VIOLENCE IN CONTEXT

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INTRODUCTION

'We live in an increasingly violent world.' This 'statement of fact' sums up one of the most popular ideas of our time, an idea that is affirmed and confirmed almost daily in the media's coverage of acts of brutality, aggression and violence. The message of the media is clear – violence is bad, abnormal, irrational and mindless, and its prevalence to-day is symptomatic of the ills of our society; senseless actions in a sick society; something must be done.

What history teaches us, however, is that violence is not atypical, or anomalous; on the contrary it is usual and endemic in the historical development of all nations. Virtually every study points to the fact that violence has been pervasive, and sometimes chronic, as far as history records. In an early study, Sorokin[1] surveyed the history of eleven nations over many centuries and concluded: 'Disturbances occur much oftener than is usually realised ... On the average of from four to seven years, as a rule, one considerable social disturbance may be expected. The fact that these phenomena occur so frequently confirms our conclusions that they are inseparable from the very existence and functioning of social bodies'. Sorokin also felt that he had been able to explode such myths as the belief that history exhibits a trend towards peacefulness, towards 'civilization', and that violence is thus atavistic, that only some countries are violent and not others, that outbreaks of violence occur only in cases of decay and decline and not 'in periods of blossoming and healthy growth'.[2]

In this short essay I propose to elaborate further on some of the

[1] *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, Vol. III: Fluctuation of Social Relationships, War and Revolution (Allen and Unwin) London, 1937.

[2] This conclusion contrasts sharply with the words attributed by the Italian philosopher and journalist Andrea Caffi to Condorcet, namely that 'the more (a) civilization will spread over the earth, the more war and conquests will disappear, together with slavery and poverty.' See, Caffi: *A Critique of Violence* (Bobbs-Merrill) N. York, 1966.

more popular 'myths' associated with violence as well as briefly go over the main theories that have been put forward in order to explain it. I make no apologies for attempting to simplify a topic that, is by its very nature, complicated with branches and offshoots in psychology, psychiatry, law, sociology, history and criminology. Nor is this essay intended as a phenomenological[3] account of violence over any given period of time or with reference to any particular country. My aim is simply to tackle the subject from a succession of different angles, all of which are relatively complex in themselves.

The Problem of Definition

A major problem in any essay on violence is how to define the word. There are many and varied forms of violence, and perhaps as many definitions. Indeed, one Swedish philosopher has entitled his essay 'Violence is a Porous Term'[4] and he goes on to explain that 'with porosity I mean that the borders of the term are not fixed in normal use of language. This non-determination is the very reason for the usefulness of the term in, for example, political propaganda'.

Among the many definitions of violence that have been proposed we find: 'behaviour designed to inflict personal injury to people or damage to property';[5] 'the intentional use of force to injure, kill or destroy property';[6] 'destructive harm ... including not only physical assaults that damage the body but also ... the many techniques of inflicting harm by mental or emotional means'.[7] These definitions valuable as they may seem, fail to take account of a very important distinction, namely the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence and, to carry the discussion into the field of the criminal law, the distinction between criminal and non-criminal violence. To-day's violence may often, through the passage of time, become tomorrow's heroism and martyrdom. The problem of legitimate or illegitimate violence is undoubtedly ex-

[3] By 'phenomenological' is meant the attempt to identify and describe the essences of experience as directly apprehended, without reference to any metaphysical or epistemological presuppositions.

[4] Tage Johansson: Om Väld-ett peröst begrapp, *Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift*, 1971.

[5] Graham and Gurr: *The History of Violence in America: A Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence* (Bantam), N. York, 1969.

[6] Skolnick: *The Politics of Protest* (Clarion) N. York, 1969.

[7] Walter: *Terror and Resistance – A Study of Political Violence* (Oxford U.P.) 1969.

tremely complex. For example, a declared war, in which many thousands or even millions of men, women, and children are slaughtered is regarded as legitimate violence.[8] Yet undeclared acts of war, such as the IRA bombings in England are regarded as illegitimate violence although many fewer people are injured, maimed or killed. The fact that the action is regarded as terrorism (a convenient 'political' label) rather than the action of one sovereign State against another means that the violence is regarded as illegitimate and unacceptable.

A further example is provided by the resistance movements which operated during the Second World War. These carried out violent actions against the enemy occupying armies and were applauded by the population and regarded as heroes. Actions of a similar nature now against their own governments would be regarded as murder and high treason. Thus very often the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence is related to political and partisan perceptions and not to any intrinsic element of the act itself or to clear legal principles. Similar issues arise when lesser forms of violence in terms of physical contact are examined. For instance, in a game of rugby a good deal of physical contact takes place, sometimes of a very brutal nature, in which punches, kicks or vicious tackles may be aimed by one member of a team against a member of the opposing team. This is regarded as legitimate as long as it takes place during the hour and a half of play and on the playing ground. If the same behaviour took place in the dressing rooms or in a bar it would become a brawl and illegitimate, the police would intervene and the whole criminal process could be brought to bear against the perpetrators.

In an attempt to resolve the problem of the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence, Macfarlane[9] proposes the following definition: 'Violence is the capacity to impose, or the act of imposing one's will upon another, where the imposition is held to be illegitimate. Force is the capacity to impose, or the act of imposing one's will upon another where the imposition is held to be legitimate'. Though this definition does not avoid the subjective perception of the act in question, it emphasises that if we see an action as good or desirable we will tend to avoid calling it violent, but instead talk of *force*. Frequently, in fact, we ascribe

[8] One of the unresolved problems in the sphere of public international law is whether war or an act of war (other than resort to war in self-defence) can in any circumstances be *legal* in the light of the United Nations Charter and the judgements of the Nuremburg and Tokyo Tribunals.

[9] *Violence and the State* (Nelson) London, 1974.

to actions some particular quality that they do not in themselves possess; our judgement of the actions is contained in the words we select to 'describe' them.[10] We thus tend to 'see' violence according to our cultural, social and political values and biases. One recalls how in the Vietnam war, the Viet Cong regarded American military activity as violent aggression, whereas the U.S. Chief of Staff insisted that it was a show of force. The Communist take over of the South was hailed by Hanoi as the reunification of Vietnam; others saw in it the violent subjugation of a plucky little nation for whom freedom is nowhere in sight.[11]

We can add to this confusion by considering the possibility of verbal violence. Another form of violence is that which Tutt calls 'emotional violence' as the opposite of verbal violence, '... the emotional violence of strictly observed silence within a home, in which a father and mother refuse to talk to one another, the pregnant pause, these can be a form of violence to the emotions and the senses'.[12]

So the first and most important point about violence as behaviour is that it is not a homogeneous concept. It lumps together a whole range of behaviour, and all-embracing definitions and simple explanations cannot therefore be expected since it is unlikely that such heterogeneous behaviour could arise from one single cause.[13] Not surprisingly, most legislation refrains from giving one single

[10] This is one aspect of the *labelling theory* which one comes across in the literature on the sociology of deviance.

[11] Rulli: *La Guerra 'Americana' nel Vietnam* (ASCA) Rome, 1973.

[12] Tutt: *Violence* (HMSO) 1976. See also, Storr: *Human Destructiveness* (Chatto-Heinemann) Sussex U.P., 1972.

[13] Psychologists frequently distinguish between aggressiveness, aggression and violence. The word *aggressiveness* describes a state of mind, a tension which keeps the organism in motion until the motivation is reduced. This definition – a very broad one indeed – implies that aggressiveness is an essential state of mind without which the personality cannot develop and, in a wider context, without which a living being cannot take its place in the social and geographical environment. This 'state of mind' which aggressiveness constitutes does not necessarily lead to *aggression* itself. The word *aggression* takes us a step further, from a potentiality to an *act*, and this act is often defined as a form of behaviour aimed at the partial or total, literal or figurative destruction of an object or a person. Finally, the term *violence* is held to involve an *illegitimate* or at least *illegal* use of force. Hence psychologists and psychoanalists speak of a specifically *human* type of behaviour when talking of violence, because it is assessed by reference to rules or laws. See, Debuyst: Etiology of Violence, *Report of Conference on Violence* (Council of Europe), 1974.

definition of violence and sometimes refrains entirely from defining it; at other times, the constituent elements of violence as defined for legal purposes do not tally with popular notions of violent behaviour. All of this is certainly true of our criminal law (Ch.12, Revised Ed. of the Laws of Malta 1942) where the basic distinction is between public and private violence. *Private* violence constitutes in itself those offences belonging to the class of offences against the person or the liberty of the individual, such as illegal arrest, detention and confinement (Section 85), bodily harm caused to Judge, Attorney-General, Magistrate or Juror (S.93), wilful homicide (S. 225), involuntary bodily harm (S. 240), abandoning or exposing a child under seven years (S. 259); or it may constitute an ingredient of a particular offence such as the crimes contemplated in Sections 90, 95, and 212; or it may constitute an aggravation of certain other offences (e.g. Sections 217(1)(a) and 275). With the exception of Section 275 (theft aggravated by violence), in none of the abovementioned instances is violence defined, not even when violence is an essential ingredient of the crime (as in Section 212, rape or camal knowledge with violence). As regards *public* violence, this is considered as a special crime against public tranquility and constitutes a crime in itself (Section 66) and it aggravates all other offences which it accompanies (Section 63). The crime of public violence contemplated by Section 66 is constituted and completed by the mere act of the assembling of three or more persons with intent to commit an offence and two of whom carry arms proper.[14] Surely this crime is far removed from what most people would consider as a 'violent crime', as far removed, in fact, from popular notions of violence as the definition of aggression used by psychologists in laboratory experiments on violence, namely, the 'delivery of noxious stimuli by one person to another'.

The Interest in Violence

I think it may be helpful, at this stage, if some brief consideration is given to the reasons why people are interested in criminal violence. For what is most striking in the literature on violence published over the last two decades is not just the variations in the level of knowledge of the subject, but also the different levels of reality and images which form the basis of attempted understanding and communication of the subject. Broadly speaking, the interest in the subject springs from four main motives.

First there is a strong feeling in many European countries and in the U.S.A. that this kind of behaviour has been getting worse

[14] i.e., 'armi regulari'.

and has probably been increasing in recent years to an extent which gives rise to concern in relation to community safety and well-being; as a result of this members of the public wish to be better informed and to receive answers to the questions whether there has really been an increase and, if so, what is the extent and nature and why it has occurred. Secondly, there is the concern of those who have an immediate practical share in, and duty of, prevention and control; namely, in the law-enforcement sphere, the police, the judiciary, the administrators and the correctional treatment personnel. Thirdly there is the academic thirst for investigation stimulating those who make an objective study of the phenomena, substituting hypotheses by empirical research; building up theoretical explanations; or attempting to understand the phenomena on the basis of the existentialist experience of the violators and victims in the context of the social, ideological and cultural setting in which it occurs. Lastly, there is the inherent fascination of the subject, a fascination which seems to be lacking in property (non-violent) crimes and in white-collar crime in general. This curiosity may be merely a morbid appetite or it may spring from some primary disposition or instinct, because aggression, in one form or another, seems to be elemental in each of us as human beings. This is reflected in the vast literature of murder 'thrillers' which is found in all Western types of societies.

The Increase in Violence

Therefore, the second important factor to consider in any discussion on violence is whether, as the media is continually telling us, violence is increasing and we now live in a violent age. It is important, of course, to bear in mind that not all media may be willing or able to portray violence as on the increase. Censorship, government monopoly, vested interests of all kinds determine, say, a newspaper's choice of news items, news headlines, and covert or overt distortion of facts.[15]

Despite the existence of statistics purporting to show an 'increase' in violence, we do not know enough of the facts to make a quantitative investigation of the amount or intensity of violence in the history of any particular nation. 'It is only through knowledge of its history that a society can have knowledge of itself. As a man without memory and self-knowledge is a man adrift, so a society without memory ... and self-knowledge is a society adrift'.[16]

[15] See, Cohen and Young: *The Manufacture of News – Deviance, Social Problems and the Mass Media* (Constable) London, 1973.
[16] Marwick: *The Nature of History* (Macmillan) London, 1970.

Writing at the end of the last century, Emile Durkheim was categorical in his assertion that crime, and consequently criminal violence, had increased. 'It has everywhere increased. In France the increase (from the beginning of the nineteenth century) is nearly 300%'.[17] Yet very often apparently historical assessments are invalidated by the demonstration that not only the form of violence but the ways contemporaries had of identifying the problem have changed from one age to the next. A clear illustration of this is over the matter of baby 'battering' which in some countries (certainly in England) is regarded as a major social problem.[18] And yet in the past one hundred and fifty years infant mortality was much greater and the treatment of children often brutal; but because the relationship between parents and children was regarded differently and the State's right of intervention in family affairs was limited, to most people it was not a cause for great concern. A similar argument is traced by Gibbens[19] with regard to wife battering, a problem which, he argues, has for a number of social reasons become more visible and less acceptable, independently of whether or not it has changed in extent. McClintock in his well-known book *Crimes of Violence*[20] puts forward a number of reasons why we should not accept at face value the increase in the rate of violent crimes as it emerges from the statistics. McClintock calculated that changes in police methods of recording crime would by themselves have caused an apparent increase of 13% between 1938 and 1960. Another important factor was the increased readiness of ordinary members of the public to report such crimes. The wider the margin of unreported crime, the greater the scope for apparent increases of this kind. In districts where fights are an everyday occurrence and antagonism to the police is endemic, acts of violence often come to the notice of the police only when one of the participants reaches the casualty department of a hospital. McClintock believes that even in 1960 there were in England many

[17] *The Rules of Sociological Method* (Free Press of Glencoe) N. York, 1958.
[18] See, Smith: *The Battered Child Syndrome* (Butterworths) London, 1975.
[19] Violence in the Family, in *Medico-Legal Journal*, 43, 1975.
[20] (Macmillan) London, 1963. The sample studied consisted of recorded crimes of violence in England and Wales in 1950, 1957 and 1960 (first six months). A more detailed analysis was made of those occuring in the Metropolitan area, including sexual offences in which violence or threats were used, and data analysed in this part included, (a) the locations, methods and victims, and injuries to the victims; (b) the characteristics of crimes not 'cleared up' or not leading to prosecutions or convictions; (c) the characteristics, histories, sentences and subsequent reconvictions of the convicted offenders.

areas where only a fifth or a sixth of the assaults which occurred become known to the police. If so, such areas must have been even more numerous before the rehousing operations of the post-war decade. Moreover, if it is true that the middle class outlook is being acquired by an increasing number of skilled manual workers, the percentage of the population who regard the police as their natural enemies is probably decreasing. McClintock also suggests that the publicity given to crimes of violence by the press, radio and television may also have persuaded more people that it is their duty to report them. If the margin of unreported offences is as wide as McClintock estimates, such influences could account for a very large apparent increase. We have only to suppose that in pre-war England 10% of minor indictable assaults were reported, and that by the nineteen sixties 25% were reported, to see how the statistics would show an apparent increase of 250%. In other words, statistics of offences committed within any period or locality include only those 'known to the police'. If criminologists are to use these data to study the comparative incidence of different types of violent offences or changes in the level of criminality over time – through, for example, the construction of a crime index – or its relative occurrence in different social environments, they must investigate three major questions, namely: (a) what proportion of crime committed is known to the police, and does this ratio vary for different types of offences?; (b) is the ratio of crimes committed to crimes known constant over time and between different areas of the same country or in different countries?; (c) is the 'quality' of the crime reported constant over time and between different areas? Are, for example, 'n' cases of violence in 1938 similar to 'n' cases of violence in 1967 in terms of their seriousness and the circumstances in which they are committed? Only by answering these questions (and particularly (b), i.e. if it can be shown that a constant ratio of certain crimes is reported) will it be possible to develop an index from official statistics – like a price index – to measure fluctuations in the quantity and quality of violent crime that is committed. Without the assumption of constancy in reporting and recording practices an uncertain amount of any fluctuations in recorded crimes might be due to changes in reporting behaviour by victims and other witnesses of crime and to the actions of the police.[21]

[21] Hood and Sparks: *Key Issues in Criminology* (World University Library) London, 1970, esp. chs. 1 and 2; and, McClintock: Criminological and penological aspects of the dark figure of crime and criminality, in, *European Conference of Directors of Criminological Research Institutes* (Strasbourg) 1968.

'We cannot, of course, dismiss the whole of the apparent increase (as shown in official statistics) in this way; almost certainly some of it reflects a real trend. But equally certainly the real trend is not nearly as spectacular as the statistics makes it seem'.[22] Indeed the literature is replete with authors claiming that violence *is* on the increase.[23] Using arguments very similar to those outlined above, these authors purport to show that official statistics as well as self-report studies on hidden delinquency and victimization studies in fact *underestimate* the amount of violence and crime around us. As Box rightly observes:

> 'At one extreme there are persons with a conviction that the facts speak for themselves; at another extreme there are persons with a conviction that they ought to speak for the facts. Whilst neither motive should intrinsically arouse our suspicion, we should nonetheless be cautious and reserve our judgement; for allowing the facts to speak for themselves often masks an ignorance of the meaning of these facts and how they are officially compiled; and speaking for the facts is often a means of selective perception and interpretation to support and further personal, group or political interests'.[24]

THE NEWS MEDIA

Since the news media in most Western countries play such an important part in the orchestration of public crusades and moral panics about violent events, a word on the media at this stage seems opportune. The media are one of the principal agencies continually exploring society's normative boundaries, what are the breaking points and limits of social tolerance. This deconstruction and reconstruction of consensus is compounded by two aspects of media work. The first is news value, that structure of professional ideas and practices, of routine and know-how which organise the routine work of news-selection and construction. For news values, tied both to the professional requirements of journalists and the competitive requirements of the media, will always prefer the sensational, unpredictable, unexpected, dramatic, conflict and the extreme contrast over what is normal and predictable. In Jock Young's famous phrase, the media 'select events which are *atypical*, present them in a *stereotypical* fashion and contrast them

[22] Walker: *Crime and Punishment in Britain* (Edinburgh U.P.) 1968.

[23] Suffice it to mention, Wertham: *A Sign for Cain* (Collier-Macmillan) London, 1966; and, Porterfield: *Cultures of Violence* (Leo Potisham Foundation) Texas, 1965.

[24] *Deviance, Reality and Society* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston) London, 1971.

against a backcloth of normality which is *overtypical'*.[25] The second aspect is *visual* news value (especially in the case of television) and the choice of dramatic or sensational pictures as a way of making an impact compared with almost any other way of relaying information or analysing situations. The operation of news values through the media, and particularly the operation of visual news values in television, has the effect of representing every event at its most dramatic moment, which almost by definition, is its most violent moment. In the general search for the dramatic the media are inclined to select the most illegal aspect of something which is morally disapproved; the most subversive side of something which is illegal; and the most violent side of something which is subversive.

Closely allied with the notion of news selection is the concept of *deviance amplification.* The major exponent of this concept is the criminologist Leslie Wilkins, who notes that when society, usually via the media, defines a group of people as deviant it tends to react against them so as to isolate them from the company of 'normal' people. In this situation of isolation and alienation, the group tends to develop its own norms and values, which society perceives as even more deviant than before. As a consequence of this 'increase' in deviance, social reaction increases even further, the group is even more isolated and alienated, it acts even more deviantly, society acts increasingly strongly against it, and a spiral of deviance amplification occurs.[26] It is easy to see how, with some slight modifications, this concept can be applied to 'violence amplification': during a period of actual increase in the rate of violent crime, the feedback of information about this rise increases public sensitivity to this 'social problem', which in turn is reflected in increased reporting by this public to the police, hence amplifying the initial increase. All this is not intended to suggest that there is no violence or that it is not a 'social problem'. My point is simply that the media does use the considerable power at its disposal to keep alive, direct and to some extent exaggerate the problem as it is purveyed to the public.

There is still, however, divergence of opinion among researchers as to the extent of the actual impact of the media (particularly the press) on public perceptions of, and opinions about, crime and violence. The findings of one survey carried out in England by

[25] Young: Mass Media, Drugs and Deviance, in, *Deviance and Social Control*, ed. by Rock and Macintosh (Tavistock) London, 1974.

[26] Wilkins: Some Sociological Factors in Drug Addiction Control, in, *Narcotics* ed. by Wilner and Kassebaum (McGraw Hill) N. York, 1965.

Roshier and reported in *The Manufacture of News*[27] suggest that although the press does present a consistently biased picture of crime and criminals there is little evidence to show that this is very influential on public perceptions of, and opinions about, these phenomena. Roshier maintains that the simple, deterministic conception of the effects of the mass media, whether on attitudes, knowledge or behaviour, grossly underestimates the abilities of the recipients to differentiate and interpret the information they receive. 'Not only do they not confuse media fiction with reality but nor, it seems from this study, do they take media presentations of real events to be necessarily representative of reality'. In a somewhat similar survey carried out in Colorado (U.S.A.) different results emerged.[28] This study was designed to test two hypotheses: (a) that there is no consistent relationship between the amount of crime news in Colorado newspapers and the State crime rates, either for total crime or for various types of crime; (b) that public opinion about Colorado crime trends reflects trends in the amount of newspaper coverage rather than in actual Colorado crime rates. The findings of this study bear out the first hypothesis and lend considerable support to the second one. Which of course, can simply mean that the inhabitants of Colorado are more impressionable than the average Englishman!

A Historical Perspective

In one sense, the further back one goes in time the more the use of violence is inseparable from other features of social activity and political organisation. It is trite knowledge that in the past there was more 'justice' than law, and the exaction of the blood price for violent crime and murder was for a long time more important than the punishment of the offender as such. In England the task of the monarchy was, for centuries, to contain domestic warfare (and to channel the impulse to fight into service against national enemies) while establishing throughout the land respect for the king's peace underpinned by a growing body of customary and statute law. Even so, however, the main task was to maintain law and order in the towns and cities, not in the country-side. 'The urban activities of commerce and manufacture flourish best in conditions of civic peace and for four or five hundred years the greatest part of the effort to contain violence has been directed at the preservation of order and the promotion of seemly behaviour in

[27] *supra*, f.n. 15.
[28] Davis: Crime News in Colorado Newspapers, in, *The Manufacture of News, supra.*

our towns'.[29]

And yet, town dwellers were far from docile, as can be gleaned from this passage from *Itinerarium Britanniae*, by Andreas Franciscius written in 1497: 'Londoners have such fierce tempers and violent dispositions that they not only despise the way in which the Italians live but actually pursue them with uncontrollable hatred ... they sometimes drive us off with fists and blows of the truncheon'.[30]

This was tame stuff, however, compared with the terrifying tergiversations of the mob as it swung its destructive way into the smarter squares of 18th centuryLondon to the cries of 'No Popery', 'Give us back our eleven days', 'Wilkes and Liberty'. These events lie at the beginning of a hundred years in English History, from the mid-18th to the mid-19th century, which constitute a sort of golden age of challenge to law and order. Provincial towns suffered food riots and the violent destruction of turnpike gates. Gangs of labouring men marched to break machinery in the Plug and Luddite riots and, joined by craftsmen and lesser trades people, to demonstrate for parliamentary reforms or the People's Charter.

To emphasise the usualness, normality and continuity of violence is not to say that it is desirable. But surely, as hinted in the foregoing paragraph, it *might* be. Tyrants have been banished and despots deposed by violent means, by the use of violence. The assassinations of the Kennedys and of Martin Luther King outraged us – but the attempts to kill Hitler and the summary execution of Mussolini at the hands of the *Corpo Volontari della Libertà* are not similarly notorious. Indeed some philosophers (e.g. Suàrez) have even advocated regicide[31] as a final means of redressing gross evil when all other means had failed. Slavery in America and elsewhere was only abolished after considerable turmoil and violence. Historians who have concentrated not on leaders, emperors, governments and on events which have proved significant or cathartic to political development, but on the day to day lives of ordinary folk provide markedly different interpretations of historical development. One historian concludes that 'the chief moments at which ordinary people appeared unmistakably on the European historical scene before the industrial age were moments of revolts'.[32] On the other hand it must be pointed out that

[29] Robottom: A History of Violence, in, *Violence, supra.*

[30] *A Journey to England in 1497* ed. McFault C.V., Barcelona, 1953.

[31] more precisely, tyrannicide.

[32] Tilly: Collective Violence in European Perspective, in, *The History of Violence in America* ed. by Graham and Gurr, *supra.*

Marx's high sounding, pompous dictum, 'Violence is the midwife of history', lacks subtlety. The hemorrhages caused by the historical forceps may be more or less serious; the operation may succeed to one degree or another, but may also fail. There are insurrections brought about by desparation or fanaticism and drowned in blood: violence burst out with savagery and, often maiming the foetus, the patient -civilization- finds herself so very weakened that she can no longer recover.

When confronted with the statement that violence (whether in the sense of political violence or of ordinary crime) is harmful to the body politic, we must moreover bear in mind that in a way the prevailing authority structures of the State necessarily redefine the harm emanating from violent acts. Thus in most primitive societies individual or interpersonal violence is accepted as usual and in some cases even desirable – the feud, the brawl, the tribal conflict, the small local intense battle and feuding between religious groups. It is really only with the development of the modern nation-State and the centralisation of political authority that we find rulers claiming a monopoly of force and even of threats of violence. This claim to monopolise the rights to use violence and the claim to receive allegiance from citizens has become usual in modern States. Yet we should also remember that the political map of the world and the Sovereignty of nation-States is arbitrary and the result of accidents of history. We are not entitled to assume that there will not be further shifts in sovereignty and continual realignment (though certainly this appears to-day to be more difficult than it was, say a hundred years ago). In other words while the State's insistence on its right to monopolise force and receive allegiance may be usual, so too is the refusal to recognise such claims.

Finally, it is important to recognise that West European society is capable now of much greater tolerance than ever before. We live in what the sociologists call a *pluralistic society*. By this they mean that society consists of a range of groups, different life styles, different attitudes, different norms of behaviour, the whole heterogeneous mass being welded and held together by a more or less loose but stable structure of government. It is difficult not to hypothesise that had Western society shown the same degree of tolerance in the past, the Protestant Reformation might have been averted and we would not to-day have the English Martyrs, St. Bartholomew's Day and Bloody Mary!

The above arguments are not intended to defend violence, much of which in *any* society is to be condemned. But if we come to accept the usualness and the normality of violence we may begin

to view it in other than purely emotional terms. If we put violence in perspective and in its particular context we may understand it better. In other words we might move from simple condemnation to some form of comprehension.

Aetiology of Violence

Given that violence is not a homogeneous concept and that changes in society may be reflected in changes in the level of violent behaviour, it is not surprising therefore that when an explanation is sought, no one explanation is sufficient. Any theory to explain human or social behaviour merely attempts to give the best description of the facts available and such a theory is always open to change as society's view of the behaviour changes. Conflicting views on the causes of violence does not mean that one view is correct while the other is incorrect; both may be correct or incorrect depending on different stages in society's development and how cultural attitudes have changed within the intervening period.

A further complication is that many theories put forward to explain violent behaviour are more relevant to *aggressive* behaviour, though in the criminological literature the difference between aggression and violence is often difficult to define.[33] For the remainder of this essay the terms aggressive behaviour and violent behaviour will be used interchangeably.

Violence is by no means peculiar to humans, nor to primates; many forms of animal life have the capacity to fight among themselves. On the other hand not all animals are violent. Fairly obvious examples of non-aggressive creatures are caterpillars and butterflies, earthworms, mussels and barnacles. What is the difference between these animals and those that are aggressors? One basic difference is that the creatures listed do not really have any mechanisms for fighting. 'Aggression and violence are meaningless concepts unless there is the possibility of a real destructive force being brought into play'.[34] However it is probably also true to say that man has special 'skills' and attributes for violence. Indeed man is perhaps the only creature which in the course of intraspecific aggressive relationships is capable of killing his opponents. Other species limit themselves to agonistic or ritual fights and do not go so far as to kill the opponent of the same species.[35] Indeed most animal species – especially those equipped with dangerous weapons, such as wolves, crows and rattle snakes

[33] *supra*, f.n. 13.
[34] Gunn: *Violence in Human Society* (David & Charles) 1973.

– are equipped with certain inhibitory mechanisms which are triggered off by stereotyped or ritual patterns of behaviour which serve as signals for the fight to be broken off when one of the combatants appears to be in serious danger. Thus the gesture whereby the defeated animal presents the most vulnerable part of its body constitutes a genuine signal which inhibits the aggression attitude of its opponent.[36]

However, the essential distinction between man and animals is that the social behaviour of animals is controlled by regulating mechanisms which cannot be by-passed and which condition their relational horizons within strict limits. The functioning of these mechanisms is based essentially on a system of stimulus signals; the animal produces a conditioned response to these stimuli, which trigger a given form of behaviour or inhibiting mechanisms. This factor considerably limits aggression – particularly intraspecific aggression – in animals.[37] It is characteristic of man, as opposed to animals, that this balance in bio-ethological relations is upset; it is upset for a variety of reasons. The most obvious reason is probably man's brain development, accompanied by a substantial increase in cognitive capacity (his discovery and use of the principle of causality, his ability to foresee the consequence of an act and so to make plans and carry them through, the development of a system of communications based on signs which exist independently of what they signify, etc.). The result is a new kind of relationship with the outside world; the latter becomes an environment to which man is no longer content to submit but which he dominates and is able to transform.

Through such transformations man discovers his conative poten-

[35] Reference is made principally to two books by Lorenz: *Essays on Animal and Human Behaviour*, containing a series of articles, the first of which dates from 1935, and, *On Aggression* (University Paperbacks) 1968.

[36] Occasionally animals do kill members of their own species, but these are in reality 'errors' arising from faults in the 'signalling system'. The problem arises mainly in connection with aberrant behaviour on the part of a mother towards her young. The classic example given by Lorenz is of deaf turkeys massacring their young because on an error of identification: the young, whose cheeping is not heard by the mother, are taken for intruders because the mother is unable to receive the signals which would enable her to identify them as young birds needing her protection.

[37] This in no way means that other aggression-eliciting mechanisms are not to be found in animals; in them, as in human beings, aggressive reactions may be sparked off by frustration, and there is even a persistent tendency to react aggressively to repeated frustration. See, Moyer: *The Physiology of Hostility* (Markham Publ. Co.) Chicago, 1971.

tial; in other words he acquires an ability, for the purposes of the project in hand, to inhibit his immediate reactions or to control them in such a way that they do not jeopardise that project.

Thus he is able to maintain an emotional state – whether love or hate – aroused by external circumstances, but at the same time to make it fit in with his programme.

This being so, it is fair to say that man is indeed the only animal capable of killing systematically, because he is the only animal able to make the destruction of others part of a plan and to place himself in circumstances such that anything which might jeopardise that plan is avoided.

On the other hand, man is the only being in which a hiatus exists between his actual potential at birth (which is extremely limited) and the experience he subsequently amasses, which leads him beyond this initial impotence to 'solutions' which lie in the realm of the imagination and which rely on the psychological mechanisms of introjection and projection, in other words, on the incorporation or absorption in oneself of certain qualities of the outside world and on the discarding of distressing inner realities (anxiety-producing sensations, etc.).

The first and perhaps most popular view of violence in the past has been that violence (and consequently criminality resulting from violent behaviour) is an inherited quality. Certain animal species have been bred for their aggressive or violent behaviour (e.g. terrier dogs and hounds which excell in tenacity and aggression). Also mice have been inbred for generation so as to produce many strains, each of which is genetically almost homogeneous; and yet it is possible to grade the strains according to the amount of aggression shown in standardized tests.[38] In species with a relatively short life span, it is possible to breed for more or less aggression by selecting animals which show the appropriate behavioural trait. Thus, compared to the wild stock from which they originated, laboratory rats are remarkably peaceful, because aggressive rats are usually removed by the experimenter. It has therefore been suggested that in animals where artificial selective breeding has not taken place, and in humans it is likely that individuals will have varying thresholds for aggression depending on their genetic Constitution. While extrapolation from the animal world to that of human beings may be scientifically dangerous (for the reasons outlined in the foregoing paragraphs) there is a con-

[38] Scott: Genetics and the development of social behaviour in ammmals, in, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, Vol. 32, pp. 878-893.

siderable amount of literature purporting to show that violence, and crime in general, is associated[39] with certain mental or physical characteristics which are inherited. Leaving aside the all-encompassing Lombrosian theories which sought to explain all criminal and violent behaviour as related to some biological deficit (the atavistic man),[40] one could mention the works of Lange,[41] Christiansen,[42] Shields,[43] Page,[44] Mittler,[45] and Mednick *et al.*[46] While most of these works are not concerned with violent criminal behaviour as such, they nevertheless provide strong, though not conclusive, evidence of an underlying hereditary element in the case of certain abnormal and violent behaviour.

An extension of the inheritance theories are the theories of transmission of abnormalities from chromosomal sources. Some studies[47] have suggested that individuals (males) with an XYY chromosomal combination, suffer from some kind of predisposition to violence or sexual misbehaviour and perhaps also to mental disorders, for they seem to be over represented not only among the populations of some penal institutions in England but also of the special hospitals for dangerous mental patients. Moreover, sex hormones are also known to facilitate aggression, and castration is a long-established practice in animal husbandry for reducing aggression. However, sex hormones allow behaviour to occur, but do not cause it. Other changes in body chemistry, such as the lowering of blood sugar associated with hunger or an increase in adrenal secretion during stress, may also affect the threshold for aggression.

Physical factors have also been considered as possible explanations of violent behaviour. The foremost exponent of this theory was Sheldon.[48] Briefly and crudely summarised, Sheldon's typology

[39] An *association* or *positive correlation* does not necessarily imply a *causal connection* or *causality*; it may simply indicate a *predisposition.*

[40] Lombroso: *Crime: Its Causes and Remedies* (Little, Brown) Boston, 1918.

[41] *Crime as Destiny* (Allen and Unwin) London, 1931.

[42] Threshold of Tolerance in Various Population Groups, in, *The Mentally Abnormal Offender*, a CIBA Foundation Symposium (Churchill) London, 1968.

[43] *Monozygotic Twins brought up Apart and Together* (Oxford U.P.) 1962.

[44] *Psychopathology* (Aldine) Chicago, 1971.

[45] *The Study of Twins* (Harmondsworth: Penguin) 1971.

[46] *Genetics, Environment and Psychopathology*, Amsterdam, 1974.

[47] Summarised in, Medical Research Council, *Current Medical Research* (HMSO) 1967.

[48] Sheldon *et al: Varieties of Delinquent Youth* (Harper) N. York, 1949.

of body types is based on the relative predominance ofdigestive viscera, of bone and muscle, and of neural and cutaneous tissues. The first component makes for softness and roundness; the second for hardness and rectangularity; the third for leanness and fragility. The first component he called *endomorphy*, the second *mesomorphy*, the third *ectomorphy*. The endomorph tends to be easygoing. sociable and self-indulgent; the mesomorph restless, energetic, insensitive and aggressive; the ectomorph introspective, sensitive and nervous. Sheldon analysed detailed physical and biographical data on 200 boys at Boston's Hyden Goodwill Inn, a rehabilitation home for boys, and concluded that although mesomorphy did not necessarily produce delinquency it was the constitutional background most favourable to it and to violence. Other studies[49] have also found a great preponderance of mesomorphs among delinquents. This apparently well established association between mesomorphy and delinquency does not necessarily reflect an inherent tendency in mesomorphs to be anti-social and violent (as Sheldon and the Gluecks seem to have thought). It could simply be a question of natural selection. If for 'mesomorphy' we substitute 'a muscular', athletic boy' and for 'juvenile delinquent' we substitute 'a boy who fights, robs and steals', it is easy to see how the mesomorph's physique is the best adapted of the somatotypes for the sort of things that juvenile delinquents do – assault other people, climb walls, run away from the police. Children begin to learn at an early age what they are physically able to do successfully, and what is not their strong point. Similarly, a tall, muscular person may gain self-esteem through utilising his strength in a violent manner. A short person may become gruff and aggressive to compensate for feelings of inferiority. An ugly or deformed person may seek out involuntary sexual partners because he cannot find willing partners.

Certain pathological abnormalities are also often linked with violence, particularly abnormalities of the brain structure in some form either due to illness such as menengitis, or to physical trauma resulting in brain damage.[50] Brain damage reduces an individual's ability to inhibit certain behaviour; his behaviour, therefore, tends to be uncontrolled and being uncontrolled, if he becomes angry with people he is more likely to lash out and be violent. There is currently some highly controversial evidence that

[49] Glueck and Glueck: *Physique and Delinquency* (Harper) N. York, 1956; and, Gibbens: *Psychiatric Studies of Borstal Lads* (Oxford U.P.) 1963.
[50] Reference is made to Mark and Irvin: *Violence and the Brain* (Harper) London, 1970.

people who suffer certain specific brain lesions may be subject to periodic, epileptic type behaviours that are characterised by violence.

It may also be that people whose capacity to perceive the environment accurately is impaired by some type of general brain disfunction (usually referred to as an acute or chronic brain syndrome) are more susceptible to violent behaviour than those who are not so impaired. These explanations obviously account for a very small number of violent cases appearing before the courts or occuring in society generally.

Other theories attribute violence or aggression to a drive like hunger or sex which builds up until it explodes into behaviour. Alternatively the Freudian view attributes violence to an instinct deep within the *id* of the individual and occasionally arising to the surface and being expressed in behaviour.[51] More recent theories have argued the frustration/aggression approach to violence. Broadly speaking, according to these theories the source of frustration may lie within the personality – in one's own conscience, for example – or in the environment. The strength of frustration depends on the strength of the needs, wishes or impulses that are thwarted, and as the strength of frustration varies, so does the intensity of the impulse to aggression. However, the manner in which it is expressed and the object at which it is directed will depend on controls operating at the time. If the controls are strong enough to prevent the expression of aggression outwardly, it may be directed against the self. If it is directed outwardly, its object (the victim) may be the source of aggression itself, though perhaps internal and external controls will deflect it towards some substitute target. It may also be rendered harmless, so to speak, by sublimation; in this case the aggressive energy is used up in some socially acceptable or constructive way. Possibly no mechanism has been used to explain so much deviant behaviour as the frustration/aggression hypothesis, and it is as popular in commonsense thinking as it is in the professional literature.

Although the frustration/aggression theory has been cultivated mostly by psychologists and psychiatrists, Andrew Henry and James Short in their work *Suicide and Homicide*[52] applied it in an attempt to solve a sociological problem: to account for variations in rates of suicide and homicide among different social categories and through time. Countless sociologists have put forward their

[51] Friedlander: *The Psychoanalytic Approach to Juvenile Delinquency* (Routledge) London, 1947.

[52] (The Free Press of Glencoe) Illinois, 1954.

own views on the source of violence. These range from Durkheim's 'normalessness' of society and the individual's inability to be a part of a social system taken as an organic whole;[53] to Merton's 'disjunction between socially approved goals and socially available means';[54] down to subcultural theorists like Thrasher, Downes, Miller and Matza[55] who in one sense or another all emphasise how violence is 'learned' as a result of growing up in a particular environment where violence is either tolerated, admired or positively approved, and where parental control is reduced to a minimum.

THE SMALL SCREEN

One important factor which looms large in any contemporary discussion on violence must be the media. Something has already been said about the effect of the media on our perception of violence as a 'social problem'. Another question is: does the portrayal of violence on the screen or in comics and newspapers *relieve* aggressive tendencies or does it *strengthen* them? People to-day watch television for hours every week; many of the programmes contain violence in one form or another, whether real and actual violence as transmitted through news programmes or phantasy violence in cartoon programmes and westerns. It has been established for some time that children and young people are impressionable and imitative creatures. In a short time they learn a great deal, in an irregular sort of way, and may imitate and mimic what they see and hear from almost any and every significant educational force they come into contact with: parents, school, the media, significant others in the community. Nobody who has watched young people emerge from some of our cinemas after an hour and a half of kung fu fighting and karatè can have much doubt about the effect of such viewing, And yet the literature on the subject is divided. Experimental psychologists like Berkowitz and Leibowitz[56] maintain that even the mere sight of a weapon is sufficient to increase aggression. Others take a very different view.

[53] Simpson ed.: *Emile Durkheim: Selections from his Works* (Thomas Y. Crowell) N. York, 1963.

[54] Clinard ed.: *Anomie and Deviant Behaviour: a discussion and critique* (Free Press of Glencoe) London, 1964.

[55] Thrasher: *The Gang* (Chicago U.P.) 1927; Downes: *The Delinquent Solution* (Routledge) London, 1966; Miller: Lower Class Culture as a Generating Milieu of Gang Delinquency, in, *Journal of Social Issues*, 14, 1958; Matza: *Delinquency and Drift* (Wiley) N. York, 1964.

[56] Berkowitz, in *Psychological Review*, 81, pp. 165-176; Leibowitz, in *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 32, pp. 21-25.

Thus Stuart Hall, in an essay entitled *Violence and the Media*[57] maintains that the influence of television on children does not appear to be either strikingly strong or deep and long-lasting, or anywhere nearly as significant as, say, school and parents. 'We know the impact of televised violence is much sharper for a very small proportion of the younger audience, but they appear to be the vulnerable group, already predisposed by a host of other circumstantial factors[58] to 'act out aggressively'. Hall maintains that television merely provides the trigger, and so might any other violent or vigorous stimulus. Under limited circumstances and given certain conditions, most research suggests, television may have the effect of stimulating aggressive behaviour, either through imitation or instigation. The trouble here is precisely; 'under what circumstance and conditions?' Unfortunately most of the clear-cut evidence comes from highly controlled social-psychological experiments, conducted under extraordinarily well-controlled laboratory environments, so unlike the conditions of normal viewing and so crude in their symbolic conception, as to be virtually useless for extrapolating to wider, more normal, social settings. In other words, these experiments have a high degree of *internal* validity, but a very low degree of *external* validity.

One of the most recent (and perhaps most sober) studies of the effects of T.V. violence on young people is Grant Noble's book *Children in Front of the Small Screen.*[59] The author observes: 'The limited evidence from naturalistic studies, including my own, suggests that the effects of televised aggression are less marked (than most people think) and can even be beneficial ... My own view on the effects of televised violence is that nine times out of ten it has no effect on the viewer. In the remaining 10 per cent of cases the effects depend first on the type of televised violence, and secondly on how aggressive the viewer feels'.

Violence and Deterrance

The last few paragraphs of this essay will be culled mainly from Hans Toch's brilliant work entitled *Violent Men.*[60]

After pointing out that we must try and deepen our understanding of the violent man (of *each* violent man) and of his personality if the goal of criminal justice to rehabilitate the offender is to be achieved, the author goes on to consider a fundamental problem

[57] in *Violence, supra.*

[58] including, no doubt, such variables as personality, temperament, parental control, socio-economic level of the family, religious persuasion, etc.

[59] (Constable) London, 1975.

[60] (Pelican Books) London, 1972.

within the whole penal system: are violent men deterred by prison? 'Nothing suggests that they would be. On the contrary, in fact: violence feeds on low self-esteem and self-doubt, and prison unmans and dehumanizes; violence rests on exploitation and exploitiveness, and prison is a power centred jungle. We do try to teach inmates that the use of force can only produce more difficulty for them, but we make this lesson far from convincing. If a man harms others in a prison, where else can he go? What extremity of discouragement can we give him? ... Destructive behaviour is the least loss-and-gain motivated conduct of all antisocial activity. The rewards and punishments of violence are measured in increments and decrements to the ego, rather than in terms of future well-being. The perspective is short-term and impulsive rather than calculated with a view to the future. The violent man measures his worth by his physical impact, rather than his ability to pursue a life plan. He has no career to be threatened, no stake to be impaired by prospective imprisonment. Of course, he would rather be at large than in prison; but his violence is neither stimulated nor inhibited by such remote and general needs. It is curiously true that deterrance is most effective with those who least require it – rational, career-oriented, future-invested individuals of the non-violent, law abiding middle class'.

It is important, however, to understand what Toch means by the 'violent man'. Not every person who commits a crime (or even more than one crime) of violence is necessarily a violent man. According to Toch 'the consummate robber is a professional who is usually skilled at avoiding the use of the weapons he may carry. Such a man must be separated – for purposes of treatment – from the unstable amateur, who may shoot because of a propensity to be clumsy, boisterous, fearful, touchy or sadistic. This is a violent man, and he must be precessed as such, having been identified through a systematic review of his past conduct'. For Toch, a violent man is a person who has a propensity to take actions that culminate in harm to other persons.

Finally it is also interesting to note that Toch considers most police officers as violent men. Their violence is largely engendered by police organisation and procedures, by formal and informal indoctrination; they reflect the same fears and insecurities, the same fragile, self-centred perspectiveness, and display the same bluster, bluff, panic, punitiveness, rancour and revenge as violent men not in uniform. However their violent propensities are circumscribed by social pressures and administrative rules, and protected by a code of mutual support and strong *esprit de corps*. It would certainly be interesting if it could be established to what extent

(if at all) these characteristics are applicable to members of the Malta Police Corps.

Conclusion

This short paper certainly cannot do justice to such a complex topic. Certain aspects of the subject have been deliberately omitted since they constitute almost untrodden ground even in the professional literature. The reader will also have observed that the topic has been discussed with virtually no reference to the Maltese scene. It is sincerely hoped that sociological or criminological research into the 'problem' of criminal violence in Malta will in the not too distant future be carried out under the aegis of the University of Malta.