

Violence: a summary

Conor Cruise O'Brien 'The Observer', London

Editor's note

This short paper represents part of the summing up given by Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien at the conference on Violence arranged under the auspices of the London Medical Group in February of this year. As all the papers were not available for publication we have included mainly those comments of Dr O'Brien's which relate to the preceding papers, also drawn from the Conference.

Dr O'Brien, in his summing up, looks at the social significance and implications of violence.

One theme which I think must force itself on our minds as we listen to a discussion of violence is this, how far do we human beings who are subject to the emotions and pressures that produce violence know what we are doing when we think that we are discussing violence? How far and in what level are we influenced by our own unconscious drives? Somebody gets up and says such and such and such and such points to such and such a conclusion. Had he reached the conclusion before he found the such and such? And when he says again, no there is a lot of evidence there but for such and such reasons, rather complicated reasons I reject that evidence, how far is he resisting for emotional reasons something which is in fact intellectually convincing? That is not a polemical statement on either side of the debate, because I think, when we discuss these things, we are not gods, we are not machines, we are human beings. We have the feelings we are talking about and we don't know what influences us unconsciously as we go through our reasoning processes.

I would like to make a couple of points about conditioning and about stress. Professor Eysenck spoke of conditioning people against violence to use some provocative language there, comparing the conditioning of a puppy to the formation of conscience, which will have offended I think both Liberals and Religious people and animal lovers (a formidable confederation especially when we add the last!) But the only point I would like to make there is that conditioning towards violence can also be positive, violence-creating. I know for example in Northern Ireland both in homes, and schools and in the streets certain forms of conditioning are going

on all the time which will when the appropriate situation comes legitimise violence and right up to lethal violence. That is happening, that is part of conditioning and it evades as much else does the action of the democratic state. The extent to which the democratic state is powerless is one which we are perhaps apt to underestimate.

The most terrible thing of course that we have been confronted with especially in our third session today is the problem of what one might call hereditary violence. That is to say the battered child, the battered boy who grows up to be a battering father and so on perhaps *ad infinitum*. We have been told that it does not always happen, but we have also been told we don't know how often it happens, or how generally it happens. But it does happen we were told, we were given quite large statistics about actually known figures for battered families and it has been going on for a long time. How do you deal with it?

One speaker suggests that when population begins to flatten out all these problems of violence disappear, people have more space and we would get like the monkeys in the open Savana. I'm not convinced by that analogy. Even within a more stable population, if you have families of that kind transmitting their characteristics (possibly some of them hereditary, if not the physical, then certainly the emotional environment hereditary), you will continue to have the problem of child abuse. Adoptive families are subject to certain supervision at least in the early years, so are foster homes, but natural parents, a sizeable number of whom are engaged in beating the hell out of their children, are not subject to any inspection unless the children are drastically or publicly damaged and even then provided only somebody is willing to notice the fact that they are. Could we tolerate the degree of intrusion into family life which would be required by the supervision of *all* families by social workers readily visiting all families where there are young children? Could we support the costs of that? Maybe we can't, but if we don't it is certain that what we are doing is condoning this violence. People talk about violation of civil rights in prisons, but the violation of civil rights in families, mainly natural families, is surely happening on a much larger and more terrible scale and happening all the time.