Editorial: A dangerous world

On all sorts of levels, capitalism is a society that breeds violence and danger on a daily basis. The last month has been as good an illustration of this as any. In addition to the twenty-odd full-scale wars that have been raging across the planet, the news has been filled with all sorts of other violent phenomenon. Rioting in Belfast. Rampaging soccer hooligans on the streets of Moscow. Suicide bombers in the Middle East. More terrorists on aeroplanes. Not to mention the simmering nuclear tension between Pakistan and India.

Capitalism is so violent many people take it for granted. And it is so ingrained in some, like the soccer thugs, that controlled violence is even an outlet – a release – for them. But how has this situation come about?

Many contend that it is “human nature” to be violent and that the violence we see daily within capitalism is merely a reflection of our own inevitably darker side. In fact this is probably the popular view, fuelled by the excesses of the popular press, who push this interpretation at every turn.

But if it is human nature to be violent, then there is very little that can be done about it apart from locking people up, shooting them or putting them in the electric chair. If violence is a genetic trait amongst humans that finds expression in everything from wars to street muggings, then there is no point reasoning with the perpetrators. Violent offenders just can't help it – it's “in their genes”.

Not that any of this stops proponents of this view from advocating retributive justice, like the cabbie drivers of lore, yelling “it's the only language they understand” to anyone who'll listen. But if violence is only human nature (i.e. natural to all humans) then what good does retributive justice do, perhaps apart from satisfying the equal blood lust of those otherwise railing against the perpetrators of violence? Presumably– from the editor of the Daily Mail to the Home Secretary himself—they must all have the same naturally violent tendencies.

That is the odd thing though. The advocates of violence as the only response to violence have a marked tendency to see themselves as absolved of the precise failings of “human nature” they identify in others. And this is as good a clue as any that what we are dealing with is not “human nature” at all.

If the kind of violence we see around us was natural, then it would tend to be exhibited by all people and in all societies – but it hasn't been. For instance, it certainly didn't happen in early tribal societies of primitive communism, a few examples of which still exist in Africa, Australasia and South America. Even people in modern capitalism (very often the kind of people railing against “human nature”, ironically enough) see earlier periods in capitalism itself as having been more tolerant, less violent and more community-spirited than they are today. All of which does tend to suggest that the overriding factor in all this is not the natural urges that homo sapiens are supposed to have, but the influences on us from babyhood of our social environment.

People who grow up in veritable war-zones (whether it be the Middle East or the concrete jungles of the inner-cities of the sink council housing estates) learn to live on their wits in a 24-hour a day battle for survival – a battle for survival where almost anything goes. They are not somehow “pre-programmed” to behave that way from conception and there is no evidence to suggest it. What they are, pre-eminently, is a product of their circumstances.

A recognition of this doesn't make the lot of the victim of violent crime – or of outright warfare – any better. But it certainly is a precondition for changing things for the better.

No problem is ever solved by just dealing with its effects. This applies just as much to international
terrorism as it does to soccer hooliganism. The fight against such things in modern capitalism is a good illustration of this as these “fights” become just another “war” to be perennially fought, but never won.

Recurring problems can only ever be dealt with satisfactorily by addressing their causes. But that is why the beneficiaries of the current way we organise society in the ruling class are happy to rant about human nature and the war against its supposed effects while the problems get ever worse and not better. The alternative is to recognise that competitive, violent, “individualistic” cultures breed competitive, violent and “individualistic” people who will be competitive as a means of attaining wealth and status, violent in the pursuit of this (“by whatever means necessary”) and individualistic in refusing to accept the view – let alone the “authority” – of others. Capitalism has bred precisely such a culture and there is no turning back the clock or bucking the system.

The only available conclusion is an unpalatable one for the ruling class, because it is the one identified by socialists. And it's that the only way to end violence in society is to end the violent society that breeds it.