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Future Agendas for Research on Violent Crime: The Challenge to History from Evolutionary Psychology¹

John Carter Wood

Recent decades have seen a tremendous growth in knowledge about the history of crime, criminal justice, policing, and punishment in the early modern and modern periods, particularly with regard to Europe and North America. Amid this expansive array of research interests in what I will, for simplicity, call “crime history”, violence has attracted particular attention. Using social-science and cultural-theoretical methods, historians have generated a vast amount of quantitative data on violent crime and state responses to it and examined qualitative evidence on how perceptions of and attitudes toward violence have changed. Numerous case studies have cast light on forgotten or hitherto unknown chapters of violent crime. New sets of questions have pushed historians’ emphases from an earlier focus on serious crime toward a greater interest in crime’s relationship to everyday life, with a particular focus on gender and participation in (and perceptions of) violent crime. It has become increasingly difficult to speak of a single field or even to keep up with the expanding number of debates, disputes, and sub-specialisms that have thus been created. And as the other contributions to this special issue demonstrate, there is no shortage of suggestions for the future directions crime history should take in the coming decades.

Most of these, as useful as they may be, come to us via well-trodden paths through the fields of sociology and cultural studies. However, I would urge historians to take into account, engage with, and make use of perspectives, approaches, and conclusions from a field that has received little attention in historical studies of crime: evolutionary psychology. I have previously argued that historians of violence should take evolutionary psychology seriously, and – given limited space here – I would refer those looking for a broader argument and literature review to those articles². While a few historians have recently discussed evolutionary psychology, it continues to be less *rejected* in the field than simply *ignored*³. Nonetheless, evolutionary psychologists directly address topics of interest to historians and are even challenging historians on their own ground by making claims about long-term patterns in human violence. Here, I briefly suggest why historians should welcome this challenge and why evolutionary psychology should be part of the future of violence studies, and I offer some starting points for those historians interested in exploring this issue further.

¹ I thank Rob King and Anja Müller-Wood for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

² Wood (2007a, 2007b, 2011).

³ Mc Mahon (2013); Knepper (2016, p.63-68 and 81-82); Sharpe (2016, p.19-27).

TYING THINGS TOGETHER

One reason for taking evolutionary psychology seriously is that it has the potential to help organise historians' research results into a "general" or "unified" theory of violence. The ever-growing amount of historical knowledge about crime and violence is to be welcomed, but it has brought with it an increasing theoretical complexity, diversity, and even idiosyncrasy. As a field, it often seems that historians are far more interested in change and diversity rather than in finding clearly delineated commonalities and continuities. Indeed, some historians seem to see the multiplication of complexity, in itself, as an explicit *goal*. While I would be the last person to urge simplicity for its own sake or to suggest that one-dimensional models should be imposed upon complex phenomena, we might do more to recognise larger patterns, identify reliable causal relationships, and provide useful information for contemporary debates about crime and ways of responding to it. Such goals are sometimes disparaged as "reductionism"; however, quite apart from the undefined meaninglessness of this reproach, it ignores the progress in moving toward a coherent understanding of human behaviour made by the natural sciences relative to the humanities.

There have, however, been some moves toward establishing a concrete and clearly definable set of causal relationships relevant to violence from sociologists, criminologists, and psychologists, and the issues they address are directly relevant to history. Three examples have employed evolutionary psychology in one way or another in explaining violence or criminal behaviour more generally. Manuel Eisner has explored the goal of developing a "general theory of violence", i.e. a "meta-theory" or an "overarching and parsimonious set of general principles that helps to organize local theories". It would perform four tasks: it should "identify general mechanisms that operate on different manifestations of violence across cultures and over time"; "demonstrate that a few general principles bring forth similar manifestations of violence across culture and over time"; "integrate disciplinary theories at the biological, the psychological, and the sociological level in such a way that they are non-contradictory and that the resulting explanatory power is higher than that of each primary theory"; and "show that successful strategies of controlling and preventing different types of violence are based on the same general principles"⁴. Eisner sees evolutionary theory as playing a useful role in this effort. Steven Pinker's wide-ranging study of the changing propensity of human beings to kill each other at levels from everyday street violence to mass murder has an understanding of evolved predispositions toward violence – and toward controlling it – at its analytical heart⁵. This emphasis usefully points to continuities and commonalities in human social relationships and enables understanding how these contrasting tendencies to enable or constrain violence have worked out in historical circumstances. While taking into account wide disparities and variations in violence's presence and perception, Pinker also provides concise arguments about *which* social and cultural factors have influenced the growth or reduction in fatal violence. More recently, a group of criminologists have developed a "biosocial" approach to crime and argued for a

⁴ Eisner (2009, p.44)

⁵ Pinker (2011).

“unified crime theory” that would take into account social environments, individual life-history trajectories, and evolved predispositions in explaining criminal behaviour⁶.

MAKING SENSE OF VIOLENCE

In addition to contributing to a greater organisation of knowledge about historical violence evolutionary psychology can help historians “make sense” of violence itself, guiding us toward new research questions and – equally important – helping us evaluate which questions and assumptions are useful and which are not. If violence is, as Gregory Hanlon has put it, “part of our design”, analyses which completely ignore this factor will be missing something vital⁷. One can “make sense” of violence via understanding the *motivations* for its use, the *patterns* in its deployment, and the *meanings* ascribed to it. Evolutionary psychology can contribute to all three goals. Since readers are likely to be familiar with the historical literature on these topics, I will focus on some probably less familiar works employing evolutionary psychology in the remainder of this section.

Much of evolutionary psychology has analysed most physical aggression as a strategic, interest-pursuing and non-pathological behaviour arising from a shared (and normal) human psychology, although there is room here for seeing a significant role for individual genetic variation and mental illness⁸. The relevant psychological mechanisms are seen as strongly context-dependent. Notably, the social influences related to violence often affect one of the human sexes far more than the other. Important relationships have been identified, for example, between inequality, the defence of status, and male-on-male violence, as young men escalate their competitive tactics and “discount the future”, driving up male homicide rates⁹. Such effects appear far less relevant for women. This should not surprise historians, who have made much of “honour” cultures as causes of male-on-male violence. Evolutionary psychology, here, offers not only an explanation for *why* such motivations came to exist – indeed, the omnipresence of “honour cultures” in the histories of human societies are unlikely to be explainable *without* recourse to shared psychological predilections – but also the potential for fine-tuning our understanding of which social circumstances encourage (or restrain) “honour” in motivating intra-sex violence. Evolved human physiology may provide clues for understanding the prevalence of semi-ritualised combat among men in many societies¹⁰.

There have also been evolutionary arguments about violence in families and between the sexes. Kinship and “reproductive value” have been central to Darwinian perspectives, including issues such as sibling rivalry, coalitional violence by related men, and the higher rates of abuse and homicide faced by stepchildren¹¹. Useful

⁶ Boutwell *et al.* (2015).

⁷ Hanlon (2007, p.86).

⁸ Eisner (2009, p.44-48); Pinker (2011, p.31-58).

⁹ Wilson and Daly (1997); Daly and Wilson (2005); Archer (2009, p.256-257).

¹⁰ King (2013).

¹¹ Daly and Wilson (1988, p.17-35); Daly and Wilson (1998); Archer (2013).

distinctions have been made in such work between different *kinds* of relationship violence between men and women: in the modern West, there may be similar levels of “situational couple violence” (arising from conflicts over everyday issues) while males predominate strongly in “intimate terrorism” devoted to controlling a partner’s sexuality¹². Explaining the basic emotions and cognitive calculations underlying reciprocity, revenge, jealousy, fear, and aggression, this work helps understand the logic of the “cultures of violence” that historians have explored.

Motivations *for* violence can be read from the patterns *in* violence that result from them. As historians know, these patterns can be marked by continuity and change; evolutionary psychology has, similarly, taken both into account. One of the key continuities centres, again, on sex differences. The psychologist John Archer has provided a thorough, systematic comparison of evolutionary and “social-role” arguments – the latter similar to historians’ emphases on “social construction” and “discourse” – for the greater male predilection for physically aggressive behaviour¹³. Social-role perspectives fare badly in this comparison, and Archer shows how bodily, psychological, and behavioural sex differences relevant to violence fit the predictions of Darwinian sexual selection. Evolutionary history, he argues, has formed an “adaptive complex” of physical and psychological features resulting from inter-male competition across human evolution¹⁴. Men’s predominance in intra-sexual aggression is universal (even if its specific magnitude varies), increases with the seriousness of that aggression, arises early in development, increases during young adulthood, and is mediated by psychological mechanisms that follow functional principles that suggest adaptations. Anne Campbell, similarly, calls sex differences in aggression “robust”, “universal”, and “durable” features of human societies, concluding that “the ubiquity of this effect, its early developmental onset and its consistency with other primate species suggest the utility of an evolutionary perspective”¹⁵. As both Archer and Campbell show, differences in aggression emerge in children *before* capacities for “gender labelling” and “stereotypes”¹⁶. Such continuities do not deny that violence is a social and cultural phenomenon; however, they do suggest that – as with behavioural sex differences more broadly – these elements need to be understood in the context of an overarching evolutionary framework¹⁷. It seems difficult to explain the universality of such patterns in violence without recourse to some kind of species-wide similarities.

Some historians may find evolutionary psychologists’ stress on sex differences in physical aggression hardly surprising; if this is all that evolutionary psychology has to offer, they may conclude, then it is not worth spending time on: we, after all, already know this. However, part of the value of evolutionary psychology is that it can add value to existing social-level arguments without seeking to replace them, offering “ultimate” explanations for (and links between) the more “proximal”

¹² Campbell (2007, p.374-375).

¹³ Archer (2009).

¹⁴ Archer (2009, p.259-262)

¹⁵ Campbell (2007, p.365).

¹⁶ Archer (2009, p.255-256); Campbell (2002, p.5).

¹⁷ Schmitt *et al.* (2008), Schmitt (2015).

factors on which historians concentrate¹⁸. For historians an “honour culture” might seem a sufficient proximal explanation for violence; but how – and why – did the underlying mental predilections that enable such a “culture” evolve? Moreover, one might also put in a good word for well-evidenced and well-theorised efforts at stating the obvious. After all, there are historians – and sociologists and cultural theorists – who have committed themselves to *denying* the obvious, i.e. to repudiating any (or at least any significant) evolved sex differences in violence and claiming that sex-role education and gender construction are alone sufficient to explain such disparities¹⁹. Other historians and criminologists have downplayed sex differences in violence, sometimes via questionably broad and/or undifferentiated definitions of violence or claims that female violence has remained hidden by a gender-biased culture or justice system²⁰. Still others have undertaken an explicit agenda of seeking to, as it has been put, “de-essentialize the maleness of violence”²¹. Clearly, nobody should “essentialize” violence in the sense of seeing it simply as an automatic programme running independently of external context or individual variation; however, the effort here seems a more extreme – and misguided – commitment to ignoring one of the most well-evidenced and consistent sex differences in human history.

This is not, of course, to suggest that female homicide (or female violence more generally) is any less worthy of study: that would be an absurd claim. While, generally speaking, less common and deadly than male violence, female violence is also a feature of all societies, and understanding women’s use of violence – as well as their victimisation by it – remains a vital interdisciplinary project. It is also, however, one that evolutionary psychology has long addressed²². Anne Campbell has opened up an intriguing avenue of study of female violence, suggesting that one of the core differences mediating sex differences in violence is not aggression itself (which, she suggests, is similar between the sexes) but rather women’s greater fear, on average, of physical injury²³. Apart from its own intrinsic importance as a key part of human behaviour, the topic of female violence remains important for other reasons. For example, cultural historians have been right to point out that the *perceptions* of women as perpetrators of violence have often gone well beyond such violence’s actual incidence, acting as a cultural magnet for a diverse set of cultural anxieties. However, I would argue that in completely leaving out evolutionary causes of human behaviour historians are missing something important in explaining why certain patterns and tendencies seem to recur again and again in quite different social and cultural circumstances.

Alongside contributing to explaining continuities such as the persistence of sex differences in serious violence, evolutionary psychology will offer assistance in addressing the issue of *changes* (or of cross-cultural *differences*) in violence. If anything, historians have tended to be far more interested in explaining change and difference rather than continuity. This interest may be one reason why evolutionary

¹⁸ On “ultimate” and “proximate” levels of explanation, see, e.g. Daly and Wilson (1988); Archer (2013).

¹⁹ See a summary and response to such efforts in Campbell (2012).

²⁰ For citations and discussion see Wood (2011).

²¹ Carrington *et al.* (2010, p.393).

²² Stockley and Campbell (2013).

²³ Campbell (2002, p.106); Campbell (2013).

psychology has seemed, for many, to offer little to historians. But, contrary to a frequent misunderstanding, there is nothing in biological or evolutionary reasoning that would predict violence to be constant or unchanging. Indeed, evolutionary psychologists have always emphasised violence's "context-specific" nature, arguing, for instance, that high rates of social inequality or local mortality – or unbalanced sex ratios – can strongly drive up male homicide rates, and they have suggested that changing Western cultural norms have driven a relative equalisation in some forms in partner violence²⁴. Developing a general theory of violence may mean thinking more about continuity *in* change: i.e., about the extent to which particular *kinds* of social changes reliably lead to corresponding shifts in violent behaviour, whether to increase or decrease it. Historians have fruitfully explained long-term homicide rate changes by focusing on social norms (regarding self-control or violence's legitimacy), the development of institutions (courts and the police), changing relations between the classes and sexes, and degrees of political legitimacy. All of these phenomena assume particular kinds of underlying psychological mechanisms; however, such assumptions are rarely made explicit in historical studies. Scholars informed by evolutionary psychological approaches, however, have independently made highly relevant claims about the psychological underpinnings of social and cultural changes in violence, whether with regard to the desire for vengeance or mental abilities to, selectively, recognise and absorb social norms, to weigh the rising social cost for using inappropriate violence, and to exercise self-control²⁵. And, of course, not only anger and vengeance are rooted in the emotions, so are relevant factors such as empathy and forgiveness²⁶. (Many) historians and (many) evolutionary psychologists are, independently, addressing similar topics but still failing to speak to one another.

CONCLUSION

I have suggested that evolutionary psychology is something historians of violence – and of crime generally – should take into account in seeking to organise their research into a coherent body of knowledge in coming decades. Evolutionary psychology – by providing essential knowledge about human potentials, tendencies, limits, and predispositions – can help provide a unifying theory to explain why violence sometimes occurs and why, at other times, it tends not to. It can help reveal how some aspects of human psychology are "innate", in the sense of "organised in advance of experience"²⁷. On levels from the micro to the macro, it may help historians "make sense" of violence by providing links between disparate findings from specific contexts into a more coherent body of knowledge about the human past and present. It offers us specific results and claims – related, for example, to kinship, sex-difference, and changing social environments – with which historians may agree and which they may use as models for their own work or, alternatively,

²⁴ Daly and Wilson (1988, p.275-291); Wilson and Daly (1997); Archer (2009, p.257-258); Campbell (2012, p.142).

²⁵ Daly and Wilson (1988); Frijda (1994, p.265); Solomon (1994); Hammel (2010, p.29-35); Pinker (2011).

²⁶ Singer (1982); McCullough (2008).

²⁷ Haidt (2012, p.153).

disagree and seek to correct on the basis of historical evidence. A greater engagement with evolutionary psychology may, in addition, help us evaluate the quality of the assumptions that we, as historians, have hitherto tended to bring to the topic of violence; in some cases, it may convince us to question or even to abandon assumptions that no longer seem relevant or convincing. I do not anticipate that all – or perhaps even a majority – of my fellow historians will heed this call. I have had experience with historians' reactions to "biological" or (allegedly) "reductionist" or "essentialist" explanations of social behaviour. And it is certainly the case that working one's way into an extensive literature in another field with different concepts, jargon, and ways of thinking requires a substantial investment, not least since – as this special issue demonstrates – there are many other methods and research aims on offer that are more widely accepted in the discipline of history.

In discussions I have had with my colleagues over this topic, scepticism (or hostility) often centres on whether evolutionary psychology is "true", in the sense of whether its conclusions provide an accurate image of aspects of human thought and behaviour. However, even those who have at least provisionally (if sometimes grudgingly) agreed that it might be *true* have doubted whether it is *useful*, in the sense of offering something specifically relevant to historical methods or research design. The question of what we historians do with evolutionary psychology as a methodology – and the extent to which it should change the questions we ask and how we go about answering them – is indeed a challenging one. However, I suggest that *if* evolutionary psychology does in fact tell us something accurate about motivations for, patterns in, and perceptions of physical aggression in human beings – that is, if it is *true* – then it *must* be also useful to historians.

It may well be that, apart from a few exceptions, historians will continue to ignore evolutionary psychology, along with many separate but often related disciplines such as cognitive psychology or neuroscience. But even those who remain sceptical of evolutionary psychology's utility may be convinced by another reason to pay more attention to it: as some of the work I have cited suggests, evolutionary psychologists – or sociologists and criminologists influenced by their models of thinking – have already made (and will continue to make) claims about the phenomenon of human violence. Recent years have shown that there is a great interest in both the public and among policymakers in works that can provide concise, well-grounded, and realistic conclusions about violence. Evolutionary psychologists have long made claims about violence *in history* – from Daly and Wilson's classic study *Homicide* (1988) to Pinker's more recent ambitious global overview (2011), and they will continue to do so. A continuing failure by historians to engage in a well-informed and serious fashion with evolutionary psychology's arguments about violence – and in the process potentially confirming, questioning, or modifying them – would be an impoverishment not only of the field of history itself but also of the public debate about a fundamentally important issue of human life.

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