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VIOLENCE

CONSENSUS AND COERCION

The control of violence lies at the heart of politics. This doesn't mean that all politics is inherently violent. Lots of forms of politics have no violence in them at all: argument, discussion, agreement are often peaceful activities undertaken by people who wouldn't dream of attacking each other physically. Sometimes fights do break out in parliaments, which is both hilarious and shocking. But it's not meant to happen like that, and in all parliaments there are plenty of rules in place to try to ensure that it doesn't happen. (In the British parliament you are not even allowed to accuse your opponents of lying, in case it provokes them.) Nor is it true that all violence is inherently political. If you get mugged, you don't enter into a political relationship with your mugger (though a mugging could have political consequences if it made you angry enough to try to push for a change in the law). The key to politics is not the violence as such. It is the control.

There are two ways to think about politics as controlling violence.

One is that violence can be used as a tool of control to draw people into ongoing relationships of authority and obedience. This is control *through* violence. If I know that you have the consistent power to hurt me, I will adjust my behaviour accordingly, to the point where you may not need to threaten me in order to get me to do what you want. I'll do what you want anyway, because of my knowledge of the power you have. The prospect of violence can shape people's behaviour without anyone getting hurt. All politics contains an element of this sort of pressure: we behave law-abidingly because of the implicit threat of what would happen to us if we didn't. But the other side of politics is the control *of* violence. Politics enables people to reach agreements about how to deal with violence, about who should have access to it and the circumstances in which it should be used. All political systems contain agreements of this sort as well: the people who control us through violence are the beneficiaries of our shared understanding about how to control the use of violence. We behave law-abidingly because we accept that lawmakers and law-enforcers have the right to tell us what to do. Without that shared understanding there would be no politics. There would just be an endless series of muggings.