

# Decontrolled by solidarity: Understanding recreational violence in moral holidays

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*ABSTRACT: This paper seeks to develop an understanding of 'recreational' youth violence against strangers in 'moral holidays'. These are enclaves in which youth seek to enjoy disorder and disruption. Drawing on Eliasian theory and Collins's micro-sociology of violence, it is argued that violent moral holidays share features of decivilization. First, youth positively sensitize one another towards violence. Second, absorbed in the group action, they become 'decontrolled by solidarity': their behaviour is guided much more by the group (social constraint) rather than by internal monitoring (self-restraint). Third, a process of desidentification was identified, in which the identity of the victims was seen as merely futile, rather than bad or evil.*

*KEYWORDS: Violence, decivilisation, micro-sociology*

## Introduction

On 21 September 2012, the Dutch village of Haren was scourged by riots. After a girl had inadvertently announced her fifteenth birthday as a public event on Facebook, her party turned into an internet hype, now named 'Project X Haren', after a movie by Nourizadeh in which a teenage party gets completely out of hand. During that day, thousands of youths came to visit the village, waiting for something to happen. While the crowd watched and cheered, a minority of the assembled youths started to smash the windows of houses and shops, set cars and other property on fire, looted a supermarket, took possession of a private swimming pool and used violence against police officers and some villagers, one of them an elderly man who was severely wounded after an attack in his home. The pictures and video footage of the riot show happy faces of young men demolishing property as well as young people cheerfully making obscene and provocative gestures at the far outnumbered police force.

Riots and other forms of youth street violence are often described in the media as 'senseless' and 'irrational'. As Blok (2001: 103) points out, labelling violence in these terms is the result of a long-term process in which people have developed strong negative feelings about violence. Following Elias' (1994 [1939]) famous argument, in relatively pacified, modern, differentiated societies with complex networks of interdependencies, people increasingly force one another to internalize the controlling of their impulses. Thus, they tend to become more sensitive, repugnant and shameful towards behaviour that escapes such control. Consequently, violence is labelled as 'irrational', 'senseless', and also 'bestial'. However, perceiving violence in these terms stands in the way of understanding it as a 'historically developed cultural form of *meaningful* action' (Blok 2001: 104, 111, italics in original; see also De Haan 2011).

Instead of a senseless act, the Haren riot could be seen as a 'moral holiday': an enclave, bounded in time and space, in which people suspend conventional norms and enjoy disturbance, disruption and disorder (see also Collins 2008: 98-9; 242-53; 320-2). Moral holidays often revolve around bodily experiences that are considered deviant and repugnant outside the enclave, such as excessive drinking and drug use, sexual behaviour in public and, sometimes, the experience of 'recreational' violence, which is the focus of this article. The term 'moral holiday' was coined by psychologist and philosopher William James, to denote situations in which individuals regale themselves with a temporarily relaxing of the rules of conduct, treating themselves to an enjoyable moment. In the 1920s, social scientists who studied riots started to use the term to denote joyous looting and vandalism (Collins 2008: 476, note 11; Martin 1920).

Describing violence as 'recreational' or a 'moral holiday' may sound inappropriately euphemistic or sympathetic. However, the term captures an issue that needs to be explained: the unpleasant and unpalatable fact that people actually enjoy disorder and destruction. Indeed, several studies indicate that youths seek to experience violence for the thrill of it, for instance among football hooligans (Bairner 2006: 209-10; Dunning, Murphy, and Williams 1988; Moll 1977; Spaaij 2008) in nightlife or leisure time (Graham and Wells 2003; Katz 1988, chapter 3; Tomsen 1997) and at riots (Jarmana and O'Halloran 2001; McPhail 1994). The existence of violent moral holidays seems to challenge Elias' 1994 [1939] argument described above. Apparently, (young) people are able to arrange zones where they can indulge in impulsive, decontrolled bodily behaviour. This article aims to develop an understanding of the emotional processes underpinning violent moral holidays. It draws on Eliasian notions of decivilization and disidentification as developed by Dunning and Mennell (Dunning and Mennell 1998; Mennell 1990), Fletcher (1997) and De Swaan (1997), as well as Elias' and Dunning's (1986) idea of a 'quest for excitement' and Collins's (2008) micro-sociological theory of violence. The main question this paper aims to answer is whether violent moral holidays can be regarded as enclaves of decivilization.

Understanding the emotional processes of violence requires close-up analyses of the detail of violent situations themselves, rather than abstracting away from them by relating background features of individual perpetrators to the likelihood for violence to occur, as mainstream research in this area tends to do (see for similar critiques: Blok 2001: 106; Collins 2008: 1-3; Katz 1988: 3-4). Hence, the article is empirically grounded in detailed descriptions of two violent moral holidays, taken from judicial case files. Each of them consists of a series of violent attacks on strangers, committed by groups of youths during one night in the first case, or several consecutive nights, in the second case. Admittedly, two cases provide a modest basis for drawing conclusions about the empirical appearances of this phenomenon. However, the primary purpose of this article is to enhance conceptual understanding rather than to offer empirically representative observations. What follows is an attempt to relate Elias and Dunning's notion of the quest for excitement to Collins' micro-sociological analysis of violence, and a subsequent effort to relate their insights to features of decivilization and disidentification, as outlined by Dunning, Fletcher, Mennell and De Swaan. The questions that result from these conceptual considerations will be confronted with the empirical material of the two cases. In the concluding section, some avenues for future research will be discussed, specifically with regard to including a long-term perspective in this approach. First however, several more commonly heard explanations of youth violence will be discussed, in order to position the approach developed here.

## Prevailing explanations of youth violence

One frequently heard argument in both social scientific analyses and public debate is that alcohol intoxication causes violence (indeed, the governmental research committee that reported on the Haren riot concluded that alcohol had played a predominant role in the violent destruction, see Commissie Project X Haren 2013: 26, 32-33). Parker and Auerhahn's (1998) extensive review demonstrates that numerous studies have found a relationship between the use of alcohol and engaging in violence (much less so for the relationship between drug use and violence). However, researchers of alcohol and violence disagree how and to what extent violence is actually caused by the consumption of alcohol. In fact, out of so many drunken youths only very few are violent and many instances of youth violence do not involve alcohol altogether (see also Collins 2008: 263-270). As Parker and Auerhahn note, the relationship between alcohol consumption and violence might be spurious. In this line of reasoning, excessive alcohol consumption may fuel shared expectations of disorder and the experience of violence. Thus, for some groups and in some situations, collective drinking may be a way to align the group towards a night in which they will collectively 'waste' themselves and their victims (Graham et al. 2006; Graham and Wells 2003; Graham, Wells and West 1997; Lister et al. 2000).

The second type of explanation is more in line with the approach followed in this article and concerns the idea of a differentiated civilizing process (Dunning, Murphy, and Williams 1987, 1988): the degree of impulse control and the extent to which people abhor violence differs across social classes. Thus, the socialization practices of what Dunning et al. call the 'rough sections of the working class' involve a lower degree of impulse control as they make up social figurations that are less differentiated, less extended and more closely tied to local residential areas. In addition, local self-help is their preferred way of resolving conflicts and formal authorities are avoided, thus pointing at a lower degree of state penetration with regard to the means of violence. This argument corresponds with studies that seek to understand violence as an expression of masculine toughness in working class culture (Polk 1994; Spaaij 2008; Winlow and Hall 2009; Winlow et al. 2003). However, and again, out of so

many young working-class males, only few actually behave violently. Furthermore, while violence may be more common among working class youth, it is certainly not restricted to this social category (Adang 1998; Brug 1986; Jackson-Jacobs 2004). Thus, both the alcohol and the rough and tough working class explanations suffer from a lack of specificity: alcohol intoxication and the presence of young working class males are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for violence to occur.

Another common explanation with regard to riots in particular takes the form of the classic frustration-anger thesis: the violent destruction (anger) is caused by oppression and marginalization (frustration). In their book *The Roots of Football Hooliganism*, Dunning, Murphy and Williams (1988) suggest a more nuanced version of the argument. They argue that football hooliganism might be related to an incomplete process of functional democratization. While the civilizing process has proceeded far enough to allow marginalized groups to express their interests, their demands are only partly met due to persisting power differences. The resulting frustration and lower commitment to conventional society spreads among the marginalized, potentially leading to decivilizing trends, increasing the likelihood for violence as in football hooliganism (see also Mennell 1990). However, in most riots, looters opportunistically target shops and property in their own disadvantaged neighbourhoods, rather than engaging in politically driven attacks towards alleged oppressors (Durodié 2011; Jarmana and O'Halloran 2001; McPhail 1994; Murphy 2011; Ocqueteau 2007). Moreover, the predominant mood in moral holidays is by definition joyous, rather than angry.

An overarching problem with these explanations is that they divert the attention away from the violent action itself. As Blok (2001) and others (Athens 1997 [1980]; Collins 2008; Katz 1988) have argued, in order to further our understanding of violence, researchers should turn to the detail of what actually happens during these interactions. One way to move forward is to explain the emotional dynamics of these situations with the help of Eliasian notions of decivilization and Collins's micro-sociological theory of violence.

## Conceptualizing violent moral holidays as enclaves of decivilization

The existence of violent moral holidays seems to contradict the long-term civilizing process as outlined by Elias (1994 [1939]). However, the theory allows for decivilizing tendencies as well (Dunning and Mennell 1998; Mennell 1990; De Swaan 2001). Are violent moral holidays enclaves of decivilization? Fletcher (1997: 176-84) gives the following features of decivilizing processes, which are based on Elias' understanding of the Nazi-terror. First, they comprise a shift in the balance between internalized social restraint (self-restraint for short) and direct social constraint by others in favour of the latter. Second, they entail a desensitization towards violence, indicating that in processes of decivilization, people find violence less difficult to bear, and are less likely to find it repugnant and shameful. Third, mutual identification between groups diminishes.

Before considering how these three features of decivilizing processes may appear in moral holidays, let us first conceptualize what drives violent moral holidays forward. A useful point of departure is Elias and Dunning's *The Quest for Excitement* (1986). Here the argument is that in overall pacified societies with a high degree of civilization, people and young men in particular, still feel an urge to experience the excitement that stems from competition, rivalry and danger. This is provided for by institutionalized and regulated surrogates: activities such as sports, which offer room to engage in controlled violent competition. Interestingly, in the chapter that aims to explain spectator violence in football games in the same book, Dunning and colleagues (Dunning, Murphy, and Williams 1987) do not invoke the notion of a quest for excitement but rely on the idea of a differentiated civilization process. However, spectator violence arguably offers even more intense opportunities to experience the sensation of rivalry and domination than the more regulated and controlled forms of aggressive competition provided by sports.

Relating violence to a quest for intense bodily and emotional sensations approaches Collins's (2008: 98-9, 242-53, 320-2) micro-sociological explanation of violence during moral holidays. [\[1\] \[#N1\]](#) Collins (2008: 130) indicates that some violent situations are driven by intense feelings of group membership: 'outbursts into collective violence, and especially in the rhythmic, repetitive pattern that constitutes the overkill and the atrocity, is so compelling to its participants because it constitutes an extremely high degree of solidarity'. Here, the violence is driven by 'audience/team entrainment' and turned into a 'Durkheimian solidarity ritual' (Collins 2013: 143). Prior studies demonstrate the important role of that supportive groups in youth violence. They create a stage by

watching, or more intensively, by scolding and yelling or joining in (Felson 1982; Felson and Tedeschi 1993; Sanders 1994: 88-92; Tomsen 1997: 98; Wilkinson and Fagan 2001). Jankowski (1991: 171-2) explicitly notes the link between feelings of group membership and violence that turns extreme: 'when members [of a gang] act as part of a collective, they frequently go too far, becoming caught up in the dynamics of group action rather than considering the consequences of that action. Sometimes individual members and the group find it difficult to determine when enough force has been used, that is, when to quit' (see also Decker and Van Winkle 1996: 24). Furthermore, my prior analyses of youth violence suggest that solidarity excitement, the experience of strong feelings of group membership prior to the attack increases the likelihood for violence to turn extreme (Weenink forthcoming). To conclude, these literatures suggest that the emotional dynamics that drive violent moral holidays are intense feelings of solidarity among the attackers and their supportive groups. Caught up in the collective violent action, they enter a state in which they are *decontrolled by solidarity*.

The three features of decivilizing processes can now be related to this emotional grounding of violent moral holidays. Consider first the shift from self-restraint to social constraint. When attackers are strongly attuned towards one another and their supportive group, the balance between self-restraint and social constraint shifts toward the latter, to the point of a dissolving *homo clausus*. Elias introduced this term to denote the specific image of the self that individuals tend to adopt as the civilizing process unfolds. The figurations that make up highly differentiated societies with relatively strong state monopolies of violence require personalities that are not impulsive but reflexive, and who are sensitive towards their own and others' behaviour, particularly their bodies. Following Elias, people in these societies start to treat their bodies and emotions and those of others as a constantly monitored 'danger zone' as a result of the anxiety that follows from their vulnerability to not only others', but also their own inner drives (Elias 1994 [1939]: 445). Elias argues that this has two consequences, captured in the idea of *homo clausus*. First, human beings draw tight boundaries between themselves and whatever is 'outside'. Second, there is a tendency to see themselves as free and unique, sovereign (and apparently also anxious) individuals. Relating the notion of *homo clausus* to group violence in moral holidays, it can be expected that individual group members who are caught in the collective action no longer (want to) draw tight boundaries between themselves and the other group members, and instead of seeing themselves as free, unique and sovereign, individual group members now (want to) direct their actions entirely towards the collective action, just like doing the wave in a football stadium. [2] [#N2]

The other two features of decivilizing processes, the desensitization towards violence and the diminished mutual identification between groups, are probably strongly interrelated: violence is less difficult to bear, and people are less likely to find it repugnant and shameful when the victims are not considered as equally human. While violent moral holidays may not invoke categorical group boundaries necessarily, attackers still must find a way to negate their victims' identity as fellow human beings, and they need to create a moral distance between themselves and their victims in order to be able to hurt them. Following Blok (2001: 109-10), ritualization is one way of doing this. Thus, attackers may invent special names for victims, and use other abusive terms to dehumanize them, to remove them from the moral community. De Swaan's (1997) conceptualization of disidentification processes that preceded the Rwanda genocide elaborates this further. The process starts off with projection: negative but still human features, which have been denied in oneself and other in-group members, are attributed to outsiders. As identification is still possible at this stage, the in-group recognizes these features as potentially their own, so that further distancing is required, by reinvigorating and exaggerating the prior projections. As the process takes full swing, the outsiders are dehumanized, and transformed into a general category that is abstracted away from specific personal relationships, places or experiences. Thus, it can be expected that, through processes of ritualization and projection, the victims in violent moral holidays are perceived as an abstract dehumanized category, that stands in hostile opposition to the attackers' own categorical identity.

To summarize the argument so far: Whereas conventional daily life is peaceful, violent moral holidays might be viewed as enclaves where people arrange violent encounters that meets their desire to become decontrolled by solidarity. 'Decontrolled by solidarity' here means that the participants are completely absorbed in the group action, entering a state of dissolving *homo clausus*. In this state, the participants have undergone a marked shift in the balance between self-restraint and direct social constraint by others in favour of the latter. Now their actions are oriented to achieve and intensify a collective bodily rhythm, rather than being guided by internal monitoring. Furthermore, they have become desensitized towards violence, as their victims have been dehumanized in processes of projection and disidentification.

The following research questions allow us to assess whether and how these features appear in the empirical reality of violent moral holidays. First, relating violent moral holidays to the quest for excitement thesis, the question is: Are participants decontrolled by solidarity? Important features of this decontrolled state are the dissolving of *homo clausus* and relatedly, a shift from self-restraint to direct social constraint. Thus, the second question is whether the participants were able to monitor their actions and whether their actions were oriented towards attaining and intensifying the group action. The other two features of decivilizing processes to be discerned are the desensitization towards violence and the dehumanization of the victims. The former feature is captured by the following, rather open question: How do the participants in violent moral holidays experience the violence? The latter feature, that involves processes of projection and disidentification, is captured in the last, again rather open question: how do the participants of moral holidays perceive the victims?

## Two violent moral holidays

The descriptions of the two violent moral holidays below are taken from a larger sample of 159 violent interactions. The larger sample comprises an interval selection of all the cases referring to the sections of Dutch penal law related to violence at four juvenile courts (Arnhem, Utrecht, Den Bosch and Zutphen) in the Netherlands in 1995, 2000 and 2005. The files comprise interrogation reports of witnesses, defendants, victims and reports of the courts and the public prosecutor. Based on these files, a textual database was set up, with cases containing detailed descriptions of the violent interaction. Each case also includes explanations, commentaries and other communications about the violent interaction. Of these 159 cases, two cases were selected because they stood out in terms of the duration of the violence: it concerned groups that committed violence during one long night in February 1995 in case one and during several consecutive weekends in April and May 2004. The names reported in this article are fictitious.

### Case one. Four friends at carnival

On a Monday at 1 PM during carnival, Pieter, Xander, Patrick and Micha (aged 17-18 years) started drinking beer at the central square in the small town where they live. The four of them emptied a crate and then went home to eat. At 9 PM they came together again in the centre of town. They then bought beer at a cafeteria and went to the central square to consume the beer, take XTC pills and sniff speed. After that, they went to the pub. About 11 PM the group started to behave aggressively. Patrick said about this: At that time we agreed to beat someone up. Xander was bored and did not enjoy the carnival. I don't know who said it first, but we used words like "we feel like bashing". This means that someone would be beaten up without a reason. We were not completely angry, but we knew we wanted to do something, I mean to give someone a trashing. At first, we just boasted about it, later it became clear it would really happen. At least I agreed with it. Xander and Micha wanted to go outside and I joined them. We went out and started to offend and shout at everyone who happened to come close to us. We had agreed to provoke someone and then beat him up. While they shouted at everyone they encountered, the three boys (Pieter was still in the pub, with his girlfriend) saw two younger boys (aged 14-15), riding a bike. Patrick recalls: 'We looked at each other and I said: "Shall we", and I meant to say that we would get them.' One of the boys managed to escape, but the other was caught. Note that Patrick, Xander and Micha were by then affected by the alcohol, as they experienced difficulties in getting the victim on the ground, and could not keep abreast with the boy who escaped. First, a glass of beer was smacked at the back of his head, then they hit him and pulled him off his bike eventually. When he hit the ground, the boys started kicking him. Micha said that he 'had the intention to give him a good kicking. I wanted to hurt him. I was thrilled by it at that moment. I was acting though with my friends. While we kicked him, the boy cried out loud and begged us to stop. He panicked'. Fortunately, the friend who had managed to escape, alarmed the residents living nearby and they warned that the police would come. Then the boys ran away, laughing loudly, as both the victim and Micha reported. According to Micha, they boasted about the fight. Back in the pub, they told more friends about what they did: 'We were proud of it and wanted to be tough'. Because Pieter had not joined this fight, the boys agreed to do 'some more thrashing'. At about midnight, the four wanted to buy more alcohol. When they encountered three other boys, 'we looked at each other' and, said Patrick, 'I knew then very well that we were about to rag them'. In the first instance, they were just standing next to them. Then the four boys looked at each other again so, 'I knew it was going to start now'. As two of the three were quick enough to run away, the group jumped on only one of them. Patrick explained that he 'had no feelings' when he punched and hit the victim. 'I just hit him. Only later I started to ask myself why I did it'. Xander recalls that while he heard the victim screaming because of the pain, they did it

'for the thrill of it and because we could act tough'. Patrick indicates that in this situation, Pieter took the lead: 'I saw Pieter running toward him. I had the impression that he did this because he was not involved with the other beating.' The victim suddenly managed to escape, probably due to the slow movements of the intoxicated attackers, but he was chased again, and while one of the attackers stumbled and fell during the chase, the victim was eventually caught again and kicked to the ground. Luckily, a man who worked at a cafeteria nearby intervened and urged the boys to stop. Micha, a frequent visitor of this cafeteria, also wanted his friends to stop 'because I know the owner of the cafeteria quite well and I was not happy about us fighting in front of the cafeteria'. After this second beating, the boys headed back to the pub. In the pub, they started to talk 'their tough stories' about the fight to other friends. Thus, according to one of them, Benjamin: 'Pieter said to me that he had been fighting and he showed me his knuckles. They were glowing red. Xander was with him and he pointed to his shoes. I saw then that Xander had put a crown cap between the laces of his right shoe. Xander told me he kicked someone with the crown cap'. When the pub closed, the four boys started to roam the streets, laughing and shouting again at everyone they met. Patrick and Micha then started to smash several large windows of a shop. Patrick said about this: 'I still don't know why I did it'. When two others commented on their vandalism, Micha and Patrick wanted to attack them. However, Xander stopped them from doing so, as they turned out to be friends of him. After this last breakdown of violent urge, the boys were tired and headed towards home.

## Case two. A cruel group rules

This case concerns a much larger group of eleven boys and two girls (ages ranging from 15 to 20 years) who had beaten up at least nine but probably more victims during several consecutive weekends. As in the other case, the violence was always opportunistic and occurred at night. This group consumed large quantities of alcohol together as well. As Vincent said: 'We all went drunk and then tried to provoke others randomly, giving us reasons to beat them up'. The provocative actions were often preceded by verbal alignments of violence as a future line of action. Simply by saying: 'Shall we beat someone up tonight, I just found a new victim', as Denzel reported about his friend Gradus. Or by indicating at some point that they were 'in the mood for a fight'. One of the arrangements that this group used to catch suitable victims was the 'road block'. As Robin recalls: 'We were standing on that road. Suddenly Gradus went for a guy on a bike and he ran to him. He caught him and pulled him off his bike. Then he started to punch and hit him. The boy dropped down from his bike due to that beating. Then Denzel and I joined Gradus and we started shouting "We kick him! We kick him!" like we were crazy. We then offered his bike for sale to the rest of the group. That guy did not react, he seemed dizzy because of the kicking.' Another strategy to find victims was to pretend that a group member had been hit by the future victim. Elroy said about this: 'Denzel told us that two boys [which later appeared to be brothers] had hit him and that they were standing outside'. Giddy comments: 'The moment Denzel told us he had been hit, I knew I would be beating someone up for no reason actually'. This situation also shows how the group launched their attacks as a team. Thus, Elroy continues, 'When we went there, Erik was there before I could grab one of them. However, the boy managed to get away. So, Kim, Giddy and me went for him. First, I gave him a hard blow in the face. But then he tried to get away again, so I kicked him very hard at his legs, to make him hit the ground. He fell down. At that point I don't know what happened to me, but I kneeled down and start to punch him in his face. I wanted to hurt him very badly. While I punched him, Giddy and Kim kicked him all over his body.' Giddy comments on this: 'I saw that all my friends ran to that boy. I went with them to give him more blows and I wanted to watch how my friends would beat the shit out of him. That same night, I heard from Robin and Glenn that they got that guy's brother really good, and they were acting very tough about it.' Group members often referred to the wild chasing of victims by 'the whole group'. As in case one, the chasing attackers frequently fell down due to their state of intoxication. The slower movements and lowered coordination skills of most of the attackers offered opportunities for victims to escape the violence more than once. In one striking example of drunken clumsiness, attacker Roy broke two fingers because he missed a victim and hit a wall. Returning to the issue of team work, this group of attackers devised a division of labour, as Denzel states: 'Robin and I had agreed that we would follow that boy to trash him. I had already said to Robin that I would tackle him and that Robin then should hit him'. Upon asking why he did this, he responded by saying, 'We wanted to act tough, like we were part of the group'. This was the opening move for a kicking that involved four group members against one victim, during which Denzel 'had a haze in his eyes'. In another situation, Elroy and Robin divided tasks: Elroy took the victim from behind, so that Robin could hit him in the face. One distinctive feature of this group's violence is meanness or ominous bullying. For instance, when a desperate victim asked what he had done that made the group attack him, the answer of one group member was that 'he wanted to break my bones just as well'. Or, when a victim's

blood had dripped on Patrick's shoes, he said to the victim: 'Look now, at my shoes' and then Patrick pulled the head of the victim toward his knee and gave him a kneeling. This brings us to another feature of this group that also appeared in the first case: the storytelling afterwards. Thus, considering the above kneeling, specific reference was made to Patrick's trousers, full of blood. Another story was that Robin hit a victim so hard that the guy's nose was crooked; or the impressive way Gradus had been beating up a boy was later talked about as one 'could really hear the blows on his face, you could hear him punching, so it was really hard'. It should be noticed that some group members reported that they found the violence 'dirty and difficult to look at' and that they sometimes tried to intervene. As in the first case however, it were generally adult bystanders or police coming to the rescue. And if it were not for their state of intoxication, the attackers would have probably made more victims and would have committed more severe violence.

## Decontrolled by solidarity?

One of the most frequently heard explanations of the violence given by the attackers themselves is that they wanted to act tough for the group. This could be interpreted as group pressure; in this line of reasoning, attackers acted violently because they feared that the others would disapprove of them, calling them cowards or weak. However, if they had been unwillingly involved in the group violence, it is hard to understand how they could manage to align their actions so easily. They only needed to look at one another to know what would happen. Considering the second case, if the group members had felt they were forced to use violence, it would have been easy for them to duck the group's requirements given the large group size. Instead, it seems that the attackers were attracted rather than pressed to engage in the violent group action. What they perceive as 'toughness' is a token of group membership: whoever is tough is in the middle of attention. In the first case, one of the attackers stated he was proud, which means he felt like a worthy group member. In case two, toughness is explicitly related to group membership ('like we were part of the group'). There are more indications that intense feelings of group membership are at issue here. Take for example the preparatory moves: the shouting at strangers, the name-calling, the pointing at potential victims, and the creation of roadblocks. These are various ways to focus attention on the upcoming violence, aligning the group towards violence as a possible or probable line of action. In doing so, the group increases the excitement and works towards a shared emotional mood, although it should be noted that some group members were more active in attuning the group towards violence than others. The shared mood seems to be a mixture of arranged anger and joyful meanness. Arranged anger expresses itself in the desire to seriously hurt the victims, after participants expressed fake feelings of humiliation or denigration. Note that other group members know the instigators were pretending; again, these messages serve to align the group towards violence as a possible line of action. Joyful meanness appears when the attackers leave the scene laughingly in case one and when they toy with their victims in case two. The violence itself is a strong form of bodily attunement: think of the attackers kicking and punching a victim together, and how they divide tasks. The attackers also talk of 'the whole group' that came running after the victims. The chasing of one or two victims by the group, a recurrent feature in both cases, must have given individual group members not only a strong sense of dominance, but also a feeling of being in the middle of group action. Furthermore, in both cases, group members like to tell each other what happened afterwards. The storytelling can be interpreted as a way to revive and prolong the shared experiences, thus providing another indication that violence forges feelings of group membership. Such stories may even transcend into group symbols if they become a recurring part of the group conversations (cf. Collins 2004). The cases also suggest that the monitoring Me of the attackers was temporarily switched off as they became absorbed in the collective violent action. This appears in case one, where one of the attackers indicates that he had no feelings and just hit the victim and only later asked himself why he did it. Also in case two, where an attacker says that he didn't know what happened to him at a certain point in the violent attack, while another one speaks of a 'haze' in his eyes and a last one remembers he had been shouting like crazy. All in all, there are clear indications (the alignment actions that build up to a shared focus of attention, the strong group attunement, the attackers becoming absorbed in collective violent action, and the storytelling afterwards) that the attackers were decontrolled by solidary excitement and had entered a state of dissolving *homo clausus*. Their actions were much more guided by group alignment prior to the violence and bodily synchronization during the actual violent action than by internal monitoring.

This conclusion contrasts prevailing social-scientific and common sense notions of violence that tend to focus on individual perpetrators rather than violent situations. The claim is here that individuals, even the most bloodthirsty of them, act violently in a specific range of situations only, for instance in the enclaves of disorder

under study here. In line with this, only a minority of the participants had a history of violent offenses and violent behaviour outside the enclave. These youths were also most active in aligning the group toward violent action. But for most of them, what happened in the enclave was part of an unusual 'time-out'.

## Desensitization towards violence and dehumanization of the victims?

How did the participants experience the violence? Although some group members mentioned in case two reported they found it sometimes hard to watch how their friends beat up victims, the descriptions suggest that youth were actively seeking opportunities to experience violence. Thus, they created a space in which they were positively sensitized towards violence, rather than being in a state of desensitization. The sensitization towards violence takes places before, during and after the actual violence. For instance, in case one, the group members indicated to one another that 'they felt like bashing'. Also, the spotting of suitable victims by the attackers in case two can be interpreted as efforts to sensitize the group towards violence. Sensitization occurred during the violence as well, as the attackers indicated they wanted to inflict pain on the victims and, even though they noticed that the victims suffered from the pain as they heard them screaming, this did not keep them from continuing to hurt them. Finally, in the stories afterwards, the violent acts were considered positive, as markers of toughness and worthiness.

One striking feature of both cases is that victims were opportunistically targeted and did not seem to play an evident role in provoking the violence. While some attackers indicated that a potential victim had somehow wronged them, this was merely a way to get the group ready for action. Also, the violence did not involve much prior ritualization or other forms of emotional work to project negative identities unto the victims. Obviously, victims were scolded and subject to name-calling, often as attempts to provoke them. However, no efforts were made to single them out as a distinctive evil category. These interactions are not punishments or acts of vengeance, but attempts to display dominance for the sake of dominance itself. Instead of a moral logic, the attackers' ominous whims rule. In Katz's (1988: chapter 3) terms, they display 'the ways of the badass'. The badass acts as if the existence of the other is futile, a non-entity, rather than portraying the other as blameful, threatening, fearful or evil. Badasses are not 'morally malleable' (Katz 1988: 80), they have elevated themselves beyond the moral existence of the other. At this point, making a distinction between the terms desidentification and disidentification may be helpful. Desidentification captures the process in which groups negate the identity of others, nullifying their existence as human beings. In De Swaan's (1997) conceptualization of disidentification, victims need to be identified as bad or inferior first, in order to become the target of righteous anger. In both dis- and desidentification, dehumanization takes place, as the identity of the other as a human being that deserves compassion disappears in both processes.

To conclude, the analyses suggest that violent moral holidays share features of decivilization. First, as enclaves in which participants become decontrolled by solidarity, they form figurations in which the actions of the individuals involved are guided more by social constraint than self-restraint and in which they are much less guided by internal monitoring, dissolving *homo clausus* temporarily. Second, a process of desidentification was identified in which the participants reject the identity of their victims as futile. However, desensitization towards violence did not appear. Instead, the participants' attitude towards violence is better captured as positive sensitization towards violence.

## Discussion

It is striking that the participants so often indicated they were acting tough, even though they arranged their violent encounters in ways that hardly can be seen as fair fights (but then, unlike in the movies, fair fights may be hard to find in real life). Displaying toughness seems to be an important meaning these youth themselves attribute to violence, perhaps related to the differential civilization of the social figurations of which they are part. Even so, the meaning of violence as a sign of toughness by itself does not explain why youths actually engage in violence. This only happens when there is a group that provides the emotional force to launch the meaning of toughness into violent action. Such toughness comes to live in situations of decontrolled solidarity, that allow the participants to desidentify towards the victims and to positively sensitize towards violence.



The aim of this paper was to show that a combination of insights from the Eliasian tradition with Collins' micro-sociological approach provides a fruitful conceptualization of violent moral holidays. The explanatory framework proposed here is both more specific and more realistic than prevailing explanations, as their focus on aggregated background features of individual perpetrators abstracts away from the dynamics and meanings of actual violent interactions. Future studies should rely on a larger sample of situations in order to replicate the findings reported here. In addition to more extensive empirical analyses, some of the ideas introduced here deserve conceptual elaboration as well. For instance, developing the notion of dissolving *homo clausus* further and providing a more precise conceptualization of the conditions under which this occurs may help to improve our understanding of how attackers experience violence. Also, the appearance of processes of desidentification in various contexts, also in connection with processes of disidentification, deserves more conceptual attention and elaboration.

Perhaps the most important avenue for future empirical and conceptual work in this area concerns the long-term development of this sort of violence. A long term approach to forms of group violence may start by making a distinction between the joyous, recreational and predatory group violence of the type that has been analysed here versus moralistic, dispute-related group violence that arises from antagonistic interests. Reasoning from a figurational/process sociological perspective, the hypothesis would be that the proportion of the former type of violence increases in the course of the civilizing process. This is not to say that violent moral holidays are a new phenomenon, as it may very well be that similar enclaves appeared at rural fairs, or in the form of traditional *charivari* (Blok 2001) centuries ago already. Nevertheless, as the civilizing process unfolds, two developments may result into an increasing proportion of joyous predatory violence. First, as the level of state penetration increases, people are more likely to turn to state officials to have their conflicts solved, rather than using informal violent means to settle their grievances and disputes. When people seek justice, they increasingly turn to the state rather than to rely on violent self-help (Black 1983: chapter 7, especially pages 139-141; Cooney 1998: chapter 2). This process is reinforced by increasing levels of functional democratization (Elias 1978 [1970]: 63-68), a process in which more and more categories of people gain access to political arenas where they can pursue their functional interests and settle disputes, instead of engaging in violent political struggles to achieve these means. Second, as Elias and Dunning (1986) argued, the civilizing process may result into an increased desire for collectively experienced bodily and emotional sensations, or, in terms of this article, a quest for being decontrolled by solidarity (see Presdee 2000; Rojek 1999, who claim that deviant experiences play an increasingly important role in contemporary societies). As the analyses suggest, violent moral holidays provide such intense emotional and bodily experiences. Thus, under civilising conditions, it can be expected that the share of moralistic, dispute-related group violence decreases and that the proportion of predatory, recreational group violence increases over time. This hypothesis may offer a new direction for research that contributes to the already rich figurational/process-sociological tradition of analyses of violence (Franke, Wilterdink, and Brinkgreve 1992; Johnson and Monkkonen 1996; Spierenburg 1996, 2008).

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## Notes

- Note that the violence in moral holidays is atypical in Collins's theory. The source of violence in most other situations is related to confrontational tension and fear (ct/f, see Collins 2008, chapter 2). Following Collins (2009, 569), the focus of attention on the other that produces emotional attunement in normal interactions, is sustained in antagonistic confrontations, but instead of attunement, now it results in ct/f. The main source of ct/f is that antagonistic confrontations are strongly at odds with human beings' inclination to achieve situational solidarity in social interaction, while ct/f is also partly related to the prospect of being hurt or experiencing pain. Following Collins, ct/f forms a barrier that keeps people from using violence. Two important pathways to overcome that barrier are the presence of weak, passive victims who give in to emotional dominance and/or the presence of supportive audiences that help to build up emotional dominance. ↗ [\[#N1-ptr1\]](#)
- While this was not an explicit focus of analysis, I happened to find indications that in situations of extreme violence, the attackers' Meadian acting 'I' temporarily silenced the 'Me', their monitoring, reflexive part of self. This is another indication that individuals may enter a state of dissolving *homo clausus* while engaging in violence, as seeing oneself as free, unique and sovereign requires a monitoring Me (Weenink forthcoming). ↗ [\[#N2-ptr1\]](#)