

# Explaining the Long-Term Trend in Violent Crime: A Heuristic Scheme and Some Methodological Considerations

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# Explaining the Long-Term Trend in Violent Crime: A Heuristic Scheme and Some Methodological Considerations

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There has been a discontinuous but fairly persistent long-term decline in homicide rates in core European countries since about 1500. Since the 1950s, however, we observe an upward trend in violent crime not only in Europe but in almost all of the economically advanced nations that combine democratic political structures with free-market economies. The paper presents an explanatory scheme designed to account for both, the long decline and its apparent reversal. The theoretical model draws heavily upon ideas taken from the sociological work of Emile Durkheim and Norbert Elias – with some modifications and extensions. It seeks to integrate sociological and historical perspectives and to give due weight to both, structural and developmental forces. A key hypothesis is that the pacifying effects of the erosion of traditional collectivism can only be maintained to the extent by which “cooperative individualism” dominates over against the forces of “disintegrative individualism.” Some suggestions are made concerning the selection of appropriate indicators and the handling of methodological problems related to causal attribution.

## 1. Introduction: Defining What Is to Be Explained

In previous articles (Thome 1995, 2001) I have outlined a heuristic scheme for explaining the long-term trend in lethal violence in Europe since, roughly, the beginning of the sixteenth century. This paper now offers a more concise and systematized version of this theoretical account and adds some reflections on methodological problems that arise when it is applied in empirical research.

My point of departure is a set of empirical observations that document (1) the long-term decline in lethal interpersonal violence in Europe since about 1500 and (2) the upward trend in violent crime that has occurred more recently – in the second half of the twentieth century – not only in Europe but in almost all of the economically advanced nations that combine democratic political structures with free-market economies (Gartner 1990). The “S-” or “U-shaped-curve” (depending on how far back one goes in history) of this development was depicted by Ted R. Gurr some twenty-five years ago when he investigated British court records on homicide indictments and other related sources (Gurr 1981; Gurr et al. 1977). More recently,

in a series of papers Manuel Eisner (2003a; 2003b) has extended Gurr’s work considerably by compiling homicide data from nearly four hundred historical case studies that cover different European regions and nations in the pre-modern era, and adding data from national vital or police recorded homicide statistics for the modern era. Thus, we now have a much better database that reduces the influence of the idiosyncrasies – the measurement errors – of each study in shaping the overall trend pattern.

The pattern that emerges from these data basically confirms the picture drawn by Gurr. Eisner calculates a factor of more than thirty by which homicide rates decreased between the end of the medieval period and the middle of the twentieth century when the mean rate stood at less than one death per year per 100,000 inhabitants (Eisner 2003a, 106). There are some discontinuities and short-term departures from the (trans-)secular trend line, but the decline as such is remarkably persistent through time. In addition, between the late nineteenth century and the 1950s the national homicide rates in western Europe more or less converged and cross-national differences have

remained rather small since then. Even in non-European countries like New Zealand the homicide rates between 1880 and 1990 clearly display the U-shaped trend pattern (Dunstall 2004). Of course, we do not know if the upward trend or level shift since around 1960 (roughly doubling the rates by 1990) will persist or whether it will yet be another short-lived departure from the long-term trend. In many countries there is a leveling off in homicide rates or even a slight decline during the 1990s, but other types of recorded violence, like serious assault and, in particular, robbery, have generally continued to rise strongly.<sup>1</sup>

For the sake of argument, I will assume that we are not facing a short- or medium-term discontinuity but rather, since the middle of the twentieth century, a reversal of the long-term trend in criminal violence. The task for sociology then is to construct a coherent theory that accounts for both the long decline and its reversal, i.e., the U-shaped-pattern. If such a theory is available or can be constructed we may switch perspectives and predict that the increase in violent crime – at least a level shift, if not a continuing upward movement – will persist beyond the present. Studying the discontinuities, the local and temporary departures from the trend, or the manifold “contextual trajectories” (Eisner) would certainly also be very instructive. But if we want to find the picture behind the puzzle we must first have an idea what it might look like. And in order to apprehend the meaning of the picture one first needs to know something about the principles and techniques that were used in constructing it.

If the pattern is so consistent across the nations that have followed the Western type path of development,<sup>2</sup> then we apparently have to relate these crime trends to fundamen-

tal structural changes that have shaped these societies – again in fairly similar ways. This has led some sociologists to use sweeping concepts like rationalization, individualization, or social disintegration in their efforts to explain the increase in violent crime during the last forty or fifty years. But rationalization and individualization have been rising for several centuries during which interpersonal violence decreased, as indicated above. So these concepts are not sufficient, or at least they must be greatly refined and supplemented with additional hypotheses. What follows is an attempt at doing just that.

Being interested in theoretical generalizations, I have set up my explanatory scheme in terms of an explanandum and certain propositions and descriptive statements that are supposed to provide a basis for constructing the explanans. (The explanans itself is, as yet, far from being complete.) The phenomenon to be explained is the long-term trend in interpersonal violence, the U-shaped pattern documented in the work of Gurr, Eisner, and others. The core ideas for developing an explanation I have found in the work of Norbert Elias and Emile Durkheim.

## 2. Concepts and Propositions: Building Blocks for Constructing a Theoretical Model

### 2.1. Elias's Theory of Civilization

According to Elias, the major pacifying forces that have been unfolding in the long extended civilizing process (or processes) are the following (this is only a brief reminder): (1) The creation of the state monopoly on violence, its subsequent legitimation in the processes of democratization, and its constriction by the rule of law. Anticipating my later references to Durkheim, I should like to add a fourth component or stage in the process of state and

<sup>1</sup> This is a revised and extended version of a paper presented at the conference on “Cultures of Violence: Incidence, Social Regulation and Perception of Violence, Past and Present,” organized by Sophie Body-Gendrot (Paris) and Pieter Spierenburg (Rotterdam), sponsored by the Posthumus Institute and the Groupe Européen des Recherches sur les Normativités (GERN) and held in Ferrara, Italy, September 18, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> With respect to death rates (completed homicide) one has to take into account the improvements in medical services made over the years. For example,

Harris et al. (2002) calculated that at the end of the 1990s the U.S. homicide rate would have been three times higher had no progress been made in medical services and equipment since the 1960s.

<sup>2</sup> The major exceptions among the Western countries with respect to the U-shaped-curve are Finland, and the United States. On Finland (and its unique national history) see Ylikangas (1998). With respect to the United States, one first has to note that this nation came into existence as a modern state, a fully-fledged democracy. Second, there has never been a state monopoly of violence

in the sense that this monopoly became established within European states. Third, the United States has experienced the biggest waves of immigration and most enduring ethnic conflicts among the Western states, and ethnic conflicts tend to come in cycles. The cyclical pattern that is to be observed in American homicide rates (Gurr 1989) may be amplified by the comparatively low level of social security benefits granted by the state and the high level of economic inequality and social marginalization; both leave ordinary people highly exposed to the tide of economic ups and downs.

nation-building: increasing social inclusion, the balancing of freedom and equality within the institutional framework of the welfare state (in short, “social democracy”). (2) The extension of the market economy implying the elongation of action chains and increasing functional interdependencies between individual and collective actors. More people are impelled to plan and strive for distant goals and places. (3) The promulgation of a culture of non-violence, an increasing condemnation of and even revulsion at the infliction of serious bodily harm including corporal punishment. (4) Finally, the transformation of personality structures in the direction of a greater capacity for affect control. Apart from the state and the market, other agencies of formal and informal social control and generalized discipline have contributed to this – like school and factories and, not least, the processes of (religious) “confessionalization.” Other scholars (like Weber, Oestreich, and Foucault) who have analyzed various disciplinary forces shaping modern cultures readily come to mind, but I will not consider specific contributions made along these lines.

Elias has shown all of these processes to be closely interrelated in a way that I will not draw out here. They are more or less cumulative and sufficiently continuous as to fit into a trend pattern that can be imagined to be inversely related to the secular decline of homicide rates. I do see some problems in Elias’s heavily Freudian conception of affect control (Thome 1995), but will not take up this point in the present discussion. Later on (in section 2.3), a revised concept of self-control will be proposed.

There are several routes through which the evolving structures of a centralized and democratic state have promoted the gradual reduction of criminal violence.<sup>3</sup> The decisive point has been and still seems to be that the monopoly on violence becomes embedded within an institutional framework that integrates effectiveness and legitimacy, making one dependent upon the other. Given that this has happened in Europe (step by step, unevenly, and with retrograde movements), what are we to make of this hypothesis

when we turn to the increase of violent crime since the 1950s or 1960s? To maintain consistency in our reasoning three routes are open. The first one would be to argue that the legitimized and effective state monopoly on violence has been eroding for quite a while. If the development of the state’s monopoly on violence and its subsequent “domestication” within liberal democratic systems has been and still is a major factor in bringing about *decreasing* rates of interpersonal violence, one should expect an *increase* of such violence if this monopoly is weakening or crumbling without being supplanted by functionally equivalent forces. The other alternative would be to demonstrate that the monopoly on violence has not been weakened significantly, but that other factors have come forward to push up crime rates. Finally, a third alternative – favored here – would be to consider both, an erosion of the monopoly of violence and some additional factors, as the driving forces behind the trend reversal.

Several scholars have argued in favor of the erosion hypothesis. They have presented a number of indicators that support the hypothesis that the institutional nexus in which the legitimacy and the effectiveness of the state monopoly on violence were closely intertwined has started to erode and will continue to do so. The German sociologist Trutz von Trotha, for example, speaks of an “oligarchic-preventive order of security” (OPOS) which, in his view, has been emerging in Western democracies during recent decades (von Trotha 1995). It is characterized, among other things, by the remarkable growth of private security industries and services (DeWaard 1999), moves towards privatization of prisons, and the promulgation of community control orders. He notes that the newly emerging security system is without a “center”; that the responsibility of the agents of political and administrative power has, at least partially, been replaced by the purchasing power of clients in security markets and this transforms the structures of economic inequality into the social inequality of differentially available security. This “commodification” of security normalizes the use of violence, which then progressively

<sup>3</sup> I am not dealing with the state’s potential for starting a war against other nations or misusing its powers in domestic affairs. This would make for another explanandum than the one chosen here.

penetrates into the web of social relationships (von Trotha 1995, 157–59; for further arguments see, e.g., Garland 1996; Gallagher 1995). “No-go-areas” outside the reach or continuous attention of (regular) police forces have been expanding. A “culture of violent self-help” (von Trotha) is re-emerging; the taboo on violence is losing ground among an increasing number of individuals and social groups (Eckert et al. 1989). In many European states people’s trust in governmental institutions has been in decline for quite a while (see, e.g., Inglehart 1997; Putnam 2000, 2001).

One should also note that discussions about a general “legitimation crisis” (Habermas 1973) and the dissolution of the functional prerogatives of the state (Luhmann 1981) have been with us for quite a while, not just since the 1990s. In a more recent book, Gary LaFree (1998) links the rising crime rates in the United States since the 1960s to a wide variety of indicators of diminished legitimacy of social, political, and economic institutions. The protest movements that called into question the legitimacy of “the system” in the 1960s were primarily politically and morally motivated (e.g., civil rights and the Vietnam war in the United States, and in Germany the younger generation’s insistence on discussing responsibility for the terror of the Nazi era). A second, perhaps even more powerful, and still unfolding discussion about the delegitimation and diminishing regulative power of the state has been set in motion by various technological innovations and economic developments now summarized under such headings like “the information age” and “globalization” (see below). In these processes a positive feedback system seems to have established itself in which diminishing control capacities of the nation-state undermine its legitimacy and subsequently further diminish its regulatory powers (Castells 1997; van Creveld 1999). In particular, globalizing free market economies have undermined the state’s monopoly of taxation upon which – to recall Elias – the monopoly on violence and other regulatory capacities had been founded. (We will return to this point in our discussion of Durkheim’s ideas.) On a more concrete level of analysis, one would have to talk about the internationalization of organized crime and about technological developments in weaponry and worldwide electronic communication that have put certain types of criminals into a rather advantageous position over against the state. As a consequence, the

state increasingly finds itself in a dilemma whereby it either has to let go or apply “big brother” strategies outside the previously legitimate boundaries (e. g., the extensive installation of CCTV surveillance systems, particularly in Great Britain, and other technologies of collecting and using previously non-accessible data on suspects and non-suspects).

Before taking up the second major element in Elias’s theory of civilization processes, i.e., affect- or self-control (section 2.3), I will continue on the macro-level by bringing in some of the major concepts found in Durkheim’s work.

## 2.2. Durkheim: Structural Evolution and Social Pathologies

Some forty years before Elias wrote his now celebrated book on the processes of civilization, Durkheim suggested that “with the progress of civilization homicide decreases” (Durkheim 1992, 113). He saw the reason for this in the demystification of the collectivity and its devaluation relative to the “worshipping” of the individual. “Collectivism” he construed as an integrative pattern in which the group – the family, the clan, the caste, a religious or ethnic community, the nation – was valued more, much more, than the individual and his or her well-being. The collectivity takes on the quality of a sacred being demanding harsh reactions against those who step out of line, thereby creating a culture of violence. High levels of passion and low respect for the individual render the individual more likely to become the object of physical attacks by others. The major organizing principles that foster violence are “honor” and “hierarchy.” The importance of honor (and its counterpart, defamation) has been widely recognized in the literature (e.g., Spierenburg 1998), and I have nothing to add to it in the present paper. With respect to hierarchy (cf. Roth 2001, 47), I should like to emphasize the following aspect. If the group counts more than the individual, there are typically particular individuals that are closer to the gods than the masses; there are leaders and followers, masters and servants, insiders and outsiders. In other words, there is rigid stratification, and the members of various strata differ in the amount of honor, respect, and general worth granted to them. These differences seem to have a criminogenic effect on their own. Eisner, in analyzing data provided by Ruggiero on violent offenders in early Renaissance Venice, notes that “upper-class people seemingly victimized people of lower standing more often than vice

versa, which...contrasts strikingly with modern patterns. Nobles, it appears, did not scruple to assault, rape, or kill people of lower standing” (Eisner 2003a, 116). It would be interesting to consider whether there has been a return of hierarchy in (post-)modern “winner-take-all” societies (Frank and Cook 1995), and with it the return of certain routines of adoration and defamation on which the mass media thrive.<sup>4</sup>

Traditional collectivism had to break down in the course of increasing social differentiation. The individual now is no longer tied into a closely knit mesh of norms, symbols, and rituals that define his or her own identity in terms of belonging to the collectivity. The fusion of personal and collective identities dissolves. Violations of social norms that occur somewhere in the group are no longer of immediate personal concern. The individual’s social standing and reputation are no longer defined by a code of honor that, for example, makes blood revenge obligatory. The expression of identities becomes less body-centered (this trend may also have been reversed recently); violence that injures, mutilates, or kills another person becomes repugnant, abominable. There is a “collective conscience” even in individualized societies, but the highest-ranking value in it is the individual “in general” as Durkheim emphasizes; not just the individual “self” but also the individual “other.” And such a system implies a lower level of passion and stronger control of emotions. The reason why passions are lower or more constrained in individualist cultures seems to be that the person who violates the norms (and is to be punished for that) is, so to speak, an incarnation of the very object which is now being worshipped, i.e., the individual in general (Durkheim 1978). This seems to be reminiscent of Elias, but note the shift in perspective: large-scale pacification is effected not by disciplinary forces holding down individual impulses but by freeing the individual from the closely knit bonds that kept him tied to the collectivity. Restructured agents of social control and moral guidance, particularly the (nuclear) family, the school, and professional organizations, however, remain

important for providing the moral underpinnings of social life in modern societies. Durkheim believes, however, that it is not so much the rise of individualism but rather the erosion of collectivism that directly causes the reduction in the number of homicides (Durkheim 1992, 115).

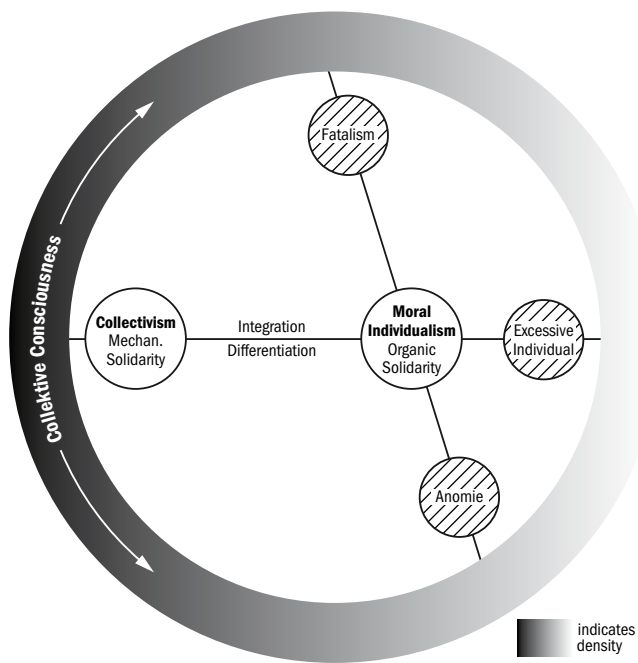
There is some empirical evidence from cross-national studies indicating that there is a positive correlation between the degree of collectivism and the level of interpersonal violence in a society (Karstedt 2001). One problem with testing this proposition is that the erosion of collectivism and the formation of the state generally have co-evolved, more or less (at least in Europe), throughout history so that the pacifying effect of one of these processes can hardly be disentangled from the effect of the other. A strategy for circumventing this problem is the study of cross-sectional units that differ with respect to collectivism but stand equally under the jurisdiction of the same state. Following this strategy I have utilized data on more than five hundred urban and rural counties in Prussia at the end of the nineteenth century and treated birthrates as an empirical indicator of the degree of collectivism vs. individualism prevalent in a county. In a multivariate analysis it was shown that birthrate was by far the most powerful predictor of violent crime (serious assault and battery) controlling for various indicators of economic development, demographic and ethnic composition, degree of urbanization, and dominant religious confession. Another noteworthy result that emerged from these analyses is the following: Though violent crime (severe bodily harm) was generally rising between 1880 and 1900 the rates in highly urbanized areas remained generally below the rates in rural counties by a margin of about 20 percent (though not equally in all regions) (Thome 2002; parts of the analysis are also presented in Thome 2001). This is important to note, because it demonstrates the necessity to distinguish between (anomic) developmental and structural effects. Rapid change may, for some time, bring about higher crime rates even though the emerging social structure may be less criminogenic than the old one.

<sup>4</sup> Baumeister et al. (1996) review some of the psychological literature confirming the violent implications arising from claims of superiority. For the connection between sharpened economic

competition and the “renaturalization” of inequality resulting in differential claims of moral worth, i.e. superiority, see Bauman (1990), Young (1958); see also footnote 7 below.

If we are prepared to accept Durkheim’s hypothesis on the effects of collectivism, an even more formidable problem seems to arise. If the erosion of collectivism is said to explain the long decline of violence, how do we account for the rise of illegal violence in the second half of the twentieth century – a period that has brought us even more individualism? Does this observation not falsify our (Durkheim’s) hypothesis? I will try to answer this objection by specifying the concept of individualism along the lines Durkheim proposed. The answer will be that only a specific type of individualism protects against violence or, rather, preserves the pacifying consequences of the eclipse of collectivism. Figure 1 presents the two analytical dimensions on which Durkheim’s typology of “normal” and “pathological” states of society rests (Hynes 1975; Besnard 1993):

Figure 1: Durkheim’s analytical scheme



The horizontal axis represents the dimension of cultural and structural evolution from collectivism to individualism, from mechanical to organic solidarity, or from a seg-

mentally differentiated and hierarchically stratified society to a functionally differentiated society, as we would put it today. Durkheim’s major concern here is with integration, viz. coordination. The slanting vertical axis represents a more actor-oriented analytic dimension, i.e. “regulation,”<sup>5</sup> which is foremost the domain of the state or the political subsystem including secondary groups and public discourse. If regulation optimally fits in with the possibilities and restrictions given by the structural elements inherent to “modern” societies (with – primarily – functional instead of segmentary differentiation), then Durkheim’s ideal type of “cooperative” or “moral” individualism should be realized.

Particularly in *Suicide* (1951), Durkheim was concerned with two major “pathologies” that he thought would threaten the future course of societal development: one would be “anomie” (a lack or breakdown of regulation), the other “excessive” or “egoistic” individualism. The analytical scheme provides for a third pathology: over-regulation, which in Durkheim’s terminology figures as “fatalism” (perhaps a misleading term, since it connotes subjective reactions rather than the normative arrangements and material conditions that might cause them). Here, severe restrictions imposed on the autonomy of the individual run counter to the opportunities provided by the degree of social differentiation and economic productivity reached within the given society. Durkheim downplayed the role of this particular pathology, but I think that there are good reasons to include it in our heuristic scheme. So let me briefly characterize each of the four social types, first the allegedly “normal” type.

**2.2.1. Moral or Cooperative Individualism**

I have already characterized this type in terms of its cultural orientation. It refers to a broad consensus according to which the individual is more valued than the group. But it is not the particularized – egoistic – individual that is addressed here, but rather a universalistic conception, the individual “in general.” As a philosophical perspective, Durkheim’s moral individualism comes close to contem-

<sup>5</sup> The axis is slanting to indicate some measure of correlation both between anomie and egoistic individualism and, on the other side, between fatalism and collectivism.

porary communitarianism (however with a completely different conception of the state). As a social praxis, moral individualism is based on mutual sympathy and respect for others – any other person; it seeks to increase social inclusion and it postulates the right of self-actualization for all.

On the socio-structural and political plane this type seeks to secure justice and to balance personal freedom and equality, mainly by combining social welfare provisions and parliamentary democracy. Durkheim insists on the functional primacy of the state over the economy, which he saw as immanently amoral. On the other hand, he clearly considered it necessary to counterbalance the power of the state by strong secondary social groups – thereby anticipating what political scientists and sociologists have later conceptualized as various forms of “corporatism” (e.g., Siaroff 1999; Kenworthy 2002, Hall, and Gingerich 2004). Measures of decommmodification and corporatism have also been used in criminological research, e.g., by Messner and Rosenfeld (1997) and Pampel and Gartner (1995).

When evaluating the trend concerning the development of cooperative individualism, one may also look at indicators discussed in the literature on “social capital,” like membership in voluntary associations or generalized social trust (Putnam 2000, 2001; Pharr and Putnam 2000). Participation rates in national elections (after partialling out event-specific effects) might also be a useful indicator of shifting weights between cooperative versus egoistic individualism. Cooperative individualism implies a principled readiness to invest in collective goods (like having a democratic government) even without calculable individual payoffs (resulting from one’s own investment) or losses (resulting from making no personal investments). The “collective good” dilemma involved in voting, e.g., is overcome by individuals who feel a moral obligation (responsibility) to vote, whereas from a purely instrumentalist perspective voting is simply irrational. Shifting membership rates among different types of associations might be evaluated

in terms of implied contributions they make for collective goods versus individual payoffs.

### 2.2.2. Egoistic (Excessive) Individualism

On the cultural plane, this is the reversion of the defining characteristics of moral individualism: particularism instead of universalism; hedonistic self-fulfillment instead of social solidarity; ruthless pursuit of one’s own interests while using others as a mere “means” in strategic interactions. In the tradition of the Frankfurt School of social thought, it is the triumph of “instrumentalism” or, in Habermas’s terms, the dominance of strategic interaction over communicative action seeking mutual understanding and recognition (Habermas 1981).<sup>6</sup> With regard to social structure and politics it implies the functional primacy of the economy and the expansion of market competition into other realms of social life, the diminution (if not dismantling) of welfare state provisions, the recommodification of social relationships, and the strengthening of forces that advance social marginalization and exclusion. Tocqueville already warned that materialism and egoism triggered by too much competition would threaten the moral base for political democracy. Durkheim himself, in his book on suicide, did not interpret egoistic individualism as a force that would promote violence; he saw it only as an aggravating condition with respect to suicide. I have argued elsewhere that his reasoning is not convincing on this point (Thome 2004).<sup>7</sup>

As for Durkheim, the role of the state is crucial for safeguarding moral individualism against egoistic individualism. He conceives the state as being “the organ of moral discipline” (Durkheim 1992, 72, 69), but he also sees it as the champion of individualism. Without the state the individual could not have been set free from his primordial bonds, without the state there would be no power to protect the individual against the “tyrannical” claims of his group. Durkheim expressly rejects the Hegelian, the socialist, and the utilitarian (liberal) conceptions of the

<sup>6</sup> Gary LaFree (referring to work done by Stefensmeier) notes that in the United States “the rate of instrumental, felony-related killings (e.g., contract murders) increases substantially during the postwar period (from about 7 percent of all murders in 1960 to about 20 percent in 1990)” (LaFree 1998, 40–41). British data, however, do not reveal such a trend.

<sup>7</sup> On the causal connections between a culture of competition, social and economic inequality, and violence see also Hagan et al. (1998), Jacobs and Carmichael (2002), Messner (2004), and Pescosolido and Rubin (2000). Studying data from European surveys conducted in 1969 and repeated in 1990, David Halpern (2001) found evidence for

increasing importance attached to “self-interest.” He also found a rather strong positive relationship between aggregated self-interest and national victimization rates, particularly when combined with relatively high levels of social inequality.



state. What he had in mind was a democratic state whose power had to be limited by strong secondary groups and free social associations that would mediate between the individual and the state. The state, however, should have adequate regulatory power to implement the measures necessary for securing sufficient degrees of justice, equity, and equality – which Durkheim considered to be the structural precondition without which moral individualism could not prevail.

The processes of globalization that were set in motion by the dismantling of the Bretton Woods agreement in the early 1970s followed by the liberalization of financial capital markets in the 1980s and further accelerated by the collapse of the Soviet Union have gradually undermined the role and legitimacy of the nation-state, in particular its regulative power regarding the economy. Nation-states, even within the European Union, have come to compete with each other in providing the most favorable conditions for attracting economic investments. The average tax rate on corporate profits in twenty-one OECD countries fell from about 50 percent in the mid-1980s to 32 percent in 2003 (Ganghof 2005). At the same time the low-income sector has been expanding broadly. In this process the secular trend towards more equality has been reversed: inequality in income and assets has been rising in almost all OECD countries since the mid- or late 1970s (Smeeding 2002). Despite continuous economic growth (in terms of real GDP), large segments of the populations have actually suffered from falling real incomes, which has increased the number of people forced into or threatened by social marginalization and exclusion. Apart from measures that capture inequality, poverty, and the generosity of public welfare provisions (for the latter see Scruggs 2005; Scruggs and Allan 2006), further indicators that one may want to consider in this context are, for example, the number of insolvencies of firms and private households (severity of competition), the volume of consumer credit in relation to income (indicative of the prevalence of economic aspirations), the volume of advertising and sponsoring activities (competition and expanding commercialization), the share of individually paid fees for using public services

and facilities relative to public funding (downgrading the role of the citizen – and the public good – relative to that of the consumer and the private good), and the number of people who never have children and the number of children who live with one parent only (reduced weight of institutions outside the economy).

### 2.2.3. Anomie or Lack of Regulation

Durkheim propounded (but did not systematically elaborate) different versions of the concept of “anomie” that, due to space limitations, cannot be discussed here in any detail (see Thome 2003). In my understanding Durkheim considers three major subtypes of anomie in *The Division of Labor in Society* (Durkheim 1933). One is a lack of coordination or a functional imbalance between different societal subsystems (like the economy and education); another is the discrepancy between diverse role requirements on one side and the actors’ need for self-actualization. The third has become the most prominent one in the literature: anomie as a lack of cognitive and normative orientation making conformity to moral and legal rules less likely. These tendencies are most prominent in times of rapid social and economic change so that we may speak of a *developmental* or process-induced variant of anomie. But in *Suicide* (1951) Durkheim also envisioned the possibility of “chronic” anomie induced by the internal dynamics of an economy that is bound to defy moral and political constrictions, i.e., a *structural* type of anomie. Witnessing the first round of economic globalization in modern times he observes: “Ultimately, this liberation of desires has been made worse by the very development of industry and the almost infinite extension of the market. (...) Now that he [the producer, H.T.] may assume to have almost the entire world as his customer, how could passions accept their former confinement in the face of such limitless prospects?” (Durkheim 1951, 255 et seq.).

On this point, the pathologies of egoistic individualism and structurally rather than developmentally induced anomie collapse into one category that we might label as *disintegrative* individualism.<sup>8</sup> Under the structural conditions of chronic anomie “excessive individualism”

<sup>8</sup> Though Durkheim, in his book on *Suicide*, concedes that “anomic” and “egoistic” suicide might empirically merge, he insists on keeping

both types analytically distinct. In the literature there have been lively debates on the feasibility and

validity of this distinction, see, e.g., Hynes (1975) or Johnson (1965).

loses its character as a temporary or minor deviation from the “normal” type of moral or cooperative individualism; instead it becomes an evolutionary type of its own (not explicated by Durkheim himself). There is considerable conceptual overlap between “disintegrative individualism” (conceived in this way) and Merton’s structural anomie or Messner and Rosenfeld’s institutional anomie theory (Messner and Rosenfeld 2000). This, however, needs to be worked out in detail in another paper.<sup>9</sup>

One major idea underlying Durkheim’s *developmental* variant of anomie, however, remains important in my heuristic scheme designed to account for the rise of violent crime between 1950 and the late 1970s: rapid social change – in whatever direction – is likely to produce anomie, i.e. high levels of “normlessness.” Though Durkheim, again, did not clearly specify the mechanisms through which this happens, two routes are suggested: (1) Previous regulations (norms) become obsolete, counter-productive, or inconsistent, whereas the emergence of more adequate new regulations lags behind the dynamic development of productive forces and structural change.<sup>10</sup> (2) Personal aspirations tend to rise beyond the capacity to fulfill them and threaten the individual’s sense of personal integrity and having an identity anchored within a social community.

During the 1950s and 1960s the economically prosperous countries (not only in Europe) underwent great social change with unusually high GDP growth rates. For most people in the early 1950s everyday activities concerning social life and human sustenance were still organized primarily on a local level. For example, in Germany at that time 40 percent of the labor force were employed in the traditional sector: farming and small-scale manufacturing, service, and retail trades (Lutz 1984). Even the majority

of those who worked in the industrial sector were closely and primarily integrated into local milieus. Most people possessed no car, had no telephone, and had no television available in their own household. Only a minority of people had access to more than eight years of school education. All this changed rapidly within ten or fifteen years. If the developmental variant of the anomie concept has any validity it should be a major factor in accounting for the take-off phase in rising rates of violent crime since the 1950s. But unlike developments toward the end of the nineteenth century (as indicated above), the changes initiated in the 1950s ultimately paved the way for a more, not less, criminogenic social and cultural structure. It must be admitted, however, that there is an ad hoc element in the explanatory scheme I am proposing, since there is convincing evidence that cooperative individualism was actually strengthened during the early phase of these developmental changes, not least by expanding welfare state provisions and by transforming family structures to become less hierarchic (i.e. less “collectivistic”). Unfortunately we do not have the means to clearly calculate and quantify the respective effects of these contradictory factors.

As already indicated, chronic anomie or disintegrative individualism refers to a cultural and social system whose internal structural dynamics imply a persistently high tempo of social change in the direction of undermining the characteristic features of cooperative individualism. Technological and organizational changes within the realm of mass communication via television, internet, mobile phones, and video have become a decisive force in this process. Here again, we can draw upon Durkheim’s ideas about anomie by generalizing his notion of “aspirations” becoming unlimited or unfettered. The modern technologies of communication have greatly enhanced the possibili-

<sup>9</sup> Much of what has been said by Polanyi (1944), Hirsch (1976), and Frank and Cook (1995) is also pertinent in this context.

<sup>10</sup> The significance of such processes becomes obvious when we consider one of the major functions social norms perform: giving certitude and stability to expectations that govern the daily interchanges among people (Luhmann 1969). The crucial point here is that expectations based on norms (unlike “cognitive” expectations) can be maintained even when they have not been met; the fault, in this case,

is not attributed to the expectation but to those who have not conformed to it. This mechanism, however, breaks down when falsifications are mounting: incertitude replaces certitude. Transmitting norms from one generation to another is the major route towards internalization. Unrestricted (and time-consuming) “discourse” among equals may be considered to be an important method for resolving moral conflict or dilemmas on the basis of universally held moral principles (Habermas 1981). Rapid social change is detrimental to both of them. For example, normative traditions provide no

solutions for the moral dilemmas posed by recent advances in genetics, biotechnology, and medicine. The options these open up expand faster than the capacity to define or apply the criteria for choosing among them and creating a social consensus that would support them. Consequently, moral questions are being transformed into economic and political questions, thus strengthening the impetus towards instrumentalist thinking.

ties to open up diverse avenues of “*Entgrenzung*”: a generalized tendency or momentum towards lifting, tearing down, or dissolving boundaries wherever they are encountered, the transgression of symbolic demarcation lines, and the conflation or blurring of semantic meanings, the philosophy of “everything goes.” Two instances or subdimensions of *Entgrenzung* seem to be particularly important.

The first is the blending or fusion of the private and the public sphere (Sennett 1977). Just think of certain shows on television, the gossip in the newspapers and magazines, and, not least, the increasing availability of personal data to commerce and state agencies. The distinctness of the private and the public sphere, however, is constitutive for our personal integrity and dignity, and it is a prerequisite for the integration of society. Functionally differentiated societies secure their integration chiefly by roles, not by persons. When personal affairs overshadow performance of a role the functioning of the system is impaired – consider the detrimental effects that were inflicted on the U.S. administration by the mass media’s revelations about President Clinton’s sex life. The routinized exhibitionism that figures so prominently in TV programs and tabloid newspapers tends to reduce people’s sensitivity and make them less attentive to other people’s vulnerability. With respect to crime, it also has a more direct effect by reducing the preventive effect of nescience (“*Präventivwirkung des Nicht-Wissens*”), a phrase coined by the German sociologist Heinrich Popitz (1968) who observed that compliance with social norms is greatly facilitated by widespread ignorance (or at least the pretense of it) about deviant behavior by others.

A second subdimension of *Entgrenzung* is given by the blurring or blotting out of distinctions constituting the symbolic order of meaning, e.g., the distinction between the “profane” and the “sacred,” between truth and falsehood, real and imagined worlds, or, on another plane, the “destructuring” of the distinction between the lifeworld of children and the lifeworld of adults. Driving forces behind these processes are the marketing and advertis-

ing business. Another arena where the symbolic order of meaning becomes increasingly tenuous is the field of genetics, biotechnology, and medicine (already referred to in footnote 10) where research seems to have opened up nearly unlimited possibilities of shaping – and perhaps copying – the human body (or parts of it) and manipulating the chemistry of the human brain. This threatens to undermine the foundations on which any system of morality has to rest: the distinction between what is given by nature or divine providence and what is left to the responsibility of human beings making their own decisions and being accountable for them.<sup>11</sup>

It is no easy task to find meaningful quantitative indicators of the varied phenomena of *Entgrenzung* over time. Research on the changing content and consumption patterns of mass media and the use of modern information technologies (internet, etc.) might provide valuable data. The increasing intrusion of advertisements and product placement into TV programs and internet platforms, the growth of “infotainment,” and the expanding business of “event management” (i.e., the art of inventing techniques and practices which generalize the principle that “the medium becomes the message”) might be indicative of the blending of previously distinct symbolic universes. The sky-rocketing salaries of business managers and investment bankers that have severed any ties with discernible achievements and performances, the volatility of stock market indices, and the rising discrepancies between share value and real assets of a firm may all be indicative of the progressive blending of the “real” and the “imagined.” With respect to encroachments on privacy, the installation of video cameras in public places and buildings, and the sales volumes of various devices for collecting personal data (of consumers and clients, for example) are all trackable over time.

#### 2.2.4. Over-regulation: Regressive Collectivism

Durkheim’s concept of “fatalism” (in his book on *Suicide*) refers to suppressive conditions and norms that make life unbearable to a person, thereby pushing them towards committing suicide. In a way, I would like to turn

<sup>11</sup> Consider, for example, Charles Taylor’s observation that making strong valuations, as in moral commitments, presupposes that something is beyond our reach, beyond our capacities (Taylor 1989).

Durkheim's concept upside down. Rather than concentrating on a purely subjective response to a dreadful situation brought about by suppressive means of regulation, we can think of "over-regulation" as a desired state of affairs that is seen as a remedy to another dreadful condition caused by the lack of regulation or expanding disintegrative individualism. This orientation, though arising within modern societies, refers back to traditional social forms incorporating collectivistic orientations. To set it apart from "traditional" collectivism we may speak of "regressive" collectivism. This orientation manifests itself in all forms of xenophobia, intolerance towards those who think differently, contempt for democratic principles and procedures, and attempts at defining certain people or groups as being inferior by nature thereby emphasizing hierarchy and leadership over against equity and participation. Large collections of survey data provide useful information on these issues.

### 2.2.5 The "Normalcy" of Crime

Durkheim considered crime to be a "normal," even necessary, social fact in all societies. The "normal" level of crime was to be inferred from some type- and phase-specific average: "A social fact is normal, in relation to a given social type at a given phase of its development, when it is present in the average society of that species at the corresponding phase of its evolution" (Durkheim 1938, 64). Even though we may find somewhat lacking his "rules for the classification of social types" (Durkheim 1938, chapter 4) and his suggestions as to how to calculate averages and deviations that would qualify as being "pathological" (*ibid.*, 55), I still find Durkheim's conception helpful for at least two reasons. First, it draws our attention to the possibility that a crime rate might be too low. Durkheim believed that a certain level of crime was needed to keep open or clear the way for social creativity and innovation (modern type totalitarian regimes have amply demonstrated what this might possibly mean). Second, it opens up a historical perspective: what is normal depends on the given type of society, the evolutionary path it has followed, the basic principles and mechanisms that organize social life, economic productions and transactions, and the symbolic patterns of meaning. Different levels of crime may thus reflect "modes" rather than "degrees" of social integration. Collectivistic societies have a range of normal crime that differs from that which applies to individualized societies;

and when the balance shifts from cooperative to egoistic or disintegrative individualism the normal rate changes again. Even though we may not be able to define levels of normality for a single case we may still be able to predict changes when we move across time or between societies. The increasing convergence of crime rates among advanced nations, the uniformity of the trend pattern noted above, suggests that all these societies have been shaped by the same fundamental evolutionary processes (beyond all the context-specific trajectories and regional particularities that need to be recognized as well). In a historical perspective, lower crime rates do not necessarily indicate better or more integrated societies but may point to differing modes of integration and "structuration."

### 2.3. Macro-Micro Linkages: The Role of Self-control

Though crime rates are characteristics of groups or regions, they are nothing but standardized aggregates of classified individual behavior. So it would be useful to specify the intervening variables that transform structures (as considered above) into individual actions. When looking at various approaches in the theory of crime one encounters at least a dozen of them, middle-range theories each specifying bundles of variables thought to be conducive to crime in general or to criminal violence in particular – for example, differential social learning theory, social disorganization theory, theories of subculture, strain theories, control theories, opportunity theory. Decades of research have passed by, thousands of articles and books have been written, but no single unified theory has emerged (though some authors have claimed that they had accomplished just this). Many of these different approaches do not really compete with each other but simply focus on different subsets of variables that prove relevant on different occasions. A multitude of possible linkages connecting macro-structures and criminal behavior could thus be constructed. Before getting lost in such an exercise it might be more feasible to be selective and adhere to the principle of parsimony. Most approaches to analyzing violent crime look at it as resulting from some kind of deficiency. For example, the actor has insufficient command over or access to legitimate means for obtaining commonly sought or accepted goods to which he aspires. (Highly competitive cultures and high degrees of inequality tend to open up this gap for a large number of persons). Or the actor is situated within

a social environment that exerts little control upon him, or he belongs to a subculture insufficiently integrated into society. Or the actor himself has insufficient control over impulses impelling him to commit deviant acts including physical aggression. He may not get the recognition and respect that he would need to acquire or maintain a sufficient degree of self-assurance or self-respect because he is discriminated against or because he does not have the instrumental or expressive capacities for being well received by others. Again, high competitiveness and exclusivistic solidarities nourished by regressive collectivism may render such experiences more likely.

In their *General Theory of Crime*, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) declared, in a way reminiscent of Elias, lack of self-control to be the key variable making all sorts of criminal acts more likely to occur. Their argument, however, is somewhat simplistic: crime doesn't pay, they say, therefore criminal behavior is irrational. As Gary Becker (1968) and others (e.g., Freeman 1995, Morselli and Tremblay 2004) have shown, however, many criminal acts do have a sizable payoff or, at least, can be expected to have one. Therefore, they do not generally result from a lack of self-control as construed by Gottfredson and Hirschi. But numerous studies and meta-analyses (cf. Pratt and Cullen 2000) have demonstrated that lack of self-control is indeed a relevant proximate cause of criminal behavior.

The concept of self-control should however be expanded in the direction of a more sociological concept of "agency." Drawing upon a similar idea put forward by Manuel Eisner (1997) I propose a three-dimensional concept. The *first* dimension would, indeed, take up the idea of affect control: the capacity to control one's impulses and emotions without suppressing them, allowing the person to express his or her feelings while taking into account the normative requirements encountered in a given situation. This might be called *expressive competence*. The *second* component would be of a strategic nature: the capacity to use one's personal abilities and the opportunities offered by the situation to obtain one's goals, including the capacity to evaluate immediately available rewards in their consequences for long-term objectives: this we might call strategic or *instrumental competence*. The *third* component refers to moral consciousness, the capacity and the willingness

to balance one's personal interest against those of others while taking into account given social norms and, on a higher level of competence, universal principles as well (principles that might contravene group-based norms). This involves the capacity for "role taking" (as sociologists like to call it) or "sympathetic empathy" (as psychologists put it). We might refer to this as normative or *moral competence* that comprises a motivational and a cognitive component which, however, might be less congruously related to each other than Kohlberg has postulated (Nunner-Winkler 2004).

This multi-dimensional concept goes beyond Elias's or Gottfredson and Hirschi's dichotomy by shifting our attention to the individual's capacity to integrate several functional requirements: identities must be expressed, long-range personal interests must be pursued, non-exclusivistic solidarities must be preserved, and none of these at the cost of neglecting the other. To the extent that this capacity is lacking vis-à-vis the restrictions and opportunities offered in a given situation, the probability rises that the individual will resort to criminal activities, including the use of illegal violence. Durkheim's pathological types (excessive individualism, anomie, and oppressive over-regulation) refer to structural conditions that, in a given population, impede the development of sufficient measures of (integrative) self-control among a relevant number of persons. I have indicated some of these linkages in previous sections. For example, rapid social change and the decay of symbolic structures of meaning (i.e., "anomie") undermine communicative processes needed to build up moral competence. Likewise, the erosion of cooperative individualism by increased competition and re-commodification of social relationships may de-emphasize normative considerations in favor of instrumental rationality. And if the future becomes increasingly uncertain, e.g., in terms of employment or return on investments, delayed gratification becomes less plausible. Consequently, strong internalized control structures are less likely to develop.

#### 2.4. Summary: The Core Hypotheses Incorporated in the Heuristic Scheme

The major components of the explanatory scheme presented here can be summed up in the following way:

(1) The (trans-)secular decline in interpersonal violence (homicide rates) that took place between ca. 1500 and

1950 is mainly due to (a) the processes of nation-building that established a monopoly on violence held by the state that became gradually domesticated by law, legitimized by democratic participation, and supported by evolving social welfare systems; (b) structural and cultural changes (from segmental to functional differentiation) that moved modernizing societies away from “collectivistic” to predominantly “individualistic” orientations and institutional arrangements.

(2a) The institutional nexus in which the effectiveness and legitimacy of the state’s monopoly on violence mutually supported each other has been eroding in post-industrial societies in the second half of the twentieth century.

(2b) The opportunity structure and the motivation for illegal uses of violence have been enhanced in these processes.

(3a) The pacifying effect of the erosion of traditional collectivism can only be maintained to the extent by which cooperative individualism dominates over against the forces of egoistic viz. disintegrative individualism.

(3b) Since the mid-1970s free-market post-industrial societies have been evolving in the direction of strengthening the elements of egoistic individualism and anomie (i.e., disintegrative individualism) which in turn also stimulate, at least temporarily, the growth of regressive collectivism.

(4) The take-off phase in rising levels of violent crime was set in motion by rapid and particularly incisive social changes taking place in the 1950s and 1960s (developmental anomie).

(5a) The lower the capacity for integrative self-control the higher the propensity to engage in deviant behavior including violent crime.

(5b) In postindustrial societies there is a widening gap between the quality of self-control demanded from the individual person and the average level of self-control actually obtained.

### 3. Some Methodological Problems

All these hypotheses, to be sure, bear the marks of speculative thinking. Now I will consider some of the methodological problems that come up when we try to apply and test the propositions just presented.

The hypotheses that make up the explanatory scheme outlined above introduce several key concepts that need to be measured somehow. That is, one needs to establish observ-

able indicators that are either correlationally or analytically related to such concepts as legitimacy, anomie, or instrumentalism. In previous sections I have offered some suggestions regarding such indicators, but all of them are open to debate. For example: How do we measure whether or to what extent there has been an erosion of the state’s monopoly of violence? Are clearance rates a valid indicator for its effectiveness? (Probably not in the short run, but possibly in the long run). These problems are not unique to the approach I am recommending here; they are common to any approach trying to relate macro-social structures to rates of crime or other types of problem behavior in a cross-sectional or cross-temporal perspective (e.g., Eisner 2002; Messner and Rosenfeld 1997, or the overview in Messner 2003). The relationship between (observable) indicators and a nonobservable theoretical construct is (and must be) hypothetical; the burden of proof thus lies with those who want to criticize a specific choice.

In order to illustrate the kind of discussion that might come up on such an occasion let me briefly return to my decision to use birth rates as an indicator of the degree of collectivism vs. individualism present in the culture of a given nation or region in the late nineteenth century (Thome 2001, 2002). Of course, high birth rates do not “mean” high degrees of collectivism, but they may still serve as “correlative” indicators. There are two possibilities here: first, lower birthrates might be a consequence of less collectivism; second, the demographic transition that was taking place in late nineteenth century brought about higher survival rates of children, thus inducing (potential) parents to opt for having fewer children (thereby producing lower birthrates) – which, in turn, raised the value of the individual child, i.e., fostered “individualism” in the sense construed by Durkheim. One objection might be that birthrates correlate with other variables, like demographic, ethnic, religious, or social class composition that compete with “collectivism” in explaining violent crime. This objection can be answered by directly controlling for those competing variables in multivariate statistical analyses (as was done in my aforementioned study). I have made these claims with respect to the end of the nineteenth century when the issue was the erosion of collectivism (as conceived by Durkheim) and the average birth rate was much higher than today. As for the present, one might

still ponder on the idea of using birth rates as an indicator – this time for assessing the relative weight of cooperative vs. disintegrative individualism.

Provided that sufficiently valid indicators have been provided, how do we establish causal relationships between the structural (economic, social, and cultural) indicators and rates of violent crime? Most of the indicators one might think of have trends that change over time: the gross national product, unemployment or divorce rates, insolvencies, and advertising budgets have been rising, trust in government institutions and membership in certain voluntary associations have been declining. If they were not trending – parallel with or contrary to...crime rates, they could not be valid indicators of potent explanatory variables in the first place. Trending series, however, correlate with each other even without any causal linkage. Causality can be tested only if *stochastic* trends correspond to each other, i. e., if the series are “cointegrated.” Cointegration tests can be run only with long time series; fifty measurement points are often not sufficient, a rule of thumb calls for at least one hundred measurements.<sup>12</sup> Note that in my explanatory scheme I search for *level* relationships not just for correlated *change* scores. But the rate of (rapid) change in a structural variable may – as noted before – have an effect that diverges from the long run level effect.

Pooled cross-sectional time series analyses are likely to be the most efficient design for studying long-term relationships between structural indicators and crime rates. They offer better leverage for dealing with measurement problems. In causal analyses, measurement errors may be conceived of as a special type of omitted variables. Omitted variables distort the estimation of impact parameters (like regression coefficients) only to the degree that they co-vary not just with the dependent but also with the independent variables specified in the model. Some of the measurement errors (and other uncontrolled sources of variance in the dependent variable) may systematically confound over-time variance but less so the variances across units – or vice-versa.<sup>13</sup> Besides, fixed-effect models may help to neu-

tralize cross-unit differences in legal provisions, policing, and registration practices.

To develop hypotheses regarding causal linkages between structural indicators and crime rates over time it might be helpful to start with cross-sectional data and *individual* level relationships, particularly if no sufficient time series data are available for the structural variables. For example, if there is a negative relationship between individuals’ trust in political or governmental institutions and the probability of committing acts of violent crime (Sampson and Bartusch 1998), it seems reasonable to assume that declining levels of trust (inferred, e.g., from a series of public opinion polls) would contribute to rising levels of violent crime. The problem with this strategy is that the evidence on social and political trust presented in the literature is rather mixed. And this applies to other potentially relevant variables as well. One only needs to look at the literature concerning the consequences of divorce or growing up in a one-parent family.

On the other hand, one has to realize that weak or even insignificant relationships on the individual level do not rule out sizable effects on the aggregate level. For example, if only two out of every one hundred thousand persons newly exposed during the course of a year to violent scenes produced by TV programs, internet platforms, or video games are thereby pushed over their personal probability threshold for committing murder, this might significantly increase the homicide rate in the country. But no experimental setting with, say, two thousand individual subjects will demonstrate any significant effect for a probability difference of  $p = 0.000002$ .

Many of the structural changes are likely to have contradictory effects upon crime rates. For example: increased female participation in the labor force may lead to decreased guardianship, increased exposure to crime, and less social control of children, all of which would help crime rates to rise. On the other hand, if more women are working, the improved economic conditions may reduce

<sup>12</sup> For an introduction to the statistical model of “cointegration” see, e.g., Hamilton (1994) or Thome (2005); for applications in criminological analyses see Field (1999), Hale (1998).

<sup>13</sup> With respect to error-ridden measurements of suicide rates, a study by Pescosolido and Mendelsohn (1986) is instructive here, demonstrating that such errors do not necessarily distort the

impact parameters estimated for various explanatory variables.

criminal motivations. Fajnzylber et al. (2002, 1328) state the ambiguous effects connected with rising levels of mass education as follows:

An individual's education level...may impact on the decision to commit a crime through several channels. Higher levels of educational attainment may be associated with higher expected legal earning...Also, education, through its civic component, may increase the individual's moral stance...On the other hand, education may reduce the costs of committing crimes...or may raise the loot from crime...Hence the net effect of education on the individual's decision to commit a crime is, a priori, ambiguous. We can conjecture, however, that if legal economic activities are more skill- or education-intensive than illegal activities, then it is more likely that education induces individuals not to commit crimes.

At any case, the aggregate relationship will reveal the net effect that a unit increase in the level of education (or other "ambiguous" structural variables) will have on the crime rate. For a methodological individualist this may not mean a great deal. But the aggregate effect may still guide his search for moderator variables that would specify which of possibly diverse effects apply to what category of individuals.

This brings up the (in)famous "ecological fallacy" theorem, which is one of the most misrepresented methodological theorems in the social sciences. Often it has been interpreted as implying that regression estimates are always biased if they are based on aggregated data although they are interpreted with reference to individual-level relationships. Indeed, a positive "correlation" between the proportion of black people and the crime rate does not prove that black people commit more crimes than whites. It might well be the case that white people commit more and black people commit less crimes when the proportion of black people in a population increases. If this were the case, the bivariate relationship (with "crime" as the criterion and "race" as the predictor variable) would imply a grossly mis-specified model that excludes additive and multiplicative context ef-

fects. As Lutz Erbring (1989) put it: there is no aggregation bias, but, under specific circumstances, bias aggregation. If the model is correctly specified (with correct functional form and all of the relevant explanatory factors included) the slope coefficients (as causal effect measures) are unbiased no matter what the aggregation level is. (The correlation coefficients, of course, will be larger, but the size of correlation coefficients is irrelevant here).

The sad fact, however, is that often our models are not correctly specified, due to lack of data or false reasoning. But in this case, individual level relationships may occasionally be more deceptive than aggregate level relationships. For example, zero correlation between long-term *individual* unemployment and readiness to commit crimes does not preclude rising unemployment levels causing higher crime rates. Being unemployed may directly stimulate individual motivation to commit criminal acts (as specified, e.g., by a theory of relative deprivation); it may also, as a contextual variable, indicate intensified competition and hence higher levels of criminogenic instrumentalism among the successfully employed. In a bivariate individual-level relationship the direct effect and the contextual effect may cancel each other out; in the aggregate relationship they would accumulate. Another example where an aggregate relationship can be meaningfully interpreted in the absence of an individual-level relationship is provided by David Halpern. In a cross-national analysis he found a significant relationship between "self-interested values" and "social trust" that disappeared when the correlation analysis was performed with individual-level data. Halpern comments: "This is indicative of an ecological effect and does seem to make sense. An individual can be selfish but still independently recognize if those around them are to be trustworthy.<sup>14</sup> But it would be much odder if a society was generally composed of self-interested individuals yet also characterized as high in social trust" (Halpern 2001, 244). So if the number of selfish people increases, both the selfish and the unselfish person become more inclined to be distrustful.

Finally, if a relationship between macro-structural indicators and crime rates has been established, this link is not

<sup>14</sup> More precisely, a selfish person is just as capable as an unselfish person in this respect, H.T.



invalidated by missing specifications concerning intervening variables that mediate between macro and micro level. As for structural equation modeling, Diekmann (1980) and Tuma and Hannan (1984) have shown that the total effect of exogenous variables can be reliably registered without intervening relationships (as long as the system under study is non-explosive).

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

It is obvious that the hypotheses explicated within the heuristic scheme presented here cannot *in toto* be tested directly in an empirical project. Most of the concepts and propositions need further clarification and specification. But it is hoped that the approach taken here will be helpful in integrating several perspectives in the study of violent crime hitherto left unconnected and often thought to be hopelessly unrelated to each other. In particular, it is hoped that convincing arguments have been offered in favor of conducting macro-level analyses in a historical perspective. A recently completed comparative study of social change and the development of violent crime in Sweden, England/Wales, and Germany from 1950 to 2000 may be relevant here (Thome and Birkel 2007). In this work we further elaborate the explanatory model outlined in the present article and apply it to the interpretation of a large set of empirical data taken from various statistical sources and survey evidence. The results of that study may thus help to evaluate the merits or flaws of the theoretical and methodological assumptions that have been advanced in this paper.

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