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978-1-107-10911-7 - Violence and the Civilising Process in Cambodia

Roderic Broadhurst, Thierry Bouhours and Brigitte Bouhours

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Introduction

In the past 150 years, humanity has seen both the triumph of modern civilisation and the occurrence of catastrophic violence. Wars and violent conflicts, mass murders and genocides – megacrimes against humanity – have appeared to be on the rise and illustrate the dangerous side effects of modernity. These surges in mass violence have been mostly state-led, and, paradoxically, they happened in the context of a long, gradual decline in homicide and other interpersonal violence in European (Western) societies since the fifteenth century. This decline in the individual propensity for violent behaviour occurred in parallel with a gradual shift away from social approval of blood vengeance and violence in general, such that in the relatively short span of 150 years the resort to violence has become increasingly regarded as repugnant and ‘uncivilised’. These shifts in the thresholds of shame and repugnancy have taken place over time and vary with developments in the social structure or organisation of societies. For example, the public spectacle of the execution of criminals, once a matter for celebration and public participation, is now in most places abolished.¹ Criminals who once faced a gruesome death in front of the crowd are now incarcerated, and even in countries that retain the death penalty (e.g. China, Japan, Singapore, some states of the USA), the whole spectacle is hidden away and executions are performed without additional cruelties in front of a limited number of witnesses.² What are we to make of this contradiction? On the one hand, customary attitudes, values, and sensibilities towards interpersonal violence have changed. Most of us would say we have become more ‘civilised’, probably as the outcome of a process we call ‘civilisation’. On the other hand, this general civilising movement has been punctuated by wars and massacres on such a significant scale that these catastrophes could be regarded as ‘decivilising’ moments.

¹ For example, public hangings ceased in England in 1868 but much later in some American states; the last took place in 1936 in Kentucky (Garland, 1990; Johnson & Zimring, 2009).

² As Elias (1939/2012) observed, ‘Characteristic of the whole process that we call civilization is the movement of segregation, this hiding “behind the scenes” of what has become distasteful’ (p. 122).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Violence and the Civilising Process in Cambodia

This book documents and analyses the trends and forms of violence and crime in Cambodia from the mid nineteenth century to the present. During 44 months in the mid 1970s, Cambodia underwent an extremely violent social experiment, which, in an attempt to leap to higher levels of modernity, terrorised and cannibalised its own people. Thus, the Cambodian experience of colonisation, decolonisation, civil war, revolutionary terror, and finally postconflict development presents a challenging test bed for the generality of theories that argue that humanity is on a gradual course towards the diminution of violence.

Norbert Elias's (1939/2012) original concept of the 'civilising process' is such a theory, and it informs our work on Cambodia. Elias outlined broad historical movements that iteratively changed our social structures (sociogenesis) and personality structures (psychogenesis) and over time mitigated the scale and scope of violent behaviours. He proposed that the decline in interpersonal violence and the evolution in social manners were driven by ever-increasing interdependence combined with the forming and taming of the state. He called these phenomena *civilising processes*. Steven Pinker's (2011) recent excavation of empirical data documenting the scale and types of violence from preliterate to modern societies supplied further evidence of the overall decline in violence at both the interpersonal and group levels. Drawing from extensive knowledge produced by modern experimental psychology as well as insights from history, sociology, and political sciences, Pinker demonstrated how the emergence of greater capacities for empathy (psychogenesis), the expansion of interdependency through commerce and globalisation, and the pacifying potential of the state (sociogenesis) are intertwined and help evolve social structures and personality structures that transform collective and individual values about the use of violence. Both Elias and Pinker were aware that the particular development of the process of state formation paradoxically also accounted for the risks of mass violence and periods of 'decivilisation'. Neither Elias nor Pinker drew directly on criminological concepts to formulate their theses. However, historical analyses of crime and violence have been undertaken in Western societies, mainly in Europe, but rarely in other parts of the world. Comparing crime rates across time and place helps contextualise contemporary research (Johnson & Monkkonen, 1996; Monkkonen, 2001). Historical analyses are also relevant to contemporary criminology, particularly for research and interventions focusing on crime and policing in developing, transitional, and postconflict countries. We therefore seek to address two major questions, one empirical and one theoretical.

The *empirical* question is whether trends in non-Western societies, particularly in a developing country such as Cambodia, are similar to those found in Western societies, which show an overall progressive decline in interpersonal violence starting as early as the fifteenth century (Spierenburg, 2008). To answer this question, we attempt to bring to light the particular historical trends

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

for Cambodia. Drawing from colonial archives collected in Phnom Penh and in France, historical and contemporary secondary sources, official police data, crime victim surveys, and newspaper records, we estimated the trends in homicide in Cambodia between 1900 and 2012.

The *theoretical* question asks whether macrosocial theories of crime and violence developed and applied in the West can also apply in non-Western contexts. We believe that our examination of long-term trends in the prevalence and forms of violence and crime, as well as the history of the state and governance since the mid nineteenth century in Cambodia, are best analysed through the lens of a process-oriented sociohistorical approach such as proposed in 1939 by Elias in his *civilising process*.³ We have attempted to follow through on Elias's suggestion that such a study be extended to include oriental or non-Western societies, that is, a study of the civilising process in Cambodia. In short, we study the particular interacting sociogenesis and psychogenesis of the development of Cambodian society and how these shaped crime and violence. Before going further into the details of our study, we present the results of the empirical research on long-term trends in crime and violence in Western countries that inspired and informed our work.

Historical approaches to the study of crime and violence

Analyses of historical trends focusing on Western countries for the period of our study (1900–2012) have revealed a general pattern of criminalised violence shaped as a distended U curve (Gurr, 1981); namely, a steady decline until the mid 1950s followed by an increase up to the mid 1990s – but one that never reaches the level observed in the early 1900s – and then a slow decline again (Figure 0.1).

Historical approaches to the study of crime based on the compilation and analysis of long-term trend data, as well as social-structural and cultural evidence over long periods of time, are indispensable to developing and testing macrosocial criminological theories. A number of scholars in this field have focused on European nations. Through theory testing, they significantly contributed to our understanding of the effects of social-structural and cultural change (i.e. civilising processes) on crime trends, particularly homicide, but most of these theories had originally developed in the context of nineteenth-century Europe. Scholars tested a number of hypotheses about the relations among crime trends, the state, and modernisation proposed by the two major

³ Originally titled *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation*, or *On the Process of Civilisation*, and first published in 1939 in German but appeared in English as *The Civilizing Process* (e.g. 1994 edition) – the title chosen by Elias. All quotes from Elias's work are drawn from the 2012 University College Dublin Press edition.

4 Violence and the Civilising Process in Cambodia

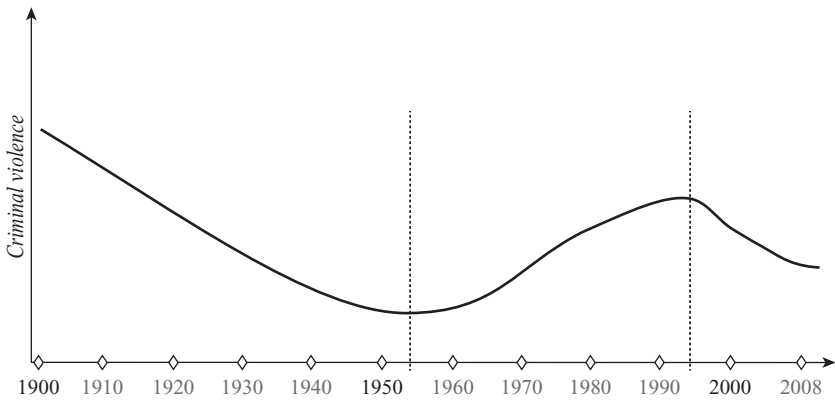


Figure 0.1 Gurr's distended U curve of criminal violence, 1900–2012

Western theoretical schools: Durkheimian functionalism and Marxian conflict perspectives. Well-known examples include Stone's (1983) and Sharpe's (1996) studies of English homicide trends compiled over 700 years, which confirmed functionalist predictions that modernisation was associated with a decline in interpersonal violence. Eisner (2001, 2003) examined other European nations, including Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and Scandinavia, and found a similar long-term decline in homicide in these countries, which he explained by drawing from Elias's notion of the civilising process. Supporting this interpretation was the fact that homicide levels had declined sooner in the most modernised parts of Europe where state formation was well advanced than in regions where states had taken longer to emerge (Eisner, 2001).

Such historical approaches also confirmed Cooney's (1997) thesis that lethal conflicts, whatever their forms (war, rebellion, or mass execution), are more frequent 'when state authority is absent and when it is strong or heavily centralized' (O'Donnell, 2005, p. 683) and generally decline in number between these extremes. For example, O'Donnell (2005) showed how, before 1922, Ireland's colonial status was associated not only with political violence but also with a high level of nonpolitical interpersonal violence, which significantly declined after the Irish Free State in 1922 and reached an all-time low by the time the Republic was declared in 1949.

Stickley and Makinen (2005) examined data from Russia at the end of the Tsarist (1910) and Communist (1989) periods. Their findings showed that violence in non-Russian areas had remained steady or declined, but Russia itself had become more violent. In addition to a number of social-structural theses, they proposed a cultural explanation to account for the differences between

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

non-Russian and Russian areas, in which preexisting cultures of violence were further exacerbated by the role of the state in the Soviet period. Their finding also challenged the belief that the USA was comparatively more violent than Russia. The European empire of Russia in 1910 had a homicide rate of 7.6 per 100,000, that is, similar to the rate in the USA, which had been estimated by Eckberg (1995) at 7.9 per 100,000 during the same year. In 1989, the Russian rate (10.6 per 100,000) was higher than the rate in the USA (8.7 per 100,000). The Russian homicide rate continued to rise and peaked at 19 per 100,000 in 2004 before falling to 10.2 in 2010, but in the USA the rate continued to decline, falling to 4.8 per 100,000 in 2010, suggesting that a sharp anomic period followed the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Archer and Gartner (1976) investigated postwar homicide rates by assembling homicide data from the 1900s to the 1970s in 110 countries. They could therefore examine pre- and postwar homicide rates in relation to World War I, World War II, the Vietnam War, and a number of other conflicts. They found that warfare played a significant role in increasing homicide rates: 'after large and small wars in victorious as well as defeated nations, in nations with improved post-war economies and nations with worsened economies, among both men and women offenders, and among offenders of several age groups [but] post-war increases were more frequent among nations with large numbers of combat deaths' (Archer & Gartner, 1976, p. 960). After testing a number of explanatory models, they concluded that their data fitted best with the notion that the effects of the legitimisation of violence during war carried on during an extended period after the war – the lingering habits of war. Eisner (2008) tried to account for the decline in homicide rates between 1840 and 1950, the rise between 1960 and 1990, and the decline afterwards, using Weber's notion of 'models of conduct of life' and the shifts in culturally transmitted and institutionally embedded ideals of such conduct. Eisner also noted in this explanatory notion of cultural shift⁴ that both the 1840–1950 decline and the 1960–90 rise were essentially caused by, first, a decline and then a rise in young male-on-male conflicts in circumstances increasingly defined as public space. Here, it is worth noting, as we shall see later, that Eisner's cultural shift explanation significantly overlaps with Elias's analysis of the psychogenesis of civilising processes.

Crime and violence in Cambodia: a historical perspective

The period of the Khmer Rouge (KR) between 1975 and 1979 has been described as 'year zero', a characterisation borrowed from the title of the book

⁴ This shift included an emphasis on self-control as a personal ideal, domesticity and familism as guidelines for private life, and respectability as the yardstick for public appearance, as distinct from premodern standards of honour.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Violence and the Civilising Process in Cambodia

by Ponchaud (1978), *Cambodia: Year Zero*, which described the ideology and policies of the Khmer revolutionaries and how they intended to engineer a radical break from the past.⁵ Although the notion of *year zero* is a metaphor for a radical revolutionary agenda aiming to bring a new era and erase everything before it, we should not take it as some kind of reality and relegate the pre-KR Cambodian past to the *oubliettes* of history, particularly if we want to understand crime and violence.

The magnitude of the violence perpetrated during the apocalyptic reign of the KR is certainly unprecedented in Cambodian history, but this does not mean that the preceding epochs were idyllic times of unperturbed Buddhist peace and harmony. With these introductory remarks we do not wish to minimise the horrendous sufferings of the Cambodian people during the KR regime but merely to point out that the terrible crimes committed by the government of Democratic Kampuchea (DK) should not eclipse the past or lead to its romanticisation. In fact, Cambodia's history not only reveals many violent periods prior to the KR but also helps our understanding of the multiple factors that contributed to the murderous years of the KR regime. For example, Chandler (2008) in his *History of Cambodia* described the dire situation in nineteenth-century Cambodia:

The first sixty years of the nineteenth century form the darkest portion of Cambodia's dark ages before the Armageddon of the 1970s. Invaded and occupied again and again by Thai and Vietnamese forces, the kingdom also endured dynastic crises and demographic dislocations. For a time in the 1840s, it ceased to exist as a recognizable state. Just as Jayavarman VII's totalizing ideology can be compared in some ways to the ideology of Democratic Kampuchea, the first half of the nineteenth century bears some resemblance to the 1970s in terms of foreign intervention, chaos and the sufferings of the Cambodian people. (p. 141)

We do not believe it is possible to link, in any linear fashion, the crimes of the KR regime to some singular historical causal factor. Rather, we argue that cultural, social, economic, and political currents from within and outside Cambodian history have converged towards and precipitated such a tragic outcome, in a process comparable to the build-up of a perfect storm – crystallising as a sudden decivilising event. However, our aim is not just to try and explain the crimes of the KR but rather to present a history of crime and violence in Cambodia since the mid nineteenth century.

⁵ Ponchaud's title was inspired by the decision of the French revolutionaries to abolish the Gregorian calendar and decree the 22nd of September 1792 as Year One of the Republic. Both the French and the Khmer revolutionaries indeed attempted to eradicate the past through their regimes of terror.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

7

Historical trends in homicide

Our empirical examination of historical and contemporary primary and secondary data on Cambodia shows a pattern punctuated by successive ebbs and flows in the level of homicides: for a decade or so low levels of homicide followed by a spike in homicides, which then recedes but reappears a decade or so later (Figure 0.2). There is such a spike during the first two decades of the twentieth century followed by lower levels of crime and violence in the 1920s and 1930s. From the late 1940s to the mid 1950s a new peak occurs, which peters out until the mid 1960s, when collective violence surges and grows exponentially to reach an unprecedented magnitude during the KR period. After 1989 and particularly in the 1990s, there is again a significant spike, followed from the turn of the new century by a steady decline, with the level of homicides as low as those estimated in the 1920s, late 1930s, and early 1960s. To some extent, these trends mirror the characteristic shape of the distended U curve observed for Western societies if we consider the beginning of the twentieth century, the late 1950s to early 1960s, and the current period. However, given the armed conflicts and the period of revolutionary terror that ravaged Cambodia from the mid 1960s to the mid 1990s, the shape of the Cambodian curve also requires specific interpretations. An important part of this book is devoted to the description, analysis, and discussion of these trends in the context of the socioeconomic and political events that marked Cambodia's history from the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twenty-first century. Before we present this historical analysis in the following chapters and the theoretical framework that guides this analysis below, we need to clarify our underlying sociological perspective and associated assumptions as well as our basic definitions of *crime* and *violence*.

*Concepts and definitions**'Human nature'*

First, we adopt Barnes's (2001) conception of human beings 'as sociable creatures whose interactions are characterised by intelligibility and mutual susceptibility', that is, beings who are 'intrinsically sociable and interdependent' (p. 339). Thus, it is taken for granted that these human interactions include both integrative (e.g. cooperative) and disintegrative (e.g. conflicting) experiences. In our book we focus on disintegrative, or conflicting, events and experiences in Cambodia, but this does not imply that we disregard the other side of human sociability, that is, the role of integrative, or cooperative, experiences. It is only that our focus on conflicts requires us to make such interactions more explicit, as violence and crime are the specific phenomena we study and analyse in Cambodia.

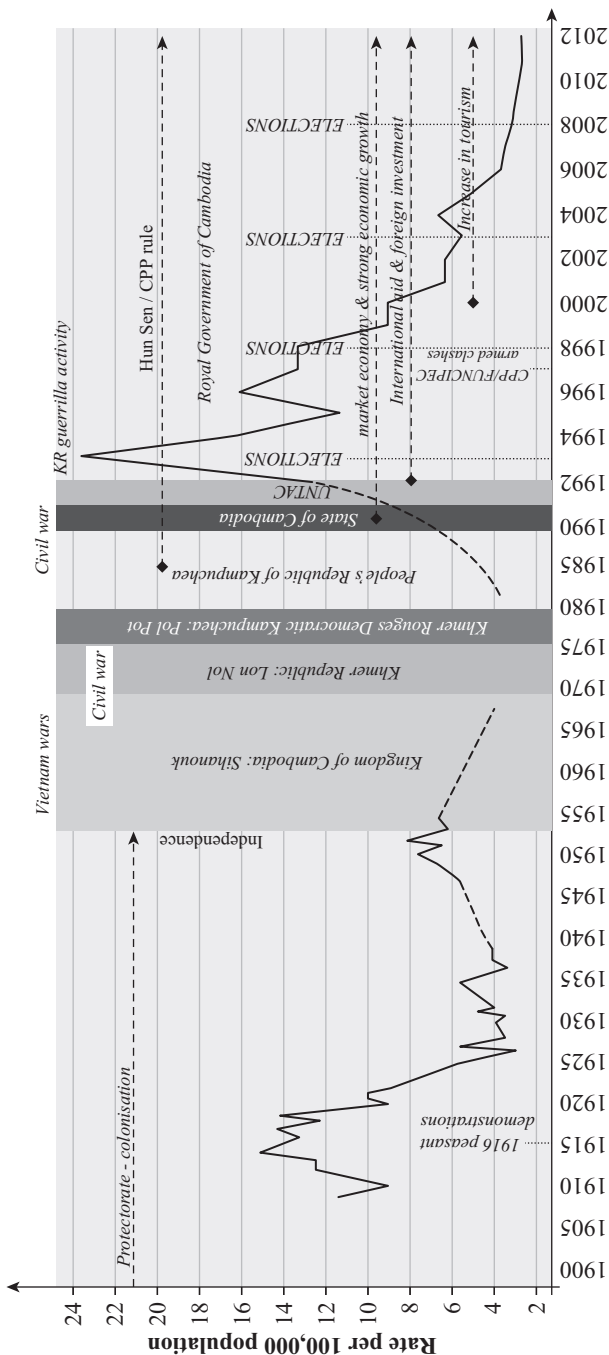


Figure 0.2 Estimated rates of homicide victims in Cambodia, 1900–2012

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Violence*

For our purpose, we define *violence* as a conscious aggressive behaviour occurring during a conflict between human beings, enacted with at least the awareness, if not the intent, that it will cause physical harm to some other(s), irrespective of whether this behaviour is criminalised or not, and we focus particularly on lethal violence. To further operationalise the main elements of our definition of violence – aggression, harm, and conflict – we make the following propositions:

1. All violent behaviours are aggressive behaviours, but some aggressive behaviours are not violent (e.g. gestures, speeches, and other activities consciously enacted to incur psychological harm). For instance, slander is an aggressive behaviour (consciously enacted to incur psychological harm) but not a violent behaviour because it does not incur physical harm to the victim. However, in the cases of nonviolent behaviours, the perception of aggressiveness may depend also on the subjectivity of the protagonists.
2. To some extent the concept of harm is also subjective. The behaviours that are conceived as harmful change not only along spatial and temporal dimensions but also according to the perspectives of the individual protagonists. Our implicit perspective is that of the modern individualistic rationalist that developed in Western societies with the Enlightenment, in which the expression of pain or displeasure of those who are at the receiving end of particular behaviours, or involved in particular interactions, may be seen as a valid measure of harm.
3. We can also conceive behaviours that cause pain or displeasure to some of the protagonists in terms of conflict (see Christie, 1977). Conflict is a comprehensive concept, ranging on a continuum from minor interindividual non-violent disputes (verbal disputes or disagreements) to war and genocide and encompassing aggression, harm, and violence, but not limited to any one of them.

Crime

Crime is a value judgement (i.e. a social construction) about particular human behaviours that particular societies prohibit and punish at particular times. Crime can include the following types of behaviours:

1. Some nonaggressive and nonviolent behaviours that are not intended to cause direct harm to others (e.g. drug use and prostitution)
2. Some nonaggressive and nonviolent behaviours performed despite the awareness that they will cause direct harm to others (e.g. theft)
3. Some nonviolent and some violent aggressive behaviours (e.g., respectively, slander and assault)

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Although *crime* refers to objectively observable behaviours, it is a normative judgement about these behaviours. It is only when societal norms have determined and institutionalised some rules of appropriation that breaking these rules becomes a crime (e.g. theft or fraud).

Anarchist, Peace-Making, and Republican criminologists have proposed a more principled normative concept of crime, which regards the essence of crime as the exercise of unwanted or unwarranted domination. Tifft and Sullivan (1980), for example, in an early attempt, defined *crime* as ‘the suppression of the human spirit’, and Braithwaite and Pettit (1990) as ‘an invasion of dominion’. These revisions of the notion of crime shift concerns away from conventional definitions of crime based on property rights to wider notions of individual rights and the forms of violence that impinge on the expression of independence or agency.

Even within the restrictive framework of legal positivism, which defines as crimes only behaviours prohibited by the criminal law, modern criminology has broadened its scope. It now includes not only crimes perpetrated by individuals or groups against other individuals or groups – for example, homicide, robbery, rape, assault, theft, and fraud – and crimes against state regulations and general public morality – for example, drug trafficking and corruption – but also, with the evolution of international law, crimes perpetrated by states against individuals or groups – for example, genocide and other crimes against humanity. International and domestic laws generally do not define the mass violence that occurs during foreign and civil wars as criminal, even when many victims are noncombatant civilians. Criminologists, however, are not constrained by legal positivism, particularly when legally defined offences such as crimes against humanity and genocide often occur during wars. More importantly, the boundaries between various crimes perpetrated by and against individuals or states, as well as violence not legally defined as criminal, are often tenuous. These different types of criminality overlap and interact, and one type of criminality may become a factor or a consequence of another type of criminality: for example, corruption may contribute to the onset of mass political violence, which in turn may degenerate into banditry.

In summary, compared to aggression, harm, and crime, violence appears as a more objective concept. We limit our definition of violence to behaviours causing some physical harm to individuals other than the perpetrators and involving the perpetrators’ awareness that some physical harm to others is likely to result from the perpetrators’ behaviour. We focus on conscious conflicts between humans and, in particular, but not only, on violent conflicts. Those who suffered tangible harm or death in these conflicts we call *victims* and those who caused tangible harm, *perpetrators*. In practice the operationalisation of the main object of this study – the patterns and trends in violence, especially lethal