



## A Question for the Systems Sciences: Is a Nonkilling Society Possible?

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Science proceeds by asking questions over time. However we calculate social time, now is appropriate at the end of a murderous era to question whether human beings can stop killing each other. Is a nonkilling society, from local to global, possible? If no, why not? If yes, why?

But what is a “nonkilling society”? A nonkilling society is taken to be a society in which (1) there is no killing of humans and no threats to kill, (2) no weapons for killing and no justifications for using them—e.g., no political, religious, social, cultural, or common sense permissions to kill, and (3) no conditions of society that depend for maintenance or change upon threat of use of lethal force.

Is such a nonkilling society possible? If the various scientific and humanistic approaches that constitute the systems sciences take this question seriously, important contributions to understanding and advancing peaceful human capabilities can be made.

For many, the possibility of a nonkilling society may be dismissed as “absolutely unthinkable”. Among customary arguments are: (1) **human nature**—human beings are dangerous social animals forever prone to kill, (2) **scarce resources**—scarce resources will always produce conflict conducive to killing, and (3) **the anti-**

**predation imperative**—defensive killing against all forms of predation such as rape, attacks upon one's children, weak third parties, and aggression represented by Hitler and the Holocaust is both empirically and ethically imperative.

For others, a nonkilling society may be considered to be completely within the range of human capabilities. Among plausible grounds for confidence are: (1) **nonkilling human nature**—most humans do not kill, (2) **nonlethal responses to scarcity**—through creativity, productivity, limitation of consumption, and most importantly equitable sharing of resources, and (3) **nonlethal alternatives for stopping predation**—preventive socialization, defensive nonlethal technological and social coercion, and post-predation, probability-reducing individual and social transformation therapies.

Whether or not systems scientists agree on the ultimate attainability of a nonkilling society,<sup>1</sup> important contributions can be made if the question of its attainability is rigorously investigated as a hypothetical problem in pure theory. This will assist identification of obstacles and interdependencies—as well as facilitative factors and nonlethal transformational process potentials—from complex systems perspectives.

In political science pure theoretical thinking tends to be discouraged and especially that related to violence. Philosophical tradition, violent historical experience, and patriotic citizen-scholar socialization in violence-accepting nation states tends to create "assumption drag" (after Harold Linstone) in resistance to exploring nonviolent alternatives. This is particularly evident in American political science.

Nevertheless as systems scientists from several disciplines consider whether and how to explore the question of nonkilling social potentiality, it will be useful to note some components of a nonkilling society that already have emerged in human experience. If creatively combined and adapted to the needs of any given



society, a close approximation to a nonkilling society is even now plausible. For example, consider the following: (1) **No killing and no threats to kill**—homicides in most societies are very low, far less than one percent of population (in the United States about 26,000 murders annually for 260,000,000 people). Furthermore 57 countries have abolished the death penalty for all crimes including treason, 15 have abolished it for ordinary crimes, and 28 retain the death penalty in law but as of 1996 had not executed anyone in the past ten years.<sup>2</sup> Most humans do not kill and even many political states emerging out of historical violence have decided not to execute their citizens.

(2) **No weapons for killing and no legitimizations for using them**—no “hardware” and no “software” for killing. Twenty-six countries have no armies although 11 have defense treaties with other states.<sup>3</sup> Britain has pioneered in having police without firearms; Japan has demonstrated the possibility of a virtually unarmed citizenry. Calls for domestic and international disarmament are increasing—to ban handguns, assault rifles, land mines, and other lethal devices; to abolish nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons; and to ban the arms trade. Proscriptions against taking human life, despite atrocious violations, are present in all world faiths and there are adherents who take them seriously. What some faithful are inspired to do, others can do also. We are all biologically capable of responding to the spiritual imperative not to kill. Forty countries as of 1995 have decided to recognize form of conscientious objection to killing in military service.<sup>4</sup>

(3) **No conditions of society that depend upon threat or use of lethal force for maintenance or change.** Institutions expressive of nonviolence that have emerged within societies structured by violence provide organizational components for nonkilling structural change. In politics, we find a nonviolent electoral party (Britain’s Pacifist Fellowship Party since 1955). In economics we find a non-violent capitalist mutual fund that invests in nonwar enterprises

(the Pax World Fund) and a nonviolent labor union that disavows all violence against employers and their violent agents in the struggle for economic justice (the United Farm Workers of America). In **education**, we find the historic example of an entire university dedicated to nonviolence with a Peace Brigade (Shanti Sena) instead of training for military lethality (Gandhigram Rural University in Tamil Nadu, India). In **research**, we find an institution devoted to empowering people with strategy and tactics for nonviolent struggle for freedom from domestic oppression and foreign domination (The Albert Einstein Institution of Cambridge, Massachusetts, founded by Gene Sharp). In the **arts**, we find an institution devoted to nurturing nonviolent creativity in all the arts to assist human liberation from cultures of violence (The Centre for Nonviolence through the Arts in Ahmedabad, India, founded by Mallika Sarabhai). Many other institutions operate explicitly upon nonkilling principles such as pacifist religions and social change organizations like Amnesty International and Greenpeace, while far more implicitly express nonkilling pragmatism. With our attention focused upon violence it is easy to forget that most humans live and work from birth to death unarmed without ever killing anyone.

## 1. The Possibility of Combinatorial Adaptation

If the leadership and citizenship of any contemporary society purposively set out to realize the conditions of a nonkilling society (1) by bringing out domestic capabilities and traditions, and (2) by creatively adapting nonkilling policies and institutions from other societies—a society based upon already demonstrated nonkilling human capabilities could be achieved. Such a society would have virtually no homicide, no death penalty, no army, unarmed police, unarmed citizens, nonviolent religious institutions, nonviolent political parties, nonviolent economic enterprises with nonviolent

labor unions, nonviolent educational institutions, nonviolent research and development institutions, and institutions devoted to encouraging nonviolent creativity in all the arts. In global relationships this dynamically evolving nonkilling society, liberated from the psychological and material costs of violence, would pose no lethal threat to others and could draw upon the inspiration, experience, goodwill, and mutual assistance of nonkilling components in all other societies. It could become capable of contributing to nonviolent global transformation by offering a model for creatively adaptive emulation.

## 2. Scientific Requirements for Nonkilling Transformation

To guide choices in nonkilling transformation within any given society and across the global human social system, basic and applied scientific knowledge is necessary. Systems science insights and contributions are needed from pure theory to experimental and applied research.

From whatever systems science approach or level of analysis, we need knowledge of (1) causes of killing, (2) causes of nonkilling, (3) causes of shifts between killing and nonkilling, and (4) characteristics of completely killing-free conditions.

Based upon such fundamental knowledge we need applied research to guide social choices to transform what can be conceived as a "funnel of killing" into an expanding "fan of nonkilling alternatives". The funnel of killing can be portrayed as having four zones progressively converging at the tip in lethality.

These are the (1) structural reinforcement zone where socioeconomic conditions support and predispose to lethality, (2) the cultural conditioning zone where legitimizations for offensive and defensive lethality are provided, (3) the socialization zone where people directly and vicariously learn to kill, and (4) the killing

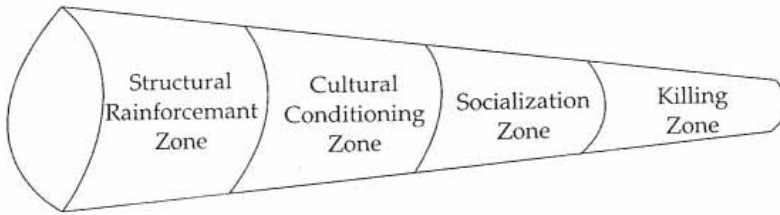


Fig. 1. Funnel of Killing

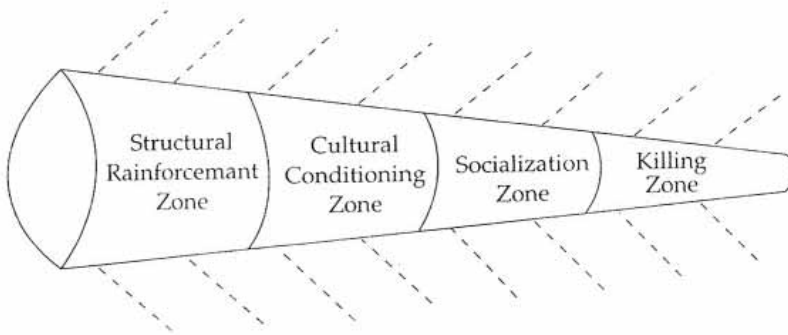


Fig. 2. Fan of Nonkilling Alternatives

zone where homicides, genocides, assassinations, terroristic killing, executions, coups, revolutions, and wars occur.

Purposive action is needed within and across each lethality-prone zone to create a widening fan of nonkilling alternatives.

Some examples of contemporary efforts conducive to avoiding convergence in lethality are nonviolent movements to remove political oppression and socioeconomic injustice; to question religious and media conditioning for violence; to substitute peaceful service alternatives for military training and gang socialization; and to intervene in killing zones through peacemaking presence and nonlethal high technologies.

It is hoped that systems science insights can contribute to analysis of elements that converge in the funnel of killing, to identification of factors that facilitate widening the fan of nonkilling alterna-

tives, and to understanding systems processes capable of supporting completely nonkilling individual and global life.

In view of the extraordinary contributions that the physical, biological, and social sciences (as well as the humanities, philosophy, and religion) have made to the unprecedented lethality of the 20th century, it can be expected that if systems science creativity is applied to investigating the possibility of a nonkilling society, timely and effective contributions to end humanity's era of lethality can be made.

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## Notes

1. Readers may wish to compare their responses with the responses of a group of 73 Canadian high school students in grades 10, 11, and 12 from a dozen schools in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada on October 4, 1997. No, 45. Yes, 28.
2. Paige (1996) and (1997), Appendix A.
3. Paige (1996) and (1997), Appendix C.
4. Paige (1996) and (1997), Appendix B.

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