
H-France Forum Volume 1, Issue 4 (Fall 2006), No. 3

Stuart Carroll, *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 2006. xii + 369 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography and index. \$110.00 (hb). ISBN 0-19-929045-8.

Review Essay by Jonathan Dewald, University at Buffalo.

Blood and Violence offers its readers a mix of wonders and frustrations. Stuart Carroll has explored archives throughout France and an amazing range of published sources as well. From his tour through these difficult materials (difficult to locate and make sense of, many of them difficult even to decipher), he has brought back an extraordinary collection of narratives illustrating early modern mayhem. I know of no comparable depiction of the phenomenon for any early modern European society. The project demonstrates as well Carroll's wide-ranging insight into the period's institutions, social relations, and mindsets. But there are also signs that these materials have been hastily assembled, leaving unanswered questions, missed interpretive opportunities, and a certain amount of plain confusion.

From the outset, violence has been a central issue for early modern studies; in some ways it has defined the field itself. As Carroll notes, Johan Huizinga placed "the violent tenor of life" at the start of his 1919 *Waning of the Middle Ages*; Marc Bloch (in *La société féodale*, published in 1939) and Lucien Febvre (in *Le problème de l'incroyance*, published in 1942) offered similar observations. For these historians violence was built into the fabric of pre-modern life. Their limited technology condemned early modern men and women to an uncertain existence and extremes of daily experience—its oscillations between darkness and light, cold and heat, hunger and abundance—in turn generated psychological extremes. Accustomed to instabilities in the outside world, early modern Europeans quickly became angry and quickly turned to violent deeds, but they as quickly cooled off, producing dramatic scenes of repentance and reconciliation.

Constructing modernity (so runs this central narrative of early modern studies) required disciplining these explosive tendencies, replacing the Homeric rage and tears of earlier times with self-control, cool altruism, and attention to long-term consequences. Stronger governments, reforming churches, and material progress together did the job, producing by the mid-eighteenth century a relatively orderly society, the precondition for capitalist economic relations. With this new society came as well the modern personality, with its mix of self-repression, self-awareness, and polite hypocrisy; its distinctively inward pleasures and neurotic pains; its readiness to conform to the society around it. The *émigré* German sociologist Norbert Elias offered what has become for historians the most convenient formulation of this shift, which he described as "the civilizing process." But variations on the idea have come from a wide variety of scholars, some of them critics of Elias, some of them his predecessors. For all of them, rates of violence measure the distance between the early moderns and ourselves—and implicitly between ourselves and contemporary residents of non-modern places.

Carroll wants us to rethink this widely-accepted narrative, and he has little patience for his predecessors' misapprehensions. He proclaims that "the essential narrative of the linear growth in royal power, with its cast of winners and losers, has remained preserved in aspic since the nineteenth century" (p. 330), airily dismissing the now-bulging library of sophisticated reflection on early modern politics. (The comment typifies the pugnacious and occasionally outlandish stance toward others' scholarship that mars the book.) Medieval society, he tells us, was not the warring chaos that scholars have imagined; in France the march to modernity entailed an intensification of violent misbehavior, as royal authority fell apart and religious factions came to view each other as absolute enemies. Each civil war

from 1562 through 1652 created new and bitter memories, which contemporaries could exorcize only in theatrical acts of vengeance.

Carroll offers, as well, a second, overlapping explanation for the special violence of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this one focusing on social mobility. Economic and political developments in the sixteenth century combined to bring large numbers of new men to prominence, civil servants and others, men on the make who were assertive about their rights, edgy about their social standing, and noxious to their old-school neighbors. In this situation, both old and new elites turned readily to violence, and they continued to do so into the eighteenth century. Only under Louis XIV did the tide of violence begin to recede, partly because of cultural changes, above all because of the king's own efforts: unlike his predecessors, Louis worked hard to settle quarrels among France's elite, and he encouraged his intendants to do the same at the provincial level. Violence did not disappear, but it was increasingly restricted to the army camps, and no longer infected whole provinces.

These are important and plausible interpretations, and they lead Carroll to impressive descriptions of violence as a culturally specific phenomenon. "Anger is shaped by cultural rather than emotional templates..." he writes; "Violence is a term that covers a vast range of acts, the responses to and acceptable boundaries of which are shaped as much by custom and law as by ego" (p. 309). Yet much of the book points in exactly the opposite direction, depicting early modern violence in terms of timeless emotional structures. Thus chapter seven attempts to understand the workings of early modern vengeance through extended comparison with the *Iliad*, which "provides us with a valuable insight into the psychology of revenge" (p. 171, italics mine). He speaks of "an atavistic chivalric culture" that glorified violence (318), "the thirst for atavistic satisfaction" (p. 171), "warrior culture" and "blood lust" (pp. 174-175), "the naked warrior beneath" chivalric and religious conventions (p. 160), and of souvenir hunting as "an aspect of warrior culture that has survived into the modern era" (p. 177).

It does not help matters that the book's first chapter focuses on violence within the early modern family, with stress on the explosive tensions that familial structures generated and with a large helping of examples from the fifteenth century. These are fascinating cases, revealing sides of the early modern family that have been drastically underappreciated by historians, but they have nothing to do with factional enmity, religious division, or social mobility, the forces on which the book's interpretations rest. On the contrary, they suggest the timeless angers generated by any dynastic society, which showered resources on some family members and denied them to others. In a similar way, chapter two opens with a series of blunt-instrument affirmations about the nature of "honour in the pre-industrial west," statements that together offer an essentialist, ahistorical view of honor's connections to masculinity, violence, birth, and physical courage (p. 49).

Hence a first level of frustration with Carroll's analysis: in it, early modern France appears by moments to have had a specific regime of violence, shaped by cultural and political particularities; at others, it appears merely to have manifested timeless qualities in the male, military, and aristocratic temperament. In this latter mode, *Blood and Violence* seems less distant from ideas about an early modern civilizing process than Carroll acknowledges. The distance is further lessened by the extreme savagery in many of the narratives that the book recounts. Again, the analysis wavers on this point, and Carroll intermittently suggests careful calibrations in his subjects' actions, telling us that they tailored their violence to the injuries they had suffered in accordance with communal norms. Most of his examples, though, illustrate ungoverned rage, readiness for cruelty, and an almost-insane indifference to the act of killing itself. We in the twenty-first century are already responsible for more violence than our ancestors, but we have confined the doing of such acts to strikingly limited groups of people and confined them to limited circumstances. We may hesitate to call the change a civilizing process, but Carroll's examples suggest that something fundamental separates his subjects from ourselves, in roughly the ways that Elias taught us to expect.

The reader's second frustration is more elemental. Carroll seems undecided about the social contours of the phenomena that he has studied. The book's title promises an overview of violence throughout French society, albeit perhaps with special attention to the bloodlines hinted at in the title, but that promise comes to almost nothing. In fact this is a book about what Carroll at one point terms "elite violence," and the lower orders appear only as its victims. Their absence encourages the reader in nagging questions. How different was violence among elites from that of ordinary Frenchmen? Did the violence of the ordinary follow similar chronological trajectories and share the same geography as that of their betters? In short, was there a national culture of violence, or did culture follow the lines of class?

Carroll's answers are unambiguous, but also unsubstantiated: he tells us that French elites had an outlook that sharply distinguished them from the rest of their society, producing distinctive practices. As the terminology quoted above suggests, many of these practices derived from the experiences of France's warriors, the nobility of the sword, whose behavior Carroll explains partly as an offshoot of their military training and experiences. But here too ambiguities surface, for he is also at pains to depict the violent behavior of small-time royal officials and magistrates of the sovereign courts, most of whom could not claim nobility and had little contact with military life. Such "men on the cusp of nobility," he writes "were especially sensitive to challenges to their status," hence especially ready to start duelling (p. 57). But can their values and behaviors really have been so different from those of their middle class cousins, or even of the villagers among whom they moved? A generation ago, the anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers and the historian Yves Castan both argued for common values of honor in Mediterranean societies, shared by nobles and commoners; and in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, men of all classes fought duels and received letters of remission for their violent misdeeds. Simply to assert the absolute barriers between elite and peasant cultures of violence is to foreclose important questions about how French society and culture functioned.

One's queries on this point are reinforced by a third group of concerns, about method and the presentation of data. In the 1960s and 1970s, students of European violence worked in a haze of quantifying optimism. Statistics distilled from previously unexploited police and judicial archives, it was thought, would allow historians to chart the depths of European social change. We are sadder and wiser today, far more alert to the difficulties in getting at real crime rates and the real stories underlying violent incidents; the terminology of crime, we now know, invariably distorts the complexities of human behavior. Carroll shares this skepticism, and reasonably enough focuses on narratives rather than numbers. Yet his argument is ultimately a quantitative one—that violence was frequent and functional in upper class social relations—and offhand quantitative remarks dot the book's pages (for examples, pp. 75-76). Hence the reader looks forward to his chapter on "Quantifying Violence" to provide at least a rough overview of the geography, chronology, and sociology of the phenomena studied.

Amazingly, "Quantifying Violence" merits only seven of the book's 333 pages, discreetly placed in the last of its three sections, and the chapter fails to address some basic questions. It includes only one estimate of the overall incidence of violence, and that is limited to the nobility and based on a highly-speculative estimate of the group's total numbers. More revealing estimates ought to have been possible, given the genealogies available for such specific groups as the *ducs et pairs*, military officers, and members of honorific and official *corps*. No quantitative comparisons with other early modern societies are offered. A casual comparison to twentieth-century homicide rates is attempted, but it fails to take into account changing medical technologies: if we want to compare ourselves with early modern Europeans, the relevant measure is surely not homicide but aggravated assault, most of whose victims would have died of their wounds in earlier times but live on today.

Perhaps most serious for the book's interpretive claims, "Quantifying Violence" fails to map violence across the notoriously variegated French landscape. It provides no numbers that would establish the relative weights of urban and rural violence or distinguish backward regions like the Auvergne from advanced ones like the Ile-de-France. Yet, again, the account is marked by ambiguities. We are told that

violence was common in the most advanced regions; that aristocratic gang warfare "was not confined to the periphery"(p. 147; also p. 287); and that city life especially encouraged violence, by making encounters among the aggressive more frequent and providing audiences for struggles over status (p. 167; p. 169). But we also learn (at the very end of the book) that "the south and west [are] the primary area of focus for this study" (p. 331), and an impressionistic reading suggests a preponderance of backwoods examples. The reader is left to decide for her/himself whether these have unduly tinted the book's picture of France as a whole.

Despite its ambiguities and nuances, *Blood and Violence* ultimately offers a functionalist interpretation of its subject matter: it presents violence as a method by which French elites sought to maintain or establish positions in a competitive, changing, hierarchical society, a society with very limited room at the top. This is an important argument, emerging from a deep understanding of the period's social practices and according with much recent thinking on related subjects. Like Carroll, Natalie Zemon Davis, William Beik, and others have pointed to the rational components of early modern violence, the degree to which it served widely-accepted social purposes rather than merely expressing the psychological imbalances of its perpetrators.

Yet Carroll's narratives in the end overflow their functionalist containers, leaving a final set of questions about the experience and psychologies of violence itself. Military historians and psychologists have suggested that killing is actually a difficult act for most people, so difficult that a majority find themselves unable to do it even after being trained to do so. In World War II, three-fourths of American soldiers who entered battle seem not even to have fired their guns, and the number who actually killed anyone was much smaller; almost none used their bayonets in the manner they had been trained for. Similar findings have surfaced for nineteenth-century combat. (The American military has taken such findings to heart and in response has radically changed its training methods.) Scholars have noted as well the complicated after-effects of killing, which they describe as far more psychologically disruptive than (for instance) the risk of violent death. We have not yet considered the implications of such claims for the study of early modern Europe, a society that trained its upper classes to kill, and to kill in ways that moderns find especially difficult: at intimate range, using sharp objects, and knowing the likely victims were not ethnic outsiders, who might be reduced to sub-human status, but instead members of the killer's own social category, often acquaintances, not infrequently blood relations. Should we then think of early modern elites as having a psychological make-up fundamentally unlike our own, which shielded them from traumas that we find almost unmanageable? We may be forced to such a conclusion, more or less the one that Huizinga, Elias, Bloch, and Febvre came to. But before we accept such a view, we need other narratives—including histories of fear and of melancholy—which would allow us to situate violence within the subtler psychologies of early modern life. Carroll's remarkable collection of examples only deepens these problems of interpretation.

Jonathan Dewald
University of Buffalo
jdewald@buffalo.edu

See also the Review Essays on this book by Kristen Neuschel, David Parrott, and James Collins, as well as Stuart Carroll's response to all four Review Essays.

Copyright © 2006 by H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media

will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Forum Volume 1, Issue 4 (Fall 2006), No. 3

ISSN 1557-7058