

The Utility of Violence*

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Dear Audience,

In this presentation I shall have two handicaps. The first I share with you. The second I hope to share. The first is the language. It is foreign to us all. Cry out if my English becomes impossible to understand, – I might have mixed in a too great quota of Norwegian. The second handicap, the one I want to share with you in the end, is a considerable doubt concerning the very phenomenon I am to comment on. It is common knowledge that violence is a bad thing. As criminologists we have to fight it, reduce it or to get rid of it. My problem is only that I do not know what violence is, or what it ought to be. My intention during this lecture is to attempt to get you to share my doubts. If you leave this audience in complete confusion, my purpose has been fulfilled.

We had a court-case in Norway a few months ago. It was on behalf of hens. The modern production of eggs takes place in huge buildings where the hens are placed in individual, rather narrow cages. This is violence against the hens, according to The Society for the Protection of Animals. The other party had the view that the cages were a protective device. Hens kill each other if they are placed together in larger compartments. Each day eggs and dead hens are to be picked. Cages bring an end to violence.

What takes place here is a fight. A fight on property rights. A fight over the question: Who owns the concept? Who has the right to decide what is violence? Words, or concepts, are not anything in and for themselves. They become.

Definitorial power is one of the most fundamental that exists. This is probably the only reason for the relatively high regard for artists and other cultural workers that exists in so many societies. High regard, but so often combined with tight control. Cultural workers are experts on meaning. Stalin was preoccupied with linguistics. Franco, Mussolini and Hitler with art in general. For Hitler society became a theatre where realities were given the meaning he wanted to be expressed.

Let me again move back to the family of hens, but this time their products, chickens. I spent an Easter in a foreign culture. Foreign, but Christian. Everywhere there were chickens. Everywhere there were children, there **were** also chickens. Living chickens with cute, small voices. On the café-table, in small boxes in buses and trains. They were very lively for some hours, until they died from thirst and starvation. With a sigh of relief I came back to my kind country. Summer had come. The fields were beautifully green. But the cows were chained inside the barns. It is more economic for the farmers. 'Nullbeite' (non-grazing?) is the euphemism for it. Most cows in industrialized farming are kept away from the fields all the year round. The only break of the routine is a man who arranges for them to be preg-

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nant, and nine months later the birth of a calf while they are still tied to their place in the cow-house. But Scandinavians would not dream of introducing bull-fights. During a meeting of radical criminologists in Madrid two years ago Louk Hulsman and I were heavily criticized for watching one.

I am probably not invited to this hounourable university to talk about cows and chickens. Or do I suggest any connection between behaviour vis-à-vis animals and behaviour vis-à-vis humans? I do, but that is not my point. My point is simply that behaviour towards animals illustrates my topic particularly well. The 'same' behaviour vis-à-vis animals is seen as extremely different in different places, at different times and towards different animals. It is a great challenge to try to find out why. By including animals we get a wider range of examples.

Maybe we could divide our animals in three categories:

1. Too bad to be eaten
2. Too good to be eaten
3. Neutrum – O.K. to eat

In my culture rats and snakes would come in the first category. These are animals where killing is acceptable, or more than that, encouraged, under nearly all circumstances and in all forms. Rats can be suffocated, molested, poisoned, experimented with.

They are not in the hit-list for any organization for the protection of animals. This is probably one major reason why they are so useful to scientists. There is no pressure-group working on their behalf. Rats carry the burden of history, the plague, and legends of famine and pests. Snakes carry the burden from Adam and Eve. Both are perceived as highly dangerous.

Cats and dogs are clearly placed in the second category as too good to be eaten. Cats, half wild, half domesticated, never subdued. Dogs, man's best friend, better than any man, reliable, trustworthy, – more than any man. Special food is easily available for cats and dogs in any super-market. A temptation for old age pensioners. Veterinarians are available with a service some humans might envy them. When the end is near, an injection helps the beloved into heaven. The body of the pet is most often left with the vet. In Sweden a terrible scandal broke out recently. It leaked that dead pets were re-circulated, boiled and later sold as food for pets. No wonder that churchyards for pets have appeared.

In Norway, pigs, sheep, cows and reindeer would be solidly placed in the third category. But I remember well a meal on a ship from Oslo to New York. It was in those old days with Captain's dinner and great expectations. But then; reindeer appeared to be on the menu. Half the Americans left in horror. To eat Rudolf, the red-nosed reindeer, the horse of Santa Claus or Father Christmas, was not possible. Ordinary horses are rather problematic as food in my culture. Mostly horse-meat is camouflaged as sausages of some sort. Bears were also problematic to hunt in the old days. A bear, strong as ten men, clever as twelve. But it was more to it, some God-like qualities.

The first category has its equivalent in the enemy in a fierce war. Extinction is the goal. Most means are acceptable. It is not murder, it is war action. It is not torture, it is necessary to gain information. We do not see ourselves in the rats, they are objects in a war against the bad forces. It has nothing to do with violence, it is a hygienic measure.

But why then are pets so well protected? For the opposite reasons. Particularly the dog is the ideal object for love. It is possible to build into the dog all sorts of highly valued human qualities, thoughts and considerations. The trade-mark for the record company 'His Master's Voice' is the prototype, an understanding and obedient human on four legs, one that totally accepts the master. One with small demands and unlimited loyalties. Thus the dog becomes more suited as the man's best friend than other men. Dogs in towns are also close to completely practical uselessness. There are only emotions left. What is left is a recipient of our fantasies of how we would like to be looked at. No wonder that such a being is well protected. To keep a dog on a leash outside a house will by many be seen as a grave case of violence against the dog.

Why are not cows in chains seen as mass-violence? And as to the case of the hens in cages, why is not a third alternative introduced, – the possibility of hens walking freely around the farm-house? The answer is obvious: Economy. These animals have a high direct use function. Farmers earn more money, the nation pay less in subsidies to them. Cows are for economic use, dogs for emotional.

Let us on this background go back to the three categories of animals, but now – with more knowledge – order them slightly differently. Like this:

SPECIES	PURPOSE	REGULATION
Dogs, cats	For emotional use	Regulation similar as for humans
Cows	For material use	Regulations mostly to protect user
Rats	Enemies Reduction – control extermination	Minimum of regulations

Read from the bottom:

And now to humans, looked at in the same perspective. We might first look at *females*. As a female enemy I would suggest the witch. All means were permitted for their extinction. It is fascinating to follow how elderly ladies have changed their status from medieval times until today. Those we tortured until confession and thereafter burned to death, were mostly elderly ladies. At that time perceived as the archenemy. Not particularly powerful within their social systems, but often important, particularly in healing. Today little old ladies are probably those who get the greatest sympathy of all if somebody hurts them. They represent the perfect victim. Weak, innocent, of no use for anybody, a sort of little pet, free to die in loneliness, but not to be touched intentionally by people.

A pale echo of the destiny of witches is what we see in some very recent American films. In the wake of the AIDS-inspired slogan 'Back to the family', modern witches are those hunting married men. Their destiny is a certain and terrifying death.

One step above – in line with cows – in the perception of their owners during certain historical stages, I would place the wife in the old bourgeois family. A person first and foremost to serve the needs of the household. Without personal legal

rights and with a husband with all rights to punish her as well as the children and the servants. This was no violence. It was discipline, as long as the blows were kept within certain – rather wide – limits. Consideration of material utility would also put limits to the more extreme forms of physical power. As a heritage from that period, what some would categorize as wife beating is still called ‘house unrest’ by a large portion of the police.

And who should be elevated to the stage of dogs, with a major emphasis on emotional utility? The choice was made already by Henrik Ibsen. Nora lived in the doll house, a beautiful little thing to play around with, caring for the man’s emotional needs, a mirror presenting him as he would like to be. As long as the service is performed, the doll is safely protected by the generally positive attitudes towards pets. An those hurting the pets are badly off. With an elevation in the position of woman from position 2 to position 3, my suggestion would be that physical power from man against females has been reduced in quantity, but that none of these acts have been perceived – given the meaning – of being acts of violence.

I have compared, from the bottom:

- Dolls
- Wives
- Witches

Let me introduce some males in the same pattern like this:

- Playboy
- Worker – Slave/prisoner
- Enemy

I was not particularly happy about this list, particularly not the example on the top of the list – the playboy. I needed an equivalent to dogs and cats and dolls. Emotionally useful for other parties. Maybe my troubles were a reflection of the role of a man – my own as well as the general. Boys do not play with dolls, and men do not like being seen as dolls, to serve other people’s emotional use. Discussing this with a female friend, she suggested one answer. The male functional equivalent to the female doll is the sport champion. He cares for the emotional needs of the nation. What the club managers do to him, with extreme pressure for physical exercise and often with blood-transfusion and hormon treatment – is seen as necessities for excellency, – not as torture of the body.

But the slave is OK. Also as an example of recent times. It is an example of utility brought to the extreme. ‘Arbeit macht frei’ was the slogan over the entrance to concentration camps – utility to the extreme. I have published extensively on this topic earlier (Christie 1959, 1972), so let me here only say that those killers and torturers I know from concentration camps did not perceive themselves as killers and torturers. That is so, because they did not perceive their victims as humans, but rather as something close to dangerous animals. Enemies, for material use. An employee in a slaughterhouse for cows in Belgium would have troubles in the comprehension of the emotions among visiting hindues, living conditions for the working-class in Europe during the first stages of the industrial revolution are also of a sort where our comprehension fails. How could they, these men of income, education and elevated class, let their fellow humans – children, females, males –

suffocate in the pits, or destroy their lives with dangerous substances to produce matches. Work as cattle. Exactly, and then I also have to suggest the answer: As useful animals, outside the regulations relevant for humans. In this perspective, the most important contribution by the labour movement was maybe to present themselves as humans, as dignified persons with qualities above their use value.

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At this point in the lecture I hope it is clear that you will get highly unclear answers to the classical question: Is violence on the increase? As criminologists we have a free choice between three answers. And they will all be right.

We can say YES

or NO

or: We do not know. And we could add: We will never come to know.

This is so because violence does not exist. It does not exist as something in itself. It is a social construction, reflecting the social structure, determined by power-holders. From many theoretical perspectives, the most interesting perspective on violence is what is seen as violence and what is not, by whom, and with what consequences.

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But death exists. And suffering, physical as well as psychological. Is it on the increase? Again the most interesting aspect of the problem is that it cannot be answered. The question of death relates to the definition of life. Death among newborn has never been so low as in these days. Or it has never been so high – if abortions are included.

So the answer depends completely on when we think life starts. Every third pregnancy in Norway ends in a medically induced abortion. In some more extreme cases doctors perform abortion on something not called a child in the morning and strive to save the life of a prematurely born child of exactly the same age in the afternoon.

This is not – at least not necessarily – an argument against abortion. But it is an argument against oversimplified statements on the conditions of life and death.

And I want to press this view one step further. Technical developments create new conditions, new frames for life. It is now relatively simple to tell if a pregnancy will result in a boy or a girl. In several places in India the number of new-born girls is drastically reduced. A girl is a burden to the family, a boy is a blessing. So mothers with girls get abortion. Abortion and widow-burning have the same material base. It sounded strange to me, until I came to see that we have exactly the same practise in Norway. Not with sex as the criterion, but with ability. All pregnant women who are not quite young any more, get an offer to test if the child will be a Mongoloid. If so, abortion is suggested. I heard from Italy many years ago that the birth of a Mongoloid child was a special gift to the village: there will not be many gifts in the future.

Criminology, as carried out in my culture, is often seen by authorities and population as a great disappointment. Our answers are unclear, we complicate, we make a mess of what people are really interested in. As with this lecture. A governmental official might ask: Are these reflections of any practical importance at all?

I tend to think that clear answers followed by fast action are more dangerous for this globe than doubt and inactivity. But nonetheless; let me take up the challenge and show the practicability of these criminological reflections on violence.

Let us go back to the stages of animals, females and man. What is striking is that they represent stages of utility. The enemy is a danger to utility, and is therefore open to extermination. So is also the materially useful – cows – wives – workers – or non-useful in the abortion case. Best protected are those with only one form of use-value, – the emotional one, even though they might lose all if they lose that.

The logical next question is this: What would be the consequences for violence by not accepting utility as a criterion, a governing principle, for how to act vis-à-vis other living beings (if we could agree on what that was)?

Here I am forced to make a detour to Poland. I am inspired to do so by an article written by Professor in Labour Law, Anna Christensen 1985/86 in Lund, Sweden.

The Polish case is a case of a Ghetto. A Jewish ghetto that survived holocaust longer than most. It survived by exceptionally close co-operation with the Germans. The whole ghetto was transformed into one big factory, producing for the German army. The overruling goal was to save Jewish blood. This could be accomplished by being useful to the Germans. The ghetto had to be so useful that it could not be exterminated.

But to be useful the Jewish leaders of the ghetto were brought into the same dilemma as farmers or factory owners. Or in this case: the Jewish leaders were forced to run the ghettos as concentration camps, they themselves to get rid of the old, the sick, the children that would not be productive until after the expected liberation from the German terror. With a shortage of insulin the medicine had to be given to the potentially most productive.

At this point in the story Anna Christensen makes a twist. She asks if this story does not ring a bell of familiarity and bring us home to our modern institutions for health and welfare. Evil acts are not committed by evil persons, she insists. They are carried out by good persons in structures that create evil results. What is happening in our hospitals just now, is it not a selection according to the same principle as in the concentration camps? And will not this become even more pronounced as the economy deteriorates? Old people will be given less service. Why renew the heart of an older person when a young one is in the queue, why give radiation for cancer or dialysis for failing kidneys? Or as in a case in my country last week; why perform a heart operation on a young but mentally retarded person – the problems with him should have been solved through an abortion.

Maybe something is lacking here. Maybe something ought to be included in my old diagram. Again from the bottom:

?	?
Cats/dogs	Emotionally useful
Cows	Materially useful
Rats	Enemies

It has all to do with uses. And I raise the question: Maybe we have come to the limits of utility. So definitely that we have to raise the question if the category above use is simply non-usefulness, or in another formulation; life as an absolute value. If so, we are approaching classical ground. With this reasoning I feel to be in a position to give an answer to the administrator who asks for clear advices. The best policy for the preservation of life in general is to look at life as a quality above valuation according to utility. To prevent behaviour as against cattle, 19th century workers, humans in concentration camps, we have to insist on a morality where humans are given equal worth – and rights – completely independent of the use of that life – included the use for the person herself or himself. A radical position with regard to crime prevention brings us back to an absolute position with regard to the value of human life. With this I have also prepared the ground for a view on a definition of violence. I would suggest this one: Violence is any action vis-à-vis other humans which give priority to their use-function for the actor and thereby negatively influences their physical well-being.

With this definition we would come in collision with the basic premise of industrialized societies. We would be in a position to say that the *use* of humans and particularly unequal value given to humans – represented forms of violence. From that standard – the standard of equal value of all humans independent of their use – we might take part in a discussion if violence is increasing.

But as we all know, this is not the 'normal' use of the concept of violence. The normal concept is related to what appears in the crime statistics. I will end my lecture by raising the question:

In whose interest is it to talk about violence, and to press forward, as a matter of course, that violence *is* what today appears in the crime statistics? With my Finnish friend, the alcohol researcher Kjetil Bruun, I have published a book on suitable enemies. It was the drug problem we had in mind, the moral panic over drugs as a suitable enemy distracting attention to even more fundamental problems. My contention is that violence, as conventionally perceived, and with the sometimes terrible consequences for the victims, still has to be looked upon with scepticism. There is so much to gain on violence for the by-standers. As academicians, scepticism is one of our prime obligations. So even if you kill me after the lecture, I will insist that violence in the conventional meaning is of minimal relevance to the great problems of today.

I thank you for your attention.

Literature

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