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## Conceptualizing cultures of violence and cultural change

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## Conceptualizing Cultures of Violence and Cultural Change.

J. Carter Wood

Over the past two decades of crime historiography, violence has been increasingly approached as a cultural issue. Undoubtedly, the complexity of attitudes toward violence in our own time is obvious, whether one considers the equivocal relationship between the perception and reality of crime rates or recurring discussions about the appropriate levels of force which, for example, may be used by homeowners against burglars or by parents against children. More directly, of course, the trend toward cultural methodologies has had professional causes, including the broader 'cultural' and 'linguistic' turns in the humanities as well as debates about the reliability of statistical data on violent crime. In their wake, historians have plumbed new sources and reconsidered familiar ones in order to draw out the social meaning of violence in the past and establish a better qualitative context for quantitative data. It is now apparent that concerns about violence have fluctuated dramatically, as particular forms of violence have rapidly gained public attention and then faded from view. However, we have also learned enough to question the extent to which such fears have reflected alterations in actual violence. A 'culture' may move from seeing violence as a result of individual moral failure toward viewing it as a product of social forces or psychological imbalance in the absence of any dramatic alterations in the real nature or prevalence of violence itself.<sup>1</sup> Cultural emphases and professional interest may shift from one category of victim to another without corresponding variations in actual patterns of victimisation.<sup>2</sup> Thus, changes in 'cultures of violence' and changes in (real) violence are two different things. The expanding amount of cross-cultural data on violence also raises doubts about the extent to which culture is an independent force in its history. How much can culture explain if some patterns in violent behaviour appear across 'cultures'? To what extent does culture reflect forms

of social or economic organisation? Is culture related to enduring human psychological preferences? The balance between ‘nature’ and ‘nurture’, tensions between continuity and change and the relationships between society and individual are not, of course, issues unique to the topic of violence. Nonetheless, violence’s prominent place across disciplines, its centrality in modern debates and the rapid growth in its historiography make a conceptual discussion about the connection between violence and culture all the more relevant and necessary.

My own research has led me to reconsider some common assumptions about violence and culture. In particular, I have become increasingly interested in perspectives on violence which are influenced by ‘evolutionary psychology’. Some of this work has been sharply critical of cultural approaches to violence. Nonetheless, I am convinced that cultural, sociological and psychological methodologies can coexist in ways which are mutually beneficial, thereby providing a broader framework and agenda for future work. However, this will mean reconsidering what ‘cultures of violence’ are, what they do and how they change. For example, it is clear that violence is always understood through narrative, a distinctly ‘cultural’ process.<sup>3</sup> However, if, as an evolutionary perspective suggests, the human mind is a ‘narrative machine’, appreciating how it functions (and why it works in the manner that it does) will be crucial to comprehending the cultural forms it produces.<sup>4</sup> In what follows, I will discuss the concepts ‘culture’ and ‘violence’ before moving on to describe two key functions of culture with regard to physical aggression: identifying and controlling violence. These topics form the basis of a subsequent consideration of cultural change. My overall interest is to explore ways of anchoring understandings of culture in enduring psychological motivations, material realities and forms of social organisation, a topic to which I shall return in my conclusion.

### **‘Culture’ and ‘Violence’**

The terms ‘culture’ and ‘violence’ are invoked to cover a wide variety of phenomena. It may, for

instance, be impossible to propose a universally applicable definition of ‘culture’: in the early 1950s, two anthropologists identified at least 164 definitions of the term, and subsequent intellectual trends have, if anything, made matters even more complex.<sup>5</sup> Although one common denominator among cultural studies has been identified as an interest in meaning and symbolic representation, this focus should remain allied to the reconstruction of patterns and causal relationships in actual behaviour.<sup>6</sup> Culture is not only what people think, it is also what they do. Ideally, cultural explanations would also strive to be mutually non-contradictory with relevant approaches from the social and natural sciences. This means taking into account both the nature of the individual mind as well as the dynamics of social interaction. Thus, ‘cultures’ should be understood as historically accumulated collections of beliefs and practices which are socially produced and aimed at meeting psychological needs. I would like to think that most elements in this definition are uncontroversial; nonetheless, as recent debates suggest, the nature of the relationship between culture and society remains a sensitive subject among historians.<sup>7</sup> The suggestion that culture serves ‘psychological needs’ may need more explanation, implying, as it does, human nature, a concept which is not universally welcomed. Without being able to do justice to a much wider debate about an enormously complex topic, I would like to briefly sketch out what I mean.

Evolutionary psychologists have made a convincing case that the human mind has been subject to selective, evolutionary processes which have resulted in a particular structure of psychological adaptations.<sup>8</sup> The resulting mental mechanisms are variable and flexible; however, they are not infinitely so, creating cross-cultural regularities in human social behaviour. Cognitive psychology and behavioural genetics have explored the mental prerequisites which not only allow the generation of culture but which also shape its resulting dynamics.<sup>9</sup> However, despite the optimistic ring to the term ‘psychological needs’ and the notion that culture ‘meets’ them, neither they nor it are a recipe for peaceful coexistence or individual happiness. Some psychological mechanisms arose in prehistoric contexts at odds with what has come to be seen as desirable,

acceptable or even 'rational'. Some needs conflict with others. Others may not even be consciously apparent in individual decisions. Nevertheless, what the psychologist Steven Pinker has called the 'long reach of human nature' is relevant to the modern cultural history of violence, as predispositions shaped by the evolutionary past have confronted rapidly changing social contexts over the last several centuries.<sup>10</sup> People are no more 'programmed' to be violent than they are to be considerate, but 'selection thinking' – considering how evolutionary processes have shaped human psychology – can contribute to the cultural analysis of violence.<sup>11</sup> Culture, after all, is not a free-floating force or a realm (for example, defined by text or language) existing independently of psychology or material reality. It is, firstly, produced within an individual psyche with its own in-built predispositions.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, each psyche is possessed by an individual who is positioned within a series of specific relationships with other people. Some of these relationships are consensual and equal; others are less so. Culture, although it cannot 'do' anything on its own, provides a framework through which people are motivated to act. Subsequently, incidents of violence are individually and socially understood through narrative, that is, through the stories which are developed by participants, observers and the institutions which deal with them (such as the courts and media). These narratives, in turn, can express motivations or justifications for further violence or, alternatively, for its avoidance or suppression.

Positing a 'nature' which is stable (at least with regard to historical time) does not preclude seeing cultures as complex and consequential. Evolved mental mechanisms can be highly sensitive to local conditions. While it is true that evolutionary psychology tends toward 'universalising' the human psyche (in identifying a psychological apparatus possessed by all normal brains), it is not contradicted by cultural diversity and change. Indeed, evolutionary psychology helps to more concretely define what a 'culture' actually is, by explaining where it is located, how it emerges and some of the parameters within which it functions. Reconstructing a 'culture of' some social behaviour (whether, for example, eating, sport or violence) means identifying and explaining patterns in belief and action shared by a particular group of individuals.

However, such cultures are rarely homogenous, static or clearly bounded. Not all members of a group observe all cultural prescriptions, or they interpret them idiosyncratically. Cultural patterns are dynamic, full of tension and variable over time. It is often difficult to identify where one 'culture' ends and another begins. Furthermore, any conceptualisation of culture makes (perhaps unspoken) psychological assumptions. Arguing, for example, that culture is driven by 'power' presumes that people are interested in pursuing certain kinds of influence over others. Explicitly incorporating the perspectives of evolutionary psychology means viewing the relationship between culture and mind in a particular way. 'Culture', in the sense of the accumulated beliefs and practices of a defined group, is actively processed by the individuals confronted by it, that is, remoulded and remade from a personal perspective according to cross-culturally valid mental processes and in relation to individuals' position within a particular social figuration. The result is a 'private culture' reflecting a personal reassembly of surrounding cultural information.<sup>13</sup> It is a function of an interaction between genetic inheritance and 'environmental' factors such as social structure, group pressure and the contingencies of individual experience. Collectively, such private cultures form shared group cultures, which remain riven by internal tensions and smaller subdivisions with distinct attitudinal and behavioural variations. A particular 'culture' is thus a provisional result of psychology, social structure and accumulated, prior culture.

As with 'culture', there can be many definitions of 'violence'. Many of those used by historians have aimed more at clearly delineating a specific area of study (for example, distinguishing physical from mental violence) than explaining what 'violence' actually is. As with 'culture', the impression can easily arise that 'violence' is a distinctive thing, a sort of universal substance which erupts – in greater or lesser quantities – in different social settings and historical moments: despite resulting from different intentions, taking place within different contexts and having dramatically different consequences, phenomena as diverse as schoolyard bullying and genocide can be labelled as 'violence'. In my view, the perspectives of cognitive and evolutionary psychologists are helpful in developing a differentiated conceptualisation of what violence is, and

some of them are compatible with historical theorisations and evidence. For example, Pinker concludes that violence

is not a primitive, irrational urge, nor is it a 'pathology' except in the metaphorical sense of a condition that everyone would like to eliminate. Instead, it is a near-inevitable outcome of the dynamics of self-interested, rational social organisms.<sup>14</sup>

I think that a critical application of this definition is useful for the cultural history of violence. Initially, there is a useful focus on individuals and the relationships among them as foundational to society and culture, a common feature of evolutionary psychology. Furthermore, behind the phrase 'near-inevitable' lurks a reality familiar to those who have studied violence in any particular society: some violence – or its latent threat – is always present. Nonetheless, the 'near' is important, and even though homicide can be seen as 'the ultimate conflict resolution technique', its use is variable and subject to the availability of alternatives, such as legal action.<sup>15</sup> Here, as elsewhere, characteristic patterns of human psychology – and the various goals toward which they are directed – need to be taken into account. Importantly, from an evolutionary perspective, 'self-interested' does not always mean 'selfish', as cooperation can also serve individual interests.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, 'rational' does not always mean 'reasonable' or sensibly calculated, as people often react according to unconscious or competing motivations and on the basis of incomplete information, but it usefully suggests that behaviour within groups tends to be coherently patterned. As annotated, Pinker's definition is useful in highlighting violence as a variable outcome of social dynamics and signalling what culture is actually doing to violent behaviour: shaping it according to particular kinds of social arrangements and psychological needs. Evolutionary perspectives emphasize violence's source in 'normal' social relationships, a point increasingly noted by historians. As V. A. C. Gatrell has argued, 'even in stable times, violence is immanent', and, as I shall discuss, the nature of most cultures of violence contributes to concealing that fact.<sup>17</sup>

Violence is one of the reasons why, although culture evolves to meet human needs, not all people in a given society will have all their needs met. Some needs – such as for sustenance, status or security – cause conflicts themselves, as individuals (or groups) may have (or perceive that they have) different interests. Self-interest, dominance, hierarchy and inequality have featured in all societies, and psychology frames the priorities and preferences recognisable in all cultures. ‘Culture’ is thus meaningful in itself, but is ultimately located in the psyche and shaped by social interaction. Much everyday violence, rather than a form of pathology, is a more-or-less predictable, culturally mediated strategy to deal with some of these interactions. Many forms of violence emerge from the ways in which the (extremely long-term) stabilities of the human evolutionary past meet the (short-term) instabilities of social change. Culture plays an important role in managing this relationship.

### **The Functions of Culture**

For some, the foregoing may seem an unwarranted limitation of culture to a mere ‘reaction to’ certain social structures or evolutionary imperatives. This is not my intention, and while seeing culture embedded in psychological and social structures may limit its *independent* force, it neither denies cultural diversity nor underestimates the complexity of what we might see as culture’s emergent properties or internal workings. It can, however, provide an explanation of how certain kinds of important cultural phenomena, such as narrative, function and, furthermore, why they have come to exist in the first place.<sup>18</sup> Despite the variety and intricacy of cultures of violence, many of their underlying functions are cross-culturally similar. I will focus here on two of the most important of these functions: the identification and shaping of violence. Violence is made visible by culture, as the boundaries of legitimate physical force are drawn and the sources of violence are identified. Violence is also shaped through culture, which channels aggression into socially tolerable (and possibly even socially useful) forms.



If the history of violence has shown us anything, it is that ‘violence’ is a phenomenon in the eye of the beholder, a historically defined notion dependent not only on physically aggressive acts but also views of justice, attitudes toward cruelty and notions of public and private space, among other things. The boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate forms of physical aggression, a fundamental distinction, are established and maintained culturally. As part of defining ‘violence’, ideas about who is responsible for it also take shape, relating violence to social arrangements such as class and gender as well as to attitudes toward the self, morality and psychology. Normative standards, however, do more than simply differentiate right from wrong: they fundamentally affect perception and memory. Is a particular physically forceful act legitimate or illegitimate? Is it a direct threat to individual, group or social interests? Does it offend moral standards, or, to the contrary, does it enact them? Cultures of violence help individuals to answer such questions, providing guidance in navigating social relationships. Their cultural functions are universal; their specific parameters vary, but they rarely do so in arbitrary ways.

As a recent sociological study of male-on-male violence in Germany succinctly points out:

not all violent acts are perceived and talked about to the same extent. Certain forms of violence are so normal in men’s lives that the men themselves do not perceive them as violence and therefore have only limited memory of them.<sup>19</sup>

Elizabeth Stanko has focused on similar elements in the relationship between culture and violence. Pointing out the state’s limited notion of what ‘violence’ is – specific legally defined acts which are reported to the police and which they decide to treat as violence – she notes:

violence in the home, bullying at school or in the neighbourhood, courtship violence, gay bashing, racial harassment and crime, sexual harassment and intimidation, ‘fair’

fights between adolescent men or women – little of which comes to the attention of the police or any official agency – are commonplace and rarely classified within the narrow boundaries of the criminal law.<sup>20</sup>

As a result, ‘victimisation ... appears to be an aberrant event, piercing the harmony of normality’, while in actuality, ‘for a sizeable proportion of the population – both women and men – encounters with violence are a part of their daily lives’.<sup>21</sup> The ubiquity and prosaic nature of many kinds of violence have been increasingly noted by historians; however, the fact that so much violence remains unperceived in contemporary European societies, which are relatively highly sensitized to violence and whose victimized groups are better organized than at perhaps any time in history, makes Stanko’s critique all the more striking. It also emphasizes the historical importance of violence’s visibility (or, more specifically, invisibility) in times when it was more broadly tolerated.

Indeed, the development of attitudes toward violence over the last few centuries has been fundamentally one of making violence more visible, partly through expanding its definition. As Martin Wiener has detailed, the growing visibility of violence against women in nineteenth-century England – that is, a tendency toward seeing hitherto acceptable ‘disciplinary’ acts *as violence* – was important in courts’ increasing willingness to protect abused women and to control men.<sup>22</sup> Previously tolerable (or even laudable) behaviour was redefined as unacceptable. Importantly, visibility does not necessarily refer to the actual openness of behaviour such as violence to observation. The relative invisibility of violence against women did not always depend on it taking place within a materially isolated private sphere: an imagined privacy helped to ensure that some public violence was ignored, making outside intervention less likely. Seemingly paradoxically, spousal abuse became increasingly ‘visible’ as a social issue as the domestic sphere was, in some ways, becoming more enclosed.<sup>23</sup> There is, moreover, no inevitable historical trend toward greater visibility. Prohibited behaviour can, through growing acceptance or simply

increasing prevalence, cease to be as visible as it once was. This would be the case in processes of *de-civilization* associated with, for example, social and state collapse.

Along with allowing violence to be seen, the second main function of culture is to control it. No society has ever comprehensively banned all interpersonal physical force: some level of aggression is always legitimate in certain contexts, and cultures of violence are less aimed at ending violence *per se* than in channelling and shaping it. Having drawn lines of legitimacy around some kinds of force, of course, a society wages war against those sorts which remain. However, 'controlling' violence means much more than prohibition; it involves not only the negative condemnation of illegitimate force but also the positive support (or even celebration) of legitimate force. Seeing violence as 'socially useful' sits uneasily with the modern truism that 'violence never solved anything'; however, violence's social functions arise from its sources in psychology and the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. If violence is 'near-inevitable' in some of these relationships (in contrast to it being merely culturally learned), it is socially useful to provide a structured cultural form which allows it to be used while also being contained. Two relevant examples are ritualized male fighting and the notion of vengeance.

The main form of public violence in most societies involves inter-male antagonisms, and much of it has historically been ritualized.<sup>24</sup> Martin Daly and Margo Wilson suggest that there is a cross-cultural 'logic' to male conflict, arguing that it has been the rule rather than the exception across human history.<sup>25</sup> Typically, men's altercations are seen as socially legitimate by at least a large subsection of the population, for whom they are way of managing the distribution of masculine status. This legitimacy is typically conditional upon adherence to rules ranging from complicated combat rituals to less elaborate assumptions about where, when and how disputes can be settled, honour defended and manhood proven. The social function of such fighting cultures is twofold, enabling a public arena within which masculine honour can be won and defended while enclosing those conflicts within socially acceptable boundaries. The logic of male fighting is rooted in evolutionary psychology, but it is also a question of social structure; physical force is a

means by which hierarchies of power are negotiated, and ‘violence between men, as a solution to an argument or to save face or status, is most prevalent among working-class, poor, and disenfranchised young men’.<sup>26</sup> Particularly for poor young men, the resort to violence can be a rational strategy to gain status. Cultures of violence provide restrictions on how such conflicts should play out; although the ‘rules’ can be broken, prevailing cultural codes give people a coherent framework for evaluating their own behaviour and that of others.

The social value of limiting violence is clear; however, what about another – from our modern perspective less pleasant – function: enabling violence? What, for instance, is the social value of legitimized vengeance? The risk-taking and obsession with honour which characterizes many male social interactions are often seen as products of social dysfunction, and retribution has a particularly bad reputation in light of its association with emotions we have been taught to despise and political forces which many find distressing. However, vengeance has been a legitimate motive (to varying degrees) for physical aggression in all societies, at least in part because it has proven to be useful. It has been argued that an ingrained sense of injustice – a perception of a moral debt which needs to be paid as a result of a wrong – is the product of a fairly straightforward psychological imperative ‘to reckon justice and administer punishment by a calculus which ensures that violators reap no advantage from their misdeeds’.<sup>27</sup> While vengeful violence sometimes eliminates those who have seriously violated social norms to their own advantage, its mere threat aims at deterring such violations in the first place. The precise calibration and forms of punishment have, of course, varied, with the ‘calculus’ of vengeance (like the limits of ‘self-defence’) enmeshed in cultural notions of justice and the respective ranking of various misdeeds. Vengeance is often regarded as bloodthirsty and anarchic, and out-of-control feuds or vendettas can indeed pose a serious threat to the local social order. This is why most states have sought to suppress extra-judicial retribution whenever capable of doing so. Nonetheless, however unpalatable, the social utility of retributive violence should not be ignored, particularly in unpoliced or lightly policed societies which are particularly reliant upon forms of

individual or community self-policing. Such violence codes are far from ancient relics, and they tend to reappear whenever state justice is (or is seen as) inadequate. Elijah Anderson has argued that a retributive ‘code of the street’ in modern American inner-cities is ‘a cultural adaptation to a profound lack of faith in the police and the judicial system – and in others who would champion one’s personal security’.<sup>28</sup> This phenomenon is not confined to the Philadelphian streets that Anderson took as his topic of study. I would suggest that it is universal.

Perhaps part of the modern unease about vengeance relates to a complicated tension: although most people are probably happy to relinquish personal responsibility for vengeance, the state’s use of this power remains unsettling, particularly due to the vast imbalance in power between the state and the targeted individual. Similarly, the relationship between public violence and masculinity has become more tenuous than in earlier periods. However, as they remain, inter-male competition and retribution have been important parts of all cultures of violence. This does not mean, of course, that there is an automatic link between these motivations and violence per se (nor does it mean such violence is ‘natural’ and should be simply accepted). When given the opportunity to gain honour or to deter social disruption through other means, most people often do so. Sometimes, however, the underlying psychological motives are untouched. As Thomas Gallant has found, the decline in public fighting rituals in the Greek Mediterranean did not destroy the local culture of honour, which was merely maintained in a different form through the courts.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, the difficulty in reforming cultures of violence emphasizes the ways in which violence is not simply an explosion of atavistic brutality, but can also be analysed according to its psychological value and social logic. These topics are also important to understanding how cultural change influences violence.

### **Culture, Violence and Change**

Specific cultures of violence are indeed ‘constructions’ which have meaning because the people

living in a given society agree that they do rather than as a result of some fixed genetic programming. Unlike natural laws, they are neither universal nor deterministic. Moreover, attitudes about physical aggression are influenced by other cultural phenomena, such as attitudes toward sport, gender, fairness, public space, drinking, property or politics. A decline in the acceptability of ‘brutal’ sports may have a broader affect on attitudes toward violence, just as a greater insistence on public propriety more generally will diminish the acceptance of street-fighting. Such patterns may be based on a crucial aspect of psychology: as John Corbin has suggested, ‘Concern for coherence is a basic engine of human action’.<sup>30</sup> We can see this ‘engine’ at work when attitudes toward violence seem to take on a life of their own, as efforts are made to reduce or remove apparent contradictions within them. Revulsion toward ‘cruelty’ or an emphasis on civilizing ‘humanity’ can initially have limited aims or be intended to mainly protect a particular group in society. However, once established, new instances of cruelty are identified, contradictions in the culture of humanity can be recognized and sympathies can be broadened.<sup>31</sup> As such notions are successfully expanded, their deployment can become increasingly subtle. For example, the notion that an attack on a ‘helpless’ victim was the characteristic of a ‘brutal’ assault could, in the nineteenth century, extend from women and children to include various categories of ‘defenceless’ men.<sup>32</sup>

Another area in which ‘culture’ is especially important relates to education, including not only institutionalized learning but also all of the means through which attitudes and beliefs are passed on across generations. Here, culture has had a great impact on violence, not least because – if one accepts that there is a social ‘logic’ to violence – it is less remarkable that physical aggression occurs than that cultures of violence have been able to contribute to its long-term decline.<sup>33</sup> Gatrell has stressed the powers of social learning in reshaping affective relationships over time:

Recommended by a culture’s prophets and teachers and internalized by dominant

groups, shifts in affective patterns develop their own momentum as rules are elaborated. Although some reactions operate automatically, the feelings associated with them are intellectually mediated and highly socialized.<sup>34</sup>

The historically specific intellectual mediation of such automatic reactions, urges or predispositions makes up a large portion of what we understand as 'culture'. The seeming independence of culture also appears to be demonstrated by the shifting relationship between the objective reality of physical aggression and the attitudes toward it, wherein the latter appear to be almost limitlessly variable. What is more, few complex societies possess a single, all-encompassing culture of violence, rather, it is likely that there will be multiple and competing cultures of violence.

However, while cultures of violence are social constructions, they are not arbitrary ones. As I have described, they serve similar functions in all societies: identifying violence, clarifying who is violent and attempting to contain violence by establishing rules for its legitimate deployment. Rather than an amorphous force detached from the social structure, culture is produced among individuals who are positioned within particular relationships with one another. Violence related to trespasses of social boundaries, honour and possession is ubiquitous.<sup>35</sup> The nature and stability of these boundaries – and the security of honour and possession – will, in return, be decisive in the formation of cultures of violence. Thus any analysis of how cultures of violence change requires attention to such basic issues as security and fear. Fear can, of course, be artificially manipulated, and studies of crime 'panics' have shown how suddenly the perception of violence can outstrip actual threats.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, attention to such extreme cases should not overshadow the possibility that most people are able to evaluate everyday, local dangers with some accuracy. As in the case of the 'code of the street' identified by Elijah Anderson, the actual degree of physical security in a particular network of social relationships will have a profound effect on the culture of violence which emerges from it. More generally, comparatively high levels

of intolerance toward defensive violence will be unlikely in societies characterized by constant threats to individual security, and it is improbable that increasing sensitivities will develop amidst material and social breakdown. In the same way, personal vengeance and ritualized violent dispute settlement will be more acceptable in societies with weak and/or distant state authorities than in those with well-functioning courts and police forces. The specific form of rituals or the precise calibration of vengeance codes will, of course, vary; nevertheless, they will have recognisably similar functions, and the extent to which they change will be tied to the nature of local social relationships. Cultures of violence are not only products of past tradition but also of present need.

This is one of the reasons why cultures of violence are so often resistant to change, such as the imposition of new forms of state authority over populations committed to personal vengeance. Although Norbert Elias's theory of the 'process of civilization' might superficially appear optimistic about the possibility of controlling physical aggression, one of its strengths, in my view, is its emphasis on the immense shifts in 'social power' which are essential to 'civilized conduct':

Classes living permanently in danger of starving to death or of being killed by enemies can hardly develop or maintain those stable restraints characteristic of the more civilized types of conduct. To instil and maintain a more stable super-ego agency, a relatively high standard of living and a fairly high degree of security are necessary.<sup>37</sup>

While individuals or certain social groups might advocate reforming a culture of violence that no longer serves their interests, making that leap may be relatively challenging for those in other classes or groups. Being the first to refrain from violence (or its threat) entails risks as long as older understandings still hold sway. Assuming that a demonstrated willingness to resort to violence is itself a weapon, it is difficult to be the first to 'disarm'.<sup>38</sup> Such forms of relative domestic social disarmament are possible, as the past several centuries in Europe have shown. The



evolution of authorities which have taken unto themselves (and jealously guarded) the power to settle disputes and to mete out retribution on behalf of wronged individuals – thereby relieving them of the responsibility of doing so themselves – changed social relationships. This meant a concurrent ‘cultural’ shift; however, it was not only driven by a growth in sympathy or an abstract sense that less violence is better or more ‘civilized’. Reductions in violence have been hard won, the outcome of long-term processes of state building, new levels of material security and profound changes in interpersonal relations. Such broad shifts were the preconditions for the historical agency which ‘civilizing’ reformers have undoubtedly enjoyed. In combating cultures of honour (a task which, one must note, continues), Europeans have relied upon state compulsion, the provision of alternatives to violence and the production of a social reality in which, for most people, the resort to violence is usually more damaging to status than its avoidance. Here again, society and culture interact with psychology: social pressures to refrain from using violence can only be effective if exerted upon people with psychological means of self restraint, predispositions toward social conformity and a concern for status. The provision of alternative forms of dispute settlement have to satisfy the need for security and the calculus of ‘justice’. ‘Respectability’ is not merely a cultural notion, but also involves the distribution of economic resources, one’s place in a social hierarchy and a psychology of social recognition. Social organisation, psychological mechanisms and culture are mutually interactive, and cultural change is not simply about culture.

## **Conclusion**

Cultures of violence are important, as they are the frameworks through which physical aggression is understood, justified, condemned and controlled. Cultural trends such as a growth in ‘sensibility’ or ‘humanitarianism’ in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are evidence that increasing numbers of people accepted the new narratives on pain and suffering which were being generated. However, to see such developments purely in cultural terms would underestimate the

importance of social figurations, institutional change and evolved psychology. 'Cultures of honour' are more likely to develop in some kind of socio-economic contexts than others, and the reactions and attitudes which compose them have a physio-psychological basis.<sup>39</sup> If economy, society and psychology have been crucial in building such 'cultures', then it is also likely that they have been (and will be) elements in their decline. Those historical developments which have engaged with the most effective 'levers for humane social change' in human nature seem to have had the largest impact on cultures of violence.<sup>40</sup> Understanding this topic will require interdisciplinary, 'vertically integrated' explanations on different levels.<sup>41</sup> As Daly and Wilson argue,

the concept of natural selection explains behavior at a distinct level complementary to the explanations afforded by motivational theories. A psychologist might be satisfied to explain the behavior of two men fighting a duel in terms of self-esteem or status or face. An evolutionary psychologist will also want to clarify why the human psyche should be such as to value intangible social resources enough to risk death over them.<sup>42</sup>

Because cultural historians, like psychologists, tend to be interested in more immediate levels of explanation does not mean that other levels are inconsequential, especially if they want to make explanatory judgements which extend beyond a specific time and place.

Although the diversity of cultural responses to violence suggests that the number of social forms which can serve psychological predispositions toward personal security, family life, the formation of hierarchies or sexual competition is large, it is not infinite. Arising out of a variety of social relationships – all of which are shaped by aspects of power<sup>43</sup> – violence is a common resource for dealing with distinct kinds of interpersonal tensions and social contexts. The positive side of the process of civilization has been the extent to which these tensions have been reduced or have proven capable of alternative means of settlement; however, a careful consideration of this process also highlights the enormous long-term economic, political and

social effort involved in producing civilizing effects, the extent to which they have been resisted and the tenuous nature of the resulting social and psychological arrangements. The relative pacification of most of contemporary Europe may obscure the ‘fragile construct’ of civility, and despite the general containment of ‘collective passions’,

there have always been fractures through which violence recurrently breaks free. Come a collapse in the structures of authority or in the material rewards which sustain our social collaborations, and repudiated instincts are easily unleashed.<sup>44</sup>

The process of civilization is constantly dynamic; it is thus always potentially reversible:

The armor of civilized conduct would crumble very rapidly if, through a change in society, the degree of insecurity that existed earlier were to break in upon us again, and if danger became as incalculable as it once was. Corresponding fears would soon burst the limits set to them today.<sup>45</sup>

In a seeming paradox, cultures of violence are both robust and fragile. On the one hand, they influence some of the most fundamental beliefs of large numbers of people, thereby playing a role in shaping countless individual conflicts and, alternatively, enabling and repressing many kinds of serious and petty cruelties. However, on an almost daily basis, the contemporary world confronts us with evidence of how rapidly the intricate rules and prohibitions imposed by such cultures can break down. Cultural historians of violence would do well to keep such lessons in mind.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Wiener, *Reconstructing the Criminal: Culture, Law and Policy in England, 1830-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

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