Geometry of Deterrence

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Not all deterrence is a consequence of violent threats, despite the tendency to equate the two. It is time to rethink this crucial form of social life if we wish to reduce violence in the world. The problems of crime and violence are not simply at the margins of modern societies, but also at the core. Deterrence is a complex form of social interaction, in Georg Simmel's sense; one party tries to influence another party's actions by means of threats of sanctions or promise of rewards, so that the other will not do something defined as harmful. It is a fundamental element of every sphere of social life; individually and collectively we devote many resources to deter people from engaging in crime or military aggression, from withdrawing their economic trade or their affection. It is a form of interaction in which we engage frequently, but about which we seem to know little.

Surprisingly, deterrence is one sphere in which our personal practice is sometimes better than our public theories. Successful deterrence is perceived in the conventional wisdom as a result of the threat of violence, which it sometimes is. In international relations the term has become synonymous with military threat strategies, and in criminology with the effort to instill the fear of punishment in the mind of potential lawbreakers. In practice, the preferred deterrent strategy for most of us on a daily basis is a nonviolent one.

Few of us regularly threaten our friends and family with violence, although some do it more frequently than others. Even the state, for which violence is the ultimate means of social control, cannot govern without some consent of the governed. Society rewards as well as coerces in order to deter, and the power of a state depends upon a certain level of trust and goodwill, as well as the ultimate threat of violence. Even the most repressive despots and violent criminals use nonviolent as well as violent tactics, rewards, and sanctions to deter both allies and adversaries.

No one wants to live with a constant threat of violence, but how to most effectively deter people from violence is a matter of much dispute. We must reframe our theories of deterrence along three dimensions. We need to recognize that deterrence is the result of, first,
a complex set of behaviors located on a continuum from violent to nonviolent; second, the use of both rewards and sanctions; and third, the interaction between microlevel and macrolevel processes.

When people try to deter others, they pursue strategies chosen from a varied repertoire. At the most violent end of the spectrum lies the threat of nuclear retaliation; at the nonviolent pole lies friendship or love, and a number of options lie between the two. Violent deterrence is prominent in public discourse, from nuclear retaliation to incarceration and capital punishment to corporal punishment for children. People using or advocating one subform of deterrence sometimes think that they are choosing the only viable option. Nonviolent deterrence, however, are also an important element of social action at all levels.

We are continually deterred from acting out our aggressions for nonviolent reasons; perhaps some parents never think of hitting their children, but most are at least tempted to do so. If they are deterred, it is not from fear of violent retaliation (although elementary school children are now arming themselves), but rather because they do not wish to harm those whom they love. Similarly, nations are often deterred from aggression by fear of retaliation; but they are also deterred by historical bonds, cultural ties, and even personal relations between heads of state.

It is helpful to explore the varied strategies we now use, as well as those we could develop, to deter individuals and groups, beginning with the most popular macrolevel deterrence: the threat of violence. A violent deterrence is a cost-imposing strategy aimed at coercing an opponent with threats of injury, whether on an interpersonal or an international level, in order to scare them into refraining from taking certain actions. Superficially, it seems a simple matter, yet even a violent deterrence relies on a complex combination of trust and distrust, previous and potential rewards and sanctions, and a context of social organization and psychological motivations that sustain the deterrent effect.

According to mainstream theories of strategic nuclear deterrence, officials of the United States and the former Soviet Union deterred each other with threats of retaliation with nuclear weapons, the possibility of escalation, and potential annihilation. Although sometimes touted as an alternative to trusting an evil enemy, this subform of deterrence relies on a fundamental trust that the opponent will perceive the threat as credible and act on it in a dependable manner. It does no good to threaten someone who does not understand a threat, believe that it is real, and act on that belief.

The threat of nuclear war as a violent deterrence strategy at the macrosocial level relies primarily on sanctions, but rewards are an
element of this subform as well. Sometimes the rewards are explicit, as in military aid or the withholding of sanctions (one nation may reward another’s behavior by not engaging in violence against it, such as not using air strikes over Sarajevo). At other times, the rewards are paradoxical or unintended: Soviet and U.S. elites often benefited from their adversarial relationship during the Cold War, so that the very existence of a threat helped to bolster the power of the military sector, provide the rationale for expended military budgets, and so forth.

Although not as well developed as violent strategies—and certainly not as well funded—more nonviolent deterrent mechanisms are used at the microlevel as well. Economic boycotts and the withdrawal of special relations, such as most favored nation trade status, may be used as sanctions, whereas increased trade, aid, and other benefits are used as rewards designed to induce deterrence.

At microsocial levels, violent deterrence strategies include the use of threats to inflict injury or, at the most extreme, to kill someone who engages in prohibited behavior, such as corporal punishment or spouse beating in the family, gang retaliation in the community, and many elements of the criminal justice system at the community and national levels: armed police patrols, incarceration, and the death penalty. Rewards are also part of microlevel violent strategies, primarily as promises not to injure someone. Here, too, some effects are somewhat paradoxical. Certain parties in the illicit drug trade, for example, earn profit and status precisely because the illegality of drugs and the threat of violence against the sellers increase the market costs many times beyond the direct production and distribution costs, producing enormous profits that would not exist if the substances were available legally.

Less violent strategies are ubiquitous in microlevel social processes, again implemented by means of both sanctions and rewards. A withdrawal of interaction or affection is a common example of a nonviolent sanction. Anyone who has been shunned, exiled, or divorced may even argue that such tactics may be experienced as violent. They can cause considerable harm, not only from psychological pain, but also from other kinds of injury such as a potential decline in one’s economic and social status and opportunities for employment. Such tactics are clearly less violent than incarceration or capital punishment, however, and demonstrate the importance of viewing deterrent strategies along a continuum, rather than as absolutely violent or nonviolent.

At the most nonviolent end of the continuum are those microlevel deterrent strategies that cultivate friendly or loving relationships with other individuals: gift giving, affection, and praise for
other people. These rewards in and of themselves serve as a deterrent in many instances, although they are linked to the possibility of their being withdrawn.

Macrolevel deterrence theory faced its most serious challenge in the 1980s when nuclear war fighting strategies became the subject of major political controversy worldwide. Any threat deterrence relies on convincing one's adversary that the threat is credible, and the idea of nuclear retaliation became increasingly problematic, especially in light of nuclear winter theory that argued that even a modest nuclear exchange could destroy the earth's ecosystems. Many people in the nuclear states became convinced that using nuclear weapons would destroy those who launched the weapons as well as any target populations, thus undermining the possibility that the weapons would ever be deliberately detonated.

Ironically, U.S. President Ronald Reagan undermined confidence in the nuclear deterrent system by insisting in the earlier 1980s that nuclear wars could be fought and won or lost, that the United States must double its military budget, and that deterrence was a fragile phenomenon: "Either deterrence works perfectly forever or it fails utterly," he claimed. Reagan's critique was designed to support the need for the Star Wars defense system, but it inadvertently underscored the same fundamental doubts being expressed elsewhere. Even more significant was Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's endorsement of the Common Security principle long advocated by the peace movement: No one (and no nation) is secure unless everyone (and all nations) are secure. Popular discontent with military deterrence reached the elites.

The assumptions behind theories of nuclear deterrence had been questioned from the beginning of the nuclear age: first, that nuclear weapons could be used to deter in the same manner as conventional weapons; second, that actors act rationally and perceive messages sent and received in the same manner; third, that a nuclear war can be limited and either won or lost like any other war; and fourth, that national interests are worth the risk of nuclear war. Nuclear winter theory and widespread public debate about these issues underscored those problems with nuclear deterrence strategies so profoundly that by the end of the 1980s even most people at the Pentagon and Kremlin did not believe one could fight and win a nuclear war, thus making the threat of nuclear attack or retaliation somewhat empty for the purposes of deterrence.

A debate about violent deterrence in the 1990s in the wake of the Cold War has some parallels with the debate over nuclear deterrence in the previous decade. This occurs when mainstream political
discourse focuses on threats to security from ethnic violence (e.g., in former Yugoslavia and other Soviet bloc nations, India, Ireland, and the United States) and other forms of increased violence in urban areas, from youth gangs to organized crime. Although the conventional wisdom still calls for increased violence against criminals and so-called deviant groups, minority voices that question the efficacy of violent deterrence now have a place in the debates from which they were previously excluded.

What do we know about how the process of deterrence works? First, behavioral psychologists suggest that the most effective way to influence behavior is by means of a random positive reinforcement, that is, the use of rewards in such a way that actors will anticipate being rewarded for engaging in certain behaviors and avoiding others. This practice may be more effective, at least at the microlevel, than punishing undesired behavior in hopes of deterring its further occurrence. Similar conclusions might be drawn from efforts to control crime and military aggression through punishment. In the United States during the past ten years, both overall crime rates and incarceration rates have been generally on the rise. The number of inmates in state and federal prisons increased between 1980 and 1990 by 168 percent (from 350,000 to 883,000). The consequence has been not a reduction in the crime rate, but a call for tougher sentences and increased spending on police.

Some criminologists suggest that two components of punishment are significant in deterring crime: severity and certainty. The most important deterrent may be certainty of punishment, which is reduced by increased severity, since the costs of inflicting the punishment generally increase with its severity. This has some interesting implications for deterring violence across the board, because less violent sanctions may be more readily applied and therefore more certain.

We may not be very sophisticated in our understanding of how deterrence works, despite practicing it daily. What is most puzzling about the contemporary deterrence theories implied by public policy in most parts of the world, however, is that they so often contradict what little we do know about how the process works. To put it bluntly, our policies tend to be crude, unidimensional, and, above all, violent.

The erosion of confidence in nuclear deterrence at the macrolevel, and the growing criticism of violence in the family and community at the microlevel, raise the possibility that new forms of nonviolent deterrence might be implemented. There is no empirical evidence, despite its popularity, that a "get-tough" policy on crime has a deterrent effect. Crime rates have not been reduced by the
dramatic increase in incarceration in the United States, which leads the world with a rate of 455 incarcerated per 100,000, compared to 45 in Japan, 81 in France, and 97 in England. At the macrolevel, the formation of a large military seems, ironically, to increase the probability of a country's going to war, perhaps because larger military spending and aggressive foreign policies go hand in hand, and perhaps because such powers convey a threat to their neighbors that provokes rather than deters attack.

For most thoughtful people, the critique of violence makes sense; the question that lingers is: What is the alternative? No one knows the horrors of violent conflict more than those members of the armed forces who have engaged in combat or those police officers who patrol the worst urban neighborhoods. The problem of how to deter an aggressor, if not through superior force, remains unsolved. The major problem with violent tactics is that they may provoke a proliferation of weapons and an escalation of violence, undermining the purpose for which they were created.

The primary problem with nonviolent deterrent strategies is that they appear weak and untested. Most of us are convinced that nonviolence is a good idea, when possible, but that violence is ultimately necessary in extreme situations. If we are really serious about something, we feel compelled to declare war on it. "Why doesn't someone do something about Serbian aggression in Sarajevo?" usually means "Why don't we stop using diplomacy and embargoes and start bombing or send in the troops?"

Most of the nineteenth-century Western intellectuals who founded the modern social sciences were convinced that the progress of humankind would result in the gradual elimination of war. As humans became more rational, they would become less violent. Unfortunately, the twentieth century has produced the militarization of all levels of social organization, so that the largest single bloc of capital available for any activity in many countries is the military budget. The institutions of modern life are so structured that it is almost impossible to expect nonviolent solutions to be imposed on large-scale conflicts.

It is no accident, however, that new paradigms of conflict emerged in history's bloodiest century, growing out of nonviolent movements mobilized by Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others. These paradigms and their related strategies for nonviolent struggle have been elaborated in the new wave of pro-democratic movements in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

There have been experiments in nonviolent direct action in the Philippines and Chile, amidst the Palestinian opposition and their
Israeli allies, and in the prodemocracy movements of China, Burma, Taiwan, Thailand, Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union. Along with the systematization of nonviolent strategies for deterrence provided by Gene Sharp and others, these experiments provide an entirely different context for rethinking how deterrence strategies could be implemented. In nonviolent deterrence—as in nonviolent struggle—the doer is distinguished from the deed, as Gandhi put it. Undesirable behavior is denounced, but its perpetrators are humanized as a way of enhancing nonviolent deterrence.

Not surprisingly, the idea of nonviolent deterrence emerged originally as a bottom-up movement from people of color who knew all too well the violence of the system that oppresses, sometimes overtly through crude violence and sometimes more subtly with a veneer of civility that only thinly disguises the system's fundamental violence. What Vaclav Havel calls "the power of the powerless" comes not from superior weaponry, but from the collective ability to resist even the most powerful and violent of social structures.

For most people, the idea of a nonviolent deterrent sounds like a strategy that should be confined to nurseries and monasteries. Since we lack any convincing comparative database for making accurate comparisons of violent and nonviolent means, and since the burden of proof still seems to be on advocates of nonviolence, we should examine experiments with nonviolent deterrence in more detail. Note the social dynamics of two anecdotal examples. Paula Rogge, a Quaker physician, who moved into an economically deprived neighborhood a few years ago, had her house burglarized three times shortly thereafter. Convinced that the burglaries were carried out by neighbors, she held an open house and invited them all to the party. The break-ins stopped altogether.

In Manila and Moscow (in 1986 and 1991), nonviolent resisters to authoritarian governments won over the troops dedicated to their respective regimes. The soldiers, who were treated with respect and given gifts by the demonstrators, discussed the purpose of the resistance and eventually refused to follow orders to suppress the opposition. In each instance, the anticipated superiority of violent deterrent strategies were overcome by the nonviolent actions of people of courage who refused to be deterred.

Both conservatives and liberals in the United States criticize Attorney General Janet Reno when she talks about the importance of child care and economic opportunities for young people as a way to promote long-term crime prevention. Perhaps the liberals might concede that Attorney General Reno is right in the long run, but her task at the moment is to get the criminals off the streets and stop the
violence in the cities and schools that threaten "good law-abiding citizens" (i.e., voters). She should concentrate on how best to punish or get rid of criminals, many would say; concern about day care and economic development in deprived neighborhoods belongs elsewhere and is irrelevant to the task of the "Justice" Department. If successful deterrence strategy is perceived as something more than simply a matter of making violent threats and then following through with sanctions when deterrence fails, we might find our deterrence strategies more successful. In a world system armed to the teeth not just at the periphery, but also (perhaps especially) at the core, and with a downward proliferation of weapons into spheres where people who used to fight with fists and knives are now using guns, we can ill afford not rethinking how to deter people from using violence to settle conflicts or to obtain that which they do not have.

Moreover, we must acknowledge the violence of a system that prevents large portions of the population from maintaining even minimal living standards while a privileged few live in luxury. Such a system provokes violence at both the top and the bottom, as those with wealth fight to keep their positions and those without struggle for survival. One caveat is in order regarding nonviolent deterrence: It is less effective than violent deterrence in preventing rebellions among discontented and oppressed sectors of a local, national, or global system.

Deterrence, in short, is a complex form of interaction that requires negotiation among conflicting parties over resources and the use of sanctions and rewards to influence others. We will coexist more peacefully in a crowded global village, and perhaps make it more just, if we move from violent toward nonviolent sanctions, and from imposing sanctions toward offering rewards. From the top to the bottom of the social order, our current approach to deterrence creates structural pressures toward pursuing violent solutions to resolve conflict, but the path of violence is a dead end.

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