SEEDS OF TYRANNY

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Abstract

This paper explores the societal underpinnings of child abuse and neglect. It looks at child abuse and neglect as systemic violence against children, and argues the importance of recognising its occurrence as the collateral damage of social strategy and not just individual happenstance. Thus, in order to address the problem of child abuse and neglect effectively, we need to understand the normative biases in its favour, its structural causes, dynamic schema, costs, fallout and payoff. In other words, we need to know why, how, in which ways and for whose benefit societies operate as though (and people seem to think) violence against children is ok – even necessary – and, so, perpetuated. The paper particularly focuses on the evidence of indigenous children.

INTRODUCTION

Today, when there is the least excuse of ignorance or of overall unavailability of resources and means, and there is a fairly universal standard of norms,[2] child abuse and neglect are still not decreasing.[3] Even in those societies where material needs are assured, child abuse and neglect are common,[4] certainly common enough to warrant the United Nations Secretary General's concern expressed in the initiation of a study of violence against children.

The phenomenon cuts across cultural, socio-economic and geo-political matrices, exhibiting only disturbing variations of form and manner – from the outright brutal and indeed pedaphobic[5] to a more insidious and general attitude of discounting,

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2   The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and related instruments have been ratified by every country except the United States.
3   Excluding violence due to war and armed conflict, over a million children suffer violence and abuse every day.
4   Even in Scandinavian countries, where children' rights and mechanisms for support are intensive, the prevalence of domestic violence is high enough for the issue to be a matter of national concern.
5   In the Northern belt of India and in China sex determination (amniocentesis) tests are used to determine the sex of the foetus in order to eliminate females through abortion.

an ubiquitous belittling of the condition of childhood.[6] The impacts of these are so ingrained in the social psyche that they are invisible, "normalised", even perceived as desirable. It is possible that a larger proportion of children are deliberately and avoidably abused or neglected today, both in large groups and as individuals, than ever before.[7]

The moral and ethical grounds of justification, the cultural rationalisations, the socio-economic excuses for permitting child abuse and neglect to go unchecked[8] are innumerable, more creative and certainly more intensive than the efforts to eradicate the phenomenon.[9] This inevitably draws us to the conclusion that while child abuse and neglect may be, in terms of specificities and individual targets, the outcome of chance, it is somehow integral to our social structures.

The seeds of tyranny and oppression must be sown early for the harvest to be bountiful. The exclusion of children from the purview of the fully human validates and assures the entrenchment and perpetuation of similar systemic exclusion and casual disregard of many discriminated-against and oppressed groups that characterises global societies today. The structures of our lives run on the assurance and threat of widespread repression – making us, common well-meaning people, the foremost and most efficient enforcers, as we are ourselves also the beneficiaries (of the status quo).[10]

"VIOLENCE AGAINST A CHILD" IS TO "VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN" AS "CIRCUMSTANTIAL" IS TO "REGULATED"

Systemic violence presupposes a powerful, strategised institutional procedure that defines the targets, methodologies, processes and mechanisms, sanctions, normative and legal frameworks, limits and penalties. It also, of course, signifies rationales and motivations, expectations of benefits that outweigh costs, the beneficiaries and the investors/invested and certainly, if not obviously, those who (by design or default) decide these matters.

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6   Casual statements discounting children's capacity to comprehend a situation or respond rationally or with justifiable emotion and decision: "only a child", "just a kid", etc.

7   Today children are abused against a prevalent but acknowledged aberration or perversion of the social ethos that militates strongly against such abuse, rather than, as when we review the past, an understanding of abuse according to our contemporary norms and ethics, which may be inconsistent with previous norms under which the abuse has occurred, such as child marriage in America in the 19th century.

8   Every major religion today has ancient sanctions, even encouragement, promoting judicious corporal punishment and admonishment of children.

9   These efforts to eradicate child abuse and neglect are typically pedestrian and sanctimonious, and punitive towards the perpetrators in a framework of legalistic and inhumane processes which often end up penalising the child as well.

10 Humans and human societies are notoriously adaptable to all kinds of limitations and exigencies, so the retention of the status quo offers substantial benefits in the way of equanimity and security, demanding only the extreme fringes of society as sacrifice.

Religious and moral literature of almost every institutionalised belief system presents a wealth of strictures and sanctions (in the sense of official permission) regarding violence against children, founded on a clear and explicitly articulated set of values. These values could possibly be posited to have emerged from an experience or the archetypal memory of survival under threat, survival of the fittest, survival of the most compliant: the vital demand to adjust, qualify, prevail and survive – or die. Caring and competent educators in every situation and role are therefore mandated, rewarded and recommended by society to commit violence (moderated, controlled, measured and restricted, but still violence) for the good of the child, for the good of society. Most people are convinced of this: the decision makers, who must feel able to predict the outcomes and therefore the responses of their constituencies with some measure of certainty (and what is more certain than obedience under duress?); and those decided for and about, who usually respond with more confidence and enthusiasm to the prospect of predictability (however torturous) than the off-chance of surprising delight.

The power of learning though witness, rather than direct exposure, must have easily demonstrated its merit in terms of best use of scarce resources[11] in minimising attrition in the schooling[12] process. An additional incentive may have been the possibility of reducing investment in teachers and teaching processes in a society committed to exemplary pedagogical process. From indirect but witnessed abuse to anecdotal, mythological and reported abuse is a shorter step, and even more substantially reduces both attrition and direct outlay. The move from physical and corporeal aspects of violence, and the alterations in perceptions and definitions from culture to culture, situation to situation, indicate a more complex and sophisticated dynamic emergent in the phenomenon, until what we hope is its final and fullest flowering preceding extinction in the present.

THE BENEFICIARIES, THE EXEMPT AND THE TARGETS:[13]
THOSE WHO GET HURT AND THOSE WHO DO NOT

From female foeticide and infanticide to child marriages, culminating in murder; and in terms of deprivation of food; denial of dignity; refusal of emotional security and intellectual or developmental opportunity; subjection to sexual and physical abuse and trafficking – sex (in terms of biological characteristics) is probably the broadest determinant of subjection to violence. Girls also probably suffer the most insistent and comprehensive, as well as the most intensive and diverse, forms of violence.

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11 Remember, humans as resource have indeed been scarce up until only a few centuries ago (although, in some pockets of the globe, perhaps a couple of thousand years earlier).

12 I mean schooling in the sense that horses are schooled, or training in the sense that plants are trained, especially creepers.

13 I use the term "targets" not as it is currently employed (ironically enough) as a synonym for beneficiaries, but in this context as its precise opposite.

The children of communities facing ethnic and racial discrimination, particularly indigenous peoples and minorities, also experience a relatively higher incidence of violence. Displaced and refugee children; children in slums, on streets and the homeless; children of economically marginalised and less affluent classes; those institutionalised for any reason from the "mentally or physically challenged" to what may one of these euphemistic days be called "socially, morally or ethically challenged" – all of these, already having experienced violence as an intrinsic aspect of life, are often selectively subjected to even more of it.

Those presumed to be exempt may not actually be so, but merely presented as such in order to fortify the normative hierarchies of privilege. Boys, often presumed to be less vulnerable than girls, are in fact merely differently vulnerable. Genital mutilation of boys, especially at puberty, is a practice so established that it is assumed to be painless or irrelevantly painful and even beneficial. It is supported and protected not only by practitioners but also by the scientific community. I am not referring specifically to penile circumcision here, nor am I necessarily excluding it from review. However, the prevalence of such practice obscures the large number of lesser-known penile and genital mutilations and physical scarring that boys must endure or risk in different societies. The emotional, psychological and spiritual trauma associated with breeding "men" are so varied, so densely camouflaged with social and survival desiderata, and so flamboyantly ornamented with ostensible rewards, that denial is the first and most difficult problem to approach in resolution and healing.[14]

There are of course situations in which girls are or are assumed to be at greater or more frequent risk. Over the past decade considerable effort has gone into prioritising this concern, linked with gender discrimination and the women's movements. We need to learn to express difference without comparisons that assume to prioritise investment, support, attention to remedy, etc. For instance, the fact is that more boys than girls end up dead on the front lines of war. It is rather crass and certainly unfeeling to suggest that the female children have the worst of it since they have to deal with surviving the conflict. To be dead untimely is no less an experience of violence than to live in and survive violence.

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14 To be a man it is required to be not merely stoic but actually to refuse to acknowledge or recognise certain set thresholds of pain: physical, mental or other. These thresholds and forms are set by society as being the minimum standard of strength or courage or endurance likely to be demanded of male adults in order to perform their roles in society. Men are rarely required to examine their pain and the causes of it in order to understand and analyse it, and to address it more rationally. Nevertheless, that unexamined pain causes men a certain rage over the demands of being men. I believe that every girl who has had a boyfriend dump her – every woman who has been batted emotionally or physically – knows all about the not-so-hidden rage that men carry.

Only when we accurately identify targets, perpetrators and the exempt, without preconceptions or bias, does the image of the beneficiary become distinct. The first beneficiary in every concrete context will clearly emerge astride the apex of the particular social segment. The greater (and therefore more remote) profiteers gains their advantage by a similar position where the beneficiary in the previous segment becomes the target (or, at best, exempt) in the next. Consequently, the greatest beneficiaries are the most remotely connected from the targets that support their yields. Essentially, we find that children signify the highest ethical value internal to any socio-political group; and at the same time they are the most susceptible and fragile target (the most amenable and rewarding as an instrument of manipulation), and of the least economic value, thus representing a good investment to those external to the child's society. The direct political value of violence or threat to children is therefore clear in any exploitative or oppressive social dynamic and structure – in other words, they are worth very little to the violator and worth a lot to the violated.

DESIGNS – PATTERNS – MODES:
RESPONSES TO CHANGING POLITICAL ECONOMIES

According to existing statistics, and given the weight of empirical evidence, more children (in sheer numbers) are knowingly and deliberately subjected to violence than in any previous classifiable period (not surprising, of course, given the steep growth curve of the human population over the last couple of centuries). There has been a mammoth resurgence of so-called "traditional practices" (including genital mutilation, scarring, sex selection and elimination of offspring, street violence, violence against street children; innumerable forms and of the entire range of intensity and scope) firmly ensconced and buttressed by religious, cultural, or even "neo-nationalist" fundamentalism. In addition, there are innovative and extreme variations, where infliction of violence is deliberately and consciously integrated into a chosen lifestyle and normative system, such as snuff pornography[15] and internet "paedophilia". Further, there is the deliberate endorsement of policies that kill and harm tens of thousands of children in the most excruciating manner, including thirst and starvation, preventable disease and injury.[16] Any possible excuses – such as respect for "private space" and "choices", which have infected public moral options – for permitting such phenomena to continue unabated, let alone legitimising and glorifying some manifestations (such as the sexualised images of teenage pop idols and child product-peddlers in highly paid advertising), are inarguably specious.

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15 This is the sado-masochistic erotic practice that culminates in the death and murder of the victim, usually of a child – a form of erotic entertainment where the viewer or voyeur rather than the direct and active perpetrator of the act is the beneficiary.

16 This has happened in the Sahel, in Vietnam, and in almost every country in the world, even the richest.

Fascinatingly, and shockingly, although immense quantities of impossible-to-discredit data have demonstrated that violence against children invites more violence against children – usually the same children and even the same child – we have not found either the will or the resources (as a society or as concerned segments of society) to end it using a rational and "evidence of success" approach. The moot point is, of course, why we are tied to this trans-generational oppression. And, subsequently, how must we engineer responses if this is indeed the social attitude and if we want to change it. This is a task for our psychiatrists and psychologists, counsellors and sociologists, even for our economists and financiers who must make available the ways and means to accomplish this.

Sadly, the recognition of violence as a health issue (World Health Organization 2001, 2002, World Health Assembly 2003) seems to have only followed on from the estimates of its cost in monetary terms, particularly as a cost to the public health system. Unsurprisingly, violence against women and now violence against children have received useful "press" because of this realisation, at least in the larger process paradigm of international prioritisation and investment in the issue.

WAYS AND MEANS

For such an enduring practice, if we may term violence against children a "practice" rather than say, a pedagogy, there is (as there undoubtedly would have to be) a set of procedures or systematic processes that validates it as legitimate rather than criminal, as part of a process rather than incidental or perverse, and thus identifies it as eligible for investment as a social capital venture. This prevents the costs, whether personal or to the group, high or low, being considered as excessive and allows them to be computed as investment, thereby inflating the value of the prime crop, so to speak, and justifying continued investment. From the massive and universal annihilation caused by wars, to the less dramatic and spectacular disintegration of an individual child's self-esteem and confidence, ongoing investment must be justified by increasing the value of the asset. Ominously, attrition (production losses) must be assimilated into this cost-benefit assessment and prove its productivity or value enhancement. Therefore, it is clear that the phenomenon must manifest at two intensities at least: on the one hand, the chronic, low-key, constant environmental threshold of threat and minor frequent wounding and with it, on the other hand, the occasional grand spectacle.

Exclusion

The definition of "out-groups" as opposed to "in-groups" begins from home and infancy if not earlier. The grounds established are those of social undesirability of the individual, based on a group identity or "label". The threat of violence is constant, restrained – if at all – on the clear understanding that this is so as an unmerited grace rather than due to any attribute or behaviour of the "target". However, it is also implicit that the target is responsible for any and all violence actually unleashed, if the target's existence is perceived to pass an arbitrary, constantly shifting behavioural benchmark of non-aggression and complicity in the oppression. This is the typical marker of sex-based or gender-based, caste, class, racial and ethnic violence, and its essence suffuses the psychological atmosphere in which the child is born and grows. Here, too, an occasional public and extravagant example is required to drive home the lesson of safety in exclusion to the point of invisibility. A pogrom, a war, a single, particularly "bestial" incident well publicised serves to reinforce such lessons efficiently enough.

Reinforcement of Lessons

Active infliction of child abuse and neglect at the constant toxicity-endurance threshold of a given psycho-social ecology – as distinct from the occasional, high-profile, publicised exemplary – is required as a reminder of what would be meted out, if. The reminder, the daily dose as it were, is not intended for any specific group or groups, any more than the spectacles of violence are so intended. The entire range of occupants of the social order must have their status, roles and responsibilities affirmed, and the penalties are a pre-emptive measure against the erosion or overthrow of painful, but instituted, positions and processes. The so-perceived oppressors must be strengthened to continue their certainly strenuous and eroding function and character as much as the victims must be reconciled to their (differently, but equally) excruciating position.

Self-Policing, the Ultimate Aim in the Process

The most efficient management of society – the one in which costs of attrition in educating and in maintenance are minimised – demands self-policing: the voluntary surrender of choices, freedom, ethics and morality in favour of dominion of and by the existing elite. And for what? The possibility of avoiding pain, of surviving as an integral member of the herd (if possible, slightly privileged in one's class), distinguished only by perfection of compliance and adherence to the norm. The commonplace reversion to popular fatalistic ideologies and fundamentalist religious or political values when self-selected, rationalised ethical and normative behavioural choices are perceived as too costly, high risk or effort-demanding (whether by individuals or by social groups), demonstrates the value of the methodologies of social control and indoctrination in evolving self-sustaining cycles of repression.

PROFIT AND LOSS

Who profits? Apart from criminal networks that profit from physical and sexual violence and abuse as a tool of control over the children in their brothels, or of warlords who similarly use such violence to control child troops, or businesses that allow the intimidation and abuse of child employees, or landlords who abuse their bonded child labour, who else?

The maintenance of a docile and commercially exploited child population does not only benefit the direct exploiters. It is an unsubtle reminder to adults that they too can be so abused should they step beyond the line of what is permitted; it also keeps the reality of child labour alive as an alternative to recalcitrant or potentially recalcitrant adult labourers. Similarly, the image of the oppressed child acts as a reinforcement of the threat to adults and children alike: this could be you. Or more eulogistically: there but for the grace of god, go I. Divine intervention is a crucial element in this thanksgiving, as it underpins the assertion that salvation from harm is not attainable by rational behaviour and choices, but is unmerited and random. At best, harm is avoided by keeping one's head low, merging with the mob. In the end, we must all fall to the overlordship of statistics and probability.

Beyond that, the subtle and ever imminent threat of violence maintains the current imbalance among the various economic stressors in society: the north–south wealth–poverty tensions and the inter-class pressures to name only two. Remembering that the political controls in today's world depend on economic diktat, we need to re-assess the political implications of such a systemic and thoroughly integrated threat of violence as a control and repression mechanism.

If the child is father to the man, then a thoroughly cowed child – moreover, one who is convinced that the experience of deliberately inflicted violence can possibly be avoided only through compliance – gives rise to an adult who not only avoids confrontation and conflict, but who will opt for self-imposed constraints and deprivations rather than expose himself or herself to an unknown experience of violence perpetrated by an external agency. This may explain why Germans complied with Hitler and other populations complied with leaders who offended their sense of permissible behaviour rather than challenged them.

The process of instilling fear of possible disaster as a controlling instrument must commence in childhood to enable it to become an unconscious bias in adulthood. It must pervade all social strata and therefore must be visible as insidious.

VIOLENCE AND NON-VIOLENCE AND PEACE: COMPARATIVE COSTING

Who will and will not profit from child abuse and neglect? What kind of world do we want? What are we willing to pay for it and who is willing? These are critical issues and questions to be decided in today's world where the survival of existing cultures and species is as vulnerable and unpredictable as that of individuals in the most challenging circumstances. An avalanche of impacts are augured by climate change (not to mention natural disasters that have already occurred) now that our highly technological and capital-intensive social environment challenges the natural laws of energy production, retention and usage. If we want to be certain of our survival as a species or culture, we have to re-define the basis of our social structures in order to select survival strategies rationally – ones shaped by laws of bio-chemistry rather than political economics.

Is non-violence the same as peace? Of course not. Non-violence is a personal way of life, a response to a stimulus of either aggression or threat; peace is a social environment. That we can in many dimensions choose to live non-violent personal lives to various extents is a favourite theme of prophets, seers and messiahs. More rarely, they have been the political ideologies propounded by revolutionaries, such as Gandhi, King and perhaps some others.

Peace is a social environment that fosters non-aggression in a universe perceived as holding scarce resources and unlimited demands. That means that the personal values and choices limiting our acquisition of goods and services to the minimum must extend to social contracts that seek to minimise the demands societies make on individuals, on each other and on their environments. We are looking for viable ethics and modalities of self-limiting processes. We are trying to get our social structures to say "enough, thank you".

The imposition of values, even these values of temperance and prudence, at either personal or social levels of organisation, amounts sooner or later to repression and violence. This rarely, if ever, encourages self-discipline, just policing. To leave everything to individual and collective choice rather than rule and rote is a fearful thing, and I am not aware of such social dynamics in history.

What we probably need is a double-pronged strategy that addresses both individual and collective psyches. This probably means that we each have to change a whole lot about ourselves and a whole lot more about the way we are as a group, as societies. We can start only with the children, and then help them learn that they have to start with theirs. Possibly in that way, some number of generations down the line, we may actually have given rise to such a society as we have dreamed of for millennia in however distorted an image: since Plato's Utopia, Confucius's perfect kingdom, Christ's Kingdom of Heaven and earlier the Jewish Garden of Eden, and others perhaps.

So are we going to do this or what?

Note: This paper is based on work undertaken to contribute to the United Nations Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children, looking at the disproportionate violence endured by indigenous children and communities over the last several centuries. Though my reading has contributed immensely to the articulation of the ideas and concepts in these pages, their spirit is that of growth despite all odds, the oasis in the desert that children represent to all communities. The violence these children endure appears in stark contrast to their joie-de-vivre, which challenges their poverty (violence in itself). Violence is their companion from womb to death, a constant element in their social and cultural environment. Yet, with all its looming horror, not the only element and far from the most imposing element.

I have included no statistics in this presentation since there are, we know, plenty of evidence for the violence suffered by various groups of children. None of it proves that it is any less horrific for one than another, and the competitive "I have three hundred mutilated kids you have only three" merely shows the willingness of their self-appointed saviours to use their torment and grief to fuel the vehicle of redemption, be it an NGO programme or government scheme, without actually knowing whether it helps the children or not. Nothing we have cumulatively done so far has actually reduced the statistics, though with any luck we may have made things a little better for a few of the kids with whom we have come into contact.

Both the footnotes and the brief bibliography below are indicative rather than comprehensive. Each book I have read and listed has led me down many paths of thought and memory, to books I have read before and the names of which I cannot even remember: there lingers just a vague or razor-sharp insight, recalled by the smell, touch, scent of one of those in the list, or perhaps even the text contained in these.

If our lives are a challenge to become, individually and collectively, rather than a complacency of being, then I hope this paper will not predicate gloom, but illuminate one streak of darkness in the complex light of our psyches and societies, demanding that we look without fear at the depths of our failure and responsibility in order to devise the means to overcome and transcend them.

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