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## **Criminal Violence in Modern Britain**

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Given the prominence of violence in modern social fears, its history proved to be a surprisingly late bloomer. As a distinct field, the history of violence began emerging only in the 1980s within the broader framework of the history of crime. The delay in giving detailed and sustained attention to violence may be accounted for by historians' earlier preoccupation with property crime and the intensity of related disputes about the law's role as a disciplinary tool of an increasingly bourgeois state. Violence received some attention in these debates, for instance, in the analysis of rioting crowds or harsh state punishment (the so-called "bloody code").<sup>1</sup> On the whole, however, it was a secondary issue. The growing interest in violent crime has meant a departure from the clear ideological divide of earlier crime historiography as – unlike in the case of laws protecting property – it is more difficult to find specific class interests embedded in laws against homicide or assault (even though the interpretation and enforcement of these laws were rarely class-neutral). Thus, the different nature of violent crime has required new theoretical approaches to examining it as a historical phenomenon. With regard to violence, for instance, the expansion of law and policing not only imposed onerous new forms of control and authority on certain parts of the population but, arguably, was also more broadly beneficial. Nevertheless, disagreement about the distribution, purpose, timing and extent of such changes has ensured that the history of violence has quickly become a vibrant topic of analysis. It is also a field that is increasingly able to address more general questions about the nature of British society in the modern period. The optimistic assertion once made that Britain had witnessed a "conquest of violence" by the mid twentieth century is one to which few historians of crime and

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<sup>1</sup> These debates were largely set off by Douglas Hay, et al. (eds.), *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Pantheon, 1975). See summary and commentary in Joanna Innes and John Styles, "The Crime Wave": Recent Writings on Crime and Criminal Justice in Eighteenth-Century England," *Journal of British Studies* 25 (1986): 380-435. Punishment now has an extensive historiography, but prominent works are Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) and V. A. C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People, 1770-1868* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

violence would today subscribe, and Britons' treasured image of their society as historically tranquil, restrained and peaceful is receiving a long-overdue revision.<sup>2</sup>

There is now a broad and diverse historiography on violence, one that is difficult to efficiently summarize. In part, this has to do with the different directions from which the complex phenomenon of violence can be approached. Like other historical topics, violence can be looked at "from above," taking the perspective of the authorities who saw violence as a social problem and developed institutions which sought to deal with it. Alternatively, one can study violence "from below," from the point of view of the wider population of perpetrators, victims and witnesses of violent crime. Further complications arise because of the numerous specific meanings attached to "violence." In practice, these definitions refer to two closely related – but still distinct – things: particular kinds of acts and the interpretative frameworks used to define and understand such acts. The former approach tends toward seeing violence as an event that can be clearly labeled (e.g., non-consensual physical force which causes harm) and reliably quantified. The type of violence to be studied can then also be further delimited by the nature of the victim (e.g., wives, children or ethnic minorities), the level of force used (e.g., fatal or non-fatal) or the context in which it took place (e.g., community, home or workplace). Alternatively, focusing on the ways that violence has been historically interpreted means analyzing the production, maintenance and evolution of attitudes toward certain kinds of physically aggressive acts; in some cases, this means looking at behavior that may not have been defined contemporaneously as "violence." This approach concentrates on cultural attitudes toward physical force, and because violence is typically a contested issue its interpretations are highly varied. What for some is brutal violence is for others a justifiable use of legitimate force. Thus, in the past as in the present, violence is very much a phenomenon that is in the eye of the beholder. The same, perhaps, could be said about the most important issues in the history and historiography of violence, and it is unlikely that all historians of violence see the development of their field in the same way. However, there are three topics that, in my view, stand out as having most significantly shaped the recent (and continuing) development of the history of violence: the interaction between quantitative and qualitative methodologies, the notion of a "civilizing process" and the issue of gender. In explaining each of these, attention will be given not

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<sup>2</sup> T. A. Critchley, *The Conquest of Violence: Order and Liberty in Britain* (London: Constable, 1970); Clive Emsley, *Hard Men: Violence in England Since 1750* (London: Hambledon & London, 2005).

only to key developments in historiography but also to the history of “violence” itself, in both of the senses mentioned above. In my conclusion, I shall then make some brief observations about emerging trends and suggestions about where the field can usefully go from here.

The distinctions I have noted between studying violence as a concrete event with a quantifiable pattern (its social history) and as a collection of shifting, largely narrative discourses around a particular set of events (its cultural history) are significant insofar as they designate important differences in method and assumptions. However, these distinctions are permeable, and elements of both approaches are, in practice, part of nearly all works on the history of violence. There has, nevertheless, recently been a subtle movement from quantitative, social history frameworks toward qualitative, cultural approaches. This shift in emphasis has, unsurprisingly, much to do with the broader “cultural turn” in the historical profession; however, the growing importance of cultural methodologies has also resulted from developments in the quantitative study of violence itself. Pioneering work demonstrated both the utility and limitations of judicial statistics.<sup>3</sup> These issues were further developed in a wide-ranging debate, based on homicide rates, about historical patterns in English violence.<sup>4</sup> The questionable solidity of statistical measurements of violence – due to unreliable population estimates, changing laws, uneven law enforcement and improving medical treatment of injuries – was one prominent issue in this debate. Subsequently, an even more skeptical analysis of crime statistics has emphasized the financial and institutional pressures on the state policing apparatus and, thus, on the crime figures they produce.<sup>5</sup> Most historians of crime and violence, while aware of the problems with statistics, have not abandoned them; however, the issues raised in what one participant called the “violence we have lost”<sup>6</sup> debate – in particular the impact of cultural changes

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<sup>3</sup> V. A. C. Gatrell, “The Decline of Theft and Violence in Victorian and Edwardian England,” in V. A. C. Gatrell, Bruce Lenman and Geoffrey Parker (eds.), *Crime and the Law: The Social History of Crime in Western Europe Since 1500* (London: Europa Publications, 1980): 238-370; Ted Gurr, “Historical Trends in Violent Crime: A Critical Review of the Evidence,” *Crime and Justice: An Annual Review of Research* 3 (1981): 295-353.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Stone, “Interpersonal Violence in English Society, 1300-1980,” *Past and Present* 101 (1983): 22-33; J. A. Sharpe, “The History of Violence in England: Some Observations,” *Past and Present* 108 (1985): 206-15; Lawrence Stone, “A Rejoinder,” *Past and Present* 108 (1985): 216-24; J. S. Cockburn, “Patterns of Violence in English Society: Homicide in Kent, 1560-1985,” *Past and Present* 130 (1991): 70-106.

<sup>5</sup> Howard Taylor, “Rationing Crime: The Political Economy of Criminal Statistics Since the 1850s,” *Economic History Review* 51 (1998): 569-90; Howard Taylor, “The Politics of the Rising Crime Statistics of England and Wales, 1914-1960,” *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History and Societies* 2, no. 1 (1998): 5-28.

<sup>6</sup> This (partly ironic) label for the debate, a play on the title of Peter Laslett’s *The World We Have Lost*, was coined by Cockburn in “Patterns of Violence,” 71.

related to violence over the past few centuries – have made qualitative studies increasingly necessary.<sup>7</sup>

Two issues, on which the debate participants broadly agreed, have been particularly influential: the long-term decline in violence rates and the important role of changing attitudes toward violence.

It now seems clear that a long-term decline in violence has occurred in Britain since the late Middle Ages. Most research on this issue has concentrated on the period between the early seventeenth and late nineteenth centuries. The decline in violence was neither strictly linear nor constant, involving periods of stagnation and even periodic, short-term increases in violent crime; nonetheless, the overall trend was a decline in rates of serious violence until the middle of the twentieth century. At that point, violent crime rates began to increase. Similar overarching patterns have also been found in other European contexts, thus establishing the likelihood that the modern decline in violence is a significant, cross-cultural phenomenon (a conclusion limited to interpersonal aggression on the individual or small-group level rather than mass violence in war or the Empire).<sup>8</sup> A broad consensus on the long-term decline in violence has therefore established a quantitative basis for further research and qualitative interpretation. Significantly, it has also posed a new question: if violence has declined, why has it done so? This question is all the more intriguing because, although dominated by a long-term decline in actual violence, the past three centuries have nevertheless seen a massive growth in the significance of violence as a social issue. The twin issues of declining real violence and growing concern about violence have become central historiographical themes. The result has been increasing interest in the notion of a “civilizing process” which has reshaped social relationships in Britain (and elsewhere) through mounting antipathy toward violence, increasing social interdependence, state efforts to establish a monopoly on the legitimate use of force and the linkage of social status to the exercise of emotional self-control.<sup>9</sup> The theory suggests that people became

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<sup>7</sup> See analysis of the broader debate and an assertion of the need for qualitative approaches to the history of violence in John E. Archer, “‘The Violence We Have Lost’? Body Counts, Historians and Interpersonal Violence in England,” *Memoria y Civilización* 2 (1999): 171-90.

<sup>8</sup> Manuel Eisner, “Modernization, Self-Control and Lethal Violence: The Long-term Dynamics of European Homicide Rates in Theoretical Perspective,” *British Journal of Criminology* 41 (2001): 618-38.

<sup>9</sup> The theory of a “civilizing process” was developed by the German sociologist Norbert Elias, whose work has had a significant impact on violence history even though violence was only one of many themes he explored. See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilization*, Edmund Jephcott (trans.) (1939; Oxford: Blackwell, 1994). For a recent debate on the utility of Elias’s theory for the history of violence, see Pieter Spierenburg, “Violence and the Civilizing Process: Does It Work?” *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History and Societies* 5, no. 2 (2001): 87-105 and Gerd Schwerhoff, “Criminalized Violence and the Process of Civilization: A Reappraisal,” *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History and Societies* 6, no. 2 (2002): 103-26.

increasingly sensitized to violent behavior, becoming more likely to see certain kinds of behavior as violence as well as finding it increasingly abhorrent. At the same time, social and state pressures drove the development of more restrained, self-controlled personalities, making the use of violence less likely. Nonetheless, it is easier to change perceptions than broad patterns of behavior, and there were different rates of change in sensitivity toward violence and the actual use of violence. This may have meant that even a falling rate of (real) violence was not always perceived as such. The applicability of the notion of a civilizing process is best explained by looking at trends in violence in Britain between the late seventeenth and mid-twentieth centuries.

In late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain, violence was both strikingly present and curiously absent. On the one hand, physical aggression was a common part of social relationships; on the other hand, it was little commented upon. In this period, in families, workplaces and neighborhoods, in both private and public life, violence was (within certain limits) an acceptable means to express authority and maintain discipline that was regularly resorted to by individuals from all ranks of society.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, various forms of ritualized group violence (“rioting”) – whether associated with market prices, elections or labor disputes – were common. Raising the specter of social upheaval, they revealed the tentative nature of political authority and the potentially raucous character of class relationships.<sup>11</sup> As elsewhere in Europe, the state in Britain also played its part through the infliction of various corporal and capital penalties. Such draconian punishment, however, was mainly aimed at deterring property crime; the laws against violence (other than outright murder) were relatively lenient. This latter point raises the intriguing matter of violence’s absence, for, despite its apparent ubiquity as a real phenomenon, it received (by later standards) relatively little mention. While certain kinds of threats to public order or the safety of person and property – such as rioting or highway robbery – excited periodic unease, violence and cruelty *per se* were comparatively minor issues. This was a result of the broad legitimacy that both law and tradition bestowed upon physical force used by husbands against wives, parents against children, employers against (mainly youthful) employees, men against other men, or communities against deviants.<sup>12</sup> Because it was acceptable, physical aggression generated little concern: this culture of violence was largely shared by all classes.

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<sup>10</sup> Susan Dwyer Amussen, “Punishment, Discipline and Power: The Social Meaning of Violence in Early Modern England,” *Journal of British Studies* 34 (1995): 1-34.

As the eighteenth century progressed, however, laws against violence became stricter, and courts were increasingly willing to punish perpetrators of violent acts.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, there appears to have been a gradual decline in at least some forms of violence itself, as people became less ready to resort to physical force and more often preferred alternative means of expressing authority and settling disputes.<sup>14</sup> Sensitivities regarding cruelty grew noticeably, violence itself became a topic of public concern and previously acceptable behavior was condemned as detrimental to public morality.<sup>15</sup>

These trends gradually accelerated until, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, violence was “invented” as a social issue.<sup>16</sup> The term “invention” implies neither a major shift in actual violence nor a claim that violence had previously failed to generate any degree of interest, fear or revulsion. Rather, it describes a fundamental change in the importance and nature of violence’s cultural understanding: more and more, violence was treated as arising from social causes (a view which came to coexist with older beliefs emphasizing personal moral failure and sin) and having broad antisocial effects. Violence – in the individual and popular imagination – took on a new role, becoming associated with a variety of social fears (whether about urbanization, class relations or national decline) and emerging as a relevant subject matter in connection to other issues of social, cultural and political importance. Far from being ignored, violence emerged as one of the most talked about topics of general public concern. Significantly, these dramatic changes in attitudes toward and commentary about violence occurred in spite of stagnant or slightly declining rates of real violence; seemingly paradoxically, the greatest concerns were expressed among those classes with the least direct experience of violence. They saw violence as caused by and located among the working classes, in their increasingly segregated urban neighborhoods. The shared culture of violence, with its broad legitimacy for certain kinds of physically forceful acts, fragmented. In the view of many middle- and upper-class observers, “civilization” (the nascent culture of refinement which they were themselves

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<sup>11</sup> E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (New York: The New Press, 1991), 185-351.

<sup>12</sup> E.g., Robert Shoemaker, *The London Mob* (London: Hambledon & London, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Peter King, “Punishing Assault: The Transformation of Attitudes in the English Courts,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27 (1996): 43-74.

<sup>14</sup> J. M. Beattie, *Crime and the Courts in England, 1660-1800* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 112.

<sup>15</sup> J. S. Cockburn, “Punishment and Brutalization in the English Enlightenment,” *Law and History Review* 12 (1994): 155-79; Greg T. Smith, “Civilized People Don’t Want to See That Kind of Thing: The Decline of Public Physical Punishment in London, 1760-1840,” in Carolyn Strange (ed.), *Qualities of Mercy: Justice, Punishment, and Discretion* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1996): 21-51.

fashioning) confronted a (recently acceptable) “savage” culture of brutality. While depicting the working classes as bestial barbarians was a caricature which served various interests, from advertising one’s own refinement to arguing against working-class suffrage<sup>17</sup>, the lower classes did in fact continue to adhere to a customary mentality of violence that legitimated the use of physical force in a relatively wide variety of circumstances. Though harsh, this deeply-ingrained cultural adaptation to life in the lightly-policed society of pre-nineteenth-century Britain nevertheless provided mechanisms for maintaining community order and rituals for the containment of disputes.<sup>18</sup>

There were areas of agreement as well as conflict between “customary” and “civilizing” cultures, and despite increased anxiety about violent crime, traditional notions about violence and justice remained influential in the nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup> The Victorian era was also subject to violent crime panics: most spectacularly in the cases of “garroting” or the “Ripper” murders, but also in terms of more prosaic fears about street robbery.<sup>20</sup> Criminal violence became a staple issue of literature, newspaper reporting and public discussion.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, after mid-century, analyses of violence became more differentiated, particularly as increasing sections of the working classes adopted respectable standards of behavior and gained the vote. Institutional changes, such as the development of professionalized policing and the better enforcement of increasingly strict laws against violence, helped to pacify most public areas.<sup>22</sup> Concurrently, influential psychological perspectives on aggression made it more difficult to simply blame violence on a dissolute underclass, and with the

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<sup>16</sup> J. Carter Wood, “A Useful Savagery: The Invention of Violence in Nineteenth-Century England,” *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 9 (2004): 22-42.

<sup>17</sup> Karen Halttunen, “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture,” *American Historical Review* 100 (1995): 303-34; Anna Clark, “Domesticity and the Problem of Wifebeating in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Working-Class Culture, Law and Politics,” in Shani D’Cruze (ed.), *Everyday Violence in Britain 1850-1950: Gender and Class* (Harlow: Longman, 2000), 34-35.

<sup>18</sup> J. Carter Wood, “Self-Policing and the Policing of the Self: Violence, Protection and the Civilizing Bargain in Britain,” *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History and Societies* 7, no. 1 (2003): 109-28. J. Carter Wood, *Violence and Crime in Nineteenth-Century England: The Shadow of Our Refinement* (London: Routledge, 2004), 70-94.

<sup>19</sup> Carolyn Conley, *The Unwritten Law: Criminal Justice in Victorian Kent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 44-67.

<sup>20</sup> Jennifer Davis, “The London Garotting Panic of 1862: A Moral Panic and the Creation of a Criminal Class in Mid-Victorian England,” in V.A.C. Gatrell, B. Lenman and G. Parker (eds.), *Crime and the Law: A Social History of Crime in Western Europe Since 1500* (London: Europa Publications, 1980): 190-213; Judith Walkowitz, “Jack the Ripper and the Myth of Male Violence,” *Feminist Studies* 8 (1982): 542-74; Rob Sindall, *Street Violence in the Nineteenth Century: Media Panic or Real Danger?* (New York: Leicester University Press, 1990).

<sup>21</sup> Richard D. Altick, *Victorian Studies in Scarlet* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1970).

<sup>22</sup> There is now a vast literature on policing, but see, e.g., Clive Emsley, *The English Police: A Social and Political History* (London: Longman, 1996) and David Taylor, *Policing the Victorian Town: The Development of the Police in Middlesborough c. 1840-1914* (London: Palgrave, 2002).



retreat of customary forms of public violence and the increasing respectability of working-class culture, violent crime – like crime more generally – became seen as a worrisome but more-or-less normal part of social life.<sup>23</sup>

Undoubtedly, large-scale outbursts of violence occurred in Britain in the first half of the twentieth century: most notably, the political and labor struggles preceding the Great War, the demobilization riots of 1919, the General Strike of 1926 and the political violence caused by (or in reaction to) localized fascist political activity in the 1930s. There were also, of course, more enduring and commonplace forms of criminal violence. However, notwithstanding fears of brutalized soldiers returning from the Great War (and despite rising overall crime rates between the wars), rates of murder, attempted murder and rape remained largely stagnant and may have even declined in the late 1930s; official rates of lesser violence increased, yet contemporaries tended to put this down to procedural changes which brought more cases to court.<sup>24</sup> But even as serious criminal violence remained a relatively minor phenomenon, its prominent place in the British media and culture continued: professional criminals and juvenile delinquents were particular loci of social fears, joined by unruly neighborhoods that bucked the perceived trend toward a more tranquil British society.<sup>25</sup> Historiographically, criminal violence in Britain after 1945 has, with some exceptions<sup>26</sup>, remained relatively untouched territory; however, the postwar increase in violence rates – to the extent that it points to a change in real behavior<sup>27</sup> – means that further examination of that period may pose challenging questions about the validity of the “civilizing process,” the nature of social change and (as much of this increase can be blamed on the activities of young men) the importance of gender.

Gender has long been a central concern in historiography of violence. Whereas the issue of class dominated debates about property crime, gender has proven far more central to research on

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<sup>23</sup> Martin Wiener, *Reconstructing the Criminal: Culture, Law and Policy in England, 1830-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 257-79.

<sup>24</sup> Clive Emsley, “Crime, Police and Penal Policy,” in Chris Wrigley (ed.), *A Companion to Early Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 439. Jon Lawrence, “Forging a Peaceable Kingdom: War, Violence and Fear of Brutalization in Post-First World War Britain,” *Journal of Modern History* 75 (2003): 557-89.

<sup>25</sup> Geoffrey Pearson, *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears* (London: Macmillan Education, 1983); Philip Jenkins and Gary W. Potter, “Before the Krays: Organized Crime in London, 1920-1960,” *Criminal Justice History* 9 (1988): 209-30; Jerry White, *The Worst Street in North London: Campbell Bunk, Islington, Between the Wars* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1986).

<sup>26</sup> For example, in parts of Emsley, *Hard Men*. See also Eric Dunning, Patrick Murphy and Ivan Waddington, “Violence in the British Civilizing Process,” *Leicester University Discussion Papers in Sociology*, no. S92/2 (July 1992).

<sup>27</sup> Taylor, “Rising Crime Statistics,” 24-25.

violent crime. This is clearly appropriate, as the most obvious historical and cross-cultural dividing line in the propensity for violent behavior is one based on sex, with men overwhelmingly dominating nearly all categories of violent behavior (with a few exceptions such as, for instance, infanticide).<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, cultural understandings of and assumptions about violence tend to be deeply influenced by the topic of gender. Partly for this reason, one form of highly gendered physical violence – domestic abuse – quickly became the most intensely studied category of interpersonal aggression. As the most private form of violence, confidently determining the actual rates of abuse in the home (and their patterns of change) is all but impossible. Thus, cultural concepts related to domestic violence, such as domesticity and patriarchy, have taken center stage. “Domestic violence” can, of course, involve a variety of constellations between perpetrators and victims; however, despite some examination of violence against children<sup>29</sup>, wifebeating has received the most attention. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the acceptability of male violence against women was not unlimited, and explicitly homicidal violence was rarely tolerated and could be harshly punished. Nonetheless, “disciplinary” violence against wives who failed to maintain expected standards of domestic care and sexual propriety was traditionally permitted. In some cases, this sort of violence proved fatal; nonetheless, husbands who killed their wives in the context of exercising disciplinary violence in the home were often treated leniently by the judicial system. Thus, in the historiography of violence, sexual and domestic abuse have been sometimes seen as elements of male strategies to dominate women and enforce an emergent ideology of separate spheres in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; this has tended to downplay class by proposing that the results benefited men of all classes – whether working-class wife beaters or the all-male judges and juries who tolerated their acts.<sup>30</sup> Other perspectives have emphasized class. From this angle, working-class domestic violence has been seen as a gendered struggle between husbands and wives for control over scarce resources within a broader culture which tolerated violent dispute settlement and took marital conflict as a

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<sup>28</sup> See e.g., Margot Arnot, “Understanding Women Committing Newborn Child Murder in Victorian England,” in Shani D’Cruze (ed.), *Everyday Violence in Britain, 1850-1950: Gender and Class* (Harlow: Longman, 2000): 55-69; Mark Jackson (ed.), *Infanticide: Historical Perspectives on Child-Murder and its Concealment* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> G. K. Behlmer, *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England, 1870-1908* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982).

<sup>30</sup> Anna Clark, *Women’s Silence, Men’s Violence: Sexual Assault in England, 1770-1845* (London: Pandora, 1987).

given.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, there were differences in the cultural contexts of working- and middle-class marital strife, with middle-class men – though no less (and possibly more) patriarchal and controlling – under greater social pressure to restrain their more violent impulses.<sup>32</sup>

The relationship between gender and violence has thus been well established, but there is a growing awareness of its complexity. In particular, this has meant greater attention to masculinity, which had previously been often either ignored or seen rather simplistically with regard to violence. The (often implied) assumption that there was a direct and one-sided relationship between violence and men is now being revised.<sup>33</sup> While the ability to use violence was indeed important to men (especially working-class men), the legitimacy of violence was context-specific. Examination of the duel, for instance, has emphasized both the importance of using violence to defend male honor as well as the complicated relationship between this gendered expectation and broader “civilizing” trends.<sup>34</sup> Violating the cultural “rules” of violence – i.e., using the wrong kind or level of violence – could be as damaging to a man’s reputation as avoiding physical confrontation. Additionally, although men have been mainly analyzed as perpetrators, more recent studies have focused on male-on-male violence, allowing exploration of men’s experiences as victims.<sup>35</sup> Also, although never entirely ignored, women’s use of violence has also been receiving increasing attention.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, it now seems that an earlier emphasis on the hesitancy – or outright resistance – of the state to protecting women has obscured the real extent of change during the nineteenth century. Rather than a period in which lawmakers, social commentators and judges sat idly by in the face of domestic violence, there now appears to have been a far more active (if uneven and – often – frustratingly ineffective) variety of

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<sup>31</sup> Ellen Ross, “‘Fierce Questions and Taunts’: Married Life in Working-Class London, 1870-1914,” *Feminist Studies* 8 (1982): 575-602; Shani D’Cruze, *Crimes of Outrage: Sex, Violence and Victorian Working Women* (London: UCL Press, 1998).

<sup>32</sup> A. James Hammerton, *Cruelty and Companionship: Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Married Life* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>33</sup> Andrew Davies, “Youth Gangs, Masculinity and Violence in Late Victorian Manchester and Salford,” *Journal of Social History* 32 (1998): 349-69; John E. Archer, “‘Men Behaving Badly’?: Masculinity and the Uses of Violence in the Nineteenth Century,” in Shani D’Cruze (ed.), *Everyday Violence in Britain, 1850-1950: Gender and Class* (Harlow: Longman, 2000): 41-54.

<sup>34</sup> There is now a large, cross-cultural literature on dueling. In the British context, see, e.g., Antony E. Simpson, “Dandelions on the Field of Honor: Dueling, the Middle Classes and the Law in Nineteenth-Century England,” *Criminal Justice History*, 9 (1988): 99-155; Robert Shoemaker, “Male Honor and the Decline of Public Violence in Eighteenth-Century London,” *Social History*, 26 (2001): 190-208; Robert Shoemaker, “The Taming of the Duel: Masculinity, Honor and Ritual Violence in London, 1600-1800,” *Historical Journal* 45 (2002): 525-45.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Wiener, *Men of Blood: Violence, Manliness, and Criminal Justice in Victorian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 40-75; Wood, *Violence and Crime*, 70-94.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Davies, “‘These Viragoes Are No Less Cruel Than the Lads’: Young Women, Gangs and Violence in Late Victorian Manchester and Salford,” *British Journal of Criminology* 39 (1999): 72-89.

institutional, legal and cultural innovations aimed at reducing violence against wives in the nineteenth century. Stricter codes of gendered behavior have often been seen largely as an issue of femininity, confining women through idealized notions of domesticity and – in more extreme cases – justifying violence when they failed to live up to these ideals. However, shifting gender roles applied to masculinity as much as, or in some ways even more than, they did to femininity. The Victorian “criminalization of men” meant decreasing acceptance of traditional justifications for male violence and harsher penalties imposed on violent men; those women who were able to demonstrate their respectability were able to take particular advantage of increasing judicial interest in punishing violent men.<sup>37</sup> Such approaches emphasize the complexity of concepts such as masculinity and femininity, the reciprocal distribution of rights and responsibilities attached to them and the importance of analyzing their employment in concrete situations. Historians are now far more aware of the subtlety of the interconnections between gender and violence as well as the ways that they are also shaped by topics such as class and space.<sup>38</sup>

In the foregoing summary of the historiography on violent crime in modern Britain, I have tried to emphasize the rapid development and increasing methodological diversity of the study of physical aggression in the past. Along the way, I have tried to provide an overview of what we know about the history of “violence” itself, whether defined as an accumulation of real acts or narrative constructions. Of course, knowledge about the history of violence and the state of its historiography are in many ways inseparable. There are now some broad areas of consensus among historians of violence (e.g., the long-term decline in rates of – and tolerance for – violence, the interrelationship between cultures of violence and assumptions about gender and class) along with topics which have remained – or recently become – more contentious (e.g., the reliability of crime statistics, the relationship between serious and lesser violence, the role of a “civilizing process”, the precise impact of gender on violence). Historians now have the benefit of some two decades of detailed research on many kinds of violent behavior; thus, in many ways a great deal more is known about violence than was once the case. Some findings, like the long-term decline in violence, have fundamentally changed

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<sup>37</sup> Martin Wiener, “The Victorian Criminalization of Men,” in Pieter Spierenburg (ed.), *Men and Violence: Gender, Honor and Rituals in Modern Europe and America* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998): 197-212; Wiener, *Men of Blood*, 92.

<sup>38</sup> Shani D’Cruze (ed.), *Everyday Violence in Britain 1850-1950: Gender and Class* (Harlow: Longman, 2000); Wood, *Violence and Crime*, 95-118.

our perspectives on the past and have the potential to alter our views of the present. Nevertheless, we are also increasingly conscious of the vexed relationship between violence's perception and reality, and, aware of the reversal of declining violence rates in the second half of the twentieth century, historians may find it increasingly difficult to make bold generalizations about the prevalence of physical force in the past and why it changed. Additionally, attention has shifted away from spectacular, large-scale disorder toward a reassessment of violence as an "everyday" phenomenon.<sup>39</sup> This is to be welcomed, as it promises to generate significant conclusions about the quotidian role of violence; however, it also means developing new approaches to reconstructing the history of a diffuse, obscure and contentious phenomenon. It is, furthermore, becoming more difficult to confine the topic of violence within a framework entirely based on the concept of "crime." Since its "invention" as a social issue in the early nineteenth century, violence and attitudes toward it have become inseparable from matters of identity (whether that of class, gender, ethnicity, group or nationality), social authority and organization, imaginations (and perceived geographies) of danger, family relationships and even sport and recreation. The long social and cultural reach of violence means that, in different ways, methodologies derived from the "cultural turn," sociological theory, anthropology and the biological sciences will all provide avenues for further research and analysis. In particular, we need to refine our understanding of the interaction between actual violence and the way it is culturally perceived and understood; to better embed the history of violence in Britain within a comparative framework which draws out commonalities and differences among different states and regions; and to better ground our analysis of "culture" with reference to both social structure and human psychology.<sup>40</sup> No less than the "conquest" of violence itself, conquering these issues in the history of violence is likely to prove an elusive task. Nevertheless, given the importance of violence to modern social fears, it is a goal worth pursuing.

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<sup>39</sup> D'Cruze, *Everyday Violence*, 11-14.

<sup>40</sup> Much progress is already beginning to be made in the area of comparative approaches; see, for instance, the essays in Barry Godfrey, Clive Emsley and Graeme Dunstall (eds.) *Comparative Histories of Crime* (Collompton: Willan, 2003).

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