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## Commentary: Everyday Violence Against Children

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When we speak of violence as a “culture”, we cannot, surely, be focusing mainly on the current statistics of violent crime. Despite the high visibility of acts of murder, and despite our understandable preoccupation with this danger, it is a fact that people who shoot and stab and chop up other humans beings make up a very small percentage of the population.

We could, perhaps, choose to see those people as belonging to a *sub*-culture, and that would neatly separate them from the rest of us, the righteous citizenry. But the culture of violence includes all of us, whether or not we have ever shot or chopped up anybody.

Moreover, the high incidence of violent crime, or violence clearly recognized as criminal, is a recent phenomenon; but the culture of violence was there all the time. The fact that it was always part of us might help to explain how it was so easy for an element of the population to jump up, seemingly out of nowhere, and start dispensing the kind of unthinking, remorseless violence that we are witnessing today.

These manifestations cannot be separated from something more deep-seated that inhabits the whole society. The culture of violence cannot be defined only by outrageous acts of violence committed in the public sphere. I would like to locate that culture in a more

intimate space, and to identify it as a long-standing acceptance of violence as a normal, even necessary part of everyday human interaction.

The culture of violence in the context of the Caribbean may have something to do with unprocessed historical experience. I would like to quote a few lines from an article of mine published 35 years ago, “The Shadow of the Whip”<sup>1</sup>, in a collection edited by Orde Coombs: *Is Massa Day Dead*. The central concern of this article is “the legacy of violence and disruption with which our society has never adequately come to terms” (111).

Caribbean society was born out of brutality, destructiveness, rape: the destruction of the Amerindian peoples, the assault on Africa, the forced uprooting and enslavement of the African; the gun, the whip, the authority of force. Yet the Caribbean today is not particularly noted for any large-scale, organized violence...But the violence of our history has not evaporated. It is still there. It is there in the relations between adult and child, between black and white, between man and woman. It has been internalized: it has seeped down into our personal lives. (111)

For me, the most important manifestation of this internalized violence is our profound commitment to the use of physical and verbal violence in the socialization of children. I focus on this feature of our social reality because it is so pervasive. The majority of our people believe in the efficacy of corporal punishment for the successful upbringing of children. It is part of the national ideology, whereas the majority of us dissociate ourselves from other forms of violence against the person; that is to say that we frown on the phenomenon of men beating women (for that is domestic violence), or adults beating up adults (for that is assault and battery); but adult men and women beating children is all right, for that is discipline.

In 1999 the group Women Working for Social Progress (Workingwomen) intensified its advocacy for the removal of corporal punishment, mounting a campaign, in the first instance, against its use in the schools. As part of that campaign, we lobbied the Ministry of Education and met with the then incumbent Minister of Education Ms. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, to recommend, among other things, changes to the Education Act and the Children Act.

The latter document gives written permission to adults to do whatever they want with children in their care, in the name of punishment. At the end of a section of the Children

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<sup>1</sup> Hodge, Merle, “The Shadow of the Whip: A Comment on Male-Female Relations in the Caribbean.” in *Is Massa Day Dead?* ed. Orde Coombs. (New York: Doubleday, 1974).

Act, headed PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PERSONS, there is a clause which reassures the population as follows:

Nothing in this Part shall be construed to take away or affect the right of any parent, teacher, or other person having the lawful control or charge of a child or young person to administer reasonable punishment to such child or young person.<sup>2</sup>

Ms Kamla Persad-Bissessar took the extremely bold step of having this section amended by the following insertion:

Reasonable punishment referred to in sub-section (1), in relation to a teacher, does not include corporal punishment.<sup>3</sup>

Other amendments were made to the Children Act to bring our treatment of children closer to what is required by international conventions.

Both Ms Persad-Bissessar, and her successor, Ms Hazel Manning, are to be commended for having the courage of their convictions with regard to the use of corporal punishment, in the face of retrograde opinions to the contrary—people calling for the Ministry to “bring back the strap” (as if it ever went anywhere).

Very instructive was the response of many teachers to the outlawing of corporal punishment. It was a response of extreme dismay—as though the ground had been cut from under them. It became clear that there were teachers who saw their relationship with children as based almost entirely on the teacher’s power to dispense violence. With no whip hanging overhead, how was a teacher now to operate?

In this matter there are few who are qualified to cast the first stone, and I am certainly not intending to be judgemental or self-righteous here. When I was a student I went to work in a children’s home in Denmark. It was a home for children who, because of experiences in their early childhood, presented marked behavioural difficulties. These children were a real challenge—they did everything in the book of “bad behaviour”. To my consternation, however, nobody was beating them! NO LICKS! I argued with the people running the home: why don’t you beat these children when they misbehave? I thought these people had to be crazy. Who ever heard of bringing up children without beating them?

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<sup>2</sup> *Laws of Trinidad and Tobago*, Chapter 46:01, Clause 22.

<sup>3</sup> *Act No. 68 of 2000: An Act to amend the Children Act, Chapter 46:01*. Clause 10A.

This was more than 40 years ago, just to debunk one of the common arguments flying about in the corporal punishment debate. There are people who argue that the movement against corporal punishment is just a case of people trying to copy new-fangled psychological theories from America.

There is also a tendency to put down a firm, bold line between child-beating and child abuse, so that we can express outrage at, for example, newspaper reports of toddlers being beaten to death. There have been all too many cases in recent years that have come to public attention—babies, one-year-olds or two-year-olds beaten to death by their caregivers for doing things that are characteristic of children in their age-group, such as wetting their beds or crying when they are hungry.

When these things happen, there is an outpouring of righteous anger from people who have no problem at all with the child being hit—“but you don’t have to hit it so hard”. That is like George Bush condemning the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by the occupation forces, as though all the other violence they were doing to the people’s country was not abuse. Who can guarantee that approved violence will not move from one level to another?

Then there is the proud boast “But we get licks and we okay”. Or, “I get plenty licks when I was small, and I thank my schoolteachers for that, because look at where I am today. Look at how well I have done.”

Indeed, the Minister of Education who preceded Ms Persad-Bissessar, responded with a statement like that when he was asked for a comment on something that had taken place in a primary school. A little boy had been severely beaten and injured by a teacher who accused the child of scratching his car. When asked by a television reporter for a comment on the incident, that Minister of Education replied with words to the effect that he himself had been beaten in school, and that it had made him the achiever that he was.

We were beaten but we are okay? To reveal that physical pain was inflicted upon you regularly over a period of several years, and that it was a *good* thing, is the first sign that you are not “okay”.

We may not recognize how it has affected each of us individually, but there is one phenomenon in our country that I think is a result of our having been socialized by violence. Consider the immense popularity of the most abusive talk-show hosts in our country. People lap up the abuse. Radio stations feed off it; management is unable to make the moral decision not to indulge the collective masochism. When they try to pull the abusers off the air, there is an outcry. And, significantly, these on-the-air abusers

often boast about how much they were beaten as children. If that whole syndrome is not mental illness, then I do not know what is.

Child-beating is not only the major symptom of the culture of violence. It is also the method of its transmission from generation to generation. I believe that because our earliest experiences in life include violence directed at us by the people who are closest to us and who love us, our caregivers, there are to be found among us some behaviours and attitudes that are not particularly healthy, and which are part of the culture of violence.

Think of how readily a person may resort to violence against another person in response to the mildest aggravation or perceived affront. An automatic response is a slap, and in modern times the slap too often leads to murder. Over the past few years, simple disagreements over a card game, a hat, a drink, a few dollars, have moved swiftly from argument to physical assault, followed by shooting, or stabbing, or chopping to death.

Look at three simple incidents that took place in the first five months of 2004: there was a police officer alleged to have slapped a young man who may have bumped into him at a party; there was a security guard alleged to have slapped a young woman suspected of shoplifting in a store; and there was a young man alleged to have slapped a security guard who warned him about smoking marijuana in a mall. Each of these three incidents graduated to a more extreme act of violence, and in two of the three cases, death.

Such incidents only become public knowledge when they develop into murder or wounding, but the starting-point is an everyday occurrence: a grown person dispensing instant physical punishment to another, because that is how we are conditioned by our early caregivers to respond to irritation or frustration. Not only did our caregivers slap us when we made them *damn vex*. They also strongly exhorted us *not to take no lash* from another child, and to hit back without delay.

Most of us, of course, have sufficient restraint not to actually lash out physically when other adults upset us, and the alternative, verbal abuse, is a fine art in our culture. The point is that as individuals we are ill equipped by our upbringing to settle conflict or deal with anger by peaceful, rational means; and that as a nation we can think of no other approach to solving the problem of violence than the punitive approach—retaliation. When you catch them, beat them, hang them. The remedy popularly advocated for juvenile crime is to give young offenders more of the violent punishment that predisposed them to violence in the first place.

Yes, previous generations were beaten left, right and centre (or “back, belly and side” as my grandmother used to say) and they did not grow up to be gun-men; but what was the

environment when they were growing up? For one thing, the guns were not so readily available for use in settling scores.

There are factors in the environment today that have made it more likely for our latent culture of violence to explode into public violence. Things like the forms of entertainment that are packed with gratuitous images of violence; the undermining of community and family networking that robs the individual person of material and emotional support in times of economic hardship; the cutting back of our social services that took place in the era of IMF/World Bank Structural Adjustment; and the cultivation of consumerist tastes that must be satisfied by any means necessary.

In such an environment we cannot continue to support violence in the home and in the school. We have to make a strong commitment to creating a climate of peace. This will require, among other things, that we change our treatment of offenders, especially young offenders, and that we spread education on how to bring up children without violence. We will not be rid of the culture of violence until the people who have responsibility for the socialization of children can be persuaded, and equipped, to work at fostering self-discipline in them rather than beating them into submission.