

3.3: Poverty, Anomie, and Strain

Poverty and inequality – links to violence

72 There has been a great deal of debate about the linkages between disadvantage and discord. Various causal relationships have been suggested and explored in respect of a wide variety of conflicts. Some are more persuasive than others, but none, we believe, are compelling. The fundamental point is that, since even extreme poverty by itself does not necessarily lead to violence, where violence does occur other further factors must be in play.

73 Poverty needs to be addressed in its own right and on the basis of commitments made by individual countries and the international community to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. But poverty alone does not automatically make people violent nor, in particular, does it lead to terrorism.

74 To illustrate that poverty is rarely single-handedly responsible for group violence it is instructive to consider the connections between these phenomena in Northern Ireland, Britain and Calcutta (Kolkata), India. Successful efforts to reduce economic inequalities in Northern Ireland during the 1970s and 1980s did not greatly impact in the short term on the course of the Troubles. Although they helped to assuage some Catholic grievances on the economic and social fronts, these policies did little to address the essentially political grievances of the Catholic/Nationalists, which were about the very legitimacy of the state itself. At the same time they antagonized Loyalist/Protestants (some of whom were also disadvantaged) who felt themselves being surreptitiously betrayed by the British.

75 In Britain, for example, opening up new economic opportunities in economically disadvantaged areas will not necessarily assuage feelings of alienation and grievance amongst black young people in inner urban areas who do not have access to good schools and employment-related networks. They are five times more likely to be stopped and searched by the police in London than are white young people.¹ Here, the actual problem is the perception of discrimination and disrespect in policing policy which cannot be overcome without a real partnership being established between the community and those who police the community.

76 Kolkata is one of the poorest cities in India –in the world, even. However, it also has a very low crime rate – the lowest crime rate of any Indian city. This applies to the incidence of murder as well as to all other crimes. It also applies to crime against women, the incidence of which is very substantially lower than in any other Indian city.²

77 Crime is not an easy subject to explain with empirical generalizations, but there are some possible connections. One is that Kolkata has benefited from the fact that it has a long history of being a thoroughly mixed city where neighbourhoods have not been separated on ethnic or religious lines, as has occurred elsewhere. There are also other social influences, such as the huge role of shared cultural activities in the city, which mobilize the residents in co-operative directions.

78 The politics of the city may also play a part. The focus of left-leaning politics in Kolkata and West Bengal on deprivation related to class, and more recently gender, has made it harder to exploit religious differences to instigate riots against minorities, as has happened elsewhere – for example against Muslims and Sikhs in Bombay and Ahmedabad. Cultural and social factors (and sometimes the absence of such factors), as well as features of political economy, are therefore important in understanding violence in the world today; they demand integrated attention as they are rarely separable.

79 More direct than the relationship between poverty and violence are the links between inequality, particularly economic inequality, and violence. There are a number of reasons why socio-economic marginalization or disadvantage can be linked to patterns of violent conflict. These will normally relate to both subjectively perceived and objectively measured material inequalities, and a sense of injustice about those inequalities, as well as to a combination of other factors that are specific to the situation.

80 Objective as well as perceived disadvantage can interplay with one another. Thus, one group has, or is perceived to have, the land, the well-paid jobs, the best services, and the other has very limited access to these. In other words we need to assess the evenness or unevenness of the opportunity structures that exist and to take a long look at how far access and outcomes are, or can become, open to weaker groups. Patterns of disadvantage may be to do with discrimination (in jobs, housing), long-institutionalized cultural attitudes and structural inequalities (racism, the legacy of migration, lack of citizenship status), the apparent lack of government moves to put in place policies and laws to redress these inequalities, or other causes.

Rationales for intervention

81 What matters from the perspective of public policy is the degree to which inequality, particularly where it is deeply ingrained over time, can be tackled by extending opportunity structures.

82 In these circumstances the state should intervene to, in effect, represent and sponsor the interests of the powerless.

83 When socio-economic inequality is widely evident, acknowledged, and linked to opportunity structures, interventions can aim to correct economic distortions or deliver a fairer outcome. For example, the exclusion of a specific group from particular labour market opportunities may be experienced in daily terms as discrimination. Enlightened public policy can correct the current poor use of labour, which disadvantages both those who experience discrimination and the society as a whole, which is damaged by structural inequality and unfairness.

84 The public interest, crudely speaking, lies in bearing down on discriminatory and exclusionary practices in order to deliver benefits for the excluded or oppressed group (arguably helpful to the group) and all groups (compelling in the interests of all). The short-run loss of benefits for advantaged groups is something that must be managed in the meantime, perhaps through cushioning devices and open explanation and dialogue, if an adverse reaction is not to occur.

85 The first task in tackling inequality is to acknowledge that it exists. There must be a common, shared understanding of the problem.

Embedded inequality can be harder to tackle

86 Inequalities are more consequential when they are clearly perceived and linked with other divisions. Purely economic measures of inequality, such as the degree of disparity between the wealthiest and poorest groups in a society, are aggravated when minorities are disproportionately represented at the lower end of the economic scale. For example, when the people in the bottom groups in terms of income have different non-economic characteristics, in terms of race (such as being black rather than white), or immigration status (such as being recent arrivals rather than older residents), then the significance of the economic inequality is substantially magnified by its coupling with other divisions.

87 Unrest often reflects the strong effects of such coupling (for example, in the turmoil in the periphery of Paris, France and other cities in the autumn of 2005). The same degree of economic inequality may be much more explosive in one case than in another, when it occurs in combination with disparities in other social characteristics. In a global context, the proliferation of satellite television means that people in many poorer nations have a window into the lives of those in richer countries, and see the difference.

88 Violence, when it erupts, can seem mis-targeted when it is not directed at the obvious suspects (the government, large global corporations such as mining and oil companies), but instead at other groups in the area – those who are poor too but are seen to be benefiting in a local context and even if only marginally – from the presence of global corporations. Battles for ‘crumbs from the table’ may also have historical roots – the unequal distribution today of mineral wealth reignites the memory of previous imbalances. Where people of particular sub-groups have greater access to these ‘crumbs’, this inequality must be diluted through opening up educational and vocational opportunities.

89 Perceptions of inequality can, paradoxically, also be felt by the relatively powerful, not just the relatively powerless. In this case the issue is generally a fear of losing control of a resource to which they have previously had access or about which they have a sense of entitlement.

90 This accounts for the antipathy of existing residents towards newly arrived migrants in the same economic class (‘they are after our jobs’), to say nothing of existing settled migrants who face new competition for scarce resources. Not surprisingly, this antipathy is greater if the existing residents are poor themselves and have had to struggle to get a foothold in the job market. The last thing they want is to give up this tenuous position to people who will accept even lower wages. Their own loss is seen as directly caused by the gain of others.

91 Violence is therefore often occasioned by a fear of losing out on something. State violence also falls into this category. When the police or army are ordered to fire on crowds of demonstrators it is often because the government is already on the back foot. The violence is instrumental – it is used to suppress opposition but also to inspire fear, all in the name of regaining or maintaining political control.

92 Yet inequality, even severe inequality, does not inevitably lead to violence or, necessarily, even to protest. Huge inequalities exist between groups that live together without incident. This may be because the inequality has been internalized and the minority group feels its position is ‘natural’. It may also be because they are aware of the inequality but do not make an issue of it – perhaps they are recent migrants and are prepared to put up with hardship because they hope for betterment in the future and for the sake of their children (which can store up problems which arise in the second and third generation of immigrant families).

93 Lack of protest may also be for pragmatic reasons; if protest has been tried before and met with a violent response then putting up with inequality may be a choice. Perhaps the growth of the economy and the prospect of educational advancement inspire hope. If the minority group can appeal to existing mechanisms for complaint and redress – if the political process allows for voice and the courts work well – inequality may be countenanced in the belief that their voice will be heard and their situation improved in the longer term. The Commission is keen to stress that objective material inequality does not mean people automatically protest, let alone choose violence.

Triggers for violence will vary

94 So what additional factors are normally present when violent conflict occurs? And how is violence sustained, given its enormously destructive impacts – for individuals, for communities, for nations? We have already alluded to one often missed element: the way in which various identities are truncated to one dimension which is then understood and presented as a fundamental clash of values, civilisations or belief systems.

95 In short, it is only with instigation that a grievance (for example over the unequal distribution of a resource) comes to be interpreted as an attack on the identity of a group. The message that must be conveyed and take root is: (a) ‘This is happening because you are Kurds or Shias, Catholics or Protestants, Kosovars’ – or whoever – and (b) ‘There is no way of defending what is ours (and our self-respect) other than through violence’.

96 One of the legacies of colonialism is that it left in place populations already demarcated in terms of single identities and therefore potentially open to this sort of message. In many post-colonial countries racial, ethnic, and religious identities became politically and legally institutionalized through deliberate and planned processes of decolonization and nation-building, resulting in clearly differentiated populations within bounded categories of identity, as well as simple distinctions of majority and minority.

97 In many of these countries, group privilege and rights were and continue to be officially entrenched in the institutions, processes, and practices of the nation-state, thereby reproducing multiple disparities among groups who have been classified and administered as distinct and unequal. In such circumstances group mobilization can easily take place along the fault-lines of identity.

But humiliation can also have links to disrespect and violence

98 Feelings of humiliation can also be powerful contributors to a sense of disrespect and grievance. Humiliation is born from current or remembered ill-treatment, often over decades and even centuries, so that after some time people’s energy and self-esteem ebbs away. Their sense of what is right is no longer taken into account and they are left with a sense of acute injustice. Violence that is underlain by feelings of humiliation and shaming can be experienced as a form of retaliation, a fighting back for self-esteem and a statement of self-worth.

99 There are many examples of how humiliation has been imposed on peoples and communities and on how it has (though not always) lead to retaliatory action.

100 The Independent Commission on Africa led by Albert Tevoedjre argued in their 2003 report that Africa is a ‘continent of humiliation’. They considered the factors that have made for its subjugation and denigration over the last millennium. These include the transatlantic slave trade, the colonization process and the fragmentation of the continent before and during the colonial period, the systematic devaluation of Africa’s natural and human resources through an unjust exchange system and the portrayal of Africa as a continent of poverty in the media. While addressing underlying causes is essential, the Tevoedjre Report also sees winning the ‘war against humiliation’ as the primary task for Africa in this millennium, through institution – and capacity-building and empowerment.³

101 The narrative of humiliation that is articulated and received in many Muslim societies is an important theme amongst commentators analysing the root causes of growing Islamist fervour. Some have gone further and sought to explain today’s tensions in terms of a sense of collective humiliation felt by declining Islamic empires from the sixteenth century onwards. Even the most casual observer acknowledges the contemporary dynamics of global Islam in which the sense of the honour or dignity of Muslims is under attack. A perception of humiliation at the hands of western, secularly-minded governments and publics is a core element of the narrative.

102 In a similar vein the Palestinian readiness to be recruited for violent ‘retaliation’ against Israel is made possible by the sense of humiliation which has been caused by displacement, and a sense of oppression and statelessness.

103 Migrant populations, those that have moved from their place of origin either through their own volition, through forceful removal or through their vulnerability to poverty and unequal treatment may also feel a sense of individual or group humiliation.

This can occur however short the journey. Migrants who are not afforded the rights of citizens and who have an identity as ‘non-persons’, who feel their energy and enthusiasm and skills are consistently ignored when they try to find work or housing, or who are forced through trafficking into degrading work like prostitution, are likely to feel humiliated as a group but also at a personal level. Such humiliation may never manifest itself in a public way – there may be little chance to do this without reprisal. In other situations humiliation can fuel feelings of grievance at a very basic level and, if other circumstances are present, result in violent retaliation in subsequent generations.

104 Like poverty and inequality, feelings of humiliation can be eased and sometimes even healed over time. None of these things is immutable. One of the ways this has historically happened in the case of humiliation is through programmes of ‘reconciliation’ and inclusion after prolonged periods of conflict. This is discussed below in the context of breaking down historical narratives of grievance and rebuilding relationships on a different footing.

1 Stewart, 2005: 7.

2 National Crime Records Bureau, Government of India 2006: 53 (table 1.8).

3 Tevoedjre, 2002.

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