

A Change of Perspective: Integrating Evolutionary Psychology into the Historiography of Violence

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Violence is something we always have with us, even if its presence and meaning fluctuates in different times and places. Debates continue and knowledge varies from country to country, but historians have greatly contributed to understanding the continuities and changes in this phenomenon. Painstaking archival research has produced broad statistical outlines of fatal aggression in the past. For example, homicide appears to have declined in Europe since the early modern period, a trend that has often, though not without contention, been interpreted as a ‘civilising process’ (Eisner 2001; Spierenburg 2008). In North America, the long-term trend is less straightforward (Roth 2009). But alongside important quantitative findings, the ‘cultural turn’ has directed historians’ attention to the changing social meaning of violence. Since both the (largely quantitative) ‘social’ and (largely qualitative) ‘cultural’ approaches to the history of violence have their counterparts in criminology, it is surprising that, despite recurring calls for more interdisciplinary cooperation, the divide between history and criminology has remained so rarely crossed (Lawrence unpublished). In what follows I focus on historical studies of violence; however, my comments are intended to be relevant to historians and criminologists alike, given their common topical and theoretical interests. I will first consider historians’ views regarding evolutionary psychology and violence, although there has been relatively little debate within the discipline on this issue; I will then leave the field of history to consider Darwinian views of two issues relevant to historical, cultural and criminological studies of violence—‘social-role theory’ and the notion of ‘social construction’—focusing particularly on the different rates and contexts of serious physical aggression among men and women. Finally, I will reflect on how evolutionary psychology contributes to a better understanding of the social and cultural contexts of violence.

1. EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY AND HISTORY: THE CURRENT (LACK OF) DEBATE

If there is an intellectual war regarding the relevance and status of biology and evolutionary theory for the social sciences and humanities, it might be said that historians have so far found themselves far from the front lines. The history of violence has developed within the fields of social and cultural history (moving somewhat from the former toward the latter [Wood 2006]), where discussions of methodology rarely broach biological issues, except perhaps to downplay them (e.g., Hunt 1989; Bonnell and Hunt 1999; Burke 2004; Green 2007).

However, related disciplines have seen significant publications addressing evolutionary theory, notably sociology (Runciman 1998; Sanderson 2001), economics (Skyrms 1996; Koslowski 1999; Young 2001), criminology (Ellis and Walsh 2000), political science and public policy (Rubin 2002; Bloom and Dess 2003) and law (Masters and Gruter 1992). Going back to the 1970s, one can already find a well-developed contribution of biological thinking to anthropological approaches, and the *Annual Review of Anthropology* features both 'biological anthropology' and 'socio-cultural anthropology' (though they appear in separate sections). Anthropologist Jerome H. Barkow's recent edited collection *Missing the Revolution: Darwinism for Social Scientists*—despite its somewhat pugnacious title—is a balanced discussion of the relevance of evolutionary psychology to the social sciences, and its contributors come from the fields of psychology, anthropology, sociology and criminology but not history (Barkow 2006). Another recent book addressing multiple aspects of the evolution of human psychology—many of interest to historians—included contributions from people in departments of archaeology, psychology, anthropology, zoology, public health, management, environmental science and neurobiology but, once again, not history (Gangestad and Simpson 2007). Cultural studies—closely related to cultural history—has also engaged

with biology and the issue of a common ‘human nature’ (Barker 2000; Bennett, Grossberg and Morris 2009). ‘In very broad terms’, John Storey has argued, ‘culture is how we live nature (including our own biology)’ (Storey 2003: ix). Art historians and literature scholars have also confronted this issue (Carroll 1995; Dissanayake 2000; Volland and Grammer 2003; Carroll 2004; Gottschall and Wilson 2005). The status of Darwinian thinking may remain contentious in these disciplines, but it has certainly fed into crucial debates.

This has been far less so in history, though with important exceptions (e.g., Kroll and Bachrach 1990; Hinshaw 2008; Smail 2008). Historians who *have* addressed evolutionary psychology or other biological approaches have often done so dismissively or defensively. In 2000, Jeffrey Adler and Thomas Gallant concluded that a historical perspective ‘especially calls into question universalist models’ of violence:

Biochemical research is unlikely to explain why the homicide rate in early twentieth-century Memphis, for example, was fourteen times higher than that of Philadelphia, twenty-five times higher than that of Berlin, and fifty-nine times higher than the homicide rate of London or why South Carolina had more homicides in 1878 than the combined totals of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Michigan, and Minnesota. (Adler and Gallant 2000)

This sort of response might be summarised as ‘things change’. Stasis and similarity, in this view, may be biological, but change, difference and variation are *cultural*, and ‘culture’ is presumed to have nothing (or at least very little) to do with biology. Peter Mandler even urged cultural historians to use social science to defend themselves against ‘biology envy’ and the ‘vast claims made by socio-biology and evolutionary psychology to have unlocked the secrets of human behaviour’ (Mandler 2004: 116-17). Carla Hesse, similarly, saw the ‘fundamental aim’ of psycholinguistics, sociobiology and evolutionary psychology as the discovery of ‘immutable laws of human behaviour’; these fields’ interests are ‘essentially at cross purposes with what historians want to know about “meaning”, “identity”, “needs”, “desires”,

“discourse” and “narrative”, and their levels of analysis are ‘deeply incommensurable with those of the historian’ (Hesse 2004: 207). Reviewing Martin Wiener’s study of male violence in Victorian England (Wiener 2004), criminologist Anette Ballinger dismissed the author’s ‘strange’ combining of evolutionary psychology and the theory of the ‘civilising process’ as theoretical ‘confusion’. Given the tentativeness with which Wiener gestured toward Darwinian approaches in that book, the ire generated by his suggestion that male sexual possessiveness was ‘possibly’ a ‘biologically male-linked trait’ speaks volumes about the vehemence with which the boundaries between culture and evolutionary biology are sometimes policed (Ballinger 2005: 218).

Much of the attention evolutionary psychology *has* received from historians has focused on violence. One of the most ambitious efforts remains David T. Courtwright’s study of violence in America, which considers social factors in the light of biological and evolutionary evidence regarding male aggression (Courtwright 1996). Jeffrey Adler wrote an article analysing violence in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Chicago through the lens of evolutionary psychology; although he was ultimately sceptical about its utility, his intriguing article marks a rare effort by a historian to at least confront it constructively (Adler 2003). There were a few signs of a changing attitude in 2007. The two published responses to an article of mine on ways of combining sociological, cultural and evolutionary perspectives on the history of violence were critical, in different ways, that I had not been quite biological *enough* (Wood 2007a; Wiener 2007; Rosenwein 2007; Wood 2007b). Stuart Carroll made several positive references to work by evolutionary psychologists in the introduction to his edited collection on cultures of violence (Carroll 2007). Finally, Gregory Hanlon’s *Human Nature in Rural Tuscany* looked at several topics in an early-modern Tuscan village—including conflict and violence—from a perspective influenced by evolutionary and cognitive psychology. The frequently violent conflicts and disputes in seventeenth-century

Montefollonico are placed within an evolutionary framework, bringing out their underlying patterns and their commonalities with similar phenomena in other times and places. Emphasis is usefully put on both the rational, instrumental motivations for violence as well as the less calculating (but still, from an evolutionary point of view, 'useful') emotional psychology that generates aggression: 'Violence is part of our design', Hanlon argues, 'not a disease to be eradicated' (Hanlon 2007: 86).

Despite such encouraging contributions to interdisciplinary dialogue, the lack of sustained engagement with evolutionary approaches is curious. Historians are certainly not uninterested in psychology, and their research is full of suppositions about how people think and behave. 'Whole works', Daniel Lord Smail has rightly observed, 'can be shaped by psychological assumptions' (Smail 2008: 159). Perhaps most historians are content with a model of human nature that combines a few drives and motivations (toward, say, status or pleasure and away from discomfort or humiliation) with a general culture-absorbing ability (i.e., 'learning'). One participant at a 2008 history conference responded to my argument that historians should pay more attention to biological explanations of violence by asserting that 'social psychology' should surely be sufficient: after all, she said, 'people get their ideas from culture, don't they?' History, especially social and cultural history, has been strongly influenced by theoretical impulses that—whether inspired by Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Geertz or Foucault—emphasise external forces acting on people in historical situations, whether means of production, discourses of power or symbolic representations; the structures in the human mind that process, interpret, enable or resist such forces are often ignored. Combined with a predominant emphasis on change, diversity and cultural particularity, it is not difficult to fathom historians' (or culturalist-oriented criminologists') indifference to explorations of the innate brain structure possessed by 'culture-bearing organisms', of the presence of human universals and of the 'psychic unity of humankind' (Daly and Wilson 1989; Brown 1991;

Cosmides and Tooby 1997). Despite the prevailing disinterest in evolutionary perspectives, I will, in the next section, examine two issues to which they are relevant, namely *socialisation* and *social construction*.

2. EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY, SOCIAL ROLES AND CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION

There are now several readable introductions to evolutionary perspectives on human behaviour (e.g., Wright 1994; Cosmides and Tooby 1997; Segerstråle 2000; Pinker 2002; Ridley 2004). As its name suggests, evolutionary psychology is a framework for understanding the human mind's development. As Leda Cosmides and John Tooby put it:

The brain is a naturally constructed computational system whose function is to solve adaptive information-processing problems (such as face recognition, threat interpretation, language acquisition, or navigation). Over evolutionary time, its circuits were cumulatively added because they 'reasoned' or 'processed information' in a way that enhanced the adaptive regulation of behavior and physiology. (Cosmides and Tooby 1997)

This process resulted in adaptations (and their side effects) constituting a 'species-typical' human psychology with a range of built-in potentials, motivations and predispositions. As a result—on average and dependent upon context—we tend toward particular ways of thinking and behaving. Some of these mechanisms affect us consciously while others are automatic, but all are mediated via mental and emotional systems based on neurochemistry and hormones. A large literature on violence from this perspective has emerged; despite many debates, one consensus position is to see the psychology behind most physical aggression not as aberrant but rather as a normal part of the human mentality that evolved just as other behaviours did (Buss and Shackelford 1997; Pinker 2002: 329). Evolution is less about specific violent *acts* (there is no single adaptation that governs, say, pub brawling) than the

mediating factors that generate them, such as anger, jealousy, impulsivity and risk-taking.

Criminologist Anthony Walsh explains this clearly:

Although killing rival suitors and rival claimants to resources and territory doubtless conferred a reproductive advantage on the killers, evolutionary psychologists do not claim that there is an evolved mechanism dedicated to homicide. Behaviors that were adaptive, however, such as male sexual propriety, jealousy, aggressive resource acquisition, and status striving, would have occasionally manifested themselves in homicide. (Walsh 2006: 235)

Some violence-related mechanisms are common to all humans; others—and this is, for some historians, perhaps the more controversial claim—differ between the sexes.

This is obviously a different view of violence than that adopted by most historians, though, as noted, they have rarely sought even to explicitly distance themselves from such arguments. The work of psychologists Alice Eagly and Wendy Wood may serve as a useful proxy in this debate, as their arguments against evolutionary psychology are likely to be largely in accord with most historians' general assumptions. Their elaboration of 'social-role theory' as an alternative to evolutionary thinking has itself been evolving, resulting in a revised, 'biosocial' version (Eagly and Wood 2007; see also Eagly and Wood 1999 and Wood and Eagly 2002). They accept that evolution has formed the *physical* differences between men and women relating, for example, to size, strength, reproduction and infant feeding. Such bodily differences have led to cross-cultural similarities in sexual divisions of labour 'because certain activities are more efficiently accomplished by one sex' (Wood and Eagly 2002: 702). Men and women are then observed performing particular acts, and, as Eagly and Wood put it: 'These observations underlie *gender roles*, which form a shared knowledge structure specifying what men and women usually do and what they should do in a society' (Eagly and Wood 2009: 276). Eagly and Wood, thus, accept a role for biology and they are at pains to distance themselves from 'blank slate' psychology, noting that evolutionary pressures have

led humans to prefer healthy and fertile mates ‘of their own species who are of the sex complementary to their own’ and arguing that social roles ‘are mediated by biological, social, and psychological processes. Our perspective rejects false dichotomies between the evolution of nature and culture but strives to understand the relation between them’ (Eagly and Wood 2007: 384, 386). Nevertheless, they argue against meaningful differences in male and female psychology, including with regard to reproduction and physical aggression; the main feature of evolved psychology is ‘flexibility in behavior’ enhanced by social learning abilities (Eagly and Wood 2009: 276).

Eagly’s and Wood’s views echo some of the psychological assumptions of mainstream social and cultural history. While I presume that most historians would not deny evolution’s central role in shaping human physiognomy, they (myself included) have tended to attribute sex differences in violence to cultural gender roles and distributions of social power.

Analysing the far lower female assault rates in north-western England in the early twentieth century, Barry Godfrey argues:

The *socialization* of girls, and the *restrictions placed on their liberty* whilst living at home with parents, meant that women in their late teens were less likely to be seen in public streets (especially at night). [...] Boys were *expected* to be rough, and it was no surprise when roughness strayed over into intolerable aggression, and the police stepped in. Girls, however, were *denied this conceptual space* ... and consequently they were also *kept out of* the cycle of repeat offending that seems to have affected young lads. (Godfrey 2004: 34, emphasis added)

As part of his examination of the long-term history of violence in Europe, Pieter Spierenburg has recently and similarly sought to explain women’s lower participation in serious violence:

Most likely, female violence as well as women’s abstention from violence *resulted from a learning process*. Many women *conformed to the cultural stereotype of passivity*, and when they did attack or defend themselves, they primarily targeted their own sex. ... The other group, the minority of women accustomed to some measure of violence, was present especially in Europe’s larger cities. They associated more frequently with lower-class men and *learned* to be aggressive in their company. They probably developed this aggressiveness *through imitation* rather than conscious male teaching. (Spierenburg 2008: 121, emphasis added)

These recent examples follow a long tradition, as James Given's 1977 analysis of homicide in thirteenth-century England suggests:

To an extent, the low level of female participation in homicide, both as killers and victims, may be explained by the *different social roles* that contemporaries *expected* the sexes to play. The use of violence was *regarded as inappropriate* for women.... The strong *social and cultural inhibitions* against the use of force by women as a means of settling disputes is [sic] reflected in the verdicts handed down on women accused of homicides.... (Given 1977: 134-37, emphasis added)

There is much to these views: people do, after all, absorb dominant ideas and behaviours of their societies, and reconstructing those worldviews remains a vital task. However, we find in these quotes a one-sided assumption that *we are what our cultures tell us to be* rather than the likelihood that (also) *cultures result from what we are*. There is an at least implicit insistence that significant sex differences in violent behaviour stem *solely* from culture: women—with a different socialization, fewer restrictions, a variant discourse, changed expectations, alternate examples to 'imitate' or a broadened 'conceptual space'—would have acted just like men.

Some criminological efforts to similarly 'de-essentialize the maleness of violence', however, have made the false assumption that 'biology' is purely 'universalizing' and can be conveniently discarded by drawing attention to evidence that men's use of and attitudes toward violence is not always and everywhere exactly the same (Carrington, McIntosh and Scott 2010). Introducing her important edited collection of historical studies, *Everyday Violence*, Shani D'Cruze approvingly cites Elizabeth Stanko's criminological analysis of male violence, in which, rather than a universally different psychology, 'varied constructions of historically specific masculinity can be seen to operate' (D'Cruze 2000: 14). D'Cruze and Louise Jackson have recently surveyed more than three centuries of women's involvement with crime and the justice system, arguing that sex differences in violence arose from women being 'socialised to reject aggression as unfeminine' (D'Cruze and Jackson 2009: 20).

However, although Stanko has expressed disdain for some 'biological' explanations of violence, she has also positively evaluated the pioneering research by evolutionary psychologists Martin Daly and Margo Wilson on homicide: in Stanko's view, evolutionary psychology 'is neither reductionist, nor does it eschew social conditions. It locates homicide within an understanding of how men relate to one another as competitors' (Stanko 1994: 42). Other criminologists have also been enthusiastic about the contributions evolutionary theory might make to understanding violence (Polk 1998; Walsh 2006). As I shall discuss, evolutionary psychologists have long appreciated 'cultural' variations in violence.

Historians may rarely engage directly with the specifics of human psychology, but if their assumptions are largely in accord with those of social-role theory they are also subject to the same critiques. Psychologist John Archer has systematically compared evolutionary and social-role approaches to violence, most recently in an article in *Behavioural and Brain Sciences* that attracted comments from commentators from a range of disciplines (Archer 2009; see also Archer 1996; Archer and Lloyd 2002 and Archer 2006). He argues that many bodily, psychological and behavioural sex differences relevant to violence fit the predictions of Darwinian sexual selection. Across species, for example, the sex that invests less in reproduction (usually males) competes more intensely (and aggressively) for access to that which invests more. Reproductive variability among men is higher than that among women, and, as in other species, this variability is associated with higher levels of intra-sexual competition and aggression. This differential evolutionary history has formed an 'adaptive complex' of features that respond to (and enable) the higher degree of inter-male competition, including greater size and strength, distinctive facial and vocal cues for threat and display and various psychological mechanisms that generate higher levels of physical aggression (Archer 2009: 259-62; see also Sefcek and Sacco 2009: 288). Men's predominance in intrasexual aggression is universal (even if the specific magnitude varies), increases with the seriousness

of that aggression, arises early in development, increases during young adulthood, and is mediated by psychological mechanisms that follow functional principles that suggest adaptations. Some claims of social-role theory are not necessarily wrong; however, Archer suggests, evolutionary theory is a more economical, comprehensive and convincing explanatory framework (Archer 2009; see also Archer 2004 and Sell 2009). Anne Campbell, similarly, sees sex difference in aggression as ‘robust’, ‘universal’ and ‘durable’ features of human societies: ‘the ubiquity of this effect, its early developmental onset and its consistency with other primate species suggest the utility of an evolutionary perspective’ (Campbell 2007: 365; on the evolution of fear, see Campbell 2002 and Tooby and Cosmides 2000: 93-94).

Eagly and Wood acknowledge some of this evidence but insist that measurable physiological and psychological differences in aggression result from socialisation. However, as both Archer and Campbell point out, differences in aggression emerge in children before capacities for ‘gender labelling’ and ‘stereotypes’—the purported source of gender roles—develop (Archer 2009: 255-56; Campbell 2002: 5). It is also unlikely that humans are a unique exception to *cross-species* tendencies in sexual selection. As three commentators on Archer’s article suggest:

Given the overwhelming preponderance of comparative evidence for sexually selected sex differences in intraspecific aggression across such a broad diversity of species, it does great violence to the principle of parsimony to invent a special explanation for exactly the same phenomenon in our own species. Surely, such special pleading cannot be considered sound scientific theorizing. (Figueredo, Gladden and Brumbach 2009: 278)

Such ‘special pleading’ is, however, common, and even those who accept innate predispositions toward violent behaviour might continue to argue that the network of rules and understandings of violence—the ‘cultures of violence’ on which historians have focused—are solely social constructions, and therefore beyond the influence of evolution.

There are definitions of ‘social constructions’, but philosopher John R. Searle usefully defines them as ‘institutional facts’ that exist because of human agreement as opposed to ‘brute facts’ existing independent of human thought (Searle 1995). They can be seen as discursively formed beliefs shaped by historically and culturally specific alignments of social power. Social construction has become a ubiquitous concept in social and cultural history, accompanied (and driven) by a tendency to treat cultures as, in the words of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, ‘an assemblage of texts’ (Geertz 1972: 26). Geertz, as part of a larger ‘turn to anthropology’ by cultural historians between the 1960s and 1990s, has been particularly influential in focusing historians’ attention to the *meanings* embedded in cultural artefacts or rituals (Burke 2004: 30, 36; Biernacki 1999). This approach has been enlightening. However, as anthropologist Roger M. Keesing pointed out long ago, it tends to locate culture ‘between the minds of those individuals [who share them] not *in* them’ and to imply ‘that a culture in some sense exists “in its own right independently of its imperfect manifestations in the thoughts and actions of its bearers”’ (Keesing 1974: 84-85, quoting Barnes 1971: 86). Keesing eloquently explains why it is wrong to ‘cut “culture” free of the individual minds through which it is realized’:

What forms cultures take depend on what individual humans can think, imagine, and learn, as well as on what collective behaviours shape and sustain viable patterns of life in ecosystems. Cultures must be thinkable and learnable as well as livable. (Keesing 1974: 86)

‘Without informing our models of cultures with deepening knowledge of the structures and processes of mind’, he warns, ‘our cultural analyses may turn out to be mere literary exercises.’

Harry Plotkin has more recently taken up this point. Our minds certainly *do* form constructions of reality that powerfully shape human life despite their immateriality (such as money, honour or religion). They are flexible, but not limitlessly so:

The necessity for agreement makes social constructions very strange entities. But it does not dematerialize them. Social constructions are inter-locking neural network states in different individuals. (Plotkin 2007: 12)

Social construction should thus be reconsidered in light of psychology. Barkow even argues that a ‘non-radical’ version of social construction ‘is not only compatible with evolutionary psychology, it is required of it’:

Our species has a hypertrophied cultural capacity, an immense dependence on socially ‘transmitted’ information. *That we socially construct our realities is an inevitable concomitant of that reliance.* (Barkow 2006: 25, emphasis in original)

From an evolutionary psychological perspective, the importance of social construction to human life both enables and results from our inhabiting what has been referred to as ‘the cognitive niche’, a species-typical way of life that requires a unique degree of reliance upon information and socially imparted knowledge (Barrett, Cosmides and Tooby 2007). These comments on the power and importance of culture from evolutionary perspectives emphasise how much common ground there potentially is between biological and cultural approaches to behaviour and thought. But what might this mean in practice?

3. WHAT CAN EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY EVER DO FOR US?

I have argued that historians have largely failed to address (even critically) the topics, methods and findings of evolutionary psychology, and I then considered Darwinian explanations for fundamental sex differences in violence as well as the main alternative

perspectives, social role theory and social construction. As is probably clear, I think the fundamentals of the evolutionary psychological approach are correct and worth taking seriously; however, being *right* and being *useful* may be two different things. What can evolutionary psychology offer us in understanding the past? It can, first of all, offer historians and other researchers a field with comparative results against which we can weigh our findings: this may help identify the questions we most need to ask and possibly some that, ultimately, we might not. Alternatively, it may provide independent confirmation of some of the conclusions toward which historians have already been working. The topical interests of evolutionary psychologists and historians of violence often converge, and greater engagement offers an opportunity (on both sides) to compare results and borrow hypotheses and findings. Three areas appear most relevant to cross-disciplinary efforts: the causes of violence, the meanings of violence and changes in violence.

Why do people use violence? Evolutionary psychologists have offered various answers, depending on the type of violence considered, but a common denominator is to see the great majority of physical aggression as a strategic, interest-pursuing and non-pathological behaviour arising from a shared (and normal) human psychology (Eisner 2009: 44-48). The psychological mechanisms underlying infanticide might not be entirely contiguous with those driving intrasexual competition, but both are hypothesised to have effectively solved recurrent adaptive problems better than alternatives (Daly and Wilson 1988: 37-93, 163-186). All evolutionary mechanisms, however, are context-dependent, bringing evolutionary psychology into contact with topics more familiar to historians and social scientists. Important relationships have been identified, for example, among inequality, the defence of status and male-on-male violence, as men (especially young men) escalate their competitive tactics and 'discount the future', driving up male homicide rates (Wilson and Daly 1997; Daly and Wilson 2005; Archer 2009: 256-57). Such effects appear to be either absent or far less

relevant for women. Mariko Hirai-Hasegawa has examined the opposite phenomenon, connecting declining homicide rates in post-war Japan to increasing resource equality, declining family size and increasing educational opportunities (Hirai-Hasegawa 2005). Local sex ratios have also been seen as relevant (for both sexes) to intrasexual conflict and violence (Campbell 1995; Hudson and Boer 2002). Whether male predominance in intrasexual killing is caused primarily by sex differences in the propensity to anger itself or rather in the inhibitions acting upon that emotion, debate on this matter is relevant to historians' interests (Archer 2009: 256-57; Campbell 2002; Campbell 2007; Pound, Daly and Wilson 2009).

The same is true of violence between the sexes. Citing various studies, criminologist Anthony Walsh has argued that 'the single most important cause of domestic violence (including homicide) is male jealousy and suspicion of infidelity' (Walsh 2006: 241). Evolutionary arguments about intersexual violence have focused on the dangers of cuckoldry in driving a particularly intense male sexual jealousy and efforts to supervise mates' sexuality (Daly and Wilson 1988: 187-219; Buss, Westen and Semmelroth 1992; Buss 1994; Wilson and Daly 1998; Goetz et al. 2008). Questions have recently been raised—from within what is still an evolutionary framework—about whether there are meaningful sex differences in jealousy that lead to violence (Sagarin 2005; Harris 2005; Edlund and Sagarin 2009). One distinction that has emerged from this debate differentiates 'situational couple violence' from 'intimate terrorism': the former seems to generate similar levels of aggression between the sexes while males predominate as perpetrators of the latter (Campbell 2007: 374-75). Given historians' extensive interest in domestic violence, the relevance of these debates seems obvious, particularly since some evolutionary analyses have confronted social and cultural change as well as statistical anomalies. Archer's evolutionary psychological analysis suggests that sex ratios in partner violence are sensitive to cultural changes reflecting female empowerment, leading to what he suggests may be parity in some forms of partner aggression

in advanced societies (Archer 2009: 262-64). Daly and Wilson have examined the American ‘peculiarity’ that, in some contexts, ‘women kill their husbands almost as often as the reverse’ (Wilson and Daly 1992). Kinship’s roles in alternatively generating and suppressing violence has also been treated from a Darwinian perspective, including sibling rivalry, coalitional violence by related men and the higher rates of abuse and homicide faced by stepchildren (Daly and Wilson 1988: 17-35; Daly and Wilson 1998).

Evolutionary perspectives can also contribute usefully to understanding another topic that is closely related to the causes of violence. While patterns in violent behaviour remain a central concern for historians, the ‘meaning’ of violence has become an increasingly salient issue. ‘Meaning’ is a complicated—and perhaps unavoidably vague— notion, referring to social constructions or sets of narratives shaping how people perceive and react to violence, whether as perpetrators victims or witnesses (see discussion in Wood 2004). Historical arguments have emphasised violence’s relationship to ‘cultural’ notions of shame, disgust, pity and fear. The social ‘place’ and performative nature of violence in many societies has been highlighted (see citations in Wood 2007c). As noted earlier with regard to social constructions, all of these topics—meaning, discourse, shame, pity, disgust, fear, humiliation and empathy—are, at root, psychological phenomena, many of which have been addressed by evolutionary psychologists in ways that are potentially useful to historians.

The same could be said for the topic of masculinity. Karen Harvey and Alexandra Shepard have summarised the historiography of that subject: they urge historians to consider long-term trends, suggest a ‘palpable dissatisfaction’ with cultural approaches and find growing interest in more social and psychological perspectives (Harvey and Shepard 2005: 276). Nonetheless, Harvey and Shepard see ‘the heart of the endeavour’ of understanding masculinity as ‘change over time’ (280). As in the historiography of emotion, there is,

therefore, an almost exclusive emphasis on variable *cultural* constructions of masculinity to the exclusion of broad continuities in male behaviour and psychology across time and geography. The historiography of emotions has developed within a strongly constructionist paradigm that has tended, sometimes quite radically, to see emotion as entirely derived from cultural and social contexts. This has, fortunately, more recently been changing, as Peter N. Stearns notes:

The maturation of emotions history has also involved growing recognition of a need to modify some of the impulses toward reifying stark contrasts that characterized much of the initial work. Premodern families, for example, are no longer seen as emotionally cold. *Affection for children is not a modern invention, nor—despite the fascinating argument of a feminist French historian—is mother love.* (Stearns 2008: 21, emphasis added. The reference is to Badinter 1980)

As noted, similar views of the cultural variability of masculinity have also shaped work by criminologists interested in variations in male violence (Carrington, McIntosh and Scott 2010). However, if men and women are to some extent inherently different with regard to factors such as fear, empathy and aggression (Geary 1998; Archer and Lloyd 2002; Campbell, 2006) this is obviously relevant to topics that, according to Harvey and Shepard, are of direct interest to gender historians, namely ‘selfhood’, the ‘subjective experience of being male’ and men’s social relationships (Harvey and Shepard 2005: 275). Such observations are equally important, of course, to understanding historical definitions of femininity.

Finally, along with providing insight into psychological universals, evolutionary psychological perspectives contribute to understanding changes in patterns and meanings of violence. More than two decades ago, Daly and Wilson devoted a chapter of their book *Homicide* to cultural variations, which makes the continuing misapprehension that evolutionary psychology has had nothing to say on the issue of change mysterious (Daly and Wilson 1988: 275-91; see also Daly and Wilson 1989). *Every* claim that a particular social or

cultural factor has an encouraging or restraining influence on violence at least implies a corresponding psychological mechanism. The notion of ‘evoked’ culture—thinking and behaviour resulting from (i.e., ‘evoked’ by) the interaction between innate predispositions and environmental factors—has been one avenue for explaining cultural differences from an evolutionary perspective (Cosmides and Tooby 1992). But evolutionary psychologists have also highlighted the kind of culture with which historians are more familiar: ‘transmitted culture’, i.e., information communicated through socialisation and learning (e.g., Richerson and Boyd 2005). It has recently been argued that variations in homicide rates can be explained by ‘a combination of transmitted culture (values transmitted vertically from parents to children) that sets thresholds for activating evolved psychological circuits of violence (i.e., evoked culture)’ (Gangestad, Haselton and Buss 2006: 91). This study demonstrates yet again evolutionary psychology’s sensitivity to cultural issues and how many interests it shares with history. Taking another tack, Richard B. Felson has rightly argued that understanding violence requires attention not only to aggression but also to ‘deviance’, i.e., the breaking of rules (Felson 2009). Without taking an explicitly evolutionary perspective, he nevertheless depicts both the psychologies of aggression and deviance as largely generating instrumental behaviour based upon bounded rational choice. All of these studies suggest how particular social situations allow different opportunities for living out innate predispositions and result in what might be seen as ‘cultural’ differences. A particular set of norms (backed up by institutions, such as legal codes) might affect the calibration of those dispositions, either encouraging or discouraging them. A developing ‘rule of law’, for example, reduces the need for an aggressive deterrent stance *vis-à-vis* rivals or the need for private, often kin-related, vengeance, which has featured in both historical and Darwinian analyses. Changes in reactions to violence as part of an increasing ‘sensibility’ have also been pointed to as relevant to alterations in the place of violence in European societies over recent centuries. Historians

of violence—to a significant extent influenced by Norbert Elias’s notion of the ‘civilising process’—have argued for the important role of self-control, foresight, empathy and the important role of changing cultural rules about the legitimate use of violence—i.e., social norms (Johnson and Monkkonen 1996; Fletcher 1997; Wiener 1998; Gallant 2002; Emsley 2005; Wood 2006; Spierenburg 2008). They have not needed evolutionary psychology to point out such trends; however, evolutionary thinking offers helpful explanations of *why* such influences *work*, potentially solidifying our understanding of what factors have influenced changes in the prevalence of (and reactions toward) physical aggression.

Along with offering a series of specific comparative hypotheses and findings, the encounter between evolutionary psychology and history may be more generally useful. Barkow has addressed the suspicion of many of his fellow anthropologists toward ‘metanarratives’, noting that they are ‘more likely to be comfortable with local, contingent, non-absolute, and situated partial knowledges’ (Barkow 2006: 24). One might say the same thing about historians. This is not necessarily a criticism, since breaking down some previously held theoretical assumptions has had a positive effect on the study of history. However, it may be that the outright suspicion toward metanarratives as such now poses an obstacle to integrating the ‘local’ and ‘contingent’ findings that historians of violence have been so assiduously collecting. Manuel Eisner suggests that a ‘general theory of violence’, if it is possible, will be a ‘meta-theory, i.e., an overarching and parsimonious set of general principles that that helps to organize local theories’ (Eisner 2009: 44). Such a theory would have to perform four tasks: it should ‘identify general mechanisms that operate on different manifestations of violence across cultures and over time’; ‘demonstrate that a few general principles bring forth similar manifestations of violence across culture and over time’; ‘integrate disciplinary theories at the biological, the psychological, and the sociological level in such a way that they are non-contradictory and that the resulting explanatory power is

higher than that of each primary theory'; and 'show that successful strategies of controlling and preventing different types of violence are based on the same general principles' (Eisner 2009: 44).

Evolutionary psychology does not, in itself, constitute such a general theory; however, I agree with Barkow and Eisner that evolutionary psychology offers one avenue for 'vertical' or 'conceptual' integration, a concept that Barkow explains via the natural sciences:

[C]hemistry is compatible with the laws of physics, but in no practical way can it be reduced to physics. Biology is compatible with chemistry as well as with physics, but no one in their right mind would attempt to reduce the functioning of the pancreas or the succession of forest ecologies to chemistry. (Barkow 2006: 29; See also Cosmides, Tooby and Barkow 1992)

'What evolutionists are asking', he writes, 'is only that sociology and social-cultural anthropological accounts be *compatible* with what we think we know of human evolution and psychology: that is all' (Barkow 2006: 29). 'A culture-bearing species,' he writes,

one that like ours depends primarily on socially transmitted information pools for adaptation to local conditions, must also evolve mechanisms permitting and even requiring social construction—how else could individuals adjust to local reality, that is, to the different constructions of different cultural informational pools? Social construction is thus not an alternative to a biological account of human behaviour; properly understood, it *is* a biological account, a major aspect of our evolved psychology.... Like other biological traits, social construction is both enabled and constrained by our bodies, in this case the organ known as the brain and its various evolved mechanisms.' (Barkow 2006: 25).

In response to those scholars who argue that 'cultural' or 'social' are 'emergent' phenomena that take place on a separate level from biology and individual psychology, Plotkin offers a convincing response:

Emergence does not mean a coalescence out of nothing or into nothing. Emergence is the appearance of a property or phenomenon which is inherent in some constituent processes or entities and which is expressed when those constituent elements come together. About this there is nothing magical or mysterious. The emergent

phenomenon has direct causal links to those constituents. It is the product of those constituents. (Plotkin 2002: 113)

As Walsh has put it: ‘While it is true that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, what we theorize about emergent properties of the whole must be consistent with what is known about the parts, which invariably help us to better understand the whole’ (Walsh 2006: 226). Of course, the proof of the value of this approach depends not on such claims, no matter how well put, but rather on the extent to which this integrative framework improves our knowledge. I am confident that a sustained attention by historians and cultural theorists of violence to the hypotheses, findings and arguments of evolutionary psychology will do so, to the benefit of both fields. This requires, however, that historians actually begin to take such work into account.

4. CONCLUSION

Further engagement with evolutionary psychology will not only enrich historical study itself but may also help to build a bridge between, on the one hand, social and cultural methodologies more broadly and, on the other, the natural sciences. This is true whether we are interested in violence in the past or present, not least since historians and criminologists—in varying ways—share similar conceptual traditions (transmitted via sociological and cultural theories). Certainly, using evolutionary theory (or any other ‘biological’ approach) does not automatically make a particular argument about violence (or anything else) better, sounder or more convincing. Some of the conclusions emerging from evolutionary psychology—which is now a large field, with many sub-schools, divisions and methodological debates—appear convincing and well supported, while others are speculative or even questionable. (Much the same, of course, could also be said about sociology or cultural theory.) Moreover, this

encounter should, in my view, be a dialogue: social and cultural studies of particular times, places or social groups may well point out aspects of evolutionary psychology that need to be reconsidered or offer suggestions for its refinement. The important point is that evolutionary theories—as well as related cognitive, neuroscientific and other ‘biosocial’ (Raine 2002) approaches—have much to offer those seeking to understand violence as historians or criminologists.

The foregoing should not be interpreted as a call for a wholesale revision of historical (or criminological) methods. Some of the work *already being done* on violence in historical, sociological and cultural is in many ways compatible with that of some evolutionary psychologists (Wood 2007a). At least methodologically, this is particularly true of those more quantitative approaches accustomed to testing clear, falsifiable hypotheses about the causal relationships regarding violent behaviour. In this case, the shift would be more one of perspective, involving a different (or additional) set of social factors, new (and better) ways of explaining how they affect behaviour and a coherent framework for interpreting the psychology that underlies them. This will likely lead to the revision of some disciplinary assumptions or even their abandonment; as I have argued, however, I think this will be a constructive development. For more culturalist approaches to violence—whether among historians or criminologists—evolutionary psychology offers a more directly methodological challenge. Their interest in understanding the relationships among violence and issues such as meaning, attitudes or identity, are not (or at least not entirely) quantifiable. But even if incapable of being hypothesised in ways suitable to a standard of *falsifiability*, they must still meet one of *plausibility*, and their ability to do so would be significantly enhanced by attention to evolutionary theory, psychology and the neurosciences. Arguments theorising male-dominated cultures of violence as local permutations of a historically and cross-

culturally valid male propensity for intrasexual aggression are more generally plausible than those that argue (or, more commonly, imply) that they are purely cultural ‘social constructions’. Our understanding of the cultural rules of violence will, moreover, be enhanced by awareness of the fundamental features in the human psychology of morality (Haidt 2007), just as the emotional history of physical aggression—such as the emergence of a culture of ‘sensibility’—will be strengthened by understanding the psychological bases of empathy (Hoffman 2000) and innate predispositions regarding the formation of coalitions (Kurzban, Tooby and Cosmides 2001).

Precisely what ultimate difference this will make is beyond my ability to predict, but I cannot help thinking that a history (or criminology) that takes seriously the issue of human nature and of the psychology underlying social behaviour is going to be different in important ways than one that does not. Along the way, some cultural concepts, such as ‘patriarchy’, need not be abandoned; quite the contrary, they become more useful when re-thought in the light of human psychology (Smuts 1995; Baker 2000; Vandermassen 2005: 184-89; Campbell 2006). Archer, for example, has argued that it is possible that ‘the consistent pattern of gendered socialization can best be viewed as a co-evolutionary process that accentuates evolved predispositions’:

Sexual selection theory predicts a pattern that fits men for the social world of intermale competition—for example, assertiveness, toughness, and not showing emotion—and seeking to control the reproductive decisions of women; it predicts a pattern for women that would foster interpersonal networks and exercising choice over their own reproductive decisions. This prediction better fits the evidence from cross-cultural studies of socialization patterns than one that is simply characterized in terms of agency and communion, as is social role theory. Gendered socialization is therefore viewed as playing an important part in maintaining behaviour consistent with the different fitness interests of men and women. (Archer 1996: 916)

Nor does evolutionary psychology, as I discussed, contradict some conceptualisations of ‘social constructions’ or an appreciation of the importance of socialisation and cultural learning.

Still, the change in perspective that accompanies taking evolutionary psychology seriously helps to focus on issues that too often get short-changed in social and cultural analyses. Daly and Wilson have argued (and I think demonstrated) that some sociological emphases on broad social trends pay insufficient attention to individual motives; models that emphasise cultural ‘transmission’, similarly, too often downplay the active role of individuals in *using* culture strategically to pursue their interests (Daly and Wilson 1989: 108). It would also be helpful to have a theoretical approach to violence that could help to integrate its behavioural and imaginary manifestations. Evolutionary psychology seems to offer at least a starting point for such considerations: how, for example, might the psychology of revenge function in both real-world and fictional settings? Do sex differences in violence apply also to its imagined forms? And what impact do civilising processes have on violence and the imagination (Hoffner and Levine 2005; Campbell 2007: 371; Schredl 2009; Müller-Wood and Wood 2010)? I think that those historians who are interested in understanding how people think and why they act as they do have much to gain from listening to (and talking back to) the biological sciences. That challenges involved are an *opportunity* rather than a threat. I leave my few last words to Marek Kohn, who has eloquently expressed the relationship between biology and culture:

We do not migrate from biology to culture like settlers moving into a land of opportunity, nor do we shuttle backwards and forwards between the two provinces. We live in both at the same time. This is a complicated state of affairs. The options are to try to understand it better, to maintain the fiction of simplicity, or to declare that the situation is too complicated to analyse. (Kohn 1999: 7)

The best option seems clear enough to me.

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