Crime in the Post-Peak World

Contributed by Peter Goodchild
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As humanity plunges ever more deeply into the age of declining resources, what will be the future of law and order? The particular problem of which I am thinking might be called, more specifically, “future violence,” since other acts that are now deemed criminal may seem trivial in later days. Unfortunately all discussion of violence becomes an emotional issue, and a rational answer may be elusive. After all, for most human beings the most terrifying actions on the planet Earth are probably those involving physical assault by other humans. It is therefore hard to get a calm or rational response from people with whom one discusses the matter.
The topic is also a rather vast and nebulous one, and the following notes can barely raise the questions, let alone provide the answers. Even a brief and random search of the literature, however, may reveal a few patterns.

Comments often reveal only extremists from one side or the other. One side says, “Don’t take chances. Arm yourself to the teeth.” The other says, “We don’t believe that arming oneself is a good response to the fact that the bad guys will themselves be armed.” The second side might even refuse to believe that violence is an issue worth considering. Is this latter a head-in-the-sand response? Is it the reflection of a wish to avoid a self-fulfilling prophecy of the “first strike” variety? Or, on the other hand, is it based on a valid belief that humans are fundamentally compassionate?

As with all proclamations about humanity, there is always the problem of generalization. No doubt there will be much variation. For one thing, countries that are already violence-prone, or where guns are common, might well continue in that manner, but to a greater extent. Countries of the opposite nature will perhaps be correspondingly less violent. It is conceivable that where there are guns but no government, there will be a “wild west,” and where there is government but no guns there will be peace. Whether there is any tangible evidence for any of these theories is another question.

The nature of the particular events will also no doubt be relevant. Woodham-Smith’s book, The Great Hunger, about the nineteenth-century potato-famine in Ireland, includes little reference to violence. On the other hand, an Internet article written during the currency devaluation of 2001 in Argentina includes many comments such as the following:

By far, the most dangerous moment of the day, is when I (or my wife) leave/enter my house. A solid, secure house cannot be broken in easily, so criminals wait until you are standing on front of the door with the keys on your hand to jump on you. This is why we are extra alert when approaching our house, look all around us and if we see anything strange, keep walking around the block or keep on driving. No door is ever opened when there is a strange person around.

Of course one has to consider that with ordinary acts of assault, as with the case of armed rebellion against the state, “bad guys” and “good guys” eventually will be equally disadvantaged by the decline in technology. When both parties are riding horses and carrying bows and arrows, does the whole matter simply resolve itself into the grimmest form of humor? Perhaps not.

Homicide vs. War

As I said, I am largely equating “future crime” with “future violence,” but the word “crime” has odd connotations. Surely, one might say, in a world without law, there can be no such thing as crime. But Webster’s defines “crime” to include offenses against moral codes as well as those against written law. We can go a step further and say that crime is a concept that extends beyond the behavior of Homo sapiens. The behavior of wolves, for example, is filled with utterances and body language to which the animals are perpetually sensitive. Even if wolf law is not in writing, infractions are quickly noted and dealt with.

Of course, within my own vague categories of both crime and violence there are issues that should perhaps be dealt with separately. For example, do we refer to certain forms of secessionism as violence? When is secession a perfectly legal proposal, and when does it become treason or even civil war? My guess is that there are, in any case, two major areas that need to be dealt with separately. Some acts should no doubt be classified as treason, i.e. rebellion against the state.

Others are forms of violence that basically constitute assault by one person against another. Oddly enough, the killing of one person is an offense called murder, but the killing of millions is regarded not as a crime but merely as war.

As the American federal government pushes the general population's gullibility into overload, the government itself becomes a likely target for hostility. One might question how a few hundred civilians armed with nothing more than rifles if that is a fair portrait of the American militia movement, for example could do battle against the most powerful army in the history of the world, assisted by spyware operating in the terabyte range. I suspect however, that the incipient disappearance of oil, metals, electricity, transportation, and communication would affect the power struggle.

In any case, secession and civil war may become outmoded or even pointless concepts over the next few decades. In a world without such things as oil or electricity, there will not be much "state" left to rebel against. The government's attempts to suppress rebels in Montana may involve traversing some impossible stretches of territory, while capturing Washington, D.C. will not be worth the bother. But acts of violence by small groups of criminals against individuals or other small groups are a matter that needs to be discussed.

Rousseau vs. Hobbes

For the last few decades, the prevailing opinion has been that humans are fundamentally nice. To be human is to be humane. That opinion, however, is really an academic one, and academic thinking often goes rather willfully against common sense. To a large extent, academia has always been the last stronghold of political correctness and the chief defender of anachronistic thinking consider the fates of plate tectonics, of the bell curve of IQ, or of biological evolution. (For that matter, I remember being castigated in graduate school for suggesting that Shakespeare wrote some bad lines.)

Within this bastion, the consensus about human violence has for a long time been along the lines of Rousseau and his "noble savage." The contrary would be Hobbes and his claim that the life of man in a state of nature is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." However, there have been various recent studies (e.g., Keeley's War before Civilization) clearly showing that primitive societies have a higher rate of death by violence, per capita, than more technologically advanced societies. By "studies" I mean those based on careful analysis of statistics. Again, the issue is always clouded by emotion, and anyone supporting the opposite party will be met with a round of applause. There is little to be done with those who believe that their right to believe is more important than their right to be right. Harvard University Psychology Professor Steven Pinker, however, shows us that the facts may be otherwise:

Cruelty as entertainment, human sacrifice to indulge superstition, slavery as a labor-saving device, conquest as the mission statement of government, genocide as a means of acquiring real estate, torture and mutilation as routine punishment, the death penalty for misdemeanors and differences of opinion, assassination as the mechanism of political succession, rape as the spoils of war, pogroms as outlets for frustration, homicide as the major form of conflict resolution all were unexceptionable features of life for most of human history.

The recent studies are, as I said, generally based on the rates per capita, of course, not on absolute numbers. The difference can be explained by Pinker's statement that "if the wars of the twentieth century had killed the same proportion of the population that die in the wars of a typical tribal society, there would have been two billion deaths, not 100 million."

With regard to ancient cruelties, I often think of Gregory, the sixth-century Bishop of Tours, whose History of the Franks is filled with descriptions of torture, most of it taking place within his own lifetime. Page after page repeats the tone of the casual remark about King Chilperic, in Book VI, that "whenever any were judged guilty of some crime or other, he would have the eyes torn out of their heads."

What causes crime in the first place? David G. Green et al. seem to dispel some misconceptions about its origins, and about the correlation between crime rates and such factors as poverty and unemployment. Referring to a 1985 study by James Q. Wilson and Richard Herrnstein, Crime and Human Nature, they say that the long-term crime rate is actually affected by three principal factors:

1. The age structure of the population, specifically the proportion of young males. . . .

2. The net benefits of crime, including the number of criminal opportunities, and the costs if caught. . . .

3. Social or cultural changes that reduce or increase “social investment” in institutions that encourage law-abiding behaviour. Schools, churches and families can play an especially important role in encouraging individuals to think ahead, consider the feelings and interests of other people, and accept common rules. . . .

If these three factors are the correct ones, then we indeed have something to worry about. As the decades unfold, the survivors will tend to be young and male, the benefits of crime will be many, and the institutions will disappear.

The Psychology of Violence

One reason why violence is unlikely to end is that it is one of life’s greatest pleasures. Robert D. Kaplan refers us to an exclamation in Andre Malraux’s Man’s Fate: “Oh, what a relief to fight, to fight enemies who defend themselves, enemies who are awake!” Kaplan then quotes from Martin van Creveld’s Transformation of War:

Just as it makes no sense to ask “why people eat” or “what they sleep for,” so fighting in many ways is not a means but an end. Throughout history, for every person who has expressed his horror of war there is another who found in it the most marvelous of all the experiences that are vouchsafed to man, even to the point that he later spent a lifetime boring his descendants by recounting his exploits.

An anonymous police officer, in an essay entitled “The Thin Blue Line,” offers a somewhat parallel comment about human nature:

There is one general rule to remember about all of humanity: it is at the core of our sinful nature to do that which is best for ourselves, regardless of what effect that may have on other people. We are a murderous and self seeking race. . . . So we must prepare ourselves spiritually and physically, with the assumption that we will soon be facing unimaginable evil, and it will be in the form of a human face.

The Shrinking Moral Circle

Although I am the least likely person to be defending any religion, I have often wondered if we have generally missed the remarkable sociological theory that seems to underlie much of the thinking in the several centuries beginning about 600 B.C. Around the time of Gautama Buddha there seems to have been a hypothesis that it would be to the whole world’s benefit if the concept of “friend” were to be expanded from the circles of clan, tribe, or family, and made to include every human on earth.

The theory seems to suggest that if human intelligence, or wisdom, or understanding, were great enough to encompass the actions, thoughts, and feelings of all humans, then pure reason would dictate that we act benevolently toward all. Apparently someone, somewhere, realized that a perpetual cycle of revenge is hardly a sane response to life’s vicissitudes. In fact the theory may have been floating around over a good deal of the ancient world, even if the existing record of intellectual exchanges between India and Greece is meager.

The oddity of such a theory is lost to us today, and we need to look at the astonishing cruelty of other times in order to see how novel such an idea must have been. To some extent the theory must have seemed to defy common sense: how can honor and tranquility be restored if death is not paid for with death? Even in the thirteenth-century Icelandic Njal’s Saga, it is perhaps sheer exhaustion, as much as the conversion of Icelanders to Christianity, that puts an end to a hopeless series of killings.

In spite of all one might hold against various religions, or rather in spite of religion's Jekyll-and-Hyde transformations, there has often been that seed of all-embracing compassion, and I find it still alive today. In spite of the popular image of Islam in the west, for example, I feel safer walking down the main street of a strict Moslem town than through the center of many towns in the United States. Kaplan quotes a West African government minister: "In the poor quarters of Arab North Africa, there is much less crime, because Islam provides a social anchor: of education and indoctrination."

Pinker's essay brilliantly summarizes why uncontrolled murder went somewhat out of fashion over the centuries. Although he describes four different theories, they all have a common thread: that violent behavior is ultimately self-defeating, but especially in cases where a strong government has the opportunity to referee disputes:

No one knows why our behavior has come under the control of the better angels of our nature, but there are four plausible suggestions.

The first is that Hobbes got it right. Life in a state of nature is nasty, brutish, and short . . . These tragedies can be averted by a state with a monopoly on violence, because it can inflict disinterested penalties that eliminate the incentives for aggression. . . .

Payne suggests another possibility: that the critical variable in the indulgence of violence is an overarching sense that life is cheap. . . .

A third theory, championed by Robert Wright, invokes the logic of non-zero-sum games: scenarios in which two agents can each come out ahead if they cooperate. . . . As people acquire know-how that they can share cheaply with others . . . their incentive to cooperate steadily increases, because other people become more valuable alive than dead.

Then there is the scenario sketched by philosopher Peter Singer. Evolution, he suggests, bequeathed people a small kernel of empathy. . . . Over the millennia, people's moral circles have expanded to encompass larger and larger polities: the clan, the tribe, the nation, both sexes, other races, and even animals.

However, if we live in an age in which so much else has reached a peak and begun to decline, the same may be true of what David G. Green et al. refer to as "civil society." While the decline in world oil supplies seems to belong to the early twenty-first century, the decline in "good behavior" may have started a few decades ago. In the foreword to Green et al., Judge Alan Taylor says, with reference to the UK:

There is widespread public concern about the high level of crime in this country. Although the statistics fluctuate a little year on year, the picture is clear: over the past two generations crime has increased enormously. A great deal of crime goes unrecorded, and much of the crime that is reported to the police is not adjudicated upon by our criminal courts.

There has also been a transformation on a much larger scale over the last few years. Kaplan claims that war is no longer between state and state, but closer to the Medieval world in which the state as such did not exist. He quotes from Van Creveld's description of those earlier times:

In all these struggles political, social, economic, and religious motives were hopelessly entangled. Since this was an age when armies consisted of mercenaries, all were also attended by swarms of military entrepreneurs. . . . Many of them paid little but lip service to the organizations for whom they had contracted to fight. Instead, they robbed the countryside on their own behalf. . . .

Given such conditions, any fine distinctions . . . between armies on the one hand and peoples on the other were bound to break down. Engulfed by war, civilians suffered terrible atrocities.

Toward the end of his own essay, Kaplan claims that "future wars will be those of communal survival, aggravated or, in many cases, caused by environmental scarcity. These wars will be subnational, meaning that it will be hard for states

and local governments to protect their own citizens physically."

But how do we define the present-day "failed state" of which Pinker, Kaplan, and others often speak? Kaplan later incorporated his essay into an entire book called The Ends of the Earth: From Togo to Turkmenistan, from Iran to Cambodia — A Journey to the Frontiers of Anarchy. That doesn't leave much.

The United States itself is characterized by vanishing natural resources, high unemployment, colossal debt, and uncontrolled warmongering. American government at all levels does not even bother hiding its corruption, unrepentant dishonesty, and conflicts of interest, or the nature of its Madison-Avenue elections. The general populace, meanwhile, is stunned into apathy and silent obedience. Is that or is that not a description of a failed state?

Several accounts in the US and Britain indicate that long-term crime figures are understated in government reports, no doubt to make the politicians look as if they are doing their jobs. Even in particular events such as natural disasters, however, the extent of crime seems to be misreported in the press. The witness to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 says:

Law enforcement problems will often be "glossed over" and/or ignored by authorities. In many cities housing evacuees, there have been private reports of a significant increase in crime caused by their presence but you'll find that virtually all law enforcement authorities publicly deny this and/or gloss over it as a "temporary problem". . . . All the LEO's [law-enforcement officers] I speak with, without exception, tell me of greatly increased crime, including rape, assault, robbery, shoplifting, vandalism, gang activity, etc. However, you won't see these reports in the news media, and will often see senior LE figures actively denying it. The officers with whom I speak are angry and bitter about this, but they daren't "go public", as their jobs would be on the line if they did so. They tell me that often they're instructed not to report certain categories of "incident" at all, so as not to "skew" or "inflate" the "official" crime figures.

Waiting for the Authorities

No doubt the police will be overburdened, in view of the fact that even now the police force is only just large enough to accommodate the present levels of crime. In a condition of true social collapse, there will be greater opportunities for crime, while conversely the police force will be unable to increase in numbers, mainly because the money to do so will be unavailable.

The sight of police cars sitting in a police-station parking lot, with no gasoline to put the cars on the road, would be quite funny if it were not so foreboding. And a police force trying to operate during a lengthy breakdown of the electric-power grid might not be able to do much of anything. The author of "The Thin Blue Line" offers a view of the future:

Proceed with me through the following scenario. A major economic collapse occurs. Millions are unemployed and have no way to earn honest money. The rest of the citizenry is crippled by inflation. Through various economic events, the entire economy grinds to a halt. Trucks and trains stop moving, which means that coal is not delivered to power plants, and food is not delivered to stores.

Things quickly grow desperate. The average family realizes all too late that they have only a few days worth of food in their cupboard, with no available means to acquire more. . . . Hungry people with weapons will have no reservation about doing unspeakable evil on others if it means their own family will survive a little longer. . . .

Here's where it gets really scary, and the vulnerability of the thin blue line becomes apparent. At most, the agencies in my area could muster about 50 officers. . . . It would be impossible to maintain order with this ratio. We would be lucky to be able to hold a few buildings, let alone provide law enforcement service to 1,000 square miles of rural area. . . .

If law enforcement agencies can't answer calls in a timely manner during normal times, how could a reasonable person expect law enforcement to be there during a societal collapse? . . .

The observer of the Hurricane Katrina disaster has little positive to say about any authorities who became involved:

The idea of a "team" of friends with (or to) whom to bug out, survive, etc. is looking better and better. Some of the team could take on the task of keeping a home maintained (even a camp-type facility), looking after kids, providing base security, etc. Others could be foraging for supplies, trading, etc. . . .

People who were prepared were frequently mobbed/threatened by those who weren't. . . . . There were many incidents of aggression, attempted assault, and theft of their supplies. . . .

When help gets there, you may get it whether you like it or not. There are numerous reports of aggressive, overbearing behavior by those rescuers who first arrived at disaster scenes. It's perhaps best described as "I'm here to rescue you — I'm in charge — do as I say — if you don't I'll shoot you.". . .

I'm more and more convinced that in the event of a disaster, I must rely on myself, and a few friends, and never count on Government or relief organizations for the help I'll need.

Personal Responses

The police in western society hold a position that is in many ways ambiguous, and they themselves may be most aware of the problem. There is a common belief that modern democracies are blessed with law and order, and that any dismantling of present-day western governments would present a grave risk to human life and property. Yet sometimes the reality is otherwise: if my house is robbed, the police will arrive eventually and take notes, but that may be all they will do. Over the years I have been affected by various crimes, either as victim or as witness, and I have heard similar accounts from friends and neighbors: in most of those cases there was no arrest, nor was stolen property returned.

The police themselves, of course, are generally not to blame for their inability to aid society. They can be held accountable if they believe that any political ignorance on their own part is justifiable as political neutrality, but greater problems are caused by irrational laws and an overburdened judiciary. When governments deliberately lie about crime figures, and when the courts are perpetually buffeted by the shifting winds of politics, even the most enlightened and well-meaning police officer is in a difficult situation.

Because of all these uncertainties, it seems that as society crumbles the average person is unlikely to get police protection against the aforementioned "greatly increased crime, including rape, assault, robbery, shoplifting, vandalism, gang activity, etc." Blind faith in perpetual peace and good-neighborliness might not be the best way of planning for a world without government.

When it is far too late, we may realize how much we have lost. Westerners often ridicule their own inherited political ideals, but they may be suffering from a misunderstanding of the difference between the ideals and the reality. Democracy, equal rights, civil liberty, the "rule of law," and so on, cannot be explained clearly in less than a few hundred pages. Unfortunately, the people who disparage these ideals are generally those who have enjoyed living in that world since the day they were born, and they are unaware of the reality of life under other regimes, except as temporary vacationers at an American-owned hotel.

There is no great blessing in living in a country with a fraudulent government. I've tried it for years at a time, and I've decided it's not my style. In various countries I have seen the direct effects of a lack of responsible leadership. A country with a dysfunctional and uncaring excuse for a government does not provide much opportunity for freedom and

happiness. On the contrary, the entire mental atmosphere is a combination of apathy and despair. If my comments about western ideals sound rather Boy-Scoutish, I should add that I have no sympathy for the thieves and liars who make up the present governments of the western world, I just happen to admire the tradition that stretches from Magna Carta to the American Constitution. Without good government we have a problem.

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How Much Land Do We Need?; Putting Meat on the Table; Laborers Before Sunrise; The End of Electricity; Growing Your Own Grains, and After the Age of Exuberance.

Editor's note: Congressman Roscoe Bartlett pointed out to me that in a riot or prolonged civil disturbance, police and firefighting personnel remain on the job only a few days before abandoning their posts in order to go protect their own families. He seemed to glimpse total collapse, and he also seemed to believe it would be a logical consequence of, as he put it, the U.S. being "the pig of the world." - Jan Lundberg