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Journal Item

How to cite:

Wood, J. Carter (2004). A useful savagery: The invention of violence in nineteenth-century England. *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 9(1) pp. 22–42.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [not recorded]

Version: [not recorded]

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.3366/jvc.2004.9.1.22>

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*A Useful Savagery:
The Invention of Violence in
Nineteenth-Century England*

J. Carter Wood

Friendly and courteous behaviour seems to increase daily; and gentler manners, arising from the better training and example of the upper and middle classes, which reflects usefully upon the conduct of all. J. H. Elliott (1868)¹

Our Civilisation, vaunt it as loudly as we will, is full of unclean mysteries; yet we go on boasting of the material and scientific triumphs of our age, as if these were all in all, and never bestow a thought upon the moral shortcomings that render our Civilisation, however advanced it *may* be, the merest mockery of what it *should* be, if our wealth and virtue kept pace with each other. Charles Mackay (1867)²

Violence played an important contributory role in the formation – and re-formation – of nineteenth-century ideologies and identities. Reciprocally, new material realities and changing cultural patterns influenced perceptions of violence. More specifically, the social imagination of violence, what I refer to as its ‘mentality’, underwent remarkable alterations. The notion that such attitudes alter directly in relation to changes in ‘actual’ violence has been seriously questioned.³ However, I suggest that it is useful to look at the narratives applied to small-scale interpersonal aggression in order to explore developments in the role of violence in English culture. Nineteenth-century social commentators often wrote as if they were *discovering* violence, and, indeed, increasing social investigation brought into view much that had been previously ignored. However, these commentators, along with the state and legal profession, were also involved in *inventing* violence: developing a new set of beliefs as to the nature of physical aggression, debating and redrawing the boundaries of legitimate interpersonal behaviour and seeking explanations for violence in the structures of social life. I refer to violence’s ‘invention’ neither to suggest that there had previously been a lack of violent acts in England nor to claim that violence had completely failed to generate concern or thought prior to

the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, violence, which had been a widely accepted part of social relations, community self-policing and recreational life in the eighteenth century, gained a new cultural prominence as a 'social problem'. Many of the limitations and ambiguities in this process – for instance, the continuing relevance of what Peter Gay has called 'alibis' for aggression – cannot be fully dealt with here.⁴ Furthermore, my concern is not to offer a comprehensive or exhaustive depiction of nineteenth-century constructions of violence. Instead, I shall outline some salient points related to attitudes toward violence and speculate upon their influences on culture and identity. Ultimately, my aim is to suggest ways of conceptualising historical changes in the ways that violence is perceived and to explore the influence that those developments had on culture more generally.⁵

Inventing Violence

For centuries, violence had not been perceived as a particularly troublesome social problem in England. J.M. Beattie has found 'a high tolerance of violent behaviour', noting that 'few children in the eighteenth century could have avoided physical punishment at home or at school, in service or as apprentices; and few adults could have failed at least to witness physical violence'.⁶ Violence was not merely a reluctantly acknowledged 'fact of life': rather, the early modern state, community and home were all arenas in which violence was an accepted – indeed, an expected – means of expressing legitimate social power.⁷ Margaret Hunt notes that not only was the eighteenth century 'a society suffused with personal relationships of dominance and submission, but it was one that saw violence as a necessary, if not always optimal, way of maintaining order in any hierarchical relationship'.⁸ Acceptance of violence was shared among all social ranks, and visible 'cruelty' applied to animals, children or adults was a generally assumed part of daily life.⁹ Pieter Spierenburg, writing of early modern Europe more generally, has found 'vindictive' and 'indifferent' attitudes toward violence evident even at the top of the social scale: the state's judicial punishments embodied a retributive model of justice based upon widespread popular consent.¹⁰ Although particular whippings, pilloryings and hangings might provoke the (sometimes violent) hostility of crowds, such unrest signalled disagreement over the legitimacy of a specific instance of physical punishment rather than revulsion against pain, retribution or violence *per se*.¹¹

The prevalence of violence in English society did not go entirely unquestioned, and, of course, eighteenth-century elites did fear (and

fight) crimes against the person along with those against property. Concurrently, reformers, typically from dissenting religious backgrounds, actively opposed popular pastimes, and the 'reformation of manners' became a prominent concern. However, violent behaviour was, in the practice of the law, generally tolerated as long as it was neither explicitly murderous nor connected to threats to property or the state, and it was rarely a target of early modern Christian reform efforts.¹² Despite the eighteenth century's nascent concern with manners and morals, reformers were far more interested in stamping out various forms of 'impurity' and 'sin' or attacking earthly pleasures and frivolity than in battling cruelty or violence.¹³ Although there were limits to the acceptability of violent behaviour, those frontiers were, by subsequent standards, broad, and violence had yet to become a prominent form of social anxiety.

Beginning in the first decades of the nineteenth century, attitudes toward violence were transformed. Three general tendencies characterised this changing outlook: increasing efforts to define the limits of legitimate violence, the linking of violence to social causes and effects and the elaboration of a new 'mentality' of violence. In the process, violence as a social idea was 'invented', becoming a key cultural concern and increasingly urgent topic for discussion and analysis. The modern multiplicity of the meanings of violence is a product of those nineteenth-century narrative efforts to define and differentiate it as a phenomenon. Norbert Elias, in theorising a 'civilising process', emphasises the cultural importance of an increasingly elaborate differentiation of behaviour.¹⁴ Although his theory encompasses numerous kinds of social interaction and its empirical focus is largely on earlier periods, his description of increasingly nuanced appraisals of conduct is apposite to the nineteenth-century intellectual encounter with violence. Proliferating scientific and sociological discourses were among the mechanisms for the differentiated analysis of many kinds of activity, violence included. In applying these discourses to physical aggression – in the process, creating violence as a phenomenon to be understood – neither the state nor social critics achieved a single definition of what it was. Nevertheless, violence was addressed in new ways: like sexuality, violence 'became something to say' and was subject to a veritable 'discursive explosion'.¹⁵

Law is one of the most obvious contexts in which violence is defined, and when people spoke of 'crime' they increasingly referred to violent crime. Furthermore, the century saw a shifting legal classification of various forms of physical harm. Attitudinal changes are visible in legislative and judicial moves toward stricter punishment of violence as well

as the gradual limitation of corporal and capital punishment for non-violent offences.¹⁶ In 1803, Lord Ellenborough's Act imposed death sentences for the first time on attempted murder and certain kinds of assault.¹⁷ The 1820s saw the beginning of a prolonged legal effort to define and demarcate violence: penalties for manslaughter were increased in 1822, while in 1828 an omnibus Offences Against the Person Act was passed.¹⁸ The Act, referred to as Lord Lansdowne's Act, marked a decisive step in legal efforts to bring clarity to the law on violence. It repealed fifty-seven violence-related parliamentary Acts dating back to the reign of Henry III and set out, as a contemporary magazine described it, to 'make that intelligible which is now obscure' relating to offences against the person and also broadened magistrates' jurisdiction to summarily try violent offences.¹⁹ In 1837, the penalties for some kinds of assault were raised, and, in 1853, an Act provided the first specific legislative prohibition on violence against women and children.²⁰ 1861 saw another comprehensive Offences Against the Person Act, which further redefined the law and provided the basis for the legal distinction between 'actual' and 'grievous' bodily harm.²¹ An in-depth 1875 parliamentary report on 'brutal' assaults canvassed opinions among the legal and policing establishment on the prevalence of violence and sought recommendations for defining, distinguishing and punishing various gradations of non-lethal violence.²² Despite all this activity, much remained unclear: a critic noted in the 1880s that 'the Act [of 1861] relating to offences against the person throws no light upon [homicide] whatsoever', pointing to the continuing unsettled meanings of terms such as 'homicide', 'manslaughter', and 'malice aforethought'.²³ Thus, the legal categorisation of violence was very mobile; nevertheless, there was a sustained attempt to define it and develop more precisely calculated punishments for illegitimate physical force.

Furthermore, violence came to have a social resonance beyond the law. 'Murder is not merely a technical word; it has a broad popular meaning', as a reviewer in the *London Quarterly Review* pointed out in 1866, an observation that could be equally applied to lesser forms of violence.²⁴ In using a variety of vocabularies and pursuing different specific aims, nineteenth-century commentators were not always talking about the same thing when they discussed 'violence', 'brutality' or 'savagery'. Emphasising the elasticity of the term 'violence', a statistical report on violent deaths in Liverpool included fatalities under the rubrics of 'accident', 'died from the bite of a mad dog', 'exposure to the inclemency of the weather and starvation', 'excessive drinking' and 'choked while eating'.²⁵ 'Savagery' and 'brutality' could describe

many different kinds of situations; yet, in most cases, the terms were applied to deliberate interpersonal altercations.²⁶ By the 1820s, concurrent with its more refined legal differentiation, murder could be discussed with detailed attention to its nuances in circumstances and forms.²⁷ Increasing attention was given to the gradations of violent behaviour. Some early nineteenth-century critics attacked pugilism, a long-accepted form of sport- and street-fighting, as 'repugnant to the laws and maxims of a civilised state' or argued that accidental fatalities during boxing matches should be classified as manslaughter.²⁸ Even those who defended traditional forms of prize-fighting developed elaborate rules and 'systems' and debated the legitimacy of various forms of sporting violence.²⁹ Later in the century, the parameters of acceptable violence in the home came under close scrutiny.³⁰

Although the contexts of these critiques and the authors' arguments varied, such discussions circulated critically (or defensively) around a newly perceived social problem: violence. Physical force itself – rather than merely as an accompaniment to other kinds of crime – became a heated topic of public concern. New 'humanitarian sensibilities' expressed a heightened sensitivity to visible human suffering and sought explanations for violence not only within the individual's soul but also in the collection of social factors that formed his or her character.³¹ Although it is the second half of the nineteenth century that tends to be noted for the rise of social determinism, strong assertions of the role of environment in shaping behaviour are apparent earlier. From the late 1820s onwards, letters to the Home Office, investigations into working-class life and studies of crime emphasised environment as a cause of violence and brutality.³² By the late 1830s, it could be argued, in the context of a broad series of articles on the English 'moral economy', that 'it would be almost just to say, that society prepares the crime, and that the ostensible criminal is only the instrument by which it is executed'.³³ Social analyses of violence in the early nineteenth century always competed with, and often mixed, physical or moral discourses; however, there was a tendency toward an even 'more finely tuned justice, towards a closer penal mapping of the social body' as new forms of violent 'deviancy' were created.³⁴ These developments were accompanied by a growing view that violence was eradicable: it could become, as never before, a 'problem' to be solved.³⁵ Social investigations were not merely a vehicle for refined, voyeuristic tourism of the dark side of lower-class life, but were also underpinned by an expectation that such explorations would open the way for social improvement. Social reform was not, of course, only driven by concerns about violence; however, violence was a prominent concern of social

reformers preoccupied with mapping and improving behaviour.³⁶

As violence achieved a prominent place in the map of social criticism, a new, 'civilised' mentality of violence was developed. 'Civilisation' was a word with great currency in the nineteenth century, reflecting a particular set of attitudes toward behaviour that became associated most strongly with middle-class cultural tastes. 'Civilisation' formed a nexus where attitudes toward pain, crime, punishment, aggression, masculinity, Englishness and public comportment met, linking violence with other concerns such as impulsiveness, gender, national identity and imaginations of public space. Violence became a token that could be invoked in numerous contexts and took on a new and enduring importance in the language of social critique; reciprocally, attitudes toward violence were influenced by other 'civilised' imperatives.³⁷ A central issue was applying new narratives in understanding violence (for example, defining the places, situations, forms and agents that created a legitimate context for the infliction of physical pain) and expressing the increasing alienation of self-consciously 'civilised' opinion from the presumed 'savagery' of other social groups. With the development of new understandings of violence came efforts to promote them and the erection of official institutions to enforce and enable different standards of behaviour.³⁸ Thus, while violence was invented as a problem, new discourses were developed to grapple with its origins, forms and meanings.

'Civilisation' and 'Savagery'

'Civilisation', like 'violence', had neither a stable nor uncontested meaning. Nevertheless, throughout the nineteenth century, repeated and reciprocal connections between 'savagery' and 'civilisation' surfaced, influenced by an intensifying link between violence and social order. In an influential 1836 essay, John Stuart Mill described 'Civilisation' as a word with a 'double meaning': 'it sometimes stands for *human improvement* in general, and sometimes for *certain kinds* of improvement in particular'.³⁹ While emphasising 'human improvement', the bulk of his essay is concerned with 'Civilisation in the narrow sense: not that in which it is synonymous with improvement, but that in which it is the direct converse or contrary of rudeness or barbarism'.⁴⁰ Violence is an important element in Mill's arguments: he makes specific references to the necessity of protecting individuals from 'injury' inflicted by others, the limitation of visible pain and the replacement of personal or community vengeance by the mechanisms of law.⁴¹ It was the 'narrow sense' of civilisation, its self-conscious differentiation from

'savagery', that most importantly implicated violence in new cultural imaginations. Such moralising and differentiating rhetoric inflected even the more 'positivist' discourses on crime and violence: statistical analyses of criminality used categories such as 'wantonness', 'profligacy', a 'vicious' previous character, 'idleness and bad company', 'temptation' and 'bad habits' to denote causes of crime.⁴² With specific reference to assault, causes such as 'drinking', 'weak intellects' and 'confirmed bad habits' were duly counted and given the gloss of scientific certainty.⁴³ Statistical studies could contrast 'civilisation' with 'barbarians', discover 'evil' emanating from working-class areas and emphasise the importance of Christian redemption as a solution.⁴⁴ This intermingling of moral and social categories links even 'objective', quantitative analyses to the civilised mentality of violence.

'Savagery', which referred to various kinds of behaviour, became a standard part of social commentary on 'civilisation'. In his series on the 'Moral Economy of Large Towns', W.C. Taylor claimed 'no one can visit the streets in the vicinity of the [Liverpool] docks without feeling that he has seen something very like savage life in close contact with Civilisation'.⁴⁵ Matthew Davenport-Hill referred to the lack of proper moral education among working-class children, linking it to their 'fall into nomadic habits' and describing them as 'a herd of savages in the bosom of civilised society'.⁴⁶ Discussions of violence were grafted onto this discourse of savagery: much like the English explorer examining 'savage' societies in Africa and Asia, middle-class observation at times confirmed the worst fears of degeneracy and cruelty existing alongside idealised notions of Englishness.⁴⁷ In analysing labour-related violence, one writer in 1849 emphasised the presumed impulsiveness of the lower classes and equated them with supposedly primitive societies:

a scene ensues calling into operation all the passions of hatred and anger which one might have hoped belonged only to the American Indian or African warrior.⁴⁸

Such observations sat uneasily with perceptions of an expanding humanitarianism in nineteenth-century culture. However, particularly brutal crimes reinforced the notion that marginalised groups formed a debased culture unto themselves, radically disconnected from the civilising and reforming spirit of the age.

There was another, ethnic element in 'civilised' social analysis: the association of the Irish with violence became 'axiomatic', and Irish savagery was believed to spread like a contagion to English workers.⁴⁹ In the early 1830s, one writer, referring to Irish immigration, concluded, 'the colonisation of savage tribes has ever been attended with effects

on Civilisation as fatal as those which have marked the progress of the sand flood over the fertile plains of Egypt'.⁵⁰ A perceived rise in drunken assaults in factory towns was attributed to 'the inferior order of Irishmen hav[ing] brought with them all their vices into the manufacturing districts'.⁵¹ However, the Irish aside, there was plenty of home-grown savagery to concern reformers and the state as they sought to identify the social causes of violence.

Some observers suggested that the problem lay in the inability of certain classes or groups to adapt to industrial, urban society; savagery was thus depicted as a primitive survival. Despite the long-extant idealisation of the countryside within English culture, these analyses depicted an unenlightened rural culture unaffected by new disciplines and cultural patterns.⁵² Joseph Fletcher, commenting upon a mass of 'moral statistics' on violent and property crime, argued that the most degraded and violent populations were to be found in the rural areas 'furthest removed from every civilising influence', which were on a par with 'the most neglected of the manufacturing and mining populations'.⁵³ A correspondent to the Home Office in 1823, who had had bullets fired through his windows, noted 'the principal inhabitants here are farmers, who have always been considered a very rude and unmanageable set of people'.⁵⁴ One of the most striking portrayals of the 'savage' countryside was an 1851 essay by Richard Horne and Charles Dickens, 'Cain in the Fields', in which a rural idyll is quickly juxtaposed with a vivid account of the recent murder of a woman by her lover, an agricultural labourer described as 'the selfish and illiterate fiend of the fields'.⁵⁵ This case prefaces a more general negative evaluation of rural life; for example, they describe 'a country hawker', asking 'can the worst streets of London produce anything to beat this specimen of low cunning and depravity?'⁵⁶ Although we are more familiar with the argument that urbanisation and industry created violence and disorder (along with other sorts of immorality), there was a pronounced counter-opinion that cities and factories were civilising agents. 'But for the renovating influence of its manufactures', Andrew Ure wrote in 1835, 'England would have been overrun ere now with the most ignorant and depraved race of men to be met with in any civilised region of the globe'.⁵⁷

There was, of course, another tendency that saw violence as a product of urban and industrial society and as a symptom of 'civilisation' itself. Mill, while distinguishing between civilisation and savagery, hinted at connections between them: 'It is in this sense that we may speak of the vices or the miseries of Civilisation; and that the question has been seriously propounded, whether Civilisation is on the whole a good or an

evil?'⁵⁸ 'That there *is* a connection', a writer in 1849 claimed, 'of one kind or another – that there is something in the present form of our Civilisation which produces or encourages this seeming anomaly [of more heinous crime amidst growing refinement] – appears to be certain'.⁵⁹ These analyses often idealised the (sometimes relatively recent) past as a time of more stable and pacific social relations. The view that industrial society created its own forms of madness and violence became more common later in the century and fed into a sociology of urban life that has tended to see cities as the prime sites of social dysfunction.⁶⁰ One writer pointed to the structures of urban life themselves as sources of new types of cruelty and violence: 'there is *springing up* amongst us a systematic child injury, torture and murder – has sprung up and has quickly grown to serious proportions – at which pagan Rome might have blushed'.⁶¹ In the late nineteenth century, some observers continued to see 'the existence of this life of savagery, running parallel with the ordinary life of refinement and civilisation ... forced under their notice by an act of violence or more than usual daring outrage'.⁶² An 1874 gang rape and murder in Liverpool inspired a seething attack on 'savagery' and 'bestiality':

The most brutal, the most cowardly, the most pitiless, the most barbarous deeds done in the world, are being perpetrated by the lower classes of the English people – once held to be by their birth, however lowly, generous, brave merciful, and civilised.⁶³

Specific incidents were marshalled as part of a generalised discourse of savagery that defined certain groups as inherently impulsive and wild, unconstrained by cultural codes or recognisable boundaries.

The relationship between 'civilisation' and 'savagery' was succinctly expressed in a mid-nineteenth-century article:

Growing up in the very midst of this kindness of spirit, fastidious delicacy, and romantic refinement, there is a tendency to crime more wild, more brutal, more abominable, than the darkest ages of the world ever heard of. ... This horrible taint in the national mind occurs in the midst of social, moral, and religious soundness. It is the attendant of our civilisation, the shadow of our refinement.⁶⁴

The image of a 'shadow' was perceptive; shadows, after all, cannot exist without something to cast them. The creation of a 'civilised' mentality of violence, itself a part of a broader 'civilising offensive', resulted in the discernment of new and varied threats to refined society.⁶⁵ Violent crimes became the focus of social commentators when they discussed the crime rate or expressed fears of social breakdown.⁶⁶ But the relationship was not only one-way: while civilisation manufactured the

darkness around it, it was in turn elaborated in reference to and supported by its shadow. Through discussion of acts of violence, social observers gave 'savage' elements a social location. Although that location was often unclear, changing or contradictory, the menacing presence of 'savagery' nevertheless brought clarity to the 'civilised' identity, making violence an important part of the refined social imagination.

Violence and Identity

The invention of violence interacted with issues of identity in the nineteenth century, particularly those related to class, the language of which 'is always unstable'.⁶⁷ The interrelationship between identity and violence emphasised that instability, connecting the 'civilised' self to changing attitudes toward violence. The emergence of a 'civilised' mentality of violence was concurrent with a foundational period in middle-class identity. Rather than a pre-formed middle-class identity clashing with violence, new attitudes toward violence contributed to the formation and maintenance of a fractious and unstable middle-class identity. The class associations of the 'civilised' mentality of violence proved to be quite flexible, particularly as the dramatic growth in concern about violence does not seem to have been directly related to changes in 'actual' violence in the nineteenth century. Although the statistical measures of violence are notoriously questionable, the period seems to have witnessed either a gradual decline or stagnation in the quantity of violent acts.⁶⁸ Moreover, violence during this period was 'almost exclusively' *intra-class*.⁶⁹ Undoubtedly, violence that impacted on the middle class directly might fuel one of the 'moral panics' that punctuated Victorian life.⁷⁰ However, the violence that surfaced most frequently in social commentary was overwhelmingly committed by working-class people upon their social equals in the form of male brawling, domestic abuse or labour-related attacks. Thus, violence was invented as a social problem by the class for whom its experience was most remote.

Although revulsion against cruelty and the tendency to see most forms of violence as something opposed to culture and society has become so deeply ingrained as to seem natural, such reactions first took root in nineteenth-century linkages of pain, violence and savagery. Mill described a former 'state of perpetual personal conflict' that had once 'habituated every one to the spectacle of harshness, rudeness, and violence'; however, by the 1830s the 'spectacle, and even the very idea of pain, is kept more and more out of the sight of those classes who

enjoy in their fulness [sic] the benefits of civilisation'.⁷¹ The visible suffering that remained could be depicted as against the 'feelings' of the humane parts of the public, while lower groups watched violence 'with brutal curiosity'.⁷² Empathetic, imagined identification with those who suffered pain structured a civilised attitude toward violence, including that distributed by the state.⁷³ Throughout the century, even arguments in favour of extreme punishments in particular cases (such as against traitors, wife-beaters or murderers) cast themselves in the language of humanity.⁷⁴

Along with changing perceptions of the meaning of violence, 'civilising' attitudes also aimed at changing behaviour. Since men were the most common perpetrators of criminally violent acts, those efforts concentrated on developing new definitions of masculinity.⁷⁵ While earlier dominant masculinities relied on bodily prowess and the ability to deploy violence, respectable male identity came to concentrate more on 'occupation, on "rational" public activity, and on one's role as husband and father'.⁷⁶ Middle-class culture emphasised self-restraint, aspiring at least to the appearance of control over 'passion', which was often linked directly to violence.⁷⁷ Consequently, 'violence ... acquired a symbolic currency in political discourse, for middle-class men pointed to their own self-control as a justification for their claims to political power, while attacking the working class as too violent to deserve the vote'.⁷⁸ Different material circumstances and customary definitions of masculinity gave violence a continuing resonance in working-class masculinity, where opportunities to gain 'civilised' signifiers of manliness were scarcer.⁷⁹ Although 'civilised' people did not always adhere to their ideals, the exhibition of a restrained, self-controlled demeanour became essential to displaying respectability. These views were passed on to the lower classes through the production of educational texts, promotion of improved housing, reformation of law and punishment and active intervention in disputes.⁸⁰ Various forms of behaviour associated with (mainly working-class) men became targets of civilising activity. Customary violent sports were transformed so that they could take on more 'civilised' forms; for example, middle-class men predominated as the heads of the boxing associations that promoted new, more civilised rules of pugilism.⁸¹ The explicit purpose of those associations was not only to promote a sporting interest in boxing but also to reform the behaviour of working-class men.⁸²

As Mill noted in 1836, 'Civilisation' in one sense 'stands for that kind of improvement only which distinguishes a wealthy and populous nation from savages or barbarians'.⁸³ Such distinctions were drawn domestically as well as internationally. Although Mill himself did not

identify the working classes as such with 'savages or barbarians', other writers were less hopeful. In the same year as Mill's essay on 'civilisation', one commentator compared the 'refinement' in the middle classes with 'the degree to which the inferior classes in the manufacturing towns and districts have retrograded, or remained behind in the march of improvement'.⁸⁴ The 'harsh brutality' of such groups remained stubbornly resistant to the 'irresistible power' of the 'wheels of Civilisation'.⁸⁵ Identifying the 'dangerous class' increasingly preoccupied such commentators. Writing in 1832, Thomas Arnold posed the question: 'Has the world ever seen a population as dangerous ... as the manufacturing population of Great Britain?'⁸⁶ Artisans might be pointed to as a prime location of savagery and violence.⁸⁷ 'It would appear', wrote one author in 1849, 'that society requires to be roused from time to time by the protrusion of such enormous facts [spectacular murders], in order to become unmistakably aware of the fearful amount of ignorance misery and crime seething in its lower strata', in 'these underlying masses' and 'the lower departments of society'.⁸⁸ Some later social investigators such as Henry Mayhew were often at pains to make finer distinctions.⁸⁹ However, in the decades from the 1820s to the 1870s, the working classes and poor, variously defined, tended to represent the social location of violence.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, the predominant view of the nature and forms of 'violence' changed yet again. Confidence in the 'otherness' of violence came to be questioned, particularly in terms of violence against women (and, to a lesser extent, children). Although in the 1850s it could be confidently asserted that 'men of education and refinement do not strike women; neither do they strike each other', and concern about spousal violence was focused more exclusively on the 'savage' and 'uncivilised' lower classes, the associations of violence and class later became more ambiguous.⁹⁰ This was partly due to the success of the civilising offensive in limiting public violence. Attention then turned to forms of violence, such as spousal and child abuse, which had previously been relatively ignored and could not be so easily blamed on a dissolute other.⁹¹ An article on wife abuse from the 1890s, while still associating violence with the working classes, also put blame on the legal system:

inadequate sentences are passed by judges and magistrates who occupy a high position in society, and who profess to be chivalric gentlemen; they are acquiesced in by men of all ranks.⁹²

Attention also was directed to the occurrence of violence within well-to-do homes. 'It is a mistake', noted Benjamin Waugh in 1888,

to suppose that poverty, or large families, or ignorance ... has anything whatever to do with cruelty. The proportion of comparatively well-to-do and well-informed who have fiendish dispositions towards children is found to be greater than those who are very poor.⁹³

Violence is thus located within the human psyche rather than simply in the specific social conditions of lower-class life.⁹⁴

The antagonism between 'civilising' thought and working-class culture was affected by more general shifts in English life that are identifiable from the 1870s: spreading notions of civility, growing acceptance of new forms of state power, increasing social interdependency and broadening political incorporation. In general, the nineteenth-century civilising offensive fostered an individual psyche structured by stricter standards of self-control and restraint. Such standards, although partly driven by exterior compulsions (whether in the streets or workplace), were increasingly accepted and adopted among the working classes.⁹⁵ A suggestive model for changes in working-class attitudes toward violence comes from Judith Walkowitz's analysis of working-class prostitution. 'Labour aristocrats', were instrumental in persecuting prostitutes, who had previously accepted in working-class communities, and 'the isolation of a separate criminal class may have been a necessary corollary to the increasing social and legal pressures placed upon the poor to adhere to a more rigid standard of public respectability'.⁹⁶ The 'lowest classes' became more clearly distinguished from the 'respectable' working class through the creation of new norms, 'by a whole range of degrees of normality indicating membership of a homogenous social body but also playing a part in classification, hierarchicalisation and the distribution of ranks'.⁹⁷ In a similar fashion, although not remoulded into a replica of middle-class values, a decreasing subset of the working class held traditional attitudes toward violence.⁹⁸ Class rhetoric regarding violence did not disappear altogether; however, there was a tendency toward identifying subcultures, both more narrowly defined and more numerous, such as particular trade unions, 'roughs', 'outcasts', or 'hooligans' as the social location of violence.⁹⁹ I suggested earlier that a culture of 'refinement' used particular imaginations of violence, in part, to define a 'shadow' against which it could shape its identity. Increasingly, deviant subcultures 'on the fringes of society' embodied that shadow, one that, by the late nineteenth century, the 'respectable' working-class could also react against.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

The development of a 'civilised' mentality of violence was more than a rhetorical device: this was a *useful* savagery, reshaping cultural attitudes, helping to forge new contours of identity and interacting with the elaboration of state power and authority. Although these developments could be used in various ways, I neither suggest that attitudes toward violence were conspiratorially manipulated nor imply that cultural change was merely the result of imposition from above. Instead, novel narratives about violence became part of the available repertoire of attitudes about society and the individual, and the self-adoption of new attitudes to violence was an important part of working-class culture. Thus, the redefinition of violence contributed to social reorganisation and was put to use in numerous social and cultural contexts. Attitudes toward violence contributed to the construction of middle-class identity and later demarcated a wider sphere of respectable society against a 'rough' residuum (or, in more modern terms, an 'underclass'). In return, the modern understanding of violence was born in relation to imperatives of a 'civilised' identity. Out of this period emerged the distinctly modern assumption that violent behaviour 'is always destructive, "dysfunctional", and devoid of meaning'.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, only particular types and locations of violence became dominant in refined thought. Other kinds of violence – notably those existing within the increasingly privatised spaces of the home, undertaken by legitimised agents of the state or occurring in the borders of the empire – were, at least initially, blind spots in the 'civilised' view of violence.¹⁰² Elizabeth Stanko has examined a modern 'criminological myopia' originating in the nineteenth century, noting that concepts such as 'rage' and 'losing control' have come to construct masculine behaviour norms, and

because of the historical focus on the criminalised actions of working-class and marginalised men, the ideological and practical strength of the image of 'real' violence remains firmly fixed on the street.¹⁰³

Thus, the culture of refinement was predicated upon a particular notion of what (and where) violence was and, equally important, what (and where) it was not.

The invention of violence emerged from the previous century's movements for the reformation of manners, and there were inconsistencies in 'civilising' thought. Traditional, customary mentalities of violence were not simply licences for uncontrolled savagery, nor were the middle classes the unquestionably humane force that they sometimes believed. Furthermore, for most English people, the 'place'

of violence in society did not fundamentally shift until the last decades of the nineteenth century, the result of a process that had visibly accelerated in the 1820s. Alongside the difficulties in precisely defining 'civilisation' or the forces that threatened it came the problem that people of all classes did, to varying degrees, commit violent crimes. Martin Wiener suggests that the nineteenth-century discourse of character feared that 'savagery – rooted in human nature, not class – could break out at any social level', and fears of impulsiveness and 'passion' were not strictly limited to a particular class.¹⁰⁴ A variety of explanations for violence coexisted, although the emphases between them changed. Working-class violence could be explained as a function of social environment and a 'vicious' culture while moral, medical and psychological discourses explained middle-class or aristocratic aggression and violence. As wider segments of society accepted 'civilised' standards, and, as the working class was more fully admitted into the political state, undifferentiated attacks on working-class culture became less viable. However, the apparent success of these civilising efforts did not bring as much satisfaction to its advocates as one might have expected. This was because the relationship between savagery and civilisation is dialectical. The wider adoption of civilised standards of behaviour fuelled new, more-detailed forms of differentiation. Inherent in the civilising process is the necessity to continually imagine new forms of 'incivility' against which civility can be measured.¹⁰⁵ In various ways, the shadows haunting civilised refinement have proliferated, and, undoubtedly, will continue to do so.

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Endnotes

This article is a shorter and somewhat altered version of the second chapter of my book, *Violence and Crime in Nineteenth-Century England: The Shadow of Our Refinement* (London: Routledge, 2004). I thank Routledge for permission to reproduce that material in this form. I am also grateful to J.S. Cockburn, Richard N. Price, Anja Müller-Wood, William Beik and the Victorian Studies Reading Group at The Johns Hopkins University for commentary on earlier versions of this text.

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 9. Peter King, 'Punishing Assault: The Transformation of Attitudes in the English Courts', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27 (1996), 43.
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 13. King, 'Punishing Assault', 68-9.
 14. Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilisation*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (1939; Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 496.
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 24. 'The Law of Murder', *London Quarterly Review* 26 (1866), 447.
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