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1. The Rising Tide of Urban Violence

William H. McNeill

Urban violence worries us as never before in our lives. The monopoly of organized violence that European states began to exercise in the 17th Century shows signs of breaking down in many urban neighborhoods. We especially are disturbed by this breakdown in countries of recent modernization in the New World and the former Soviet empire, in cities such as New York, Rio de Janeiro and Moscow. The breakdown is partly a function of legal restraints on the way police and army behave. In any open fight for control of territory, armed individuals and urban gangs could not prevail over bureaucratically organized police and army. But despite that sort of ultimate superiority, police seem unable to prevent rising incidence of criminal violence in many, perhaps in most, cities of the modern world. In some instances, as in the past, the police and army join forces with criminal gangs. Somehow, the bureaucratic monopolization of violence is challenged by the disaffection of many citizens, on the one hand, and by the open defiance of a few.

In trying to understand what is happening, it is well at the outset to remember that private violence in defiance of police and other constituted authority is not new. For instance, as James Boswell’s diary makes clear, in 18th century London, criminal violence was such that private persons scarcely dared to walk the streets at night alone or unarmed. And in the 19th Century, individuals on the American frontier defended life, property and reputation by shooting first and settling at law afterwards, if at all.

What is peculiar to our situation, therefore, is not the existence of private violence but our expectation that bureaucratically-organized wielders of lethal force should both monopolize its exercise and command popular support while doing so. This, of course, has never been perfectly achieved; but the gap between ideal expectation and actual experience seems to be widening. Or, to put it differently, the breakdown of everyday public peace and order, sustained by use and wont and only occasionally in need of being backed up by police and legal procedures, apparently affects a larger proportion of urban society today than at any time since European states effectively asserted their monopoly of legal violence in the 17th Century.

Our sense of a rising tide of urban crime undoubtedly reflects heightened expectations as well as more accurate statistics. In Mark Twain’s day, for instance, his account of life aboard Mississippi steamboats shows that what happened among blacks was of no concern to the police, while, at the same time, legal authorities deliberately overlooked white men’s violence against blacks. Boswell’s *Journal* tells the same tale: the lower classes of London were, in effect, outside the system of British justice unless or until they assaulted a man of property. Similar conditions prevail in rural communities of Africa and Latin America today; but within our cities, by and large, police power extends, in principle if not always in practice, over all sections of the city, and over all classes and conditions of its inhabitants. Because we are more ambitious, extending public policing beyond its initial function of protecting the rich and well born, we are far more acutely aware of unlawful violence than our predecessors were. Yet there are real changes too. In particular, the conventions that defined the limits of unlawful violence in times past — conventions that confined nearly all extralegal violence to the poorer parts of town — have blurred, exposing everybody, and often at random, to the risk of being shot.

**Rural roots**

Throughout most of the recorded past, rulers and officials made little or no effort to win the hearts and minds of their subjects. Government was a matter of straightforward exploitation by a privileged few. Rulers took rent and taxes away from their subjects for purposes of their own, giving (an often uncertain) protection against other, less restrained plunderers in return. But in a world where raiding and pillaging had become a way of life for some armed groups, subjection to more or less predictable rents and taxes was advantageous to payers as well as to receivers. Tax collectors, after all, were not interested in seizing so much as to make tax payers die of destitution. That would simply visit deprivation upon the rulers they served.

A real common interest thus connected rulers and subjects despite the equally real, and rather more immediately obvious, collision of interest between...
payers and collectors of taxes and rents. This duality explains why bureaucratic monopoly of violence so often broke down only to be regularly restored wherever local populations produced a taxable surplus.

From the rural perspective, paying rent and taxes required significant modification of the autonomy that had formerly prevailed. First and foremost, farming families had to learn to produce more food than they needed for themselves; in many soils and climates this proved feasible. Technical improvements were sometimes necessary before a food surplus could be produced regularly; presumably, harder work was always required as well. Establishment of new moral expectations on both sides of the tributary exchange were a third requirement.

As time passed, rent-and tax-paying peasants eventually became a majority of the entire population of the globe. But since, to begin with, they produced almost everything they needed, local autonomy within village communities continued to prevail in most matters affecting everyday life. To be sure, peasant society was always threatened by the possibility that armed raiding parties might suddenly appear on the scene, burning and destroying what they could not seize and carry off. Local self-defense was seldom effective. Flight sometimes saved lives; but successful concealment of stocks of food and seed was also essential for recovery. Concern for local survival was demanding enough. Struggles among rulers, landlords and professional fighting men for state power and the right to tax were not peasants' affairs, as a rule, though peasants often suffered from the disasters such contests visited upon their homes, fields and persons.

But recurrent disaster inhered in the farming way of life, since unfavorable weather, swarming pests and crop diseases could ruin the harvest at any time. Village rules for human conduct always had to cope with disasters. Disasters inflicted by outsiders’ violence could therefore be assimilated to prevailing patterns of response to natural disasters. With that adjustment, customary guides to life could become almost as firm and comprehensive within peasant communities as they had been before cities with their tax and rent collectors came along to bother them. In effect, therefore, submission to external exactions altered village life without doing much to erode the solidarity of the local community. More often than not, dislike and distrust of the powerful outsiders, who carried off rents and taxes every year, may even have consolidated common sentiment in the countryside.

It was the regular outflow of such income, concentrated in storage magazines along the army’s rout of march, that immunized local populations against destructive exposure to plunder. The king and his army secured a surer supply of food and could march further and arrive at the scene of battle in better condition if they had stopped to plunder along the way. The peasant populations, likewise, by handing over a more or less fixed portion of their harvest to tax and rent collectors, escaped sporadic destitution and risk of starvation. Hence, even though levying taxes and rents pitted the interests of rulers and landlords against those of the peasant producers, both parties had a real interest in substituting such regulated exactions for plundering.

The lopsided parasitism of early cities and empires was altered by two creeping changes in the pattern of civilized life. One was the invention of portable religions, based on sacred texts and congregational worship, that filtered into the countryside, where they established a moral community between urban and rural populations, and
reduced, at least modestly, the moral distance between the different classes of society.

The second factor that gradually modified the starkness with which early cities exploited the surrounding peasant populations was that bit by bit rural people began to participate in urban-based exchanges, buying tools or other manufactured goods and selling food or some other commodity they could bring in from the countryside. Truly efficient, ruthless rent and tax collectors of course left nothing over for peasants to offer on urban markets; but in practice rent and taxes always tended to freeze at average, customary amounts and modes of collection.

The first landmark in urban-rural exchange was the use of iron for farm tools. When professional smiths started to propagate the arts of iron metallurgy, beginning, apparently, in eastern Anatolia in the 14th Century BC, they soon began to manufacture tools for rural use; and peasants found ways of paying for such tools by entering urban markets. Thereafter, despite innumerable ups and downs, and some total disruptions of local market relations, economic exchanges between rural and urban populations tended to increase slowly through the subsequent centuries.

Exchanges between urban and rural populations attained a new intensity in China shortly after 1000 AD, when the imperial government began to collect taxes in money, thus compelling innumerable peasants to find something to sell to pay the imperial tax collectors. It was, of course, only because peasant-produced cheap common goods had already come on the market in significant quantities that the government could hope to collect taxes in money. But once that step had been taken, the process of folding rural and urban populations into a single exchange network went into high gear. It soon created a more efficient economy by rewarding the cheapest and most skilled suppliers everywhere. Wealth, skills, and population all increased rapidly and. China became the center of an intensified long-distance trade network that extended as far west as the Mediterranean and, ere long, to Atlantic Europe as well.

In due course, western Europe caught up with and then surpassed the Chinese accomplishment, after inaugurating global exchanges by opening the oceans to shipping after 1500. The emergent global economy intensified once more with what we commonly call the industrial revolution, starting some two hundred and fifty years ago, and beginning about one hundred and fifty years ago, instantaneous communication united the world as never before. A global flow-through economy became possible; and in our own age has come (perhaps uncomfortably) close to reality, even though large numbers of rural folk in Asia, Latin America and Africa are still only sporadically connected with world markets, and various legal barriers to the free exchange of goods and services exist across state boundaries.

A regime of expanding world-wide markets, going from strength to strength during the past two hundred and fifty years, increased both wealth and inequality. Village autonomy decayed in proportion as peasant populations began to depend on imported goods; and whenever that happened, grievances multiplied. Rural sellers regularly felt cheated because, as they saw things, middlemen were always dishonest. After all, they bought cheap and sold dear without doing any sort of real, i.e., muscular work. For that reason, most of the world’s population is still imperfectly reconciled to participation in the urban-based exchanges that govern the global economy today. A prime item on the political agenda of the next few centuries will be whether or not the human majority can be persuaded by reasoned argument and demonstrated benefits to accept a commercial mode of life, or will instead support violent efforts to impose their idea of justice on cheating middlemen by political intervention in the market place.

The elementary fact is that customary ways in most of the world are no longer viable. Throughout most of rural Asia, Africa and Latin America, the young face hard choices between more intensive cultivation of smaller plots of land, bringing new fields under cultivation, migrating to towns, or living by resort to some sort of predatory violence.
This essay will examine problems of violence besetting liberal, democratic nation-states in our time. However, I wish first to define another form of organized violence which has played a large role in the human past, and shows signs of reviving among us today. I have in mind what historians of medieval Europe commonly refer to with the German term Gefolgschaft. This refers to a group of young men, abstracted from civil society, who swore an oath to follow a particular leader, and lived by preying on those around them, either by negotiating protection payments, or by unrestrained rapine and plunder. Such groups grew powerful in German society in early Christian centuries, and lay behind the creation of feudalism when Viking attackers, organized on the same principle, had to be beaten back by more efficient local self defenses than local farmers and distracted officials of the Carolingian empire could mount.

Similar bands of restless young men followed first Saul and then David to create the Hebrew monarchy; and the Biblical narrative of II Samuel and I Kings offers a vivid portrait of the ambiguous relationship that arose between the established leaders of society — property owners, priests and judges like Samuel — and the armed men who rallied to Saul and David, fighting off outsiders, but also demanding contributions which soon became bureaucratically collected taxes.

Similar bands have arisen in many other societies, simply because young men are so often restless. Rebellion against paternal authority is probably inherent in attaining sexual maturity. Yet when suitable land or other resources are already owned by others, young men cannot at once establish families of their own. Waiting for the older generation to transfer fields and property to their heirs will only work for one son and one daughter. This means that problems arise whenever population grows so that several juveniles have to fit themselves into space where only one adult pair had lived before. Population growth probably helped to create the Hebrew monarchy as it later provoked German Gefolgschaften, and Viking raids.

Innumerable other youthful predatory bands arose in response to the obstructed access to full adult status that ensued whenever population grew and new resources could not readily be found to support new families. Their resort to violence, in fact, constituted an ecologically efficient response for relieving population pressure, since either those who took to the sword perished by
the sword, as the Bible says, or they succeeded in seizing new resources for themselves and for those adult societies that made terms with their depredations by negotiating protection rents of one sort or another. The upshot was of enormous political importance, for, generally speaking, the states of recorded history were created by unusually successful Gefolgschaften.

The Epic of Gilgamesh, for example, shows that kingship began in Mesopotamia when Gilgamesh and his ilk attained power by recruiting households of fighting men from the margins of society, just as Hebrew and German chieftains did later. We simply do not know about Aztecs and Incas, but I suspect that very similar processes lay behind their imperial command systems as well. As far as Eurasia is concerned, after about 875 B.C., when horseback riding was invented, the most successful conquering bands originated among nomad horsemen of the Eurasian steppes. Their mobility allowed them to concentrate superior force, almost at will; only a comparably nimble cavalry force could hope to oppose them in open country.

There are, to be sure, a few examples of civilized states that emerged not through outside conquest or usurpation by an internally-recruited Gefolgschaft Coalescence of kindred and of local villagers for more effective self-defense lay behind the emergence of the classical Greek city states, for example; and a few other cases can be discerned, e.g., northern India in Buddha’s day, or the Swiss cantons during the 13th Century. This alternative was not trivial. Gautama Buddha’s religious example acquired its world-transforming power in large part because he modeled the community of his followers on the self-governing republics of his youth. And the Greek (and Roman) ideal of freedom, requiring equal, active, and participatory citizenship, provided a model for American and French revolutionaries of the 18th Century.

Because we are heirs and subscribers to that ideal, we may be tempted to take it as a norm for human public life. But in fact that is not the case. Most people, most of the time, have been ruled by strangers and outsiders, whose political legitimacy depended on armed force that derived, directly or indirectly, from Gefolgschaften that were subsequently transformed into royal bodyguards or standing armies.

**Violence and the modern state**

In reflecting on the immense variety of local behavior, we can see three basic ways by which human beings have tried to organize and control violence in times past. The first was by local community action. The second was by bureaucratized government in more complex societies. The third was by creation of the modern nation-state.

Whenever people lived in small, autonomous groups, and had only limited encounters with outsiders, two options existed. Either they could rely on kindred for help in safeguarding themselves and their property, or they could rely on propinquity, turning neighbors into allies for the maintenance of public peace both against unruly individuals within the community and against intruders from outside. Reliance on kinship invited blood feuds between rival families, clans and tribes that sometimes lasted for generations. Reliance on propinquity sharpened collisions across territorial boundaries. But in either case, the necessity of cooperation against outside enemies, and the precision of what was expected of insiders — old and young, male and female — maintained a very high level of peace and order within the group itself.

Our evolutionary past attunes human beings to this sort of small group solidarity. Throughout prehistory, human survival required firm and customary cooperation within the limits of a small, primary community, together with suspicion and fear, if not overt enmity, directed against strangers and outsiders. We still revert to this behavior in situations of acute uncertainty and fear when civilized patterns of collective life threaten to break down. But civilized society could not be built exclusively on primary communities. Civilization depended on cities, where relatively large numbers of people came together, pursuing different occupations and exchanging goods and services. Ways for dealing peaceably and predictably with strangers were therefore needed if cities and civilization were to flourish.

This need was met, after much travail, by the invention of bureaucratized government, exercising monopoly (or at least superiority) of armed force within the boundaries of a territorial state. Beginnings go back to the third millennium B.C., with conquerors like Sargon of Akkad; and historians have devoted enormous pains to elucidating the resulting tangled rivalries among states and rulers throughout the recorded past. Bureaucratized monopoly (or mere superiority) of armed force within a territorial state was difficult to maintain. Taxes had to be collected from unwilling subjects, and central authorities found it hard to control local magnates and officials, who were always tempted to intercept tax income from their districts, thereby depriving the central authorities of resources needed to maintain armed forces capable of overpowering them.

There is another, exceptional form of bureaucratic regimen that sought to exploit the advantages of cooperation
in the collective use of violence — characteristic of some primary communities — on an expanded territorial scale. The result, proclaimed to the world in 1776 and anew in 1789, was a nation-state of free, equal and fraternal citizens. In the American and European context, where this ideal first emerged, new-minted nation-states were or became secular, thus side-stepping inherited religious divisiveness among the citizens. Differences of wealth were sometimes troublesome in the 19th Century, but on the whole national patriotism prevailed over class interest, Marx to the contrary notwithstanding.

Nearly all the world now has embraced this exceptional form of government as an ideal, even though local practice departs from European and American models in, greater or lesser degree. The problem we have in adjusting to current conditions of violence in our cities is, in fact, very largely created by the extraordinary expectations about official and private behavior built into this ideal, for liberal democracy claims to turn citizens into proprietors of the state through the ballot box, while converting rulers into servants of those who elect them.

Reality, of course, never conformed to such principles perfectly. But for more than a century after their proclamation in Philadelphia in 1776 and their even more emphatic reiteration in Paris in 1793, nation-states constructed along liberal and (more or less) democratic lines proved capable of mobilizing resources for common purposes more efficiently than other governments, both in peace and war. The spectacular growth of wealth and power that came to such nations as the United States, Britain, and France persuaded the rest of the world to try to conform, hoping to match the success enjoyed by these early exemplars of liberal self-government.

For a while, socialist criticism of economic inequality challenged the more limited concept of merely political and legal equality; but the economic failures of the USSR, that became public in the 1980s and disruptive in the 1990s, cast doubt on the possibility of efficient bureaucratic management of an entire national economy. Widespread abandonment of the ideal and practice of state socialism followed, though some important countries remain at least quasi-Marxist.

But, no matter where they turned for inspiration, the poorer countries of the world have been generally disappointed by the results of their efforts to imitate and catch up with the more successful nation-states of the West. Neither liberal nor socialist prescriptions for pursuing justice, wealth, and power seem to work very well. That, too, feeds urban violence, and weakens the consensus assumed by, and required for, effective cooperation in common enterprises, private as well as public, that made a handful of nation-states so remarkably successful between 1793 and 1945, or even, 1973.

If this anatomy of how human societies have managed violence is anywhere near the mark, it means that when we try to sustain public order among a diverse population with legally restrained application of violence on the part of bureaucratically-managed police and armed forces we are indeed running against the grain of the past. That is what we usually call progress; and it is not, therefore, absurd or necessarily doomed to fail. But it is bound to be difficult, since important and enduring human impulses and needs run counter to the ideal of public order maintained by a bureaucracy that is expected to police far-ranging social diversity. Let me say a few words about the difficulties this aspiration confronts.

**Cities and civilization**

Cities and civilization have always had to struggle with the problem of how to reconcile commonality and public order with the need for allowing something like the primary communities we evolved with to flourish inside a larger, impersonal society. This perennial difficulty is further accentuated in our time by the rather dramatic decay of nurture arising from changes in work patterns and family life.

In peasant villages, workplace and domicile are the same. Children start to work alongside their parents as they become physically able, and so acquire adult attitudes, knowledge and skills simply by growing up, without much need for formal, institutionalized instruction. Before the advent of factories and office employment, cities also shared this style of familial nurture, though some occupations, requiring literacy or some other recondite skill, always needed specially organized schools.

But, beginning on a big scale in the 19th Century, factories, mines and offices required men to leave home for work; and in the twentieth century, as newly invented household machines made housekeeping into a part-time job, women began to follow suit. Changed work patterns thus consigned the nurture of children, once past the helplessness of infancy, to schools and the society of their peers. This, in turn, opened a new domain to pop culture, disseminated by mass media and addressed specifically to rebellious adolescents and slightly younger and older age-cohorts.

Long term consequences for civil society have yet to show themselves. Perhaps youthful counterculture will
simply collapse into adult conformism, as aforetime. But conformism may be hard to learn and still harder to embrace with any real conviction. Clearly, traditional attitudes and behavior are unusually fragile, simply because informal transmission from generation to generation has been so markedly attenuated.

Recent events in the Soviet Union illustrate how volatile public life can become when traditions weaken. The pieties of democratic citizenship and national patriotism are not necessarily immune from comparable erosion, though nothing so drastic as the decay of the Communist faith is yet apparent in western countries.

Strains on traditional ways of ordinary, everyday human behavior are further complicated when migrants from poor and remote villages crowd into cities in hope of improving their life chances. On the one hand, such migrants bring with them habits of hard work combined with modest economic expectations derived from their rural nurturing. When suitably low skilled jobs can be found, such persons constitute a willing work force and may fuel economic expansion, as is clearly happening in parts of south-east Asia. Conversely, when suitable jobs are not available in sufficient number, socially destructive responses are likely to multiply, among them resort to violence.

Complex and only partially understood factors affect the rate of job creation for low-skilled immigrants to cities. Somehow or other newcomers survive, even in the absence of regular employment in factories. If they did not, the flow from countryside to city would not continue. Yet nothing assures an accurate match between supply and demand for labor, and deliberate political intervention does not often produce the intended or hoped for results. What actually happens depends on the energy and ingenuity of individuals and families, who have to steer a path between the village world they grew up in and the urban environment in which they find themselves.

Under these circumstances, weakening of traditional rules for living a good life opens the door for new invention, especially among the young. In particular, the breakdown of old traditions and institutions invites the creation of new primary communities, since only by belonging to primary groups can individuals have practical guidance for making choices about everyday behavior and, with the support of their fellows, give meaning and direction to their lives.

Vivacious and effective primary groups, arising in response to these needs, fall into two, contrasting types. On the one hand, the age old Gefolgschaft finds its modern expression in the form of street gangs and variously well-organized criminal behavior. On the other, new-sprung and emotionally vibrant religious sects seek to reconcile their members to the sufferings and disappointments of life by promising eventual redress in Heaven, while simultaneously comforting them in a great variety of practical, everyday ways.

Both forms of response to hardship and uncertainty are age-old, and their uneasy coexistence and competition in modern cities is a reprise of similar competition in former times than Gefolgschaft violence; but, as pointed out above, youthful violence, organized under a chosen chieftain, has played a very conspicuous role in political history, and can be expected to do so again whenever bureaucratic instruments for the enforcement of public order wear thin.

Since my theme is violence in our cities, I will leave the religious response aside to focus on the connection between market exchange and the moral regime of Gefolgschaften.

Although most of us deplore civic violence and dislike crime, we need to realize that resort to armed violence has real advantages for young men who have difficulty in attaining satisfactory adult roles in urban society by other means. First and foremost, violence offers a chance at easy wealth by simple robbery, or through more complicated arrangements for the sale of illegal substances and the collection of protection rents. Robbery can and often is an anarchic, individual activity, but the drug trade requires very considerable cooperation with suppliers, and protection rents can only be collected by an organized gang. The rise of such criminal gangs is the main reason urban violence is on the increase around the world. Accordingly, they constitute the principle contemporary expression of the age-old attraction of the Gefolgschaft alternative to peaceable entry into adulthood.

As such, we should recognize that their attractions are not solely economic. The discipline of a gang requires obedience to a leader and loyalty to one another; and this simple code resolves moral dilemmas on a straightforward basis by making it obvious what each member mum do in nearly all situations he may face. It has the further advantage of simultaneously indulging hostile impulses, directing them against constituted authority and the general public. A satisfyingly wide range of human emotional capabilities thus finds expression, ranging from heroism and self-sacrifice on behalf of one’s fellows to the most brutalized behavior towards enemies.
Status within street gangs depends very much on personal prowess and deeds of daring. This, too, gives scope to human impulses that find little expression in urban routines, other than sports. In addition, the distribution and redistribution of money and goods among gang members depends more on status and gift-giving generosity than on calculations of private advantage and the haggling over prices that prevails in more peaceable market exchanges.

3. Prowess, status and gift-giving

As far as I am aware, economists have paid little attention to prowess, status and gift-giving, as an alternative to the market mode for the distribution of goods. Yet across the sweep of human history, I suspect, what may be called the heroic pattern of economic management has had great importance. As an economic system, heroism involves high risk, violent appropriation, conspicuous display, sharp fluctuations of income, and extravagant gift-giving to recognize others’ prowess and thus maintain the *Gefolgschaft*. Its recrudescence in urban society in our time ought to be of theoretical and well as practical interest, even though the official statistics that economists like to use are unlikely to cast much light on the flow of economic resources among the members of criminal gangs.

Prowess is not absent from the business world. For example, some entrepreneurs and managers derive satisfaction from taking over other companies through hostile financial manipulation. More interesting is the converse procedure whereby shrewd bargainers sometimes bestow handsome gifts on those with whom they deal, thereby challenging the receivers to reciprocate by conceding whatever it is they are asking. Long ago, Marco Polo made his way across Eurasia in this fashion by giving jewels to local potentates and receiving gifts from them in return. Instead of haggling over prices, he preferred to make local rulers into his debtors by extravagantly generous gestures, and prospered accordingly by provoking their complementary generosity.

Similar inversion of market pricing retains considerable scope in modern times, especially where private businessmen have to deal with public officials. Its role in distributing goods among the members of criminal gangs is therefore not unique. Quite the contrary, political economy has always given scope to gift-giving since that is how political leaders gather party followings. From this point of view, indeed, the leader of a criminal gang and the leader of a political party are brethren under the skin, however much politicians may abhor and seek to suppress the extra-legal violence that challenges their monopoly of legal force.

The transition from criminal outsider, wielding violence in the crannies of urban society, to overt exertion of political power is an easy one. Disruption of routine bureaucratic administration immediately opens the door for gangs to become territorial sovereigns of whatever part of the city they inhabit. I well remember witnessing how, on the Martin Luther King was killed in 1968, two gangs on the south side of Chicago ratified a truce by gathering on the Midway, facing each other with about forty yards of open space between the two front lines, and then sending a delegation forward to formalize the suspension of hostilities. The two gangs then took over the streets of a part of the city known as Woodlawn, and for the next week no Chicago policeman attempted to cross the check points they set up along its borders. During the day, passing motorists were required to put on their car lights as an outward sign of mourning; while store keepers and other business enterprises of the community were invited to contribute gifts to the cause in return for a very effective guarantee of protection from the plunder and arson that angry crowds visited on other parts of the city. By arrangement, after a week the gangs withdrew from the burdens of local administration; the police returned; and ere long the young men renewed their long standing feud, provoking sporadic gunfire on the streets they had patrolled so successfully during the moment of civic emergency that Martin Luther King’s assassination had provoked.

This episode offers a particularly vivid example of how gang discipline and behavior can fluctuate between opposition to constituted authority and the public exercise of local governance. Similar mirror images abound in history. ‘Set a thief to catch a thief is an old adage. Civilized governments of Eurasia regularly protected their frontiers against steppe raiders by following that policy, hiring some tribesmen to keep the others at bay. The Romans hired barbarians for the same purpose, and in such numbers that by the fifth century...
Germans dominated the ranks of Roman armies, making the substitution of German tribal sovereignty for Roman administration in the western provinces less of a change than our school books sometimes imply. Or to mention a more modern example, in the Ottoman empire in the 18th and 19th Centuries, brigands and police became interchangeable. Which was which depended on the policy of local governors, who by authorizing one group of armed men to guard the roads and collect tolls, automatically converted their rivals into bands of brigands, who lived outside the law by extorting gifts from the public. Outlaw bands, in due course, joined the revolts against the Ottoman state that established the Serbian and Greek national governments. Guerrilla bands continued to fluctuate between legal and illegal existence in the Balkans during and after World War II, and continue to operate in Bosnia today.

4. Reason and violence

What relation can we see between reason and violence, regarded by most of us respectively as among the most civilized and primitive traits of human character? As aspects of human behavior, reason and violence are inextricably entangled and, indeed, complementary to one another, like the oil and vinegar of salad dressing or the yin and yang of Chinese art and thought. Fundamentally, reason and violence are both ways of expanding the human niche in the ecosystem. Violence against other forms of life is the way we live. This we have in common with all other animals. What makes the human career on earth different from that of other animals is that our powers of reason allow us to invent new ideas and techniques and accumulate skills across the generations with biologically unprecedented rapidity.

By the same token, reason and violence are also ways of expanding the ecological role of one group of humans at the expense of other human groups. This is where real complication sets in, largely because boundaries of human groups are endlessly variable. How does a person decide who and what he or she is, over and above the physiological level of individual persistence? Once again, reason and violence clearly collaborate in defining “us” against “them”. Reason shapes and transmits all the shared beliefs, traditions, skills and language that makes “us” different from others. Violence, applied to outsiders, keeps them at distance, and prevents them from contaminating or destroying reason’s heritage as peculiarly elaborated within the group itself. Applied to insiders, violence also keeps members faithful to the same heritage by punishing individual acts of crime or
betrayal.

The question of how reason and violence can and should collaborate gets its particular resonance in our time from the fact that the boundaries between groups aspiring to command our allegiance are blurring very rapidly. The process began with civilization itself, for urban, civilized societies persistently brought strangers face to face. Variations in occupation, skills and knowledge, not to mention familial, ethnic and religious diversity meant that different identities competed for individuals’ loyalties in urban settings from the very start. As communications improved and became more capacious, the resulting confusion crept out into the countryside, so that now, towards the end of the 20th Century, we all confront a multiplicity of overlapping identities with conflicting claims on our attention and allegiance. This presents us with a new and formidable task of somehow sorting out who we are in an increasingly cosmopolitan, confusing age. Only by answering that question unambiguously could we know when and how to use reason and violence in competition with other groups of human beings with clear conscience.

When it comes to answering the critical questions: Who are we? and How should we apportion violence and reason between ‘us’ and ‘them’? what I think I detect amidst all this buzzing blooming confusion is a fine, old fashioned Hegelian thesis-antithesis. The thesis is utterly familiar. It was that enormously successful liberal ideal of secular, participatory citizenship in a nation-state as proclaimed in 1776 and, even more resoundingly, in 1789. Its most remarkable and practical effect, as in the wars of the French revolution, was to expand state power enormously by commanding the services of every citizen for war and other common purposes.

Three results followed. First was exploitation of the enhanced power of nation-states in Europe and America to build or expand empires in Africa, Oceania and much of Asia. Next was the increasing destructiveness of wars among the same, ever more powerful, European states, climaxing in World Wars I and II. Third was the contagion of nationalism across Asia and Africa, where local peoples set out to match and overtake European and American wealth and power by imitating their political organization into national states.

As I say, all this is utterly familiar. But what about the antithesis? It remains amorphous and confused; but, so far as I can tell, three conflicting answers to the question: “Who am I?” are still competing with old-fashioned national patriotism for dominion among us.

First is the apolitical counter-culture that seems increasingly prevalent among youthful age-cohorts. It is easy to see how it arose. When parents started to go to work outside the home, schools took on part of the task of nurturing. Indeed, special institutions for transmitting literacy to the few whose occupations required such skills are as old as civilization. Then, during the 19th Century, as literacy became needful in more and more circumstances, schooling was made compulsory. This became one of the most effective ways ambitious nation-states found to make loyal citizens out of the population under their jurisdiction. Schools still have this practical effect for their pupils.

But some young people resist literacy, and a good many, influenced by pop culture, have begun to espouse one or another form of revolt against adult norms and public pieties. Instant gratification is simply incompatible with the rural work ethic that shaped most lives in the past.
How youthful urban-born rebels will fit, or fail to fit, into adult society thus becomes problematical, as their rural heritages fade away, and as unrestrained sexual and other wishes gain more frequent and uninhibited expression. Continuity of our familiar social roles, skills and attitudes can not be taken for granted. Tradition has become fragile, making sudden, unexpected turns and twists in public life far more likely than I, for one, can comfortably contemplate.

On the other hand, all the millions of villagers who have moved to cities keep old work habits alive, and in that sense are a stabilizing influence. But, ironically, when they migrate into another country across ethnic and linguistic barriers, their presence introduces or exacerbates a second challenge to the ideal of a nation of free and equal citizens. For ethnic and religious groups are beginning to elbow one another for greater space within the confines of all the nation-states of Europe and America. This is plainly, but only partly, due to accelerated migration across cultural boundaries since 1945. It also reflects how the ideal of assimilation that nation-builders once took for granted turned into catastrophe for the Jews of Europe during World War II. In addition, the failure of American society to assimilate black citizens successfully more than a century after their ostensible liberation in 1863, confirmed the limitations of the old ideal. But whether claims to a collective identity and special cultural and other rights can be reconciled with the ideal of equal participatory citizenship is hauntingly unclear.

Ethnic and religious pluralism and autonomy for separate communities existed within old-fashioned empires of the past. However, because of their internal pluralism, such polities could not mobilize the entire population for common purposes, as secular nation-states were able to do. That looked like a fatal weakness as recently as 1991, when the Soviet Union broke up. Yet what goes out the front door often creeps in at the back; and in the most prosperous countries of the world, except for Japan, ethnic and religious minorities are asserting a common consciousness that sets them off, in one degree or another, from the rest of the citizenry. If the result is to multiply internal friction and standoffs of the kind that have weakened polyethnic empires of the past, the European-style of nation-state will have lost its former advantage over other polities. It is still too soon to know for sure.

Simultaneously, growing transnational solidarities are also undermining the once-triumphant nations of the earth. These affect the managerial classes more than others. International bureaucracies have begun to proliferate, both governmental and in the form
of international business corporations. The learned professions have also become noticeably more international, with cheap airfares and even cheaper telephones and faxes. Remarkably, even the military, once the arcana of patriotism and separate national identities, is becoming transnational, as attested by NATO command structures, UN peacekeeping forces, and the numerous training schools for foreign military officers that are maintained by the United States and many other leading nations.

What changing roles for reason and violence can be discerned amidst such confusion? I will content myself with three observations, each tentative and speculative, but the best I can do to answer my own question.

First, it seems apparent to me that the triumph of the national state, and its success in bureaucratizing violence by setting up professional armies, navies and police forces, is increasingly at risk. Popular support for the police within our cities is hard to achieve. Whole communities fear or suspect policemen, and live, as far as they dare, on the other side of the law. The armed forces, too, seem increasingly isolated from the citizenry. Mass armies of hastily trained citizens, in the style of the American and French revolutions, are obsolete now that high-tech weapons rule the battlefield. But the interests of specialized, long-term soldiers and sailors are potentially at odds with other groups in society. Under these circumstances, the well-known way in which Roman citizen-soldiers first became long-service professionals and then, to protect their own interests, followed leaders who destroyed the republic, acquires a new, unhappy resonance.

Growing gaps between civil society at large and the wielders of legally sanctioned force augur ill for public peace. More generally, there seems to be a weakening of common standards of behavior, attributable to decay of family nurture and to the malign influence of TV programs that resolve most human problems with violent, fictitious deaths produced by blank ammunition. Such programs surely encourage young men, finding it hard to fit into adult roles, to solve their real problems by using real guns and real bullets. Such persons are relatively few in number, soaked in drugs, and seldom live very long. But they do have an exciting life and a chance at easy wealth. By belonging to a tightly-disciplined gang they may also enjoy the psychological advantages of membership in a primary community. As such, one can argue that the violent career of contemporary hunters and gatherers in our streets is a rational choice of lifestyle, replicating more closely than is otherwise possible the form of society to which we are all genetically attuned. But is it not sure that such communities are biologically and culturally self-sustaining. In the short run, they are enormously troublesome; in the long run perhaps unlikely to persist, owing to the self-destructive risks they run, and to the limited patience of others for behavior that seriously interferes with more peaceful activities.

Living with violence

Gefolgschaften are parasitic on civil society; and the principles on which they act are hard to reconcile with the forms of behavior needed for the smooth conduct of market exchanges. Yet, as civilized administrators have known ever since the time of Gilgamesh, protection payments can be negotiated, formally or informally, so as to accommodate predatory bands within the texture of urban market economies. And as restless young men have shown from even more remote times, joining together in bands to engage in organized violence risks life and limb, but can also satisfy psychological as well as practical, material needs more effectually than meek and peaceable behavior is likely to do.

Gang violence will not soon disappear. Too many young men face disappointment in trying to attain satisfactory adult status. This, in turn, is an aspect of the more general breakdown of definite and practicable rules for personal behavior that pervades modern urban society, giving fresh impetus and enlarged scope to the rebelliousness of the young. Religious sects and violent street gangs are, so far, the two most prominent ways people that have responded.

Wielders of public authority traditionally and necessarily sustain their power and position by force or threat of force. In the long run, what holds the balance between legal and illegal exercise of force depends on how the population at large chooses between rival forms of governance. The growing range of activity for criminal groups is, from this point of view, an index to the state of public sentiment in choosing between cops and robbers, i.e., between official and private wielders or violence.

Revulsion against the costs of excessive private exercise of violence can be counted on to increase acquiescence to official resort to police violence. Choice between evils is what most people have had to face in the past. Modern electoral politics and the ideal of democratic government has probably not escaped that age-old dilemma. For a while it looked as though the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity might transcend the old antagonism between rulers and ruled; but domestic peace and order could only be maintained on a free, voluntary basis as long as
force was seldom needed because citizens agreed about most aspects of everyday behavior. That circumstance is less and less evident in modern cities, except perhaps in Japan. It follows that public order requires more frequent resort to force, and, without consensus, one person’s legitimate use of force is another’s oppression. A new consensus could only be created by planting a new ideal so firmly and generally as to override competing loyalties and identities. Wholesale conversion might bring about such an alteration of public attitudes, but that might not do much to diminish violence since really committed converts do not flinch from compulsion when truth and virtue, as they understand them, are at stake.

I conclude that violence is a prominent part of human life and always has been. Sadly, civil violence seems sure to persist, and is likely to increase among us until existing demographic pressures and moral disarray fades into the past, giving way to a different set of intractable problems to distress future generations. Human history is like that. Insoluble problems always exist. And when a solution is found — as the liberal, democratic nation-state once appeared to be — unexpected side effects soon arise to embarrass human hopes and expectations once again.

There are no quick and easy solutions. People always have lived with violence. We will have to do so too, trying to minimize its cost and impact as much as we can.

5. Violence in Brazil

Robert M. Levine

Violence has been growing in Brazil, swelling like an infected wound. It is overwhelming the weak institutional constraints of law and justice. Few of the thousands of murders in the last three decades have come to trial. For an estimated million major crimes committed annually on Brazilian territory, there were 345,000 outstanding arrest warrants in 1993. Both hardened criminals and abusive authority act with impunity.

After the massacre of 110 prisoners during the revolt in São Paulo’s Carandiru prison in 1992, testimony filled 10,800 pages of official record, but impunity of the policemen who slaughtered unarmed prisoners after they surrendered was confirmed. There are two sides to all these grim stories. Even when jails are secure enough to hold their inmates, prisoners rule within the walls. Rio de Janeiro’s Bangu Penitentiary, built to hold the most dangerous criminals, is said to be ruled inside by three gangs, the Comando Vermelho, the Terceiro Comando, and the Falange Jacare. As both random and organized violence escalates in Brazil, the institutional rule prevails that prisons are only for the poor and unimportant. The governor of the Northeastern state of Paraiba is still free and in office a year after walking drunk into a crowded restaurant, drawing a revolver and shooting his main political rival in the head at point blank range before several witnesses. Justice in Brazil is very selective.

Numbers fail to register the impunity with which violence spreads, but are useful indicators of the deepening institutional vacuum. Brazil employs 7,000 judges for its 150 million citizens; Germany has 120,000 for a population of 80 million. Brazil’s Supreme Tribunal of Justice, with 33 judges, faces a backlog of 34,000 cases. The police are equally burdened: each police official in São Paulo averages a case load of 2,000 unsolved crimes to investigate. Brazilian judges are entitled to two months of paid vacation annually, but while hard at work are known to have sold favorable verdicts to persons charged with crimes, including narcotics traffic. One judge charged $10,000 just to agree to meet with a lawyer seeking a writ of habeas corpus for his client, the director of a multinational firm. At the other end of the system, 95% of incarcerated prisoners have no money to hire their own lawyer. The United States, with 250 million people, had 1.1 million in jail in 1993; Brazil, with 150 million, has 126,000 in jail, in cells built for a total of 52,000, with 175,000 more convicted felons free because of lack of prison space.

Meanwhile, the wealthy and powerful benefit from laws unique to Brazil. Criminal suspects with no previous arrests are virtually exempt from pretrial detention. The two percent of those accused who are able to afford lawyers are rarely convicted. College graduates get private...
cells and special treatment. Brazil lacks a death penalty, but thousands of “criminal suspects” are summarily executed each year by military police and paramilitary vigilantes. With courts hopelessly backlogged, vigilantes are increasingly supported by public opinion, becoming respectable to many.

As William McNeill observes in his essay on “The Rising Tide of Urban Violence,” organized violence is as old as human society. In colonial Brazil, isolated country villages always faced danger from roving highwaymen or bands of thugs, who never had very much to steal. Country folk were not afraid to venture out at night. Since everyone knew everyone else in a village, women were relatively safe from sexual attack, since rapists would be instantly identified and dealt with savagely. With the arrival of paved roads and economic diversity, though, things swiftly changed. The better the roads became and the more closely linked formerly remote places became to the outside, the stronger the fear of assault, robbery and death.

The protection provided by rural isolation was violated by modernization. Central authority found new ways to contain or destroy diversity. Followers of the charismatic mystic known as Antonio Conselheiro, clustered in the recluse settlement of Canudos in the backlands Bahia in the 1890s, were labeled dangerous fanatics. The massacre that destroyed them and their settlement was praised as an act of cleansing and national unification, celebrated with parades in cities throughout the nation. One of the classics of Brazilian literature, Euclides da Cunha’s *Os Sertões (Revolt in the Backlands)*, was written in grudging admiration for the victims of the Canudos massacre and in defense of the need to consolidate the authority of the new republic. The Canudos massacre came not from disorder surging from the depths of society, but from the insecurity of those in power. For decades in Brazil, intimidation and violence have been used to enforce social control. Personal violence has usually been suffered by those lacking the protection of status or family connections or wealth. Violence has also, of course, been employed by individuals against others, and not disproportionately by the poor.

Encroaching political and economic change in the late 19th Century broke down traditional patron client bonds in northeastern Brazil and saw violence erupt in many different ways. Bands of restless young men ranged the Brazilian interior in the same manner as the *Gefolgeshaften* described by McNeill. Some brigands accommodated to the changing power structure by aligning themselves either with incumbent or opposition political factions; others saw themselves as independent actors, Robin Hood-like champions of the downtrodden even if their actions did not follow their claims. Romanticism aside, this would-be social banditry represented less class consciousness and conflict than an adaptation to, and not a protest against, the local power structure. The bandit Lampedo openly negotiated with politicians and in 1926 was hired by federal and state government officials to pursue and capture the guerrilla Prestes column, members of the nationalistic *tenente* crusade that raised the banner of revolt in the 1920s against the civilian regime of the First Republic. Less patriotic than practical, he accepted because of the lure of government weapons. In the same vein, the bandits and drug traffickers in the *favelas* establish patterns of cooperation with police and local politicians. The lessons of history should teach us not to be surprised by this behavior. However, it is a test of the cohesiveness of organized society.

One of the costs of chronic inflation and political disorder in Brazil is that government is losing the capacity to defend itself and protect its citizens. Protection always has extracted its price. Whether citizens are willing and able to pay this price, and to demand that protection be administered lawfully, involves decisions that will give form and substance to organized society.