

Original citation:

Roberts, Penny. (2017) French historians and collective violence. *History and Theory*, 56 (4).
ISSN 0018-2656

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French Historians and Collective Violence

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History and Theory, 56, no. 4, Theme Issue 55 (December 2017)

Abstract

French historians and French history have dominated the study of early modern violence. This essay addresses why this is so and what has characterized French historians' approaches to collective violence in particular, whether in the form of popular revolt, confessional division or revolutionary violence. It posits that historians are essentially uncomfortable in defending and explaining popular violence in the past, that they ought to address this issue more directly and not to establish too much cultural distance from their subjects in doing so. It concludes with some reflections on approaches to violence in the past and the present, how historians and others talk about and engage with violence, and how its treatment today should inform how historians address the challenges of writing the history of violence in the future.

Keywords: History of Violence, Ritual Violence, Collective Violence, Protest, Cultural History, Historical Sociology

It is the conceit of this essay that violence is a peculiarly prominent feature of early modern French history or, at least, of its historiography. Thus, it is the intention here to investigate why studies of early modern French history are so often focused on violence or, rather, why historians of early modern France are particularly drawn to study its most violent episodes.¹ They would appear to have a predilection for analysing and seeking to understand violence, but why is this? Is French history particularly strewn with bloody episodes or as a society has

¹ It is notable, and perhaps no coincidence, that three of the contributors to this volume are French historians.

it been peculiarly subject to inherently violent experiences? Or has its historiography simply been shaped by a focus on the brutal, the dramatic, the intolerant or the vicious? In other words, are historians guilty of (perhaps gratuitously) concentrating on the macabre and the grisly? Of course, it is an exaggeration to state that early modern French historians have concentrated on violence to the exclusion of other themes or topics. Yet, historians of other countries tend to cite both French history and French historiography as representing the benchmark against which all violent incidents should be measured. This is, after all, the nation that gave us the word massacre, is most associated with duelling (often to death), that created the guillotine and the episode known as the ‘(Reign of) Terror’. Yet, at the same time, this period of French history is also characterized by the rise of civility, courtly elegance and enlightenment. This apparent paradox has not been lost on historians. Stuart Carroll, in particular, has tackled the “myth” of civility when it comes to the aggressive tendencies of the early modern French nobility. Strikingly, he claims that, “civilization is built on violence.”²

Violence does have a certain fascination for all of us, whether in explaining what happened in the past or for understanding contemporary events. It generates heated debates and moral outrage, not least in discussion of the proper ways in which brutal acts should be presented and analysed. It leads us to question what it is to be human and in what circumstances an appropriate response would involve the use of force against opponents, neighbours or associates. Like horror stories, accounts of violence intrigue and repel us, engage and terrify us. While there is an understandable tendency to relate to the experience of victims of violence, there is also a strong urge to understand its agents or perpetrators. This remains, however, a sensitive and potentially divisive area, whether discussing actions in the past or in the present. As with terrorism today, for example, to explain is not to justify, to

² Stuart Carroll, *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), quotation p. 330, and his “Violence, Civil Society and European Civilization, 1500-1800,” in *The Cambridge History of Violence* 4 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), iii, forthcoming.

rationalize is not to excuse. Simple dismissal and condemnation of violence as being the result of evil is insufficient. We need to understand the context and the journey of those who carry out violent acts if we are to understand why they take place and how they can perhaps be contained. Assessing violence in the past can be just as freighted as it is today for the very reason that it reflects the acceptability or otherwise of such actions. As we will see, historians have chosen to wrestle with the challenge of explaining the unacceptable in different ways. Comprehending the context in which they have done so is sometimes as important as the context of the violence itself.

One oft-remarked upon continuity from the past to now, regarding the perpetrators of violence, is the predominance of men, especially young adults. As a consequence, a particular fascination remains with the more remarkable involvement of women and children, most often as innocent victims, but also as participants. Both passive and active roles in violence are emotive and symbolic. Children can, after all, be violent as soon as they are strong enough to throw a rock, wield a knife or fire a gun, wear an explosives' belt or drag a corpse. For the early modern period, children or youth regularly feature in descriptions and depictions of religious violence and communal festivities, which could sometimes tip into fighting, such as the ritual humiliation of individuals associated with charivari.³ Women, too, are portrayed as hapless victims, which makes the violence against them seem all the more heinous. They also often feature in protests, taking action themselves or inciting their menfolk to violence, in France as leaders of the sixteenth-century Catholic League or the *tricoteuses* during the Revolution. In most cases, the involvement of these groups accompanies collective or crowd action which can result in lynching and even massacre.

It has been reliably claimed that the first use of the term massacre (in its modern understanding) emerged in France in the sixteenth century, drawn from the name for a

³ Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Reasons of Misrule: Youth Groups and Charivaris in sixteenth-century France," *Past and Present* 50 (1971), 41-75; John Cashmere, "The Social Uses of Violence in Ritual: *Charivari* or Religious Persecution?," *European History Quarterly* 21 (1991), 291-319.

butcher's knife, the "massacreur."⁴ This seems like no coincidence. As an historian of the French religious wars, I find that confessional violence is always the most popular essay topic with students, the St Bartholomew's Day massacre of 1572 is the most well-known of its events and, even for hardened contemporaries, the ritualized brutality witnessed was shocking. A seventeenth-century French historian once asked me why the sixteenth century was so violent and what attracted people to study it. Yet that begs the question and underplays the extent of the violence exercised outside of the confessional context in subsequent periods, including the peasant revolts but also localized acts of vendetta in the seventeenth century and the brutality of the revolutionary period.⁵ During the Terror of 1793-94, there were mass drownings, numerous executions including of nobles, clergy and peasants, and the Vendée War alone may have claimed as many as 200,000 lives, with terrible retribution carried out against both people and property. Yet, was the violence of early modern France really so much worse than that experienced by the thousands who died during the German Peasants' War of 1524-26 or the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) in Central Europe, or the victims in particular massacres at Antwerp (1576), Magdeburg (1631), Drogheda (1649), or the aftermath of the Gordon Riots (1780), to name only a few? The military context is doubtless crucial here, with historians identifying the presence and participation of soldiers and civil militias as an essential part of large-scale violence, as was indeed the case during the St Bartholomew's Day massacres.⁶ Allan Tulchin supports this view, arguing that "much of the literature on violence during the Wars of Religion conflates

⁴ Mark Greengrass, "Hidden Transcripts: Secret Histories and Personal Testimonies of Religious Violence in the French Wars of Religion," in Mark Levene and Penny Roberts (eds), *The Massacre in History* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 1999), p. 69.

⁵ On this point for the seventeenth century, see Stuart Carroll, "Vendetta in the Seventeenth-Century Midi," *Krypton. Identità, potere, rappresentazioni*, 5/6 (2015), 25-40.

⁶ On this point, see Barbara Diefendorf, "Prologue to a Massacre: Popular Unrest in Paris, 1557-1572," *American Historical Review* 90 (1985), 1067-91; also Stuart Carroll, "The Rights of Violence," in Graeme Murdock, Penny Roberts and Andrew Spicer (eds), *Ritual and Violence: Natalie Zemon Davis and Early Modern France* (Past and Present series, vol. 7; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 127-62; and Penny Roberts, "Inter-communal Violence in Europe," in *The Cambridge History of Violence* 4 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), iii, forthcoming.

riots and massacres,” with the latter primarily carried out only by the military or militias as was the case elsewhere.⁷ Ritualized violence was also characteristic of inter-communal violence during the Reformation in a number of countries, so, once again, we need to ask why France has been singled out for particular comment.⁸

When discussing early modern violence, even historians not primarily interested in France, as well as political scientists and sociologists with a much more modern focus, tend to begin with or, at least, to highlight French examples.⁹ Benjamin Kaplan observes that “none of the other religious wars of the early modern era saw neighbor commit violence against neighbor ... on such a scale.”¹⁰ The political scientist David Apter uses French episodes as progenitors, or exemplars, and refers to the “social pathology” of the French Revolution.¹¹ In his recent chronologically and geographically broad study, Richard Bessel cites the “terrible violence” of the French Wars of Religion and the “uncompromising violence” of the Revolution.¹² This sense of continuity between the religious wars and the Revolution is often noted by French historians and ought to be more fully explored than it has been hitherto. It explains at least some of the emphasis on France. Colin Lucas asserts that, “No historian would question the essential continuity between the *émotions* and *séditions* of the *ancien régime* ... and the turbulent events of the decade 1789-99” in terms of riots, rituals, peasant wars and incitements to violence.¹³ This is supported from a Marxist standpoint by Henry Heller, who argues that the popular violence of the 1560s was a product

⁷ Allan A. Tulchin, “Massacres during the French Wars of Religion,” in Murdock, Roberts and Spicer (eds), *Ritual and Violence*, pp. 109-110, 125-6.

⁸ Roberts, “Inter-communal Violence”.

⁹ In particular, the studies by Natalie Zemon Davis, Charles Tilly, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Robert Darnton et al whose works are all discussed below.

¹⁰ Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 75.

¹¹ David E. Apter, “Political Violence in Analytical Perspective,” in idem (ed.), *The Legitimization of Violence* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), pp. 7-8.

¹² Richard Bessel, *Violence. A Modern Obsession* (London and New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), pp. 59, 65-72.

¹³ Colin Lucas, “The Crowd and Politics between *Ancien Régime* and Revolution in France,” *Journal of Modern History* 60 (1988), 422.

of social, political and religious grievances producing a state of crisis comparable to that of the Revolution.¹⁴ These continuities have been examined by a variety of scholars, including Charles Tilly, Caroline Ford and, most directly, William Beik in a wide-ranging comparative article.¹⁵ For Beik, “Violence and the threat of violence in the Old Regime belonged to a distinctive discourse that was still part of lived experience and that still prevailed during the Revolution [and]... Many of the Revolution’s features can be imagined in terms of past practice.”¹⁶ Still, he is at pains to mark out what is distinctive and “new” about the Revolution. Thus, he speaks of “new dimensions,” “new language” and a “new revolutionary spirit,” even if these features may sometimes seem rather more a matter of nuance than of novelty.¹⁷

Although the extent and extremity of violence are hard to measure, wherever one looks, it seems undisputed (if not indisputable) that early modern France was “considerably more violent than its neighbours.”¹⁸ Many factors might have contributed to this reputation. First, we should consider the power of the French state and its development of the largest army in Europe, allowing it to wield maximum force, although it could be said at least to have channelled, and curbed, interpersonal noble violence. It might not be insignificant either that France remained a regionally fragmented country, with a relatively large population for the time, which was more volatile in the face of burdensome state taxation and other forms of oppression. Indeed, many have argued that the role of violence can only properly be

¹⁴ Henry Heller, *Iron and Blood: Civil Wars in Sixteenth-Century France* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991), pp. 46-7.

¹⁵ Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French: Four Centuries of Popular Struggle* (Cambridge, Mass, and London: Harvard University Press, 1986), esp. p. 9, “continuities (of contention) across the Revolution of 1789 will provide a clear case in point.” Caroline Ford, “Violence and the Sacred in Nineteenth-Century France,” *French Historical Studies* 21 (1998), 101-12, extends the points of continuity for religious violence in particular into the nineteenth century.

¹⁶ William Beik, “The Violence of the French Crowd from Charivari to Revolution,” *Past and Present* 197 (2007), 109-10.

¹⁷ Beik, “Violence of the French Crowd,” 96, 97, 100. Take his discussion of prison massacres as “new” (105-6), although there are several examples of prisoners being rounded up and killed in cold blood during the St Bartholomew’s Day massacres, as discussed in Philip Benedict, “The Saint Bartholomew’s Massacres in the Provinces,” *Historical Journal* 21 (1978), 205-25.

¹⁸ Stuart Carroll, “Thinking with Violence,” in this volume.

understood by reconstructing the regional context of events and, in particular, the make-up of local society and politics, for “violence, like a chameleon, wore the colours of its surroundings.”¹⁹ Here, too, the centralization of royal authority may have eventually diminished the opportunity for local acts of vendetta which were previously so prevalent.²⁰ In turn, however, it created the conditions which led to significant regional and, ultimately, national revolt.

For Beik, “France is an ideal place to study protest because there was so much of it.”²¹ He suggests that what he calls “the culture of retribution was only one kind of intervention, possibly one that was distinctively French,” and French crowds do, indeed, seem to have been more prone to violence than groups elsewhere.²² This distinctiveness is remarkably resilient. Indeed, Mark Greengrass has asserted that little remains of the former exceptionalism of the French Reformation “save violence”.²³ Meanwhile, Tilly highlights the peculiar “quirks of French history” and argues that “France’s experience with contention since the seventeenth century sets a [particular] challenge for historical analysis”.²⁴ Whereas other national histories concentrate on more positive traits, their own bloody histories should not be down-played however. Early modern England, for instance, usually known for its relative restraint and moderation, was the home of the Bloody Code and a degree of control

¹⁹ Mark Greengrass, “‘La Grande Cassure’: Violence and the French Reformation,” in Robert von Friedeburg and Luise Schorm Schütte (eds), *Politik und Religion: Eigenlogik oder Verzahnung?* (Munich and Oldenbourg, 2007), p. 92; Carroll, “The Rights of Violence,” pp. 133, 161-2.

²⁰ Carroll, “Vendetta in the Seventeenth-Century Midi”; Malcolm Greenshields, *An Economy of Violence in Early Modern France: Crime and Justice in the Haute Auvergne, 1587-1664* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1994); Robert Muchembled, *La violence au village: sociabilité et comportements populaires en Artois du XVe au XVIIe siècle* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1989); Michel Nassiet, “Vengeance in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century France,” in Stuart Carroll (ed.), *Cultures of Violence: Interpersonal Viol in Historical Perspective* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 117-28.

²¹ William Beik, “Protest and Rebellion in Seventeenth-Century France,” in Michael T. Davis (ed.), *Crowd Actions in Britain and France from the Middle Ages to the Modern World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 43.

²² Beik, “Violence of the French Crowd,” 107.

²³ Greengrass, “‘La Grande Cassure,’” p. 72.

²⁴ Tilly, *The Contentious French*, pp. 6, 9.

and coercion which has been described as a form of “subtle violence.”²⁵ Early modern Italy provides plenty of parallels with France in the presence of numerous internecine feuds and plentiful examples of brutal interpersonal and ritualized violence, and yet it does not command the same exemplary status.²⁶

So having looked at the history of France and some of the reasons for its violent reputation, let us now turn to how the historians of early modern France have written that history. To what extent may they have contributed to this “violent turn,” as we may be tempted to call it. How have they shaped the discussion of violence as a historical phenomenon, and what are the theories that form the basis of this analysis?

French Historians Writing Violence

From its sixteenth-century religious wars, through its seventeenth-century revolts and its eighteenth-century Revolution, violence is a dominant theme for interpreting popular agency in France. This interest in crowd behaviour, in the agency of the disenfranchised to influence the world around them, is at the root of many studies. Identifying this historical interest as a fairly recent or, at least, twentieth-century phenomenon, Greengrass argues that it is born of “a social and cultural distinctiveness rather than a national one.”²⁷ Indeed, many of the principal contributors emerged from the focus on social and cultural history of the 1960s and 1970s, which addressed the role of the common people in resistance, rebellion and revolution. It is notable, however, that this trend was dominated to some extent by historians of early modern France from the outset. As a result, collective action is a prominent theme in the leading studies by historians and historical sociologists, such as Charles Tilly. Yet, while for historians of crowd behaviour, such as E.P. Thompson and George Rudé, who were mostly concerned with legitimizing the actions of what had previously been dismissed as an unruly

²⁵ Ethan Shagan, *The Rule of Moderation: Violence, Religion and the Politics of Restraint in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 29, 341.

²⁶ A good example is Edward Muir, *Mad Blood Stirring: Vendetta and Factions in Friuli during the Renaissance* (Baltimore, 1993).

²⁷ Greengrass, “‘La Grande Cassure’,” p. 72.

mob and giving a voice to the masses, French historians, in particular, turned to analysing the violence which accompanied many protests and revolts.²⁸ The process of restoring agency to ordinary people in the past was thus accompanied, sometimes rather awkwardly, with seeing violence as an intrinsic part of righting injustices and achieving certain “democratic” goals.

The particular historiographical strand which predated and intersected with the “violent turn” in interesting ways was the prominent discussion about the role of the elites in popular revolt in the seventeenth century. In the 1960s, the Soviet historian, Boris Porchnev, and French historian, Roland Mousnier, clashed over the nature of large-scale peasant revolts, especially those of the 1630s in Normandy and the south-west, the so-called Croquants and Nu-pieds. Porchnev asserted that the revolts were the result of class conflict, spontaneous and independent uprisings of the peasantry against their lords.²⁹ Mousnier opposed this view, denying that there was antagonism between tenants and lords, and argued instead for their unity against an increasingly centralized state. He claimed that it was the lords, as the natural leaders of society, to whom the peasants looked for the leadership of the revolts.³⁰ In a highly politicized debate, at first, it was Mousnier’s depiction of the society of orders rather than Porchnev’s focus on class conflict which held sway. However, subsequent generations of historians of France have provided a much more nuanced picture and questioned the reliability of the sources for revolt, which suggest a degree of elite complicity, but also reveal the often ambivalent position of the local authorities.³¹ The chronology and geography of the revolts studied were also extended. Most, however, took a primarily functionalist approach regarding who was involved, their motivations, targets and objectives, giving very little direct

²⁸ E.P. Thompson, ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,’ *Past & Present*, 50 (1971): 76-136; George Rudé, *The Crowd in History. A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730–1848* (Wiley & Sons: New York, 1964).

²⁹ Boris Porchnev, *Les soulèvements populaires en France de 1623 à 1648* (Paris, 1963).

³⁰ Roland Mousnier broadened his thesis out to a comparative approach in *Peasant Uprisings in Seventeenth-Century France, Russia, and China* (translated by Brian Pearce; New York, 1970).

³¹ The historiography on this is extensive, for a useful bibliographical overview, see William Beik, *Urban Protest in seventeenth-century France: The Culture of Retribution* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1997), pp. 268-70; one of the most useful interventions was by Leon Bernard, ‘French Society and Popular Uprisings under Louis XIV,’ *French Historical Studies*, 3 (1963-64): 454-74.

attention to their more brutal aspects except in respect to the executions which accompanied their suppression.³² Violence, then, was not at the centre of this debate, but the extent of popular initiative certainly was and, therefore, where responsibility for violent acts lay when they did occur. It was left to other historians to take up the mantle of tackling more directly the genealogy from protest to violence and, thereby, to address its more unsettling characteristics.

The key player here, of course, was Natalie Zemon Davis. Her 1973 essay on “The Rites of Violence” was (and is) the universally cited starting point for many studies of violence long before she became the globally renowned figure we think of her as today. The attraction of studying crowds and protests in the past for Davis and others was the opportunity to gain insights into the everyday lives and experience of ordinary people, to understand their motivations and to restore agency to them, to “make sense of what people said and why they behaved the way they did.”³³ This reflected a left-wing political agenda which was very much the zeitgeist of the time, as Davis acknowledges; for her, the 1960s was characterized by the “carnavalesque turning of the world upside down of the student movements.”³⁴ The events in Paris in 1968 have been a touchstone for many other scholars, too, including Charles Tilly.³⁵ This atmosphere and the popular action of anti-Vietnam protests focused Davis’ mind on festival and protest, but also, less comfortably, on violence. She began with the playfulness of charivari, particularly its communal nature, before she moved on to the neglected and more disturbing phenomenon of religious division and the violence it produced, particularly its ritual aspects.

³² Yves-Marie Bercé, *Revolt and Revolution in Early Modern Europe: An Essay on the History of Political Violence* (translated by Joseph Bergin; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), addresses the issue, but it is not his primary concern. He mainly considers it from the perspective of warfare and brigandage.

³³ Natalie Zemon Davis, *A Passion for History: Conversations with Denis Crouzet* (translated by Davis and Michael Wolfe; Kirksville, Missouri: Truman State University Press, 2010), p. 54.

³⁴ Davis, *A Passion for History*, pp. 44-5, 63-4.

³⁵ Tilly, *Contentious French*, p. 40.

Davis' "Rites of Violence" is frequently cited, but its arguments are far more multi-layered and nuanced than is often assumed.³⁶ Most important for this analysis, however, is her conception of popular violence and evident sympathy with those who carried it out. In particular, she set out to show how such actions can be seen as legitimate as well as subject to constraint. "We may see these crowds as prompted by political and moral traditions which legitimize and even prescribe their violence. ... [and] their violence, however cruel, not as random and limitless, but as aimed at defined targets and selected from a repertory of traditional punishments and forms of destruction."³⁷ Davis' use of language is telling. She admits that the violence may be "an embarrassment," "troubling," "disgusting" and "disturbing" to us, even involving a "ghoulish commerce" in body parts, but that it "is related here less to the pathological than the normal." She emphasizes that, "even in the extreme case of religious violence, crowds do not act in a mindless way."³⁸ If anything, however, it becomes somewhat sanitized by the almost jolly air of competitiveness she evokes: that Calvinists are "champions in the destruction of religious property," while "in bloodshed, the Catholics are the champions."³⁹ Historians should not be too appalled, we might surmise, since ritual encompassed mockery, parody and "a process of dehumanization," so that those involved, including women and boys, did not have "a full knowledge of what they were doing."⁴⁰ Thus, the use of ritual by the crowd can distance both us and them from what they do: an act of purification indeed. I highlight this response not to be critical of Davis, but to underline the historian's difficulty in dealing with the sensitivities surrounding the subject of violence, both hers and those of her readers. As Davis has stated about her own approach, "I

³⁶ For a recent multifaceted analysis, see Murdock, Roberts and Spicer (eds), *Ritual and Violence*.

³⁷ Davis, "Rites of Violence," 53. She makes a rather different point by claiming that, "By every sign, the crowds believed their actions legitimate," 66.

³⁸ Davis, "Rites of Violence," 54, 82, 83, 90, 91.

³⁹ Davis, "Rites of Violence," 77; this distinction, which is the most often cited part of Davis' argument, she in fact drew from the pro-Huguenot, *Histoire ecclésiastique des églises réformées au royaume de France* (edited by Theodore Beza, and first published in Geneva in 1580), 75-6 and n. 78.

⁴⁰ Davis, "Rites of Violence," 85-8.

had wanted to provide an explanation for violence not a pardon or justification, but a social and cultural explanation for such extreme forms of aggression,” and, addressing the kind of critique to which all discussions of violent behaviour are potentially subject, she adds “the idea that the final explanation for an event is absolute evil is *unacceptable*.”⁴¹

In a series of publications, William Beik has focused our attention on the relationship between popular protest and violence. In doing so, he cites the “vocabulary of violence” and rituals of revolt as learned from “the truly violent legacy of a generation of sixteenth-century religious wars.”⁴² He, too, seems more than a little uncomfortable with his subject. On the one hand, he seeks to distance us from the perpetrators, explaining their violence as a matter of an alien, past culture, but, on the other, he plays down how central that violence was. “Early modern people had a tolerance of physical violence that is unsettling to us... they were unperturbed by nasty brawls, bloodshed or display of body parts.” However, as if awkward about his own premise, he hastens to add that violent threats were often not carried out and “ordinary people ... were not nearly as bloodthirsty and barbaric as they might have appeared.”⁴³ Again, Beik asserts, with regard to urban protests, that “seventeenth-century people were used to blood. ... had little hesitation in brutally attacking an enemy, yet their violence was never gratuitous.”⁴⁴ In his comparative study of early modern revolts, while asserting that “these demonstrators undoubtedly had a tolerance of physical violence which we do not share,” he assumes that this can be excused by their “hard life” resulting in them having a “level of indifference to blood and physical assault (which) *must have been higher* (my italics).”⁴⁵ He defines this approach as a “distinctive mixture of crude violence and moral

⁴¹ Davis, “Rites of Violence,” 65.

⁴² Beik, *Urban Protest*, p. 71.

⁴³ William Beik, *A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 271.

⁴⁴ Beik, *Urban Protest*, p. 30.

⁴⁵ Beik, “Violence of the French Crowd,” 75, 86.

purpose,” but which was always “measured.”⁴⁶ At the same time his central argument for a “culture of retribution” is itself inherently unsettling, that people sought not just justice but vengeance and punishment for those responsible for oppressive practices or those who colluded with them. Thus, the lynching of tax collectors or other officials was legitimate in their terms, but clearly vindictive too. While championing the “righteous indignation” and “moral purpose” of the ordinary people, Beik is evidently more sympathetic to the views of the “educated, cultivated citizens” who, he says, found the violence “barbarous.”⁴⁷ Even Davis is not immune to these hints of elitism, for she concedes that “urban rioters ... *even when poor and unskilled* (my italics), may appear respectable to their everyday neighbours.”⁴⁸ It is the aggressiveness of the ordinary people whose interests he is seeking to champion which causes Beik the greatest disquiet. He, and others who have written on popular violence, find its interpretation and, in particular, its justification difficult. They can neither condone nor condemn. They are, however, conspicuously more comfortable describing elite violence which does not appear to present them with the same dilemma.

Beik concludes that for nobles, “violence was an accepted way of life and revenge a natural counterpart to their concern for honor,” and (quoting Stuart Carroll) “an unshakeable belief in the right to violence lay at the heart of noble egotism.”⁴⁹ Municipal officials were also not to be trusted, since when confronting each other during revolts, Beik argues, “the population was suspicious and the magistrates were two-faced.”⁵⁰ Heller, in his controversial analysis of the religious wars, focuses on disputes between nobles and non-nobles, and uses striking language to do so. “Noble violence could assume the proportions of a reign of terror,” and the people were faced with the “anarchic violence of the nobility,” which

⁴⁶ Beik, “Violence of the French Crowd,” 107.

⁴⁷ Beik, “Violence of the French Crowd,” 86, 100, 107.

⁴⁸ Davis, “Rites of Violence,” 53.

⁴⁹ Beik, *Social and Cultural History*, p. 276 (Carroll, *Blood and Violence*, p. 263).

⁵⁰ Beik, *Urban Protest*, p. 115.

increased popular discontent.⁵¹ It is unsurprising, perhaps, that historians of a particular political persuasion might take the brutality and untrustworthiness of the elites (or at least a section of them) for granted. The unrestrained violence of the nobility is universally accepted and also a necessary prelude to the civilizing process described by Norbert Elias.⁵² The assumption of the gradual distancing of the elites from the violence of the general populace is one formulation of this. Another is that of the present-day academic struggling to defend popular violence in the past. A tension remains when it can be confidently stated that the people “undoubtedly had a tolerance of physical violence *which we do not share* (my italics).” Who is the “we” here? It may be the educated reader, perhaps, but presumably not those whose regular experience of a night out may be the threat of a bar-room brawl or a fight on the street. This is exclusive language, indeed, for a discussion of violence. It goes beyond not wanting to condone particular acts of violence to making an unfounded assumption about the absence of everyday violence in society today.

Again, this is not a criticism of any particular historian, but of how scholars approach the study of topics which jar with their own sensibilities. I would suggest that historians have a tendency to be less objective and more emotive about violence than they are about other, less controversial subjects. Yet, unlike contemporary elites, or earlier historians who dismissed protestors’ behaviour as wrongheaded and irrational, Davis, Beik et al do not see the more extreme acts of violence as the product of just a few “hotheads.” This is the language used by sixteenth-century Calvinist ministers and elders when confronted by popular acts of iconoclasm, for instance, which they feared would result in a Catholic backlash and would discredit them with the authorities.⁵³ In order to justify the violence perpetrated by those that they seek to defend, the early modern cultural imperative toward

⁵¹ Heller, *Iron and Blood*, pp. 20-1.

⁵² For a critique of the Elias thesis, see Carroll, “Violence, Civil Society and European Civilization.”

⁵³ For example, in Troyes in 1560, cited in Penny Roberts, *A City in Conflict: Troyes during the French Wars of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 91; see also Davis, “Rites of Violence,” 64, 67-8, 76 n. 82.

brutality and vengeance necessitates a generalized interpretation. Historians have, thus, argued for a crowd mentality in order to explain the symbolic actions and rituals that are carried out which result in inter-communal violence. Such a thesis lends the people a degree of agency in such situations, but not often on an individual basis. They are in a sense prisoners of their own culture which predetermines their response to certain stimuli. As the historical sociologist, Tilly, has put it, “The crowd knew their enemies.”⁵⁴ Yet, at the same time, they did not have “a full knowledge of what they were doing.”⁵⁵

Initially, Tilly himself played down the significance of violence in early modern protests. In *The Contentious French* he actually makes very little comment about it, only addressing it directly in his conclusion. This does not mean that violent incidents do not feature in the rest of the book. One could point, for example, to his description of the bloody history of the Place de Grève, the principal site of execution in Paris.⁵⁶ Tilly argues, however, that there has been too much “focus on conflict.”⁵⁷ He states that the “vast majority of events involved no significant violence;” indeed, over time “forms of collective action (had) less likelihood of generating violence;” professional soldiers and police did most of the killing, and that which did take place was not often large-scale.⁵⁸ He is also at pains to emphasize that “the significance of such protests was not dependent on violence.” Events mattered because “popular contention ... brings us closer to the continuous experience of ordinary people,” and violence does not need to be a part of that. For Tilly, the violence that did occur was mostly official or militarized. At the same time, his focus is on broader issues which he feels have been ignored, especially the impact of capitalism and the increasing power of the state. Subsequently, of course, Tilly came to focus on the typologies of political violence in a more

⁵⁴ Tilly, *The Contentious French*, p. 23.

⁵⁵ Davis, “Rites of Violence,” 85-8.

⁵⁶ Tilly, *The Contentious French*, pp. 48-54.

⁵⁷ Tilly, *The Contentious French*, p. 4.

⁵⁸ Tilly, *The Contentious French*, pp. 382-3, 386.

generic sense, but not without still referring to early modern French examples, in particular the case of the explosion of brutality in sixteenth-century Romans (discussed below).⁵⁹

Tilly is not the only scholar to complain that most paradigmatic studies of popular violence in early modern France tend to neglect the role of the state. David Andress declares that historians have been quick to assert that “popular violence defined the French Revolution,” whereas he claims that state violence ultimately became more characteristic of the movement.⁶⁰ Lucas had already made this point with regard to crowd violence: “The inception of the Terror was the final appropriation of the crowd, the substitution of state violence for crowd violence.”⁶¹ Tilly’s emphasis on the importance of the “complexity and specificity of everyday struggles for power” in revolt, is a theme echoed in Suzanne Desan’s perceptive critique of Davis’ “Rites of Violence.”⁶² She takes Davis to task for not pushing the role of violence far enough. In particular, she calls for more discussion of the use of violence in relation to both power and ritual, its legitimacy as a political tool, as well as its role in fragmenting as well as reinforcing community. As we have seen, Desan is quite right to emphasize the importance of “community” and “legitimacy” to those writing about popular protest of all sorts.⁶³ As already observed, violence problematizes both of these concepts for those seeking to champion the interests of ordinary people in the past. Desan challenges the emphasis on cohesion rather than the political dynamics of conflict and power which she sees as far more significant for understanding the context of these acts. “Violence forced urban-dwellers to rethink traditional definitions of community” and sometimes tore those

⁵⁹ Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), on Romans, pp. 190-3.

⁶⁰ David Andress, “Popular Violence in the French Revolution: Revolt, Retribution and the Slide to State Terror,” in Carroll (ed.), *Cultures of Violence*, p. 175, quoting Jack Censer and Lynn Hunt, “Imaging the French Revolution: Depictions of the French Revolutionary Crowd,” *American Historical Review* 110 (2005), 38.

⁶¹ Lucas, “The Crowd and Politics,” 457.

⁶² Tilly, *The Contentious French*, pp. 10-11.

⁶³ Suzanne Desan, “Crowds, Community and Ritual in the Work of E.P. Thompson and Natalie Davis,” in Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley and London: California University Press, 1989), pp. 56, 62.

communities apart.⁶⁴ For Desan, violence shaped ritual as much as ritual shaped violence; violence also had the potential to destroy communities by reconfiguring rather than reinforcing communal relations. Violence could be transformative as well as traditional and always had a political edge.

Stuart Carroll, too, has sought “to question how far it is possible or desirable to distinguish between (elite) ‘political violence’ and (popular) ‘religious violence’.”⁶⁵ He does so by placing “the religious violence into its local political and social context” arguing that “the nature, chronology, and level of violence” differed according to that context.⁶⁶ Without that awareness of the role of local political groups and everyday social relations, he contends, historians cannot hope to properly reconstruct what lay behind individual and collective responses to situations which resulted in violence. This is an appeal to the traditional regional approach to early modern French history, rather than generalized theories of violence, which has proved so successful. Furthermore, microhistory has been at the heart of some of the most cited case studies of violence for this period, such as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s, *Le Carnaval de Romans* (1979) and Robert Darnton’s ‘The Great Cat Massacre’ (1984). The thick description of the events in the small dauphinoise town of Romans in 1579-80 has become the quintessential example of the bloody fusion of social and religious tension and political ambition, which encompassed not just urban but rural hostilities.⁶⁷ The slaughter of the peasantry, as well as the violence in Romans itself, looms large in Le Roy Ladurie’s account. Darnton’s essay has also acquired classic status, with its deconstruction of the cultural context of a seemingly senseless act of brutality against defenceless animals.⁶⁸ Once

⁶⁴ Desan, “Crowds, Community and Ritual”, pp. 64-66.

⁶⁵ Carroll, “The Rights of Violence,” p. 133.

⁶⁶ Carroll, “The Rights of Violence,” pp. 133, 161-2. See also, the case study by Mark Greengrass, “The Anatomy of a Religious Riot in Toulouse in May 1562,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 34 (1983), 367-91.

⁶⁷ Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Le Carnaval de Romans. De la Chandeleur au Mercredi des cendres 1579-1580* (Paris, 1979) [translated as *Carnival in Romans*].

⁶⁸ Robert Darnton, “Workers Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Séverin,” in idem, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (London, 1984), pp. 79-104.

again, ritual is central for understanding these episodes, mixed with a powerful sense of theatre, in the carnivalesque dressing up as animals of the rival political factions in Romans and the re-enactment of the “cat massacre” by the apprentices in Paris.

Other historians of France have also remarked upon the theatrical and performative aspects of violence, from sixteenth-century religious martyrdom to the streets, cabarets and workshops of early modern Paris.⁶⁹ Beik, too, refers to the “theatricality” of defending honour in public which might involve insults and blows.⁷⁰ The throwing of rocks and mud was not uncommon, and the disheveling of hair and pulling of beards was a direct and symbolic assault on an individual’s honour. Ritual and theatre may be seen as a means by which contemporaries (and perhaps also historians) distance themselves from the horrors confronting them. While rituals in the past provide a cultural reference point to understand how people dehumanized their victims, equivalent acts now (involving mutilation, display or desecration of bodies) are seen as particularly heinous and defined as “evil,” not to be explained but condemned.

I have focused here mostly on anglophone, indeed, American voices which have been some of the most prominent in the debates about the nature of early modern violence in France. Denis Crouzet is the main exception in his direct engagement with, and expansion of, the “rites of violence,” both in terms of Davis’ thesis and his more comprehensive cultural treatment of the whole period of the religious wars.⁷¹ For Crouzet, it is the prevailing eschatological angst of the Catholic populace which is most significant in driving confessional violence. His is a psychological, often abstract analysis of what he calls “the

⁶⁹ David Nicholls, “The Theatre of Martyrdom in the French Reformation,” *Past and Present* 121 (1988), 49-73. The term “theatres of violence” is also used in the sense of the spaces where violence commonly occurred, for example, in Diane Roussel, *Violences et passions dans le Paris de la Renaissance* (Seysse: Champ Vallon, 2012), esp. chap. 6 “Les théâtres de la violence,” pp. 168-213; Arlette Farge and André Zysberg, “Les théâtres de la violence à Paris au XVIIIe siècle,” *Annales: Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 34 (1979), 984-1015.

⁷⁰ Beik, *Urban protest*, pp. 32-4.

⁷¹ Denis Crouzet, *Les Guerriers de Dieu. La violence au temps des troubles de religion (c.1525-c.1610)* (2 vols; Seysse: Champ Vallon, 1990).

socio-cultural dynamics of panic” which sees individuals “slipping into violence.”⁷² It was a collective state of anxiety which predated the wars and which shaped the response to the establishment of Huguenot churches through massacre and the aggressive regime of the Catholic League. More recently, French historians have become increasingly interested in interpersonal violence or violent crime rather than collective action, including most notably the work of Arlette Farge, Robert Muchembled, Diane Roussel and Michel Nassiet.⁷³ Roussel and Farge, in particular, have focused on early modern Paris as the ‘theatre’ for their studies. Roussel has argued for the relative moderation of violence in the capital which was well-policed by both the authorities and the community, in contrast to Beik’s depiction of urban relations. Both Muchembled and Nassiet have also published more generalized works on violence, contributing to a much broader and less specific debate about its historical role.⁷⁴ All of them are less concerned with the political imperative to defend, rather than simply account for, the violent actions of people in the past.

Concluding Reflections

Arguably, collective violence has received too prominent a billing in our historical understanding of the society and culture of early modern France. A preoccupation with its most brutal episodes may also distort the realities of the everyday experience of those who lived through this period.⁷⁵ Undertaking a close scrutiny of the way that historians of early modern France have approached the study of violence should, however, teach us to think more carefully about the subjectivity of what we write about such a sensitive topic. This is

⁷² Davis, *A Passion for History*, p. 65.

⁷³ Arlette Farge, *Fragile Lives. Violence, Power and Solidarity in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (translated by Carol Shelton; Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993); Farge and Zysberg, ‘Les théâtres de la violence,’; Muchembled, *La violence au village*; Robert Muchembled, *A History of Violence from the Middle Ages to the Present* (translated by Jean Birrell; Cambridge: Polity, 2012); Roussel, , *Violences et passions*; Nassiet, “Vengeance in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century France.”

⁷⁴ Robert Muchembled, *A History of Violence from the Middle Ages to the Present* (translated by Jean Birrell; Cambridge: Polity, 2012); Michel Nassiet, *La violence, une histoire sociale: France, XVIe-XVIIIe siècles* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2011).

⁷⁵ As I have argued elsewhere, see Penny Roberts, “Peace, Ritual and Sexual Violence during the Religious Wars,” in Murdock, Roberts and Spicer (eds), *Ritual and Violence*, esp. pp. 75-6.

instructive not just for how we theorize violence in the past but how we think with it today. Historians have sought to legitimize early modern popular violence, but in doing so have justified something that they are essentially uncomfortable with. Yet, perhaps their discomfort is misplaced. David Nirenberg has argued that, “violence was a central and systematic aspect of the coexistence of majority and minorities” and should not be seen as indicating an unwillingness to accept diversity.⁷⁶ In other words, low-key violence was a mundane, unremarkable and often innocuous culturally-conditioned experience in past societies. Yet, it can still be distasteful to us today for principally being a result of prejudice. The historian’s dilemma in addressing the causes of violence, then, is striking the balance between historicization and modern sensibilities.

Certainly, the more extreme and brutal sorts of violence discussed by historians remain unsettling. Such discomfort is reflective of that of liberal educated elites more generally when confronted by such actions and cannot be easily resolved. This essential squeamishness reflects how perturbed historians are by the idea that ordinary people can be capable of extraordinary acts of cruelty. Yet, the role of ritual which they have used to better explain popular behaviour in the past, involving mutilation and the laying out of body parts or taking them as trophies, would today be condemned as particularly sadistic. Vindictive violence is no better. Equally, it is important to accept that all protests, however well-meaning, are capable of turning violent; the fact that some do should be unsurprising to us. Some often radical elements will always be frustrated by a lack of progress or delay in taking the next step. This was certainly the case during the Reformation and the Revolution, with participants believing that they had been promised equality, whether spiritually, socially or politically, which remained unfulfilled. Such actions are, thus, the result of a shared ideology, but also a fundamental disagreement about how best to achieve what is sought and what

⁷⁶ David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages*, (Princeton University Press; Princeton NJ, 1996), p. 245.

constitutes a legitimate use of force. As a result, radical groups may face repression by their own side for delegitimizing their cause through the inappropriate use of violence.

As we have seen, the language historians use to describe early modern violence is instructive. Indeed, the words used to describe violent acts, whether in the past or present, is vital to legitimizing the use of force, but is entirely subjective. Who decides when an “extreme,” “disproportionate,” “excessive,” “inappropriate” or “unreasonable” amount of force is wielded, or just how this should be defined, will depend on judicial and official variables. Common to all periods, too, is the apparently disproportionate response of the authorities to protests that turn violent or just to the threat or fear of attack in a situation where they always have the advantage of more deadly weaponry and executive powers. All sides are inclined to use the most “effective” weapons to hand, whether fists, rocks or pitchforks, or guns, water cannon or cluster bombs. In most conflicts, however, the imbalance of power is clear.

In many places around the world, civil authority has broken down or has always been perennially weak leading to routine corruption and violence in place of effective government. War continues to prevail in many countries and the political delicacies cannot allow us to turn a blind eye to the sufferings of those caught in the crossfire of a conflict which they have not chosen. Civilian deaths cannot be dismissed as the “collateral damage” of a supposedly legitimate use of superior force. This obfuscation of the essential nastiness of violence whoever it is perpetrated by is reflected in the “war on terror,” in which suspects are “neutralized” rather than killed, and individual or collective violence is politicized. It is often hard to distinguish between collective action that can involve individual acts characteristic of the “lone gunman” scenario and those that are more obviously “ideologically-inspired.” Today we are confronted by a new challenge with regard to our involvement or complicity in violence. The on-line visual ubiquity of such acts may carry a warning about disturbing

scenes. Will watching help us to better understand that violence or just make us feel sick to our stomach or even in some way complicit? If acts of violence are filmed on a phone while nothing is done to intervene is not an individual morally if not necessarily legally culpable? Is the use of hashtags or the customization of Facebook profiles to show solidarity with the victims of violence in Syria, Paris or Manchester meaningful or simply a way to deflect modern-day guilt or discomfort with violence?

Historians face a different set of dilemmas. Everyday violence does not inevitably lead to more brutal incidents, yet it is a prelude to these more disturbing acts and cannot be isolated from them. While rejecting the teleological approach of Elias, Pinker and others, we have to be careful and aware enough not to distance ourselves in a different way.⁷⁷ We need to accept that violence and violent urges are a part of today's society. In a perceptive review article, Gregory Hanlon states that, "Historians generally emphasise the uniqueness of specific places, actors and periods, but there are some striking commonalities across space and time that today have become too obvious to ignore."⁷⁸ As a result, he exhorts historians to become better informed about the advances made in other disciplines that study the role of violence as part of human nature. Historians are perturbed and challenged by the events which they describe and analyse and make sense of in the same way that journalists are by present conflicts. As "witnesses" through the documents that they read, historians have a responsibility to acknowledge the realities of violence and not to try to explain them away. Violence is the product of a certain time and place, of a prevailing culture, but cannot just be reduced to that. There are elements of human and circumstantial continuity. The defence of honour is a case in point. The rhetoric and expression may have changed, but individuals and gangs will still fight over codes of honour which they believe have been breached, and will

⁷⁷ For a critique of the approach of both Elias and Pinker, see Carroll, "Thinking with Violence," and his "Violence, Civil Society and European Civilization."

⁷⁸ Gregory Hanlon, 'The Decline of Violence in the West: from Cultural to Post-Cultural History,' *English Historical Review*, 128 (2013): 367-400, which includes reviews of Pinker, Muchembled and Nassiet.

seek vengeance through acts of violence. The tendency of historians to distance contemporary culture too much from the violent predisposition of past societies is potentially problematic in the same way as the approach to the trajectory of a civilizing culture which privileges modern mores. The association of violence with a particular “class” of person, whether now or in the past, is especially problematic. Domestic violence and child abuse, to name only two of the most graphic instances, are no respecters of class, social group or education. Likewise “hate” crimes still prevail throughout society and, indeed, seem to have witnessed a recent resurgence. Violence presents a challenge to us both as historians and as citizens and a moral responsibility to understand its causes and complexities which cannot be ignored. Ultimately, when considering violence, historical, cultural and social distance need to be equally contested, as well as addressed, with a full knowledge of what we are doing.