporary South are quite unlike those of the North and West.

Far more than in other parts of the country, the common belief in the Old South was that one had a duty to obey the orders of people in positions of power regardless of the justness of the orders. In such a traditional society one's position determines the legitimacy of one's orders. So to question the orders of an authority figure was to question the legitimacy of Southern society, itself.

Since so much Southern behavior was based on face-to-face relationships among individuals, retaining one's honor was considered more than a virtue, it often was a necessity. Relationships in traditionalistic political cultures are built on personal interactions to a greater extent than on laws, moral rules, or bureaucratic regulations. If one's honor is lost, so is much of one's power and self-image, as well. This idea of an affront to

personal honor is not nearly so important in many other parts of the US because their political cultures possess more general standards of behavior and definitions of self-worth that are independent of a person's social, economic or political position.

In the North and the West one can have a sense of self-worth by following moral or ethical rules that are far more independent of the power relationships between people than in the South. In a society historically based on slavery there are few rules that are largely independent of one's position in the power structure. Consequently, maintaining self-esteem through preserving individual honor was far more important for Southerners, and this cultural legacy remains today. This may be an important reason in explaining the higher rates of police assaults and police murders in the South, which is also sometimes called a "subculture of violence."[10]

For instance, the act of an officer asking to see a driver's license or putting his hand on a suspect as a means of calming him down can be seen in the right situational context as such a serious affront to one's honor that it might require a lethal response! Pertaining to violence directed against police, the South, as shown in Tables 2 and 3, is disproportionately represented in the percentage of officers assaulted and feloniously killed.

Why is this theory of political culture not more commonly discussed in the literature, especially given its clear importance in understanding the level of violent behavior in the South? One reason that many American history text books do not deal with such matters was that until well after the Civil Rights era, questioning the ethical foundations of Southern society could open up a very large can of worms that few politicians wanted to address. Such fundamental questions could not be tolerated by the Southern power structure because too close an examination of the basis of Southern society would show it had little ethical legitimacy of the sort that exists in both the North and the West. We already had experienced one civil war, and most hoped that the South could peacefully be "Americanized" without the need for a second military conflict.

Rather than holding absolute moral values independently of the situational context—and particularly the power relationships among people who are involved—many Southerners had only had a superficial religiosity. This allowed them to believe they were virtuous, but that virtue lacked much substance. To a certain degree—but clearly to a much lesser degree

than even thirty years ago—the South still is haunted by its ghosts of the past. In making decisions that people in the West or North would base much more on matters of morality, rationality, or profit, to a far greater degree Southerners still make decisions based on relative power positions. For many Southerners it still remains not for those who carry out orders to question their superiors' reasons for those orders.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that when questionable ethical issues arise in the public domain, people in the South and the Southwest—who are empirically classified as having much the same sort of traditional political culture—are often in the forefront in seizing upon them as opportunities, rather than seeing them as moral traps that should be avoided. A recent example is the savings and loan debacle. Rather than asking, "Is our behavior morally right for our community and the nation?" the elites of the Southwest instead asked, "How can we make a fast buck? And when the bubble bursts, how can we ensure that someone else will suffer the consequences of our reckless actions?" Because of their historical experiences, to a greater or lesser extent, people in all the states of the Southern part of the US from Nevada to the East Coast are not as strongly bound to the sorts or normative rules respecting the lives and property of others that still somewhat guide the behavior of people in the North and in the West. In the latter political cultures such rules have acted to reduce the level of physical violence among citizens and against authority figures by imposing upon people the moral duty to constantly ask whether their use of force is just. For at least some Southerners this is not a relevant question.

In part, an interpretation of societal violence based on the three American political cultures also helps to explain the occurrence of police violence and police corruption. This is legendary in such Southern cities as New Orleans, and common in many rural areas of the South, as well. When people who have taken orders all their lives without questioning the reasoning behind those orders assume positions of power in law enforcement, many of them lack the sort of moral compass that guides and restrains the violent tendencies of their fellow officers in the North and in the West. Among the three American political cultures, the moralistic states of the North have a much lower level of most sorts of crimes, including assaults against—and by—police officers than does the South.

Violence as a Response to the Modern Organization of Society

Another prominent argument about murders and assaults is that the rampant violence of American society is a social pathology. It is a reflection of America's role as the leading post-industrial power of the modern world. Accordingly, in the transformation from the farms and small towns of the nineteenth century came the collapse of all the support systems for individuals, including the family, the church and the community. With their demise there remained little to check violent human egotistic tendencies, which began to win out over the virtues of altruism and cooperation.

The culmination of this process takes two steps. The first is described by the social obligation theory of crime, which argues that much of America's problems result from our failure to communicate social norms too increasingly large segments of society (e.g., *Mead* 1986). The second step is a rational choice perspective, which says that as these norms start to disappear, it becomes increasingly rational for those who would like to live in a peaceful and harmonious society to consider employing violence themselves. As violence becomes increasingly more effective in many situations, violence becomes a more commonly adopted alternative. While people regret having to use violence, they increasingly feel that they have no choice.

Society as the Machine

Modern society has become increasingly constructed in such a way that human beings are no longer the ultimate value embodied in the Golden Rule's "Do onto others as you would have them do onto you." And instead of Immanuel Kant's equivalent prescription that "One should look upon others as ends in themselves rather than only as means toward one's own ends," in the modern post-industrial state other people are just a means to advancing one's own selfish ends. The structure created by the culmination of the industrial revolution replaced an older system based much more heavily on inter-personal values. Today what dominates is bureaucracy, technology, the machine, and the organization. The more traditional American values have been relegated to a lower status—if not discarded altogether. Men, women, children, the poor and the elderly are treated as inferior entities, whose existence is only a way for others to make profits.

Economic factors often have been cited as major sources of criminality, not only in the direct manner that violence is a means to achieve valued goods, but in the indirect fashion that the modern capitalist system has destroyed traditional values. Friedrick Engles (*1845*) was one of

the first to argue that economic distress dehumanizes people and strips them of their civilized values. Relative deprivation theorists also believe that crime results from large differences in wealth.[11] Both of these problems are associated with industrialization and post-industrialization, which cause the breakdown of traditional, pre-industrial values.[12]

Humans have thus become appendages to the machine, which is embodied in the state and the corporation. Their role is to serve. The notion of this economy of mass consumption was clearly portrayed by Lewis Mumford:

> The tendency in mass production is to transfer initiative and significance from the worker who once operated the machine to the machine that operates the worker. As the process becomes more highly rationalized, on its own narrow terms, the worker becomes, as it were, derationalized, and this applies on every level of organization (*Mumford 1954: 53*).

Directing his attention to white-collar workers, Robert Presthus (*1965*) was equally disturbed by the alienation and dehumanization of humans in modern society:

> Today, however, big organizations tend to view man instrumentally...Administrators often try to reconcile the organization's interests with those of the individual, but they tend nevertheless to view human beings as instruments designed to achieve ends considered by the organization to be more important than those of any individual person (*Presthus 1965: 25*).

Although both of these perspectives were predated by Marx's insight about basic values being derived from the individual's relation to a society's economic means of production, violence would seem to be almost rational and normal in contemporary American society where all things and all people are perceived as interchangeable throw-away parts. In such a topsy-turvy value hierarchy where inanimate machines and organizations take precedence over the lives and welfare of real living people, the preconditions for violence are already well established.

Those who believe that in the structure of the modern society lies the bases of most violent human behavior see demeaning and devaluing

people in this manner as a necessary prerequisite for setting the stage to treat people with violence. If people are not very important, why should society be concerned if pain, injury, and destruction are inflicted on them? After all, machines break down and eventually are discarded, so why not the same with people who are subservient to machines? In a society where humans have become so depersonalized, dehumanized, and degraded, it should come as no surprise that violence is a common result, and there is both more violence among civilians and more civilian attacks on public servants.

A similar sort of observation about modern governments was made by a British newspaper toward the end of World War II. In describing the authoritarian Nazi state and Albert Speer, who was one of its leading architects, the Observer noted:

> Speer is not one of the flamboyant and picturesque Nazis. Whether he has any other conventional political opinions at all is unknown. He might have joined any other political party which gave him a job and a career. He is very much the successful average man, well-dressed, civil, noncorrupt, very middle-class in his style of life, with a wife and six children. Much less than any other of the German leaders does he stand for anything particularly German or particularly Nazi. He rather symbolizes a type which is becoming increasingly important...the pure technician, the classless bright young man without background, with no other original aim than to make his way in the world and no other means than his technical and managerial ability. It is the lack of psychological and spiritual ballast, and the ease with which he handles the terrifying technical and organizational machinery of our age, which makes the slight type go extremely far nowadays...The Hitlers and the Himmlers we may well get rid of, but the Speers... will long be with us (*quoted in Brunk, et al. 1996: 31-32*).

Political Interest Groups

Another school of theorists see interest groups as a major, but indirect source of criminal behavior through the loss of governmental legitimacy. According to the view that the purpose of the law is to provide neutral, fair and objective standards, the selfish actions of interest groups to benefit themselves at the expense of others so undermines the structure of the legal system that its justification is slowly eroded. Interest groups do this by subverting the law's most fundamental purpose of fairness.

The basic goal of interest groups is to create special privileges that apply only to their own people. This destroys the legitimacy of the legal system in the eyes of anyone who examines it closely, and eventually the legitimacy of the state is destroyed as well. As time passes, fewer citizens will automatically obey the law or follow the wishes of the police and others in positions of authority when asked to do so, until both the law and the agents of government become irrelevant in regulating behavior and solving disputes. As the legitimacy of the legal system further fades, the level of societal violence increases.

Ironically, the first scholars to make such an argument were not from the industrial West, but were traditional Chinese historians. For while interest groups are most common in modern societies, they existed long before the industrial revolution. The chief ingredient of the Chinese dynastic cycle theory of history was the imperial tax system (*Wang 1936, Meskill 1965*). When the bureaucracy needed money, it turned to large landowners, who were allowed to buy tax exemptions in perpetuity for their estates. The result was a short run increase in operating funds for the empire, but in the long run this policy shifted the burden of taxation from the wealthy— who constituted a class-based interest group—to the unorganized masses. The masses eventually revolted in desperation, killed many officials, and formed a new government. Then the cycle began again.

Among the loudest of the recent critics of contemporary interest group's is Mancur Olson (*1965 1983*), who has proposed a grand theory of the decline of nations that rests upon the selfish actions of these interests. Their actions undermine the structure of the economy, and eventually undermine the structure of society as a whole.[13] In regard to the United States, an earlier writer put it this way:

> ... the notion that legislatures, in enacting criminal legislation, are intervening for the common good or general welfare cannot be reconciled with the harsh realism of our

politics. Such intervention is usually the result of effective pressure exerted by some group with important political influence (*Fuller 1942: 677*).

Accordingly, laws represent the preference of the politically powerful, but as time passes the system of laws becomes internally contradictory. With so many interests fighting to impose their own special rules there is no way to keep all the rules consistent with each other. Eventually, very few members of society—including the politically powerful—can be persuaded to obey a system of laws that rests upon conflicting definitions of morality and fairness with which no one can fully agree.

More recently a version of this ideal has been advocated by some physical scientists who argue that many quite varied sorts of systems are inherently fragile. Similar to the interest group theorists, they argue that every society is forced to adopt more and more rules and regulations as time passes just to maintain itself. Eventually these elaborate systems can no longer be justified because they are internally contradictory or have become so complicated that following their details is too costly a burden to bear. This leaves the police, civil servants and other defenders of the status quo in an untenable position. Of all the arguments about the sources of violence against authority, this is easily the most novel, and perhaps the most generalizable, as well.[14] Unfortunately, it also is the theory of violence that has seen the least empirical investigation.

Morality Laws

Another type of approach to public policy has caused a great deal of enforcement and associated problems. It concerns laws that try to regulate culturally disputed areas of morality. Such laws create crimes that at first do not have any victims, but after the laws have been passed there is a great incentive to violate them for economic gain. With the potential for profit comes an incentive for violence. So these morality laws eventually create their own victims and can cause a great deal of violence against the police, IRS, INS, DEA, and FBI.

The best historical example of this sort of situation was the fiasco of national prohibition after passage of the Eighteenth Amendment. It was a morally-based stricture that a Protestant majority imposed upon Catholics and city dwellers, but since a large minority of the population saw no virtue in abstinence from alcohol, the result was a political and legal disaster. In parts of Chicago and other major cities the police lost almost all control. A common result with such situations is rampant police corruption, and sometimes *de facto* local governments of criminals.

In the big cities the anti-prohibition gang organizations were viewed as legitimate by much of the population. In fact, they engaged in many of the same behaviors as the formal governments they largely replaced, including charity work and using force to rub out the opponents of their power system. So by attempting to control too much, the legal government undercut its own legitimacy. Rather than increasing its control over the behavior of its citizens, it lost much of it, instead. After the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment, the principal economic beneficiaries of continuing state-level prohibition laws were bootleggers, who remain some of its major supporters today in the South. There are strong parallels in this historical example to the contemporary situation of illegal drugs, as well.

Some authorities go further to generalize these examples and argue that such repressive actions are a systematic tactic of most regimes. This is because a common goal of elites is to suppress the undesirable—from their perspective—activities of the groups that are not well represented in the political process (e.g., *Vold 1958*). Another example of this sort of process is the infringement of the religious rights of Native Americans, who were prohibited from using their traditional drugs during religious ceremonies. Seen from this perspective, as well, alcohol is legal because many legislators drink, while heroin, crack cocaine, and other currently illegal drugs are illegal because none of the underclass are members of Congress. If they were, then today's illegal drugs would not be prohibited.

Richard Quinney generalizes this argument by contending that the legal definition of criminal behavior is enlarged during class conflicts when the elite makes various actions illegal that previously were not addressed by the law (*Quinney 1970:15-25*). But whenever such competing value structures are introduced, this tends to neutralize conventional values, and as unanticipated major consequence is an increase in the crime rate, which is exactly what the elite was hoping to reduce (e.g., *Sykes and Matza 1957*). Since there are many clear instances when the law is not economically,

ethnically or religiously unbiased, the police and other government enforcement officers often are seen by many people as just tools of exploitation used by the ruling elite during periods of internal conflict. As such, they become a legitimate target for assault since those who are oppressed by the current regime do not believe that all its rules are legitimate.[15] And it is only with such a sense of legitimacy that most people automatically accept police authority without being physically coerced to do so.

Concluding Remarks

Because we have been taught to believe that there is a general consensus on matters of right and wrong in American society, most of us are included to dismiss many extreme examples of the use of force against authority figures as aberrations. But that is a big mistake. They only appear to be aberrations because the political and education systems usually stress our common interests and try to ignore the things that are most likely to tear us apart. Instead, as a result of the ethnic, cultural, ethical, religious, economic, social, regional, and a multitude of other differences that exist in American society, it is impossible to present an all inclusive and generally agreed upon definition of what constitutes the legitimate use of force. Although America is generally a violent society, there is still a great deal of variation across the states in the propensity of Americans to use violence. One consequence of this geographical variability is that what is a legally acceptable level of force in one jurisdiction may not be an acceptable act in another jurisdiction for either governmental officials or civilians.

In fact, there is an entire region of the country—the South—that has always been recognized as a region of exceptionalism regarding almost everything, including the use of violent force to solve disputes. The South is much more violent than the other regions of the US, and the Southern threshold justifying the legitimate use of violence is substantially lower than in most other parts of the country. So it should not be too surprising that many more police officers are killed in the South—where violence is seen as a more legitimate way to solve problems and where authority figures have less legitimacy among many citizens. Not only do there tend to be more killings and assaults in the South, but its state and local governments often are prone to greater corruption and using more forceful responses against civilians, as well.

While the national and American state governments have tried to monopolize the authority to grant people the right to use force, they have not been all that successful in convincing most citizens that only the government has the right to decide when physical force can be used. Usually Americans will defer to the authority of the government in such matters, but in certain particularly contentious situations, what one group sees as the legitimate use of force, another group may see as unacceptable violence that should be treated as criminal behavior.

This is because disputes over the use of force often rest on fundamental, but many times unrecognized, disagreements. What is more important: Honoring the commandment "Thou shall not kill." Or protecting the life of an innocent civilian? Consequently, some disputes over the proper use of force can never be resolved through public discussion or education. Ironically, increased public discussion about them may just increase the hostility between the contending sides. As with the abortion controversy, an open discussion will show everyone that there really are important differences between their positions, which are not just a matter of semantics.

In trying to understand the motives and causes of violence, it is helpful to distinguish individual acts of violence from acts of group violence. Under each of these broad divisions there are a number of categories that enable the different causes of American violent behavior to be classified. These demonstrate that some type of violence are peculiar to attacks on authority figures, while some are not distinguishable from other kinds of violence in our society. The following listing seems to account for most of the goal-oriented violence that occurs in American society.

Individual Violence

1. Violence used in self-defense against assault.

2. Violence for economic gain, e.g., armed robbery.

3. Violence as a means to achieve basic needs, e.g., stealing a loaf of bread to feed one's starving children.

4. Violence as a subcultural indication of grown-up status, e.g., not considering yourself to be a man until you have been in a fist fight.

5. Violence as a means to maintain one's own identity and self-worth, e.g., punching out a person who insults your Texas heritage.

6. Violence against authority figures as a response to unresolved psychological conflicts, e.g., a teenager goes ballistic and runs over a police officer after a routine traffic stop because the kid hates his father.

Group Violence

1. Violence as a way to solidify an economic advantage over others, e.g., gang controlled drug distribution territories and prohibition era protection rackets.

2. Violence as a symbol of group solidarity and commitment, e.g. initiation rituals such as drive-by shootings.

3. Violence as a way of ensuring political control of one group over another, e.g., Southern lynchings of Blacks.

4. Violence as group revenge, e.g., the murder of a rabbinical student by a Black mob after a Black child had been killed by an automobile that was driven by an orthodox Jew.

5. Violence against people whose behaviors one believes are so evil that one is required to take all possible actions to destroy and punish them, e.g. abortion clinic bombings.

6. Violence against authority symbols as a way to so severely destabilize the system that it will be possible to overthrow the current regime, e.g., the Oklahoma City bombing.

7. Violence as a contagion process spreading like a plague once it has been triggered, e.g., the Vietnam anti-war riots and the riots that followed acquittal of the police officers involved in the Rodney King beating.

Factors Affecting the Probability of Triggering Violence

Furthermore, the propensity for employing violence for either individual or group goals within the United States seems to vary by:

1. Whether a particular sort of violent behavior is considered to be criminal in a particular jurisdiction, e.g., what is the definition of a reasonable use of lethal force.

2. The social subculture where one was raised, e.g., violence is more common in the South and the inner-city.

3. How much one's religious and ethical beliefs justify the use of force to resolve disputes, e.g., whether a person is a Mennonite or one's family has a long history of either police service or jail time.

4. Whether one has been a victim of violence in the past or has already routinely used physical violence, i.e., "violence breeds violence."

5. How reasonable one perceives the legal system, e.g., a Mississippi Black in the thirties who was unfairly accused of a capital crime should have been quite inclined to use violence in escaping because he likely would not get a fair trial.

6. The extent to which one believes that violence is an effective strategy, i.e., if it appears to work, then you will be more inclined to use it.

7. The monetary cost of violence, e.g., a person already included to use violence for business purposes is more likely to spend $2500 on hiring a hit man than if killing a competitor costs $250,000.

8. How physically risky you perceive your situation, e.g., a police officer in a small town where there has never been a murder is much less likely to think that a suspect might kill him than a Chicago police officer who has twice been wounded in the line of duty.

9. Whether there are any physical characteristics that lower one's threshold for employing violence, e.g., the use of psychotic inducing-drugs or physiological abnormalities.

10. Whether one believes that violence can be employed to achieve a particular goal without setting off an unending chain of violent events, as with prohibition era gang wars.

Given this discussion, we can now better see that only certain causes of violent behavior are closely related to one's status as an authority figure, while others are not. This revelation is particularly important for understanding the reasons for attacks on American police officers.

Notes

1. For some examples of representative studies of violence see Hannah Arendt (1969). <u>On Violence</u>. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World; Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Gurr, eds. (1969). <u>Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives</u>. New York: Bantam; Monica D. Blumenthal, et al. (1972). <u>Justifying Violence: Attitudes of American Men</u>. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research; Karl L. Schonborn (1975). <u>Dealing with Violence: The Challenge Faced by Police and Other Peacekeepers</u>. Springfield: Charles C. Thomas; Graeme Newan (1979). <u>Understanding Violence</u>. New York: J. B. Lippincott; David Lester (1982). Civilians Who Kill Police Officers and Police officers Who Kill Civilians. <u>Journal of Police Science and Administration</u> 10: 384-387; Alphonso Pinkney (1972). <u>The American Way of Violence</u>. New York: Vintage Books; Larry Baron and Murray A. Straus (1988). Cultural and Economic Sources of Homicides in the United States. <u>Sociological Quarterly</u> 29: 371-390; Ruth D. Peterson and William C. Bailey (1988). Structural Influences on the Killing of Police: A Comparison with General Homicides. <u>Justice Quarterly</u> 5: 207-233; and William C. Bailey and Ruth D. Peterson (1994). Murder, Capital Punishment and Deterrence: A Review of the Evidence and Examination of Police Killings. <u>Journal of Social Issues</u> 50: 53-74.

2. For general overviews and bibliographies see Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Gurr, eds. (1969). <u>Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives</u>. New York: Bantam; Richard E. Rubenstein (1970). <u>Rebels in Eden: Mass Political Violence in the United States</u>. Boston: Little Brown & Company; and Jean-Claude

Chesnais (1992). The History of Violence: Homicide and Suicide through the Ages. <u>International Social Science Journal</u> 44: 217-234.

3. As we will discuss later, there are subcultures of violence within the United States where the use of force is more common because it is seen as a more legitimate strategy. Ironically, one of the common American justifications for using force lies in the religious values of certain conservative Protestants. Their communities may become even more violent as a result of their attempt to decrease violence by often using physical force to impose order. Since violence tends to perpetuate itself, those who have suffered violence in their youth are more apt to be violent as adults. For a review of the literature on US religion and the justification of violence see Christopher G. Ellison and John P. Bartkowski (1997). Religion and the Legitimization of Violence: Conservative Protestantism and Corporal Punishment, in Jennifer Turpin and Lester R. Kurtz, eds. (1997). <u>The Web of Violence</u>. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. [Return to your place in the document]

4. For a variety of perspectives see D. P. Phillips (1980). The Deterrent Effect of Capital Punishment. <u>American Journal of Sociology</u> 86: 139-148; Walter Bailey (1984). Capital Punishment and Lethal Assaults against Police. <u>Criminology</u> 19: 608-625; W. S. McManus (1985). Estimates of the Deterrent Effect of Capital Punishment: The Importance of the Researcher's Prior Beliefs. <u>Journal of Political Economy</u> 93: 417-425; William C. Bailey and Ruth D. Peterson (1994). Murder, Capital Punishment and Deterrence: A Review of the Evidence and Examination of Police Killings. <u>Journal of Social Issues</u> 50: 53-74; C. E. Tygart (1994). Respondents' Free Will View of Criminal Behavior and Support for Capital Punishment. <u>International Journal of Public Opinion Research</u> 6: 371-374; and Michael Mitchell and Jim Sidanius (1995). Social Hierarchy and the Death Penalty: A Social Dominance Perspective. <u>Political Psychology</u> 16: 591-619.

5. For an extensive discussion of the justifications for using lethal force see Chapter 2 in Gregory G. Brunk, et al. (1996). <u>Understanding Attitudes about War: Modeling Moral Judgments</u>. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press; Richard Fuller (1942) Morals and Criminal Law. <u>Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology</u> 32: 624-630; and C. E. Tygart (1994). Respondents' Free Will View of Criminal Behavior and Support for Capital Punishment. <u>International Journal of Public Opinion Research</u> 6: 371-374.

6. Of course, there are all sorts of other morally-based arguments against capital punishment, including its irreversibility, which does not allow for correcting unfortunate mistakes, and the fact that there is a higher chance of a minority person being executed than a murderer from the dominant class.

7. If this sounds like an outlandish argument, recall the first Oklahoma City bombing trail where Timothy McVeigh showed no remorse during the proceedings and has showed none since.

8. See Daniel Elazar (1986). <u>American Federalism: A View from the States</u>. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Gregory G. Brunk and Laura Ann Wilson (1991). Interest Groups and Criminal Behavior. <u>Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency</u> 28: 157-173.

9. That this is not a purely geographical categorization is obvious because California, which entered the Union before the Civil War, is empirically classified more as a member of the *moralistic* North (sometimes called the Northeast) than the *individualistic* West. The political culture of the West is not as morally-minded as that of the North, but is far more so than the South. One aspect that distinguishes between the North and West is that the latter has a certain libertarian "buyer beware" quality to its economic transactions.

10. For example, see Marvin E. Wolfgang and Franco Ferracutti (1967). The Subculture of Violence. London: Tavistock; Roger B. Canfield (1973). Black Ghetto Riots and Campus Disorders: A Subculture and Philosophical Study of Democratic Legitimacy and American Political Violence. San Francisco: R & E Research Associates; Samuel Chapman, et al., eds. (1974). Perspectives on Police Assaults in the South Central United States, Vols. I, II , and III. Norman: Bureau of Government Research, University of Oklahoma and Gregory G. Brunk and Laura Ann Wilson (1991). Interest Groups and Criminal Behavior. Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency 28: 157-173.

11. Examples include Robert K. Merton (1968). Social Theory and Social Structure. New York: Free Press; Ted Robert Gurr (1970). Why Men Rebel. Princeton: Princeton University Press; and Herbert J. Gans (1974). More Equality. New York: Vintage.

12. See, for example, J. J. Tobias (1967). Crime and Industrial Society in the 19th Century. New York: Shocken; L. I. Shelly (1981). The Impact of Industrialization and Urbanization on Crime. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press; and Sethard Fisher (1987). Economic Development and Crime. American Journal of Economics and Sociology 46: 17-34.

13. For a review of this literature see Gregory G. Brunk and Laura Ann Wilson (1991). Interest Groups and Criminal Behavior. Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency 28: 157-173.

14. The theory is based on the hard science's version of the voter's paradox (See William H. Riker (1982). <u>Liberalism against Populism</u>. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman; and William H. Riker (l986). <u>The Art of Political Manipulation</u>. New Haven: Yale University Press). It explains why the actions of interest groups can be so damaging not only to the economic system, but the political and legal systems, as well. Its statistical generalization is called "self-organizing criticality," which has only been so far applied with any empirical success to explaining the behavior of such physical systems as sand piles (e.g., Per Bak and Kan Chen (1991). Self-Organized Criticality. <u>Scientific American</u> 264: 46-53.

15. See, for example Daniel Kieselhorst (1974). <u>A Theoretical Perspective of Violence Against Police</u>. Norman: Bureau of Government Research, University of Oklahoma; Peter Manning (1980). Violence and the Police Role. <u>Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science</u> 452: 135-144; and William K. Muir (1980). Power Attracts Violence. <u>Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences</u> 452: 48-52.

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