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What is This?
Forms of brutality: Towards a historical sociology of violence

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Abstract
Most analyses of violence in the different historical periods tend to view the modern era as significantly less violent than all of its historical predecessors. By focusing on such apparently reliable indicators as the decrease in homicide rates, the disappearance of public torture or growing civility in inter-personal relationships, many authors contend that our ancestors inhabited a substantially more violent world. In this article, I argue that since such blanket evaluations do not clearly distinguish between different levels of violence analysis, they are unable to provide an accurate picture of historical reality. To properly understand violence, it is necessary to compare and contrast its historical transformation at the interpersonal and intra-group (micro), the inter-group and intra-polity (mezzo), and inter-polity (macro) levels. When violence is comparatively analysed on these three interrelated levels, it becomes clear that the scale of collective brutality gradually and dramatically increases with the rise of modern social organizations and ideologies while the character of inter-personal and intra-group violence remains essentially constant.

Keywords
historical sociology, ideology, legitimacy, violence, war

A number of recent, highly influential publications, such as Pinker (2011), Goldstein (2011), Mueller (2004, 2010) and Spierenburg (2008) have helped reinforce the popularly shared view that modernity is characterized by the continuous decline of violence
in all of its forms. These studies tend to emphasize the stark contrasts between the past and the present, whereby pre-modern social relations are usually depicted as being embodied by uninhibited expressions of emotion and the unrestrained use of violence. Medieval Europe is often invoked as the epitome of barbaric behaviour where human beings were forced to sit on sharp spiked chairs, wear red hot iron crowns, endure extremely painful torture on the rack, be boiled alive or burned at the stake in the infamous auto-de-fé processions (Elias, [1939] 2000: 162–3; Scott, 1994: 64–87; Peters, 1996: 62–6, Pinker, 2011: 134–49). Furthermore, the pre-modern social universe is regularly seen as one of incessant warfare where kings and queens would readily start wars over trivial issues (e.g. personal insults, hereditary succession, failed royal marriages, or sheer boredom) and would lead large armies into the vast battlefields where hundreds of thousands of soldiers would be instantly slaughtered (Huizinga, [1919], 1996; Duby, 1964, Pinker, 2011). It is often assumed that such brutality corresponded to the dominant value systems of these different historical epochs where inflicting violence on others was either justified by prevailing religious and popular norms (e.g. just war theory, personal revenge, divinely ordained order) or that these social orders did not require any justification for violent behaviour at all. Nevertheless much of these popular and academic representations of the past are either inaccurate or de-contextualize the role violence played in the pre-modern world. More importantly, such views wrongly assume that in the traditional world ‘violence was ... deep-rooted in the social structure and in the mentality of the age’ (Bloch, 1961: 411) and that as Elias (1998: 198) bluntly states, ‘medieval societies were – compared with our own – very violent’.

As they do not distinguish between different types of violence analysis, such blanket statements provide incorrect diagnoses of historical reality. However, to better comprehend the character of violence in different historical epochs it is crucial to distinguish between three different levels of analysis: the micro (interpersonal and intra-group) violence, the mezzo (the inter-group and intra polity) violent actions, and the macro (inter-polity) forms of violence.1

If we take a more careful look at these three levels it is possible to show that the pre-modern world, and in particular the so-called ‘Dark and Medieval Ages’, were in most instances significantly less violent than the modern era. Crucially what characterizes these two ideal types (the pre-modern and the modern world) is not so much the scale and intensity as the different character and dissimilar legitimizing ethics of violent actions. The central contention of this article is that while on the micro, interpersonal and intra-group level the patterns of violent behaviour do not demonstrate dramatic change over the last millennium, the mezzo, inter-group level, and the macro, inter-polity, level have witnessed profound transformations in both violent actions and the popular attitudes towards violence. However, rather than taming violence, the modern age is a witness to the escalation of bloodshed and the extraordinary expansion of coercive reach and capacity of social organizations. In addition, more than any other historical epoch, the modern era provides the most sophisticated social mechanisms for the justification of violent actions: secular and secularized ideologies.

The article consists of three parts. The first part explores the character of interpersonal and intra-group violence in the pre-modern and modern contexts. The second charts the transformation in inter-group violent actions while the final section focuses
on the macro plane and traces the historical changes in organized violence at the inter-polity level.

The feeble creature

To understand violence on the micro level, it is necessary to look briefly at our physiological and biological make-up as species. Unlike most carnivorous mammals humans have no bodily entailments for aggressive, or even defensive, behaviour: we have no sharp and strong teeth able to hold and kill a prey, no robust and deadly claws, no sturdy and pointed horns and no strong jaws to inflict and maintain lethal bites. Human beings have a physiologically universal capacity for anger, rage and aggressive posturing, and these have developed as an evolutionary means to mobilize an organism in overcoming an obstacle (Goldstein, 2003: 134–8; Frijda, 1986: 19). However, there is a big difference between displaying anger, engaging in hostile bravados and taking part in actual violent behaviour. As a variety of recent research demonstrates, individual humans are not very good at violence (Holmes, 1985; Grossman, 1996; Bourke, 1999; Collins, 2008, 2009; Grossman and Christensen, 2008). Both our biology and our cultural upbringing mitigate against the use of violence and particularly against harming other human beings. As Collins (2008: 27) argues: ‘We have evolved, on the physiological level, in such a way that fighting encounters a deep interactional obstacle, because of the way our neurological hard-wiring make us act in the presence of other human beings.’ Despite the popular perceptions reinforced by blockbuster movies and crime thrillers, injuring and killing other humans is extremely difficult as it often involves nothing less than the ripping apart of one’s moral universe (Grossman, 1996; Bourke, 1999; Malešević, 2010). Studies by military sociology and psychology indicate that most of the killings in war are undertaken by a very small number of individuals while the majority of soldiers throughout history were reluctant warriors who would often deliberately misfire or not shoot at the enemy at all (Marshall, 1947; Griffith, 1989; Miller, 2000; Grossman and Christensen, 2008). Collins (2008) convincingly shows that most individuals tend to avoid confrontational tension/fear at any cost and that in violent situations humans are often paralysed by fear, making them often incapable of injuring or killing others. On the micro, inter-personal level, most violence is messy, disorganized, difficult to initiate and maintain.3

Nevertheless what is most distinctive about micro level violence are its nearly universal features and its relatively inconsequential character. In contrast to the views that see contemporary inter-personal relations as significantly less violent (Elias, [1939] 1998, 2000; Dunning, 1990; Pinker, 2011) or substantially more violent (Grossman and Christensen, 2008) than its pre-modern counterparts, much of the recent research on the hunter–gatherer bands, chiefdoms, city-states, agrarian empires and other pre-modern social orders demonstrates that the patterns of violent behaviour on the micro-level do not exhibit dramatic changes (Fry, 2005, 2007; Cowell, 2007; Collins, 2008; Kleinschmidt, 2008; Wells, 2008; Brown, 2011). More significantly although the prevalence of micro violent actions differs in time and space, inter-personal and intra-group violence constitutes a very small segment of social actions across most social orders. While there is no disputing the fact that serious interpersonal violence decreased in much of the European
continent between the sixteenth and early twentieth century, this long-term trend did not affect the patterns of violent criminality in terms of gender, age and other social divisions, which essentially remained the same (Eisner, 2003; Spierenburg, 2008). More significantly, the decrease itself has developed from a fairly low base that characterized micro-level violence in the fifteenth century (Kaeuper, 1999; Brown, 2011). There is an obvious and noticeable difference between the homicide rates in, for example, fourteenth-century and early twentieth-century Switzerland (37 and 1.4 respectively per 100,000 per year) (Eisner, 2003: 99) but even the extremely high figure of 37 only suggests that during an entire year in fourteenth-century Switzerland less than 0.04% of individuals lost their lives through inter-personal violence. The key point here is that the inter-personal, face-to-face, killing has always been and remains a rare phenomenon.

Moreover the oscillating levels of interpersonal and intra-group violence before the sixteenth and after the mid-twentieth century (when the rate of homicide increased again in many modern societies) indicate that such changes do not necessarily correspond with the unilinear social development or civilizational advancement. For example, Elias’s theory of the civilizing process cannot adequately explain the increase in the homicide and other forms of inter-personal violence in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s in the USA and Western Europe (Muchembled, 2012: 274–300).

Instead both increases and decreases in interpersonal violence are firmly linked with the organizational powers of modern states (Tilly, 1985, 1992; Mann, 1986, 1993; Malešević, 2010). In other words, it appears that the human proclivity to violence has not changed substantially over the past thousand years or so: there seems to be a universal tendency to avoid inter-personal violent episodes at all costs (Marshall, 1947; Griffith, 1989; Bourke, 1999; Miller, 2000; Collins, 2008). What has changed is the ability of social organizations to monitor, control and coercively prevent (already quite rare) violent inter-personal episodes. In this context it is interesting to compare the homicide rates for thirteenth-century England and the USA or most of the European countries at the turn of the twenty-first century. These data clearly show that the levels of inter-personal violence are not substantially different: from 1232 to 1248, annual homicide rates in England oscillated between as high as 30 and as low as 6.8 per 100,000 in Warwickshire and Kent respectively (Given, 1977: 35–40; Brown, 2011: 3–4). In the 1999–2001 period, the US homicide rate for the whole country was at 5.6 per 100,000 (per year) ranging from 8.1 in San Francisco to 42.9 in Washington, DC. Similarly among European states, the homicide rates ranged from 22.1 for Russia (18.4 for Moscow), 10.6 for Lithuania (8.9 for Vilnius) to 1.2 per 100,000 in Switzerland (1.7 for Geneva) and Sweden (2.8 for Stockholm) (Barclay et al., 2003: 10). This is not to say that the scale of inter-personal violence does not change from time to time nor that there are relatively stable decreasing trends, such as in sixteenth- to twentieth-century Europe, but only that one cannot detect irreversible patterns which would suggest that micro-level violence in the pre-modern world was rampant.

This becomes even more apparent if we move further back in time and see that for 99 per cent of their history, human beings, as hunter–gatherers, tended to avoid inter-personal as well as inter- and intra-group violence (Haas, 1999; Kelly, 2000; Flannery and Marcus, 2003; Fry, 2005, 2007). Anthropologists have identified over 70 known, ‘tribal’ hunting–gathering and sedentary communities, most of which still survive,
including the Paliyan of India, the Mbuti of South Africa, the Semai of Malaysia and the Siriono of Bolivia, that rarely if ever engage in violent activities (Holmberg, 1969; Service, 1978; Gardner, 2000; Fry, 2007). Simply put, although the scale of interpersonal and intra-group violence has historically oscillated and the rise of social organizations was instrumental in decreasing and stabilizing homicide rates for several centuries, the human aversion and lack of susceptibility towards inter-personal and intra-group violence remain nearly universal and stable across centuries.

Furthermore, despite some historical and geographical specificities, there is a substantial degree of similarity expressed in popular attitudes towards micro-level violence. Although some individuals, groups and societies tolerate or encourage violent behaviour towards individual and collective representatives of other communities, status groups, classes and societies, most social orders condemn unprompted homicides and other forms of violence against random individuals and members of one’s own group. For example, even the ‘tribes’ that anthropologists consider the most violent, such as the Yanomamo of South America or the Angu of Papua New Guinea, have had strict rules against intra-group and inter-personal violence where internal disagreements and conflicts are regulated through highly formalized ritual practices such as chest-pounding duels, side slapping and ritualistic club skirmishes: ‘Duels are formal and are regulated by stringent rules about proper ways to deliver and receive blows. Much of Yanomamó fighting is kept innocuous by these rules so that the concerned parties do not have to resort to drastic means to resolve their grievances’ (Chagnon, 1968: 118). Similarly, medieval European blood feuds, such as the vendetta and ‘blood revenge’ killings in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Sicily, Albania and Montenegro, were strictly differentiated from murder and in-group killings which were deemed illegitimate and would invoke instant punishment (Durham, 1928: 162–4; Bloch, 1961: 125–6; Spierenburg, 2008: 22–68). In the Montenegrin case, practising feuding within a clan was unthinkable as ‘by Montenegrin definition a clan could not collect blood from itself’ (Boehm, 1983: 65). The very fact that all leading monotheistic and other world religions have very strict codes that denounce inter-personal violence (with homicide being a mortal sin) is in itself a potent indicator that much of the micro-level violence lacks popular justification all over the world. Murdering one’s family members, friends, neighbours and other in-group individuals is nearly universally condemned.

This is not to say that all forms of inter-personal and intra-group violence are reproached and deemed unjustified. Many pre-modern social orders made a clear allowance for revenge when it involved personal injuries and insults for high status individuals (Spierenburg, 2008; Brown, 2011; Muchembled, 2012). For example, in the popular ethics of medieval Europe, a violent response to insults against one’s honour was generally seen as acceptable. The medieval documents, literary, theological and scholarly works make a clear distinction between legitimate forms of violence associated with revenging personal insults and injuries, using violence to protect life and honour of one’s kin and violence for defence of Christian religion versus random inter-personal and intra-group violence which is generally deemed illegitimate. In Historia Francorum, written by Bishop Gregory of Tours, illegitimate violence is identified with randomness, irrationality and acting out of greed, lust, pride or rage, while legitimate violence stems from, as stated in Emperor Frederick II’s Landfriede and Sachsenspiegel of 1235, ‘a
man’s fundamental right to prosecute grievances personally and violently’ (Brown, 2011: 34, 231). Hence despite making room for personal revenge, medieval Europe was no different from the rest of the world in condemning wanton, random acts of interpersonal and intra-group violence. Legitimizing such forms of violence would certainly make groups and societies unstable and, in the long term, would make social life almost impossible.

From violence as status to status as violence

Human beings share a similar physical and psychological constitution, including the capability to express similar emotional responses (such as fear, anger, or sadness) to external stimuli. Turner (2007: 27) demonstrates convincingly that as evolved apes humans may not inherently be social beings in the sense of having genetic predispositions for high sociality. Instead it is our vastly developed emotions that became crucial for forging long-term social bonds: ‘we have evolved to be hyper-attuned to each other emotionally’. Emotions are indispensable for forging and maintaining groups and for initiating collective action. However, having almost identical emotional capacity does not mean that human beings will react in the same way to observed aggressive behaviour. It is nearly certain that violence inflicted on family members or close friends will regularly elicit much stronger responses than when an unknown individual is harmed. Furthermore, violence is also linked to the broader social divisions, and throughout history individuals have tended to sympathize much more with the members of their status group, class, ethnicity, age and even gender as long as these social divisions did not (and they rarely did) criss-cross the boundaries of kinship, close friendships and strong interpersonal bonds. De Tocqueville ([1840] 1960) illustrates this huge divide with the example of personal correspondence between nobility in seventeenth-century France who had no difficulty in reconciling the torture of social inferiors with their ordinary everyday pursuits. Hence in a letter from Madame de Sevigne to her daughter, one can read about such gentle issues as kisses of Provence, the smell of good wine and how ‘yesterday [was] a delightful day’, when ‘Madame de Tarente visited these wilds’ while simultaneously referring to the fiddler who was ‘broken on the wheel for getting up a dance and stealing some stamped paper’. The letter also explains that the fiddler ‘was quartered after death, and his limbs exposed at the four corners of the city’ (Collins, 1974: 417). What immediately stands out here is how dissimilar our twenty-first-century moral universe is to that of seventeenth-century Europe. In our own times, a mother who would write to her daughter about good wine, beautiful countryside and visits of her dear friends while simultaneously making casual remarks about the torture and killing of another human being would probably be considered mentally deranged. There is no doubt that much of the pre-modern world inhabited a different moral universe where some forms of inter-group violence were not only tolerated but were seen as being fully justifiable. In fact, the pre-Enlightenment era relied on violence as one of the principal social mechanisms for the demarcation of inter-group differences and social hierarchies. The proverbial medieval Europe was indeed much more open to the organized infliction of pain on individuals and groups deemed inferior in terms of their social status (Spierenburg, 2008; Brown, 2011; Muchembled, 2012).
Nevertheless, having different ethics does not automatically imply uncontrolled proliferation of violent action. Instead of being an autonomous force that governs social action, ethical norms originate in and, in most instances, reflect the character of social structure. Hence more egalitarian societies such as hunter–gatherers or inhabitants of the free city-states rarely, if ever, engage in, or tolerate excessive inter-group violence. In contrast, deeply hierarchical social orders such as Acadian Mesopotamia, the Roman Empire, medieval Europe, the Ottoman Empire or Imperial China during the Han Dynasty were characterized by extreme forms of inter-group violence, including torture. It is no accident that these highly stratified societies became infamous for such practices as castration, amputation of limbs, eye gouging or thumbscrews, as torture and mutilation were an important device for the maintenance of existing social hierarchies. Rather than being senseless and irrational activities driven by the sadistic impulses or ‘animalistic savagery’ of these societies, extreme forms of violence were in fact a product of social development as animals do not intentionally torture other animals. Collins (1974: 422) rightly emphasizes: ‘Torture and mutilation... are distinctly human acts, they are indeed advanced human acts. [They] are above all form of communication usable as threats and supports for claims of complete domination.’ In other words, inter-group violence in medieval Europe and other deeply stratified societies was not chaotic, random and irrational but operated according to a specific organizational logic stemming from the existing social structure of these societies (Perez, 2006; Brown, 2011; Muchembled, 2012). While aristocrats would rarely, if ever, torture and kill other aristocrats (preferring to capture and exchange them for a reasonable ransom), their attitude towards socially inferior groups such as peasants, vagabonds or town dwellers was often extremely hostile. Not only did the rigidity of the status group boundaries not allow for the extension of chivalric norms beyond the world of knights and lords, but any attempt to challenge the established social hierarchies, such as peasant rebellions, was instantly delegitimized and violently crushed. In the fourteenth-century Froissart Chronicles rebelling peasants were perceived as indistinguishable from animals: ‘the knights did not have to treat their enemies according to the law of arms. The peasants were not human; their behaviour, as well as their appearance, betrayed them as animals’ (Brown, 2011: 271). Excessive violence was essentially used as a means of status communication: breaking the limbs of rebellious peasants or heretics on the wheel sent a clear message to others never to attempt to tamper with the established social and religious structure. Since inter-group violence was one of the key mechanisms for the demarcation and enforcement of status borders, it regularly required societal and religious justification.

The gruesome character of inter-group violence in the pre-modern world is often misinterpreted as its rampant prevalence. Both Elias ([1939], 2000, 1998) and Pinker (2011) argue that medieval Europe was a world of incessant violence. However, the spectacular and cruel practices such as roasting people alive or burning at the stake associated with the ‘Medieval and Dark Ages’ often conceal that fact such practices were highly inefficient as a device for large-scale inter-group homicide. For example, even the notorious Spanish Inquisition, under the widely feared Tomás de Torquemada, was responsible for only 2000 murders between 1450–1500 (Perez, 2006: 34). As Perez (2006:173) shows despite Inquisition’s vicious rhetoric ‘the death penalty was passed in 3.5 per cent of cases, but only 1.8 per cent of those comtended were actually executed’ thus between 1540 and 1700 only 810...
individuals were killed. Since much of this violence was ritualistic and aimed at reinforcing status divisions, the focus was on the spectacular and morbid rather than on efficiency that would eliminate large groups of individuals (Malešević, 2007: 148–51; Malešević and Ryan, 2012). In this sense the pre-modern perpetrators of violent acts had neither interest, nor ideological know how or organizational means to kill or even torture huge numbers of people. In many respects, pre-modern inter-group violence resembles the actions of modern gangs who also employ spectacular violence as a means of communicating a particular message (to outsiders as well as the potentially rebellious insiders) and who have neither means nor interest to annihilate entire areas of a city. Although there were occasional, mostly religiously inspired, instances of mass inter-group slaughter in the pre-modern world, such as that of Donatists, Cathars, Huguenots, Jews or Moors, much of inter-group killing remained limited in character. The role of violence in the pre-modern world was profoundly different to that of the modern era. Whereas before modern times inter-group violence was for the most part a status deterrent aimed at reinforcing internal group boundaries and communicating its message in a most brutal manner, the modern age generally dispenses with macabre cruelty and utilizes violence in a much more instrumental way.

In modernity inter-group violence is much more organizationally and ideologically constrained. The social orders gradually move from the relatively anarchic geographic universe where diverse rulers make multiple and often mutually exclusive claims over territory and resources towards monopoly on the legitimate use of violence and taxation over clearly defined territory (Elias [1939] 2000; Weber, 1978; Downing, 1992; Mann, 1993; Ertman, 1997). This process involves the simultaneous pacification of social relations and the cumulative concentration of coercive power within the institutions of the modern bureaucratic state. In fact, the steady decrease in inter-personal and inter-group violence in modernity is the direct corollary of the ever increasing coercive capabilities of modern states. Once the states disarm their populations while concurrently heavily arming their militaries and police forces, violent action is transformed into administrative power: ‘the sanctioning capacities of the state’ change ‘from the manifest use of violence to the pervasive use of administrative power in sustaining its rule’ (Giddens, 1985: 188).

Furthermore, this new situation calls for and is highly receptive towards novel ideological articulations of social reality, most of which delegitimize all forms of inter-personal and inter-group violence. It is no coincidence that the Enlightenment-inspired ideas that glorify human reason, autonomy, moral equality and peaceful resolution of conflicts became principal values shared by highly diverse and often mutually incompatible ideologies (from liberalism, socialism, nationalism to republicanism and others) that have become the legitimizing backbone of modern states. In direct contrast to the pre-modern universe where the divine origins of monarchs and other religiously embedded doctrines provided universal justification for the rigid social hierarchies, the modern era insists on the moral equality of all citizens. Hence, if all members of a polity are of equal moral worth, then all forms of inter-personal and inter-group violence are instantly delegitimized. However, the dramatic decrease in inter-group violence and the delegitimization of this type of violent action have little to do with the changing popular perceptions that violence has no place in the advanced, civilized, world but are, just as in the previous era, much more a reflection of the changing social structure. Whereas in the pre-modern world, violence was a social device for the demarcation and reinforcement of inter-group
hierarchies, in modernity, violence is often a mechanism for the organizational and ideological control of the entire social order. Since in modernity the patterns of social stratification are generally much more flexible, with greater social mobility it is very difficult to rely on violence to preserve one’s social status. As Gellner (1983: 24–5) noticed long ago:

Modern society is not mobile because it is egalitarian; it is egalitarian because it is mobile.
Moreover, it has to be mobile whether it wishes to be so or not, because this is required by the satisfaction of its terrible and overwhelming thirst for economic growth.

Hence instead of using violence to maintain status divisions, modern states prefer to ideologically and coercively preserve the status quo and where possible to externalize the domestic social conflicts.

However, this is not to say that inter-group violence has disappeared in modernity. Instead as the state maintains a monopoly on the use of violence over its territory, the central issue becomes who controls the mighty state apparatus. Although Marxists have traditionally interpreted the state as no more than an instrument of class oppression, this is a rather simplistic, deterministic and one-sided view that ignores the historical complexities of state power. The coercive capabilities of states have been used against many different groups including ethnic minorities and majorities, women, ideological enemies (such as ‘kulaks’, communists, fascists, liberals), peasantry, the aristocracy, workers, the middle classes, religious movements and organizations, atheists, homosexuals, intellectuals, Westerners, traditionalists and many other groupings. What is more important is that as the coercive and organizational powers of states significantly increase in modernity, so does the potential for greater inter-group violence. It is no accident that modernity was inaugurated through inter-group violence that characterized the French Revolution, the Jacobin Reign of Terror and the Napoleonic Wars. Whereas the rulers of pre-modern polities had little or no organizational means, nor need, to exterminate entire groups of people inhabiting their polities (as the periodic spectacles of scapegoat torture would suffice), the modern era has acquired organizational means for the mass extermination of specific groups. Moreover, the ideological zeal of modern conceptions of a better social order, all of which project a world of justice and equality, act as much more powerful mobilizers and legitimizers of organized violent action. From the Jacobin guillotining of traitors to the revolution, through Nazi concentration camps to the killing fields of the Khmer Rouge and many other genocides of the twentieth century to the Soviet gulags, it is in the modern age when inter-group violence has escalated to unprecedented proportions. Unlike their pre-modern predecessors, modern, Enlightenment- and Romanticism-inspired, ideological doctrines exhibit doctrinal purism and clearly defined ambitions of social engineering. Being in possession of the universal, indisputable, knowledge that provides a blueprint for a just, rational and orderly social world meant also that any opposition to such a perfect grand design can be nothing else than deliberate malice. And there is no compromise with malicious groups. They have to be removed from the body politic.

As Levene (2008), Mann (2005), Hinton (2002) and Bauman (1989) convincingly argue and document, genocide is a direct product of the modern condition: the availability of organizational and infrastructural means for undertaking such a gigantic task and
the prevalence of a depersonalized yet highly rationalized ethic and logic that conceive the annihilation of huge groups of people as the most efficient way of implementing a particular ideological blueprint. In this sense, the aptly named ‘Timbers of Justice’ (guillotine) and the gas chambers represented, in the words of their inventors and their users, the ‘most rational’ and ‘most humane’ way to dispose of evil obstructers who stood in the way of the perfect society. The guillotine was a product of this modern and humanitarian rationality, being conceived with an aim ‘to put an end to the inequality of death prescribed by the state. To end the vile tortures, burnings and other pagan forms of execution, handed out and measured according to social class and status. The guillotine was the embodiment of equality’ (Opie, 2003: 10). In a rather perverse way so were the gas chambers of the ‘Final Solution’.9

In consequence, rather than stifling inter-group violence within its borders, the modern state becomes an epicentre of mass murder: from the virtual annihilation of Hereros and Namas in South-West Africa, the Armenian genocide by the fiercely modernist Young Turks movement, the Nazi Holocaust of Jews and Romany Gypsies, the Cultural Revolution in China to the more recent systematic slaughters in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda and Darfur. It is estimated that in the twentieth century alone, up to 120 million people have been killed as a result of inter-group violence, including genocide, classicide and politicide (Mann, 2001: 207). No pre-modern social order had the organizational, technological and ideological means to reach such a staggering figure.10

Exporting organized brutality

Despite the popular perceptions and the depictions of early historians who portrayed the pre-modern world as full of warfare where hundreds of thousands or even millions of soldiers would kill each other on the vast battlefields, much of the pre-modern inter-polity violence was small-scale, sporadic, ritualistic and highly disorganized, often resulting in minimal casualties. Nearly all ancient documents tend to exaggerate the numbers of soldiers involved in various battles and even more the casualties of the enemy side. For example, in his book *Wars of the Jews* (75 CE), Flavius Josephus writes about 1.1 million dead in the siege of Jerusalem but in fact ‘a cautious estimate suggests that Jerusalem at that time could have had a population of sixty thousand to seventy thousand inhabitants’ (Sand, 2010: 131). Similarly, the celebrated (1457 BCE) battle of Megiddo between ‘Egyptians’ and ‘Canaanites’ was described by the ancient sources as involving millions of warriors and hundreds of thousands of human casualties, however, as archaeological records show, only 83 soldiers died in this battle (Eckhardt, 1992: 30).

Since their rulers lacked developed social organizations, means of communication, transport, exchange, technology, logistics and literacy, the pre-modern polities could not fight very destructive wars. Instead most conflicts were decided with few human casualties. The simple hunter–gatherers did not fight wars; ancient Greek battles of phalanx were essentially pushing matches aimed at breaking the phalanx formation often with minimal losses; medieval warfare was regularly limited to aristocrats who engaged in ritualistic skirmishes and generally avoided open field conflicts (Mann, 1986; Keegan, 1994; Fry, 2007; Malešević, 2010). The rulers of antiquity, medieval times and even the early modern era possessed small armies, limited war budgets and little if any popular
support for waging wars. They also had great difficulty in assembling and maintaining large military coalitions of diverse and mutually suspicious nobility. Notwithstanding the inflated depictions of ancient and medieval historians, pre-modern polities were simply organizationally and infrastructurally too weak to engage in the prolonged wars that would bring about mass destruction and annihilation of large groups of people. Furthermore, there was no ideological rationale to pursue such wars of annihilation. As intergroup status solidarities were still much stronger than cross-polity solidarities, the rulers and aristocratic warriors had little interest in physically harming their fellow nobility to whom they were often related in kinship. Moreover, neither they nor the peasantry they ruled over had a particular sense of attachment to each other or the motivation to fight or support fighting against peasants from the neighbouring polities. In addition, the dominant religious doctrines, including Christianity and Islam, reinforced these social hierarchies by delegitimizing warfare between members of the same religious communities while simultaneously advancing doctrine for the justification of war against the infidel (i.e. just war theory and holy war). However, even these religiously inspired wars, despite the abundance of fierce and uncompromising rhetoric, remained limited in character: the legendary siege of Antioch (1097) of the First Crusade involved no more than 3000 Christian soldiers and as many Muslim Seljuk forces, while the largest army ever assembled in defence of Jerusalem (1183 CE) had fewer than 15,000 soldiers (Beeler, 1971: 249–50; Herwig et al., 2003: 164). These and similar military undertakings resulted in small numbers of casualties, most of which occurred before and after the battle (from exhaustion, disease, hunger and the slaughter of retreating forces).

Such figures stand in stark contrast to the inter-polity violence of modernity. Since the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815), modern warfare has involved millions of soldiers, the full ideological and organizational commitment of entire polities and regularly ends in huge fatalities. For example, only seven weeks of fighting in the Austro-Prussian War (1866) resulted in more than 100,000 dead; 11 months of ferocious combat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870) ended in more than 200,000 dead; the casualties of the American Civil War amounted to 620,000; and 12 years of Napoleonic Wars brought about 6 million human casualties. Nevertheless it is the twentieth-century war death toll that really stands out with First World War casualties amounting to 13 million dead and 20 million wounded and the Second World War totals of 55 million dead and around 100 million injured (Clodfelter, 1992; Herwig et al., 2003). The twentieth-century casualties of inter-polity violence total more than 120 million and, as such, they constitute around two-thirds of all war deaths for the last five thousand years on this planet. Simply put, in the last hundred years we moderns have killed twenty-two times more individuals than our precursors did in 4,900 years (Eckhardt, 1992: 273; Malešević, 2010: 118).

Hence, the modern age is the true age of mass slaughter. The fact that in modernity much of violent action is not internal but occurs at the borders of nation-states has led some analysts, such as Elias (2000) or Pinker (2011), to believe that we live in a less violent world than our predecessors. However, the opposite is true: rather than extinguishing violence, modern social organizations transform violent action into cumulative coercive power that is periodically unleashed with devastating results. Not only that, the monopoly on the legitimate use of violence over a particular territory often successfully redirects violence from the inside towards the outside, but relying on the most advanced
organizational and ideological knowledge, it also creates an unprecedented bureaucratic machine of destruction. Even more importantly, the modern era, unlike any other, is able to reconcile mass murder with Enlightenment-inspired ideals of autonomy, justice, liberty, authenticity and popular sovereignty. At the heart of the modern project lies a paradox, a form of ontological dissonance, whereby the most devastating and most systematic extermination of human life is happening at the very time when that life is nearly universally considered as sacred and precious (Malešević, 2010: 141–4).

Nevertheless, as in previous historical periods, this paradox too is rooted in the social structure of its age. It is the prevalence of moral equality and ethical universality that creates the structural conditions for the proliferation and ultimate justification of mass murder. In feudal Europe, the aristocrats were not interested in the annihilation of rebellious peasantry as they needed their labour, and the peasantry as such was generally regarded (and have often regarded themselves) as inferior to nobility in every respect. As the two principal social strata were seen as occupying different places on the social ladder and inhabiting two different moral universes, there was no need to engage in the extensive delegitimization of peasant rebellions. After all, all peasants were seen as no better than animals, and torturing a small number of rebels and torching their villages had proved to be much better deterrent than killing hundreds of thousands of peasants. In contrast, as modernity brings about a new and profoundly different ethics where all human beings are now considered to be of equal moral worth, the only reliable way to delegitimize one’s political opponent is to deny him membership of the human race (Malešević, 2010: 119–24). Hence, it is precisely because of this moral universality that organized violence becomes so rampant and indiscriminate in the modern era. In addition to controlling huge organizational powers, capable of historically unprecedented mass destruction, modern nation-states and various social movements are regularly guided by the uncompromising ideological vistas determined to bring about a perfect social order. As these ideological blueprints are more often than not conceptualized as the ultimate truth-delivering projects, buttressed either by scientific authority, moral humanist absolutism or both, then any attempt to stand in the way of such a noble endeavour can be interpreted as nothing less than deliberate evil. In this context, the Jacobin Terror becomes ‘cruel necessity’ since the noble idea of an egalitarian and righteous Republic requires, as Saint-Just puts it, ‘prompt, severe and inflexible justice’ as the true ideal of the Republic ‘can only be based on inflexibility’ (Weber, 2003: 85). The possession of ultimate truth and absolute justice calls for righteous zeal and no restraint. As the parliamentary deputy of the new French Republic, Brissot, put it unambiguously: ‘We cannot be calm until Europe, all Europe, is in flames’ (Doyle, 2001: 52). Similarly to establish a classless world of proletarian justice entails not only the ‘expropriation of the expropriators’ but also their ultimate destruction as they are bourgeois stooges of the capitalist enemy nations. In the alternative modernist vista, the foundation of a new, better and racially pure, world necessitates the implementation of genocidal policies against malicious ‘Judaean-Bolshevik’ conspirators.

Hence those who oppose the creation or existence of such a perfect social order can be no other than ‘parasites’, ‘leeches’, ‘rats’ and ‘monsters’ and as such they do not deserve equal treatment to that of humans: they have to be destroyed. Therefore, it is the inclusivity, universalism and moral equality that paradoxically create the conditions for the
greater dehumanization of one’s ideological enemy. When there is an acknowledged and visible hierarchy between social groups, there is no great need to dehumanize the (already inferior) Other. It is only when all human beings are universally considered to be of equal moral worth than one needs to deploy an elaborate ideological apparatus to deny a particular group full membership of the human community. It is only in modernity that dehumanization becomes necessary for both the justification of organized, inter-polity, violence and for the popular mobilization to participate in such violence. How else could one reconcile the idea of building a more liberal, democratic world that respects human rights and the dignity of all human beings while simultaneously deploying atomic bombs to kill hundreds of thousands of civilians? It is no accident that the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was justified through dehumanization. When President Truman said that ‘When you have to deal with a beast, you have to treat him as a beast’ (Alperovitz, 1995: 563), he was just reflecting the dominant perception of the Japanese shared by large sections of the US public. As various polls conducted at the end of war show, most respondents enthusiastically supported bombings, with substantial numbers advocating dropping more atomic bombs and the extermination of all Japanese (Hixson, 2003: 239). Furthermore, while in the pre-modern world both the infliction and legitimization of violence remained essentially a vertical, status-based, phenomenon, in the modern era much violent action is inflicted and justified horizontally. That is, whereas in medieval Europe, brutalizing inferior others within one’s polity was regularly seen as legitimate and killing fellow aristocrats as a heinous crime, in the modern age, it is the other way around: murdering your fellow national provokes moral outrage and severe punishment while killing an enemy combatant is a heroic deed. Thus, with the rise and expansion of modernity, both infliction and legitimization of brutality become more organized and externalized.

Although in modernity violence has become less publicly visible, it is, in fact, much more prevalent. The modern age differs from its pre-modern counterparts in hiding death, as both killing and dying are removed from the public eye. The animals we eat are killed in the closed and distant slaughterhouses, our morgues are removed from the public view; our old and sick die in hospices and hospitals; we do not organize public hangings neither do we torture or burn people in the town squares. Yet in times of war the citizens of modern polities generally give tacit or explicit consent for the mass murder of those who inhabit other polities. Moreover, it is regularly those who are the least affected by the calamities of war that often support the most extreme forms of violent retaliation. For example, surveys of the British public in the Second World War clearly show that there was substantially greater support for the reprisal bombing of German cities among individuals living in the areas unaffected by the Luftwaffe’s aerial bombardment than by those who lived in the cities that were excessively bombed (Garrett, 1993). Similarly, in the wars of Yugoslav succession, it is the civilians (academics, journalists, university students, and teachers) rather than the front-line soldiers who regularly expressed the most extreme attitudes towards the despised enemy (Malešević and Uzelac, 1997; Popov, 2000).

As both Collins (1974) and Bauman (1989) rightly emphasize, in the modern era visible and brutal infliction of pain has been replaced by largely invisible and detached callousness. Modern social organizations require depersonalized, disciplined and callous
ethics that avoids moral responsibility through the bureaucratic delegation of tasks. In this context the killing of the large number of ‘enemy’ soldiers and civilians becomes ideologically grounded, a question of mere instrumental efficiency. This utilitarian, rationalist logic of mass murder reached its pinnacle in the Vietnam War where military success was not measured by the territory the soldiers occupied or the battle victories achieved but by the body count, that is the number of enemy soldiers killed and ‘the proportion between that number and the number of its own dead (the kill ratio)’ (Caputo, 1977: 160). In the most recent wars human casualties have become even more depersonalized as they are now simply reduced to ‘collateral damage’.

Conclusion

No human being lightly tolerates unfair and non-reciprocal relationships. Any marked and prolonged social injustice requires an elaborate and believable process of legitimation. This is particularly the case with the extreme forms of essentially one-sided relationships that constitute violence. All violent action requires some form of justification. However, the sense of justice is a historically specific phenomenon: the pre-modern forms of infliction and legitimization of violence differ substantially from their modern counterparts. This is not to say that modern human beings as individuals are vastly different from their hunting–gathering or medieval predecessors but only that the social conditions under which we live have undergone immense transformations. Simply put, our relationship towards violence at the interpersonal and intra-group level has not dramatically changed, since at the micro-level most human beings avoid direct violent confrontation and prefer flight over fight. Moreover, just like our ancestors, we generally do not approve of random, wanton and indiscriminate interpersonal and intra-group killings.

However, what makes the modern world different from its pre-modern predecessors in its attitudes towards, and its practice of, organized violence are its substantially different structural foundations. It is the cumulative rise of coercive and ideological powers of social organizations and most of all, the modern nation-state, that have created the unparalleled potential for destruction (Malešević, 2006, 2010, 2012). As neither our biology nor our culture equip us properly for violence, we require both the coercive push and the ideological sugar-coating of social organizations to be able to inflict and justify violent action. Hence, rather than stifling brutality, modernity opens the door for the extraordinary proliferation of violence. With the constant increase in the coercive, infrastructural and ideological might of modern social organizations, there is a greater devastation and heavier human costs. Despite the common-sense view that sees our world as strikingly less violent than all of its traditional predecessors, this is essentially an upside-down image that hides true reality: with modernity, inter-group and intra-polity violence have dramatically escalated and inter-polity violence has reached unimaginable proportions. Our age is the most belligerent in all of history.

Notes

1. Most sociologists, such as Collins (1975), and Turner (2002, 2007) who operate with a similar three-level typology tend to make a distinction between the interpersonal behaviour (micro level), corporate and categoric units (mezzo level) and the institutional systems (macro level).
For example, for Turner (2002: 32–40, the mezzo level refers to the corporate units (such as city, school or business enterprise) and the categoric units (such as age, gender and ethnicity) whereas ‘institutions are the most macro level reality of societies and systems of societies’. However, I do not see the need to separate the ‘categoric units’ from other institutions such as the educational or legal system, as they all operate on the similar mezzo level. Instead what is missing in this typology are the geo-political forces which have historically shaped (and were shaped by) the mezzo and micro levels and it is they who constitute the proper macro level: the inter-polity dynamics.

2. As Collins (2009: 567) rightly points out, despite stereotypical views that link anger to violence, this is not the prevailing emotion that accompanies violent action: ‘My examination of hundreds of photos of individuals in military combat, police arrests, riots and robberies show that anger is rare on the faces of persons engaged in violence: by far the most common emotion is fear, or its milder version, tension.’

3. None of this is to say that human beings are immune to social pressures. As classical psychological studies of conformity from Milgram (1974) and Zimbardo (1971) to the more recent experimental studies show (see Midlarsky, 2011, for a synthesis), individuals can be cruel to others when conforming to authority.

4. There is an ongoing debate in anthropology and archaeology between those who argue that early humans were very violent (Keeley, 1996; Guilaine and Zammit, 2005; McCall and Shields, 2007) and those who contest such blanket characterizations and show that there was little violence among early hunter–gatherers (Kelly, 2000; Fry, 2005, 2007). For example, Otterbein (1997: 271); Kelly (2000: 157) and Fry (2007: 54) convincingly dispute Keeley’s evidence arguing that he ‘intermingles archeological examples of individual homicides . . . nonviolent deaths due to starvation and disease with the archaeological examples of warfare’.

5. Turner (2002, 2007: 23) explains that unlike monkeys that remained living in trees and were able to find food and sustain much larger groupings, the walking apes could not survive in large groups:

   To limit the size of ape groupings in the forest canopy, natural selection hit upon a solution to this potential problem by wiring apes for the female transfer pattern that, in essence, breaks the group apart at puberty and by weakening ties among all adults so that they could move alone in temporary and small foraging parties in the forest canopy. Weak ties, mobility, individualism, and fluid groups were fitness enhancing in the marginal niches of the arboreal habitat.

6. For similar examples of the pre-modern attitude to violence, see Elias ([1939] 2000) and Pinker (2011).

7. Although a similar ethical discrepancy was just as present in the letters from SS officers who were able to reconcile the detailed descriptions of torture of their Jewish prisoners while expressing tender emotions towards their family (Klee et al., 1991), there is a qualitative difference between these two cases. In the pre-modern context, torture was used, and popularly considered to be a justified form of punishment for the disobedience (of the inferior peasantry); in the modern era the ethical discrepancy is firmly rooted in the ideological dehumanization of the ‘enemy’.
8. For an in-depth critical analysis of the role of violence in Elias’s theory of the civilizing process, see Malešević and Ryan (2012).

9. In a view highly indicative of the modernist obsession with ideological and technological perfection, Hitler deemed the guillotine ‘an ignoble and degenerate form of execution’ (Opie, 2003: 177), preferring apparently more ‘humanitarian’ and ‘dignified’ gas chambers.

10. A number of recent studies such as Pinker (2011) or White (2010) have tended to minimize these figures by focusing on the relative (i.e. per head of population) rather than absolute numbers. However, such a strategy is highly problematic as it is difficult to agree what the unit of an analysis should be: the whole world, the individual polities involved in the conflict, the specific regions, towns or battlefields where the violence took place? The time scale is also of crucial importance. For example, relying on the relative numbers, Pinker (2011: 195) rates the Middle East Slave Trade far ahead in the number of human casualties to both world wars. However, this seems rather a bizarre way of pairing one long-term historical process that took place over 1,800 years with events lasting only several years. There is obviously a huge difference between the slow, cumulative human casualties resulting from the pre-modern violence and the ability (and will) to kill hundreds of thousands in a matter of days or hours as was the case in most modern wars from the American Civil War to Hiroshima.

References


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