

COVID-19, the Police, and the Politics of Violence

by Phillip W. Weiss

One of the responsibilities of the police is to quell civil unrest and restore order. As events in New York City and elsewhere have recently proved, we need the police, now more than ever. We need the police to maintain law and order. Without law and order, our society, at least as we know it, will crumble and be replaced by something ugly and grotesque.

Civil unrest must be identified for what it is: a direct threat to the survival of the nation. There is a population of people, whom for the purpose of this essay will be labeled the “marginals,” who exist on the fringes of society and are resistant to all lawful efforts to transition into the mainstream. They are the people for whom the socialization process has failed and who feel no stake in society. They are angry, alienated, brazen, and aggressive. They operate in a subculture that rejects middle class values and embraces intimidation and violence.

For the marginals, violence is a means to an end. The fictional violence depicted in the movies is for the marginals a real and powerful weapon. For them, to act violently is not only good, but justifiable. It is a means to attain gratification and defy lawful authority. What we are taught to work for, they want to extort or steal. The presence of the law does not deter them. They have no fear of the police or of going to jail. Indeed, to them, incarceration is a badge of honor. It is proof that they can take on the system. The marginals are neither stupid nor completely devoid of social consciousness. They are aware of their estrangement from the rest of society.

This estrangement is a source of pride and a reflection of their contempt for a society which they abhor, and which, to them, is something that must be destroyed.

That makes their violence political. They want to physically tear down society and replace it with a new society in which their subculture will dominate. All they need is a crisis to provide the catalyst to initiate the transformation process. For them, every crime committed is a victory for their cause, which for them is the freedom to be violent without restraint and do whatever they want. They reject everything that forces them to suppress their urges. They cannot tolerate lawful restrictions. They cannot tolerate lawful authority. They cannot tolerate lawful rules and regulations. They are maladapted to living in a civil society based on law which to them is a symbol of everything they hate.

The marginals are cunning and predatory. They will steal, extort, and kill. They are emotionally maladjusted but amongst their peers their behavior is perfectly normal. Conventional social institutions mean nothing to them. Their purpose in life is threefold: one, to act out their urges; two, to attain immediate gratification; and three, to destroy the society that blocks their way. To achieve these goals, the marginals will riot and run amok.

Marginals resist all lawful efforts to get them to obey lawful rules and regulations. They cannot tolerate even the slightest attempts by duly authorized authority to get them to comply. They are incapable of complying with even the simplest of lawful regulations without becoming confrontational. They will rather put themselves on the street than comply with authority. The root causes of their social dysfunctionality is a matter for conjecture. Whatever the causes, it has damaged their psyches beyond our ability to repair.

Nor do we know how to effectively respond to their anger that is bottomless and their rage that can erupt without warning and with a ferocity that knows no bounds. Once unleashed, their rage is frightening. They will break, smash, crush, and burn. They will topple automobiles, burn buildings, assault people, and steal. They are society's burden and a threat to society. Nobody knows what to do with them. It seems that there is nothing that will stop them from wanting to make war against the society that produced them and which they want to destroy.

Now, what does mayhem have to do with the COVID-19 virus? Seemingly, nothing. The COVID-19 virus and civil unrest seem to be separate phenomena. The virus does not make a person become a fanatic any more than fanaticism causes a virus. Yet both are inextricably intertwined. The COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing economic shutdown has provided the marginals with a golden opportunity to sway public opinion in their favor. The current fragile condition of the economy along with the growing sense of uncertainty about the future has produced a climate of discontent that is ripe for exploitation by fringe groups who are hungry for power, and no group wants power more than the marginals. The death of the black man in Minnesota triggered the resulting civil unrest, but the preconditions were already in place for the mayhem to occur. It was only a matter of time. Both have another thing in common. Each robs us of control over our lives.

Now a few more comments about the police. The police have a critical role in preserving the viability of society. They are the first and last deterrence against the criminals who want to harm us. However, recently, the police have come

under direct attack. Their motives have been impugned. Some accuse the police of being fascist storm troopers and tools of racist oppression for the white power structure while others castigate the police for being uncaring, disengaged, and unwilling to enforce the law. Either way, these attacks erode public confidence in the police and puts our personal security at risk.

We need an effective police force to enforce the law. Thus, it is in the interest of society to support the police. This support cannot be unconditional. We must insist that the police perform their duties professionally, diligently, fairly, and in good faith, and not be influenced by personal biases or political pressures that could cloud their decisions, which are often made under stressful circumstances. However, regardless of the mistakes the police occasionally commit in their efforts to enforce the law, let it be understood that the police are our one and only deterrent against those who seek to use intimidation and terror to impose their will on us. We cannot afford to let that happen and the only way to stop it from happening is to fully and unequivocally support the police.

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