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Edward L. Ayers
University of Richmond, eayers@richmond.edu

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HOMICIDE AND HISTORY

Edward Ayers

OMICIDE HAS BECOME the leading cause of death among black youths in the United States. The killings announced every day on the television news or the metro pages of newspapers make it seem that things have always been this way, that they can be no different. Professionals as well as the public have come to view the violence as a disease, an epidemic for which no cure seems possible. Criminologists have run the numbers on black homicide through their computers over and over again to find the key to the murders. Debates rage between those who argue for a distinct subculture of violence and those who stress inequality and injustice. The literature on black homicide has become enormous and enormously complicated.[1]

What could a humanist—in my case, a historian—hope to add to this discussion, a discussion pursued with such energy and sophistication by specialists in current problems? Not an easy solution, certainly, for humanists tend to complicate things rather than clarify, to add reservations rather than certainty. In the instance of violence among black Americans, though, maybe that is what we need. Perhaps a humanist can help provide distance from a problem that seems so overwhelming. And with that distance, that perspective, the problem may look somewhat different if no less tragic and important.

We can get beyond the limits of our own experience and casual impressions by looking both at other times and at other places. A historical perspective offers a surprise at the very beginning: the Western world, contrary to the sense of so many people today, used to be a far more violent place than it is now. Medieval and early modern Europe were filled with assaults, rapes, and murder, with the violence becoming even more common in the eighteenth century. The Western world

began to become less violent only in the mid-nineteenth century. People contained in towns, factories, and schools, people raised to hold violent impulses in check and punished if they did not, were less likely than rural folk to turn to violence. Police became much stronger, expectations about public safety more demanding, incarceration rates higher. These trends have grown much more pronounced over the course of the twentieth century and show no signs of abating. To some extent, then, our sense of increased violence is a product of heightened expectations.[2]

There is another reason violence seems more threatening today than in the relatively recent past. For centuries, crime was kept out of sight. The "criminal classes" were segregated from the rest of society, walled out of cities, run out of town kept on the other side of the tracks. Newspapers, police, and courts paid relatively little attention to crimes among the poor, who often had to prosecute cases themselves if they wanted any redress against violence they suffered. Today, things are different: television news thrives on scenes of flashing lights, distraught parents, and bloody sidewalks. Police continually patrol parts of town they used to ignore. Modern transportation permits members of the "dangerous classes" to range more widely than before. As a result, the general population is far more aware of violence now than in the past.

Not that the violence is new. Since its beginnings, the United States has seen bloody conflicts between whites and Native Americans, between employers and workers, between North and South, and between factions of urban rioters. It has also experienced three major waves of homicide since the middle of the last century. The first one came in the wake of the Civil War, in the late 1860s and early 1870s. Such violence has erupted in almost all places following wars, as the legitimized violence of wartime bleeds over into the peace. The next wave of homicide was less predictable, for it swept the United States early in this century—beginning about 1905 and building steadily until the early 1930s. The causes of this surge in homicide are obscure. It may have had something to do with increased immigration from Europe, with prohibition, or with the growth of cities. In any case, even though Americans tend to think of the early twentieth century as the good old days, the United States registered rates of homicide in the early 1930s as high as those of the late twentieth century.

Those who want to recall a relatively peaceful era in American history would do well to look in a somewhat unexpected place: the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War. Even as hunger, labor strife, and war mobilization convulsed the nation, homicide declined. The rate, in fact, declined steadily until about 1960. American society became more peaceful, ironically, as the world became more dangerous, precisely because our armed forces absorbed enormous numbers of young men, the group in almost every society that accounts for the great bulk of violence. These low rates of homicide in the mid-twentieth century should make us wary of easy notions about the sources of crime. Poverty, alone, did not necessarily create violence, and neither did the social dislocation that came during the largest migration of African Americans from the South to the North. Violence is not an inevitable by-product of modern urban society. Crime is not the simple thing it sometimes seems to be in everyday life, not simply the story of individual character or individual failure, but the complex product of shifting circumstances.

Some circumstances must have changed in the mid-1960s, then, for the number of murders began to skyrocket and rose steeply throughout the 1970s. After a shallow dip, the rate rose again in the early 1980s, then after a pause in the late eighties, has begun to mount once more in the early 1990s. It is this wave of the last twenty-five years that has occasioned so much commentary, so much worry. It has been blamed on everything from the social programs of Kennedy and Johnson to television to the proliferation of handguns to drugs to the decline of the two-parent household. We cannot untangle the causation here, but perhaps we can gain some long-term perspective about its origins, about the larger contexts in which the more immediate conditions for violence have flourished.

It is helpful, and surprising, first of all, to realize that the escalation of homicide in the 1960s occurred not only in the United States but in virtually all European countries as well. The explanation seems to lie in the unusually large generation born in the baby boom after World War II, its males entering the ages between 15 and 24 in the 1960s and early 1970s. An increase in that male age cohort commonly brings an increase of crime along with it. Criminologists, in fact, predicted, and saw, a brief decline in the homicide rates in the late 1980s

as the relatively small generation born in the 1960s came of age. Unfortunately, the large post-World War II generation will likely be echoed in the crime rates of the 1990s as their children enter the age when they are most likely to commit violent acts.[3]

If comparisons that show the United States is not alone in its crime wave are comforting, however, other comparisons are less so: about ten of every one hundred thousand Americans are killed by homicide each year, a rate about ten times that of other industrialized countries such as England, France, Japan, and Germany. An American is killed every twenty-two minutes. These are the numbers that we read about each year when the government releases its latest statistics, the numbers that confirm our belief that we are the most violent developed nation on earth. Again, though, there is more to the picture. The homicide rate in the United States falls considerably below that of some other countries. Latin American nations such as Colombia or Mexico have rates more than double that of North America, and other countries in the Caribbean, North Africa, and the Middle East are also more violent than we are. Measuring ourselves against relatively homogenous industrialized countries may not do justice to the degree of difficulty Americans face, creating false expectations and subsequent despair.

It may well be, international examples suggest, that when it comes to violence the most important aspect of a nation is not merely its degree of industrial development, but rather its degree of heterogeneity, its ethnic diversity. Comparative studies show that, throughout the world, the people most likely to commit homicide are young males who belong to minorities of ethnicity or religion. Groups persecuted or ignored by the dominant society seem to breed violence among themselves. The aggression grows out of displaced anger, a loss of faith in the law, poverty, and discrimination.

The place to start, then, in understanding American violence is to recognize the centrality of the connection between ethnicity and homicide, to understand that the situation of the United States is not unique. Much black violence grows out of blacks' perception that they are outside the concerns and protection afforded other Americans. And that feeling that they must take matters into their own hands is a catalyst for violence, just as it is in other parts of the world.

The roots of black estrangement run deep. As in all things

African American, we have to start in the South. Despite the horrors of slavery, newly freed African Americans proved eager to participate in the American legal system. Soon after freedom, though, blacks discovered that the law in which they had placed so much faith was not intended for their benefit. They were excluded from juries, segregated in courthouses, even made to swear on Bibles reserved for black witnesses. Blacks began to refer to the "white man's court," to recognize that it held no justice for them. Police often neglected black crimes against other blacks; as the saying went, "When a nigger kills a white man, that's murder. If a white man kills a nigger, that's justifiable homicide. If a nigger kills another nigger, that's one less nigger." Newspapers largely ignored black-on-black violence. Southern prisons became filled with blacks prosecuted for minor offenses, and the convicts were leased out to the highest bidders, in whose camps they died in appalling numbers.

White Southerners, who had long bragged of the docility of their slaves, began to worry that violence among blacks was becoming rampant in the post-Reconstruction era. White injustice, some warned, was creating a disregard for the law among black people; former convicts coming out of the South's prison camps were treated as heroes by some African Americans. White Southerners themselves lost faith in the efficacy of their own legal system and began to lynch black men by the hundreds each year in the late nineteenth century, taking trial and punishment into their own hands. Whites blamed the torrent of lynching on a new generation of young black men born since emancipation who hated whites and did not fear the law.

Commentators of both races observed that black men increasingly fought among themselves. African American men seemed especially sensitive to any verbal slight from another black man, especially quick to fight or kill when they felt their honor had been impugned. In a place where the law offered no protection, African-American men felt they had no choice but to settle conflicts themselves. In a place where their dignity was constantly assaulted, young black men demanded the respect that grows out of physical domination and intimidation.

This violence of honor has shown remarkable longevity. In Southern cities in the 1930s and 1940s, for example, nine out of ten black homicide victims were killed in disputes over women, gambling,

and insults. It is mainly because of the continued existence and volatil-
ity of honor-related violence that the South has witnessed such high
homicide rates throughout its history and why high homicide rates
have accompanied Southerners of both races when they have moved to
the North and West. The legal situation in cities outside the South
often proved not to be very different from what they had left. Police
routinely ignored black districts, where people were left to fend for
themselves. De facto segregation kept much black violence beyond the
view of whites.

For awhile, the economic situation in the North offered some
hope. Black migrants benefitted from jobs in defense and other indus-
try in the 1940s and 1950s, jobs newly opened to them by federal anti-
discrimination legislation enacted during World War II. Black unem-
ployment reached all-time lows in the mid-1950s. Middle-class neigh-
borhoods developed, as African-American businesses, schools, and orga-
nizations thrived. Just when it seemed that blacks would gain a
foothold in the cities of the North, urban economies began to change.
Even as black Americans continued to migrate from the countryside in
hopes of finding manufacturing jobs, those jobs began to disappear
from the cities, either because the factories moved to cheaper places or
because the factories required workers with higher levels of education
than was available to most blacks. Jobs for domestic and unskilled
labor waned, lessening the chances for recent migrants to win a place in
the economy. The cities fell into a long and painful decline. Whites,
along with many blacks who had the resources to do so, fled the cities
for the suburbs, leaving those without jobs trapped in the cities. Some
criminologists have found that the best indicator of growing crime in
America's cities is, surprisingly enough, the rate of suburbanization.
Escape for some means hopelessness for others.

It is this decline of the urban economy that helps account for what
is for many people the most frightening aspect of crime in present-day
America: the growing prevalence of armed robbery and drug-related
homicide. Armed robbery was not a common crime in the nineteenth
century, but today it accounts for a growing proportion of crime—and
the crime in which the disproportion of blacks is the largest. While
alcohol has always been related to crimes of violence, the growth of the
drug trade since the 1960s has fueled crime to an unprecedented

degree. The introduction of crack in 1983 made an already dangerous situation even more so. It is not merely that drug users commit crimes while high; in fact, crimes of violence seem to have become more calculating than they were before, directed more at material ends. As the legitimate economy has dried up and died in the places where many black Americans live, the illegitimate economy seems to offer at least a hope of immediate gain.

In more recent decades, the violence of honor has begun to meld with a violence of acquisition. Drug-related robberies and assassinations have grown as young black men turn to the alternative, illicit, economy for money and identity. In the past, the great majority of homicides occurred between people who knew one another; today, more and more killings involve strangers. To a certain extent, this instrumental violence has displaced the older style of violence triggered by sexual jealousy, insults, and gambling. On the other hand, the violence of honor mixes easily with the violence of gain. Drugs, desperation, and honor have made for a volatile combination, as people who feel they have little to live for confront escalating assaults on their dignity. Violence triggered by such a wide array of causes has come to seem more random and meaningless than before as it lashes out at anyone who, even temporarily, embodies oppression or opposition. Frighteningly, too, as violence is directed more at strangers than at acquaintances, police find it harder to prosecute: as recently as twenty-five years ago, nine out of ten murders were solved, but today only seven in ten reach such a conclusion.

The United States, then, is so worried about black criminal violence now because measurable rates are at a historically high level, because a violence of anger is merging with a violence of gain, and because violence is becoming more visible to people outside the poorest neighborhoods. All these causes are rooted in long-term changes in demography, the economy, and residential patterns.

The major continuity is inequality. Poverty alone, we have seen, need not produce violence. The time when Americans were poorest, in the 1930s, saw the rates of homicide plummet, while the increase of violence in the 1960s occurred during a time when the economy was booming, when television carried images of prosperity into the despairing homes of a swelling young black population. Economic inequality,

increasing though it is, may not be the most damaging kind. Inequality in justice, enduring for generations, has eroded faith in the law and its representatives, reduced the rewards for restraint. Crimes are committed by individuals with responsibility for their actions, not by social forces. But we should not forget that every individual life takes shape within cycles, processes, and histories that stretch far beyond its own time.

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