

Hobbes, Rousseau, and the Ju|'hoansi: Reflections on Violence in the Longue Durée

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Is violence the primordial condition of humankind? Or has 'civilization' raised levels of violence to unprecedented heights? At the 2002 Joanne Brown Seminar on Violence and its Alternatives, the group explored violence from multiple perspectives. I considered the role of the impact of the state on levels of violence by comparing the forms of violence in state and stateless societies. These reflections built out from my long-term fieldwork with the Ju|'hoansi, former hunter-gatherers of Botswana and Namibia. Evidence from the Ju|'hoansi (formerly known as the !Kung San or Bushmen) and from other hunting and gathering peoples is significant because, collectively, they represent the longest-lived, sustainable human adaptation, a way of life in which human culture, society, and consciousness—and hence, human nature—evolved.

Evolutionary arguments are fraught with pitfalls, and one must proceed with extreme caution. Yet with the appropriate caveats, arguments from hunter-gatherers can offer an immensely valuable glimpse into a way of life as human as any other, but without the complications brought about by hierarchical organization, class inequalities, ecological crisis, and advanced technologies of social and thought control.

Arguably the greatest philosophical battle of the 17th and 18th centuries was the 'state of nature' debate; among its many skirmishes, it pitted the hard-headed materialism of Thomas Hobbes against the soul-searching humanism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. For Hobbes, the nightmare vision of life in the state of nature as the "war of all against all" could only be avoided by the surrender of individual sovereignty to the

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Leviathan, a state in which an absolute monarch enjoyed a monopoly of power. Evil lay in the faulty human material, which left to its own devices, could only come to ruin.

For Rousseau, it was the Leviathan itself that was the source of evil. The state was the problem, not the solution. Left to their own devices humans could live lives of dignity and fulfillment. That "man was born free but everywhere lives

in chains" was his profound reflection on the corruption and bankruptcy of France's *ancien régime*, a regime whose demise was hastened by Rousseau's writings.

Three centuries on, the debate shows few signs of being resolved. Reflections on the possibility of good government and the perfectibility of humanity (or lack thereof) continue to animate social and political philosophy. What has changed are the terms of engagement. Formerly, arguments pro and con were based on philosophical starting points originating in the great black box of human nature. Almost any position—innate greed, innate aggression, innate altruism—could be defended by reference to some putative characteristic projected on the behavior, biology, or psyche of Homo Sapiens.

Modern social and cultural anthropology provides at least a partial corrective to untrammelled speculation. Learned disputation has been enriched by the entry of empirical evidence, not from the lab or the dissecting table but from the field, documenting the ways that human beings actually lived. Now classic ethnographies of hunters and gatherers from a variety of settings in the Arctic, Africa, Australia, Amazonia, and elsewhere have provided an important check against what used to be called brick-making without straw.

Of the hundreds of ethnographic case-studies, the African Ju|'hoansi are among the best documented. Over thirty researchers conducted in-depth studies of a range of topics—ecology, social organization, politics, religion, and child-rearing—during a period (prior to 1980) when foraging subsistence remained dominant, and the people retained a degree of political autonomy from the colonial order which allowed them to continue to live their lives without hereditary or formal leadership.

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During my fieldwork (1963–69) I examined the levels and forms of violence in detail. Although the absence of centralized authority worked for the Ju|'hoansi it was a mixed blessing. When fights did break out there was no one within Ju|'hoansi society with the force of law behind him (or her) to separate the parties and reach a settlement. Far from being harmless, the Ju|'hoansi could be scrappy and violent, and the violence sometimes led to fatal results. During 1960s fieldwork, 81 disputes were recorded in all, including 10 major arguments without blows, 34 involving fights without weapons, and 37 with weapons. My retrospective inquiries on the period 1920–1955 turned up cases of homicide, and although homicide ceased between the mid-1950s and the mid-1970s, it flared up alarmingly in the late 1970s.

Given the lack of property and the widespread practice of sharing, what was there for the Ju|'hoansi to fight about? And given the lack of governmental

structures, when fights do break out, what prevented them from escalating out of control? I was initially attracted by the characterization of the Ju|'hoansi as the 'harmless people'. But my early fieldwork interviews turned up pesky and oblique references to bloody fights in the past.

After first ignoring these signals, I decided to make a systematic study of conflict and violence. I systematically began inquiring about homicides and gradually, reluctantly, people began mentioning cases. In all, 22 cases of homicide came to light, and 15 other cases of nonfatal fights, most of which had happened 20 to 40 years before, but some as recently as eight years before my arrival. But I also found that the Ju|'hoansi had many mechanisms for controlling aggression and preventing serious fights from breaking out.

The Ju|'hoansi distinguish three levels of conflict: talking, fighting, and deadly fighting. A talk is an argument that may involve threats and verbal abuse but no blows. A fight is an exchange of blows without the use of weapons. And a deadly fight is one in which the deadly weapons—poisoned arrows, spears, and clubs—come out. At each stage attempts are made to dampen the conflict and prevent it from escalating to the next level. It will be useful to look at each level in turn.

Master conversationalists, the Ju|'hoansi bring a rough joking and bantering quality to their speech, much of which verges on argument. But when real anger replaces joking, a 'talk' ensues—an outpouring of angry words delivered in a stylized staccato form. If tempers flare, the 'talk' may escalate further to become a very grave form of argument, involving sexual abuse or 'za'. Male examples include the insult, "may death pull back your foreskin," and female forms include "may death kill your vagina," and "long black labia." Hurling a 'za' insult arouses intense feelings of anger or shame and may lead directly to a fight.

Ju|'hoansi fights involve men and women in hand-to-hand combat while third parties attempt to break them up

(or in some cases, egg them on). In 34 fights recorded, 11 involved men only, 8 were between women, and 15 were between men and women. Fights are of short duration, usually two to five minutes long, and in wrestling and hitting at close quarters rather than fisticuffs. Fighters are separated and forcibly held apart; this is followed by an eruption of excited talking and sometimes more blows. Serious as they appear at the time, anger quickly turns to laughter in Ju|'hoansi fights. We have seen partisans joking with each other when only a few minutes before they were grappling. The joking bursts the bubble of tension and allows tempers to cool off and the healing process to begin. Frequently the parties to a dispute will separate and go away for a few days or weeks to sort out their feelings. Fission is an excellent form of conflict resolution, and people like the Ju|'hoansi, with little investment in fixed property, find it easier to split up temporarily than stay locked together in a difficult argument.

Despite the resort to laughter and fission as a means of defusing conflict, not all fights are easily resolved. In all fights efforts are made to keep men between the ages of 20 and 50 apart. These are the people who possess the deadly poisoned arrows and other weapons, and are likely to use them. The pronouncement "we are all men here and we can fight. Get me my arrows," crops up in several accounts of fights. If this level is reached, the situation is out of control and the point of real danger to life and limb has been reached.

The period of my main fieldwork, 1963–1969, was a time of relative peace. However, before 1955, poisoned arrow fights occurred somewhere in the Dobe or Nyae Nyae regions on the average of once every two years. In deadly fights during the period 1920–1955, the protagonists tended to be members of closely-related living groups. The most common *casus belli* was a fight between men over a woman and, once started, might degenerate into a general brawl. Rapid escalation would draw in more participants making the outcome more and more unpredictable. Bystanders, not parties to the original dispute, could

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caught in the cross-fire. In one case none of the four wounded were even principals in the original argument.

Deadly fighting was almost exclusively a male occupation. All 25 of the killers in the 22 cases were male, as well as 19 of the 22 victims. Of the three female victims, only one was a principal in a conflict; the other two were unfortunate bystanders. This contrasts sharply with the high level (25 to 50 percent) of female homicide victims in most Western societies. It may reflect women's high status in Ju|'hoan society.

The main weapons used are poisoned arrows, employing the same lethal poison used to kill game. Since a 200 kilogram antelope will die within 24 hours, one can imagine the effects on the body of a human weighing 50 kilograms. Even with prompt treatment, a person shot with a poisoned arrow has only a 50 per cent chance of survival. Because of the very nature of homicide, when one killing takes place it is hard not to follow it with another in retaliation. Feuds, in fact, accounted for 15 of the 22 killings. In only seven cases was a homicide not followed by another and another. In one dramatic series 9 people were killed in Nyae Nyae in a series of related feuds over a twenty year period (Lee, 1979:390-391), and other feuds involved another six victims.

The prevalence of feuds brings us back to our original question: Once the Pandora's Box of violence is opened, how is it possible for people to close it down again in the absence of the state or an overriding outside political authority? The Ju|'hoansi do have one method of last resort for bringing a string of homicides to an end. On four occasions, killings of wrongdoers were carried out, by a form of tacit agreement that can only be described as executions. A chosen person attacks and dispatches the killer in a previous conflict and the latter's allies will make no move to protect him or to retaliate.

In the most dramatic case on record, a deranged man named [Twi had killed three other people, when the

community, in a rare move of unanimity, ambushed and fatally wounded him in full daylight. As he lay dying, all the men fired at him with poisoned arrows until, in the words of one informant, "he looked like a porcupine." Then, after he was dead, all the women approached his body and stabbed him with spears, symbolically sharing the responsibility for his death. I find this image striking. It is as if for one brief moment, this egalitarian society constituted itself a 'state' and took upon itself the powers of life and death. It is this collective will in embryo that later grew to become the form of society that we know today as the state.

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At present, the Ju|'hoansi have state structures imposed upon them; depending where they live they are under Botswanan or Namibian jurisdiction. On the local level the recent presence of outsiders—Tswana and Herero—has had important modifying effects on the way the Ju|'hoansi handle conflict. Since the appointment of a Tswana headman in 1948, Ju have preferred to bring serious conflicts to him for adjudication rather than allow them to cross the threshold of violence. The kgotla 'court' has proved extremely popular with the Ju|'hoansi, and Tswana and Herero at other waterholes frequently act as informal mediators in Ju|'hoan disputes. The reason for the court's

popularity is not hard to find: it offers the Ju a legal umbrella and relieves them of the heavy responsibility of resolving serious internal conflicts under the threat of retaliation. On the other hand, the impact of outside law should not be overestimated. Two homicides occurred in the Dobe area after the headman's appointment, and in Nyae Nyae one offender was killed after he had been jailed by the South African authorities and released.

Paradoxically, the presence of outsiders has also had adverse consequences. With the increasing availability of cash and alcohol since the 1970s, the Ju|'hoan homicide rate has flared up. Men and women have become homicide victims as Saturday-night drinking parties turn violent and deadly. At the South African run settlement in Namibia six killings were recorded in the two year period (1978–80). Overall there has been a four-fold increase in violent deaths compared to the earlier study period (1920–1970).

Summing up for the pre-state period we can ask: were the Ju|'hoansi pacifists? Not at all. But neither was warfare endemic. And although homicide occurred and occasionally led to blood feuds, the Ju|'hoansi had effective means of keeping violence in check. Spacing kept combatants apart, and in the longer run opposing groups made peace by arranging marriages between them. And remember, all this was accomplished in the total absence of centralized authority, without police force, courts, or jails. It is ironic that among the contemporary Ju|'hoansi, all of the above are in place and in spite of the controls (or because of them?)—fueled by alcohol—the incidence of homicide has quadrupled.

Lessons drawn?

Looking at the larger question of violence from a Ju|'hoansi vantage point, what lessons can we draw, both for violence in history and for the human condition in the present day? First, the fact that Ju|'hoansi are not nonviolent should caution us against any overly Rousseauian view that life without the State is paradise on earth. Second,

and equally, the opposite is true; the evidence shows that neither is the Jul'hoan world a Hobbesian nightmare. Violence does occur, but powerful mechanisms exist for defusing situations and bringing passions under control. I am particularly taken by the healing power over past hurts symbolized by the incidence of marriages arranged between members of groups that had engaged in deadly fighting. The word 'passion' is used here with intent. Most of the transgressions that Ju commit are crimes of passion. Things get out of hand and arrows fly. The exceptions are the revenge killings in blood feuds. These obviously involve a degree of planning and premeditation. In formal law codes, the degree of spontaneity or deliberation becomes a key factor in determining the severity of the crime. Third, as noted, the level of non-violence is achieved without the presence of superordinate authority. No police, no judges, no prisons. Only consensus. This remarkable achievement is perhaps the greatest refutation of the Hobbesian world-view.

It is important to ask how typical the Jul'hoansi are of hunting and gathering and other 'egalitarian' societies. I would put them in the middle of the range. They are not nearly as peaceful as the Semai/Semang of Malaysia made famous by Robert Dentan, but there are other societies that are far more bellicose. New Guinea examples include the Jalée (Christopher Koch) and the work of Bruce Knauft describing endemic warfare; but note that here the economic base and population density are quite different. The Yanomano of Venezuela studied by Chagnon, subject of recent debate, are a complicated case (read Brian Ferguson).

Underlying the details of variations in conflict and violence in band and many tribal societies, is a deeper commonality. These are societies built on a foundation of common ownership of resources. In a long conversation within anthropology going back to the 19th century and Lewis Henry Morgan's *Houses and House Life of American Aborigines* (1881) the strength of communal land tenure, the relative scarcity of private property, and

the supreme value placed on the law of hospitality attests to the proposition that the human baseline is some form of primitive communism. This was the world that was lost when states appeared and conquered the globe.

One of the most striking generalizations made about contemporary hunter-gatherers is the sense of respect for the autonomy of the person, combined with the strong value attached to sharing. I would agree with C.B. Macpherson's view that today's norm of possessive individualism does not express the primordial state of humankind. That members of bands and tribes fought and killed is not in doubt; but with levels of violence so variable, the

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explanation needs to be sought not in some biological constant like the selfish gene or Lorenzian aggression, but rather in social, ecological, and historical conditions.

If hunters and gatherers represent in some sense the original condition of humankind, what are the pathways human societies have traveled since? One key feature differentiating these band and tribal societies from the rest of the human world, is the point made by Marshall Sahlins when he compared state and stateless societies in his book *Tribesmen* (1968). Lacking states, tribal people lack standing armies and state-organized warfare. Lacking police, they also lack police brutality. The rise of states brings with it a trade-off: internal peace bought at the cost of a severe decline

in individual liberties. The sense of entitlement, of personal autonomy, of band and tribal societies, is severely curtailed (except for the few). Serfhood or slavery are the norm in early states but exceedingly rare in non-state societies (though not unknown). The origin of the state therefore was not some triumphant march into the future as most histories portray it. Rather it was for many if not most, as Engels argued, a bitter pill, to be swallowed with generous draughts of religion backed by force. For Engels, the "Sturm and Drang" of state formation is the death struggle of the old communal order as the new elite imposes its will on a fractious underclass-in-the-making. At the end of this long process which is still going on, the state became for Engels, an historical entity in which the deepest contradictions of class became cast in stone.

For Sahlins, states bring another trade-off. They enforce peace within in order to wage war without. One of the trends in history is for the scale of warfare to expand in size, duration, and deadliness of weaponry, a process culminating in the modern era, where the number of war dead of the 20th century has far exceeded that of any previous century.

Why is war-making such an integral part of state formation and state reproduction? Surely one important dynamic is the psychological process of displacement—with the build-up of tensions and contradictions within the now-deeply-divided social formation redirected towards external conquest. Why resolve contradictions when you can export them? War becomes an escape valve for unresolvable internal tensions (a process very much in evidence today).

Peace within, violence without. Is that the trade-off in the rise of states?

So far we have only been discussing violence in the narrow sense: acts of physical aggression. But with the rise of the state we get entirely new forms of violence: 'the hidden injuries of class'. Thanks largely to insights of the late Pierre Bourdieu's updating of the ideas of Marx and Engels, these new forms of

violence are lumped under the heading of structural violence, and arise when inequalities are deeply entrenched. Structural violence has a long history; today it is expressed in myriad ways from minimum wage rates, to lack of housing, cutbacks to education, racial profiling, differential access to health care and essential services and the grip of advertising on consciousness.

The routinization of structural violence as part of the permanent fabric of society brings about profound changes in human consciousness. Take the example of the institution of slavery itself. In egalitarian societies, all of 'us' are human; only enemies are beyond the pale. In states the human core subdivides in at least two directions; while commoners may retain their human status, those who fall through the cracks to slavery or serfdom become less than human, while at the opposite end lords become kings and kings become akin to gods. The fancy word for the latter is apotheosis, but we lack a correspondingly elegant term for the former (immiseration? dehumanization?). Whatever the semantics, in ancient Rome Augustus became a god, while the Roman slave was a 'thing' and not a man.

Commoners did not escape the dehumanizing process. Rack-renting, conscription, *le droit de seigneur*, are examples of the exercise of arbitrary power. The many dimensions of poverty, the lack of civil rights, the vastly different life-chances of the rich and the poor are examples of structural violence.

In our deliberations at Bowen Island, the phrase 'technologies of violence' was extended to include, metaphorically, social and other-not-strictly-material forms of technology. Social technologies of violence would include, perhaps most famously, Michel Foucault's insights into the history of punishment, in which 19th century incarceration superseded 18th century public torture and execution as a means of disciplining criminals. In Foucault's terms, this seemingly benign reform movement had more sinister

undertones. The prison, the asylum, even the clinic, were means by which the powerful could discipline bodies, leading to the exercise of "capillary power," internalizing social control and therefore making it all the more insidious. In Foucault's hands, Jeremy Bentham's mid-19th century notion of the "panopticon," the all-seeing central watchtower vantage-point in prison architecture, becomes the trope of a nightmare vision of modernity, the surveillance society (cf. *NY Times* Sunday Sept 29, 2002, p.1).

The loss of privacy and the erosion of civil rights in recent decades and especially in the post 9/11 era certainly bears out Foucault's vision. But I would argue that like all other hazards and risks, the burden of surveillance falls unequally on citizens, depending on their position in the class structure or in the international division of labour. Marginalized minorities are punished for possession of drugs, while white-collar criminals in boardrooms steal millions with relative impunity (at least until the Enron, World-Com, and Arthur Andersen debacles).

Social inequality and the means by which it is reproduced remain the 'technology' of violence which causes the most harm in the world today. A large cohort of critical epidemiologists (Stephen Bezruchka, Richard Wilkinson, Clyde Hertzman, I. Kawachi, B.P.

Kennedy, M. G. Marmot and others) present convincing documentation on the links between indices of well-being—life expectancy, infant mortality, and burden of disease and income distribution.

In middle- and high-income countries, neither overall national wealth nor per capita GNP nor average income are good predictors of overall population health. By contrast, the distribution of income—the difference between high and low income, known as the Gini coefficient—provides an excellent index. The higher the Gini coefficient, that is, the greater the disparity between high and low income, the poorer is overall health. Sweden and Norway, with low Gini, have a two-year greater life expectancy compared to the much wealthier, but high Gini, United States. The latter, with five per cent of the world's population spends 40 per cent of the world's health care budget, yet ranks 25th in the Health Care Olympics (a measure of overall national health developed by Bezruchka). Interestingly, the correlation between income disparity and health works equally well in comparing US states, with Louisiana and Mississippi (highest Gini) at the low end in health status and the low Gini states New Hampshire and North Dakota at the high end. Canadian provinces, on these scales, are tightly clustered at the high end or beyond.



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Lest we drift too far from our original terms of reference, we should ask the question of how this perspective might be applied to the question of violence. One harbours a strong suspicion that the Gini coefficient would be an even stronger predictor of the prevalence of violent acts, than it would in predicting overall health status. After all, the causal chain between wealth disparity and violence is surely much shorter than that between wealth and health. And one could predict that, conversely, lessening of wealth disparity should lead to a reduction in violent crime. But confirmation of that will have to await further research.

For our present purposes, I have attempted to trace in evidence and theory a line of argument that takes us from the philosophical debates of the early modern period to empirical grounding in the Ju'hoansi of the African savannah, and from there through history of the origin of the state, to the present; tracing the interwoven history of physical and structural violence. The papers presented at the symposium by Bob Menzies and Joy Parr added important dimensions to the problem by showing the ideological roots of violence in contemporary society and the manifold ways that institutions designed to protect the public welfare, by sins of omission and commission can have the opposite effect. The

discussion took us a long way indeed from the savannahs of Africa. The Ju'hoansi welcomed the arrival of the Tswana headman as a force for adjudicating their disputes. Little did they realize that his arrival heralded the passing of political decision-making from the local to sites far beyond their control. Decisions made in Gaborone and Johannesburg, now determine much of their lives. In a sense the Ju'hoansi's world now mirrors the world of the citizens of Walkerton, Ontario, reported on by Professor Parr, where the values attached to local decision-making and personal autonomy may be at odds with the agendas of distant and unresponsive powerholders.

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