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## The process of civilization (and its discontents): violence, narrative and history

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J. Carter Wood

## **The Process of Civilization (and its Discontents): Violence, Narrative and History**

The field of history has much to offer to a cross-disciplinary exchange on discourses of violence. This is particularly so as difficulties with reliably *quantifying* past violence have caused an increasing number of historians (mainly from the field of crime history) to turn their attention to its “narratives,” “cultures,” “mentalities” or “discourses” (see, e.g., Archer 1999; D’Cruze 2000). This tendency, itself part of a broader historical linguistic turn, has increased the theoretical exchanges between history and other disciplines. While historians have gained a much wider conceptual palette upon which they can draw, they, in return, offer long-term insights and perspectives that are too often lacking in contemporary analyses of violence. Nonetheless, such cross-disciplinary approaches to violence within the humanities have not been without their difficulties, partly due to the increasing popularity of biological or evolutionary explanations for physical aggression, some of which have made use of historical data (Daly and Wilson 1994; Pinker 2003: 306-336). Their emphasis on continuities across time and space implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) challenges the primary role of culture stressed in most historical and sociological analyses, a challenge most visible in comparative studies (Wood, 2003). Yet, even those who assert culture’s dominant role in shaping the experience of violence have trouble describing precisely how violence’s “social meaning” is formed. In an ethnographic study of civil war in Mozambique, Carolyn Nordstrom noted reservations regarding a key supposition of cultural constructionism:

I have come to question traditional assumptions that people experience life in uniquely cultural-specific ways, that what happens to individuals in World War II Europe, in Bosnia, in Mozambique or in the Amazon Basin is fundamentally different and that these experiences are ultimately incommensurable, incomparable, unique (Nordstrom 1997: 6).

Nordstrom raises central questions in violence studies: how successfully can narrative be said to convey the experience of violence, and to what extent, if any, can these narratives be compared? Historians have become keenly interested in these topics, examining how other issues, such as masculinity, affect attitudes toward physical aggression (Wiener 2004). However, even assuming that particular discourses can be shown to have influenced attitudes toward violence in a particular time and place and that they have some kind of cross-cultural relevance, casting this insight as a historical process presents further difficulties. How have attitudes *changed*? *Why* have they changed? How is it possible *to reconstruct* these variations?

A variety of conceptual tools have been used in answering these questions; among violence historians, Norbert Elias's theory of the "civilizing process", originally developed in the 1930s, has become one of the most prominent of them (e.g., Spierenberg 1995; Johnson and Monkkonen 1996; Ruff 2001). The civilizing process consists of a long-term historical development involving a general increase in the control of "affects" – emotional urges – as well as a more finely regulated social interaction. Two main forces have restrained human psychological urges toward aggression: increasing *social interdependence* and *expanding state power*. Beginning in the early modern period, social differentiation and more complex forms of the division of labor tied people together in ever-longer chains of mutual reliance.

The more differentiated [social functions] become, the larger grows the number of functions and thus of people on whom the individual constantly depends in all his actions, from the simplest and most commonplace to the more complex and uncommon. As more and more people must attune their conduct to that of others, the web of actions must be organized more and more strictly and accurately, if individual action is to fulfill its social function. The individual is compelled to regulate his conduct in an increasingly differentiated, more even and more stable manner (Elias 1994: 445).

Concurrently, states' monopolization of legitimate violence enforced "pacified social spaces" in which individuals restrained themselves in the knowledge that others, in return, would do the same (Elias 1994: 451). Thus, the likelihood of attack was reduced, private vengeance was increasingly replaced by state power and restraints on some kinds of behavior were internalized.

Elias's appeal to historians is clear. Although a sociologist, his evidence and the process he describes are historical. In his historicized picture of human psychology, while people have in-built tendencies toward violence, the forces which operate upon this innate aggression – such as increasingly complex matrices of social refinement – are fundamentally social and cultural. Indeed, for Elias, the self and the social are united and inseparable (Elias 1994: 200-215). His approach thus accommodates aspects of both sides in the contemporary

debate: rather than arguing for *either* biological or cultural influences on violence, he examines their interactions. Although there remains much room for questioning some of his theory's specific assumptions or conclusions, its focus on the points where self and social unite (or material and cultural meet) is useful, and his diachronic as well as synchronic approach to violence is constructive. Moreover, it suits an important shift in violence history toward examining what now seems to have been an apparent centuries-long *decline* in interpersonal violence in western Europe (Kaspersson 2003). In short, Elias's theory seems to fit the facts.

Partly for these reasons, the civilizing process played an important role in a recently published book in which I explored the development of attitudes toward violence in nineteenth-century England (Wood 2004). Previous work had already suggested that English violence had declined between 1800 and 1900 (Gatrell 1980). How and why this occurred remained unclear and became my main topics. Conceptually, I borrowed from Elias and Foucault and incorporated elements from social geography, anthropology and traditional British social history. My goals were to see what had happened to violence in nineteenth-century England, test the utility of the civilizing process and develop conceptual approaches to the history of violence. Here, I will build upon some of my culturally-specific empirical findings and examine their broader relevance to the relationship between violence and language, the role of conflict in shaping mentalities of violence and the utility of the theory of the civilizing process. In doing so, I will also speculate on wider conceptual points which I have subsequently begun considering as guidelines in further research. As an initial note, the violence with which I intend to deal with is physical and relatively small-scale, arising out of "everyday" circumstances; thus, war, terrorism and state violence (other than policing) are not among my central concerns. I am skeptical about whether small-scale violence (e.g., pub brawls or domestic violence) and large-scale violence (e.g., war or genocide) can be analyzed with the same tools. I believe that analyses of a concept so contested as violence require differentiation and precision in terms of definition and method; what is more, this includes distinguishing physical violence from other forms of harmful social interaction, exclusion or disadvantaging (even though they may, in the end, have equivalent or greater long-term effects).

### *Speakability, Conflict and Accommodation*

Reconstructing violence mentalities requires close attention to narratives of violence. There are different senses in which the term "narratives" should be understood. They include, most obviously, various forms of speech *about* violence – i.e., commentary about physically aggressive acts – which can be found in criminal court records, sociological surveys, magazines, journals and

newspapers. However, while things can be said about violence, they can also be said *with* violence. Anthropologists have long recognized that violence has expressive qualities linked to various kinds of specific cultural imperatives (e.g., Collett 1977; Riches 1986: 12). In my view, rather than being “unspeakable,” violence has tended to be eminently “speakable,” emerging out of coherent cultural (and biological) motivations, tending to follow certain kinds of social rules and containing expressive elements. The grammars and vocabularies, dialects and accents, voices and meanings of this violence have been historically and culturally specific: the syntax in which violence speaks is connected to particular arrangements of social structure, imagined geography and cultural belief. That is, what violence has to “say” varies across both time and space, and a violent “utterance” which may be perfectly comprehensible in one culture (or within one culture at a particular developmental stage) may not be so in another. Out of these linguistic qualities of violence emerge coherent “mentalities” of violence: collections of attitudes about physical aggression that are shared by a particular cultural group.

The language of violence is most visible in cultures in which it is relatively accepted. Nineteenth-century England was one such society, with a customary mentality based on principles of retribution, autonomy and discipline. This often-scripted violence was not hidden: in fact, it was essential that it remain open to community observation, judgment and control (which incidentally helped ensure that descriptions of it were recorded as witness testimony gathered for criminal prosecutions). Particularly amongst the working classes, community relationships were “self-policed,” and criminals, deviants or unwanted outsiders were normally dealt with independently of the state. Interpersonal disputes among men were often settled through fighting rituals that had originated in sports: as one worker recalled, “You always settled your arguments with a fight. You see it was the only expression you had” (Burnett 1994: 85). Although largely unregulated by ritual forms, domestic conflicts were also motivated and patterned by the customary mentality.

Various messages and meanings could be encoded within violent acts; violence was often performative and remarkably public. A hidden, private fight or the clandestine beating of a thief would have had little purpose. Similarly, while deliberately murdering one’s wife was illegitimate, “disciplinary” violence could be used relatively freely. Private violence and intentional wife murder, of course, occurred – the rules of violence do not function like the laws of gravity. Nevertheless, the pressure of social approval tended to keep violence public and within socially acceptable boundaries. When limits were exceeded, the customary mentality provided criteria for identifying and evaluating transgressions, and those who observed (or participated in) public violence were well equipped to interpret it. These interpretations, although individual, clearly

emerged out of a generally shared mentality of violence. While I do not suggest that the resulting mentality was “fair” (even though a notion of “fairness” was an important component of it), it was widely accepted, provided a structure for physical aggression, maintained social order and made violence more predictable. In this regard, nineteenth-century England was not an isolated example, and studies across a wide chronological and geographical spectrum have found similar kinds of violence codes, in, for example, early modern France, the nineteenth-century Mediterranean, twentieth-century Yemen and contemporary American cities (Greenshields 1994; Gallant 2002; Caton 1999; Anderson 1999).

These studies suggest the broader relevance of some of the trends I have identified in my own work, particularly with regard to the centrality of *conflict* in the generation and maintenance of violence mentalities. In this sense, I use the term conflict to refer to differences *among* various mentalities as well as to tensions *within* them. Such conflicts may arise through either internal or external forces (or some combination thereof). For instance, nineteenth-century England saw challenges to the customary mentality from an emergent middle- and upper-class culture of refinement. I label this latter mentality “civilized” for two reasons. First, the term was common in contemporary discourse; nonetheless, I take a skeptical and critical attitude toward such uses (Wood 2004: 40-46). Second, this cultural movement’s impact was recognizably “civilizing” in Elias’s sense, tending toward a reduction in emotional extremes and expansion of state power.<sup>1</sup> Civilized observers grew increasingly aghast at customary forms of violence; behavior that had once been widely accepted as normal was increasingly seen as abhorrent, leading to wide-ranging controversies as to where, when and by whom physical force could legitimately be employed. Custom and civilization became poles in a dialectical relationship; each was defined in relation to the other, and each – at least initially – was based in a particular social grouping. For the self-consciously “civilized” (and typically middle-class) observer, customary forms of behavior were re-labeled as “savagery.” Concurrently, those who followed custom (typically, though not exclusively, the working-class) associated themselves with traditional English virtues, seeing new civilized values as a threat to community or individual autonomy and the bearer of a creeping effeminacy.

It is also clear that conflicts among violence mentalities can also develop as a result of intercultural encounters, especially those related to imperialism. The nineteenth-century British administrators of the Ionian Islands faced similar problems (and relied upon similar discourses) as civilizing crusaders back home;

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<sup>1</sup> Like Elias, I use this latter sense of the term “civilizing” as a description of a relative degree of self-control and social organization without thereby implying any sort of superiority, moral or otherwise.

traditional Greek violence codes were a source of cultural conflict as well as – in part – a vehicle for resistance to British rule (Gallant 2002: 117-147). French rule in Napoleonic Italy was also influenced by a cross-cultural confluence of imperial, civilizing and customary imperatives regarding attitudes toward criminality and violence (Broers 2002). In all these cases, conflicts over sovereignty, autonomy, justice and identity shaped – and were in turn shaped by – violence mentalities. Further investigation into the historical conflicts over such codes of aggression is required in order to clarify whether or not recurring patterns in such domestic and external civilizing movements can be identified.

“Conflict,” however, does not necessarily refer to a state of constant opposition: tensions typically coexist with forms of accommodation and consensus. For example, because of cross-class support, some traditional forms of sport fighting lasted relatively long into the nineteenth century. Similarly, because of some shared concepts of male dominance, attention to violence against women was long delayed. While often being seen as predominantly a tool of class oppression, capital punishment also had support across the social classes (Gatrell 1994). The social groups that tended to represent each mentality were often in some ways divided as well. Refined observers, for instance, periodically expressed fears that too much civilization could sap social vitality. Concurrently, an increasing proportion of the working classes were adopting respectable values; in some cases, this was part of a self-conscious effort at distinguishing themselves from their more ill-mannered neighbors. Other groups have demonstrated similar forms of accommodation in the context of externally imposed imperial rule. Local Greek social elites, for instance, successfully incorporated the new civilizing discourses of their nineteenth-century British rulers; in the process, they were able to augment more traditional forms of power and maintain their social status within their communities (Gallant 2002: 214). Traditional violence codes in Italy proved to be extremely resilient to Napoleonic rule, and a

world of personal vendetta and intense rivalries – small in scale but never ‘petty’ – proved stronger than the tidal wave of war and revolution, shaking off the dislocation of the former and absorbing the politicized divisions of the latter into itself. The ‘earth shattering events’ of the great age of European revolutions were sucked into this world; they did not transform it (Broers 2002:30).

Overall, in these and other contexts, I believe that emphases on violence’s “speakability”, conflict and accommodation are useful elements in defining a widely applicable model of mentality formation.

However, this combination is perhaps not uncontroversial. The crime historian Robert Sindall has argued that the recovery of some – particularly lower-class – attitudes about violent crime is impossible. In part this relates to a

fundamental lack of sources; however, Sindall argues that even if such were sources available, the lower-classes were unimportant to defining “crime”:

To attempt to understand crime and its relevance to nineteenth-century society the researcher must approach not from the bottom up, but from the middle down. ‘Crime’ as a cause or a result of social change was not a lower socio-economic group act but a middle-class perception of that act. (Sindall 1990: 13)

Although expressed in the context of a historical study, this critique is relevant to any study of crime, violence or deviancy; it assumes that only one set of attitudes is important to defining a complex cultural phenomena (i.e., “crime”) and suggests that these ideas are simply imposed from above. Similar views are not difficult to find in critical accounts of modern societies, positing (optimistically or pessimistically, depending on one’s point of view) the relatively unproblematic ability for ruling-class attitudes to become dominant. This notion appears in various guises, most to some extent conspiratorial. However, while domination and hegemony are useful analytical tools, I think they need to be used sparingly. Although certain classes’ perceptions of violence will be dominant in a given historical context (e.g., that of the Victorian bourgeoisie), such mentalities tend to be internally divided, rarely exist in isolation and face competition from other ideologies. Moreover, too great a focus on *imposition* can blind one to the importance of *negotiation* in forming violence mentalities. To understand any given culture’s attitudes toward violence, one has to take into account the interaction of various mentalities which arise out of different social groups: only through the reconstruction of such alignments of conflict and agreement can the contours of violence mentalities be revealed. Recreating these patterns is an important and continuing project of violence history.

### *The Civilizing Process*

The issue of historical change presents a further problem, as mentalities tend to be self-reinforcing, with perpetrators and victims most often coming from the same classes and sharing basic assumptions about violence. This is, I believe, a typical pattern for most kinds of violence arising out of “everyday” circumstances. However, assuming that the violent act in question is seen as legitimate, how does it at some point become illegitimate? Furthermore, even if violence can “say” something, why does it tend to say different things over time? Such questions are increasingly leading me to consider the role of historical forces outside of the narrative process of mentality-formation itself. While not the only possible methodology, Elias’s theory of the civilizing process seems to provide a fruitful conceptual framework for further study precisely

because it incorporates interactions between psychology, culture and social relations. Nonetheless, since completing my examination of nineteenth-century violence, I have become more interested in certain problematic areas in Elias's approach.

The key elements of the civilizing process – growing social interdependence and expanding state power – dramatically transformed nineteenth-century society, leading to greater expectations of self-control and increasing attention to subtle nuances of behavior. The pattern of cultural conflict that was emerging by the 1820s also fit: while Elias tended to emphasize the civilizing process as a relatively continuous progression, it is also apparent that it has been driven by historically specific alignments of conflict and accommodation. In the late middle ages, for instance, the “courtization of warriors” saw the diminution of violence as conflicts were channelled into new forms centring on struggles for status at monarchs' courts (Elias 1994: 465). In later eras a similar process functioned upon a different social landscape. The emergence of industrialism, the expansion of urban life and the creation of a mass society saw the civilizing process being impelled by other forces: e.g., class conflict. By demonstrating certain kinds of refined behavior, the middle classes were able to prove their equality to the classes above and superiority over those below. As Elias notes, “in the hands of the rising middle class [...] the idea of what is needed to make a society civilized is extended,” taking in much broader aspects of society as well as wider sections of the population in order to liberate them from “all that was still barbaric or irrational in existing conditions” (Elias 1994: 39). These motivations set the scene for a long-term social conflict, for what is considered “barbaric” or “irrational” – and, thus, what is “un-civilized” – was (as it remains) a moving target.

Built into the civilizing process, then, is the tendency for certain groups to be defined as an “uncivilized” threat to social order: this process is inherently discursive and cultural. At the same time, social pressure increases on lower classes to adopt new behavioral standards (sometimes willingly, sometimes not). The result is a decrease in the differences between classes' behavioral patterns, but an increase in the emphasis on “nuances” or slight variations in behavior:

The more the strong contrasts of individual conduct are tempered, the more the violent fluctuations of pleasure or displeasure are contained, moderated and changed by self-control, the greater becomes the sensitivity to shades or nuances of conduct, the more finely attuned people grow to minute gestures and forms, and the more complex becomes their experience of themselves and their world at levels which were previously hidden from consciousness through the veil of strong affects. (Elias 1994: 496)

This greater attention to the subtleties of conduct helps to ensure new forms of social differentiation: the constant reevaluation of current standards and attitudes

is at the heart of the civilizing process. With regard to violence, this tendency can lead to the invention of new forms of “violence” which had previously been accepted behavior. In nineteenth-century England, this increasingly “refined” sense of behavioral propriety constructed attitudes toward violence in a new way: as a “social problem.” This meant that discussions of violence were increasingly inflected by a variety of discourses. Violence came to serve as a vehicle for other kinds of social fears as well as beliefs regarding marriage, ideals of masculinity, specific forms of sport, attitudes toward outsiders and imaginations of national identity. Thus, it was like “crime,” which

became (as it remains) the repository of fears which had little to do with its relatively trivial cost to the society and economy at large. It came to be invested with large significance because it provided a convenient vehicle for the expression of fears about social change itself (Gatrell 1990: 244).

In the early nineteenth century, this relationship was innovative: it has subsequently become commonplace. Thus, Elias’s theories appear to be useful in the analysis of violence; however, I’d like to conclude by raising a few critical questions about them with regard to the relationship between the civilizing process and culture, the tendency for civilizing and de-civilizing trends to coexist and the impact of the civilizing process in different national contexts.

Although the *social* transformations to which Elias points were unquestionable influences on violence, their cultural echoes remain somewhat difficult to pin down. It seems obvious that increasing interdependence would have an impact on culture and individual psychology, but these influences themselves have remained somewhat elusive. For instance, *in what ways* were forms of external discipline translated into internal forms of self-control? How did people react to states’ monopolization of legitimate force? Elias and others have provided suggestions in these directions, but, rather like Freud, have tended to see culture as repressive, taming violent tendencies produced somewhere deep in our psyches. While this perspective can be very useful, it also tends to overlook cultural motivations (and justifications) for violence. Examining violence in terms of its “speakability” suggests that it is not only the *restraint* of violence but also violence itself which functions linguistically. Culture does not only *repress* violence; it may in some cases *enable* or even *demand* it and, if so approved, organize it to maintain particular cultural imperatives or power configurations. Attention to these factors forms a necessary supplement to theoretical approaches reliant upon the civilizing process.

A second issue relates to an assumed tendency toward increasing civilization. Elias was well aware of the problems of talking about social change in terms of quantity:

In all this we are not concerned merely with gradations, with ‘more’ or ‘less’. Each ‘increase’ in restraints and interdependencies is an expression of the fact that the ties between people, the way they depend on one another, are changing, and changing *qualitatively*. [...] And with the dynamic network of dependencies into which a human life is woven, the drives and behaviour of people take on a *different* form. (Elias 1994: 331, emphasis in original)

He and others have also pointed to the possibility that so-called “de-civilizing” trends, or “set-backs” in the civilizing process can occur (Spierenburg 1995: 22; Dunning, Waddington, Murphy 1992: 8). However, even this helpful caveat tends to underestimate the complexity of the civilizing process, because civilizing trends tend *to coexist with* de-civilizing ones. For instance, the nineteenth century saw the development of a new, more controlled form of boxing. The simpler and more brutal prize-fighting it replaced had been easily adaptable as a model for street fighting, and it had been this sporting model which had ritualized male brawling. Modern boxing – which was less brutal but more complex – could not fulfill this role; thus, even as sport fighting became less deadly and as brawling in general became less acceptable, those fights that remained became, I believe, less predictable and, arguably, more dangerous. Such apparently contradictory tendencies have also been suggested in Susanne Karstedt’s recent study of railroad travel and violence in nineteenth-century Germany. Easier and faster transportation helped engender so-called “weak ties” among people and serious violence declined. This would seem at first glance to support Elias’s argument about interdependence. However, there were increased opportunities for minor forms of interpersonal violence such as assault (Karstedt 2003). Moreover, the relationship between violence and civilizing tendencies is multifaceted. For instance, violence has been justified through eminently “civilized” arguments: in the nineteenth century, some advocates for the expanded use of corporal or capital punishment based their arguments on the refined motives of protecting women and children.<sup>2</sup> Along with such apparent contradictions within the civilizing process, active “resistance” to civilizing tendencies must be taken into account. Every mentality of violence distributes the right to use violence in particular ways and maintains specific social arrangements. Each, then, has particular winners and losers; changes in violence discourses can impinge upon these configurations of power in ways which are not acceptable to everyone.

Third, the relationship between the nation-state and civilizing trends remains unclear. For instance, certain forms of violence, such as ritualized male fighting, survived across Europe to differing extents in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There are also more direct connections between nationality and

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<sup>2</sup> Similar things could be said of more recent justifications of a nightmarish global prison regime in order to defend civilized values.

violence. In nineteenth-century England, a variety of commentators suggested that at least some forms of violence in England were more “civilized” than those in continental Europe, the United States, or, indeed, anywhere else in the world. This argument allowed a certain triumphal sense of national pride; however, it meant that when so-called “un-English” forms of violence erupted, they were all the more horrifying to contemporaries. More recently, this relationship has been reversed, and the comparatively high rates of violence and hooliganism in England (or by English people when abroad) has sometimes been commented upon as evidence of an allegedly “English disease” (Riddell 2004). The extent to which nations at a relatively equivalent stage of economic or social development – and thus with comparable levels of interdependence and state violence monopolies – have maintained different cultures and levels of violence points to the importance of examining culturally specific narratives of violence.

In conclusion, the theory of the civilizing process has proven itself to be a resilient and flexible contribution to the study of violent behavior in many historical eras. It is particularly useful when extended and enriched by narrative approaches to attitudes toward violence. Emphasizing a narrative perspective adds a greater level of nuance and complexity when dealing with the phenomenon of violence against the background of a broad series of long-term social, economic and technological changes. At the same time, Elias’s social and psychological emphases help to ground cultural approaches within a more solid historical framework. In conclusion, and from a genuinely interdisciplinary point of view, I think that history can help us know a great deal more about “how we got here” by highlighting the historical patterns of changing attitudes to violence. Moreover, it can also, I believe, usefully contribute to the discussion about where the study of violence can go from here.

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