

The Origins of Institutional Violence

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Abstract

Few people would commit violent acts if they knew that someone watching would oppose the acts and had the capacity to stop them. That is why violence that occurs within institutions in democratic societies should receive particular attention. It may appear to be sanctioned by a majority of the people when it occurs openly or when it is not criticized. Democratic societies (nations) have adopted or ratified constitutions, international law, human rights documents, or treaties that prohibit violence, including torture, but they may retain norms and practices that lead to violence or which may in themselves constitute violence. Why do some members of institutions, usually in groups, in democratic societies find that violence is acceptable while knowing it is illegitimate? Several reasons are possible, but one of the most plausible is that institutions and sub-groups that become separated from the larger democratic society are more likely to produce dysfunctional behavior because they are more distant from the thinking and practices that produced democracy and offered a more peaceful resolution of disputes.

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Individuals' violence has been attributed to human nature, motivation, environmental sources, and many other conditions. Regardless of whether the causes of violence can be identified precisely, very few individuals would commit violent acts if they knew that someone watching had the capacity and willingness to stop them. Nonetheless, some of these relatively few people will sometimes commit violent acts when everyone around them is watching and everyone knows their violence is illegitimate, illegal, or wrong, at least in the sense that a higher authority disapproves of it. Of course, people, not institutions, actually commit violent acts. But there are norms and practices within institutions that contribute to individuals' decisions to engage in violence. The norms and practices within democratic institutions, such as government agencies, can sometimes be identified, and they may be considered to be within the realm of "institutional violence."

Some people will not commit illegitimate violence under any circumstance, but others will do so when certain conditions are present. No two democratic nations have ever fought a war against each other, and almost every democratic nation has agreed to abide by every major international treaty that prohibits or constrains violence. These include the United Nations Charter (1945), which allows only national self-defense, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948), the Geneva Conventions (1949), which mandate humane treatment of prisoners and civilians by military forces, and the UN Convention Against Torture (1987). In addition, every democratic nation has domestic penal laws that prohibit violence, such as soldiers' mistreatment of prisoners or innocent civilians. This usually means there are fewer justifications for violence by government actors from democratic nations than from those in

authoritarian regimes. Therefore, where there is little or no legal justification for violence, the violence that does occur may be more clearly attributed to the norms and practices within an institution.

It should be noted that a definition of violence within the context of this paper should be broader than physical harm. A punch in the nose and the subsequent injury may cause a victim to lose time away from her or his job and the victim's family to lose the benefits that come from the money the job provides. But a family may suffer similarly when its wage earner is displaced from the same job because someone in authority wrongfully punishes or terminates the wage earner from her or his position. Physical violence has a unique aspect, bodily harm, but the essence of physical violence—one person's intent to hurt another person without justification—is derived from the same thinking that leads someone in a supervisory position intentionally to hurt a subordinate. This, sometimes called "retaliation"—which usually follows from the subordinate speaking truthfully about wrongdoing—is less understood and recognized than physical violence, but its consequences are extremely harmful to a democracy.

Aside from the legal justifications for violence, what are the conditions that lead to violence within institutions, particularly government agencies, in democratic nations? While a more complete explanation awaits, the following conditions seem uniquely to contribute to violence: sub-groups' separation from the larger democratic society; misplaced loyalty to the members of the sub-group; a culture of silence when recognizing wrongdoing, which is perhaps the most serious consequence of misplaced loyalty; censorship policies inside a sub-group or institution; and retaliation against members of the group for speaking or acting (legally) outside the conventional mores of the institution. Generally, the greater distance an institution places

between itself and the democratic norms and practices of the larger society—the less accountable an institution or a sub-group is to a cross-section of the greater society—the more likely the members of the sub-group or institution will be to adopt violence as a method to resolve conflicts or as a justification to unleash violent propensities.

¹ The views expressed here are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, DOD, or the U.S. Government.