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Reflections on Violence in the Spanish Borderlands

A Review Essay on *Chiricahua and Janos: Communities of Violence in the Southwestern Borderlands, 1680-1880* by Lance R. Blyth (University of Nebraska Press, 2012)

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I called this essay ‘reflections’ on Blyth’s book because most of what follows is a wide-ranging commentary on the book, though I do begin with a brief summary. A second caveat is that I am reviewing this book as sociologist and anthropologist interested in long term social change—meaning millennia—with special emphasis on frontiers. I hope this approach will be useful to readers of *Clodynamics*. For more typical reviews by historians see Babcock (2012), Conrad (2013), or Lee (2013).

Summary

Blyth begins with a discussion of Nirenberg’s *Communities of Violence* (1996) to lay out a claim that some communities are violence prone, often due to a variety of circumstances. He also draws on other writers: Baretta and Markoff (2006 [1978]), Barr (2007), Blackhawk (2006), Brooks (2002), Guy and Sheridan (1998a), Hämäläinen (2008), White (1991 [2010]) and many others. His summaries are good, albeit with depth only sufficient to whet one’s appetite.

He also describes his sources. The usual Spanish archives, the work of William Griffen on Janos (1998a, 1998b, 1991). He also uses what he dubs the Chiricahua archives, that is, oral history and ethnography from the early part of the twentieth century. This is a useful approach which calls to mind the work of Andrés Reséndez (2005) on identities in the nineteenth century which draws on Kiowa winter count pictorial histories and Christopher Chase-Dunn and Kelly Mann’s (1998) work on the Wintu, which draws on some oral histories and archaeological evidence. Some reviews have questioned the oral history, but not because it is oral, but because it was collected so long after the events it references. While a useful caution, it is often the case that Indigenous

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Peoples have long, well-preserved oral histories that are congruent with histories drawn from documents and archaeology.

He notes carefully that kinship is the basis of Chiricahua organization and notes that living groups often had fluid memberships. Among other obligations, was that of kinsmen to punish those thought to be responsible for violent deaths. He notes, "Revenge caused more retaliation, more revenge, and even more retaliation. In the absence of any authority to enforce cooperation or separation, or at least minimize the damage, retaliation served as the only rational option for either community" (20). This theme is elaborated in chapter 6. This gave rise to continual cycle of raiding. This, of course, has been noted in many situations where state authority is weak, and at least one party is driven by kinship considerations.

The meat of the book is in chapters 2 through 6, where Blyth documents carefully the various attacks, occasional periods of peace, kinds of trade, and personal interactions. This sort of dense narrative is difficult to summarize adequately. Yet it is in such details that relations and changes in them are demonstrated. He follows these relations from 1680 through 1875. Chapter 7 tells the story of the final imprisonment and forced relocations onto reservations in the United States. He uses the story of Geronimo (Goyahkla) throughout to anchor the narrative on a familiar, if much misunderstood and mythologized, Chiricahua actor.

In a brief conclusion Blyth draws lessons about communities of violence and suggests that the violence in which drug traffickers are embedded is a contemporary parallel to these older communities of violence. This is the most provocative chapter and one that inspires one to rethink older and more recent communities of violence.

The book is illustrated with 17 very useful maps and provides a glossary. Because of all the detailed descriptions of movement and raids, one almost wishes there were links to Google Earth to gain a feel for the territory. The territories discussed on the west are the foothills of the Sierra Madre Occidental, which is some of the most isolated territory in Mexico and which remains a refuge for drug lords. Coincidentally, as I was finishing this essay I heard a talk by Tim Gallagher on his book (2013) about the elusive Imperial Woodpecker whose primary habitat is the Sierra Madre Occidental. He was searching for the largest woodpecker in the world. Intermixed in his talk were slides and discussions of the territory, the people, and the violence associated with drug lords. He was frequently told, you should not go there it is dangerous. The point being the idea of a violent area even today is not misplaced.

Two background items on *Chiricahua and Janos* are of interest. As is all too common Blyth could not gain an academic position in the mountain west, so took another job. He wrote this book while working full-time (see pp. 219-

221). Also, an earlier draft linked his discussion of communities of violence to theoretical discussion of social evolution. Alas, the publisher asked him to cut it in the interests of readability and accessibility: great for selling books; bad for analysis. I hope that he will eventually publish a paper on this topic.

Some Brief Comments

Violence is somewhat over emphasized (also a complaint of Babcock 2012). In places it is almost reminiscent of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) but not quite—though in fact some of the events Blyth depicts are dramatized in a thinly disguised way in McCarthy's narrative. There were, in fact, extended periods of peace and non-coerced trade. To some extent the emphasis on violence is a result of what is in the archives (Spanish and Chiricahua), fighting seems always to be more newsworthy than peace and quiet. William Griffen titled his first volume on *Janos Apaches at War & Peace* (1988a). Blyth does mention peaceful periods, and implies that it was indeed a phase of the cycle of revenge and retaliation.

The jump to contemporary times in the conclusion is a leap too far without some intervening explanations and theoretical accounts. Some of that type of discussion probably ended up on the editing room floor.

All in all this is good, readable book that fills in many gaps in Borderlands history. That it was done without the usual academic supports makes it all the more impressive. Though some of my reflections may seem critical, *Chiricahua and Janos* is a good book, one that could readily be used in a variety of courses, especially on the Southwest Borderlands and Native American—settler relations, and in courses devoted to discussions of violence that have a national or ethnic character.

That said I will turn to some other issues.

Reflections on Violence in Janos Region

My key comment or critique is that violence is not an explanation, but a description. Indeed, I argue that it is in theoretical terms more often a dependent rather than an independent variable. However, what is most common is that violence is often part of complex interaction process with several feedback loops in which dependent and independent become meaningless categories (for extended discussion of violence see Clastre 1994; Cusick 1998; Denmark 1995; Green and Perlman 1985; Whitehead 1992, 2004a, 2004b; Wilmer 2002, among many others). Blyth implicitly recognizes this in his discussion of revenge 'cycles.' While he provides much that lends insight into the internal drivers of the feedback loops: need for status through warrior activities, needs for resources, needs for revenge sanctioned by kinship obligations and religious obligations, and so on. He says little about what

initiates the cycles, except when he notes that “In the absence of any authority to enforce cooperation or separation, or at least minimize the damage...” (pg. 20) the lack of state authority makes all but impossible to stop the cycle.

Also missing, but I think relevant, is this same condition, “absence of any authority” makes such areas “regions of refuge” as Aguirre Beltran (1979) termed them. That is, they are areas that precisely because they are out of the way and ignored, that social organizations destroyed elsewhere can persevere for a long time. Thus, it is no accident that Arizona and New Mexico were the last two states added to the lower 48 in the United States, and both have very large Native American populations. Ironically, up to the early nineteenth century, what is now New Mexico was the center of European population, albeit small, while Texas, California, and what is now Arizona had fewer Europeans combined than the two largest cities in New Mexico.

The “absence of any authority” does give a hint to one larger causal factor, state power, something that is characteristic of frontiers and border regions as noted by Baretta and Markoff (1978), Ferguson and Whitehead (1992a, 1992b), Guy and Sheridan (1998b), Hall (1989b, 2000, 2009, 2013), Markoff (2006), White (1991), and Whitehead (1992, 2004a, 2004b) among many others. While there is some validity to the critique that too much theorizing about frontiers emphasizes the imperial centers, they are a major factor in creating, transforming, and closing frontiers. The title of Elizabeth John’s (1975) massive history of Spanish-Indian relations in northern New Spain says this well: *Storms Brewed in Other Men’s Worlds*. Some, but far from all, the major causes of increased violence were from outside the immediate area.

However, recently, much work—see the list above—has focused on how events and processes in frontier regions also affect or influence the centers. One difficulty or caution here is that one must be careful to distinguish between the effects of frontier activities in toto vs. the effects of any one frontier region alone. David Weber has written much about Spanish frontiers, focusing on its northern-most frontiers in New Spain (1982, 1986, 1992, and especially 2005). The drain caused by any one frontier region was seldom a serious threat to Imperial stability. However, it is worth noting that New Mexico province alone cost the Spanish empire thousands of pesos per year more than it generated. So why was the colony maintained? While pride and the Catholic Church’s concern for souls of converted Indians were a partial reason, the key issue was that New Mexico served as a massive buffer between other imperial powers, France, Britain, later United States, and the silver mines further south in Zacatecas. This was a serious concern since those mines produced more wealth than all the mines in South America. Still, the collective drain from all frontiers could have serious effects on the political economy of the empire.

Other factors are local geography and overall carrying capacity of a frontier region to support human populations. Carrying capacity is especially complex issue since it is determined by climate and agricultural and foraging technology. Once a new, more productive technology arrives, typically with an expanding state or states—here Spanish agriculture vs. Apache foraging and occasional gardening—populations often increase so that a return the status quo ante is not possible, at least without considerable die-offs. Also included in these technologies in the greater southwest (Northern New Spain, Southwestern United States) are horses and guns greatly expanding fighting and hunting capacities, and vastly extending the areas over which fighting could take place. In terms of climate, it is well to keep in mind that throughout the greater southwest local ecologies were fragile. Much archaeological evidence shows that Puebloan peoples often moved their settlements in response to relatively slight changes in rainfall and temperatures (Hall 1989a; Meinig 1971; Ortiz 1972, 1979, 1983; Riley 1987; Spicer 1962; Spielman 1991; Stoddard et al. 1983; Tainter and Tainter 1996; Worcester 1979). Similarly, even slight changes in pressures on carrying capacity due to changing population densities, technologies of production, and increased foraging could have major consequences. In short, the land was overused, so Apaches, and other erstwhile foragers, had to raid to get necessary supplies.

The taking of captives, much discussed by Blyth, had major consequences too. On the northernmost frontiers of New Spain, many foragers had nothing to trade to Spaniards for horses except captives taken from enemies. As the trade in captives and the need for horses increased, every group had to increase level of warfare to gain more captives to trade for horses or face being taken captive. This led to a state of endemic warfare, little different than the cycle of revenge Blyth discusses. But note, if there had been no trade in captives or an adequate supply of horses and food, the need for violent interactions would have been much lower.

Another causal factor in violence is the desire for trade goods. This is well described by Ferguson and Whitehead (1992a, 1992b; see too Hall 1993). When states expand into non-state territory, non-state people quickly develop a desire then a need for state-supplied trade goods, here horses, guns, cloth, and so on. Local leaders could expand influence in power to the degree that they could control access to such good and use the distribution of them to gain followers. Clearly, this was happening throughout the Janos region. As this desire/need increases, leaders are prompted to fight each other, as well as to raid state-based settlements. Very quickly this raises the level of violence throughout the region. The papers in Ferguson and Whitehead (1992a) show that this happened whenever states encountered non-state peoples, including in pre-capitalist settings. This effect, “War in the Tribal Zone” (note ‘Tribal’ is used ironically here), had consequences for the development of thinking about

social evolution. This effect set in very quickly after contact. Hence even first-hand accounts of contact reported levels of violence that had not been there before contact. The forces that brought observers to the frontier, were the same ones responsible for large increases in violence. This is one of the reasons I would like to see what Blyth had to say about social evolution.

Obviously, the topic of violence (and war) is a complex one. Claims that foragers were peaceful before the arrival of states are exaggerated. Foragers did fight, but not as much as they did after state intrusion. But claims that foragers are inherently violent are also exaggerated. The issue is relative levels of violence. Without detailed and reasonably accurate population figures it is almost impossible to see if an important consequence—and hence a reinforcing factor in feedback loops—of the violence was to lower the population of humans, but also horses and cattle, thus lowering the stress on the carrying capacity. Baretta and Markoff (1978) discuss in detail how increasing cattle populations led to conflict. Not solely over possession of cattle, but also the destruction of crops by cattle (especially when there was no fencing) and a general lowering of the carrying capacity of territory to support other fauna.

This segues into another topic worth exploring. What are the inter-relations between violence and its many causal or contributing factors and ethnic identities? Frontiers are notorious places for ethnic change: genocide, assimilation, acculturation, amalgamation, hybridization, and ethnogenesis (Hall 1998a, 1998b, 2000, 2004, 2009). Also we can consider the argument advanced by Barth (1969, 1994) that ethnic boundaries often matter more than the individuals they contain. He and his students documented how people changed ethnic identity when they moved across such boundaries, especially when the change is accompanied by a change in life ways, say a shift from herding to farming. It would be helpful to know if, how, and when individuals, or families, or larger groups changed identities during the rampant conflict in the Janos area. Given that there were many captives and much interbreeding as well as intermarriage, how are identities kept distinct? Or even were they? Or did they become ad hoc to a given situation?

It is abundantly clear that Chirichua and subgroup identities persisted. It may be less obvious but clear that people also had relatives on all sides (Brooks 2002 is especially good in discussing such cases). In discussions of the southern cone of South America Susan Socolow (1992, 1998) shows how and why Spanish women taken captive by an Indigenous group, would forego recovery and elect to stay with their captors. For one, their children had Indigenous fathers. For another, such children had low status in Spanish society, and sometimes the women were seen as ‘contaminated’ and regarded to have a degraded status. That reaction was far less common among indigenous groups. Other research has shown that this was in no way unique to South America, or even to Spanish colonies. There are also documented cases

where men were adopted into Indigenous societies, though that seems to have been much rarer. Children were often adopted. Or if not, their children were. But this was not common in Spanish society with its emphasis on 'blood purity' and the *casta* system. Still, immediate kinship relations played an important role in identity formation and change

Clearly, too, identity was a social construction that involved both an individual's self-identity and how s/he was identified by others. But what else? One possible answer is that each group needed the other to define itself. It is also possible that the maintenance of another group served as a justification for maintenance of military presence. Blyth, notes the role of military service in prestige and status ranking within each group. Sometimes the presence of a military installation was valuable locally since it provided ready markets for goods and services and opportunities for paid employment and to gains in status. It is also clear that identity or appearances of identity were intentionally manipulated. David Weber (1982, 1992) reports it was not uncommon for different Indigenous groups to plant evidence that a raid had been conducted by some other groups. Apaches and Comanches did this frequently. As Blyth shows, it was not unusual for Chiricahua to claim that a raid had been conducted by a different group, or to claim it was hot-headed younger men who made the raid. That the latter was not unusual made such claims plausible. Here a lack of understanding—and in later years feigned lack of understanding—contributed to problems. Among groups led by a headman, there is little mechanism to enforce group decisions. Common practice is for those who disagree with a decision to break off and form their own group or join another. For many Spanish settlers and military leaders *los indios bárbaros* were thought to be unorganized and chaotic. Elaborate kinship and prestige relations often were not understood. To many indigenous groups all members of a state-based group typically were seen as equivalent—after all they did claim to have one leader. This often made it possible for one group to seek revenge for a wrong by attacking a segment of the other group that was not involved in the initiating raid. This readily helps endemic warfare or the cycle of revenge raiding became widespread. Indigenous groups were not averse to raiding for cattle in one settlement and selling those cattle in another settlement. As Brooks (2002) and others note sometimes these relations were known and exploited by one group to its own advantage. And as with leaving false signs indicating who conducted a raid, these understandings and misunderstandings could be, and were, manipulated for immediate gain. Such circumstances make it difficult to see general patterns when interactions are examined very locally. That there were many exceptions to some patterns does not vitiate their existence.

These musing on ethnicity and discussions of 'middle grounds' or frontiers call to mind what our editor, Peter Turchin, calls a "metaethnic frontier," a

fault line between two metaethnic communities. A metaethnic community is a large, typically the largest, grouping of people with some degree of shared identity, often containing many subdivisions. These include “not only the usual civilizations—the Western, Islamic, and Sinic—but also such broad cultural groups as the Celts and Turco-Mongolian steppe nomads” (2006: 5). Here the metaethnic frontier is between Spanish society as an exemplar of western civilization and Indigenous peoples of the America exemplified by Chiricahua communities. Thus, a metaethnic frontier is “an area where an imperial boundary coincides with a fault line between two metaethnic communities” (2006:6). Turchin further argues that metaethnic frontiers can be “incubators of group solidarity” (*asabiya*, after Ibn Khaldun) (Turchin 2003, 2011), or in the terms used here, a metaethnic frontier can be a seedbed of ethnogenesis.

Metaethnic frontiers provide a reasonable segue into my last topic, the debate about whether general theories of interaction are possible or must be understood on an ad hoc basis. It will come to no surprise to readers of *Clodynamics*, that I take the general theory side, but with some caveats.

To Theorize or Not to Theorize, that is the Question

Blyth’s account would seem to fall squarely in not to theorize camp, especially given his several nods to Brooks’s approach to Borderlands history. But this may be an overstatement in that Blyth’s connection with social evolution, which would be toward the theorizing camp, ended up on the editing room floor.

Frontiers, with their great messiness and myriad anomalies (Hall 2000, 2009, 2013), are great places to see how local processes connect to global and long-term processes. I begin with some comments on some writing on colonial history of New Mexico. One of the things James Brooks does very well in *Captives and Cousins* (2002)—and he does many things well, and deservedly earned laurels for the book and has had a strong effect on borderlands history—is to show the complexity of ethnic and racial interactions along the Southwestern frontiers. Note the plural frontiers. However, I think he overstates the case a bit that race and ethnicity are not key structural factors on these frontiers. Janet LeCompte (1985) claims that the revolts in northern New Mexico in 1836 in Chimayo, then again in 1847, wherein new American governor Charles Bent was killed, had nothing to do with race or class. Yet Andrés Reséndez (2005) very gently notes that the major players in both rebellions were Pueblo Indians. Nope, no race—better ethnic identity—there!

I think both LeCompte and Brooks were expecting a caricature of race, ethnicity, class, and gender in the ways they were used in sociology and some other disciplines several decades ago. There is an important methodological issue here that overlaps with epistemological issues, and with changes in the

way social scientists think about race, ethnicity, gender, and class. Too often race, ethnicity, gender, class, as well as identity were thought of as independent variables. Rather, they are at best interdependent variables. Furthermore, identity, might best be conceived as a dependent variable, a consequence. I hasten to add that once identity is shaped it does have causal efficacy in much wider webs of interactions. To phrase this differently, Brooks and LeCompte are correct that race, ethnicity, gender, and class are not master narrative variables that explain major historical processes. But as both writers demonstrate so well in their detailed analyses, race, ethnicity, gender, class, and identity do, in fact, play major roles in all sorts of frontier interactions. This is also the case in Blyth's book.

But my critique of narrow and local view, too, is a caricature. A much richer account is contained in the papers in *Small Worlds* edited by Brooks, DeCorse, and Walton (2008). Perhaps there is a "middle ground" to be found here. I have argued that frontiers are zones or regions where many kinds of cultural, economic, political, and historical (i.e. 'social' as a 'covering term' for all of these) changes are common. They are zones of intense and complex social change. Often, but not always, they are the only places where some changes occur (Hall 1989b, 1998a, 1998b). Hence, they are intrinsically interesting. Social change in frontier zones typically is the result of interactions of local actors and forces with larger, external actors and forces. Thus, comparisons might be drawn along any number of factors. While each constellation of such interactions is, in many ways, unique, there are underlying similarities, patterns, and commonalities—hence the common label 'frontier.' I argue that it would be useful in the study of frontiers to attend to these two different, and often conflicting, circumstances: unique constellations of actors and social forces **and** broad similarities.

Robert Pirsig in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974) argued:

The Buddha, the Godhead, resides quite as comfortably in the circuits of a digital computer or the gears of a cycle transmission as he does at the top of a mountain or in the petals of a flower (pg. 26).

The trick in any discussion of frontiers is, in the words of Brian Berry at a conference on origins of cities, to avoid putting our "noses too close to the shards," but to simultaneously avoid flying so high theoretically that all connection between shards and the people who made them is lost (at NAS Sackler Colloquium: *Early Cities: New Perspectives on Pre-Industrial Urbanism*, organized by Joyce Marcus and Jeremy Sabloff, National Academy of Sciences Building, Washington, DC, May 18-20, 2005).

So for me Blyth is a little too close to the shards, though in fairness I have often flown a bit high theoretically. I hope that we could agree that each

approach complements the other. *Chiricahua and Janos* supplies the kind of closely presented evidence that is necessary to critique, develop, revise, emend, and amend theoretical accounts of frontier change and social evolution. Conversely, such theorizing can prompt new questions of old information and searches for new data. Blyth's account would have been of great value to me when I was working my critical application of world-systems analysis to understanding *Social Change in the Southwest* (1989a). We need to keep the dialogue going.

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