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Title: Are We All on the M Squad? Murdering Schoolchildren in China
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Abstract: The author discusses the phenomena of violent attacks against schoolchildren in the People's Republic of China (PRC), and its relevance to political psychologists.

An article by Edward Wong in The New York Times (May 15, 2010) summarizes recent attacks against schoolchildren (as well as teachers and staff) in the People's Republic of China (PRC). The attackers are middle-aged men, although at least one incipient attack by a woman was stopped. The attackers use knives, cleavers, and other tools. The most common explanation among Western reporters for the attacks involves putative deviancies such as intense anger and frustration with a lack of personal and social success. There are intimations that the attackers are engaged in self-loathing and self-rage and may have lost self-control, although not the self-control to plan a premeditated act. Murdering precious children—in a context wherein the PRC government encourages to the point of coercion parents having only 1 child—becomes the best way to express, relieve, and, perhaps, project the intensity of anger and frustration. According to this logic, premeditated murder may be in self-defense because it's a behavioral exemplification of a defense mechanism. Psychological theories supporting such a perspective are described in Crime and Human Nature by James Wilson and Richard Herrnstein (1985) and at least partially by Sigmund Freud's Civilization and Its Discontents (1929).

The most common explanation among PRC reporters—almost always toeing a government line (see Cao Li's "Schools Learn Lessons on Safety" in the People's Daily of May 11)—involves placing putative blame not in the individual but within the society. In fact, in Wong's article, such a claim is attributed to PRC Prime Minister Wen Jiabao himself. Regardless of self-agency and self-motivation, the larger Issue is social determinism—specifically, causality stemming from a dysfunctional society. Here dysfunctional society most likely refers to groupings of relationships exacerbating tensions that might lead to increasing social disorganization, long the bane of Chinese political authorities valuing order over disorder as a means of control.

Of relevance to political psychologists is that the Chinese seem to favor the sociologist Emile Durkheim (cf. Suicide, (1897)) over the sociologist Robert Merton (cf. "Social Structure and Anomie", (1938))in that increasing pressures to challenge social morality are believed to cause rather than prevent deviancy. Also of relevance to political psychologists is the attention to social disorganization so feared for so long by Chinese political authorities and so revered by scholars from the University of Chicago's urban sociological tradition (cf. Harvey Zorbaugh's Gold Coast and Slum: A Sociological Study of Chicago's Near North Side, (1920); Louis Wirth's The Ghetto, (1928)).

Now I do not wish to leave the reader with the simplistic notion that the West is more individually oriented than the East. After all, PRC political authorities still advocate that the attacker deserves to die, and they follow through on this advocacy. On the other hand, the death sentence may have as much if not more to do with the attacker being an unwelcome indicator of social failing as opposed to the apotheosis of individual pathology. And often enough, as in the Soviet Union of the 1950s through 1980s, a pathological individual may be defined as someone whose behavior forces unwelcome attention to social failing (cf. Psychiatric Terror (1977) by Sidney Bloch and Peter Reddaway; Dangerous

1

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Minds: Political Psychiatry in China Today and Its Origins in the Mao Era Issued by Human Rights Watch (2002)).

In fact, a close reader of such disparate explanations might radically change the question they address. Instead of attempting to explain why some people murder, one might attempt to explain why all people do not murder. In the context of mass political violence, this question already has been asked by Daniel Chirot and Clark McCauley in their Why Not Kill Them All? The Logic and Prevention of Mass Political Murder (2006). I believe this is also an implicit question in Albert Bandura's "Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement" in Walter Reich's Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind (1990) and is explicit to social control theorists explaining social deviance such as Cesare Beccaria (see Of Crimes and Punishments (1764)), Albert Reiss, Jr. (see "The Social Integration of Queers and Peers" in Social Problems (1961)), Travis Hirschi (see Causes of Delinquency (1969)),and Jack Gibbs (see Control: Sociology's Central Notion (1989)).

This question may be uncomfortable to seriously contemplate—save for some people who are labeled as psychopaths, the morally insane, or others who would be so labeled if certain of their thoughts, motives, and behaviors were identified by political authorities including credentialed clinicians. However, murder seems to have always been with us, and there have been injunctions against and exhortations towards murder throughout history. Chirot and McCauley (2006) start their text with the injunction against even seemingly justified violence from Matthew 5: 38-45—turning the other cheek, loving one's enemies. Well before Christianity, we have the vedic term ahimsa as a part of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism holding all forms of life sacred and avoiding violence. But not only have multi-cultural sophists and hermeneuticists parsed injunctions pre-hoc and post-hoc to legitimize certain types of violence, but violence has become the highest Good in cultural practices as diverse as those of Peloponnesian Sparta of the 5th century BCE, the Hashashins of what is now Iran from the 8th to the 14th centuries CE, and—in seeking dehumanization through so-called senseless violence—the Caligula of Albert Camus (1944).

By the act of murdering schoolchildren, the murderer is murdering us. This is because we were schoolchildren. This is because many of us have, have had, or will have schoolchildren as parts of our respective families and communities, and our families and communities are a part of us. This is because many of us nurture self-images that deny the potential to murder schoolchildren, yet one of us has done just that and, thus, murdered a part of our self-image. Because the murderer has murdered, we must murder the murderer so that the murderous part of us is physically no longer and mentally but a memory of an other.

But, of course, in murdering the murderer we have become one. This is an argument for the censorship of murderous information on which the self is partially founded and detests. This is an argument for the mass depictions of murder especially through television, film, and online on which the self is partially founded and craves. Sartre wrote that hell is other people in No Exit (1944) and he was half-right. Hell is also ourselves. (Comments may be sent to bloomr@erau.edu). (Keywords: Murder.)

2