

William H. McNeill

*Violence & submission in the human past*

The retreat of Gandhian 'nonviolence' in public affairs from its high points in the 1930s when the might of the British Raj in India was so seriously challenged by Gandhi and his followers, and since the 1950s and 1960s when Martin Luther King, Jr., led civil-rights demonstrators in facing police dogs and truncheons in the American South, is obvious today. That is scarcely surprising. It takes enormous self-discipline to invite attack and refrain from retaliation, and the moral effect of nonviolence depends on who witnesses such confrontations and how that larger public reacts. Violence exercised in secret against helpless victims, as at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, escapes the price of public disapproval as long as it remains secret. And all too ob-

viously, the art of shaping public opinion by managing the news has become a far more potent ally of established authority, even (or especially) in the exercise of violence, than it used to be.

Yet it is still true that violence has serious limits and that command of superior force is a very precarious basis for government. As Napoleon is supposed to have remarked, one can do anything with bayonets except sit on them. Effective and sustained public action requires at least tacit consent of the governed; active support is much more effective, if it can be contrived. More generally, human society depends on perpetual interaction between leaders and followers, and the exercise of violence and the threat of violence is part of that interaction. So is submission and obedience; and in practice the great majority of humankind has always submitted for very good reasons. Only so can collective action be efficiently exercised, only so can home territory be effectually defended, and, in a word, only so can conditions for group survival be optimized.

In all probability, violence and threats of violence played a prominent part in defining which of several competing males achieved leadership of the proto-human, and then the first fully human, bands of foragers from whom we all de-

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scend. Recent studies of “chimpanzee politics” by Franz de Waal and others offer a plausible model for what probably existed among our remote ancestors. Among chimps, careful observation showed that the alpha male maintains his position only by facing down repeated challenges from one or more of his subordinates – encounters usually limited to gestures of defiance before the challenger backs away without engaging in actual combat. But every so often, after years of backing down, a challenger does fight, and sooner or later one of them displaces the older alpha male, thus assuring a succession of physically vigorous leaders. Moreover, male chimpanzees guard their home territory against intruders from neighboring bands and, when unopposed, cross those borders to pick up extra food. As a result, band territories are elastic, widening or shrinking with population growth or collapse, and with the corresponding vigor of local defense and aggression.

Effective local defense requires cooperation. That means subordination of most males to their established leader. Rivalry only goes so far: the common defense, on which the band’s food supply depends, requires everyone’s readiness to fight against intruders to the death if need be, using hands and teeth. Females are different; they migrate across band boundaries to mate, thus assuring dissemination of genes across longer distances and among larger populations.

Contemporary chimpanzee behavior, especially mating patterns, may not be the same as what prevailed among our human ancestors; but efficient cooperation in defense of territory, especially against fellow humans, was surely essential for them, and the subordination of other males to a single leader seems a very likely – almost necessary – means

to that result. No one can be sure, but since 99 percent of human time was spent in such foraging bands, we can be reasonably confident that human instincts and proclivities were shaped by that experience.

And how amazingly successful they were, rising to the top of the food chain and spreading around the habitable globe as no species before them had ever done. To all appearance, ready resort to violence against other humans – as well as killing animals for food – played a large part in that success.

But settled village life, starting perhaps as much as (or more than) eight thousand years ago, altered life patterns profoundly – as did the subsequent rise of cities and civilizations. In general, the effective scale of human societies expanded so that first hundreds, then thousands, and presently hundreds of thousands and millions, of individual persons began to interact within a loose and, at first, very slenderly integrated web. Older patterns of violence altered. Hierarchies of command and obedience embraced larger and larger numbers of persons, and age-old alternatives between violent self-assertion and submission became correspondingly complicated, compelling the same individual and local groups to shift back and forth between the two roles when encountering strangers, depending on who the particular strangers might be and where they ranked in the larger web.

Again, every such encounter was what it was, often beset by uncertainties on both sides. Generalization becomes more reckless as complication increased. Yet it seems to me that some general observations about the changing roles of violence are plausible or at least interesting and worth suggesting in print.

First of all, early agricultural settlements were of two contrasting kinds.

Tropical gardening may well have been older than grain agriculture, but it left only scant archaeological traces that still remain almost entirely unexplored. The reason so little is known about the history of tropical gardeners is that they did not support cities and civilizations: they simply left their crops in the ground until they were ready to consume them. As a result, outsiders could not carry stored harvests away by force or threat of force. It follows that new forms of human parasitism that grain farmers submitted to could not arise among tropical gardeners, who therefore remained in small, comparatively dense, but independent, village communities, like those discovered in interior New Guinea as recently as the 1930s. Cities and civilization passed them by; and local forms of violence, though real enough, conformed closely to the hypothetical patterns of violence among ancestral foraging bands. That is to say, local defense of territory played the central role: choice of local leaders was tied to the conduct of armed clashes with neighbors, and all adult males were expected to take part in such exercises. Costs as measured by death in battle varied widely, and we have too little information to make worthwhile generalizations.

By contrast, grain agriculture and the stored harvests it required provoked far more social diversity and, in the long run, sustained amazing transformations of human life. The whole trajectory of what we think of as human history depended on an initial differentiation between subjected villagers and urban dwellers, who lived on rents and taxes collected forcibly in kind from those who raised the food city folk consumed. Such an inequity could only be sustained if rent- and tax-takers allowed villagers to keep enough grain to feed themselves and leave enough for next year's seed.

The necessary restraint was presumably achieved by trial and error.

The basic fact was that exposure to natural disasters – hail, drought, flood, and blight – as well as the risk of total confiscation by human predators might bring death by starvation to grain farmers. Separate, isolated villages of a few hundred persons could not hope to safeguard their harvests unless a larger polity, supporting specialists both in the supernatural and in violence, were available to help protect them. That, in turn, required feeding such specialists by submitting to rents and taxes.

Both parties gained if custom regulated the transfer of food from producer to consumer so as to allow both to survive. Villagers had to work harder and consume less than they produced; urban specialists in protection – priests and warriors – probably consumed more per capita than rural dwellers did from the start, and protected themselves and their rural dependents as best they could. That partnership is what we call civilization, and civilized partnerships soon proved capable of raising monumental buildings and leaving other conspicuous archaeological traces wherever grain agriculture prevailed, in western Asia, Egypt, India, China, and Mexico.

Overall, this arrangement meant that the great majority of persons ceased to take an active part in defending their home territory. Submission to powerful outsiders who carried off part of the harvest every year was a heavy price to pay, but early grain farmers had no choice and, in western Asia, soon found ways of producing more grain than they needed for their own consumption by harnessing animals to plows, thus expanding the area of cultivation per capita substantially. In effect a new sort of symbiosis between draught animals and humans supplemented and sustained the emerging

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symbiosis between village dwellers and city folk. Domesticated animals also supplemented human food supplies by giving milk (and eggs); their bodies constituted a sort of food bank in times of famine when grain was short. On top of that, domesticated animals could be made to carry heavy loads, both for short distances between field and barnyard, and cross-country for trading or military purposes.

The West Asian pattern of human and animal symbiosis eventually spread very widely through the Old World. As a result, in most of Eurasia and in parts of Africa, urban exploitation of rural peasantries was much facilitated by the parallel and harsher exploitation of domesticated animals by village farmers. It was different in the Americas, where pre-Columbian civilizations flourished without much in the way of large-bodied domesticated animals – a difference that eventually made Spanish conquest easier than it would otherwise have been.

To begin with, it looks as though in all parts of the world, protection from natural disasters by experts in the supernatural was what mattered most. But priests were supplemented from the start by military leaders, and even the most powerful priesthoods were eventually subordinated to military rulers when protection against outside human attack became more critical for local survival. Hence, it is not surprising that warriors or their descendants remained in charge of civilized governments until recent times.

Yet the polarity between specialized protectors against destructive violence and rural rent-payers and taxpayers was complicated from the beginning by new scope that civilized societies gave to artisans and merchants. Professional artisans were able to produce superior

goods, thanks to specialization and lifelong practice. Equipping suitably splendid rituals for pleasing and appeasing the gods constituted an insatiable market for artisan skills – so did the manufacture of superior weapons and armor. Hence, growing numbers of skilled artisans could and did claim a share of the food coming from the countryside as rent and taxes.

Merchants were just as important, for it was they who traveled far and wide, supplying artisans with the rare and precious goods they needed – raw materials, like metals, gems, pigments, timber, and much else. But securing raw materials peaceably from afar required giving something in return that local persons wanted and could not produce for themselves. To be sure, violent seizure was an alternative, and to judge by the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which describes an armed foray into the forests of Lebanon in search of timber, military expeditions in search of strategic raw materials were sometimes launched when cities were new in the land of Sumer.

But just as agreed arrangements between local payers and receivers of rent and taxes were more conducive to survival than violent seizure, so it was in interregional encounters. Both parties gained if local people could be induced to part with raw materials – or, better yet, prepare them for transport to distant urban markets – and accept manufactured goods in return. This created yet another elastic demand for the handiwork of urban artisans. As both sides came to recognize the advantages of such peaceful exchanges, regional specialization slowly assumed significant proportions throughout urban hinterlands. Large-scale efforts to mine metals, fell timber, dive for pearls, and find other specially attractive commodities allowed local elites, who organized such efforts,

to acquire luxury goods manufactured in distant urban workshops.

Resulting networks of exchange transmitted ideas and skills in both directions, as well as distributed material objects, thus hastening the civilizing process whereby more and more people over widening areas began to share in a common evolutionary process of differentiation and specialization that ran across political, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. That process eventually linked most of the Old World into a far more closely interacting whole than had prevailed when only foraging bands collided and peacefully exchanged preciosities with one another on festival occasions. A similar but weaker web of exchange also arose in the Americas, hampered by the absence of pack animals capable of carrying burdens as heavy as those that donkeys, mules, and camels did in the Old World. Flotation was always more capacious and sometimes safer than overland transport. Consequently, as rafts, boats, and ships became more elaborate, river and overseas trade routes grew in importance, and eventually connected the entire globe into a single web after 1500 CE.

Traveling merchants were the most prominent instruments of long-range human interactions. They often faced ambiguous situations when encountering strangers with respect both to prices and to violence. Prices were set in two different ways: by generous gifting, with expectation of spontaneous, honorable reciprocity; or by bargaining between buyer and seller for the lowest price. Economists commonly concentrate wholly on bargaining, but gifting played (and continues to play) a larger role in human affairs than we often realize. Gift-giving was what carried the gem dealer, Marco Polo, across Asia in the thirteenth century, for example. And

gifting still plays a central role in American politics in the form of political contributions, where the old rule – the greater the gift, the greater the return – still prevails.

With respect to violence, raid and trade were and remain alternative ways of getting hold of someone else's goods. But resort to violence was always costly. It was difficult to sustain, since robbery discouraged other merchants from showing up and did not usually yield a suitable array of goods. Hence, pirates and robbers often had to seek out peaceable markets in some special, well-guarded location, where they could sell their booty and buy the things that fitted their actual needs.

Parallel ambiguity prevailed in the metropolitan centers where merchants clustered together, forming marginal, often unstable, and semiautonomous communities of their own. To tax or not to tax – and, if so, how much – was a question local rulers always had to ask. A ready supply of goods – later of money – levied on visiting merchants was a welcome source of revenue; but charging too much discouraged visitors and reduced total revenue. Those rulers who charged least often gained most by attracting larger numbers of richer merchants to their cities.

Merchants were also capable of becoming rulers of independent city-states, like Venice, and of forming influential interest groups within territorial states, like medieval and early modern England. As such they sometimes exercised political and military force for their own purposes rather than submitting to armed superiors, as was more commonly the case.

Overall, one can safely say that merchants were a disturbing, quicksilver element in civilized society – upsetting old ways by bringing novelties from afar to

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new places and peoples. Inhabitants of remote urban hinterlands suffered most. Local ways and traditions regularly crumbled as such populations were folded into the larger human web, and their new roles as suppliers of raw materials and manpower to distant urban markets were usually unattractive at best. Metropolitan centers also suffered strains when adjusting to novelties, since changing markets could destroy urban livelihoods without always creating new ones.

Above all, merchants made a living by crossing political and other boundaries, exposing themselves and those they dealt with to ambiguous situations in which resort to violence was often near the surface. Over time, recognition of the high cost of violence accumulated, and legal systems capable of settling disputes peaceably extended their jurisdiction over wider and wider territories. But crossing jurisdictional boundaries remained precarious, and merchants who did so reaped correspondingly swollen profits when they did not suffer crippling loss. Everywhere and always change and instability followed in their footsteps, interdependence of distant populations increased, as well as vulnerability to catastrophe whenever sudden breakdown of exchanges interrupted the generation of increasing wealth that drove the entire civilizing process.

What I have referred to as the civilizing process also brought far-reaching changes to religion. From the time military commanders began to compete with priestly leaders of civilized society, compromise of some sort between the two kinds of leaders prevailed. They needed each other. Supernatural sanction, confirmed and certified by priests, legitimated military rule, while priests needed military protection against outside raiders as well as heretics and/or

missionaries of alien faiths. More or less settled alliances between throne and altar usually prevailed, but there was a deficiency built into the human experience of life in large cities that recurrently upset such arrangements among the privileged leaders of society.

It took a long while for attachment between a population and local divinities to give way to universal faiths, and longer still for the new universal faiths to accommodate sectarian variation. The so-called higher religions – Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and (more ambiguously) Confucianism – mark the arrival of universal faiths between about 550 BCE and 634 CE. They were applicable in principle to every human being; but despite all the missionary effort they exhibited, these faiths divided most of humankind along new religious lines, and a wide variety of more local religions also continued to command devoted followings.

Propagation of the higher religions certainly helped innumerable human beings to adjust to urban living. That was what made these religions so successful. Yet their teaching, rituals, and institutional expression in monasteries, congregations, churches, mosques, and schools did not bring anything like religious stability. Instead, heresy and sectarianism continued to thrive and divide urban populations.

The problem was this. Most human beings need to belong to small primary groups. Only so does everyday personal life have meaning; only so are questions of what to do and when to do it unambiguous. Our descent from members of foraging bands, where everybody knew everyone else and also knew how to behave in everyday situations, undoubtedly explains this fact. Agricultural villages of a few hundred people were not too large to satisfy that need, and the conser-

vative stability of village life in most of the world until very recently reflects that circumstance. But cities where thousands congregated, where specialized occupations multiplied, and where different expectations and rules of behavior prevailed among different social classes could not do so. Smaller, subordinate groups were necessary, and among the variety of such groups, religiously defined linkages proved to be the most enduring, most flexible, and most powerful.

By definition, a functioning primary group has to be small so everyone can know everyone else. Markers distinguishing 'us' from 'them' help to define and confirm group boundaries. Details of clothing – especially headgear – and physical bearing or appearance commonly serve that purpose. Cities, accordingly, became an uneasy amalgam of separate, self-aware groups, often living close together in distinct neighborhoods and treating outsiders differently from the way they treated fellow members of the particular group to which they belonged.

One can think of such urban groupings as quasi-villages, with enough in common to sustain meaningful personal life and channel everyday behavior along firm customary lines. Occupational convergence and/or ethnic commonality was often a factor. But, as I said, the most flexible, enduring, and powerful cement for such groups was a religion that differed from other, especially official, forms of worship.

The power of sectarian religion rested on two realities. First and foremost, such faiths had priests or teachers who defined, propagated, and defended it against challenges of every kind – forcible, logical, or merely snobbish. Such specialists also adjusted details to ever-changing circumstances, partly deliber-

ately, but mostly without admitting or realizing they were doing so. When wisely done, such adjustments kept the faith alive and vigorous across generations and centuries.

Second, these religions dealt directly with the standard human crises – birth, marriage, sickness, and death – offering solace and ritual resolution for the hopes and fears such events provoke. Life without such support was difficult and unsatisfying. With it, ordinary persons could carry on even in time of extreme distress and endure yet another day. Tight-knit communities sustained by sectarian faiths, in short, contributed to survival within big cities just as much as protection by military specialists did; these faiths were even more effective because they were more immediately personal than more splendid rituals conducted by priests of official, state-supported forms of religion.

But religious differences also invited violent persecution. Minority religious groups normally submitted. Some, like Quakers and Jains, made nonviolence an article of faith. Sometimes, however, new winds of doctrine attracted so much enthusiasm that followers attempted to overthrow the established forms of worship, either by conversion or by force. Consequently, reform movements in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim history have frequently provoked large-scale violence; and religiously justified or inspired militancy remains active in several parts of the world today, as the so-called war on terror surely suggests.

Peaceable coexistence of separate religious groups, and legal toleration of diverse practices and belief, is always precarious. In proportion to the emotional attachment to a particular form of religion, the cohesion of fellow-believers is strengthened. Encounters with unbelievers become correspondingly pricklier

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and at least potentially violent. To be sure, the weaker normally submit to the stronger, enduring whatever hardships and indignities may be imposed upon them. But the gain from belonging to a small, incandescent community of believers is always countered by the costs of collision with outsiders, together with ever-present possibilities for hurtful violence.

It seems clear that human proclivity for violent action will always be with us. Violence was essential to survival among our remote ancestors – it is ironic that self-destruction on a global scale is now within human capability, thanks to atomic bombs and other forms of mass destruction. It is equally true that, since the invention of agriculture, most human beings submitted to others and seldom even tried to kill anyone else, though killing domesticated animals remained essential to most farming populations. Specialization and peaceable exchanges have gradually enriched humankind over millennia, and recently did so beyond the imagination of older times. But violence, magnified by modern weaponry, has also increased beyond anything our ancestors ever thought possible.

How the civilizing process will stumble or advance under such circumstances – complicated by increasingly obvious environmental constraints – remains to be seen. But human ingenuity is enormous, and new ways of satisfying our wishes and needs are contagious and tend to spread. They can do so very rapidly today when instantaneous communication assaults our ears and eyes every day. Mighty states and rich corporations crumble precipitously when old attachments yield to new; and so far, at least, human numbers and wealth have continued to grow. An end to the increase

of human numbers seems sure before much longer; but whether wealth and comfort will collapse as violence spreads more widely, or whether means for constraining destructive violence and sustaining collaboration on a global scale will be found, seems still an open question.

It has been an open question throughout the past, so I see no need to despair but much need for ingenuity and wisdom, together with the common sense that stubbornly prefers survival to destruction, and compromise, even submission, to victory by enforcing our will (whoever 'we' may be) on everyone else.