

Violence, “Capitalism,” and the Civilizing Process in Early Modern Europe

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One of the most durable articles of indictment against capitalism is the claim, made repeatedly from Marx to the present, that it is conducive to violence.¹ Terry Eagleton, author of *Marx Was Right*, ably sums up this long critical tradition when he evokes the “genocidal crimes of capitalism” and attributes to it evils ranging from the “horrors of fascism” to the “carnage of the First World War.” Less provocatively but perhaps more typically, Mark Lilla (2010) praises the conservative German philosopher Carl Schmitt’s “prescient postwar writings about how globalization would intensify rather than diminish international conflict.” A Google search

points in much the same direction as these authors. “Capitalism and rebellion”: 4.67 million hits; “capitalism and murder”: 9.19 million; “capitalism and resistance”: 12.6 million;

¹ First, a semantic note on the term “capitalism.” One study finds that 77% of the American public say they prefer a “free-market economy” to a government-managed economy, but only 53% prefer capitalism to socialism. (See Rasmussen Reports, April 27, 2009.) Since “capitalism” seems to connote (among other things) the very collusion between government and powerful business interests that was the express target of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, a work that the same critics who most eagerly use the term “capitalism” usually regard as the manifesto of that system, continued use of the word “capitalism” seems to me to ensure terminal confusion. In addition, as Fernand Braudel once pointed out (1982: 236), the nineteenth-century term “capitalism” is a fairly direct outgrowth of the eighteenth-century term “capitalist,” which “is never . . . used in a friendly sense.” For more on the tortured history of these terms, see the essay by Steven Marks in the present issue.

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Many commentators have felt the need for a linguistic alternative, though one should not underestimate the difficulty of finding such an alternative or overestimate the viability of one’s own preferred choice. Terms such as “commercial society,” “industrial (or post-industrial) society,” “liberalism” or “neo-liberalism,” and “globalization” (to mention a few) all have their strengths, as well as their glaring weaknesses. “Commercial society,” in some ways the best of these options, has the advantage that Adam Smith and some of his contemporaries used it, but the word “commerce” had nuances in the eighteenth century that it lacks today; it is in some sense a pre-industrial term. North et al. (2009) suggest the phrase “open-access orders,” which may or may not be identical to what others describe as “capitalism,” but although suggestive, there is little reason to believe this rather clumsy locution will bring order to scholarly, much less public, discourse. McCloskey (2010:3, 6, 77), who is as sensitive as anyone to the complexities involved, could think of nothing better than to replace “capitalism” with “innovation” as a generic descriptor of modernity, but that term seems too broad to gain the necessary traction.

My tentative entry into these endless semantic sweepstakes would be “market society,” a phrase that would seem to possess at least a couple of advantages: First, it is morally neutral—unlike “capitalism,” which, in addition to the tainted genealogy noted by Braudel and Marks, has a needless air of distance, abstractness, and exclusion about it, since “capital” is something that only some members of society usually possess. Second, its emphasis on the “market” evokes an aspect of our way of life that directly and daily involves us all, rich and poor alike, and in clear distinction to prior eras. Third, the term “society” reminds us that the debate itself is not solely over efficiency or productivity—i.e., what we normally call the economy—but is precisely over the type of personal character and human relationships plausibly associated with that way of life. For these reasons, “capitalism” will usually appear in quotation marks in this paper, and “market society” will be the preferred term wherever stylistically feasible.

“capitalism and revolution”: 20 million; “Capitalism and war”: 65.8 million hits.²

For a long time, it would not have been easy to respond in a measured and thoughtful way to such criticisms other than by questioning definitions or denying causal attributions—by, for example, challenging the claim that the First World War was a product of “capitalism” or that fascism was somehow its natural recourse when, as Eagleton puts it in characteristically anthropomorphic fashion, “its back is to the wall.” But in the past generation or so, a sea change has occurred in the empirical study of both the history of violence, and of its relationship to market society, a change that may make it possible to raise the level of at least this portion of the perennial debate over “capitalism.”

What the newly emerging paradigm seems to suggest is that “capitalism” is generally a force for peaceful rather than violent human relationships. On homicide, there is recent data indicating a close inverse relationship between murder rates and market society. (Stringham and Levendis 2010)³ On interstate war, something of a consensus is emerging on the existence of a so-called “capitalist peace”—i.e., the idea that the more open an economy is, the less likely it is to engage in warfare.⁴ As to revolution, or rebellion, it has been found that “capitalism” reduces its likelihood rather than increasing it, a claim with an unusually direct bearing on a long tradition of revolutionary social criticism.⁵ On civil war, it seems that openness to globalization reduces both the likelihood and the destructiveness of such conflict. (Gleditsch 2008 and Pinker 2011:313)⁶ Even on genocide, comparative research concludes that market societies open to trade are more likely to avoid that defining horror of our time than less market-based societies. (Harff 2003:61–62 and Pinker 2011:341–42)

² For a typical daily example, see Leo Lewis, “Capitalism raises murder rate, says Shizuka Kamei, Japan’s Finance Minister,” *Times [of London] Online*, Oct. 7, 2009.

³ For a general historical survey, complete with helpful up-to-date bibliography, see Spierenburg (2008:3–4). For the recent period, Stringham and Levendis (2010:204) find that “economic freedom is negatively correlated with homicide rates.”

⁴ For general accounts of the decline in warfare mortality, see Lacina and Gleditsch (2005); Lacina et al. (2006); Goldstein (2011a and b).

For the “capitalist peace” explanations, Bremer (1992) finds that capitalism is even more important than democracy as a factor for interstate peace; see also Weede (1996 and 2005); Gartzke (2007); Gartzke and Hewitt (2010); Mousseau (2010); Hall and Lawson (2009); Havard et al. (2010); McDonald (2007 and 2010). See Russett 2010 for an example of the opposite emphasis. Historians can also consult Clodfelter (2007) for a sweeping attempt to quantify mortality rates in warfare from 1500 to the present.

⁵ See De Soysa and Fjelde (2010). I am indebted to Professor Fjelde for making this research available to me. For the more traditional view of the relationship between capitalism and rebellion, see Hobsbawm (1960) and Wallerstein (1974:3).

⁶ This would make “capitalism” a stronger force for peace than democracy, which has been found to correlate with less severe, but not less frequent, civil wars. See Lacina (2006) on this theme.

Virtually all of the above-cited research concerns the recent period, usually from 1945 to the present, for the understandable if regrettable reason that only recently is there enough data to make meaningful conclusions possible. But in any larger discussion of the historic relationship between violence and market society, early modern Europe should hold an honored place. It was then, after all, that the modern economic dispensation began to take shape. And it is with that period that prosecutors of a “capitalist” economy begin their briefs. For example, historians have frequently described the religious and political upheavals of the Protestant Reformation, the Thirty Years War, and the English Civil War—in other words, the period in Europe from about 1520 to 1650—as a “crisis of capitalism.”⁷ And it was orthodox for a long time to depict the French Revolution of 1789 as a revolt of the rising “capitalist” bourgeoisie against a declining feudal nobility.

But both of these arguments, and others like them, have mostly disappeared from historical writing. Jack Goldstone has aptly remarked that the period from 1660 to 1760 saw both a major expansion in “capitalism” and a marked decline in both the incidence and destructiveness of revolts and rebellions by comparison with the previous century. (Goldstone 1991:2–3, 42–43, n. 4) And a generation of historians has all but abandoned the orthodox theory of a “capitalist” French Revolution, which as Keith Baker once put it, has “virtually collapsed under its own weight.” (Baker 1990:2) So the time would seem to be ripe for the kind of revisionist perspective on the early-modern relationship between violence and market society that is briskly underway for the post-1945 period. Such an enterprise would have to include a combination of quantitative and qualitative evidence. Quantitatively, the ideal would be to apply what has been learned by the kinds of studies cited in the previous paragraph to an earlier period, although that will not always be possible. Qualitatively, the goal should be to provide the kind of fine-grained contextual analysis—including the full gamut of ideas, institutions, and cultural practices—that only historians are equipped to offer.

As it happens, some of the most abundant and pioneering evidence that has already been done on the history of violence, often of a quite quantitative nature, comes to us precisely from research on early modern Europe—most notably, from the study of homicide. In 2003, the Cambridge criminologist Manuel Eisner conducted a review of over 90 specialized studies on Europe from the late middle ages to the twentieth century. He found that there has been a steep decline in the murder rate from the thirteenth century to

⁷ For the “crisis of capitalism” thesis, see Hobsbawm 1965; Anderson 1974; and Wallerstein 1974, for general orientation.

the present, so much so that rates are now more than an order of magnitude below what they were at the beginning of the available data. More specifically, he found a modest increase in homicide rates from the fourteenth to the fifteenth centuries, followed by a steep and sudden decrease in the sixteenth century, the very time that saw the opening of the Atlantic and the “price revolution” that together herald the first beginnings of the modern economy. (Eisner 2003:99, Table 2; also see the discussion in Pinker 2011:64–81.) There were further sharp declines in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as well.

Although homicide is of course only one kind of violence, and although it is problematic just how good a proxy it is for other kinds of violence (even of the person-to-person variety), it is natural that specialists have seen broader implications in the question: what could have caused such an historic transformation in the incidence of murder? The single most influential theory seems to be one that grows out of the work of the Swiss historical sociologist Norbert Elias on the so-called “civilizing process.”⁸ Writing mainly in the late 1930s, before the compilation of the statistical evidence that has done so much to renew interest in his hypotheses, Elias posited that in the early modern period, the threshold for acting out on the basis of impulses or passions came to be raised; people became increasingly accustomed to suppressing or controlling their unsocial emotions rather than giving vent to them. As they did so, the level of interpersonal violence—as well as other kinds of interpersonal unpleasantness concerning everything from hygiene to manners—declined. Elias suggested two possible kinds of explanation for this process.

The first concerned the rise of the state, although not necessarily in the direct, mechanistic fashion that unwary Hobbesians might imagine. Early modern governments, he argued at length, increasingly suppressed the private violence long resorted to by semi-independent feudal elites, accumulating a monopoly of legitimized force in the political community. Concomitantly, at royal courts such as Versailles in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, unruly nobilities learned to sublimate their unsocial passions through elaborate status rivalries orchestrated by an absolute monarch such as Louis XIV. So there was both a repressive and a persuasive dimension to the initiatives of the state in old-regime Europe. And by means of this two-pronged process, the most fractious sector of traditional European societies came gradually to be tamed, and learned the necessity of accepting their interdependence with others in pursuing their indefeasibly private ambitions. From the court, new standards of self-control in social interaction then

radiated outward to other parts of the society, as social inferiors aped their superiors. Since later research has found that a remarkably high proportion of interpersonal violence in this period was perpetrated by social elites such as the nobility (Eisner 2003:108, 118, 123), this approach has proven particularly fruitful.

The second branch of Elias’ civilizing process, one that has unsurprisingly received far less attention from scholars, concerns the rise of what the eighteenth century would call “commercial society” and what I have been calling market society. The reasoning here, in broad outline, is that interdependence was learned through the habits associated with a growing market economy, where success requires good relationships with suppliers, agents, customers, creditors or debtors, among others. Merchants, it was commonly said then, thrive on faith and credit, and eventually on understanding others’ desires in the form of consumer preferences. The more people were involved in these extended networks, the higher the incentive to accept the constraints of such interdependence, and the lower the incidence of daily violence is likely to be.

It will not be as feasible to measure the relative weight of the two explanatory models just summarized as it has been to debate the relative weight of, say, the democratic peace and capitalist peace theories adduced to explain the decline in interstate warfare since 1945. But it is not premature to observe the family resemblance between the two historiographical episodes. Nor is it amiss to remark that, just as the capitalist peace theory was a latecomer to the study of recent international affairs that has quickly moved to the center of the discussion, so too is there reason to believe that a full accounting would find the commercial aspect of Elias’ theory to be just as robust if not more so than the courtly-political aspect. Eisner, for example, pointed out that “the decline of homicide rates in early modern Europe does not appear to correspond with the rise of the absolutist state.” (Eisner 2003:128; Muchembled 1996) Instead, he notes that politically speaking, England and Holland had a more decentralized state apparatus than France and Spain during this period, and yet their homicide rates seem to have fallen sooner and more steeply than those latter countries’ rates did. We may add that economically speaking, England, the Low Countries and Scandinavia⁹ became market societies long before Russia, Eastern Europe and Spain, and they saw “modern”—i.e., single-digit—rates of homicide per 100,000 population roughly 200 years before these less marketized societies. (See Eisner 2003:104, Fig. 8)

Elias himself had intended to write about this more commercial aspect of his theory, but never got around to

⁸ See Elias 1978, 1983a and b.

⁹ On the perhaps surprising case of Scandinavia, see De Vries 1976:21, 107–8, 131.

it.¹⁰ In the past thirty years or so, however, the behavioral sciences, animated partly by game theory and neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory, have pursued and amplified a line of thinking similar to Elias' own. To take one example: The Orma, a tribal people in East Africa, include some members who engage in monetary market exchange and some who do not. It turns out that among those who do, standards of fairness and consideration for others seem to score higher than among those who do not—an outcome consistent with findings by other economic anthropologists and behavioral scientists.¹¹ The key question for early modern historians would be: how far has the decline in lethal violence, especially the face-to-face violence for which the documentation has been fullest, been a function of the spread of just these kinds of market-society norms?

In his ambitious synthesis, Pinker (2011:chs. 4, 7) distinguishes further between a “civilizing process,” a “humanitarian revolution,” and a “rights revolution.” All of these, he suggests, contributed in their own ways to a long-term decline in a wide variety of types of violence—not only homicide but also judicial torture, witchcraft prosecution, slavery, debt bondage, capital punishment, and others. Since each of these three broad movements occurred, or at least began, in the early modern period, it falls to early modern historians to sort out the relative importance of each phenomenon. In the context of the Wellesley conference of October 2011, this includes sorting out the relative importance of the advent of market society in these larger processes.

¹⁰ Elias indicated (1983b: 295 n.) that he had collected materials for the application of his theory both to the subject of sex and family life, and to that of the middle classes, but that these materials had proved “too extensive” to be incorporated easily into his existing book projects. Still, he offered hints as to where such an analysis might have gone had he carried it out. “What gives Western development its special character,” he wrote, “is the fact that in its course the dependence of all on all becomes more evenly balanced. To an increasing degree, the complex functioning of Western societies, with their high division of labour, depends on the lower agrarian and urban strata controlling their conduct increasingly through insight into its more long-term and more remote connections.” Elsewhere in the book (249–50), he had written, “Usually under heavy social pressure, members of the lower strata grow more accustomed to restraining momentary affects, and disciplining their whole conduct from a wider understanding of the total society and their position within it.” Elias' emphasis upon market discipline as a mechanism by which the advent of commercial society was causally related to Europe's broad “civilizing process” is redolent of a German sociological tradition that has its roots in Marx and Weber, among many others. However plausible it may be to regard this as an important factor, however, market discipline does not exhaust the variety of ways that commercial society might have changed the behavior patterns and expectations of those who take part in it—a consideration to which I return below.

¹¹ For the Orma, see Ensminger 2005:380. For a general explanation, see Henrich et al. 2010; for broader introductions to trends in the behavioral sciences that concern the role of trade, see Shermer 2008 and Zak 2008.

In approaching this large question, two subsidiary questions will suggest themselves: First, by what specific channels—i.e., customs, traditions, patterns of behavior, laws or institutions—might the norms of market society have had their civilizing effect on early modern Europeans? And second, what are the possible causal mechanisms by which these norms might have gained traction—through whatever specific channels—in early modern society?

In this preliminary essay, it will not be possible to do more than point to three plausible channels through which new market norms might have been conveyed: namely, the urban criminal justice system; the merchant court system; and the pro-mercantile rhetoric emanating from contemporary new media.

The leading French historian of homicide, Robert Muchembled, regards the independent urban communities of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as a more appropriate model for thinking about Elias' civilizing process than the Hobbesian state that emerged in some parts of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He does so by offering a revisionist perspective on the role of cities in breeding crime. Describing as an “optical illusion” the standard view that violence rises with urbanization,¹² he asserts that “the city softens manners” (162) and in a fashion quite different from that deployed by the absolute monarchies. While making occasional use of corporal and capital punishment, the cities placed great emphasis upon monetary fines paid to the victims and their families, even for violent offenses. He believes that this practice created a “conditioned reflex” that led to the kind of habitual, prudential thinking associated in Elias' larger theory mainly with courtly psychology.

Both the victim and the perpetrator, Muchembled suggests, gain from such a monetization of the criminal justice system. For the victim, the chief effect is to “replac[e] the law of vengeance by the law of personal interest.” (165, 170) The perpetrator, for his part, spends a very short time in the punishment phase, including prison, before getting to the monetary judgment. And the community as a whole, Muchembled argues, is thereby made more successful at integrating its inhabitants into a culture of civilized conduct than are the courts and villages around it. Citing an observed decline in the number of prisoners in Arras in the first half of the fifteenth century, Muchembled writes that this decline

¹² Muchembled 2008:135. See Shelley 1981, cited in Eisner 2003:87, for a typical statement of the urbanization-breeds-violence thesis. A more recent reference work blames “the inevitable clash of capitalism” for what it sees as high rates of violence and crime in American history (Hickey 2003: xxxi–xxxii). Another author goes further by stating that “the only source of crime is capitalism” (Lynch and Groves 2000:336), and still another claims that only “the reactionary or the naïve” could doubt “the role of capitalism in producing crime.” (Wenger and Bonomo 1993:420) See Stringham and Levendis (2010:203) for these statements. A more recent account that emphasizes the relative safety of modern “capitalist” cities can be found in Glaeser 2011 (esp. ch. 4).

“indicates the success, at the end of several decades of effort, of the municipal policy for limiting violence, and of their systematic recourse to fines preceded by short imprisonment.” (168) His psychological speculation is that the convict’s “unpleasant recollection,” linked more with heavy financial sanctions than with residency implications, “is impressed in their memories.” (169)

The replacement of the “law of vengeance” with the “law of personal interest” is of course central to the story of modernization. But there is a chicken and egg problem in Muchembled’s account: how far were those late medieval city-dwellers already the kind of people who were amenable to an interest-based rather than a vengeance-based method of solving their personal disputes, rather than being made that way by urban legislation? After all, monetary payment was part of the criminal justice systems of some Frankish peoples in the early middle ages, without there being much reason to think they brought dramatic declines in personal violence. (See Drew 1949 [1972]:23, 31, 41; Drew 1991:50)¹³

Game-theory experimenters, perhaps from a modern Western (and especially American) excess of optimism about the role of rational self-interest in human affairs, have been slow to acknowledge the centrality of vengeance to our evolved natures, and have only recently begun to catch up. Naci Mocan finds that vengeful feelings are stronger in persons who live in less-individualistic countries, that they are also stronger in countries lacking an uninterrupted experience of democracy, but that economic prosperity is more likely to be associated with low levels of vengeful feelings than is political democracy. He concludes, “democracy has no impact on vengeful feelings if the person lives in a rich country.” (Mocan 2010:19, 23, 27) And Herrmann et al. (2008) find that an attachment to civic norms and a strong rule-of-law culture make it less likely that subjects in laboratory games will engage in counterproductive, antisocial punishment of a spiteful or vengeful nature—conditions much more likely to prevail in the market societies of the West than elsewhere. These findings at least raise the question of whether it may have been some combination of the habitual commercial prosperity of the city-dwellers of the late medieval Low Countries, their greater civic cohesion, and/or their respect for a broad rule-of-law culture, rather than the crime-and-punishment system itself, that led to the observed declines in personal violence there.

A second vehicle of early-modern market norms might be sought in the merchant courts. From about the middle of the

sixteenth century, these quasi-independent entities sprouted up throughout continental Europe for the purpose of adjudicating in a quick and efficient way disputes involving traders of all kinds. In France, their numbers went from one in 1549 to eighty-six by the eve of the Revolution in 1789. Although normally studied as an aspect of legal history, some historians have recently begun to recognize the value of the sources on merchant courts for other kinds of history as well. Kessler, for example (2004, 2007), finds that the Parisian consular judges in the eighteenth century sought to inculcate Christian virtue in those who came before it, which they regarded as essential to effective commercial life. In a more recent study, I found a number of different value systems represented in the semi-public pronouncements of the merchant judges in Toulouse in the eighteenth century, including a natural-law-inspired commercial sociability and a kind of enlightened cosmopolitanism—both of which are related to the eighteenth-century humanitarian revolution and rights revolution mentioned by Pinker. (See Clark 2010) We may plausibly imagine that the multiple interactions of merchants and merchant judges in these busy but inconspicuous institutions of old-regime society did their part to steer the beliefs and convictions of those who came before them toward an interest-based rather than a vengeance-based model of human reciprocity, in much the way that Muchembled’s late medieval courts are assumed to have done.

Still a third vehicle, broader but less tangible, by which the adoption of market norms might have occurred is in “discourse” itself. According to Deirdre McCloskey, the economic “take-off” of the West that we normally associate with the Industrial Revolution was primarily a result of changes in ambient ideas and rhetoric. The perennial tendency to view merchants as strangers and thus dangerous, the “intuitive economics” by which farmers and artisans are thought to add social value while merchants, financiers and middlemen are loathed as parasites (see Pinker 2011:329), somehow gave way to the sustained rhetorical promotion of two important new ideas conducive to market-society norms: individual liberty and mercantile dignity. Starting with the Dutch Revolt of 1568, she claims, an elaborate process of emulation began by which one after the other of the European peoples came to endorse the values that had seemed to bring unlikely prominence to that small and inconspicuous polity. (McCloskey 2010:chs. 2-3) Although McCloskey is none too specific about the media through which this epochal transformation might have unfolded—the authors, genres and readerships that might have made up this newly emerging rhetorical community of mercophiles (if I may coin such a term)—there were in fact such new media: tracts on trade in seventeenth-century England and Holland, the “ode to commerce” (*éloge de commerce*) genre in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, newly sympathetic treatments of merchants in plays and poems,

¹³ Of course, Drew points out (1991:50) that the fines were set so high that the final security for payment, namely the man’s entire property and his person, often had to be paid, so that the accused sometimes probably “became a slave” of the accuser. My point is simply that circumstance matters: the monetization of fines by itself may or may not have had a substantive effect.

commercial newspapers that supplied timely information to governments and thereby demonstrated the social utility of trade, to name but a few.¹⁴ To the extent that the lethal person-to-person violence of that age tended to be perpetrated in defense of honor, the emphasis of these new media upon convincing an increasingly literate public that trade could actually be an honorable activity may itself have contributed to the decline of early modern personal violence.

Concerning the causal mechanisms by which market relations may have lowered the incidence of violence in early modern Europe, the question is a simple though large one: By what means might the institutional and discursive channels discussed above—criminal courts, merchant courts, and new mercophilic media—have become operative in the first place? One is what might be called the depersonalization of human relationships themselves in an increasingly monetized economy. Sociological theory going back at least to Ferdinand Tönnies has of course seen the anonymity of the modern economy as precisely one of its most obvious and pervasive deficiencies. (See Tönnies 2002 [1887].) But surely no proper balance sheet can be drawn up without looking closely at the other side of the ledger. The German historian Rainer Walz has convincingly argued that it was precisely the personal relations in early modern German villages that were deeply shaped by such a tangle of resentments, animosities, envies, jealousies, *schadenfreude*, petty hostilities, and unsocial passions of all kinds that they frequently broke out into violent conflict.¹⁵ The introduction of an impersonal measure of value in exchange, namely money, might itself have had the effect of defusing pent-up personal grievances and thereby mitigating the destructive “law of vengeance” highlighted by Muchembled. If one way the state becomes an agent of pacification is by providing a neutral third-party to the two parties locked in an honor-sensitive dispute, then it stands to reason that money, by displacing personal disputes from the emotionally charged arena of personal possessions and social standing, may have had a similar effect. (See Simmel 1990 [1907] for this alternative avenue of sociological inspiration.)

Second and relatedly, if these personal relations were stuck within the mental confines of a shared image of the “limited good,” then the expectation of gain—of what game theorists call positive-sum benefits—that was increasingly

integral to the experience of monetary relations might also have helped defuse the negative effects brought on by that shared image. As expressed by the anthropologist George M. Foster, who first coined it, the concept of the “limited good” means that a given people or community believe that “all of the desired things in life such as land, wealth, health, friendship and love, manliness and honor, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety, *exist in finite quantity and are always in short supply*.”¹⁶ Charles Lindholm, who finds Foster’s theory helpful for understanding the Pukhtun people of Swat in northern Pakistan, claims that acts of bravery against outsiders are a way for the Pukhtun to transcend the zero-sum logic pervading their own societies. For them, violence is thus a method of adding value (so to speak) in a society that systematically impedes other methods of doing so.¹⁷

Some version of this process of circumventing the “limited good” may have been operative in the pre-modern communities studied by Walz and others in early modern Europe. If so, the advent of a belief in the real possibility of “bettering one’s condition,” as Adam Smith sometimes put it (Smith 1982a:51; Smith 1981:100, 405, 540, 674)—or, more precisely, of improving one’s social and psychological condition by means of improving one’s material condition—may have been one way out of the cul-de-sac of the default “limited-good” psychology. One eighteenth-century Englishman reported that “we daily see manufacturers [i.e., artisans] leaving the places where wages are low and removing to others where they can get more money,”¹⁸ a clear indication that in some circles at least, such a change in perspective had already begun in the early modern period. Charting the chronology and the trajectory of this phenomenon would be a difficult but important way of understanding the relationship between violence and market society.

Enough is already known, however, for us to revise some longstanding theories on the rise of “capitalism.” In his still-influential essay *The Passions and the Interests*, for example, Albert O. Hirschman argued that the theorists who first advocated market society were responding to the unusually violent sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—with their religious

¹⁴ For one early study, see Foster 1950. Hardwick 2009 finds that among a husband’s qualities honored by ordinary men and women of seventeenth-century French cities was the image of “the household patriarch as a good manager of the dual risks and potential of credit.” The quote is from Crowston’s review in *H-France*, Vol. XI (Aug. 2011), No. 193.

¹⁵ See Walz 1992; the study focuses on the district of Lippe, in the northeast corner of North-Rhine Westphalia, quite removed from the river Rhine and its commercial activity. See also Schwerhoff 2004:228, who writes, “Rainer Walz’s description of the mental background of early modern rural societies has gained widespread acceptance.”

¹⁶ Foster 1965:296; emphasis in original. For a critique, see Gregory 1975. But the theory continues to find resonance in the work of some recent researchers, including Walz, cited above.

¹⁷ See Lindholm 2008:234–36. “Honor,” Lindholm writes (235) in a remark that could apply far beyond the Pukhtun, “. . . is a scarce good in which one’s gain is the other’s loss.” Pinker presents a more general formulation: “When dominance is reckoned within a closed group, it is a zero-sum game: if someone’s rank goes up, another’s has to go down.” (Pinker 2011:516)

¹⁸ Cited in Porter 1982:53. Sir Frederick Eden agreed, writing in 1797 that “there is no country in Europe where [man] changes his residence as often as in England.” See Eden 1797:I, 297–98; cited in Mokyr 2009:277, who summarizes the recent scholarly argument that Britain saw robust labor mobility in the eighteenth century.

upheavals and their incessant and devastatingly destructive wars—by abandoning philosophy and religion as methods of controlling the unsocial passions, and turning instead to a new kind of Machiavellian realism involving the subtle validation of self-interest. This new method would pit supposedly harmless passions such as the pursuit of material gain (avarice) against harmful ones such as noble honor, ambition, and religious zeal.¹⁹ The subtitle of Hirschman's book—*Political Arguments for Capitalism Before its Triumph*—tells the tale. For him, as for many historians before and since, “capitalism” was a distinctive phenomenon of the nineteenth century requiring an equally distinctive type of explanation stretching back centuries.

But the empirical evidence on violence that has accumulated in the past few decades suggests that Hirschman's thesis had the story exactly backwards. The leading proponents of market society—Montesquieu, Hume, Turgot, Condorcet, Adam Smith—were seeking as much to explain something that had already happened as to recommend an entirely new state of affairs that had not yet appeared. That “something” was what we know today as the civilizing process, and to these commentators, the advent of commercial society was an important part of the explanation. Although they were all well aware that political and state-to-state violence was rife during the age of the Reformation and the religious wars (1520 to 1648, and into the age of Louis XIV, 1660–1715), they were also aware that normal standards of civil conduct among private individuals had improved significantly in the two centuries or so before their own time. To the extent that they harbored a normative agenda, it was to bring the actions of religious and political elites more in line with the demonstrated capacities of ordinary people.

One episode will illustrate this last point. In his best-selling 1757 polemic, *An Estimate of the principles and manners of the times*, the English cultural nostalgic John Brown rails against the putative recent rise in the incidence of “Pick-pockets, Prostitutes, Thieves, Highwaymen, and Murderers” in contemporary England. By name, he blames the irreligious and self-regarding philosophy of Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Hume and others—singling out the Scotsman David Hume in particular for extended abuse. His specific complaint is that this philosophy has especially corrupted the high-toned servant class, the retainers of the wealthy nobles, whom he describes as the most “graceless and abandoned Crew in the world,” and whom he compares unfavorably with the morally conscientious masters and servants of bygone days.

Five years later, in his regular jurisprudence lecture at the University of Glasgow, Adam Smith offered an argument that looks almost like a response to Brown's cultural nostalgia—and he does so by expressly citing a decline in homicide rates. Echoing Brown's claim that manners are an important determinant of crime, Smith agrees that the servants of the great lords are the major perpetrators of personal violence, describing them as “the most helpless set of men imaginable.” But Smith flatly denies that the frequency of murder has been going up, and he offers a market-society explanation as to why they have gone down. Citing Hume's *History of England* [1754–62], he asserts that homicide is vastly less common now than it had been 150 years earlier, in Elizabethan times. The reason he evokes is the decline of feudalism and the consequent decline in the number of dependent retainers in noble households. These dependents, he says, “neither are willing nor able to support themselves by work, and have no way to live by but by crimes and vices.” Smith applies this causal analysis to a contrast between England and France, claiming that the more fully commercialized England has lower homicide rates by far than the still partially-feudal France. (Smith, 1982:332–33) Although the contrast he is reported to have made in his unpublished lecture between France and England is exaggerated, we now know that Smith was right about the trend lines in homicide rates as a whole over the previous two centuries.

Just as there are significant differences among current researchers over precisely why and by what mechanism “capitalism” might be conducive to peace, so too will it be necessary for early modern historians to sift carefully through the polyglot but frustratingly incomplete evidence to arrive at a compellingly credible account of the role of the rise of market society in the long-term pacification of human relations in the Western world. The foregoing pages barely scratch the surface of a large and multi-faceted topic, but will at least make clear that it is time to think about early modern Europe, and about the advent of market society that occurred then, in a significantly new way.

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¹⁹ Hirschman 1977:14–15: “A feeling arose in the Renaissance and became firm conviction during the seventeenth century that moralizing philosophy and religious precept could no longer be trusted with restraining the destructive passions of men. New ways had to be found . . .”

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