

The Uses of Violence: An Examination of Some Cross-Cutting Issues

Manuel Eisner, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom

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The Uses of Violence: An Examination of Some Cross-Cutting Issues

Manuel Eisner, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom

A general theory of violence may only be possible in the sense of a meta-theoretical framework. As such it should comprise a parsimonious set of general mechanisms that operate across various manifestations of violence. In order to identify such mechanisms, a general theory of violence needs to equally consider all manifestations of violence, in all societies, and at all times. Departing from this assumption this paper argues that three theoretical approaches may be combined in a non-contradictory way to understand violence as goal-directed instrumental behavior: a theory of the judgment and decision-making processes operating in the situations that give rise to violence; a theory of the evolutionary processes that have resulted in universal cognitive and emotional mechanisms associated with violence; and a theory of the way in which social institutions structure violence by selectively enhancing its effectiveness for some purposes (i.e. legitimate use of force) and controlling other types of violence (i.e. crime). To illustrate the potential use of such a perspective the paper then examines some general mechanisms that may explain many different types of violence. In particular, it examines how the mechanisms of moralistic aggression (Trivers) and moral disengagement (Bandura) may account for many different types of violence.

“In the course of time Cain presented some of the land’s produce as an offering to the Lord. And Abel also presented an offering—some of the firstborn of his flock and their fat portions. The Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but He did not have regard for Cain and his offering. Cain was furious, and he was downcast. Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Why are you furious? And why are you downcast? If you do right, won’t you be accepted? But if you do not do right, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must master it.’ Cain said to his brother Abel, ‘Let’s go out to the field.’ And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.” (Genesis 4: 1–8)

Cain’s behavior can be explained in many different ways, of which two are of particular interest to violence researchers. One is to speculate that Cain may have had some pathological personality characteristics (“refuses to comply with adult’s/God’s requests,” “easily annoyed by others,” “angry and resentful,” “spiteful and vindictive”) that could be part of an antisocial and aggressive behavior syndrome, and that this led him to commit the first murder in the Bible. If fol-

lowed through, this approach leads to a violence-as-illness perspective.

An alternative possibility is that Cain was a normal human being who was competing with another human being for a valuable good, namely God’s regard. Angered by the apparently unjust treatment, Cain finds that eliminating the competitor is a way to gain an advantage (which he eventually does). In this perspective Cain was confronted with a universal problem of humans, namely unequal access to valued goods; he felt an urge for revenge, a desire that has roots in human evolution; and he used trickery and physical force to achieve his goal.

The two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In this paper, however, I will mainly explore the second option, arguing that many manifestations of violence in different societies and across long periods of time can be understood as strategic, goal-driven behavior, molded by adaptive processes during the evolution of the human species, and organized and transformed in social institutions.

In arguing along these lines I will draw liberally on arguments and findings from a variety of disciplines, including evolutionary psychology, anthropology, criminology, history, sociology, and decision-making theory.

1. What is a General Theory of Violence About?

1.1. Definition of Violence

For the purposes of this paper I define violence narrowly as the *intentional but unwanted infliction of physical harm on other humans*. The definition results in several borderline issues, which merit attention.

Like most others I limit violence to *intentional or deliberate* acts. Intentions are immediate aims—as opposed to more distant goals—that guide an action. However, harm that is an unintended side-effect of intentional behavior is not included in this definition. Accordingly, for example, Stalin's conscious strategy of starving millions of Kulaks to death in the Ukraine constitutes violence, while the thirty million Chinese who died from starvation as an unintended consequence of poor economic policy during Mao's Great Leap Forward does not (Rummel 1994).

The notion of intentionality is not without problems (Anscombe 1956; Sheeran 2002). For one thing, the attribution of intent requires a judgment on the motivational process leading to an action that is often hard to obtain. Also, the difference between deliberately inflicting harm and not being bothered about causing harm (e.g. in the slave trade) is gradual rather than categorical. Thirdly, violent actors often cause considerably less or massively more harm than they intended. Finally, intentionality becomes a complex issue when violence is used within an organization (e.g. army, concentration camp, organized crime) and where agents act on the orders of authorities. In such cases the actor who intends and implements the violent action may be far removed from the immediate acts of harm-doing.

By limiting violence to *unwanted* acts the definition excludes acts where the infliction of pain has been mutually agreed and there is no conflict of interests. Thus, tattooing, sado-masochistic sexual practices, assisted suicide, or pain inflicted by medical doctors are not part of this definition of violence. In contrast, mere agreement on the circumstances

of mutual harm-doing (e.g. whereabouts of the battleground, staged fights, duels) does not constitute consent to suffering harm.

I confine the notion of violence to the actual *infliction of physical harm*. Hence the *threat* of harm (e.g. threat of killing somebody, blackmail, public calls for violent action against particular groups, etc.) and depriving somebody of his/her liberty (e.g. hostage-taking, slavery, or imprisonment) are not included unless physical harm is done. Also, unsuccessful attempts to inflict injury are not included. The exclusion of such acts is not unproblematic. Tedeschi and Felson (1994), in particular, have argued that violence should really be considered as a subcategory of the much broader class of coercive acts. However, extending violence to all acts that use threat as means of reducing the freedom of action of others would probably overburden the notion of violence.

Finally, the notion of violence is limited to harm inflicted to humans. This limitation, too, is contested. For example, there is controversy, in contemporary societies, about the extent to which doing intended harm to animals constitutes violence (e.g. in animal protection laws) or about the moment when human life starts (e.g. abortion).

1.2. Geographic and Temporal Extent

A general theory of violence should apply to all types of violence, at all times, in all places. Geographically, it should have equal relevance (and equal explanatory power) across all existing human societies, whatever their cultural, economic, or political characteristics (see also Karstedt 2001). This point is important because a large chunk of current empirical knowledge is based on Western (i.e. wealthy, state-regulated, law-bound, and individualistic) societies. Consequently much theorizing is derived from the manifestations of violence that arise under those circumstances. Contrariwise, empirical and theoretical research, especially in criminology and developmental psychology, tends to ignore the sorts of violence that are typical for less developed regions of the globe, including torture, excessive police violence, vigilante violence, genocide, and civil war.

It is more difficult to delineate the temporal domain of a general theory of violence. In examining the roots of aggression amongst mammals and primates, some evolutionary theories refer back to the split between humans and apes about six to eight million years ago (e.g. Wrangham 1999). However, it may be more prudent to restrict the remit of a general theory of violence to the emergence of modern humans, i.e. about 180,000 years ago. Since then the cognitive, genetic, and anatomical outfit of humans has remained essentially unchanged, meaning that one important set of variables can be held constant.

The implications of saying that a general theory of violence should cover all human experience at all places at all times are shown in Table 1. It lists major types of acts that satisfy the above definition. The table also illustrates several points that will be relevant for the subsequent discussion. First, listing *violence in non-state societies* separately serves as a reminder that for most of human history the dualism of crime versus law-based justice is irrelevant. Given that these

societies cover most of the history of humankind, a general theory of violence should be able to understand the role of violence in them.

Secondly, the table lists *punishments* as a separate category, although acts of violence that constitute punishment can also be found in other subheadings (e.g. revenge killings, hitting subordinates, lynching). The separate heading mainly serves the purpose of alerting readers to the fact that corporal punishment in all its forms is an important subtype of violence.

Third, the list comprises different subheadings for violence committed by single individuals and for more organized types of violence that entail the coordination of large numbers of people. Despite the subheadings one should note that the difference between individual and organized violence is gradual rather than discontinuous: Minor insults may turn into a homicide that may trigger feuds, which in turn can escalate into war.

Table 1: Manifestations of violence to be covered by a general theory of violence

Childhood Aggression	Interpersonal Criminal Violence	Legitimate and Illegitimate State Violence
Bullying	Assault	Assassination
Fights	Rape	Torture
	Robbery	Wars
Violence in non-state societies	Homicide	Massacres
Ritualized fights	Infanticide	Concentration camps
Revenge killings, feuds	Child abuse	Executions
Violent self-help	Domestic violence	Genocide
Raids		Police use of force
Battles	Punishments	
Massacres	Parental corporal punishment	Organized Political Violence
Rape	State capital punishment	Assassinations
Assassination of visitors	Flogging, stoning	Civil war
Infanticide, senilicide		Extortion of protection rents
Torture	Organized Private Violence	Terrorism
Human sacrifice	Hitting, beating, raping, killing subordinates and dependents	Resistance/liberation wars
	Organized piracy and robbery	Revolutionary violence
	Assassinations	Riots
	Private warlords	Lynching
	Gang wars	Vigilante violence
		Extremist and hate violence

Note: Grouping under subheadings serves illustrative purposes and does not imply a theory-based classification.

2. Tasks of a General Theory of Violence

Violence research does not suffer from a scarcity of theories. We have theories of family violence (e.g. Gelles 1987), theories of child aggression (e.g. Kempes et al. 2005; Patterson, Reid, and Dishion 1992), theories of bullying (e.g. Rigby 2004), theories of sexual violence (e.g. Ward and Beech 2006), theories of political violence (e.g. Muller and Weede 1990), theories of war (e.g. Levy 1998), and theories of genocide (e.g. Neubacher 2006).

I believe that violence research will always need local theories that do well in either explaining specific manifestations of violence or that highlight particular mechanisms on the continuum of biological, psychological, and social layers of reality that are implicated in the causation of violence. In part this reflects the fact that violence is embedded in a variety of social institutions (e.g. schools, family, the state) whose operational logic needs to be understood in order to explain to role of violence within them.

Any general theory, if at all possible, will therefore be a *meta-theory*, i.e. an overarching and parsimonious set of general principles that helps to organize local theories (see Tittle 2009 in this volume). To be useful, such a theory would need to do at least four things: It should identify general mechanisms that operate on different manifestations of violence. For example, it might demonstrate that fights between youth gangs, raids between neighboring tribes in non-state societies, and civil wars have commonalities (e.g. regarding motives, participants, organization, dynamics) worthy of scientific generalization. Secondly, it would demonstrate that a few general principles bring forth similar manifestations of violence across cultures and over time. For example, revenge killings seem to be a universal phenomenon across all human societies. A general theory could help us to understand whether this pattern of conflict resolution can be derived from one underlying mechanism. Thirdly, it would need to integrate disciplinary theories at the biological, the psychological, and the sociological level in such a way that they are non-contradictory and that the resulting explanatory power is higher than that of each primary theory (e.g. Dodge and Pettit 2003). Fourthly, it should show that successful strategies of controlling and preventing different types of violence are based on the

same general principles. It would be useful to understand whether, for example, the prevention of school violence and the strategies for pacifying post-civil war societies apply similar principles that can be derived from a general underlying theory.

Many such meta-theories are possible. In the following I first outline contours of one such theoretical framework and then discuss some cross-cutting themes with a view to examining the potential usefulness of the suggested perspective.

3. Violence as an Instrument

Many current theories begin with the notion of violence as a psychological disorder and individual pathology (e.g. Hodgins, Viding, and Plodowski 2009) or as a morally reprehensible “evil” (e.g. Miller 2004). While research on violence as a pathological disorder has made huge progress in identifying genetic, neurobiological, temperamental, and family-related risk-factors associated with aggressive behavior, I am not convinced that these findings can serve as a basis for a general theory of violence. Particularly, it is difficult to explain phenomena such as wars, blood feuds, capital punishment, or assassinations as the outcome of individual pathologies. Rather, a general theory should start by asking about the broader uses of violence in the patterns of interaction that constitute human society, and to consider pathological violence as a special case within such a framework.

Hence the following considerations start with the assumption that violence is *an instrument* that serves to achieve specific goals. It is a tool available to humans as animals with a high degree of behavioral plasticity. It differs from other instruments (e.g. language) in that it serves to constrain, coerce, subdue, and eliminate others—sometimes as an unprovoked attack, sometimes as a fight, and sometimes as a reaction to previous provocation or attack.

This is in line with the usage of the word violence in many languages. One does not commonly say that a person *has* violence or *does* violence. Rather, people *use* violence or force. Also, its instrumental character is reflected in the fact that it happens under highly selective circumstances

against specific people. Also, violence is subject to technological change and humans have devoted a lot of time and energy to developing better and more effective technologies of coercing and killing. Finally, violence can be collectively organized and trained, and unleashed in controlled ways against specific targets.

At first sight, the notion of violence as instrumental behavior seems counterintuitive. Rather, we tend to see violence as a generally unsuccessful behavior, as robbers generally do not succeed in getting rich, domestic batterers end up destroying their partnership, and terrorists do not topple the governments they hate (Baumeister and Vohs 2004). However, it is easy to forget that the unconditional contempt for violence in modern societies is a result of the luxuries of wealth, safety, and protection, and that the stability of state monopolies of violence is a very recent phenomenon.

A “fair” assessment of the uses of violence would need to consider equally the instances when, for example, infanticide or gerontocide helped a band to survive in a harsh environment, when empires were built by conquest, when kings were killed, or when individuals maintained their good reputation by defending their honor when insulted.

Archeological and anthropological research leaves no doubt that Rousseau’s notion of the peaceful savage was wrong. Archeological research has primarily examined skeletal remains for evidence of interpersonal violence, especially cranial injuries and embedded projectile points (for reviews see, e.g. Guilaine and Zammit 2005; McCall and Shields 2008; Schulting 2006; Thorpe 2003). Evidence is scarce for the Paleolithic period (ca. 2.5 million to 10,000 BCE). However, there is much more consistent archeological evidence from the Mesolithic period onwards. Despite the methodological difficulty of distinguishing injuries from intentional violence, archeologists come to the conclusion that lethal interpersonal violence was certainly not unknown and was probably quite widespread. Types of documented violence comprise, amongst others, fights between adult males, raids and wars, large-scale massacres, head-taking, violent cannibalism, and sacrifice (Schulting 2006). However, one should also note that even the limited evidence suggests large

differences over time and between sites, making sweeping generalizations difficult (Thorpe 2003).

Anthropological evidence also suggests that violence was endemic in many societies, although, again, significant differences are found between cultures (Ferguson 2000; Keeley 1996; Otterbein 2004). The world record in lethal killings is probably held by the Waorani, a people in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Based on extensive genealogies over five generations, Yost (1981) found that more than 60 percent of adult deaths were a result of intentional killing; 17 percent a consequence of external raiding and 44 percent from internal feuding related to vendettas, quarrels, or accusations of sorcery (Robarchek and Robarchek 1998). Comparable levels of more than 10 percent of deaths due to intentional killing (a homicide rate of about 200–300 per 100,000) are reported for a considerable number of non-state societies.

On the grounds of its pervasiveness in human history, many theorists of violence therefore find it useful to start with observing that violence is a means to get access to valuable goods that others may be unwilling to share or give away—ranging from lollipops and sneakers to money, horses, land, food, sex, or oil. Humans have developed various ways to co-opt valued goods. They include work, charm, convincing others, exchange, stealing, and trickery. The use of physical force is only one option, but has the important advantage that it is unilateral coercive action and as such does not require cooperation by or negotiation with others.

On the other hand, the use of physical force also has significant disadvantages since it entails a risk of injury to the user and often requires substantive material and temporary resources at the cost of other, more productive activities. If possible, therefore, humans tend to prefer less costly strategies for acquiring desired objects. Generally, however, an instrumental perspective expects that violence is the more likely, the more highly valued the contentious good is, the more the aggressor subjectively expects that violence is an effective way for achieving the valued good, and the less attractive or accessible alternative routes of action are. Street robbers, pirates, rapists, and war strategists found similar answers to the question of how to best strike first: Make sure you are better equipped and in larger numbers

than your target, choose a vulnerable victim, and attack the victim by surprise.

Of course, instrumental rationality is inferred rather than conclusively demonstrated in archeological, historical or ethnological studies. But the assumption of cost-benefit considerations as a determinant of violent behavior finds considerable support in contemporary individual-level studies. For adolescents and young adults a series of studies suggests that instrumental decision-making is involved in the likelihood of violent action (Nagin and Paternoster 1993). In a recent large-scale study of offender decision-making, based on the Denver Youth Survey, Matsueda, Kreager, and Huizinga (2006) found that rational choice processes have a significant impact on violent acts amongst juveniles. Specifically, violence was positively associated with risk preference, the perceived coolness of violence (i.e. a gain in status), and the perceived opportunities, while it was negatively associated with the perceived risk of arrest.

The strategic character of instrumental violence is also evidenced by a body of research that shows how instrumental beliefs—i.e. beliefs about how effective aggression is in making others comply—predict actual violent behavior (Fagan and Wilkinson 1998). More particularly, instrumental beliefs predict aggressive behavior amongst children (Tapper and Boulton 2004), school bullying (John Archer 2004), physical aggression against partners (John Archer and Graham-Kevan 2003), and corporal punishment (Holden, Miller, and Harris 1999). A recent study in Ghana has replicated these findings in a non-Western context (Owusu-Banahene and Amadahe 2008).

4. Theoretical Perspectives

Conceiving of violence as an instrument means that theory construction must be focused on providing an answer to the questions: What problems does violence solve? Under what circumstances do actors resort to violence as a subjectively promising strategy? And how do social structures create and limit the situations in which violence is seen as a promising strategy to achieve a goal?

4.1. Judgment and Decision-making in Violent Acts

For decades, psychologists made a distinction between situational and person-oriented explanations of violence (Pervin 1986). Situational explanations often refer to the famous Milgram experiments and argue that under specific situational contexts any person can be made to behave aggressively (Zimbardo 2004). Person-oriented explanations emphasize the stability of aggressive behavior during the life course and the robust evidence for links between personality characteristics and behavior outcomes (Loeber and Hay 1997).

However, most current theorists agree that some people are more aggressive than others and that some situations are more likely to trigger aggression than others, in other words that both internal mechanisms and external triggers are operating in social behavior (Pervin 1986). Or, as Buss and Shackelford put it: “No mechanism, no behavior; no input, no behavior” (1997, 607).

The premise that violence is goal-directed intentional action requires an action theory of the judgment and decision-making process involved in assaulting, robbing, or killing other people. In fact, an adequate model of the real-time interaction between the hormonal, neurocognitive, and evaluative processes within a human on the one side and the situational context on the other is the eye of the needle for any violence theory (Wikström 2003).

Several such theories have been suggested recently (e.g. C. A. Anderson and Bushman 2002; Crick and Dodge 1996; Fontaine 2007; Wikström and Treiber 2009). Most of these assume bounded rationality in the sense that humans have preferences and make decisions about how to achieve their goals, but that their judgments depend on—amongst others—their cognitive abilities and personality, their interpretation of the situation, their pre-existing behavioral routines, the speed at which they need to decide, and their emotional state. They thus combine assumptions about goal-directed behavior with psychological models of cognition and information processing (Nagin 2007). Often, such models incorporate more general action and decision-making models such as, for example, the Fishbein/Ajzen model

of planned action (Ajzen 1988) or variants of rational choice models such as the subjective expected utility model (SEU).

Probably the most complex integrative model currently available is the one developed by Anderson and Bushman (2002). Their General Aggression Model incorporates several domain-specific theories and explicitly conceives of humans as processors of information who use knowledge structures (“scripts”) that guide them through situations. Essentially the model starts with the confluence in time and space of a person with a situation. This “input” includes all the biological, environmental, psychological, and social characteristics of the person and the context. On the side of the person, the combination of these inputs determines a latent preparedness to aggress. The interaction between situation and person is then assumed to trigger change in the internal state of the person. This entails the application of cognitive scripts, emotional reactions, arousal, and the activation or neutralization of moral inhibitions. Depending on an appraisal and decision process a violent or a non-violent strategy is then chosen.

4.2. Evolutionary Perspective

Research from all angles has produced convincing evidence that some features of violence are remarkably similar across time and space. These commonalities comprise: the sex distribution of people involved in fighting (mostly men); the approximate age at which people are most likely to engage in violence (about 18 to 35); essential goals over which fights are fought (material resources, power, and sex); situations that are prone to violence (e.g. humiliations in the presence of others); individual characteristics associated with violence (e.g. courage and risk-seeking); and emotional processes involved in violent encounters (e.g. arousal and anger).

Such commonalities are difficult to understand from a purely cultural perspective. Rather, it is becoming increasingly clear that any general theory of violence will need to integrate an evolutionary perspective on human nature (Pinker 2002). In an insightful paper, Wood (2007) has recently laid out how and why an evolutionary perspective is an essential element for the way social scientists understand violence both historically and across societies.

On the most general level, an evolutionary perspective serves as a corrective to the view, long cherished amongst social scientists, that the human mind is essentially a blank slate, ready to store and retrieve whatever happens to characterize a given culture (Pinker 2002). In contrast, evolutionary psychologists emphasize that the “hard-wired” architecture of our brain evolved over long periods of time as a solution to the adaptive problems posed by the environmental conditions and problems in the ancestral world (Tooby and Cosmides 1992). Hence the human brain is theorized to be a network of “regulatory circuits” that “organize the way we interpret our experiences, inject certain recurrent concepts and motivations into our mental life, and provide universal frames of meaning that allow us to understand the actions and intentions of others” (Tooby and Cosmides 1997).

In an influential paper, Buss and Shackelford (1997) proposed an evolutionary framework for understanding human aggression. They suggest that such a perspective should develop empirically testable answers to a cluster of related questions, such as: What specific adaptive problems might be solved by aggression? What are the specific features of emotional and cognitive processes associated with violence, and can they be predicted and explained by hypotheses about the adaptive functions of aggression? What contexts trigger aggression, and can they be predicted and explained by specific hypotheses about the adaptive functions of aggression?

In developing answers to these questions Buss and Shackelford (1997) suggest that aggression is a highly context-specific collection of strategies that have evolved as an adaptation to recurrent problems that humans were confronted with during the history of human evolution. They may be grouped into strategies of proactive aggression developed to inflict costs on rivals and reactive strategies that have developed to deter rivals and to defend one’s interests. The proactive use of aggression entails violence as means to gain access to resources that are valuable for reproduction (land, water, food); as a strategy to win in competitions against intrasexual rivals; and a way to negotiate status and power hierarchies. Reactive uses include strategies where violence is used to defend against attack, situations where it serves

as a way to gain a reputation as aggressive in order to deter rivals from future aggression, and reactions that deter long-term mates from sexual infidelity (jealousy).

Over the past twenty years, scholars have examined various types of violence from an evolutionary perspective. These include, for example, the studies by Wilson and Daly (1985) on patterns of homicide, research by Archer (1994) on the causes of male-to-male violence, work by Nell (2006) on the evolutionary bases of cruelty, and analyses by Wrangham (1999) on the evolution of coalitionary killing.

4.3. Social Institutions

The third theoretical resource that I will assume to be necessary for a general theory of violence is a consideration of *social institutions*. By social institutions I mean the relatively permanent arrangements of behaviors, roles, norms, and values that structure aspects of human activity in patterned ways (Berger and Luckmann 1966). This is hence similar to what historians or cultural anthropologists call *culture*. Institutions provide individuals with scripts that limit the contingency of situations and reduce the burden of decision-making. Also, institutions regulate access to and distribution of goods such as wealth or education. Examples of social institutions are the state, the family, the police, or schools.

Social institutions are a necessary element of a general theory of violence for several reasons (also see Messner and Rosenfeld 1994). First, social institutions make use of the instrumental character of violence by storing, organizing, distributing, and technologically enhancing violence in order to achieve specific goals. The most important such institution that has emerged during the history of humanity is the state with the army and the police as its prominent violence specialists (e.g. Giddens 1985; Tilly 1985).

Second, social institutions produce normative behavior expectations, mechanisms for solving problems, and scripts for behavioral routines. As such they modify the parameters that are relevant for individual judgment and decision-making processes. For example, societies differ in the extent to which “wife-beating” is considered to be a legitimate reaction to perceived “misbehaviors” within the institution

of marriage (Haj-Yahia 1998; Haj-Yahia and de Zoysa 2007; Sakall 2001), which in turn can be expected to influence actual behaviors.

Finally, institutions can selectively cultivate or contain the personality characteristics and abilities associated with violence. For example, there are significant differences over time and between societies in the extent to which ideals such as self-control, diligence, frugality, and sobriety are reinforced in the family or in schools (e.g. Eisner 2008). Such controls over spontaneous impulses may affect situational decision-making processes when a conflict arises.

5. Three Cross-cutting Themes

The perspective outlined above does not represent a theory. It is an analytical framework organized around the idea of violence as goal-directed instrumental action. Its usefulness as a basis for a general theory of violence depends on the extent to which it can help to elucidate general mechanisms that operate similarly across a variety of manifestations of violence. In the following section I will use this framework to explore three themes that are likely to be implicated in the goal-directed use of violence.

5.1. Revenge and Protection

5.1.1. Revenge

As retaliation for an actual or perceived initial wrongdoing or provocation, revenge is a powerful motivator of violence. Keeley (1996, 199), for example, has reviewed anthropological findings on the causes of the recurrent wars in non-state societies. The data he presents suggest that revenge was a motive in more than 70 percent of all pre-modern wars, probably making it the most universal motive for war in human history. Similarly, vengeance and feuding represent a major motivational force in many societies with high levels of intra-group killing such as medieval Scotland (Wormald 1980), Corsica (S. Wilson 1988), and the Balkans (Boehm 1984) in the nineteenth century, and the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan (Knudsen 2008), or the South of the United States (Cohen and Nisbett 1994).

Furthermore, revenge has also been the motive for painful corporal punishment by the state. Thus, many early criminal laws are essentially price-lists for taking revenge

in a more rationalized and disciplined way (e.g. Barrett and Harrison 1999, 1). Also, a major purpose of the public hanging, burning, and dismembering practiced widely across Early Modern Europe consisted in establishing the state as the emerging monopolist of revenge. Finally, much aggressive behavior amongst children and adolescents belongs to a group of acts that have been classified as reactive aggression, i.e. aggressive responses to a perceived threat or a provocation (Dodge 1991; Kempes et al. 2005; Price and Dodge 1989).

Across the various disciplines different terms have been used to describe this bundle of behaviors. Frequently used terms are *reactive aggression* (Dodge 1991), *retaliatory violence* (Kubrin and Weitzer 2003), *revenge* (Chagnon 1988), *moralistic violence* (Cooney 1997), *self-help* (Black 1983), or *punishment*. Their instrumental core is that they are committed to righting a wrong, whether this is a previous attack, an insult, an unpaid debt, disobedience, an act of sexual infidelity, or an assault. The associated universal emotional mechanism is anger (Kempes et al. 2005); as Thomas Aquinas recognized eight hundred years ago, “anger is a craving for vengeance” (Aquinas 1920).

5.1.2. A General Mechanism?

Evolutionary psychologists and economists have long been interested in the underlying logic of the anger-retaliation mechanism amongst humans (e.g. Buss and Shackelford 1997; Fehr and Gächter 2002; McCullough 2008; Trivers 1971). Essentially they argue that violence-as-retaliation is an adaptive behavioural pattern. It evolves in any world where unconditional confidence in the positive intentions of others is not a successful strategy and where cooperation in a group needs to be protected. Primarily, it solves three interrelated problems (McCullough, 2008):

First, revenge deters aggressors from aggressing again. Unless effective measures are taken, the costs of attack approach zero for the aggressor. For the target, in contrast, the likelihood of oneself incurring costs in terms of losing vital resources, forfeiting freedom, or suffering injury or death become extremely high. Revenge increases the transaction costs of taking advantage of a person or his/her resources. In other words: aggressors have to consider the risk of being

hurt, killed, or losing status when attacking another person or group.

Second, revenge warns would-be harm-doers to back off. Revenge thus has a warning effect on third-party observers. If you let somebody harm you without retaliating, others might be tempted to do the same. If, however, you maintain a reputation for fighting back, others will show deference and interact more carefully with you. Experimental studies by social psychologists suggest that this is actually the case: Victims retaliate more strongly when an audience witnesses the provocation (Kim, Smith, and Brigham 1998). Similarly, cross-cultural and historical research suggests that societies with high homicide rates are characterized by the predominance of fights between men in public space, where observers can easily assess the retaliatory ability of the combatants (Eisner 2008).

The third and probably most important mechanism was initially formulated in a ground-breaking paper by Trivers (1971). In his seminal paper, Trivers examined formally how the existence of reciprocal altruistic behavior, i.e. helping each other, sharing food, contributing to defense efforts, can be explained. The core of this problem is how humans can be brought to contribute to a collective task rather than taking advantage and leaving the work to others—a problem formally represented in game theory as the free-rider problem (Fehr and Gächter 2002). Trivers argued that the evolved adaptive mechanism to solve this problem is *moralistic aggression*, a bundle of emotional and behavioral reactions that humans show when norms of reciprocity are violated, i.e. the initial behavior is perceived as an attempt to gain unjust or unfair advantage. The emotional process connected to moralistic aggression is anger, the feeling that mobilizes retaliation in face of a provocation.

5.1.3. Retaliation and Social Order

One important function of retaliatory violence is hence the maintenance of social order (also see Black 1983). For example, many traditional societies condone killing as a reaction to insult, adultery, or sorcery, or in retaliation to prior attack. In such societies there is little difference between retaliatory murder and capital punishment. In a fascinating study, Knauff (1987) examined violence amongst

the Gebusi, a simple egalitarian society in the highlands of New Guinea. After collecting data on the causes of death over five generations he found that 33 percent of 394 deaths were homicides, equivalent to an annual homicide rate of about 570 per 100,000. Examining the situational contexts he found that most homicides occurred as reactions to sorcery: The process is triggered by the death through sickness of a community member, which is believed to result from sorcery. During a divinatory death inquest a medium then names a sorcery suspect, followed by further public divinations to confirm the evidence. If the outcome is unfavorable, the suspect is often killed on the spot. This killing of sorcery suspects by adults is regarded as a communal duty and rarely results in any further retributions. In fact, Knauff (1987, 475) emphasizes that child-rearing patterns are highly affectionate and that anger and aggressiveness are strikingly absent from day-to-day life (Knauff 1987).

Often revenge is associated with a culture of honor, which emphasizes pride in manhood, masculine courage, assertiveness, physical strength, and warrior virtues (Figueredo et al. 2004). Examples include the Albanian code of honor and blood feuding known as the Kanun (Arsovska 2006), the tradition of blood-revenge and honorable cattle-theft in nineteenth-century Sardinia and Corsica (S. Wilson 1988); or the culture of masculine assertiveness among the Suri in Southern Ethiopia (Abbink 1998). In such societies the ability to retaliate effectively is valued highly. Those who lose in fights are likely to lose face, honor, and reputation. Those who win are respected, gain in social status, and are often admired by women.

In their culture of honor theory, Cohen and Nisbett (1996) develop an argument about the structural underpinnings of honor cultures. It assumes that private retribution and honor cultures emerge in the absence of effective state control. This is particularly the case in herding economies, where “Herdsmen must be willing to use force to protect themselves and their property when law enforcement is inadequate and when one’s wealth can be rustled away” (Cohen et al. 1996). In such conditions, a man must seek to do right, but when wrong is done to him, he must punish the wrongdoer to restore order and justice in the world.

Remarkably, similar cultural codes emerge in modern societies under conditions where the state provides insufficient or no protection from threat, or where illegal markets require private protection. Thus, several researchers have examined the conditions under which “codes of violence”—essentially justifications of violence as a means of conflict resolution and acquisition of status—emerge in US neighborhoods (E. Anderson 1999; Matsueda, Drakulich, and Kubrin 2006). Results suggest that a code of the street emerges in impoverished neighborhoods where the state fails to provide protection from threat. This code is associated with safeguarding respect; “watching one’s back;” deterring transgression by clothing, demeanor, and way of moving; retaliating if respect is lacking; and taking care of oneself in the face of danger (E. Anderson 1994).

5.1.4. Protection

Even if regulated by cultural conventions, revenge systems based on kin obligations, such as the blood-feud, tend towards an equilibrium with very high mortality rates. They generate self-reinforcing circles of retaliation and counter-retaliation that sometimes only come to a halt through elimination, domination, or exhaustion of resources (Boehm 1984). Their capacity to produce protection therefore hinges on the ability to limit circles of retaliation, a goal that revenge societies found chronically difficult to achieve.

In more complex societies retaliation by members of kin is superseded by larger organizations that specialize in using violence to produce coercion and protection. Such protection entrepreneurs are likely to emerge when there are good chances to make a profit from controlling a territory, when there is demand for skilled retaliators, and when there is no effective protection at a higher level of social organization. Manifestations of violent protection entrepreneurs include vigilante groups, organized crime, pirates, warlords, emerging states, and possibly—to some extent—youth gangs.

As Hobbes (1968 [1660]) recognized long ago, such institutions represent solutions to the freerider-anger-revenge problem in that they try to reduce private self-help by monopolizing the use of force.

Frederic Lane analyzed the problem over fifty years ago in a seminal article on the “economic consequences of organized violence” (1958, 1979). Lane argued that very early in the history of the division of labor large enterprises emerge that specialize in using violence against outsiders and in controlling violence within their area of influence. Typically, such enterprises strove to establish territorial monopolies and demanded payment for the protection they provided. Some of these entrepreneurs eventually turned into states that effectively monopolized violence and commanded regular taxes, but for many centuries they coexisted with feudal lords, private warlords, pirates, bandits, or other organizers of violence who used racketeering to produce both violence and protection.

In Europe, the past thousand years can be characterized as a long-term trend towards the disappearance of most protection entrepreneurs (e.g. feudal landlords, private warlords, pirates) and the monopolization of its production in nation-states (see also, e.g. Elias 1976; Giddens 1985; Tilly 1985). In effect, Lane argues that states had an incentive to produce effective protection at low costs as it attracted enterprises and generated protection rent, which could be used to maintain courtiers, to expand bureaucracies, or to control colonial territories. To the extent that these monopolists increasingly produced legitimate mechanisms of conflict resolution that people used when norms of reciprocity were broken, private self-help and revenge became gradually more marginalized—a process that may account for the significant decline in interpersonal violence since the Middle Ages (Eisner 2003).

In contemporary societies, a recurrent phenomenon on the border between legitimate and illegitimate violence is *vigilantism*, i.e. groups of people who defend a given legal and sociopolitical order without a legal entitlement to do so (D. M. Anderson 2002; Johnston 1996; Rosenbaum and Seiderberg 1974). Vigilante action is both policing and crime. It usually comprises some kind of taxation, the protection and surveillance of territories, and instant private justice—but may also entail drug trafficking, death squads, and public lynchings. Vigilante groups typically emerge when the state monopoly of force crumbles in weak states, when the state and the police are perceived as corrupt, inefficient, and

illegitimate, or when civil strife or revolutions undermine effective state control (Tankebe 2009).

Recently, Sobel and Osoba (forthcoming) have developed a similar argument regarding youth gangs. They argue that youth gangs evolve under conditions where the government fails to protect younger individuals from violence. Under such circumstances youth gangs are comparable to protection firms that use coercion and violence to enforce their rules. The authors test the assumption on the basis of monthly data on gang membership and homicide in Los Angeles. Their results suggest that an increase in homicide predicts gang membership but that the inverse is not true. In a similar vein, Skaperdas and Syropoulos (1997) speak of gangs as primitive states.

Overall, these arguments suggest that revenge, retribution, justice, and the state are part of a continuum and generated by one underlying mechanism. The analysis of such phenomena illuminates the Janus-faced character of violence both as a means for causing harm and a technique for providing protection from attack.

5.2. Intrinsic Rewards

Despite his pessimistic view of human nature, Hobbes (168 [1660]) did not think that humans would find causing harm to others a desirable goal in itself: “For, that any man should take pleasure in other men’s great harms, without other end of his own, I do not conceive it possible.” He may have been wrong in this respect. Certainly most people in most situations do not experience pleasurable emotions when watching or inflicting death (Bandura 2006). However, there is considerable evidence that amongst some social groups and in some contexts a significant proportion of participants report agreeable emotions, and that this can’t be reduced to individual pathologies (Baumeister and Campbell 1999; Nell 2006).

Some of this evidence relates to watching the infliction of pain and suffering. Historical research, for example, suggests that in many societies public torture, human sacrifice, staged deadly fights, executions, or the public burning of heretics attracted large crowds of spectators who were excited watching cruel spectacles (Auguet 1972; Dülmen 1990;

Kyle 1998; Spierenburg 1984). In modern societies, watching violent media contents or playing aggressive computer games is associated with physiological reactions such as arousal and excitement that significant proportions of young men experience as pleasurable (e.g. C. A. Anderson 2003; C. A. Anderson and Bushman 2001).

Excitement and arousal are also reported as correlates of violence in ethnographic analyses. For example, Katz's analyses of street robbery provide ample evidence that gang members experience the power, domination, and humiliation associated with a robbery as lustful, exciting, and interesting (Katz 1988). Examining street robberies in England, Bennett and Brookman (2008) also found that buzz and excitement were prominent amongst the motives for street violence. Similarly, a recent study on school violence reported that about 70 percent of middle-school students found at least some kinds of violence to be fun and enjoyable (Kerbs and Jolley 2007).

Possibly, these findings have more to do with the arousal resulting from doing something risky rather than with violence as such. Disturbingly, however, there is also evidence that the actual violent act has an intrinsically rewarding component (Baumeister and Campbell 1999; Grossman 1996). For example, Bourke (1999), who analyzed the experiences of British, Australian, and American troops in World War I, World War II, and Vietnam, found that killing was not only stressful and disturbing. A significant proportion of soldiers also reported intense feelings of pleasure once their resistance to killing had been overcome by training (also, e.g. Grossman 1996; Jones 2006). Similarly, Bar and Ben-Ari (2005) found that Israeli snipers reported joy and satisfaction as well as distress, guilt, and horror when killing their adversaries. This confluence of antagonistic feelings seems widespread, while "pure" enjoyment of violence is rare. Thus Grossman (1996) estimates that about 2 percent of soldiers may be regarded as "sociopaths" who do not feel any remorse at any stage before, during, or after the killing.

Finally, there is evidence that during massacres and genocidal killings the initial inhibitions against doing harm can quickly be replaced by an emotional state of collective rage, in which people with no prior signs of psychosis engage in

rape, torture, mutilation, dismemberment, or the killing of children. These conditions appear to be characterized by a confluence of extreme emotional states, but triumph, arousal, and pleasure often play a significant part (Dutton 2007; Dutton, Boyanowsky, and Bond 2005).

Admittedly, findings on the intrinsic rewards of violence come from a range of very different sources and little has yet been done to systematically review the evidence. Also, even at a superficial glance the attraction of violence appears as a mix of different mechanisms and emotional reactions. In particular, one should distinguish between the physiological and emotional processes associated with passively watching staged violence, the arousal in anticipation of violence, the emotions during the immediate involvement in violent acts, and the long term coping processes after having committed a violent act. Nonetheless, the similarity of findings across cultures and the association of agreeable emotions with very different types of violence require explanation.

As far as I can see no such explanation is currently available, although various authors have provided tentative suggestions. Nell (2006), for example, examined whether the apparent rewards of cruelty can be explained from an evolutionary perspective. He argues that the pleasurable emotions associated with cruelty (experienced by some people in some situations) have two distal causes. For one, the underlying arousal and pleasure is a by-product of predation. Secondly, cruelty is associated, within human societies, with social inequality and power whereby cruelty serves to express dominance, humiliation, and degradation.

Acknowledging that much is currently unknown about when any violence has an intrinsic appeal, Baumeister and Campbell (1999) tentatively suggest three circuits of intrinsic rewards that may be associated with violence. The first is sadism, the achievement of pleasure from harming others. More specifically, referring to the opponent-process theory proposed by Solomon and Corbit (1974), Baumeister and Campbell argue that by repeating violent acts (or, I would add, by experiencing support from a group of other perpetrators) the initial aversive, distressed response is reduced and the more pleasant aspects become more dominant.

Secondly, rather than being associated with the harm-doing itself, intrinsic rewards may be linked to doing something arousing, risky, and stimulating, thus providing an escape from boredom. Violence may thus satisfy a need for risk- and sensation-seeking, a personality characteristic that varies between the sexes (men higher than women) and over the life course (declining from age 20) in a way that is compatible with the distribution of many manifestations of violence (Zuckerman, Eysenck, and Eysenck 1978).

The third form of intrinsic appeal involves affirming the self by harming someone who has threatened one's own positive self-image. This is the reward mechanism that is associated with violent reactions to perceived insult, challenged masculinity, or injustice. It is thus linked to the themes of revenge, self-help, and power discussed above. However, rather than emphasizing the extrinsic motivations inherent in such dynamics, Baumeister and Campbell highlight that violence in itself may help to stabilize and indeed inflate notions of dominance and superiority.

It may well be that the satisfaction resulting from successful predation, the arousal in anticipation of risky tasks, and the pleasures of showing prowess and dominance over the enemy are evolved mechanisms of intrinsic gratification associated with violence. Also, there are well-documented differences, within each society, in the extent to which individuals enjoy watching violence or doing risky and exciting things that may end with somebody getting injured (Zuckerman, Eysenck, and Eysenck 1978).

However, historical and cross-cultural evidence also suggests that cultural norms embedded in social institutions are powerful forces that sometimes amplify and sometimes successfully control and marginalize the pleasures of violence. Probably the best evidence for this effect is long-term change in the sensitization to violence that historians of violence have documented in great detail, and that Norbert Elias described as a civilizing process (J. Anderson 2001; Wood 2004; Elias 1978; Spierenburg 1984; Wiener 2004). It is visible in the gradual disappearance of the "spectacle of suffering" enacted in public displays of judicial revenge from the late-seventeenth century onwards. But it is also evident,

for example, in the relentless efforts of nineteenth-century elites to control, and finally bring to an end, public prize fights that attracted huge crowds and often ended with the death of one of the combatants.

5.2.1. Sweet Revenge

At first sight the notion of intrinsic rewards seems to contradict the idea of violence as goal-directed instrumental behavior. However, recent research suggests interesting links between the two. Most particularly, de Quervain and colleagues (2004) explored the physiological processes involved in the kind of altruistic punishment (i.e. aggression in reaction to perceived wrongdoing) described in the previous section. In experimental studies they find that reward-related regions in the brain are activated when participants punish defectors (i.e. players who do not cooperate) and that the stronger the chosen level of punishment, the greater are these physiological rewards. They interpret these findings as evidence that revenge in the sense of retaliation against somebody who breaks rules of reciprocity is satisfying—that revenge is sweet.

5.3. Justifications

Violence differs from other types of human action in that it causes pain, suffering, and death. However, in contrast to other animals, humans are generally able to comprehend the suffering that they cause by harm-doing. This ability is present from a very age. For example, sympathetic and empathic responding can be observed by the age of two to three years (Zahn-Waxler and Radke-Yarrow 1990). Also, children as young as five or six years clearly recognize facial expression of pain and this ability is fully developed by the age of about eleven or twelve (Deyo, Prkachin, and Mercer 2004). This nearly universal ability to feel compassion for the pain of others probably evolved as an evolutionary advantage as it is linked to lending assistance to in-group members who suffer or who are in peril (Trivers 1971).

The ability of humans to feel empathy (cognition of others' emotions) and sympathy (ability to feel others' emotions), and to anticipate the harm caused by violent action poses a significant hurdle to violence. Hence violence in all its forms and manifestations is in need of *justifications*, i.e.

narratives that lower the inhibitions against violence and rationalize violent conduct (Lamnek 2003).

In “Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency,” Sykes and Matza described and analyzed this mechanism more than fifty years ago (Maruna and Copes 2005; Sykes and Matza 1957). They identified techniques that are closely related to the concept of *moral disengagement* developed by Bandura (Bandura 1990, 1999; Bandura et al. 1996). Bandura argues that humans have self-regulatory systems that guide them to behave in accordance with their moral standards. However, these control system are not perpetual overseers of conduct but only operate when activated. Mechanisms of disengagement permit actors to minimize the impact of self-sanction during the judgment and decision-making process that accompanies to harmful action. Bandura (1999) distinguishes three main points at which moral control can be disengaged.

A first set are *cognitive reconstructions of the injurious behavior* itself. Moral justifications are techniques of portraying detrimental conduct as being in the service of valued social or moral purposes, for example to protect honor, the family, or liberty. Euphemistic language is a tool to couch destructive action in words that mask the suffering caused by violent action, whether individual or collective. Robbers, rapists, generals (“collateral damage”), and mass murderers (“final solution”) all use this strategy. Advantageous comparison refers to the strategy of comparing one’s own conduct with reprehensible conduct by others, thus providing moral justification for destructive action. This is the mechanism inherent in feuding or persistent gang wars, where highlighting the despicable nature of the acts of others helps to legitimize the next round of violent action.

The second set of disengagement practices aim at *minimizing the subjective importance of individual agency* entailed in aggressive acts. Displacement occurs when actors view their action as springing from social pressures, external circumstances, or dictated by others rather than their own deliberate decision. Diffusion occurs when personal agency is obscured by distributing action over a series of seemingly innocuous action steps or by spreading responsibility across a whole group.

Finally, Bandura and colleagues (1996) describe a set of disengagement practices that operate on the *victims of violent action*. Moral self-censure is more likely when the harmed other is perceived as a human being with feelings and hopes that one can identify with. This moral control mechanism can be disengaged by techniques of dehumanization. Dehumanization entails divesting others of their human qualities. It is applied to the targets of violent acts. Once dehumanized, divested of human qualities, people are no longer viewed as persons with feelings, hopes, and concerns but as subhuman objects. They no longer evoke feelings of empathy from the perpetrator and can be subjected to horrendous treatment (Bandura et al. 1996, 366).

The important achievement of Bandura’s social-cognitive theory is that it hypothesizes a set of universal justification mechanisms that interfere with all aspects of intentional harm-doing. It identifies cognitive and moral mechanisms that respond to a universal problem of violent acts, namely the infliction of suffering on others. For a perpetrator, who acts on the basis of goal-driven considerations, moral disengagement minimizes the subjective costs of harm doing and maximizes the subjective “benefits.” In part, such justifications are probably mechanisms that operate after a first violent act has occurred. As such they are within-individual processes that reduce self-sanctions and facilitate the repetition of similar acts. However, the cognitive scripts that facilitate moral disengagement are also transmitted through the family, schools, army officials, or ideologists. As such they are social mechanisms, transmitted through the institutions of a society.

Empirically, moral disengagement has been found to be a highly relevant predictor of various manifestations of aggressive behavior (Bandura et al. 1996). Specifically, moral disengagement predicts physical and verbal aggression amongst children at the elementary and junior high school levels (Bandura et al. 1996; Pelton et al. 2004). Also, moral disengagement has been found to characterize moral-cognitive processes amongst perpetrators of hate crime (Byers, Crider, and Biggers 1999), personnel involved in executions (Osofsky, Bandura, and Zimbardo 2005), and torturers (Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, and Zimbardo 2002).

Furthermore, the combination of dehumanization and attribution of blame has been a highly successful strategy, throughout human history, for facilitating the most disastrous types of collective and state-led violent action (Day and Vandiver 2000; Haslam, 2006; Neubacher, 2006). In fact, Bandura (1996) argues that the concept of moral disengagement has a particular potential to explain deliberate acts of destructiveness committed by ordinary, otherwise considerate people.

Remarkably, the criteria by which certain groups or bearers of certain criteria can become dehumanized are extremely variable across human history. They are the outgrowth of religious principles, righteous ideologies, or nationalistic imperatives. Techniques of dehumanization served to justify the beheading of supposed enemies of the revolution during the *terreur* in the French Revolution (Tackett 2000), the massacre of people who wore glasses (as a sign of belonging to the educated bourgeoisie) during the Khmer Rouge mass killings in Cambodia (Dutton, Boyanowsky, and Bond 2005), or Stalin's planned mass starvation of Kulaks in the Ukraine.

5.3.1. Free-Riders and Cheaters

Bandura's theory of moral disengagement is a social cognitive theory, i.e. it identifies mental operations that can be learned and that, when internalized, support violent conduct. It hypothesizes that essential patterns of justifying violence are similar across cultures, over time, and for different types of violent acts. If true, it would provide a cross-cutting basis for understanding important universal social-cognitive mechanisms associated with violence.

However, it does not tell us *why* these mechanisms should be similar across cultures and situations. I cannot fully examine this question here. But it may be that part of the answer is related to the moralistic aggression mechanism mentioned earlier: As noted previously, humans appear to have a universal tendency to react with moralistic anger when rules of reciprocal cooperation are violated, i.e. when others try to be free-riders. This is one reason why people find retaliatory violence more legitimate than unprovoked attacks. Remarkably, some of the moral disengagement mechanisms identified by Bandura use precisely this

freerider-anger-punishment mechanism. They manipulate the interpretation of the situation in such a way that harm-doing looks like a retaliation against persons or groups allegedly trying to be free-riders.

In effect, it seems that all political manipulators, when stirring up collective hatred, abuse the mechanism of moralistic aggression. They present the target group as failing to reciprocate (e.g. as a fifth column, as parasites, as exploitative scum) and thus mobilize the emotional responses needed to trigger extreme violence.

6. Conclusions

A general theory of violence in the strong sense of a set of universal laws that replaces local theories and explains all manifestations of violence is unrealistic. However, it may be possible to develop a general theory in the sense of a meta-theoretical framework that comprises a set of general mechanisms that operate across various manifestations of violence. In order to identify such mechanisms, a general theory of violence needs to equally consider all manifestations of violence, in all societies, and at all times.

This paper has argued that a general theory should not be based on the patterns of individual criminal violence, which can be observed in wealthy, well-ordered, state-controlled societies. Understanding these manifestations of violence is important. However, for a general theory it has the adverse effect that a systematic structural, temporal, and geographical bias is built into the very foundations of the theory. In contrast, this paper has argued that the role and functions of violence need to be considered equally throughout the whole of human history and across the complete range of human cultures.

Similarly, this paper has made a case for a theory that does not start with the distinction between prohibited criminal violence and legitimate state use of force, which is then limited to explaining crimes. Besides the fact that the notion of crime does not apply to non-state societies—i.e. most human experience for most of human history—I have argued that the dual role of violence as a means of maintaining order and as a strategy that transgresses accepted rules needs to be a cornerstone of a general theory of violence.

Based on these considerations I have suggested elements of a meta-theoretical framework that assumes that violence is best understood as an instrument to achieve goals. Three theoretical approaches may be combined in a non-contradictory way to understand violence as goal-directed instrumental behavior: a theory of the judgment and decision-making processes operating in the situations that give rise to violence; a theory of the evolutionary processes that have resulted in universal cognitive and emotional mechanisms associated with violence; and a theory of the way in which social institutions structure violence by selectively enhancing its effectiveness for some purposes (i.e. legitimate use of force) and controlling other types of violence (i.e. crime). I have finally explored three cross-cutting themes in order to examine whether some general mechanisms, associ-

ated with an instrumental notion of violence, may help to understand different manifestations in various societies. The goal here was not to fully develop theoretical models and to examine all their empirical implications. Rather, the aim was to demonstrate that empirical and theoretical research can profit from transgressing the narrow borders of specific kinds of violence and highly specific mechanisms. For example, I have argued that the theory of moralistic aggression as an evolved mechanism to solve the free-rider problem and to encourage reciprocal cooperation provides an elegant model for understanding a large variety of manifestations of violence and to understand some foundations of social order.

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