

Thou Shalt Not Kill: A Journey into the Depths of Inhumanity

Alain Bauer

Professor of Criminology at the National Conservatory for Arts and Crafts (Paris, est. 1794)

ABSTRACT

Violence in our world is inevitable. Even when there is no war, there is violence, and this violence is returning to everyday life as the civilization of morals continues to decline in our society. Religion has taught us both that “Thou shall not kill,” but that this is *not* an absolute. Indeed, security for the preservation of mankind may also mean committing violence in the name of self-defense, in this sense, security is based in this paradigmatic violence. Security is in fact the framework of our society, it is what guarantees order and continuity between generations, it unites us. In the face of fragility, it keeps the world stable. We must therefore find a middle ground between civility and security, in order to rediscover the possibilities of genuine security for humankind.

Keywords: War, violence, peace, civil morality, security, crime, religion, order, social contract

No matarás: un viaje a las profundidades de la inhumanidad

RESUMEN

La violencia en nuestro mundo es inevitable. Incluso cuando no hay guerra, hay violencia, y esta violencia está regresando a la vida cotidiana a medida que la civilización de la moral continúa declinando en nuestra sociedad. La religión nos ha enseñado a ambos que “no matarás”, pero que esto no es absoluto. De hecho, la seguridad para la preservación de la humanidad también puede significar cometer violencia en nombre de la autodefensa; en este sentido, la seguridad se basa en esta violencia paradigmática. De hecho, la seguridad es el marco de nuestra sociedad, es lo que garantiza el orden y la continuidad entre generaciones, nos une. Frente a la fragilidad, mantiene estable al mundo. Por lo tanto, debemos encontrar un término medio entre civildad y seguridad, a fin de redescubrir las posibilidades de una seguridad genuina para la humanidad.

Palabras clave: Guerra, violencia, paz, moral civil, seguridad, crimen, religión, orden, contrato social

不可杀人：非人道的深渊之旅

摘要

暴力在我们的世界是不可避免的。即使没有战争，暴力也存在，随着道德文明在社会中不断衰落，这种暴力正在重返日常生活。宗教教导我们“不可杀人”，但这并不是绝对的。事实上，用于保护人类的安全也可能意味着以自卫的名义实施暴力，从这个意义上说，安全是建立在这种范式的暴力之上的。安全实际上是我们社会的框架，它保证了秩序和代际的连续性，把我们团结在一起。面对脆弱，它让世界保持稳定。因此，我们必须在文明和安全之间找到中间立场，以便重新发现人类真正安全的可能性。

关键词：战争，暴力，和平，公民道德，安全，犯罪，宗教，秩序，社会契约

For a long time, the exceptional news item filled conversations because of a certain absence of proximity. Now it has become the most visible expression of crimes and misdemeanors, of everyday suffering.

My previous work¹ dealt with the place of war in the human condition, its great and eternal return among the human passions that, for bad and even worse reasons, drive people to destruction.

Of course, there are periods of peace between two wars. But are these spaces, these armistices, tranquil? How is it possible to produce, at the same time, Weimar and its unbridled culture on the one hand, and the Nazi order on the other?

Do violence, criminality and delinquency ever stop? Outside the framework of their supposed but always asserted legitimacy namely national defense or the protection of “vital spaces,” “ordinary” violence populates everyday life, more or less quietly, at least until major eruptions mobilize opinion and force a swift reaction from governments.

Violence is both foundational and destructive. It gives birth and buries.

It lives in cycles and concomitances, from the very first conflict over food, a cave or cavern, a weapon, fire, a mate, or a companion.

Crime is its natural counterpart—repression, the usual response.

1 *Au commencement était la guerre*, Fayard, 2023.

Whether the police were religious or not, blasphemy, political conspiracy, adultery, homicide, theft, or any other offence that penal inventiveness might have created before evolving it, in the name of God, the king or the law, were repressed. But year after year, from successive wars to peace, the general level of violence has decreased and sensitivity to aggression has increased.² For nearly two decades, Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker has been trying, without much success, to demonstrate that violence in the world is declining. He points to the gap between feeling and reality and explains that the idea of “decivilization” has everything to do with the symptom of the opposite: the threshold of tolerance to violence would continue to fall as violence recedes.

However, over a short cycle, since the 2000s, the process of civilization of morals has reached a plateau, and has even reversed itself in some cases, returning us to the ordinary criminal violence of everyday life, and no longer only to the extraordinary violence of events (terrorism, war). The cumulative effect of these “petty” crimes and misdemeanors, this “mass delinquency,” now exceeds the exceptional peaks.

Faced with a crime that is reappearing in territories imagined as peaceful, affecting populations that thought they were preserved and protected, faced with failed or failing states, multiple and cumulative crises that never end, the expectation of security has often turned into the impulse to settle scores immediately.

Emile Durkheim, the founder of criminological science, reminded us: “Crime is observed not only in most societies of this or that species, but in all societies of all types. There is no society in which crime does not exist. It changes form, the acts which are thus qualified are not everywhere the same; but, everywhere and always, there have been men who behaved in such a way as to attract upon themselves penal repression. [...] Since the beginning of the century, statistics have provided us with a means of following the progress of criminality; and yet, it has increased everywhere. [...] In the first place, crime is normal because a society free of it is quite impossible. [...] From this point of view, the fundamental facts of criminology present themselves to us in an entirely new aspect. Contrary to current ideas, the criminal no longer appears as a radically unsociable being, as a kind of parasitic element, a foreign and unassimilable body, introduced into the bosom of society; he is a regular agent of social life.”³

We often think of the sixth commandment as the first. It is in our minds much more than in the texts.⁴ “Thou shalt not kill” appears in both versions of the

2 Steven Pinker, “Appreciating the values that have made our successes possible,” interview with Peggy Sastre, *Le Point*, September 27, 2022.

3 “Le crime, phénomène normal,” in *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique*, P.U.F., 14th edition, [1894] 1960, pp. 65-72.

4 The Ten Commandments are:
1) Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

Decalogue: Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17.

After the first five commandments, which deal with the vertical relationship between man and God, “*Thou shalt not kill*” opens a second series intended to govern the horizontal relationship between men. Already Adam, the first man, is said to have been enjoined in the Garden of Eden to observe six “laws,” the third of which forbade murder (*Shefirut Damim*) and the sixth obliged him to provide himself with laws (*al Hadinim*) and establish judges (*Dayanim*).

The prohibition of murder thus responds to the affirmation of God’s omnipotence, as if obedience to the divine were also to give rise to human civilization. “Thou shalt not kill” appears on the frontispiece of our civilized lives as an injunction, a vow, and a promise. This commandment never ceases to extend its empire, to the point of applying to the State itself, in peacetime with the abolition of the death penalty, and in wartime with international conventions. It even extends to the animal kingdom, which those who follow anti-speciesism would like to remove from the laws of nature to benefit from the often remorseful progress of our carnivorous societies.

Despite its airs of absoluteness, “Thou shalt not kill” is nevertheless neither the first nor the last word of human legislations, which know well that security is the art of relative values. Where divine life is adorable, human life is respectable, and that’s why murder is proscribed, as it was also in the seven Noahide laws that prefigure the Ten Commandments.

In the First Testament, however, killing is not totally outlawed. According to Frédéric Rognon,⁵ it would be better to translate the Hebrew expression “*lo tirtzah*” as: “Thou shalt not murder.” War, self-defense, and judicial execution are not forbidden. Sometimes even renouncing killing constitutes a serious crime, as we learn from the story of Saul, condemned to lose his kingship for imperfectly executing the command to exterminate Alamek. “Thou shalt not kill” is then understood as “Thou shalt not kill without reason,” which turns into “Thou shalt not spare without reason him whom thou must kill,” placing us at the heart of that conditionality which is the ferment of all human legislation.

Another is the leap into the absolute announced by Jesus, the future Christ

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- 2) Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.
 - 3) Thou shalt not take the name of Jehovah thy God in vain.
 - 4) Remember the day of rest, to keep it holy.
 - 5) Honor thy father and thy mother.
 - 6) Thou shalt not kill.
 - 7) Thou shalt not commit adultery.
 - 8) Thou shalt not steal.
 - 9) Thou shalt not bear false witness.
 - 10) Thou shalt not covet.

5 Professor of philosophy at the Protestant theology faculty of the University of Strasbourg; see “Tu ne tueras point,” *Humains*, no. 21, October 10, 2021.

who, in the Sermon on the Mount, will give full scope to the commandment: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies” (Matthew 5:43-44). He turns the other cheek rather than the fist. He doesn’t offer security, but the adventure of a new covenant and a New Testament, bringing together last wills and taking an entire people to witness.

But this rejection of homicide, murder, and assassination, as well as adultery, theft, false witness and, on a more moral subject, covetousness, is underpinned by the assertion of a moral stance and passes through the affirmation of order. In the same sermon, Jesus of Nazareth reminds us: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish, but to fulfill. Indeed, I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not a single letter or stroke of a letter will disappear from the law until everything has happened.”

The promise of the absolute is therefore not removed from the more relative, progressive and shifting edifice of order inherent in the world and founded on law and its evolutions; in the same way that the New Covenant, if we take care to read the texts, does not deny the old but strives to realize it, the security architecture of a society ensuring continuity in every age between one order and another, one regime and another, one paradigm and another. It is one of those deep “latencies” that allow often superficial changes to fulfill man’s aspiration to novelty without threatening his survival.

Viewed in this way, security is not the monopoly of “reactionary” or conservative forces, in whose service it would work to freeze society. Nor is it the monopoly of revolutionary or progressive forces, who willingly entrust it with the dream role of policing utopia. It is, both more humbly and more profoundly, the framework of historical continuity—not totally immobile as the reactionaries dream, nor totally malleable as the revolutionaries imagine, but oscillating, like life itself, from epoch to epoch between the lowest and the highest common denominator, holding at heart only to its perennity in time.

Cioran showed this perfectly in his reflections on utopia⁶: the Golden Age doesn’t exist in the reactionaries’ past any more than in the utopians’ future, as both strive to get out of time. Security is, strictly speaking, this descent into time of an order that is no longer transcendent, but immanent, of which man would strive to become both author and subject. In this sense, it is a work, if not the great work, of civilization.

The promise of the sermon therefore carries stability, and therefore security. But also of a rupture, which millenarians will see, will experience in the disaster and rebound of each epoch as the promise of a return to paradise lost. Or as the gradual emergence of a civilization of morals, the long journey towards the humanization of archaic societies. Indeed, in the civilization of morals, there is the

6 Notably in *Histoire et Utopie*. Gallimard, 1960.

dimension of a slow revolution, in the shadow of apparent continuities, and whose progress would be measured very precisely by the yardstick of security, whether it relates to a general environment or a particular feeling. Under these conditions, it is possible to consider security, well beyond questions of prevention and repression, as a socialization through which the human species would assert its singular domination over the planet.

This approach integrates within the same vision the conservative and revolutionary dimensions inherent in any security strategy, trying to maintain the right balances in an attempt to extract society from chaos. It also allows us to think about the cycles that seem to govern human societies, sometimes carrying them from chaos to security (*Ordo?*) in a movement of civilization, sometimes from security to chaos in a movement to abolish the norms of the moment, deemed too conservative.

In this perpetual pendulum swing, the issue of the security of people and property plays on political regimes to assert itself as one of the few constant elements in the discourse of current or future power: guaranteeing order.

Whatever the historical cycle, civilization and security are inextricably linked, whether they build on each other, or whether the crumbling of one lead to the collapse of the other. It's hardly surprising, then, that security is praised or condemned in the same terms as civilization: there is, those who despise the "police order," a latent critique of civilization, to whose preservation it contributes in a decisive way; and there is indeed, in the obsessive denunciators of insecurity, the profound anguish of seeing their civilization collapse, of which security forms the skeleton.

We must therefore accept, at the threshold of any reflection on security, that the point from which the path to clarifying debates is discovered lies precisely in the contradictory relationship between violence and civilization—a contradiction that must be understood in order to emerge from chaos or endured in order to plunge into it.

If we set out to grasp, through this contradiction, "*as with a pair of pliers*," said Simone Weil, the shifting, uncertain reality of security, then we'll be able to discern the psychological, social, economic, cultural and political forces that it moves and that move it. In *L'Enracinement*, her latest work,⁷ the philosopher asserted that "[s]ecurity is an essential need of the soul. Security means that the soul is not under the weight of fear or terror, except through the effect of a combination of accidental circumstances and for rare and short moments. Fear or terror, as enduring states of the soul, are almost deadly poisons, whether the cause be the possibility of unemployment, or police repression, or the presence of a foreign conqueror, or the expectation of a probable invasion, or any other misfortune that seems to surpass human strength."

⁷ *L'Enracinement*, Gallimard, 1949.

We'll have to identify, in the social contract, the part of security, that which we renounce and that which we gain in exchange for this renunciation; understand, in what we might call a policy or strategy of security, what holds to the injunction of "*thou shalt*" and what holds to the prohibition of "*thou shalt not*"; what has to do with the positive, the negative and the overcoming in the historical dialectic; what has to do with reaction and what has to do with revolution, in both the mechanical and the political sense.

It is by refusing to abandon contradiction in the hope of a hypothetical and sterile middle ground that we will be able to answer the decisive question: is security the civilization of violence, or the eradication of violence by civilization? In other words, is the need for security to eradicate, to integrate, or to do both, disintegrating the worst but integrating the best of that part of unfulfilled desire that drives humans to violence at the risk of death?

There would thus exist a security proper to the civilization *of* violence and a security proper to the civilization *against* violence; or again, without this opposition exactly overlapping the previous one, a collective security resting on a combination of justice and police, the modalities of which would be constructed within the framework of a social contract, and an individual security mysteriously dependent on the arbitrariness of an imminent justice.

And, faced with these four ramifications of security which can be represented by the four rivers flowing from the Garden of Eden outwards and into the uncertain world, there would be a nomadic, homeless insecurity, heir to the conflicting encounter between human and animal transhumance on the one hand, and the protective enclosure materializing aspirations to sedentariness on the other.

It is the human spirit, confronted with the instability of the world, that will operate, by projecting itself into the future or elsewhere, a form of return to unity through security. It would indeed be the common feature of all utopias (whether libertarian or egalitarian). In the perfect society that dreamers imagine, it goes without saying that security reigns and that some form of order, whether immanent in the society of equals or transcendent in the more "constructed" Fourier-type societies, is imposed. At the same time, insecurity becomes the most enervating symptom of social illness, a consequence of inequality, the disintegration of the social pact, the derangement of political representation.

To a security inhabited by the positive but condemned to a form of formal invisibility (except when it would become "oppressive") that makes its existence dubious responds an insecurity fundamentally negative but perfectly visible and for that reason obvious. And this contradiction is the source of a "right to security" whose very purpose would be to make security more tangible than insecurity, while rendering it unbearable as soon as the balance between the acceptable and the necessary is upset.

We must immediately add that such a right would have all the hallmarks of a duty and would require the citizens concerned to take hold of the conditions of their security both in terms of definition and execution and control, so as to no longer be merely its objects. We propose here to readers to seize what we have delegated; to revitalize the State, which should be nothing other than the letter of what we are the spirit of; to tirelessly pursue the humanization of humans in complete security; to rediscover the possibility of genuine security, which must rise from the mingled ashes of the ancient utopia of a world without coercion and the waking nightmare of a coercion without a world.