
Commentary

The politics and economics of murder

It is no coincidence that our murder rates in Britain have returned to levels of the mid-Victorian period (Reiner, 2007, page 108) just as our economic inequalities are moving in the same direction (Hunt, 2007). Murders are still as rare as a private financier paying their fair share of tax, but both acts are illustrative of a wider malaise.

This is a malaise that does not afflict many other rich nations as severely as Britain. The wider symptoms of the malaise are demonstrated by a very high prevalence of low level violence, and the widespread acceptance of selfish individualistic behaviour that is socially pathological. However, the possibility that this malaise may be abating slightly is evident in some of the most recent social statistics and there is no mandate that decrees we need continue to rush back either towards the Victorians' murder rate or their economic inequality rates.

True, Britain currently leads the international league table of child poverty, just beating other close contenders at the statistical finishing post thanks to our children bullying each other more than any others do (UNICEF, 2007). Simultaneously, as our poverty levels reach new highs, the British middle class en masse go out of their way to avoid paying some of the smallest of their potential taxes (Karstedt and Farral, 2007). Through this behaviour the well-off are mimicking their almost infinitely better-off more-affluent equivalents, but far less successfully. The tax 'burden' as a whole has risen, despite attempts by so many to avoid paying. The middle classes still pay the largest bulk of taxes, if not the highest relative proportions. Those above them pay less.

So what has this to do with murder? With a few anomalies, internationally, rates of murder are highest in the more economically unequal countries (Reiner, 2007 page 106). If the killing abroad which is attributable to their armed forces is added to killing at home (those murders occurring in the home country) then in recent years the rates of killing by Americans and Britons are comparable with those in South Africa (figure 1). These are rates amongst the highest in the world. Killing remains killing whether carried out at home or overseas, in uniform or not. The blame for killing, though, cannot lie solely with the individual (neither those killings carried out abroad nor at home). We all play a part in the process that makes some people more likely to kill than others, if sometimes only through paying our taxes.

English-speaking nations feature particularly highly in the world league table when poorer countries are excluded. Include the poorest of nations and rates similar to South Africa's are found in Sierra Leone, Angola, El Salvador, and Russia. These are countries often also associated with war or war-like conditions. The line between murder, war, and collateral damage is meaningless for those killed, but affects all these states and also the high rates in Colombia, Liberia, and Somalia (http://www.worldmapper.org/textindex/text_violence.html). Murder rates in all the countries just listed are roughly one hundred times higher than those found in Iceland, Japan, France, and Germany. There is no natural level of murder. It is mostly a product of the circumstances in which both victim and perpetrator find themselves.

However, before you fear the stranger and the social forces that generate violence remember that there is also a very personal politics to killing. Both at home and increasingly abroad; the person most likely to kill you remains yourself (ibid). World-wide, suicides account for almost twice as many deaths as recorded murders, and the

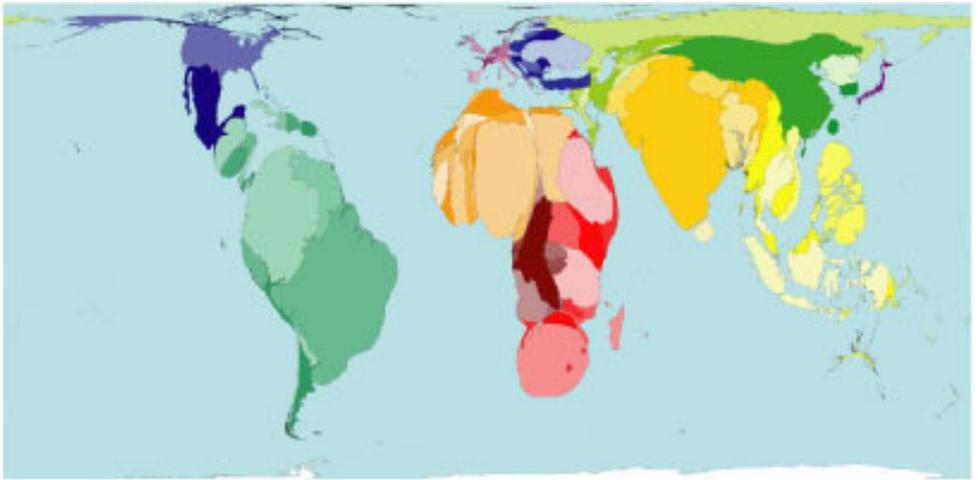


Figure 1. [In colour online, see <http://dx.doi.org/10.1068/a40425>] Murders, manslaughter, and 'lawful homicide by territories of the world, 2002. The areas of countries are drawn in proportion to murders there (excluding war deaths). Colours simply differentiate nation-states.

real ratio is probably far higher. As increasing numbers of people are finding themselves destitute in the world, a new epidemic of self-killing is slowly being uncovered [associated both with increased immiseration and increased access to lethal pesticides (see Gajalakshmi and Peto, 2007)].

Simultaneously, the voices asking who is really responsible for the self-poisoning deaths of impoverished farmers in the poorest countries of the world are becoming louder, as is the growing clamour that we can better apportion responsibility for the bulk of premature mortality worldwide to social harm (Bauman, 2006, page 100; Dorling et al, 2007).

In Britain you are roughly ten times more likely to kill yourself than be killed by anyone else, but if you are murdered it will most probably be by someone you know. And, especially if you are a child, very possibly by someone who loves you. Young men are most often killed by their drunken friends in fights.

Murders are mostly not the stuff of the detective novel. They are not the well-planned outcomes of wicked plots, clinically executed, but are mostly the product of the mess we are making of our lives. Murders hardly ever occur when (and where) in the best of times (and places) folk are not put into murderous circumstance. Then (and there) fewer than one person in each quarter of a million of us dies each year due to another's 'direct' intent. Given the hundred-fold variations in murder rates both between and within countries, a criminal justice system obsessed with attempting to mind read individual intent is a distraction at best to anyone wanting to know why we murder.

It is becoming clearer and clearer that harm in society—including the risk of murder—is becoming more concentrated both socially and spatially (Hillyard et al, 2005). Rates of murder in Britain are currently falling (Home Office, 2007), but it will be some years before we know if these are real falls or simply lags in cases coming to trial. It is not inevitable that all is getting worse, and other form of serious violence such as deaths caused by dangerous driving, and serious wounding have also been recorded as falling very recently. In contrast to murder, suicide rates in Britain have been falling consistently since 1998 and the rates are so high that those falls are having a great effect on how many Britons die young.

Returning to murder, it is often not recognised that rates have been falling in most places and for most groups of people for a long time. It has only been the extreme rise amongst young men in the poorest of parts of Britain that maintained the overall national increase up until at least 2001. Remember, too, that the victims of identical attacks can have improved chances of survival over time as accident and emergency procedures and response times in the UK tend to improve year on year.

In particular, a lower proportion of the victims of knife attacks die now than did even in recent years. Remember also that bar glasses which accounted for as much of a tenth of all assault injuries in the mid-1980s (Shepherd, 1998) are now more likely to be made of toughened glass; but that in the most recent years murder victim rates for young men in Britain reach unprecedented highs as the sons of those brought to the failed labour markets of the early 1980s themselves came of age around the time of the millennium (Hillyard et al, 2005).

All the detail matters, but so too do the general national and international trends that are becoming ever clearer. The number and rates of murder vary dramatically between different peoples and places and over time. It would only be the most pessimistic of commentators who would not expect the pendulum currently moving towards greater economic inequality in the UK to swing back some time soon, but for it to do so would require us all to change, from the parent paying that extra pound of tax they owe, to their child not taking that knife to school, to us being concerned over who our troops kill as much as when they are killed, to a realisation that murder is more concentrated amongst the poor in a grossly unequal world, just as it is mainly confined to the poorest of places at home. Remember, too, that it is only within many of our lifetimes that across Europe it became no longer acceptable for governments to kill their citizens as a punishment for committing certain crimes. The world map of murders includes many committed by the state on its own citizens.

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