

Juvenile Vandalism

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to take up the topic of vandalism. Vandalism is a collective act of urban youths, whereby they indulge in destroying property, primarily for the sake of fun, at first sight. Deeper below the surface, however, it is possible to discern latent feelings of being oppressed and accordingly it is possible to infer about accumulated resentment feelings eventually leading to a passionate desire to take revenge from the mainstream society. While many other sorts of other youth offences or crimes basically pertain to industrialized countries, vandalism is observed to occur widely in developing countries, including Turkey, as well.

Keywords: Vandalism; Property; Destruction

Introduction

Barker defines vandalism as “wanton [playfully mischievous] damage of public transport vehicles, telephone cabins, school property etc.” Also emphasizing the “game” and “Enjoyment” factors; Bakwin specifies that *the thrills adolescents obtain from such activities are usually greater than those which organized recreation can provide.*

A keen analysis into the roots of the act must reveal bitter feelings of deprivation and oppression over the course of a young life time, which, like a bluff line of hot steam are released against that “guilty society” as retaliation, as the chance is somehow obtained.

Etymologically, the word “vandalism” is attributed to the coarse and crude Vandal tribes, as a contrast to the highly civilized ancient Roman people. It is a known fact that Vandal tribes dared destroy beautiful and elaborated works of art, created by the refined Roman civilization.

Nevertheless; in the Middle East, Gengis Khan’s [1162-1227] barbaric Mongol army did worse things onto the brilliant Arabic-Islamic civilizations, without “earning” a similar negative adjective pertaining to them exclusively.

Maybe with some philosophical effort, one can infer an exaggeration of the feelings of allegedly civil societies towards the “wilder” ones, which are much more complicated than what appear to be superficially. Such “wild” people might in fact be in possession of far superior traits or techniques involving many aspects of life; compatible with their own style, survival and worldview; like moving faster from one place to another, coping with deprivation like hunger and thirst or better endurance of any adverse physical circumstances..

[For example], *the herding societies [a special form of the horticulture era in human development] were specialized in raising animals, in advanced form harnessing the energy of horses and camels for transportation; like Mongol Empire, Mughal Empire in India or the Manchu dynasty in China* (Lenski 1970: 299).

As another example; the so-called less civilized people may well be more virtuous spiritually. As Ülken (1953: 567) puts it; according to Ibn Khaldun’s well-known work, Muqaddama, *sedentarized life in cities augments all sorts of vice, especially sexual and gastric voluptuousness.*

As a matter of fact; quite aware of this fact, the pioneering forefathers of today’s Americans, with their Puritan mentality, were keenly anxious to prefer and promote the rural life, simply as a reaction to sinful urban centers, as they knew them from Europe. In the wording

of Giddens (2006: 909) “many Victorians saw the newly industrializing cities such as Manchester and Leeds as sewers of degeneration and vice” [1-6].

The Very Act of Destruction

So; in the jargon of social sciences today; the term “vandalism” refers to actions of groups of urban youngsters who get involved in especially public property destruction, mostly (but not solely) for the fun of it.

Going ahead damaging private property is definitely harder. It is better protected and is contained in closed spaces, which requires extra effort to penetrate into. Moreover, some witnesses of the act become more anxious over property of acquaintances rather than public property. So, they are more eager to report assault on private possessions. This may be a reason of deterrence. Besides, common property represents the mainstream society, the youths’ hostile figure, much more closely and directly.

The act sometimes is also executed by sheer politically-motivated mobs driven by an ideological consciousness, which differentiates it from the ordinary fun-seeking sense and purpose. In that respect; the availability of the target and the ease with which it is possible to carry out the attack is of determining significance.

Sometimes enemy soldiers perform similar atrocities against property, which, in principle, is not to be associated with any official /regular army: Normally the rules of engagement are well-defined. Soldiers are subjected to strict discipline. Above all; exterminating the enemy is pure professionalism based on killing for the sake of not being killed and is free of passionate emotions. But perhaps, on occasion, the officers and petty-officers can not exert their full control over disappointed and resentful file-and-rank especially while retreating in humiliation, after getting beaten. In World War II, both sides did their best to spare artistic structures, in general.

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In 1912 the Thracian Turkish town *Luleburgaz* was one of the battle-theaters of the Balkan War. A mosque near the strategic historical stone-bridge had its minaret blown off by an artillery-shot from the invading Bulgarian army. During my childhood days I saw the half-minaret many times, before it got repaired in recent times. (Until the end of the Cold War, a restoration might have been deliberately neglected, stressing the then-Soviet-allied Bulgaria's mischief).

During the Balkan Wars, Bulgaria was a newly-independent offshoot of the Ottoman State, revenging his former master. *Mustapha Kemal* got appointed to Sofia as the military attaché, after the peace treaty ending the Balkan Wars. One night he watched an impressive opera-show and whispered to his two friends: "I see why they were victorious. After all, a power capable of such a polyphonic performance could be capable of many other achievements".

Geographical Location

The concentration of vandalism activities appears to pertain to cities. There are reasons for that: "In urban areas, there are too few outlets available for the energies of young people. The influence of antisocially inclined groups can be important [leading them] to commit destructive acts in which they would not otherwise engage" (Bakwin 1954: 53).

Indeed; boys of rural areas—we might as well specify here at this point that vandalism is essentially a male activity—can engage in outdoor activities like wrestling (a specially common leisure activity of Turkish boys), swimming, bird-hunting, fishing, hiking, football-playing; all of which represent that very successful coping-behavior or defense mechanism or orientation: Sublimation of potentially hazardous young energies into sports.

Gibbon says such playful activities may later on gain a utilitarian character as well. Indeed; as a demonstrative example; I remember a black-and-white Turkish movie starring a popular child-player of the times, occurs to my mind. The sympathetic orphan gets friendly with an equally sympathetic crooked-man and together they stage some scenarios. The kid smashes the window-pane of a mansion with a sling shot from a distance and then vanishes. Minutes later, his confederate appears on the street as a peddler carrying layers of glass-panes on his back.

The cunningly-done and delight-giving damages seem to be mostly of social nature, accomplished together, just like many other delinquencies of the adolescents. It serves as a means of proving oneself in the eyes of close friends. For the actor it is very much desirable to have witnesses to acknowledge his deed. Those witnesses are expected to go around talk about it to other friends, maybe embellishing it with some exaggeration and contributing to the spread of the actor's fame.

After all, in many subcultures within the multi-layered modern human society; the adjective "famous" is confused with "infamous / notorious". An anti-heroic deed is considered heroic and adventurous. As a teacher-colleague narrated in the teachers' room some years ago, even in a private school where he taught he eavesdropped that that a certain fat boy was boasting to his circle about having swindled the canteen-keeper while getting refreshments in crowded circumstances.

Can even a lonely football hooligan cause substantial material damage around, without the confirming looks of his buddies around. Those buddies, even if they do not take part in the offence, at least identify with their hero. (Identification is another coping-behavior or defense mechanism or orientation and chooses the wrong model in this particular case).

Indeed; Peyrefitte (1977) cites that *in France, in 1975, only 27 solitary violent infractions were committed by minors, in comparison to 73 such cases undertaken in gang formation* [3].

Ajuriaguerra (1974) associates "rough-housing [horse-play], vandalism and violence" with "reasons of prestige", as well.

Some Psychological Probing

Feelings of inferiority and the resulting satisfaction of revenge must be predominant factors among the causes of vandalism acts. An accomplished act, thereby, provides a temporary respite, an enjoyable illusion of superiority for an oppressed—this could be real or perceived, but the outcome is just the same— young soul. Now, the malicious pleasure (in French *malin plaisir*; in German a word combining "harm" and "joy": *Schadenfreude*) is very satisfying, momentarily.

In fact, when a group of teen-agers, all failing-students, pierce the tires of the parked car of a "hard" teacher; the sentiments of getting even with him or her prevail among this group. Here the displacement mechanism (still another coping-behavior or defense mechanism or orientation) also gets into play: A corporal damage to the actual teacher normally not being a possible or wise thing to do, the teacher's valuable possession becomes the scapegoat (*bouc émissaire*, *Sündenbock*).

Such incidents are not uncommon in over-populated public schools, where pinpointing the culprits is rather difficult. Even though an internalized code of Etiquette is always the desired result; as far as the happenings go; deterrence must also be an acceptably reasonable barrier to any potentially would-be act of violence or harm. If the actor of the offence is sure to get caught afterwards, chances are fairly high that he will initially refrain from a possible wrongdoing or else at least stop, before going to the end.

Special Turkish Case-histories

Other forms and manifestations of juvenile delinquency do not, generally speaking, constitute as much of a problem in Turkey as they do in highly industrialized western countries. However, vandalism is a substantial problem for Turkey, as well.

Deliberately-damaged telephone booths, torn covers of seats in suburban trains, broken sit-benches in parks and squares, blown street light-bulbs, graffiti on walls are all commonly-encountered scenes, which, responsible citizens of Istanbul and other major cities witness with bitterness in daily life.

A special vandalism case in the southern city of Adana was smashing the window panes of passenger trains, which used to cost large sums of money for the State-Owned Turkish railroad company.

A news bulletin on the official Turkish TV channel (April 13, 1991) mentioned about a wonderful program undertaken by Adana Head Directorship of the Railroads: On weekends, groups of children were carried by passenger trains between Adana and the adjacent city of Mersin, in order to make them develop friendly feelings towards passenger trains. The program registered great success and went on for years to come.

A somewhat mild case of vandalism, which I personally experienced, is worth bringing up here: Some years ago, on an April Sunday, I went to visit my former university, where I had earned by B.S. Ironically, I was blending some photocopy pages taken from the library of the university, about juvenile delinquency, in the main canteen; when five boys (about 12 to 15 years old), all humbly-clothed and obviously from the adjacent underprivileged shanty town-quarter,

began to rhythmically and noisily tap with sticks on the basement-located canteen's rare windows from the outside.

A few times; the boys shortly retreated, having noticed the menacing looks and the slightest movements of the few boarding male students inside. But they insisted on returning soon afterwards and going on with the "game" for minutes.

The male students eventually preferred to feign indifference at the instigation of a leader-type; while a couple of female students were now discussing the situation. I never dropped them closely, just on the verge of leaving the place and caught the following words from one of them: "All they want is somebody to beat them! I'll say let us go do it. But; they escape so fast!"

World War I-Children at the Eastern Ottoman Front

It is a sad fact that desperation brings out the worst elements in human nature. Up to this point it was a matter of playful damage. The following case is different in the sense that it is deadly serious.

In one of his novels dated 1980, *Yashar Kemal* (1923-February 28, 2015) mentions about the *Sarikamish* tragedy of the Ottoman State. [Following the wrong strategy of the Union and Progress Party leaders; thousands of poorly-equipped Turkish troops meant to be employed against Tsarist Russia as an attacking (!) force — merely to provide some respite for the allied-Germans at the other fronts— got literally frozen in heavy winter circumstances, even before contacting the enemy. Just before the operation, ships loaded with military material had departed from Istanbul to sail towards Trabzon-harbor, but they had gotten sunk by the Russian Navy in the Black Sea].

In the aftermath of that disastrous incident; a chaotic situation reigns in the east while the Russians start invading Turkish lands. Meanwhile many children who became orphans or lost their parents stick together in closely-knit, half-savage assemblies. Those children collectively attack villages and towns; pillaging and devastating everything. They usually take the towns by surprise attacks after some careful planning activities. Their concern is one thing: Nourishment! On many occasions the inhabitants resort to arms against those children.

One should specify that the above information from *Yashar Kemal's* novel represents an extreme case, resembling the superb fiction by William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, 1954 [1] Children do go wild when they are deprived from the custody of parents or surrogate-parents like adults-in-charge

Yashar Kemal; a renowned realistic author, whose works are backed up with immense research; does not explicitly utter the phrase "Armenian children"; but it goes without saying that this is indeed implied.

At the chaotic time; unfortunate mutual massacres (*mukatele*) were carried out — armed Armenian gangs were organized— and one can infer that orphaned Moslem off springs including those of Kurdish parents were also mixed into the mobs.

(Many Armenian orphans were meanwhile adopted by Moslem families, especially by families of officers and officials. Magnificent folk-singer *RuhiSu* —the "Turkish equivalent of Black American Paul Robeson"— is said to be one such adopted child. Born in the eastern city Van, he was to end up in Adana at the age of five).

Probably many of the deported Armenian families also deliberately abandoned their little sons and daughters, fearing worse consequences at the end of the forced-journey. (Allied-Germans' urge in ordering

a deportation is an issue not taken extensively in related studies, yet) (Figure 1).

Conclusion

Vandalism is a basically urban and young male activity indulged in groups and involving material harm to physical environment. Experiencing psychological disappointment in the process of growing up coupled with realities or perceptions of deprivation or oppression constitute the substructure of such a mentality.

While country boys can find joy in channeling energy into numerous outdoor activities and sports, in cities this is not the case, most of the time. So, the city background itself nourishes the tendency to cause damage around.

Disasters and wars may bring up the worst aspects of mankind, adolescents included. In such extraordinary conditions much more serious forms of vandalism have been observed in the near history.

Turkey as a developing country suffers more from vandal-activities than other types of juvenile offences. The "mental-hygienic" approach in the sense of prevention of the incidents beforehand may be achieved to a great extent in a society by installing social welfare and social justice and equal opportunities. As a successful project put in practice about two decays ago, offering free travel to boys in trains by the national Railroad Company ceased the problem of their throwing stones at the train-windows in the suburbs of a populated Turkish city. An ethically-weighted education system should also definitely contribute to the possible elimination or at least minimization of this modern public problem.

NOTES

1) *It is true that Gengis destroyed the urban life of Khorassan. But soon he came to understand what a city really meant and wanted to learn more about this issue. The Turkish savants, Mahmoûd Yalawatch and his son Mas'oud Yalawatch taught him the significance of cities upon his own request. Gengis would later later order those two savants to help his Mongolian governors in the administration of Boukhârâ, Samarqand, Kachgar and Khotan (Grousset 1951: 318-319) [2].*

2) Years ago, in a dormitory "bull session" a communist student-

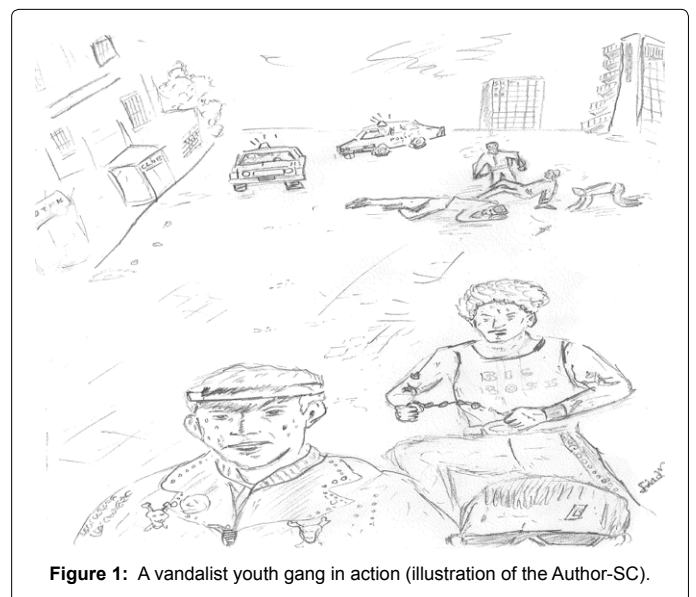


Figure 1: A vandalist youth gang in action (illustration of the Author-SC).

leader was boastfully telling his comrades how he damaged the delicate marble decorations of a wealthy dead capitalist, just on the way to the campus (an auxiliary back gate to the campus was nearby a sea-side cemetery).

3) It will be important to expand on the concept of *adventure* for children in general. While an adult normally prefers safety to adventure, for children it is not the same choice: M. Odlum, a child psychiatrist, affirms that the terrible consequences of air-raids (danger at each instant, running away from home to strange places, the uncomfortable shelters, lack of sleep, complaints and grievances of the adults, destruction of homes) had only a minimum effect on children. The dominating factor was the taste of adventure, the pleasure of integrating with the adults with whom they were sharing the ordeals on an equal footing. These feelings were astonishingly prevailing even in instances when the children witnessed the death of their parents. The troubles they developed did not, in the majority of cases, present but a transitory state.

Dorothy Burlingham and Anna Freud made similar observations in children who had survived many air-raids and had ended up in partially ruined places in London. No really psychic shocks were detected.

As long as they were under the protection of parents or persons representing the parents, the air-raids did not seem to have particularly remarkable impacts on them. Their experiences stayed as accidents which do not exceed the levels of other childhood accidents. The nurses and the members of the County Council Research Center of London all confirmed this. The children were arriving in midnight, coming directly from bombarded houses. When their families were present, this sufficed to prevent serious troubles. The children's excitement was only little pronounced.

Anna Freud talks about different cases where children evacuated from London during the course of a bombardment could hardly bear the dramatic change. But, these children were not accompanied by their mothers or family members representing the mothers. They did reveal serious psychic troubles. Contrary to these cases, the children staying with their families in London were astonishingly calm.

The observations carried out among the underground forces during the course of the [French] resistance movement permit us to reach analogous conclusions (Reiwald 1949: 271-277).

4) Observation of children during the critical stages of war not only furnishes us with very useful indications on Child psychology but it also supplies us with information concerning the psychology of masses.

Just as in the cases of masses; in children also (the psychologies of each have a lot in common) one can see that the reactions in crucial situations are not determined by the real danger itself; but rather, by the emotional nature of uncertainties. As will be seen in the following example; the children are able to endure the dangerous situations; if the emotional tie (father, mother) is not cut off. At this point, a comparison can be drawn between the attitudes of the children and those of the masses. The members comprising a mass often find themselves protected against a real or imaginary danger as long as the ties connecting them to the leader continue to exist.

As Dr. Trammer explains; one does not have the impression of discerning in children attitudes profoundly different than those of their elders. Trammer gives some observations obtained during the Finland War: The reactions of children to air raids are influenced to a great extent by the attitudes of the surrounding adults. The nervousness of the parents and the others in the shelter is easily communicated onto the children. If a hysterical woman happens to be in the group, she can in a short time create a maximum tension in the entire group by her gruesome stories and excessive lamentations denoting absence of all self-control. After this, nobody in the protecting troop can console children and adults even if he uses the most reassuring words and displays in the most determined manner. The suggestibility of the person taking refuge in the anti-bombardment shelter can achieve an extraordinary level.

The report of Dr. Donner about the same war is even more impressing: All parents, doctors, psychologists, teachers and superintendents in charge of transport assert that the attitudes of children in the face of danger depends incredibly on the attitudes of the surrounding adults. For instance, the mere proximity of a doctor was enough to reassure them. Just like adults; children also get used to the new life conditions demanded by the situation. Thus; during the air-raids they often did not suffer from an anguish if they knew exactly which behavior they were supposed to display under the given circumstances. Their feelings of tranquility or restlessness were the exact reflections of the feelings manifested by the supervising adults in charge of them (Reiwald 1949: 277-281) [7].

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