VIOLENCE AND CIVILISATION

Hilary Term 2017

Dr. Jonny Steinberg jonny.steinberg@africa.ox.ac.uk

This option will be held on Tuesday afternoons, 14.00-15.00 in Seminar E, Manor Road Building

Academic Justification

Background and Aim of the option

The aim of the course is to interrogate an argument and its corollary. The argument is that societies that have been through a process approximating Western state formation are less violent, less cruel and more peaceful than any other in human history. Such societies, the argument goes, have left both warfare as well as violence as a form of personal engagement in the past. The corollary is that where violence remains endemic today, whether in the form of armed conflict or interpersonal aggression, it is because it occurs in social space unlucky enough not to have gone through a process of state formation, or in a pocket of the world that has ‘decivilised’ for one reason or another.

It is an incendiary argument that is bound to offend. For one, it is highly evolutionist, suggesting that violence is prevalent among those who inhabit what amounts to a more primitive time. And those unfortunate enough to be living in these past historical times are, of course, generally dark-skinned or non-European. It is also a thesis that might offend left and liberal sensibilities since it potentially leaves the wealthy and the powerful unimplicated in violence among the poor and on the global periphery. It is nonetheless an argument with deep roots in social theory. And, as we shall see, many of its assumptions undergird some of the central arguments about policing and violence found in contemporary criminology.

The first aim of the course is to carefully exposit this thesis. We then interrogate it by asking how well it travels, first, to the American inner-city and the American South, then to sub-Saharan Africa.

Relation to Learning Outcomes

Students who take full advantage of the opportunities afforded by this option will be able to:

a) immerse themselves in key contemporary debates about the sources of violence in the modern world;

b) think about violence in a systemic and integrated fashion

c) acquire a deep knowledge of controversies about contemporary African conflict

Assessment

This option will be assessed at the end of the term by a graded essay of 3500-5000 words. As with other options on the MSc, students will choose 1 title from a choice of 3.

Structure of option

In the first week of the course we examine the German sociologist Nobert Elias’s thesis on Western state formation as a civilising process. In the second week, we expose Elias’s thesis to several rival arguments which suggest that modern European states introduced new, endemic sources of violence into history. In the third week we look at the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans as a way of re-examining Elias’s central arguments. The remainder of the course is devoted to
African questions. In the fourth week, we examine a range of arguments about violence in Africa and ask how useful Elias is in understanding them. Weeks five and six are devoted to two case studies: urban violence in twentieth-century South Africa in week five and the Rwandan genocide in week six. We return to South Africa in Week 7.

It is crucial to keep in mind that the knowledge acquired during the course is carefully sequenced and cumulative, rather than segmentary. In other words, it will not be possible to deal with the case studies in the final two weeks of the course without bringing to bear the theoretical work covered earlier.

Schedule of seminars
1. State Formation and the Civilising Process
2. Modern States and Violence
3. Hurricane Katrina and the Civilising Process in New Orleans
4. Violence and Civilisation in Sub-Saharan Africa
5. Urban Violence in Twentieth-Century South Africa (I)
6. The Rwandan Genocide
7. Urban Violence in Twentieth-Century South Africa (II)
8. Revision

Reading
All students are expected to come to seminars ready to engage in discussion with the same level of knowledge of the subject. Therefore, students should read all of the essential material. The additional readings provide keen students with extra work and further reading for assessed essays. The introductory paragraph to the readings for each week provides a guide to key issues students should consider when preparing for class. However, as with most graduate classes, students should formulate their own questions as they do the reading, and raise these for discussion in class.
Seminar One
State Formation and the Civilising Process

We start with a taste of Nobert Elias’s seminal book, *The Civilizing Process*, and go on to examine how his work has been used in recent times. Elias argues that, over the course of centuries, shame, repugnance and self-inhibition have come to shape human relationships, turning what had always been an endemically violent species into a largely peaceable one. The story Elias tells is Western; it is a tale of powerful centralised states that came to monopolize organised violence, thus excising it from everyday life; a story about the growth of complex economies that required co-operation and mutual respect among increasing numbers of human beings.

We go on to look at what Steven Pinker has made of Elias’s work; Pinker argues that to the extent that endemic violence remains in the world today, it occurs in spaces that have not been through Elias’s civilising process, or spaces that have ‘decivilised’. David Garland, in contrast, uses Elias to tell a more complex and disconcerting tale. He suggests that what is diminished is not our taste for violence but for its ostentatious display, suggesting that violence has not so much declined as become less visible.

We go on to look at some of James Scott’s writing on modern states and asks how it might be used to speak to Elias. Implicit in Scott’s account is the idea that modern states generate new and unheralded forms and scales of violence. Note, the connections between the readings are not self-evidently apparent, and it is important that you consult the seminar questions as you read.

**Seminar Questions**

1. Elias is interested in the history of activities like eating, defecating, spitting and blowing one’s nose. Are these good proxies for his argument about a broader civilising process?
2. According to Elias, what were the forces in European history that triggered increasing expressions of shame, embarrassment and repugnance?
3. What does Steven Pinker mean by the ‘compartmentalization of the moral sense’ and what might the implications be for his theory on the decline of violence?
4. Pinker says that: “The theory of the Civilizing Process ... makes the correct predictions about the times and places in the modern era that do not enjoy the blessed 1-per-100,000-per-year rate of modern Europe.” Critically discuss.
5. How might Scott’s account of the high-modernist state be used to ask critical questions of Elias?

**REQUIRED READINGS**


Seminar Two
Modern States and Violence

We start by looking at how deeply Elias’s idea of the civilising process has penetrated debates about criminal justice in the developed world, directly, in the form of John Braithwaite’s reflections on shame and punishment, and, indirectly, in the form of Egon Bittner’s influential theory of policing. We then turn to two pieces on criminal justice that implicitly question this Eliasian story. We look first at David Garland’s explanation of the persistence of lynching in southern America deep into the 20th century, despite the presence of strong state institutions. Garland’s aim is to decouple of the idea of modernity from that of an inevitable civilising process. Finally, we look at William Stuntz’s account of why black urban America is so violent. The presence of a strong state is very much a part of his explanation. He argues that black urban America is saturated in law to the extent that the rule of law has been suspended, its place taken by a reign of arbitrariness. He makes a powerful case for why a sophisticated modern state can manufacture the conditions of endemic violence in the fabric of society.

Seminar Questions
1) For Braithwaite, where does the usefulness of Elias’s theory of the civilizing process begin and end?
2) Braithwaite suggests that until fairly recently Western societies managed their working classes as much by exclusion and violence as by welfare. What are some of the factors that might cause a society to choose one over the other?
3) ‘Bittner doesn’t mention Elias, but his theory of policing presupposes the society Elias describes.’ Discuss.
4) Garland suggests that a society may remain violent long after the evolution of a modern state. Why might this happen? Does this pose a challenge to Elias?
5) What are the primary causes of inner-city violence according to Stuntz?

REQUIRED READINGS

FURTHER READING FOR WEEKS ONE AND TWO
Seminar Three

Hurricane Katrina and the Civilizing Process in New Orleans

In the days after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans on 29 August 2005, the city’s public institutions stopped functioning. The matrix of institutions and relationships Elias describes as underpinning civility in modern life disappeared. What took their place? What happened to the feelings of shame and repugnance that Elias insists regulate modern life? This week, we use Katrina as a way of looking awry at Elias’s central thesis.

In preparation, students will watch an hour-long documentary on the aftermath of Katrina, read a series of investigative essays by AC Thompson who methodically uncovered a series of vigilante actions, committed both by police and civilians, during the chaos. We look at Steven Lukes’s argument about the light Katrina sheds on the nature of power as well as what two veteran criminologists of New Orleans made of the hurricane’s aftermath.

Seminar Questions

1) Thompson suggests that while vigilante action in Algiers Point was initially motivated by fear it soon became a carnivalesque spree of racial killing. What might Elias have to say about Thompson’s observations?

2) In the days after Katrina, police officers still wore uniforms and carried firearms. But could they still meaningfully be called police officers?

3) It appears that in the aftermath of Katrina, murder ceased to be a meaningful category for police officers and they thus stopped recording violent deaths and at times even concealed them. Why might this have happened?

4) Lukes talks about ‘the sudden unavailability of social objects, relationships and actions’. What does he mean?

5) Lukes quotes a senior Homeland Security official saying that the federal government was powerless to restore order because every conceivable action it might have taken was ‘unthinkable’. In what ways might the situation in New Orleans ‘unthinkable’ for a federal official?

REQUIRED READING (AND WATCHING)

Frontline: The Storm – a documentary about Hurricane Katrina: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/storm/

Four articles by the investigative journalist, AC Thompson:
http://www.thenation.com/article/katrinas-hidden-race-war#
http://www.propublica.org/article/body-of-evidence
http://www.propublica.org/nola/story/how-a-new-orleans-police-detective-missed-a-key-clue-1214


Seminar Four

Violence and Civilisation in Sub-Saharan Africa

The first two of this week’s readings have in common a broadly ‘Eliasian’ understanding of violence in twentieth-century Africa. Bates and Jackson & Rosberg both contrast state formation in Europe and Africa. The former, they argue, was grounded in a slow and painful monopolisation of legitimate violence by a central state. The latter was grounded in international convention. African states thus never pacified their citizenries, a feature that shaped their subsequent trajectories.

The second two readings implicitly challenge Eliasian analyses of violence in non-Western societies. Philip and Iona Mayer describe of a process of youth socialisation in mid-twentieth-century South Africa inherited from a stateless society. The Mayers were struck by the sophistication with which young people were socialised into violence and sex in ways that contained both. Similarly, Thoden Van Valzen looks at the evolution of modes of self-inhibition and restraint in the absence of the formation of large states.

Finally, we look at Jack Goody’s broadside against Elias, accusing him of being one in a long string of West social theorists animated by the illusionary belief in European superiority.

Seminar Questions

1) Bates makes a fundamental distinction between two sorts of states. What is this distinction and how does it help explain the prevalence of violence in a society?
2) For Bates, what conditions need to be in place for a predatory state to become one that facilitates prosperity?
3) Why were these conditions not available in post-colonial Africa?
4) Jackson and Rosberg also make a distinction between two sorts of states. What is this distinction and how does it help explain the prevalence of violence in society?
5) Are Jackson and Rosberg right that Africa’s states are largely juridical?
6) ‘State formation in Africa bears almost no resemblance to the process of state formation Elias describes in The Civilizing Process.’ Discuss.
7) In the Mayers’ work, it is not a strong state that turns children into peaceable adults. What is it instead?
8) Could the Mayers’ work be used to argue that stateless societies are as adapt as strong states at producing civilising processes?
9) What are the wellsprings of self-restraint and calculation among the Djuka in Van Valzen’s reading?
10) How might a defender of Elias respond to Goody’s annoyance at the ways in which Elias uses the term ‘civilisation’?

REQUIRED READING


Seminar Five

Urban Violence in Everyday Life in South Africa

Modern state formation in South Africa was more advanced than anywhere else in sub-Saharan Africa. The long process of conquest, the discovery of vast reserves of precious minerals and the presence of a large, permanent white population all functioned to create a state with many features of the modern European state. Yet it is common cause that urban life in twentieth century South Africa was unusually violent compared to most of Africa’s large cities. If not quite a test case, urban violence in South Africa nonetheless provides a means to look awry at much of the material covered in the course. In this seminar we discuss a debate among South African scholars about the causes of urban violence in that country.

Seminar Questions

1) If Kynoch’s argument about chronic violence in urban South Africa is right, what are the implications for an Eliasian understanding of the world?

2) How might one compare Breckenridge’s and Kynoch’s arguments about racial violence in South Africa with Garland’s argument about lynching in the South?

3) Twentieth-Century South Africa was both prosperous and violent. Does the South African case challenge Robert Bates’ thesis on the relationship between prosperity and violence?

4) Similarly, what are the implications of South African violence for Jackson and Rosberg’s distinction between sociological and juridical states?

5) What, according to Glaser, are the connections between pre-colonial age grade system and modern gangs?

6) Elias argues that the complexity of modern economies stimulates co-operation and discourages violence. In what ways do Brekenridge’s and Glaser’s respective arguments challenge this idea?

7) Required Readings


Further Reading


Seminar Six

The Liberian Civil War

There is only one required reading for this seminar, but it is long: The Introduction and Part I of Stephen Ellis’s history of the Liberian civil war. Through a case study, Ellis’s book brings to bear most of the themes tackled in the previous four weeks. Ellis locates Liberia’s long war in a host of contexts, ranging from the end of the Cold War to the legacies of stateless societies to the persistent currency of indigenous African religion. There is plenty of material in Ellis’s book to argue that Liberia’s war is a case of a conflict between advanced states that exported or displaced violence onto a periphery. Equally, there is material pointing to many endogenous legacies of social and political violence inherited from a stateless past.

Seminar Questions

1) Does Jackson and Rosberg’s framework successfully explain why the Liberian Civil War started?
2) Does it explain why it went on for so long?
3) How might Bates characterise the Liberian state through the course of the 20th century?
4) Is the fact that much of the territory that became Liberia in 1847 was stateless matter to understanding conflict in Liberia in the late 20th century?
5) Were international factors much more significant than Liberia’s internal features?

REQUIRED READING


Further Reading:


Paul Richards, 'To Fight or Farm? Agrarian Dimensions of the Mano River Conflicts (Liberia and Sierra Leone), African Affairs, 104/417, 2005, pp. 571-590.

Seminar Seven:

Urban Violence in Everyday Life in South Africa (II)

The purpose of this seminar is to take further the debate on South Africa begun in Sixth Week. We begin in early Johannesburg and examine how a powerful state managed to corral chronic urban violence into prisons and contain it there. We then jump a hundred years and examine how the very tradition of organised prison violence formed at the end of the nineteen century spilled out of prisons a century later. We ask whether modern South African institutions successfully contained violence, or, on the contrary, lost control over its management.

Seminar Questions

1) What do the two readings suggest about the nature of coercive power in South Africa?
2) Nongoloza and the Flower Gang are a century apart. What are the continuities that bind them and what sort of commentary on the South African state do these continuities suggest?
3) Do South African prisons contain violence or do they incubate it?

Required Readings: