

## From boys to men

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ONE has always heard that the United States is more violent than other nations, but the statistics still come as a shock. To document American exceptionalism, David T. Courtwright includes comparative homicide figures for a group of 16 developed nations from the mid 1980s. The homicide rates per 100,000 for males aged 15 through 24 show a gradual increase from .3 (among the refined Austrians) to 5.0 (among the perfervid Scots), with the United States soaring off the chart at 21.9.

The American penchant for violence is not recent. From the "wild west" to "wilding," from the natural frontier to the urban frontier, mayhem of one sort or another has been a constant of American life. In *Violent Land*,<sup>†</sup> David T. Courtwright seeks to explain this phenomenon and, particularly, to account for "the historical pattern of American violence and disorder." It turns out that violence in America—whether high relative to other nations or not—has always been unevenly distributed, often dramatically so. We learn that "seventeenth-century Virginia was a disorderly place, though the Massachusetts Bay Colony was not." Two centuries later, circa 1880, the homicide rate in the mining town of Leadville, Colorado, was 105 per 100,000, while Philadelphia's rate stood at 3.2. Another century later, in the mid 1980s, "the rate of homicide for young white men in California was more than eleven times that of Minnesota." Given the patchwork nature of the phenomenon, its cause cannot be attributed to something generic in the national character. It's not sufficient to say that we're just a rowdy lot.

Courtwright's explanation is marvelously simple, yet open to complex elaboration. It begins from an obvious gender-based discrimination—one that an earlier generation summed

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† Harvard University Press. 357 pp. \$29.95.

up with the words "boys will be boys" (a line that good-naturedly exculpated the individual by incriminating the class). It so happens that the maxim is sociologically sound; in all cultures, it is men—*young* men, young *unmarried* men, young unmarried men *in groups*—who are given to violence. As the book's subtitle indicates, *Single Men and Social Disorder* are virtual synonyms. Nature apparently wills it so. When numbers are added to nature, the result is especially deadly. Courtwright examines the ethic of honor and vengeance that arises among bachelor hordes, the activities and vices they are given to (drunkenness, gambling, prostitution, gunplay), and the compounding effects of racism and irreligion. In sum, "violence and disorder occur most often in groups of armed, touchy, bigoted, intoxicated, undisciplined, unparented, unmarried, and irreligious young men."

**I**N the United States, such groupings have been common. As an immigrant nation, in which men often arrived without or in advance of women, America had an atypically high gender ratio (the number of males per 100 females) from the colonial period until after World War II. Women did not become the majority until 1946. The effects of this "men-first, families-later pattern of settlement" were aggravated by the concentration of the male vanguard in particular regions and locales—the frontier broadly speaking, and especially the non-agricultural frontier populated by trappers, miners, cowboys, and coolies. Courtwright has fascinating chapters on a variety of these overwhelmingly male and astonishingly bloody subcultures. As the details accumulate—the acts of aggression within the group, the destruction of the aboriginal populations (both human and animal), the squalidness of men left to their own devices (which led to as many deaths from disease as distemper)—one is struck by the disregard for life that men unanchored by women and families can come to feel.

Particularly interesting is the chapter on immigration policy and its consequences for the Chinese community in America. By the time Chinese women might have been expected to join their men in America, the Exclusion Act was in effect, greatly delaying the achievement of gender balance. In 1890, the Chinese gender ratio was 2,679 men to 100 women. Not surprisingly, "Chinese made up a disproportionate number of those who were arrested and convicted of misdemeanors and felony crimes in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries"—no "model minority" then. Also not sur-

prising, although little known, was that some of the Chinese, forbidden to intermarry with white women by anti-miscegenation statutes and public opprobrium, resorted to polyandry. With the relaxation of immigration restrictions after World War II, the Chinese-American population rapidly balanced. With the ladies came lawabidingness. A statistic Courtwright does not cite, but which buttresses his case, is reported by James Q. Wilson and Richard J. Herrnstein in their book *Crime and Human Nature*: "In 1965, there were only five persons of Chinese ancestry committed to prison in the entire state of California."

The conclusion seems inescapable that it is the domesticating force of women that makes for civilization. As Courtwright puts it: "Though the story of the triumph of law and order on the frontier is often told from the vantage of determined marshals and hanging judges, it is more properly and essentially a story of women, families, and the balancing of the population." Moreover, American women were doing more than rectifying the gender ratio through childbearing. They took an activist stance against "the worst aspects of masculine culture," founding reform organizations of all types and spurring quite effective legislative crackdowns on commercialized vice (Courtwright joins a growing number of revisionist scholars who credit Prohibition a success). Beyond their inhibitory, "just-say-no" function, American women also raised the intellectual and aesthetic tone of American life through their sponsorship of an array of educational, cultural, recreational, and religious undertakings. Although Courtwright does not explore the hypothesis, this female version of pioneering (subjugating a continent overrun with men) may account for feminism's emergence in the United States, as well as its decidedly male-bashing character. After reading *Violent Land*, one is prepared to believe that American men needed bashing.

**W**E might well wonder why the saga of exceptional American violence didn't essentially end in the 1950s when the male surplus had disappeared and the great marriage, baby, and suburban boom was underway. As Courtwright sketches it:

It was as if, in the late 1940s and 1950s, all the irenic planets in the American solar system had finally come into alignment. Gender balance, predominantly female immigration, widespread and

stable marriages, educational and employment opportunities, religious revivals, and low levels of alcohol and drug abuse all worked to diminish the number or constrain the behavior of America's young men.

And then came the sixties. If I might extend Courtwright's astrological metaphor, the much ballyhooed "dawning of the Age of Aquarius" brought us not "harmony and understanding" or "the mind's true liberation" but, instead, a rising crime rate, the sexual revolution (with all its portentous meaning for the institution of the family), and an epidemic of drug and alcohol abuse. Courtwright spends the final chapters of *Violent Land* trying to account for the breakdown and, in particular, the emergence of an "urban frontier" dominated by fatherless boys.

Courtwright gives a sensitive summary of the current explanations for the phenomenon: the "conservative" policy explanation (welfare dependency), the "liberal" economic explanation (structural unemployment), and the more bipartisan "culture of poverty" explanation. While not rejecting any of these, he adds yet another: "one that is both surprising and surprisingly powerful. It is the idea that illegitimacy and female-headed households are common in the ghetto because of a chronically *low* gender ratio." That's right: a low gender ratio. It turns out that too few men are just as bad as too many. The reasoning is that the availability of surplus women undermines female chastity and increases the likelihood that the male strategy of extorting sexual favors, without benefit of marriage, will succeed. Here are the relevant statistics, cited by Courtwright:

Black America ... has had the lowest gender ratio of any of the country's major ethnic groups for the last century and a half.... The difference begins at birth. The gender ratio for black newborns typically ranges from 102 to 103, compared to 105 to 106 for whites. The higher mortality of black male children and young men causes the gap to widen with age. At ages twenty to twenty-four the black gender ratio is 97, the white 105. By ages forty to forty-four the black ratio is 86, the white 100.

Comparative historical and cross-cultural studies confirm that low-gender-ratio nations have higher rates of illegitimacy. Always placing the onus on men, Courtwright declares: "Given favorable sexual odds it seems that men everywhere act like, and produce, bastards."

The corollary, unstated by the gentlemanly Courtwright, but evident in the language of the streets, is that women come to be regarded as, and all too often behave like, whores (a.k.a. "hoes"). On this point, the contrast to the western frontier could not be more marked. In the Old West, decent women were treated with courtesy by even the most hardened cases. On the new frontier, whether due to a low gender ratio or not, the very distinction between decent and disreputable has been lost. I suspect that feminism's sexual revolution—which is to say an ideological change—is as much to blame as skewed demographics. After all, there were female surpluses in many Eastern cities during the era of western expansion, but Victorian era Boston produced old maids, not unwed teenage mothers. (Courtwright mentions the role of "the overlapping sexual and media revolutions," but to feminism there is scarce a reference; women's responsibility for the contemporary plight of the family is consistently downplayed.)

**D**ESPITE Courtwright's emphasis on rather deterministic factors like demography, he does not ignore the moral component. In the past, the gender imbalance and consequent violence were temporary and self-correcting problems—"passing migratory anomalies in a society dominated by Victorianism and the work ethic." Today, when the situation is more intractable and self-perpetuating—"there is no built-in mechanism," Courtwright notes, "to balance inner-city populations as there was along the frontier"—it seems the only possible solution is a moral one. Here Courtwright follows the best sociological tradition, namely that of Montesquieu, whose searching exploration of the physical determinants of social life was always conducted with a view to the moral causes within the power of man which might counteract deleterious circumstances. Enter "the new familism," the movement that acknowledges and seeks to reestablish the centrality of the family in the effective socialization of the young (males in particular). Courtwright concludes his book with an endorsement of the "social utility of the family," but is careful to point out that this "does not mean a patriarchal family, or one in which the father is the sole breadwinner," although it apparently does mean a family with a father.

Insofar as it goes, this is fine. However, we do not learn what would spark a renaissance of male responsibility or what would make marriage an attractive, not just a dutiful, pros-

pect. Of course, duties themselves become more attractive if you are the only one who can do them, in other words, if one is invaluable. But what is it that fathers in particular are to do if both the hegemonic and economic roles are no longer theirs? For the "new familism" to succeed, it seems to me that the notion of male honor, which takes quite a beating from Courtwright, will need to be revived and rehabilitated in some fashion. Courtwright is quite tone-deaf to an older attempt to do precisely that through the medium, interestingly enough, of an idealized Western frontier. Courtwright is highly critical of Westerns. According to him, "they apotheosized male violence and marginalized women and children." To the question, "Did the mass exposure of three generations of audiences to violent male adventurers in the guise of cowboys and other gun-toting western characters influence the level of actual violence in American society?" he gives an implied yes, even managing to bring the Vietnam War into it:

The cattle frontier never closed. It just came back in technicolor. Or possibly in Southeast Asia. In many ways the best (though also the strangest) illustration of the pervasiveness of frontier myth in postwar America was the Vietnam War.

COURTWRIGHT may be correct about the inadequacies of the Western as description, but I think he is wrong about the Western's moral import. Whether it be a novel, a movie, or a television series, one Western after another demonstrates that proper male honor is in the service of women and children. It would be more sound to assert that the genre assisted in the domestication of the American male, by giving it an imaginative basis. Take *Shane*, the classic Western that pits hard-drinking, unmarried, ruffian ranchers against sober, married, security-minded farmers and culminates in the victory of the farmers. That victory would not have occurred but for the presence among them of two men: one, a husband, who recognizes that true security requires a willingness to hazard one's own life in defense of one's way of life; the other, a gunslinger gone good, who puts his expertise in the service of the new order based on families. The battle is seen through the eyes of a boy, with a boy's fascination with guns and status ("Can you shoot as good as Shane, Pa?" and later, "I bet you two could whip anyone"). That boy, and all the American boys who listened, received an education in the true meaning of manliness; a very large part of that education was a lesson about the subordinate status of manliness. War is for the sake of peace.

Watching *Shane* today, we are reminded of something else (something a feminized age prefers to forget): namely, the needfulness of the manly virtues. Courage is far from being the sole or the highest virtue, but it is a virtue, and one that civilization could not dispense with. Courtwright tells us that men are biologically disposed to violence, but that disposition is presented as unfortunate, a vestigial tendency that becomes problematic like an inflamed appendix. Perhaps the incorporation of young males into the body politic would be more successful if our attempts to harness them also honored their natural spiritedness. Then we might see the looked-for transformation of "Boyz 2 Men"—of boys who will be boys to men who will be husbands and fathers.

**We regret the untimely death  
of our former managing editor**

**Michael Andrew Scully**

**1949 - 1996**