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A SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF VANDALISM:
MAKING SENSE OF SENSELESS VIOLENCE

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A SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF VANDALISM:

MAKING SENSE OF SENSELESS VIOLENCE¹

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"It's just wanton, senseless destruction by vandals." Rare trees in a park garden are cut up, wrecked and demolished; animals in a sanctuary are tortured and killed, birds defeathered; churches are desecrated, synagogues sacked; schools are burned; windows broken; comfort stations set afire; public telephones ripped from their booths; parked cars are stripped and battered; cemetery gravestones are over-turned. Such is only a partial listing of the daily activities not of a conquering enemy army, but of a curious breed of citizens called vandals. The characteristic feature of vandalism is the destruction of property and of life without any apparent goal beyond the act of destruction itself. Thus such behavior seems to be motiveless and irrational since the perpetrators put a lot of effort into an activity which has no instrumental value. They appear to get nothing out of it.

Just how serious a problem is vandalism?

1. Damage to public schools throughout the nation approaches 100 million dollars yearly--money that comes out of new school construction funds and educational programs.
2. In New York City alone, broken window panes (over 200,000 annually) and ransacking have steadily risen each year and

now add nearly three million dollars a year to the public school budget.

3. In major cities, about a quarter of all sidewalk phones are out of order all the time--repair and replacement costs amounted to ten million dollars in 1968.
4. Automobile vandalism cost an insurance company over four million dollars in claims in a single year. Naturally, this gets passed on to customers in the form of higher premium rates.
5. Some houses of worship have threatened to close after being repeatedly vandalized more than a dozen times in a year.

Thus vandalism represents not only a direct loss calculated in hundreds of millions of dollars, but indirectly in the form of added security measures and at the personal level of inconvenience, loss of irreplaceable items, reduction of services to the public, and, most importantly, destruction of social trust in one's fellow man.

The response to the wave of vandalism has been the call for "law and order" and increased police and stiffer penalties. So far, the only noticeable effect of such practices is a shifting of targets and an ever greater incidence of vandalism in the following year.

"But something must be done to stop it," comes the desperate plea from every corner. If vandalism is indeed "senseless," "wanton," "aimless," "malicious," and "meaningless"--labels typically applied--then it cannot be controlled. An effect without a cause does not fit into any systematic plan which could limit it.

Careful analysis of the history of vandalism and its political, social and psychological correlates provides a perspective into which issues of its possible suppression assume broader meaning.

The term "vandalism" is an emotive one which conjures up images of ruthless barbarians bent on destruction of society. It originates from the behavior of a Germanic tribe, the Vandals, who invaded Western Europe and destroyed the art and civilization in the sack of Rome in 455 A.D.

But it is incorrect to treat acts of vandalism as homogenous in pattern, agent, intention, or lack thereof. To do so, is a technique used by those threatened by such acts, typically property-owners and politicians, designed to set vandals apart from "normal people," thereby justifying coming down hard on these deviants. In the eighteenth century, some workers who destroyed factory machines were stereotyped as "frenzied," "mad," and "pointless." Rather, they were part of the Luddite movement engaged in what they believed was a legitimate form of protest against the evils of the industrial system. Similarly, the property destruction which occurred during the racial disturbances in Watts, Newark and other American cities were labelled "mindless" until one noted the targets chosen were not arbitrary. The report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (1968) noted: "In at least nine cities studied, the damage seems to have been, at least in part, the result of deliberate attacks on white owned businesses, characterized in the Negro community as unfair or disrespectful toward Negroes."

Acts of vandalism can be sorted into one of five categories according to the significance of the behavior for the individual using a typology developed by a British sociologist, Stanley Cohen (1968).

1. Acquisitive vandalism--Property damage done to acquire money or goods, such as breaking open vending machines or telephone coin boxes, stripping parts from cars or brass fittings from housing project heating systems.
2. Tactical vandalism--Property damage done intentionally to advance some other end, as a means to draw attention to a grievance or to force a reaction. Prisoners who destroy their cells or the mess hall in protesting inadequate facilities or a man who breaks a store window to get arrested in order to be institutionalized exemplify such a tactical approach.
3. Ideological vandalism--Similar to tactical vandalism, but carried out explicitly to further an ideological cause, as part of a declaration of the cause. Anti-government slogans painted on embassy buildings or burning down ROTC headquarters are illustrative examples. Some recent "trashing" on college campuses was planned as a tactic to make the administration call the police onto campus, whose overreaction was expected to radicalize apathetic students and faculty. At what point does ideological vandalism get labelled "sabotage"?
4. Vindictive vandalism--Damage done to a selected target in order to get revenge on its owner, guardian or representative. A gang defaced the automobile of a mother who had a gang member sent to a correctional institution (Miller, W., 1966), or a student or a group of students demolish a classroom

because they feel the teacher has been unjust.

5. Play vandalism--Property is damaged in the context of a game; who can break the windows in the highest level, shoot out the most street lamps, jam telephone receivers most ingeniously.
6. Malicious vandalism--Damage done to property as part of a general expression of rage or frustration. This vandalism may be indiscriminate, but is often directed at symbols of middle class property, public institutions and anonymity-promoting systems, such as subways, schools, automobiles.

Such classification helps dispel the notion of vandalism as a unitary act committed by mindless adolescents. It should also be noted that distinctions between acts of property destruction varying from "high jinks," "mischief-making," "vandalism" to "sabotage" and "treason" are often arbitrary. They depend on the prevailing social-political climate, the context of the behavior, and the degree of association between the perpetrator of the act and those in influential positions who assign the labels to these destructive behaviors.

The night after the final examination in Freshman Western Civilization, it is traditional in some schools for students to "let off steam" by breaking up things, usually dormitory furniture or to have food fights in the cafeteria. The guilty parties (if an investigation is made) are reprimanded privately and asked to clean up and pay part of the repair costs. The damage done during the "panty raids" on girls' dorms in earlier years or

to town property after a big football game are likewise accepted as a "normal" process in which "boys will be boys." Legal prosecution is rare and the matter is typically handled with a harsh word and a wink from the Dean of Students. In contrast, breaking college windows becomes "trashing" if it is seen as part of a radical protest, and is reacted to with more severe judicial action--even though the extent of property damage is the same as in the mischief of the fraternity boys, the freshmen, or "the jocks," and considerably less than the window breakage in the public schools of any large city. In 1965, there was a public outcry of a mad, political plot in England when the names "Andy" and "Dell" were scratched on the Kennedy memorial at Runnymede. The word "Peace" painted on Caterbury Cathedral was considered an act of vandalism, "the work of a lunatic." However, obscene graffiti in less notable places is tolerated, as was the "prank" "Kilroy was here" painted on virtually everything by American soldiers in World War II. Derailing a train by putting obstacles on the track is mischief if done by children, vandalism if they have reached the age of reason, and sabotage depending on the cargo of the train. Finally, it could be pointed out that killing animals becomes a sport if the killer has a license to hunt. While polluting the environment by littering is a criminal act drawing a fine for the individual, polluting the air, water and earth by large factories and powerful utilities companies did not even draw public censure until the recent ecology movement pointed out these acts of vandalism against the property of man.

Finding Sense in the Senseless

A number of important consequences follow from calling a given destructive act "an act of vandalism." The first is to deny that it could result

from legitimate motives. Secondly, it helps define certain people as deviants whose irrationality is a danger to everyone. Thirdly, it places the instigation for the act in the supposedly disturbed mind of the vandal, thereby absolving the society and ignoring the transaction between society and the individual deviant. Finally, it implies the futility of remedial action, the impossibility of scientific investigation of the problem and the desperate need for greater police deterrents and stiffer penalties.

It is possible however to make sense of even the apparently senseless nature of malicious vandalism. This can be accomplished by talking to gang members, observing the behavior of college students engaged in acts of physical destruction and through field experiments.

Analysis of the behavior of violent gangs reveals several interrelated causal factors in vandalism (Becker, 1963; Miller, 1966; Yablonsky, 1968). Gang members, like many other unorganized individuals in lower socio-economic groups, lead lives with little hope of change or significant improvement, without feelings of ownership or relatedness to society. Social conditions have limited the availability to them of traditional means of "making it," of gaining status, prestige and social power. In turn, they have chosen to become outsiders, forming a counter-culture. But they still need to use that traditional culture to make it in their own subculture.

"If I would of got the knife, I would have stabbed him.

That would have gave memore of a build-up. People would have respected me for what I've done and things like that. They would say, 'There goes a cold killer.' It makes you feel like a big shot. You know some guys think they're

big shots and all that. They think, like you know, they got the power to do everything they feel like doing. They say, like, 'I wanna stab a guy,' and then the other guy says, 'Oh, I wouldn't dare to do that.'" (Yablonsky, 1968, pp. 230-231).

Vandalism against property and violence against people then may be a reaction to transform boredom into excitement and to derive pleasure from violating a social taboo. At a deeper level, vandalism is an affirmation that powerless people who are usually controlled by institutions and things can at times rebel and control "things." Malicious vandalism can be seen as a personal acceptance of being rejected by society and being alienated from its institutions in the form of increasing the justification for being made an "outsider."

Perhaps the most psychologically interesting use of vandalism which is without tactical, ideological, play or revenge bases is that a senseless act is more reinforced than one that is understandable and predictable. A person makes his mark, gains his rep, is remembered or feared for behavior that is out of the ordinary, unaccountable, and unlikely to be performed by others in the same situation. A justifiable act of violence or vandalism is situationally determined. Thus, almost anyone under the same situational forces would act similarly. To do a thing (or do in a thing) for its own sake is to show the arbitrariness of your personal power and the purely internal forces controlling the action. We see this in Albert Camus' play Caligula where the Roman emperor attempts to show he is a god through the arbitrary exercise of power over the life and death of other people. Through

the act of unpremeditated destructiveness, the individual finds an "almost magical way of achieving power and prestige, and in a single act of unpremeditated intensity he at once establishes a sense of his own existence and impresses this existence on others." (Yablonsky, p. 235).

It is easy for the "average" person reading this paper to dissociate himself from the violent gang member described above. However, one need only provide an old car, a sledge hammer, and the sanction to smash the car, in order to unleash the same degree of violence in even the most timid of middle-class intellectual college students.

One freshman dormitory invited to such a "smash-in" not only demolished the car in a short time, but set it ablaze, tried to prevent firemen from extinguishing it, and had to be restrained by police order from attacking it again. Graduate students who were invited to try their hand at denting an old car were reluctant at first, but got so carried away with the exhilarating feeling of physically destroying something that they did not want to stop. The tow-truck operator who removed the battered hulk said the last car he had seen in that shape had been hit by an express train.

In a more systematic effort to observe who are the people that vandalize automobiles and what are the conditions associated with such vandalism, a simple field study was recently performed by Fraser and Zimbardo (reported in Zimbardo, 1969--Nebraska Symposium).

Two used automobiles in good condition were bought, their license plates removed, hoods raised and abandoned on the streets. One was placed a block from

the New York University campus in the Bronx, the other a block from the Stanford University campus in Palo Alto, California. Observers watched, photographed and wrote descriptions of all those who came into contact with the "bait."

The researchers expected to find that the vandals were generally adolescents and young children, and that the greater anonymity in New York City would lead to a greater incidence of vandalism to the New York car. The second prediction was confirmed; the first was certainly not. Only ten minutes after the New York car was staked out, the first auto strippers appeared--a mother, father and young son. The mother acted as lookout while father and son emptied the trunk and glove compartment then hacksawed out the radiator and pulled out the battery. Soon after they drove off, another passing car stopped and its adult driver jacked up the abandoned car and removed the best of its tires. By the end of the day, a steady stream of adult vandals had removed every conceivably removable part of the car. Then random destruction began as some passersby stopped to examine the car and then cut up a tire, urinated on the door, broke all the windows and dented in the hood, fenders, door and roof. "In less than three days what remained was a battered, useless hulk of metal, the result of 23 incidents of destructive contact. The vandalism was

almost always observed by one or more other passersby, who occasionally stopped to chat with the looters. Most of the destruction was done in the daylight hours and not at night (as we anticipated), and the adults' stealing clearly preceded the window-breaking, tire-slashing fun of the youngsters. The adults were all well-dressed, clean-cut whites who would under other circumstances be mistaken for mature, responsible citizens demanding more law and order." (Time, 2, 1969, pp. 287, 290. pictures intervene).

That anonymity provides a release of inhibitions against engaging in such anti-social behavior is inferred from the startling contrast between what occurred in the two different locations. In the town of Palo Alto, not a single item was stolen, nor any part of the car vandalized during the full week it was left abandoned. Instead, as a sign of the greater prevailing sense of social consciousness, one man passing by in the rain, lowered the hood so that the motor wouldn't get wet!

Before embarking upon plans for controlling anti-social behavior such as vandalism, it should be apparent from our brief analysis of some of the variables involved, that the first step is to recognize that the locus of the problem is in the way society relates or fails to relate to individuals. Conditions that create social inequity and put some people outside of the conventional reward structure of the society, make them

indifferent to its sanctions, laws, and implicit norms based upon social trust, reciprocity and mutual cooperation. It would be senseless if they did not. The real threat is not in what some deviants will do to the society, but what society is doing to turn an ever-increasing number of its once respectable citizens into deviants and "mindless wanton vandals."

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ABSTRACT
The thesis is advanced that the anti-social behaviors labelled as "vandalism" can be understood in terms of the established nature of the social transactions between the individuals perpetrating such acts and their society. Contrary to the popular notion that vandalism is "senseless," "mindless," or "wanton" behavior is the view that these acts of destructive aggression reflect a variety of "rational" social-psychological causes. Recognition of these antecedents and the social-political conditions which help maintain vandalism leads to strategies of behavior control not based on greater deterrents, law and order, or attributing the cause to individual deviant pathological states, but rather to improving the quality of the social-psychological environment in which we live. A field experiment is reported which suggests that conditions which promote feelings of anonymity lower inhibitions about engaging in destructive acts.

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PSYCHOLOGY SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY VANDALISM--TYPES AND EXPLANATIONS VIOLENCE ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOR RECOGNITION OF LEGITIMATE MOTIVES						