

Changes in Modern Japanese Social and Cultural Currents (5)

A Modern View of Violence

By Osamu Nakano

Violence as a social structural factor

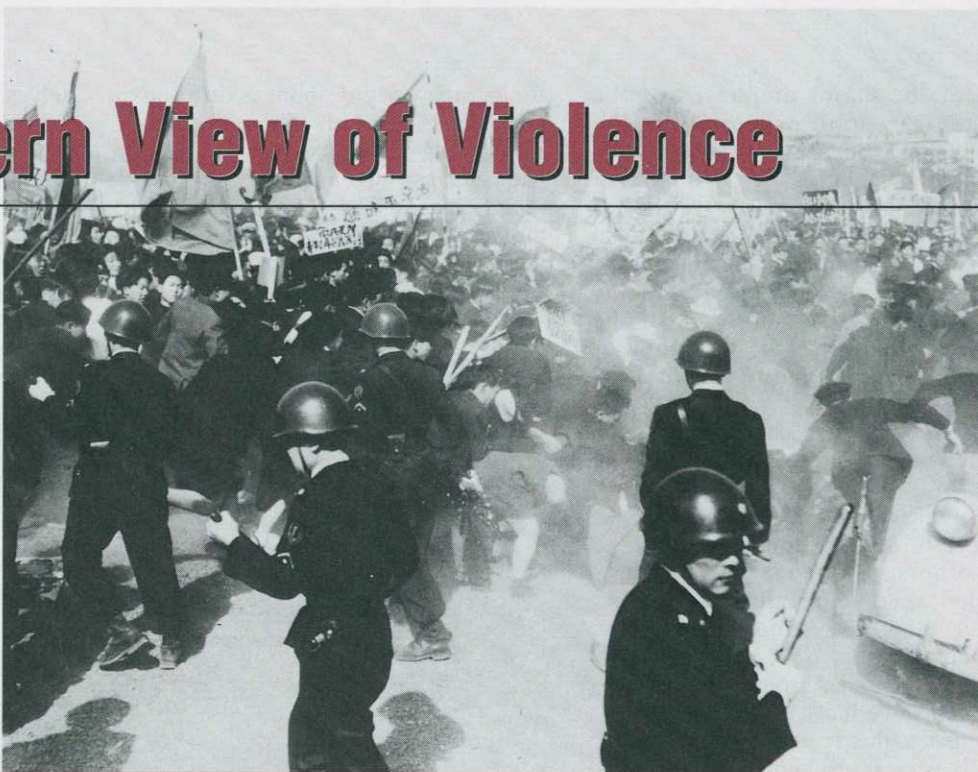
Japan's peace constitution, which renounces war, apparently has very little to do with the free use of violence during disputes and conflict within society, as many incidences of violence have accompanied the laborer disputes that appeared soon after the war ended.

For example, the site of the labor dispute was surrounded by the tanks of the occupying forces. At the site of group negotiations, clear acts of violence were committed by the workers, and violent clashes between demo units and the police were constantly seen during demonstrations.

At times of labor conflicts and elections, the word "to fight" continued to be used as a catchphrase. Then, on May Day of 1952 demo units invaded the Imperial Plaza (which the Leftists called "The People's Plaza"). Large-scale clashes were repeated between demo units and the police force, which were standing by, ready and waiting, having been informed beforehand. Police eventually fired on the crowd and wounded many demonstrators.

In 1960, the struggle against the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty and the struggle to oppose the closing of the Miike coal mine resulted in violent clashes between the anti-establishment side and the police and right-wing groups, with many more people wounded.

Then, in 1970, there were the protests by university students. As was seen in the simultaneous uprising among the young people of the developed countries, violence was exchanged between the student groups of Japan's



MAY DAY 1952: bloodshed between "demo units" and police

universities, and the administrators and riot police units. Violence reached a peak with the Asama-Sanso incident, in which leftist radicals held hostage at a certain company's resort facility near Mt. Asama, and the incident at the University of Tokyo, where radical students occupied the university auditorium. In each case, the radicals involved resisted a police crackdown, and ended up shooting, killing and wounding several police.

The internal struggles of the radical left-wing student groups around the country, (which professed to be the "New Left") were extremely gruesome at that time and in the years to follow.

I believe there were other examples of violence centering on the left-wing groups and political parties, but for the most part violence by young people fell off after their acts of rebellion in 1970.

It is a fact that a social revolution historically is accompanied by violence, and that even with a peace constitution, a physical violence mechanism is used to exert political authority. This idea was used as the basis of justification for the violence employed by the left-wing

contingent.

Although the realization of the high-growth economy and the resultant "affluent" society does not mean that the basis for justification of violence was lost, practical reasons and opportunities for its use were lost. Indeed, demonstrations by anti-establishment political parties, labor unions and other organizations were conducted "peacefully" after 1970. Putting aside the question of whether or not there is a casual relationship with the decline and fall of violence in the 1970s, incidents of armed clashes between gangs and the police became more noticeable.

Another development was the prevalence of fighting among the "bosozoku," (hot-rodgers), and their clashes with the police. Furthermore, their reckless driving is a violent infringement on the lives of ordinary citizens. Yet another development is the incidents of violence that accompany "ijime" or bullying seen among elementary and middle school students.

In the meantime, violence persists

among friends, spouses, parents and children, brothers and sisters, teachers and students, as well as strangers. These acts of violence—on a small scale, but nonetheless serious—sometimes became social crimes. The societal realities related to this type of violence can be amplified among groups, and between nations. So that in the last fifty years of the 20th century, violence accompanying disputes has persisted.

Discussions of violence usually use the following adjectives: religious, racial, national interest-oriented, historical and ideological. These epithets are merely used to “beautify” and justify violence.

Despite the discipline taken against each incident of violence, reflection, countermeasures and the fresh starts made, in the post-war period alone, given the ubiquity of violence, one is prone to think that violence is an indispensable part of human culture and that it fulfills an indispensable function or role, as if there are matters that can only be resolved by violence.

Although the social affiliation of people who use violence and the form of violence may change over time, the overall amount of violence seems to stay the same. Given that this amount is the processing of excessive or harmful substances, it makes one suspect that it plays the role of a counteragent to one's own additions, or like a catharsis. If this is the case, wouldn't it be largely inhumane to randomly deny violence? I belong to the generation that lived through the war and knows the aftermath. Parents and teachers in the prewar time and during the war used violence to discipline their children. I remember having seen “beauty” in such acts.

There are some acts that require discipline, and it is the role of parents and teachers to use violence. In such cases, children, juveniles and students agreed with the use of such violence. It must be said that violence is a part of the culture. However, what about the violent acts of *bosozoku* then? As I will explain later, even if we acknowledge that there is an intrinsic

necessity, I can't think that such an act is beautiful, nor can I allow it.

The religious cult AUM Shinrikyo frequently committed murder and other violent acts, both inside and outside the group. In the same way, although the background is understandable, the atrocity and the offensiveness of the act cannot be denied. The same can be said for the frequency with which corporal punishment is taking place in elementary and middle schools. However, on the other hand, in the midst of group living, the indispensable rules necessary for maintaining the group are ignored, and it is unimaginable how people could be unaware of the existence of the other members within the group. I think we can't deny that discipline taken against such acts is violent in some cases, and may be considered “corporal punishment.” Opposition to corporal punishment is not always a sufficient reason to deny the use of violence in punishing such acts. For this reason, it can be said that violence is also a structural part of society.

Violence as a play: *Bosozoku*

Why do the *bosozoku* drive so recklessly? This is not a response to dissatisfactions with society, displeasure or criticisms, or an expression of conscious objections.

“We're fed up. We're bored, so we make trouble. It's because society's boring, and the police are boring that we're fed up. They really irritate us. We should be able to let off steam like that about once a month,” is what they say to justify their action. That is to say, they are not conscious or aware of the social significance of speeding. They speed simply because they are fed up. This disgust is ultimately the consequence of their having flunked out of Japan's current standardized educational system of elementary, junior and senior high school.

Apart from whether this education is sufficiently lax or not, the Ministry of Education recently announced it would shift part of the junior high school math curriculum concerning quadratic equations (the solving of quadratic

equations and the handling of discriminants) to the senior high school curriculum. Hearing this, I couldn't help but laugh. I don't know what the educators of mathematics will say.

However, there is a vast difference among individuals in their ability to understand mathematics as a logical structure. There are many people who do not understand secondary functions and higher mathematics. These people will probably never understand these subjects. Of course, it is not necessary that they understand, nor is their lack of understanding due to insufficient study. Therefore, just because that subject is transferred to the high school curriculum does not mean they will understand.

It's foolish to believe that the problem would be resolved by transferring quadratic equations to the high school curriculum. If the educators on the advisory board in question really believe this then this is too comical. It's natural that a certain percent of the people won't understand, but if you decide that everyone must understand, and then criticize those who don't, then it's natural that there will be a large number who can't keep up. It's also a natural development that they'll leave school and roam the cities.

Our “wealthy society” warmly accepts these dropouts and provides a large number of devices and mechanisms in urban areas for them to comfortably enjoy their leisure. It is understandable that some of these dropouts will look for enjoyment in speeding with the *bosozoku*.

Schools make a point of teaching students that equality, liberty, and individuality are good. They also teach that what feels good is good, and that realizing one's urges and desires is moralistically good. On the other hand they grade students while saying that they are equal, and force them to prepare for entrance exams while proclaiming that immediate gratification of one's desires is good.

Given this, if we allow that speeding is pleasurable, then it is good, and there is no basis to deny their freedom to pursue this. In short, postwar education

has taught that it's alright to drive recklessly, even if it causes some nuisance to others. To teach students to think of the general public or others is a step backwards to prewar moral training. The majority of public opinion was that Japanese traditions like strong group orientation and worrying about how one appears to others should be abandoned. Even today, the Japanese psyche is criticized for putting emphasis on appearances.

If this is the case, the postwar Japanese society, on a deeper level, may actually be allowing the *bosozoku*, who do what they want to do ignoring the public eye, to create a disturbance. This may be the reason why they persist despite the criticism.

They ignore road rules and all kinds of road signs, infringing on the freedom of other drivers and threatening those dwelling along these roads with their noise. This, in itself, is an act of violence. The violent act, itself, sometimes brings a feeling of pleasure to the one doing it. The amount of pleasure is sometimes also great. The good feeling, and the moral and ethical good is not clearly distinguished. However, given the conscious uniformity of the view that comes from our society moralistic mentality, we have to condone this violence.

Once a violent act is understood to be pleasurable, it is natural that the aspect of violence will escalate. *Bosozoku* will equip themselves with pipes and chains, without any reason, will have armed clashes with other groups, and will eventually target the ones with the more powerful weapons, the police. At this point, a small war results, almost resembling the warring and fighting of different troops the Sengoku-Jidai (Warring States period in Japanese history). Whether one wins or loses, and injuries aside, this appears to be the most pleasurable of all. Generals in the Warring States period wore things that could only serve to obstruct body movement. In the same way, the *bosozoku*, in their fights, wear the group name or a symbol mark embroidered, words like "respect," and "patriotism," using such right-wing

terminology and sometimes even sexual symbols on their special fighting clothes, and may even brandish a battle flag like the Japanese flag or an arrangement of old gang flags when fighting.

In addition, these people create a flood of incomprehensible symbols in their surroundings, (like special sunglasses, for example). This method of using an unclear symbol for the violence has been a longtime custom. Certainly, with a symbol, brutal and inhumane acts are neutralized, and it appears that the pleasure is intensified.

Consider the expression of the right-wing youth who attacked a column of young actresses participating in a demonstration against the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty in the 1960s. Think of the proud expressions of students who attacked and wounded university professors—those students who created a group called "Zenkyoto," but were really only carrying out the attacks out of private grudges—during the time of the student uprisings in the 1970s. Then, imagine the expressions of the hot-rodders as they violently force other cars off the road and scare pedestrians, taking control of the road.

The expressions of these three flicker with the pleasure gotten from sadistic cruelty. Above all else, each of these has as their main aim the fulfilling their own personal desires. Given that viewed from any perspective, there is no particular social meaning, these were acts of terrorism aimed at individuals or society. These people are intoxicated by their own sadistic acts, and they give no thought to the targets of their violence, the victims, and their feelings and bodies, nor their heartache or pain. The victim is a "transparent existence," not a human being. In that sense, this is the form of violence characteristic to the affluent society, or the climax of modernization.

At the expressway terminal, the final destination for the *bosozoku*, are deposited the souped-up cars they drive. These are the physical objects they no longer need. Oversized trash. The disposal of garbage does not concern them. That is the role of

society, the role of the adults. For them, their only role is to just walk away. The full view of this final destination says a lot about their reckless driving, and violence in society in general.

Identity and violence: Aum Shinrikyo

In the modern value system, the meaning of the individual's existence, survival, or even life, itself, is not objectively validated. Rather, affixing that type of meaning must be done by oneself. This is the principle of the modern time. Moreover, the modern age is a homocentric one. That is to say, it is too much trouble to validate the meaning of life. As evidence of this, despite the excess of religious and philosophical explanations on the meaning of life, there exists no single answer. Even the Buddha writhed in agony trying to find an answer to this question. Therefore, I feel it is quite inhumane to ask one to immediately come up with an answer to this question.

In the same way, the sharing of the same values—in other words the absolutism of value—has been denied (as impossible) in modern times. However, people look for not only meaning, but a reason for living. Therefore, under the control of the agnosticism and relativism of modern times, demand is created for "meaning" and the "search for meaning" and the "discovery (creation) of meaning."

In the face of such demand, suppliers appear. As a result, it is not unusual that there would be a "product exchange." This phenomenon, at one extreme, is the new religions. Taken to another extreme, it is the cultist organizations. Yet another extreme is the "self-realization(improvement) seminar." Because the background for all these is the culture of the modern time, they follow multiple-product small-lot production system. Therefore, the three are all multiple in number, or multiple realities.

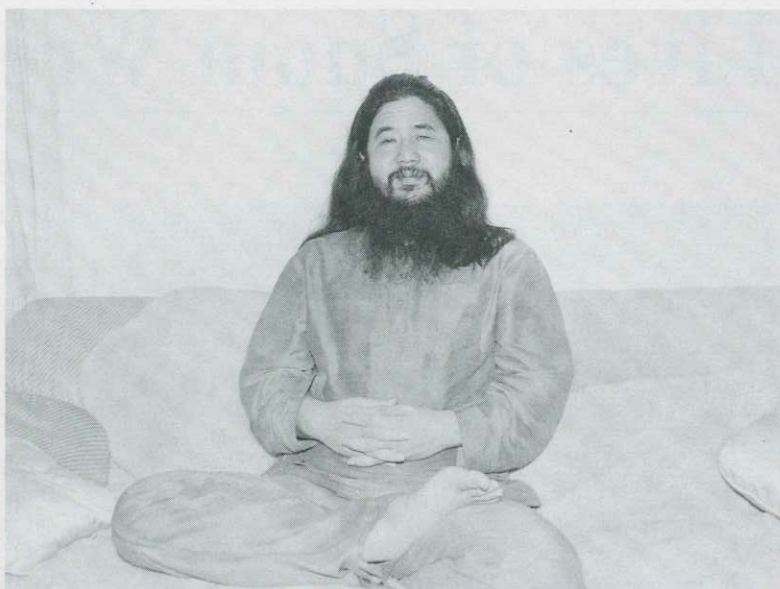
AUM Shinrikyo appears to respond to all three demands (transcendental value,

human bonds and self-improvement). AUM indeed had developed a splendid marketing program to provide this illusion. It is hard for me to understand how religious scholars and social scientists contributed to the enhancement of the value of the "AUM" product. I could not understand how some religious scholars acknowledged a religion which gathered together the best parts of many different teachings that should have contradicted each other.

On the other hand, as I mentioned earlier, post-war education taught that "Bon Sens" (good judgment and common sense) is fairly equally distributed, and that it will develop under suitable conditions. It was taught that the results of this will work effectively and that they will be valued by society. However, the reality is that there is no such equal distribution, and flowering is the result of individual ability and effort and luck, and that effectiveness and evaluation within society is entirely disparate. Many people, believing in the principle of post-war education, despaired and were disillusioned when faced with such a reality.

People who searched for "meaning," but were left instead with disappointment turned to AUM. There, within the AUM Shinrikyo religious organization, was prepared for them the simulation of the structure of the national government or corporation. Prepared for them was an existence of "meaning," and literally, a virtual reality for them, to use to their abilities and be evaluated. Therein, he or she found their meaning for living.

Of course, at the bottom of their hearts was disillusionment toward the modern age and the modern reality, and malice that comes from that disillusionment.



Evil and inhumane Asahara: the man blamed for the "sarin incident"

Photo: Kyodo News

justify terrorism and the symbols used by AUM—symbols that are marks quite weak in meaning. This symbolism (this method of manipulating symbols) closely resembles that of the *bosozoku*. As does the lack of thought given to the victims, the rapt expressions of those listening to the "story" used to justify the acts of violence, and the look of satisfaction.

The *bosozoku* and a hostile religious cult and their terrorist acts are characteristic of this society—an "affluent" consumer society that has gone through the

urbanization process. Though it may be possible to comprehend the social background behind this, it is impossible to comprehend and explain the direct cause and effect relationship in society regarding this behavior, (such as why people had to die in the sarin subway poisoning).

The *bosozoku* and AUM Shinrikyo can be discussed using catchphrases like "modern suppression," "identity crisis," "religion of an affluent age," or "opposing the system." I think it will turn out to be an interesting story. However, what we must think about first are ways to make clear the structure of this type of terrorism and its mode of life, and to guard society and peoples' lives from it. If we don't, then we ourselves may sometime somewhere become victims of violence, because such occurrences are impossible to predict. **JJTI**

AUM's leader possessed the most malice of all. The form of the activities of AUM were very different from other cultist religious group, and produced a conflict between the everyday lives of the people and the social system.

This is how this tale of malice and suffering came about. In order to remove oppression from an imaginary society they diverted an aggressive attack, but the story justifies "acts of violence." And that "justified" violence includes drugs, other kinds of "medical treatments," weapons, poisonous gas, and "psychological treatments" to destroy the individual personality, cause injury or even murder. Frustration and malice and suffering, as well as oppression from society—because it was all imaginary, the use of violence only served to fulfill the psychological deficiencies of the members of the religious group, in particular the cult founder. It did not hold any social significance whatsoever.

Thus, the violent acts of AUM were terrorist acts against society, individual acts of terrorism against unrelated people. The sarin subway incident is a symbolic representation of this.

A doctrine was scraped together, and imitations collected, a great many stories of malice and suffering used to

Nakano Osamu is a professor in the Faculty of Sociology, Hosei University. He is the author of several books specializing in media studies and critiques of contemporary culture.