**Power as a catalyst for conflict: Can violence ever be eradicated from human society?**

In the face of conflict, power can be defined as ‘the ability to get one’s needs met [1].’ Power requires not just an ability to do or act by strength and force, but also requires an inherent want and need for a commodity. Yet it is self-explanatory that a desire for power isn’t temporary, but perpetual, with those whose needs are satisfied always yearning for more. This can lead to longer term conflict, suggesting the gradient of power enrooted within society, is the sole perpetrator towards worldwide violence; yet is it possible to completely eradicate violence from society, when individuals, parties and states will never stop their crave for greater power?

When looking at power as an abstract concept, 2 broader categories emerge: Structural and personal. Structural power derives from authority that exists within society, whether it’s legal or political, while personal power comprises of human traits and qualities, all different to each individual, such as knowledge, loyalty and determination [2]. From these specific concepts, Michel Foucault argued ‘knowledge and power are intimately bound up,’ with every exercise of power depending on ‘a scaffold of knowledge that supports it [3].’ This suggests to us that personal power (specifically through knowledge) branches into structural power when we examine violence around the world, and through our human nature, a response is evoked towards a change in structural power through violence. Yet it is important to understand that a gradient in power doesn’t always cause conflict, but when there is an overlap in want and desire, violence is commonly used as a mere tool to meet one’s needs.

Violence is commonly utilized around the world when certain states are unable to get what they desire. Looking at the 2023 GPI (Global Peace Index), it is interesting to observe an increase in global conflict since 2019, with 45% more conflict related deaths compared to 2 years prior [4]. Violence has greatly intensified in ‘Mali, Ethiopia, Myanmar and Ukraine,’ which makes 2023 the deadliest year for armed conflict since 1994 [4]. Most of these conflicts have been explained because of geopolitical competition, where countries compete over resources, territories and ideologies. The constant desire for countries to want more, and become stronger, exemplifies the worldwide hunt for power, which is clearly the devil behind conflict and violence.

Against all recent trends of violence, Steven Pinker’s book ‘The Better Angels of our nature’ argues with large amounts of data, that violence has been declining over the past millennia [5]. The present day is the most peaceful time in history, with the decline in magnitude of violence being huge. However, Pinker does fearfully state that this has not brought violence down to zero, and ‘is not guaranteed to continue [5].’ His observations highlight to us that although society is seemingly violent, we are at the calmest period in human history. This beckons the question of why there is so little violence in society today, and whether this violence can ever diminish away to nothing.

Pinker sees the ‘little’ violence in our world today, as the aftermath of centuries of reformation and development. He coins the phrase ‘The pacification process,’ which resolves around the societal transition from the anarchy of tribes and hunting to the first civilizations consisting of government control over 5000 years ago [5]. It is self-explanatory that societal development paired with the introduction of the judiciary system back in the 12th century, had a great impact in reducing global violence [6]. Furthering his argument, Pinker created the terms ‘Long Peace’ and ‘New Peace [7].’ Long peace was attributed to the historian John Lewis Gaddis, where Pinker saw a major transition in low level conflict and violence after WWII [7]. New peace referred to the end of the Cold War in 1989, which had sparked greater determination in states to crush out all smaller forms of violence and conflict globally. Pinker's most relevant argument to modern society today, is known as the ‘Rights Revolutions.’ During a relatively calm decade of worldwide peace, Pinker observed a ‘growing revulsion against aggression on smaller scales;’ this grew from the civil rights movement in 1954, where the people began to campaign and care more for the concept of human right being globalized, which ultimately results in a gradual reduction of violence [7]. All these concepts created by Pinker serve as reasoning behind the trends in declining violence over the past millennia and can arguably be used to find certain methods to further reduce global violence. Although this seems convincing, it is important to accept these reforms not only take thousands of years, but also occur naturally within global society. It would seem abhorrent for us to start WWIII in an attempt to stimulate a change in worldwide perspectives over violence yet looking at it from a mere death toll perspective, the deaths in 1 war could save the violent loss of countless more lives in the coming years. Furthermore, it is not clear an artificial war would have the same impact on us as a war with true hate and intent behind it. This highlights to us that although Pinker's observations on past reformations are helpful, there is no ability for us to replicate them in society today.

After observing the timeline of past conflict and revealing certain events which drove people away from violence and conflict, Pinker moves from reasoning to reformation, by examining 4 motives which can move us humans away from violence, and towards international cooperation and altruism: Empathy, Self-Control, The Moral Sense and Reason - ‘The four better angels [7].’ The understanding that violence and conflict is the aftermath of an imbalance of power suggests to us that Pinker’s ‘four better angels’ as concepts against violence, can coincide with violence rooting from power imbalance.

This can be expressed if we go back to the definition of power, which requires not only an ability to do or act by strength and force, but also needs an inherent want and desire. We understand that conflict and violence are only utilized when there is an overlap in want and desire between 2 parties; From this understanding, Pinker forms his four better angels. It is impossible for 2 parties to avoid having overlapping desires at certain times, yet if both can show a form of empathy to each other, paired with a form of self-control, they will understand each other and restrain themselves from diverging to conflict and violence. The necessity for moral sense and reason shouldn’t be undermined, with sense needed for parties to not conflict for little to no reason, while reason needed to find solutions to problems, without the need for violence.

Pinker’s observations are helpful to highlight what is required for a peaceful, conflict-free world, yet they can be seen as mere idealistic, and reveal the true problems of our world rather than helping to resolve them. For global violence to cease, every individual, state and country must show ‘Empathy, Self-Control, Moral Sense and Reason,’ in every situation they are placed in [7]. From Pinker’s insight, there are 2 ways to treat violence around the world: Realism and Optimism.

A realist would turn to Augustine's view on fallibility and Akrasia and accept that Pinker’s four better angels' contrast against our damned human nature. Augustine suggests it is self-evident that humans are inherently evil and allows his views to be accepted by both non-religious and religious believers. For Atheists, looking around the world today is enough to show us the damage and destruction caused by the free will given to man alone. For those who are religious, the failure of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 reveals the parents of all mankind falling to greed by eating an apple from the forbidden tree [8]. Therefore, for many who do see man as Akrasic and damned, there is no possibility for the extermination of violence worldwide, due to the contradictory nature of Pinker’s four better angels with man’s true nature and identity.

On the other hand, an optimist would attempt to hypothesize a new structure to a world, where everyone willingly follows Pinker’s four better angels. In our world today, it is evident that our society is built around the requirement of violence and force, to crush opposing violence and conflict, and so to remove violence completely would mean a complete restoration and conversion of our society and government. It is clear this isn’t a possibility, with a total conversion of our societal structure not only taking centuries of monitored reformation, but also the fact that our society is regarded as highly successful, through its historical nature being built upon centuries of law and legislation. Although we understand that our world today is structured around the necessary usage of violence, it is still interesting to hypothesize and attempt to create an idealistic world without violence, and question whether it is really sustainable.

A world without violence is almost impossible to even optimistically create. Just take a small example such as small petty crimes; people would be much more inclined to steal from others if there was no consequence of violence against them. This then begs the question of how there will be a form of authority in this idealistic world, and how those who do act out of line will be punished. To take authorial punishment to an extreme level, we can case study China, which is the number 1 country for the usage of capital punishment worldwide.

A study 3 years ago showed that almost 70% of Chinese citizens were in favor of the death penalty, with an example of capital punishment being China recently ‘execut[ing] a couple for throwing two toddlers out of a high-rise apartment window [9].’ China is ranked 80/163 registered countries on the GPI (Global Peace Index) with a global average score of 2.009/5 [10]. When observing the composite index, which measures China's peacefulness, we can observe a very clear representation of capital punishment. Although China's perceived criminality, homicides and violent crime is very low, China have a very high level of political terror, very poor relations with neighboring countries, as well as high levels of organized conflict. China has an ability to limit violence internally, due to the fear of capital punishment, yet this fear channels into anger, which can lead to instability and greater conflict through organized crime and violence. China’s inability to control its internal and external violence suggests that instilling fear into the people cannot reduce violence without having a greater impact of more conflict.

Moving to the opposite side of the spectrum, Iceland is seen as the most peaceful country in the world, with a 1.124/5 global average score [10]. Iceland's unbelievably low levels of crime rate, homicides, organized conflict and political instability, is an outcome of Iceland's lack of military budget and armed forced [11]. Instead of investing in the military, Iceland prioritize the people instead, and allocates all this funding into health, education and general happiness [11]. Iceland’s ability to have almost no crime, is an extremely helpful society that other countries can attempt to recreate, and by doing so, violence will ultimately diminish away.

After observing numerous case studies of violence worldwide, paired with Pinker's ideas on the diminishing nature of violence in our society, it is clear that violence is very difficult to remove when there is a craving for global power. If we return to the case of Iceland, they have no military or protective measures, due to a lack of desire for more power. Iceland as a state is happy to invest in the happiness of their people, rather than to hunt for more power elsewhere. Pinker's four better angels are seemingly present within Icelandic society, which allows for their political stability. If all countries could suppress their desire for global domination, and instead invest into their people, societies would become stronger, the people would regain a sense of purpose and community, which ultimately would result in less violence needing to be utilized. Yet the crave for power is seemingly inevitable...

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