

Poverty and Violence

The Influence of Poverty on Destructive Behaviour

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Abstract

The author studies the connection between poverty and violence. There are two different kinds of correlation between the phenomena concerned. On the one hand poverty can be featured as specific kind of violence, so that violence causes poverty. On the other hand poverty can be understood as source of violence; in that way violence is an aftermath of misery and despair. If a really and comprehensively human culture including peace and commonwealth becomes true, this is a clear sign that the spirit of God himself is acting in the people – the spirit of a present God, the spirit of a God however who never forces anyone to follow his way against his own will. The author considers it important to point out the necessity of looking for good religious and theological answers to the problems of our torn world since mere economic answers appear to be part of the problem rather than part of a solution.

Keywords

Violence, terrorism, just war, religions, violence of poverty, spirituality, structural violence.

The theme I have chosen to deal with in this paper is the connection between poverty and violence. However, there are two different kinds of correlation between the phenomena concerned. On the one hand poverty can be featured as specific kind of violence, so that violence causes poverty. On the other hand poverty can be understood as source of violence; in that way violence is an aftermath of misery and despair.

The Violence of Poverty

The first approach reflects on the negative effect the lifestyle of a minor part of humankind has on vast areas of the world. This

influence is called structural violence according to the Norwegian founder of peace and conflict research Johan Galtung. The term *structural* emphasizes the phenomenon of the absence of single agents exercising force or doing explicit violence to someone else. But nevertheless the behaviour of a part of humankind, the mode of economic system practised, the kind of allocation and distribution of resources and wealth, the structure of political decision-making and so on, bring forth a situation in which many people are suppressed and not capable of living in health and dignity. At the moment more than 20% of the population of our planet suffer from absolute destitution. That means they do not have sufficient nutrition, lodging, clothing and medical care. At the same time more than 40% of the worldwide crop of grain is fed to animals in order to produce meat. John Paul II. - influenced by the thoughts of the theology of liberation - uses the term structural sin in this context. In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* he writes that these structures are rooted in personal sin even if they are found very complex and anonymous. Particularly that means structural sin springs from "... the all-consuming desire for profit, and ..., the thirst for power, with the intention of imposing one's will upon others. ... Obviously, not only individuals fall victim to this double attitude of sin; nations and blocs can do so too. And this favours even more the introduction of the 'structures of sin' of which I have spoken. If certain forms of modern 'imperialism' were considered in the light of these moral criteria, we would see that hidden behind certain decisions, apparently inspired only by economics or politics, are real forms of idolatry: of money, ideology, class, technology." (37)

I think it is beyond doubt that this connection between violence and poverty does really exist in our world and that the phenomenon of globalization increases its explosiveness. Further, I suppose there will be no controversy about the ethical assessment of this fact. However, it is not easy to come to a consensus about solutions to this scandalous situation in practice because effective solutions could require sacrifices from the members of affluent societies. Such renunciation will require strong external pressure on agents

or powerful ethical convictions.

Poverty-Caused Violence

This topic is very important of course and challenging for the whole humankind but let me shift to the second conjunction between poverty and violence I have mentioned. This paper should be focussed on it because it will be the more controversial subject, I presume.

If we think of violence as effect of poverty it seems to be obvious that need and misery force people to help themselves by using means of the last resort. It is a widely-held assumption that violent actions are a sort of self-defence of people who try to save their lives by repulsing malnutrition and starvation. There are vital needs and legitimate interests which justify conflict. Struggles to gain meaningful identity, real security or economic and political rights deserve our sympathy. To end them quickly and unquestioningly would mean to confirm or even enforce situations of vicious injustice. (Cfr. Cook-Huffman, 45) Thus violence is justified or at least excused if it could be understood as a reaction of the least advantaged people to their situation. Even the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith admits the legitimacy of an armed struggle against a situation “... which is gravely damaging the fundamental rights of individuals and the common good ...” (*Libertatis Conscientia* 79; cfr. *Populorum Progressio* 31) although it has to be restricted to the *ultima ratio*.

Everybody will acknowledge extenuating circumstances in case of property crimes under specific conditions. A lot of theft and robbery in developing countries but also in socially remote areas of the western world like particular suburbs or ghettos, can be taken as immediate offspring of misery. Therefore, several sorts of violent behaviour appear to be self-defence against impoverishment.

Our estimation of violence is getting more difficult if people are hurt seriously or even killed. Is it possible to justify actions causing such consequences even if they are provoked by structural

violence? Traditional moral doctrine would answer this question by applying the principle of appropriate means. But not let us talk about the ethical judgement until we have analysed the interdependence of violence and poverty in greater depth.

The complete realm of such interdependence would be too extensive to be discussed within a paper like this. Thus, I will not reflect on conventional criminality any longer but focus my attention on terrorist activities from now on. That means to think about acts "... of violence against non-combatants with the objective of exacting revenge, intimidating, or otherwise influencing an audience." (Stern XX) This kind of violence has gained an increasing importance during the last few years and stimulated several debates. Further more, I will focus my remarks on terrorism of Islamic origin not only because it has been the most spectacular and perhaps the most cruel form of violence in the recent past all over the world but also since it is a challenging topic in theological contexts. So let me specify the subject of this paper: I will talk about poverty and the violence of religiously influenced terror from now on.

Besides, the terrorist kind of violence is frequently declared a result of poverty and misery even if it is evident that no one is able to improve the circumstances of his life by using the means of terror. A lot of comments on the attack against the twin-towers on September 11, 2001, depicted international terror as a nearly unavoidable response to the situation of the present world, which is characterised by immense inequality and injustice.

The British scholar Karen Armstrong for example wrote about the roots of Terror in *The Guardian* in September 2003: "Millennial or fundamentalist extremism has risen in nearly every cultural tradition where there are pronounced inequalities of wealth, power and status. The only way to create a safer world is to ensure that it is more just." And the economist Frances Stewart published an article in the *Financial Times* on March 19, 2004 titled "Terrorism will thrive while economic inequality continues between Arab states and the west." Similar statements are made by a lot of

scholars both in the western world and in Islamic countries as well as by politicians. They presume that the state being impoverished supports the tendency to look for comfort within fundamentalist religious movements and therefore strengthens the inclination to violent behaviour.

If this diagnosis is correct, the consistent solution to the problem of terrorism has to be the diminishing of the distance between rich and poor regions, countries, peoples, ethnic groups and so on. As power and status are unevenly distributed there is a widespread conviction that economic measures will be the most adequate instrument to close the gap. Here we are faced with a specific sort of the hypothesis that economic growth will guarantee peace, which is one of the most determinant ideas of modern western thinking. But is the diagnosis quite to the point?

The Agents of Terror

Unquestionably the gap between the rich and the poor is getting wider all over the world, both between nations as well as between groups within nations. The data of the World-watch-institute say that global economy has grown sevenfold since 1950. Meanwhile, the disparity in per capita gross domestic product between the 20 richest and 20 poorest nations has more than doubled between 1960 and 1995. Thus the wealth that has been attained during the past decades is appropriated by a few. But does this mean that the poorest of world-society use the emergency brake? A huge number of commentators argue for such an interpretation. They hold the following thesis to be convincing: If people - young people in particular - have lost all hope, if they get no chance to escape the dreary situation they exist in, we must not wonder about destructive outbreaks of anger and wrath.

Evidence, however, points in another direction. The very poorest of world-society are not the agents of terror. Where do the central figures of international terrorism come from? They don't come from Sub-Saharan Africa, where 232 Millions of people had less than one Dollar at their disposal a day in 2000, and where 11 of the 12 poorest nations are located. But they come from the Arabic

world where we have no increase in poverty. Who are the individuals who are becoming members of radical organisations and terrorists in the end? It could be that they are the underdogs within their nations, people with no access to education and no chance to improve their situation. But this assumption is also not correct. Take the example of Mohammed Atta, the head of the 9/11 hijackers: He studied engineering in Cairo and urban planning in Hamburg where he was sent by his father who wanted his son to become a doctor. This man not only descended from a well-situated Egyptian family but had the opportunity to become a respected member of western society as well. Or take the assassins who committed the bombing in Riad in May 2003. They were well off, well educated, protected by the structures of a potent welfare-state. Young male adults of the Saudi Arabian middle and upper class are the adherents of Osama Bin Laden. These guys are not isolated cases. The poorest do not use means of terror – they simply don't have the resources but the relatively affluent people do.

An Egyptian study from the 80s came to recognize, that the average Islamist who potentially becomes a violent fighter for his ideas is young (early twenties), of rural or small-town background, from the middle or lower middle class, with high achievement and motivation, upwardly mobile, with science or engineering education, and from a normally cohesive family. There are similar outcomes of a study concerning Hezbollah militants in Lebanon and similar observations on members of Jemaah Islamiyah in Singapore too (Cfr. Krueger & Maleckova). Shaukat Qadir (former vice-president of the Islamabad Policy Research Institute) analyses the situation of the thousands of Madrasas in Pakistan, where mostly children of poor families are housed, fed, taught the Koran and sometimes also trained to kill. A part of these Madrasas is the breeding ground for violent Islamist groups. But the background of the leaders is, completely different from the background of the recruits, as the author notices (Qadir 340f). So that one can say the underprivileged are rather abused to realize the ideas of affluent and educated people rather than articulating their own

despair and anger.

Even the situation in Palestine, which seemingly is totally different, affirms this impression. Public-opinion polls in the West-Bank and the Gaza-Strip has shown that support for violence against Israeli targets is higher among those with higher education and higher living standards. “The PCPSR [an independent centre for Policy and Survey Research in Ramallah] study in 2001 showed also that support for armed attacks against Israeli targets is widespread across all Palestinian occupations and groups, but particularly strong among students (recall that respondents are age eighteen or older) and merchants and professionals. Notably, the unemployed are somewhat less likely to support armed attacks against Israeli targets. If poverty was indeed the wellspring of support for terrorism or politically motivated violence, one would have expected the unemployed to be more supportive of armed attacks than merchants and professionals, but public-opinion evidence points in the other direction” (Krueger & Maleckova). The results of other studies and polls could be cited here to prove that there is no direct and simple relation between poverty and terrorist violence. Rather the tendency to terrorist activities seems to increase in proportion to the rise in education and living-standard.

How can these astonishing facts be understood?

Nearness and Conflict

To approach a first answer to this question, the mimetic theory of René Girard may be helpful (Palaver 91-96; Girard 144f). The Franco-American scholar of literature and culture depicts man characterised by desire. Desire is the drive of our life. But the goals of desire are not determined. They have to be formed by models which are other individuals to whom we look up to somehow. Being the model of another one is ambivalent. Each of us likes to be admired and to find adherents. But these other ones are also a latent threat because we fear they could try to occupy our own place and our own position. Thus the message we send to them is ambiguous; this is called a situation of double-bind by psychologists. Our adherents shall follow us and imitate our way

but they shouldn't do this perfectly. So it is easier to deal with the situation of mimetic desire — as Girard calls the imitation of the goals of another subject — if there is a granted borderline between the model and his/her adherents that can not be crossed. (Kirwan 15) Such a boundary can be set on purpose or it can be the result of a given situation which is perceived as a kind of fate.

We may find the mechanisms of mimesis in the interactions of individuals as well as in the interactions of social classes, peoples, nations or civilisations. So if the distance between two collectives is vast, we will notice admiration and also a specific mode of mimesis but however the difference is usually accepted as a fact. The model-group feels secure and the admiring-group tries to manage its own pitiful existence as well as possible but tries not to usurp the place of the model. At the moment the gap between the two groups decreases, rivalry will increase.¹ A very poor man may accept that his neighbour is unbelievably rich. Even if there is envy in his eyes he will imagine no possibility to skip into the rich man's sphere. Even if he has dreams of being rich, he will not engage in changing the current constellation in fact. However, at the moment the poor is getting richer and the difference to his neighbour less insurmountable the remaining distance will focus the interest and energy of both neighbours. The rich one is going to protect it; the poorer one is going to overcome it. Finally the only barrier left between the positions of the two is the repulsive behaviour of the richer which necessarily is perceived a monstrosity by the poorer one. Thus his readiness to use violent means to gain what he is entitled to will increase. Since both sides in this rising conflict feel to be a victim a just solution can hardly be found.

Assuming this scenario to be true, we have to acknowledge that economic development in poorer countries or regions will not solve the problem of violence at once. On the contrary, it could be intensified at least as long as the positions of all nations and regions have become actually equal — quite an utopian goal. And especially the members of the wealthy western world have to admit that the fading away of global differences is not really in

their own interest for the most part. So that their behaviour – sometimes unconscious behaviour – and their actual politics in spite of all lip service to global justice are the main obstacles to its realization.

These thoughts may help to understand what's taking place, but a sufficient explanation of terrorist violence will require further considerations to be added to what I've said about conflict and possible violence between unequal groups. I am convinced that we have to focus our interest and attention on the spiritual dimension of the phenomenon. Religion is not only a hypocritical gloss covering the real motivation of Islamist terror. Thus I will argue that the people we are talking about do feel a justified uneasiness about the structures and dynamics of the modern western culture that is going to get global. Therefore, they try to install an alternative world-order shaped by religious tradition.

Fight for the Spiritual Dimension of Humans

In order to better explain what is meant by this, I refer to a thinker whose name is mentioned repeatedly in the context of radical Islamism and terror: Sayyid Qutb. Born in 1906 in Egypt, he was an official of the government and a relatively secularized Muslim. Living in the USA for two years in the late 40s, Qutb was shocked and repelled by the western lifestyle which to him was characterized by production, money and lust. Back in Egypt he increasingly became an orthodox Muslim and one of the most important thinkers of the Muslim-Brotherhood. This intellectual leadership was the reason for several imprisonments. In 1966 he was sentenced to death by President Nasser for subversion. His brother Muhammad who carried on his ideas became the teacher of Osama Bin Laden later on. Qutb's writings — among others a very extensive interpretation of the Koran — are held in high esteem in radical Islamist circles.

Reading one of the most famous and influential books of Sayyid Qutb titled *Milestones*², which was written 1964 in prison, one who is familiar with the documents of the *Catholic Social*

Doctrine will discover a lot of familiar ideas Qutb is moaning about the misguided development of the modern world. He is worried about the sanity and salvation of the human person. I quote the very first sentences of “*Milestones*”: “Mankind today is on the brink of a precipice, not because of the danger of complete annihilation which is hanging over its head - this being just a symptom and not the real disease - but because humanity is devoid of those vital values which are necessary not only for its healthy development but also for its real progress. Even the Western world realizes that Western civilization is unable to present any healthy values for the guidance of mankind. It knows that it does not possess anything which will satisfy its own conscience and justify its existence...” This deficiency of western as well as of eastern socialist societies causes a mutilation of real human dignity as the author argues. A human being is reduced to a rational animal driven by materialist desires. Both western and eastern societies are marked deficient in this way because of their materialist character. The differences between the two competing ideologies are not differences of the basic conception, the author notes. They only fight for predominance.

Very emphatically Qutb rejects each society ruled by mere human standards and manmade laws. That will necessarily result in systems of despotism and slavery characterized by division of colour, race and nation. In such system man is not only the slave of other men but also servant of his own animal desires. Thus Qutb writes: “In Islam, mere material inventions are not considered as civilization, as a jahili society can also have material prosperity. In many places in the Qur’an, God has described societies of this kind, which have attained material prosperity while remaining jahili.” (Qutb, Chapter 8) *Jahillia* means the simple ignorance of Islam but also the persistent and stolid rejection of God’s revelation which prevents real human development. Thus *jahili* societies are esteemed crude and backward.

Recapitulating, it can be said that the author of *Milestones* talks about the importance of Islam in the same way the Catholic Church talks about her own task saying she is “... a sign and a

safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person.”
(*Gaudium et Spes* 76)

This is the right point of my remarks to refer back to my first attempt to explain the causes of terrorist violence. It is just the dimension of transcendence which prevents mimetic desire from getting conflictive in a destructive way. Taboos and strong borderlines are necessary to separate agents competing for indivisible goods that have to be the exclusive property of a single person or group as already Thomas Hobbes had mentioned. Spiritual goods are of a different kind. In case of the prevailing pursuit of such goods it would be easier to overcome the tricky differences of wealth and status. People who don't consider worldly goods their final purpose are able to undo the fear of being exploited by the hungry, of being threatened by the miserable ones and being attracted by their neighbours. So it had to be noticed that a beneficial handling of desire requires the presence of a transcendent reality both in the individual human lives and in society. This conviction is already part of our Augustinian heritage.

I think a lot of people all over the world sense a lack of transcendence and spirituality in modern western societies. Especially the ones who are rooted in a traditional religious background are scared of this lack when they get in touch with societies of western style. One can say that they are not ready to accept a concept of a human being called *homo oeconomicus* and a concept of society that reduces community to market. If this hypothesis fits, we have to consider fundamentalist movements to be fighting against wealth rather than for wealth. Even if there may be some primitive resentment in their habit their justified concern shouldn't be ignored. (Cfr. Damir-Geilsdorf 63) At least it could not be convincing to reduce the conflict between the Muslim world and the west to an economic one. Qutb himself refuses this reduction as ruse of western ideology. The real conflict is between belief and unbelief. “The enemies of the Believers may wish to change this struggle into an economic or political or racial struggle, so that the Believers become confused concerning

the true nature of the struggle and the flame of belief in their hearts becomes extinguished. The Believers must not be deceived, and must understand that this is a trick. The enemy, by changing the nature of the struggle, intends to deprive them of their weapon of true victory, the victory which can take any form, be it the victory of the freedom of spirit as was case of the Believers in the story of the Maker of the Pit, or dominance in the world – as a consequence of the freedom of spirit – as happened in the case of the first generation of Muslims.” (Qutb, Chapter 12)

Of course it is embarrassing to accept such a topic. To reduce economic injustice and inequality will be difficult but it does not require reconsidering the fundamental structures of modern western societies as long as growth can be maintained. A judgement assessing the modern world to be inhuman in some respect and insufficient in its entirety is however more challenging and will require much more painful transformations.

A Justified War?

But what can be said about violence after all this consideration? Could kidnapping, bombing and killing be justified by the grave faults of the worldwide prevailing social system? Sayyid Qutb would answer this question in the affirmative, I presume.

One will barely find open invitation to use violence in the book *Milestones* — in contrast to earlier written texts. But there is a chapter dealing with the term *jihad*. There it is said that preaching is not enough to free humankind from structures of slavery and from the rule of human over human. Other means will have to be applied too. Qutb emphasises that it is not allowed in Islam to force someone to believe in and adore the one God. But the social structures that prevent God’s sovereignty from being accepted as the unique reality of human society have to be abolished and erased. Islam “... does not attack individuals nor does it force them to accept its beliefs; it attacks institutions and traditions to release human beings from their poisonous influences, which distort human nature and which curtail human freedom.” (Qutb, Chapter 4) This

attitude, however, is not compatible with Christian revelation understood in the way of the *Catholic Social Teaching* at all. In the doctrine of the church the opinion is stressed that structures and the convictions and habits of the human individuals cannot be segregated. Whoever strives to change the world by merely changing structures, will fail. (Cfr. *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* 16) Thus Pope John Paul II. writes in his encyclical *Centesimus annus* (51): "... the first and most important task is accomplished within man's heart." To Qutb it seems to be possible to install the rule of God and his law regardless of whether it corresponds to the convictions of the people or not. Therefore his approach is more similar to the Marxist idea of a bloody revolution than to the Christian idea of a subtle spiritual revolution which changes institutions from the inside. In this respect, John Gray may be right to call Al-Qaeda and other radical Islamist Organisations *modern*. (Gray 2004) To the British professor of European thought, *being modern* in this context means the condition of human agents trying to create a new world on their own. It is not so important whether this aim is pursued by rational means or by irrational means he feels.

Even if Qutb stresses that the sovereignty of God should come true, the subjects responsible for the realisation of this aim are humans. Hence, the movement of *jihad* paradoxically approximates to the harshly criticised structures of the modern world. Maybe the reason for this is a concept of religion that makes God absolutely transcendent: his law remains within the world but he himself is not a real agent of the drama of human history and salvation because he is too "high" above us. The Islamic tradition is not acquainted with the idea of incarnation. And for a Muslim it is also not imaginable that God's spirit is acting within a human community enabling it to deal with divine commitments in a creative way. Biblical faith, however, is aware that real conversion is not only demanded by God's law but is brought about by God alone, even if single humans or social structures may hamper or support it. Thus if a really and comprehensively human culture including peace and

commonwealth becomes true, this is a clear sign that the spirit of God himself is acting in the people – the spirit of a present God, the spirit of a God however who never forces anyone to follow his way against his own will (Cfr. Schwager & Niewiadomski, 64).

Though the topic of terrorist violence is very complex and I am not sure if I have provided a completely satisfactory or even the sole explanation of it in my paper, it seems important to me to point out the necessity of looking for good religious and theological answers to the problems of our torn world since mere economic answers appear to be part of the problem rather than part of a solution.

Notes

1. This concept is very similar to what S. Freud has called narcissism of minor differences.
2. The title of this books is “*Ma'alim fi'l-tareeq*” in Arabic language, which is also translated as “Sign-posts on the Road.”

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Article received: November 12, 2004

Article approved: December 24, 2004.

No of words: 4, 996