Work, Violence, Injustice and War

David G. Gil
Brandeis University

Recommended Citation

Work, Violence, Injustice and War

DAVID G. GIL

Brandeis University

This essay explores links between work, societal violence, social and economic injustice at home and abroad, and the propensity to resort to war. It clarifies the concept societal violence and traces its roots to coercively established and maintained exploitative modes of work, exchange and distribution. It suggests that overcoming violence in human relations requires transformations of work, exchange, and distribution in accordance with egalitarian, democratic, humanistic and ecological values in order to eliminate obstacles to human development. Social policies and political strategies toward these ends are discussed in the concluding sections of the essay.

Sources of Violence: Nature vs. Culture

There is a widely held assumption that violent interactions among individuals and human groups are biologically determined and, therefore, inevitable. Advocates of social justice and nonviolence need to confront this position. It is undoubtedly true that the human species does manifest physical, psychological and social capacities for violent attitudes and behaviors. In this sense violent interactions are, indeed, an element of human nature. However, these natural capacities are not actualized continuously in human behavior, but only at certain times and under certain conditions. There is also ample evidence that the human species has physical, psychological and social capacities for nonviolent, caring, loving and nurturing attitudes and behaviors (Kropotkin, 1956). These capacities too are not actualized continuously but only at certain times and under certain conditions. They too are elements of human nature in the same way as the capacities for violence. Which of the species' natural capacities are actualized by individuals and groups at different times and places, and in different social relationships and circumstances, seems to depend on the prior experiences of those involved, and on the historic and contemporary contexts of these

experiences. It seems therefore valid to assume that while both violent and nonviolent attitudes and behaviors are definitely part of human nature, their expression is never an inevitable biological function but is always socially and culturally conditioned.

Societal Violence and Counter-Violence

The concept societal violence refers to systemic obstructions to human growth, development and self-actualization inherent in a society's institutional order, its policies, practices and human relations, its circumstances of living and quality of life, and its values and ideology. Societal violence inhibits the unfolding of people's innate potential, their spontaneous drive to become what they are capable of becoming, by interfering with the fulfillment of their biological, psychological, and social needs. Simple illustrations of societal violence are such aspects of "normal" social life in the United States as unemployment, poverty, hunger, homelessness, and overt and covert discrimination by race, sex, age and class.

Implicit in the concept of societal violence is an assumption that humans, like seeds, are born with a tendency toward spontaneous growth and development of innate capacities. Seeds will grow into healthy plants only when imbedded in nutritious soil, and when exposed to adequate amounts of sunshine and rain. Analogously, human development will proceed healthily only when people live in natural and social environments compatible with their developmental needs. Consistent frustration of these needs "violates" human development, blocks constructive, developmental energy, and transforms it into destructive energy. Fromm described these dynamics insightfully: ". . . The more the drive toward life is thwarted, the stronger is the drive toward destruction; the more life is realized, the less is the strength of destructiveness. Destructiveness is the outcome of unlived life" (Fromm, 1947).

Societal violence tends to set in motion chain reactions of counter-violence from its victims. However, counter-violence will usually not be aimed at the powerful sources of societal violence in the institutional order of society, but will be displaced into helpless and powerless victims. Domestic violence and other

forms of violent crime, as well as suicide, addictions, and mental ills are direct and indirect expressions of counter-violence. Violent, destructive, and self-destructive attitudes and behaviors of individuals and groups will often seem senseless and irrational to observers of isolated episodes. However, when such episodes are viewed in the context of individual and social history, they seem no longer senseless and irrational, but reveal their inner logic as "counter-violence" to violent societal practices and conditions.

Journalistic treatment and public debate of violence, as well as many scholarly studies, tend to obscure rather than unravel the underlying dynamics of violence when they focus exclusively on the counter-violence of violated individuals and groups, while disregarding the socially structured violation of the developmental needs of these individuals and groups. Such fragmented studies of moments in the cycle of violence tend, however, to serve the interests of privileged, dominant social classes, for they deny by implication the causal dynamics of societal violence. Society is thus absolved of guilt, and the necessity of fundamental structural changes toward nonviolent institutions is discounted, while individuals and oppressed groups are being scapegoated.

Societies whose violent policies and practices give rise to counter-violence on the part of violated individuals and groups tend to respond by disregarding the actual causes, "blaming the victims," and steadily increasing repressive violence. The tragic, vicious circle of societal violence, counter-violence, and repressive violence will continue as long as its roots, systemic societal obstacles to human development as an aspect of the normal workings of everyday life, are not acknowledged and transcended within and among societies and nations.

Work and Exchange and Distribution of Products of Work

History reveals that societal violence which has obstructed human development over several thousand years, and which has caused violent interactions and wars from local to global levels, can be traced to the use of coercive measures concerning the organization of work and the exchange and distribution of products of work.

Humans must work to secure life-sustaining and enhancing resources from their natural and social environments. The organization of work and the exchange of work products, as well as ideas concerning these processes, are therefore key elements of human cultures. The extent to which human needs can be satisfied, the scope of individual and social development, and the quality of life in a society depend always on its organization of work and the terms of exchange and distribution of work products.

Work is an essential ingredient of all the goods and services, and all the ideas, knowledge, and skills, which the human species has developed throughout its history. Work is not a series of individual acts, but an inter- and cross-generational process, involving ever new combinations of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual capacities of people with nonhuman elements of nature, and with concrete and abstract products of earlier human work. The aggregate of human creativity and productivity is therefore contained in every newly created concrete or abstract product.

In psychological and social terms, people's work could be a means for discovering their capacities, and a source of their social and individual identity. Furthermore, work could be an important medium for individual development and self-actualization as well as for mutually enriching social relations and societal development. Humans seem to have an innate need to be active in the world, i.e., to work, and they seem self-motivated to engage in work when it meets their perceived needs and furthers their well-being. In this sense, work is a rational human activity. On the other hand, the frequently observed tendency to avoid work does not seem to be an innate human tendency but a defensive reaction to socially evolved, oppressive and alienating conditions of work and to exploitative terms of exchange. Under such conditions, work avoidance makes sense (Marx, 1844, 1975; Pope John Paul, II, 1981).

Work and Peace or War

Whether or not the organization of work and the exchange of work products involve coercion, domination, and exploitation, it has been throughout history a major determinant of conflict and harmony within societies, and of war and peace

among them. During long stages of preagricultural societal evo-
lution, exchanges among members of small, communal societies
tended to be essentially balanced, i.e., nonexploitative. In the
course of their lives, most people contributed to, and received
from aggregate social production about as much as others. Also,
occupational differentiation was linked mainly to age and sex,
but not to caste and class. These essentially egalitarian modes
of work, exchange, and distribution may not have required
coercion. For, under these conditions, people were likely to have
been self-motivated to work, as their work was linked directly
to their perceived interests, the satisfaction of their basic needs.

Imbalanced, i.e., exploitative, modes of work and exchange,
in which most people routinely contribute more than they re-
ceive, while social elites routinely receive more than they con-
tribute, were established by many, but not all, human societies
during the last 10,000 years as a result of the following interact-
ing processes: population increase and resulting scarcities of
land, food, and other needed resources; discovery and devel-
opment of agriculture, crafts, science, and technology; produc-
tion of economic surplus and struggles over its distribution, use
and control; spatial and social differentiation into rural and ur-
ban communities; social division of labor between manual and
mental work and establishment of social and occupational castes
and classes including peasants, craftsmen, traders, priests and
scholars, soldiers, civilian administrators, and ruling elites.

Transitions from early, egalitarian, communal, cooperative,
and relatively harmonious cultures to later inegalitarian, selfish
and competitive ways of life, modes of work, exchange of prod-
ucts and distribution of rights are unlikely to have been accom-
plished through voluntary, harmonious processes. Rather, these
transitions seem to have involved coercive and violent processes
and relations within and between societies. Moreover, once
inegalitarian structures and principles were established coer-
cively concerning work, the division of labor, the exchange of
products, and the distribution of statuses, prestige and rights,
they required continuous coercive measures, i.e., societal vio-
lence, for their maintenance and reproduction. For under con-
ditions of injustice, self-motivation to work seems to have
declined in proportion to the increase in domination, oppression
and exploitation, and work discipline had therefore, to be main-

tained by overt and covert force. Coercive measures became institutionalized as regular, overt and subtle aspects of socialization and of religions and ideologies which interpreted and justified established, inegalitarian conditions of life and work. Socialization and indoctrination were backed by elaborate systems of conformity-inducing rewards and sanctions, and by secret and open police and military forces, the instruments of "legitimate violence" within inegalitarian societies and among nations of inegalitarian global systems.

Human history over the past 10,000 years is essentially a series of variations on the themes of imbalanced, inegalitarian, grossly unjust, coercively instituted and maintained modes of work, division of labor, exchange of products and distribution of rights. This history of social-structural violence is a tragic one, indeed. The mere mention of inegalitarian work systems such as ancient and recent slavery, feudal serfdom, and early and contemporary industrial and agricultural wage labor, brings to mind images of toiling people, transformed, not by their own choices, into dehumanized "factors of production," dominated and exploited by masters, lords, and individual and corporate employers. Such work systems could never have been established and perpetuated without the massive coercion of societal violence in the form of war, genocide, murder, torture, imprisonment, starvation, destitution, discrimination, unemployment, and the ever-present threat of these and other violent measures.

Yet human history is also a record of resistance and counterviolence by oppressed and exploited peoples, social groups, and individuals against domination and injustice, and of struggles for human liberation and a renaissance of social orders based on egalitarian, nonexploitative modes of work and just and balanced terms of exchange and distribution of the products of human work. Accordingly, conflicts within societies and wars among tribes and nations can usually be understood when viewed in the historic context of societal violence and counterviolence concerning the organization of work and the exchange and distribution of the products of human work.

Institutional Justice

Since societal violence has been used throughout history to establish and maintain different types of unjust social orders,

the establishment of just social orders depends on the eradication of societal violence and the vicious circle of counter- and repressive violence. Institutional justice means therefore transcendence of societal violence and attainment of nonviolent social orders free of coercive practices and conditions.

Societies are just when institutional practices concerning the organization of work and the exchange and distribution of work products facilitate satisfaction of people's basic material, psychological and social needs and the development of everyone's innate capacities. This conception of institutional justice applies to every level of social relations and organization, from local to global. Institutional justice is assumed to result in gradual termination of counter-violence, as people's innate developmental energy would no longer be blocked by societal violence and transformed into violent attitudes and behaviors, but could be actualized freely in constructive directions. This means that such intractable social problems as intergroup, interpersonal, and domestic violence, and violent crimes, and rape, are likely to decline and eventually cease under conditions of institutional justice.

Implicit in this conception of institutional justice is a value position according to which all humans are intrinsically of equal worth in spite of their differences, and ought, therefore, be entitled to equal consideration, rights and responsibilities. As used here, social equality is not a mathematical notion, implying monotonous sameness and enforced conformity. Rather as suggested by Tawney, it is a philosophical notion implying equal rights for all to develop their individuality. Freedom is likely to increase rather than decrease, when socially structured inequalities will be reduced, and genuine freedom for all, rather than freedom for ruling classes to dominate and exploit, will become possible only when institutional justice and equality are attained by a society (Tawney, 1931, 1964).

Toward Genuine Peace Through Institutional Justice

Genuine peace, as distinguished from coercively maintained "pacification" such as the ancient "pax Romana," can be attained only by transcending societal violence and establishing in its place institutional justice, from local to global levels, within and among all human societies. This means that attainment of real

peace necessitates comprehensive institutional changes in the organization of work and in the terms of exchange and distribution of goods and services, as well as corresponding changes in the consciousness, values, perceptions of interests, and motivations of people everywhere. Achieving such major institutional and ideological changes requires organization, on local and global levels, of social movements committed to intense, nonviolent, political action over many decades. Long-term commitment seems necessary, because the movements would have to overcome violent institutional dynamics and ideologies which have evolved over many centuries and are now permeating most established social orders. Obviously, the institutional and ideological products of centuries of social evolution cannot be reversed easily and quickly. Intense activism seems necessary, because working for fundamental social changes against tremendous odds, would require the secular equivalent of missionary work. And nonviolent approaches seem necessary, because the vicious circle of societal violence and counter-violence cannot be broken and transcended by participating in it and thus actually reinforcing it.

Yet, while promoting genuine peace requires the building of movements for fundamental transformations of existing social orders and human relations all over the globe, it is also necessary to work simultaneously for immediate reductions of injustice and suffering and for prevention of "hot wars," provided such relief is not mistaken for the necessary fundamental social transformations and presented as a real solution to current human dilemmas. Limited amelioration of social conditions and peace based on a balance of terror among armed, institutionally violent and unjust societies make possible a modicum of survival and provide time for building movements committed to fundamental social transformations. Hence, they are preferable to more intense levels of oppression and to open warfare.

Peace movements in the United States have usually worked for peace and nuclear disarmament but have been reluctant to work for fundamental social change which alone can reverse the dynamics of societal violence, injustice, counter-violence and war. They have done so in order to mobilize the broadest possible support for their immediate goals and to avoid alienating

potential constituencies who support the established social order. As a result, these movements are trapped in a tragic contradiction of struggling for peace while not opposing the causes of wars. By failing to link their work for peace to comprehensive struggles against societal violence and injustice at home and abroad, peace movements actually support, the maintenance of practices and conditions which result inevitably in more conflicts and wars.

Liberating Work Life:
Essential Steps Toward Genuine Peace

If indeed, the usual function of societal violence and wars, at home and abroad, has been to establish and maintain exploitative systems of work and unjust terms of exchange and distribution of goods and services, then violence and wars will continue as long as dominant social classes strive to ensure for themselves privileged positions in the organization of work and privileged shares in the distribution of goods and services. To be effective, peace movements should therefore confront the historic, causal links between exploitative, imbalanced modes of work and distribution, and societal violence and wars. For there can be no magic shortcuts to genuine peace while domination and exploitation at work, and privilege in the distribution of goods, services and social rights are preserved.

What then are the main features of nonviolent, liberated systems of work, exchange, and distribution which peace and social justice movements should promote in order to be effective beyond short-range goals? Such systems should facilitate optimum individual and social development all over the globe, and should therefore be designed to meet the biological, psychological, and social needs of all people through humane reorganization and redesign of work and through equitable distribution of the aggregate global product. These systems would have to be shaped by values of social equality, freedom and self-direction, cooperation and mutualism, community orientation and human solidarity, rather than social inequality, domination and control, competition, selfishness and rugged individualism. Workers would have to be in control of their work as "masters of production," rather than as "factors of production," used and

exploited by individual and corporate employers. They would have to determine, design, and implement the goals and processes of work and receive fair shares of the products.

Nonviolent modes of work would also have to be in harmony with nature and adapted to the reality of population increases involving a doubling of the globe's population to about ten billion by the middle of the next century (The World Bank, 1984). Such ecologic and demographic considerations suggest avoidance of waste in relation to the environment and to natural resources, commitment to high-quality, durable products, and rejection of practices such as built-in obsolescence and wasteful, marginal product changes promoted through advertising, all of which tend to be widespread in capitalist economic systems.

To sum up, nonviolent systems of work and distribution would be democratically controlled; nonhierarchical, decentralized, and horizontally coordinated; egalitarian, cooperative, humanistic, universalistic, and ecological; and oriented to serve the interest of everyone living now and in the future.

The Transition Process

Established modes of work, exchange, and distribution are very distant from the nonviolent approach sketched here. An extended process of reexamination of consciousness and political action is therefore necessary to bring about the desired transformations. During this process, visions of, and experimentation with, alternative models of work and distribution can serve as a frame of reference for peace and social justice movements as they develop strategies and policy proposals for the transition from structurally violent ways of life and work toward structurally just, nonviolent alternatives.

An important theoretical requirement for the transition process is a conceptual redefinition of work. If the purposes of human work are to be the maintenance of life, the enrichment of its quality, and the futhering of individual and social development, then work should be defined as activities designed to meet biological, psychological, and social-cultural needs of people. A corollary of this definition is that activities which threaten or endanger life, reduce its quality, and inhibit individual and social development should not be considered work but "counter-

work," a concept akin to the notion of violence as developed in this essay. Implicit in the definitions of work and counter-work are criteria for the design and evaluation of human-development-oriented systems of work and production, as well as criteria for including and excluding activities into and from a revised concept of "Gross National Product" (GNP). Activities necessary for and conducive to human development and well-being should be included in the GNP, and should be recognized socially and rewarded materially, while activities which obstruct or are harmful to human development and well-being, should be excluded from the GNP, should not be recognized and rewarded, and should eventually be terminated.

An essential first step in the transition to a nonviolent, human-development-oriented system of work is the elimination of the societally violent and wasteful practice of excluding people from socially necessary employment through "unemployment" and "under-employment," at the discretion and in the self-defined interest of owners and managers of means of production. The elimination of unemployment could be achieved by an amendment to the U.S. Constitution guaranteeing to every individual rights to suitable employment and adequate income. Congress could implement an employment guarantee by modifying periodically the legal length of the work-day (week, month, or year), in order to match the number of workers with the number of positions in the nation's work-system and with changes in the volume of aggregate production. A mandated reduction of the average workday by just one or two hours, and mandated prohibition of overtime, would make possible the absorption of nearly all curently unemployed and underemployed workers, assuming the scope of current production were not changed. Congress could also establish appropriate and meaningful work programs to provide additional work when needed and to meet major gaps in real needs of the population, not supplied by the market, in housing, health, education, transportation, conservation, etc. Such publicly financed work programs could be carried out by worker cooperatives, sponsored by communities and regions, as well as by more conventional enterprises (Gil, 1987).

Establishing unconditional rights to work for all is an essen-

tial, though not sufficient, measure toward solving eventually many social problems such as poverty and discrimination by sex, age, race, social class, handicaps, etc. It is also a precondition toward phasing out socially useless and harmful "counterwork," such as military production, built-in obsolescence, "feather-bedding," etc., which workers, understandably, are reluctant to forego in the absence of assured, alternative, meaningful work. In short, guaranteeing work to everyone is necessary, in order to develop a rational, equitable, efficient, and effective economic system, conducive to human development and well-being for all, at home and abroad.

The redefinition of work would lead to a further important transition policy, the inclusion in the GNP of parental childcare, and similar caretaker tasks in people's homes, as socially necessary components of the work system. Such an approach was endorsed in 1985 by the United Nations World Conference on Women in Nairobi and ratified subsequently by the U.N. General Assembly which asked the governments of all countries "to include women's unwaged work in the GNP." Were the Congress to enact such a policy, women and men preferring this kind of work to employment outside their homes, should be entitled to receive adequate wages out of federal revenues raised through appropriate modifications of income tax rates (Gil, 1973; Bonnar, 1987; Hawryshkiw, 1987).

Redefining parental childcare and other caretaker tasks as work, and paying for it adequate wages out of public revenues, would enhance the physical and mental health, the social prestige and the political power of people performing this work. One further benefit of such a policy would be the phasing out of the dehumanizing Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. Altogether, the proposed transition policies of employment guarantees and parent and caretaker wages would, when fully implemented, eliminate nearly all poverty and its multiple correlates in our society, no small feat, indeed, considering the limited success, on this score, of the New Deal, the War on Poverty, Model Cities, and several other well-intended, yet inadequate efforts. A residual group of the population who are unable to work because of age or handicaps, would have to be protected against poverty through a guaranteed ad-

equate income policy. Also, all people would have to be entitled to comprehensive, preventive and curative health care, childcare and education, and suitable housing, all provided through federally funded and locally administered programs.

The transition policies sketched here are compatible with values rooted in the history and culture of the United States. Early European settlers brought with them a work ethic which originated in the biblical injunction ""to earn bread by the sweat of one's brow." They believed that everyone had obligations and rights to be self-reliant through hard work. They also thought that people were entitled to use natural resources to satisfy their needs by working on and with these resources. These ideas originated in ancient Judeo-Christian traditions according to which the earth belongs to God, is available to humans to derive their livelihood, and no one was to be excluded from using God-given resources for self-support. This ancient ethic of European immigrants is similar to the ethic and practices of Native American tribes as well as of African tribes, the roots of black Americans.

Catholic theology concerning work and workers' rights contains similar themes. Pope John Paul II's Encyclical "On Human Work," asserts the "priority of labor over capital," stresses the worth, dignity and inalienable rights of workers, and concludes that unemployment is incompatible with human dignity, needs, rights and responsibilities (Pope John Paul II, 1981). The Catholic bishops of the United States applied the same premises to an analysis of the established economic system in a recent pastoral letter. They, too, declare unemployment and poverty unacceptable on moral grounds and recommend policies that would guarantee dignified work and adequate income to all, similar to the transition policies suggested here (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986). Many Protestant and Jewish clergy have voiced similar positions.

In view of correspondence between values upheld by some people and groups in the United States and the transition policies suggested here, it may be possible to mobilize political support for these policies, in spite of likely opposition from propertied and managerial classes and their privilege-pursuing allies. The proposed policies could actually be enacted and im-

plemented without structural transformations of prevailing cap-
italist institutions. The limits of these institutions would,
however, be tested and strained, for these policies involve major
challenges to the customary rights of owners and managers, as
well as constraints on "free enterprise" similar to the ones pre-
vailing in capitalist democracies such as Sweden. In Gorz's terms,
these policies involve "nonreformist reforms" since they are con-
ceived "not in terms of what is possible within the framework
of a given system and administration, but in view of what should
be made possible in terms of human needs and demands" (Gorz,
1967).

Shifts in power from propertied and managerial elites to
majorities of working people, and corresponding shifts in the
distribution of social, psychological, and economic goods, which
would result, were the proposed transition policies imple-
mented, could gradually open up opportunities for expanding
democratic control by workers, consumers, and communities
over society's productive resources and capacities. Of course,
such social transformations would not happen automatically.
Rather, they would require the emergence of broadly based lib-
eration movements which transcended conventional interest-
group politics and promoted instead a unifying, humanistic con-
sciousness and a corresponding, nonviolent, political practice.

The gradual unfolding of a comprehensive democratic ren-
aissance, initiated by such liberation movements, could even-
tually lead to efforts to redesign work processes and products
in accordance with humanistic values, enhancing their quality
and bringing them into harmony with the intrinsic needs of
people and the natural environment. At that stage, it would also
be possible to tackle deep-seated conflicts in human relations,
including sexism, ageism, racism, and class antagonism at home,
and economic injustice and wars abroad. These issues, i.e., the
organization and design of work, the nature of products, and
relations of humans to one another and to the environment, defy
fundamental solutions as long as unemployment and poverty are
ever present possibilities. For in the absence of employment and
income security, people tend to protect whatever employment
they have, whether or not their work is compatible with their
intrinsic needs and development, and satisfying and meaningful

in personal, social, ethical, ecological, and international terms. Nor will people be committed to the protection of the needs, rights, and interest of oppressed and deprived individuals, classes, and nations, when such protection could threaten their own employment and income security.

If peace and social justice movements could achieve implementation of the transition policies sketched here, and if they then focused their efforts on qualitative transformations of work, products, and human relations, they would set in motion counter-cycles of institutional justice in place of the prevailing cycles of societal violence which for millennia have coercively maintained domination and exploitation at work, and polarities of privilege and deprivation from local to global levels. This approach would seem to be a feasible, long-range strategy toward real peace and human liberation, as it aims to overcome institutional obstacles to individual and social development—the ultimate sources of oppression and wars.

References

Bonnar, D. (1987). Women, work, and poverty: Exit from an ancient trap by the redefinition of work. In D. G. and E. Gil, *The future of work*. Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Books.

Fromm, E. (1941). *Escape from freedom*. NY: Reinhart and Co.

Gil, D. G. (1973, 1981). *Unravelling social policy* (3rd ed.). Cambridge, MA: Schenkman.

Gil, D. G., (1987). Toward constitutional guarantees for employment and income. *Changing Work*, Winter/Spring.

Gorz, A. (1967). *Strategy for labor*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Hawryshkiw, M. (1987). The wages for housework campaign. *Changing Work*, Winter/Spring.

Kropotkin, P. (1956). *Mutual Aid*, Boston: Porter Sargent.

Marx, K. (1975). *Economic and philosophical manuscripts*, (1844). NY: Vintage Books.

National Conference of Catholic Bishops. (1986). *Economic justice for all*. Washington, DC: U.S. Catholic Conference.

Pope John Paul II. (1981). *On human work—laborem exercens*. Boston: Daughters of St. Paul.

Tawney, R. H. (1931, 1964). *Equality*. London: Allen and Unwin.

The World Bank. (1984). *World development report, 1984*. Washington, DC: The World Bank. (IBRD-0058)