

Preface

The first iteration of *Violent Men: An Inquiry Into the Psychology of Violence* appeared in 1969, a year in which daily news headlines volubly trumpeted high-profile assassinations, race riots, police riots, student riots, hijackings, runaway crime statistics, and an unjust war.

In 1992, the American Psychological Association published its much-acclaimed updated and revised edition of *Violent Men*. In that year, race riots were again in the news, as were widespread complaints about police deployments of excessive force.

Today, 25 years later, we again see comparable stories in the media. We read about surging crowds of demonstrators enraged by accounts of police shootings (now helpfully disseminated over the Internet), of curfews and assertive crowd control measures that are being mobilized in response. These full-throated police actions are described as being both provocative and bellicose and as revealing a cycle in which solutions to the “violence” problem may exacerbate the problem—inviting resentments and increasing tensions in the community.

Violence is a loaded term, and one might infer from the title of our book that its self-assigned task is to describe and discuss persons who might not win popularity contests. This task would clearly not be furthered if one tried to discharge it while reflecting personal reservations and exuding disapproval. Probably more to the point, any effort to truly understand others ultimately requires not only suspension of judgment but also some measure of empathy, including the capacity to communicate genuineness

and sincerity. And if one then goes on to describe what one thinks one has learned, one's descriptions ought to convey some sense of the humanity of the persons one has been trying to understand.

The question understandingly arises whether, given the passage of time since our first efforts, we have learned anything along the way. In that regard, I can at least document that the experience has helped us by sensibly lowering our aspirations. When we first embarked on our exploration of the psychology of violence, there was enthusiasm in some quarters for formulating integrating conceptions in the social sciences, including in our understanding of violence. The classic treatise on the subject published in the sixties was subtitled "Towards an Integrated Theory of Criminology."¹

This 25th Anniversary Edition of *Violent Men* is still, first and foremost, about aspects of violence that are in the domain of the psychologist—meaning that the book is concerned with the personal motives, attitudes, assumptions, and perceptions of persons who are involved in violence. The focus of our research has been on individuals—all male—who have recurrently done physical harm to other people and who can be said to have a "propensity" for violent conduct. In retaining this focus, I have been laboring under the assumption that examining "violent men" as defined in this way may be scientifically and socially important. I have assumed that it is scientifically important because it helps us to illuminate continuity and patterning in human personality. And I felt it is practically important because (a) recurrent past violence happens to be a reliable predictor of future violence; and (b) in settings in which we face high rates of violence, it is repetitively violent individuals who commit much of the violence we encounter.

Because I am a social psychologist, the approach to violence in this book is social psychological. This means that the violence of interest to us is interpersonal and that we view violence as a form of social conduct comparable to other forms of social conduct. By the same token, we assume that repeated violence is personally syntonic, that it is a characteristic personal

¹My book at the time was modestly subtitled "An Inquiry Into the Psychology of Violence," but there was pressure (very tempting pressure) to ignore or strain this boundary.

reaction, and that it is invoked by some people with the same consistency that persuasion or retreat or self-insulation or humor or defiance is used by others. The presumption is that violence is linked to human personality in such a way that the study of one can hopefully teach us about the other.

In discharging my advertised mission to elucidate the “psychology” of “violent men,” I begin the book with attempted reconstructions of individual perspectives, followed by groupings that I hope will let us explore some permutations of a violence-related worldview. In the process of attempting this, I propose to enlist some of my subjects in the exploration, asking them to help me to help them to understand themselves. I feel that such collaboration can provide us with inferences that are both informative and respectful. I hope that if anyone should end up reading this book, he or she might emerge from the experience sensing both the humanity of violent men and their uniqueness.

The work reported in these pages was bookended by two junctures in time during which problems associated with allegations of police use of excessive force had reached crisis proportions. As it happens, early on, I and my associates were afforded the opportunity to become directly engaged by responding to a timely invitation from a troubled police agency to study (and subsequently to work with) a group of officers who had been enmeshed in messy confrontations. We were also able to interview a group of offenders (some in prison) who were happy to share vivid recollections of participating in assaults on police.

Some of our initial experiences, as we resuscitate them here, turn out to have been fatefully topical, in that the history of police–citizen confrontation has been repeating itself with a vengeance. In fact, the police department in which we worked almost five decades ago again became enmeshed in controversy for comparable reasons and with comparably unsatisfactory results. And the media across the country (now picturesquely diversified) are once again redolent with comparable accounts of violent actions perpetrated under color of law and the protests they have engendered.

There has been considerable talk—including authoritative talk by prominent public figures—about the need to tackle the challenge of reconciling polarized perspectives relating to police–community relations.

Some observers have pointed out that there may already be common denominators among divergent views, such as in the premises that explain the intensity and obduracy of resentments among police and ghetto residents. In the Preface to the 1969 edition of this book I thus quoted Colin McGlashan of the *London Observer*, who wrote that

the black kids and the white cops—their pride, their fear, their isolation, their need to prove themselves, above all their demand for respect—are strangely alike: victims both, prisoners of an escalating conflict they didn't make and can't control. (pp. xiii–xiv)

It may, of course, be true that in some respects the warring parties might manifest analogous feelings and expectations about each other, and they may have evolved these feelings and expectations in roughly comparable ways. But the members of these groups would probably resolutely insist that if they are “prisoners” of a shared “dilemma,” they are mostly prisoners of their opponents’ dilemmas. This perspective has to be accommodated if conflict participants are to be extricated from their (occasionally interminable) confrontations. People ought not to be liberated at each other’s expense. And this probably holds true for all sorts of contenders, including inmates and guards, discordant spouses, and felonious assaulters on the street.

Although we have to be respectful of targeted preconceptions, we also have to be consistently alert to the fact that most of them are designed to reinforce and escalate conflict. If any of us were in the conflict-resolution business, we would thus have to evolve and rehearse approaches that could cut through the minefields and obdurate edifices of contentious relationships. As in all minefields, the odds would look discouraging. Different perspectives shape different versions of reality on which contending actions can be based. In extreme cases, consecutive iterations of some catalytic account can incur cumulative enhancements, such that the final version of the tamest and most innocuous incident can be a truly horrendous scenario. Some alleged event (for instance, an apparently gratuitous act of violence) can thus be transmuted into the preordained outgrowth of a conspiracy or the inevitable consequence of coordinated animosity—which appropriately inspires a wave of widespread angry indignation.

Some alleged horrendous event (for instance, an apparently premeditated act of collective violence or a seemingly flagrant abuse of police authority) can at other times turn out to have been partly or largely a product of parochial imaginations. But this origin would not make the outcome innocuous. Social reinforcement takes many forms, and some of these are virulent. Self-nominated spokespersons may nurture hurtful grievances, and self-appointed champions may arise to address them. Diverse forms of righteous redress are apt to spark righteous retaliation, and before we know what has occurred, we may be faced with our next full-blown crisis.

Such a development can be disconcerting, to say the least, but it does suggest that the concerns we have been trying to address in the various editions of our book might have retained some relevance.