CIVILIZING MASSACRE:

* LORD OF THE FLIES AS PARABLE OF THE INVENTION OF ENEMIES, VIOLENCE, AND SACRIFICE

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Abstract: Lord of the Flies is often interpreted as a dark but simplistic revelation of human cruelty. Beneath the veneer of civility lurk malice, savagery, and the will to slaughter. Placed on an island, without social controls, fear of punishment, or moral condemnation, naive children begin to hunt one another, hurling through the forest chanting mantras that glorify murder. Our true nature is unveiled, as our inherent brutality bursts forth in a torrent of savagery and merciless violence toward other human beings. Bereft of law and social agencies that render violence immoral, human beings become the violent paragons of animality hidden and rationalized by the shallow pretences of civilized morality. And yet Golding envisions something more sinister. For the children on the island are placid until they confront their isolation and dread. They begin to imagine monsters, don uniforms, and struggle to adopt the civilized regulations of society. Only then do the children demand order and obedience, and further, begin to invent rituals of sacrifice and murder. They worship death, impaling and erecting the bleeding head of a pig as testament to their dominion. Taking the vantage of sociological, psychological, historical, and theological perspectives, this article considers *Lord of the Flies* a deceptively simple parable on the sadism and bloodshed that are not merely animalistic instincts, but emerge with the dawn of consciousness and civilization. The parable illumines our own civilized propensities toward slaughter, sacrifice, and atrocity.

William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954) is considered by many to be a scathing indictment of modern civilized morality and the innate cruelty of human nature lurking underneath. Placed on an island, without social controls, fear of punishment, or moral condemnation, our inherent cruelty bursts forth in a torrent of savagery and merciless violence toward other human beings. Bereft of law and social agencies that render violence immoral, human beings become the violent paragons of animality hidden and rationalized by the shallow pretences of civilized morality. So encapsulates the most common reading of *Lord of the Flies*. However, it is the contention of this paper that *Lord of the Flies* must be read with more complexity and irony. I will adumbrate how
Lord of the Flies can be read on four different and complementary levels: the sociological, the psychological, the historical, and the theological. Interpreting the text from these perspectives should demonstrate that Lord of the Flies is a deceptively simple text, a parable intimating a deeply sinister indictment of humanity and the genesis of sacrificial violence through the process of civilization. This parable should be pertinent to violence within our culture, and atrocities inflicted by governments on external enemies. But it should also evoke the genesis of violence in cultures considered more ‘savage’ and insular. This parable should resonate with recent enactments of violence and murder. It is a literary evocation of the gestation of brutality and contagious violence, and may enable us to envisage the very birth of atrocity from within.

The Sociological View: Society as Architecture for Violence
The story is familiar: children are marooned on an uninhabited island when their plane crashes. Though terrified, they try to survive by finding food and shelter. They begin to enjoy a newfound sense of freedom, but the group is divided by a conflict. Ralph wishes for peaceful and responsible cohabitation, but Merridew wants control and order. Eventually Merridew forsakes order for savagery and begins to aggress against Ralph and his friends. After scenes of violence and gruesome murder, the surviving children are rescued.¹

A sociological interpretation of Lord of the Flies might suggest that human cruelty emerges when social controls weaken, and this seems to be one of Golding’s salient interests when depicting human savagery in this novel. Golding chose sequestered, plane-wrecked children for the novel to propose the shocking notion that violence is not the result of politics, complex social forces, imitation, education, or even necessity. Human beings are cruel simply because they are human, at least ostensibly. This is an indictment of both warfare in general and of the rationalized excuses modern men offer when justifying their brutality toward others. The fact that the subjects of the novel are children, and that they are isolated from society proves this by precluding the possibility of socialization to violence. Even in childhood, or perhaps especially, since we have not yet learned to hide or ‘civilize’ our true nature, violence emerges toward our fellows.
However, even from the sociological perspective, Golding’s human animal is far more complicated. In *Lord of the Flies* society is actually *structured* upon such violence. Hierarchies are constructed, power becomes a dominant factor, and bloodlust erupts in the symbolism of removing the trappings and suits of childish innocence. ‘“We’ll have rules!” [Merridew] cried excitedly. “Lots of rules! Then when anyone breaks ‘em…” ’ (p. 33). The children discover violence without instruction, and they soon transfer their hungry drive to find food into the joy and ecstasy of hunting and killing a pig:

‘*Kill the pig. Cut her throat. Spill her blood.*’

‘There was lashings of blood,’ said Jack, laughing and shuddering, ‘you should have seen it!’

‘You should have seen the blood!’

‘*Kill the pig. Cut her throat. Bash her in.*’ (pp. 69-75)

No longer just the attainment of food, hunting becomes *ritual* sacrifice as the children discover the pleasure in killing. Such violence is power over life and death; over others in dominance and the sheer pleasure in taking life with one’s own hands: ‘“We’re strong—we hunt! If there’s a beast, we’ll hunt it down! We’ll close in and beat and beat and beat—!” ’ (p. 91).

This bloodlust is soon transferred again from the joy of mastering the life and death of animals to mastering and inflicting suffering on human beings. Merridew’s cadre despises Piggy, the weak, loathsome child who represents intelligence as well as the helplessness they need to disavow: ‘“Piggy was a bore; his fat, his ass-mar [asthma] and his matter-of-fact ideas…” ’ (p. 65). Murdering the poor, obese, defenceless, nearsighted Piggy satiates the savage children. Golding’s indictment of human beings now takes a Durkheimian turn: human beings will search for scapegoats in order to provide feelings of power and unity to the community. By slaughtering a victim, the community not only satisfies its anger and violence, it siphons and displaces the violent feelings away from the community members onto the victim.² Hence, the community is not just satisfied, but saved from intracommunal hostility. They can all be brothers, united in the thrill of violence by displacing their anger onto the evil Other.³ Further, moral justification and
nobility of cause are created to provide ideological sanction for the cruelty of the deed, and now any shred of conscience that might interfere with the sacrifice is transformed into moral necessity and justice against the heretical victim become violator of communal sanctity.

We need enemies so that we can channel our hostility from our neighbours onto victims, and we then love our neighbours when we act communally in a moral and satisfying ritual of violent justice. Anonymity in the act and social sanction allow us not to feel guilty or recognize the genuine barbarity of the deed. Such is Hannah Arendt’s (1963) ‘banality of evil’. It becomes ordinary and even morally necessary because socially sanctioned and rationalized. Those perpetuating cruelty may be genuinely unaware of their savagery, and they may even honestly believe that they are carrying out the moral good by eliminating evil.

Such savagery in Lord of the Flies is not merely an indictment of human nature, however. While the use of children might seem to be merely a cynical portrayal of unsocialized human cruelty, Golding is now saying that society is actually founded upon such cruelty. It is not that human beings are bad or evil. They are indeed prone to violence and wickedness. The problem is not only that we are violent and capable of horrific slaughter, but that ‘civilization’ manages to rationalize such acts and justify them in the name of God, King, and Country. Thus Golding is vilifying modern society for its barbarism and vicious brutality, which are disguised by the lies of moral justification, necessity, and ‘civility.’ Not human nature, but the dishonest society that lies about its own violence is the problem for Golding. The sequestered island of children is not just human nature in its own primal unsocialized element, but is a microcosm of the adult ‘civilized’ society off the island, the one which is engaged in mature war and slaughter even as the children repeat that same sociogenic violence on a smaller scale. It is true that human violence erupts when social controls diminish, but it is also true that this image of lawless violence is placed explicitly at a time when war was ravaging the entire world beyond the sheltered confines of the oasis.

If Golding were merely saying that civilization represses and hides the innate human cruelty underneath its civilized surface, then the contrast would be with a peaceful and civilized time and society, not with a world besieged with genocide and atrocity. The
truth is that the violence exists now. Violence can be repressed and contained, but it can also be sublimated, as Nietzsche (1887) said in *The Genealogy of Morals*, refined, and rationalized by social ratification. Thus we might be unaware of the evil we commit, since it has become banal and morally justified through rationalization, denial, willful ignorance. Golding, however, provides us with an adult civilization that is already abhorrently vicious. Social controls need not be eradicated for violence to erupt, since barbarism is the essence of civilization itself.

The children marooned on the island do not just become violent when they discover they are alone and unsupervised. Initially they feel helpless and terrified. Then they find fruit and lay around eating and napping in paradise. This seems to be the natural state. They have to discover and *invent* violent behaviour. They create ritual, morality, ideology, and law, which amount to creating *society*. And their society is not simply violent. From its inception they also seek to create a peaceful and organized society, which is far less evil than what emerges when Merridew organizes the group through its cruel rituals and structure of ranks and offices. The human being is also a social animal, as Aristotle said, not just a violent one. Thus the society represented by Ralph and Piggy is peaceful and rational. This is also an essential component of human nature. The salient feature to recognize is not just that human beings are innately cruel or peaceful; we are both. In fact, the process of self-civilizing even produces in Ralph a (neurotic, or civilized) aversion to filth:

> With a convulsion of the mind, Ralph discovered dirt and decay.
> ‘That’s dirty!’
> ‘I said that’s dirty!’
> ‘That’s really dirty.’
> ‘This place is getting dirty.’ (pp. 76, 80)

Golding is more interested in shocking the reader with the image of *innocence* as cruelty than in demonstrating the *innate* cruelty of human nature. Innocence in *Lord of the Flies* is not merely unsocialized childhood, but a symbol of unawareness, unconsciousness of the meaning of one’s actions. The children aren’t animalistically
violent. They select sacrificial victims. And they create morality to justify their violence. Such is the state of warfare in the mesocosm beyond the island. That is the shock. It deconstructs the pretences of ‘civilized’ society by showing us how our own morally justified warfare is akin to ignorant children needlessly massacring their fellow innocents for their own pleasure. It is no great accomplishment to demonstrate that we are innately cruel or that society prevents us from being so under ordinary circumstances. Golding could have just written another Robinson Crusoe in which his own protagonist eventually regresses to savagery. He could as well just have written another Jekyll and Hyde to portray the evil that hides beneath the surface.

What we need to recognize, so as to save ourselves from mass destruction, is not just that we are capable of violence. This is critical, but we cannot help but be aware of it since Lord of the Flies was written just after the Second World War. What we need to recognize and admit, is that our reasons for killing have no more cogency than those of narcissistic children playing a violent game they don’t remotely understand. The problem is not violence alone, but lying about the fact that we commit atrocities all the time but pretend we do not. We claim that those we have tormented, humiliated, mutilated, killed, alienated, displaced, abandoned, and ignored, are themselves violent, immoral, or heretical; that they deserve it, that it can’t be helped, that we are better than they, that they are the enemy, that they are evildoers, that they all despise our freedom and must die en masse, that torture will save us from imminent apocalypse, and so on.

This is not to say that there are no such things as justifiable or necessary wars. I doubt Golding was a utopian pacifist. The point to make here is that we too often dehumanize or demonize our enemies. We tell ourselves that they are evil so that we can say they deserved to be killed, that we can inflict excruciating pain, treat them like flies whose wings we can pull off for our own amusement, imprison countless random civilians and humiliate them sexually, or liquidate hundreds of thousands of innocents in order to save the nation from terrorism and obliteration. And with those excuses we allow ourselves not to confront our own cruelty. Victimization, sadism, sacrifice, and genocide are never necessary. Nevertheless, we come up with the same hackneyed excuses when massacring innocent citizens, performing horrid experiments, subjecting them to excruciating pain, revelling in their debasement, making a pornography of torture.
Multitudes of Germans were inspired by Hitler and were seduced by the anti-Semitic propaganda depicting the Jews as diseased and inhuman. During the rape of Nanking the Japanese tortured babies, mutilated female genitalia, forced fathers to rape their daughters, and slaughtered women and children (Chang 1997). And America virtually destroyed Native American culture. The recent wars with Iraq are emblematic of the problem. Films of Iraq after the first war depict a country of suffering, diseased, squalid, penniless citizens whose children play in debris, garbage, and offal. Over ten thousand ordinary civilians were ‘cordoned and captured’ and then subject to water boarding, and tissue-ripping treatment, tethered to dog leashes, piled into naked pyramids, and forced to masturbate before their mocking captors (while photos of these atrocities were interspersed with images of the guards smiling and having sex), none of which can yield actionable information that can prevent further violence. Are these just casualties of war? Unfortunate by-products of the necessary attack against Saddam Hussein? I leave it to the experts to debate what else could have been done. But the excuses are always the same: they were evil; they posed a clear and present danger; it couldn’t have been helped; they deserved it; they should have surrendered; they should have rebelled against their tyrant; they shouldn’t have challenged the sovereign power of the United States (or other power); they started it, etc.

If it is our violence, we invent excuses to distinguish it from the violence others do. Do we really believe the half-million victims of atomic explosion deserved it? We are already excusing it before the sentence is finished by claiming that they did deserve it, or it could not be helped, or it saved American lives. And this last excuse might in fact be true. Nevertheless, what have we become when we therefore justify the mutilation of half a million people? This is Lifton’s (1995) polemic in Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial and perhaps even more darkly in Walter Davis’ (2001) Deracination: Historicity, Hiroshima, and the Tragic Imperative. The excuse never makes an attempt to recognize the tragedy of human violence, that it is cruel and horrible regardless of whether we have a choice, and that we must certainly experience the recognition of death as horrible instead of disavowing our culpability if we are to avoid committing brutal acts without conscience in the future.
However, there is a further point to discuss, which shall serve as the segue to the psychological perspective. It was mentioned previously that the children in *Lord of the Flies* enjoyed their violence. While Durkheim (1912) explained this in terms of the displacement of violence onto a victim, we seem now to be speaking in psychological terms. How is it that a person can deny culpability and simultaneously enjoy a violent act? We have explained that displaced violence unites the community, and that the enactment of violent impulses discharges anger and frustration. I also mentioned that violence is power over life and death, in mastery of the fear and terror of weakness. These are psychological occurrences.

**The Psychological View: Regression and Psychosis**

Such irrational and violent phenomena are most often group experiences, and because group behaviour cannot be explained in terms of individual dynamics alone it would seem to reside within the province of sociology. Durkheim’s (1912) separation of sociology from psychology rested on the premise that the behaviour of individuals in groups was remarkably different from the behaviour of individuals in isolation. A person may act dramatically different in a group, and indeed many of those who have strict consciences, strong moral fibre, compassion for others, and ideological conviction, may nevertheless become savage, remorseless, and irrational under group influence. This was a contention Freud (1921) actually supported in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. For Freud, individual psychology is *always* social psychology.

As Nietzsche says, ‘madness is rare in individuals—but in groups, parties, nations, and ages it is the rule’ (1885, p. 90, aphorism 156). Ordinary individuals become monsters in groups, not just an unhappy few. Like ordinary German citizens during *Krystallnacht*, insanity may erupt under group influence, despite the fact that we might normally find the prospect of such violence in ourselves impossible and morally reprehensible. Once again, this is why Durkheim maintained the fundamental disjunction between sociology and psychology. Nothing in individual dynamics could account for the fact that individuals often lose their individuality, rationality, and morality in groups, engaging in otherwise uncharacteristic and shocking acts of rape and violence (cf. Moscovici 1988).
However, sociology cannot truly explain how these things occur, by what mechanisms individuals abandon socialized morality, their sense of values, and guilt. Irrationality cannot be explained sociologically, it can only be described well. Sociology can explain when and how it happens, under what conditions, and exactly what such groups do, but it does not have the capacity to elucidate the psychological dynamics which render these phenomena possible. Irrationality is psychological, as are murderous hostility, and the infinite means human beings employ to rationalize violence. Defence mechanisms are psychological in nature. The question is not how people evade guilt, what they do in following a leader or adopting social values, but why they follow leaders and do their bidding.

Nor can sociology explain the pleasure in killing. Speeches by Hitler aroused such euphoria that ordinary citizens engaged in random sexual couplings amidst the murderous ecstasy (Fromm 1973; Kline 1984, p. 146). To claim that feelings of power over death and weakness occur in violence is a fundamentally psychological proposition. Golding is something of a Freudian. Not only is he working with the concepts of superego and repression, he is struggling with the nature and aetiology of aggression. Golding is concerned with how morality is constructed, and under what conditions morality can either be abandoned or invented to rationalize an unstated or unconscious motive.

One might argue that violence is instinctive, and this is why Merridew, and indeed the macrocosmic adult world, are so engaged in massacre. But this would not explain why Ralph and Piggy are nonviolent. Perhaps, as I mentioned, one discovers the pleasure in violence under certain conditions. And this is not merely when social controls weaken, but when people seek to overcome the nakedness and vulnerability of infancy through coercion and bloodshed, when it dawns on them that they can dissipate dread and rage by killing, when they realize that they feel lovingly bonded when slaughtering shoulder to shoulder, when they dream up sacred justifications for wreaking death. These catalyze and intensify violence, rather than simply letting violence emerge when social controls permit it. Language, consciousness, and mentation become vehicles that transform and intensify violence. With excuses, rationalizations, ideology, rhetoric and propaganda, human beings intensify their violent impulses. Homo sapiens is not just an animal who kills for survival, in competition for territory or mates, or because he as an
instinctive fight response. He becomes a murderer with language and symbols. Now one becomes master of life and death. He can dominate evil and fear by inflicting them on others, experiencing joy in their fright, power in their domination. These are symbolic pleasures, not just instinct, or the will to power. To experience power symbolically and to feel the ecstasy of conquest is a fundamentally human and psychological phenomenon. An animal does not look into the eyes of its victim and hate. Nor does it conquer its fear of death and weakness through domination. Finally, as we have mentioned, neither does it invent ideologies that sanctify the violence or deny the guilt of the act.

As a Freudian, Golding recognizes that while civilization demands renunciation of instincts, it also is violent in its socialization. Free expression of instinct might be horrific, but people also exist on a psychological stratum of human frailties. We are helpless, envious, covetous, narcissistic, shameful, and violent in our relations with others. Such emotions are not the result of free expression, the lifting of prohibitions, but of the vicissitudes of infancy and the emotional ravages of socialization, discipline, and soul murder. Thus in Lord of the Flies violence becomes more complicated. No other animal invents rituals that celebrate violence, no other animal chooses sacrificial victims, and none turns against his companions for the sheer pleasure of hunting down and dominating them.

Indeed, Golding is once again ironic when depicting the violence of children. Readers often assume that the savagery of the children is representative of a primitive, uncivilized society which has not yet attained our level of sophistication and control over our destructive behaviour. This is a failure to appreciate the irony that these children are playing at being uncivilized. Only children from a civilized society could romanticize ‘savages’ in the forest. They enjoy the idea of adorning themselves in war paint and going out on the hunt. They are playing ‘Indian’ and deriving power through identification with the image of savagery they internalized in their cosy, civilized schools and through their popular culture.

This game allows the children to feel a sense of being other than merely helpless children. It is a ‘transitional phenomenon,’ as Winnicott (1953) would call it. The game allows the children to believe they are powerful and autonomous, not abandoned, weak, and unprotected. The game is a means to mastery of childhood helplessness, just as
Freud’s grandson played his game of mastery over his abandoning mother by throwing and retrieving a spool, the ‘Fort! Da!’ theatre of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). And like the ‘Fort! Da!’ game, the children are also expressing their hostility over that helplessness through their game.

Hence the frenzy of the ritual hunt in *Lord of the Flies*. Violence is mastery, not just instinct. One might object that Golding could not possibly be saying that violence results from helplessness, but once again it must be understood that the ritual and war paint are all attempts to become powerful masters and hunters on an abandoned island. One must also consider how the children cry at the end of the novel when they are rescued. When the adult appears, their game is shown to be a fiction, they realize they are only mere children once again, and they experience the terror and fear of being helpless instead of powerful hunters.

In this sense as well social rituals and hierarchies are the means to master anxiety and fear. One might even suggest, as do Wilfred Bion and Elliott Jaques (1955), that civilization is a paranoid-schizoid defence against the anxiety of helplessness and death. In erecting rituals, morality, and a schema of value and meaning, individuals protect themselves from the terror of unpredictable violence, from intracommunal anger, hostility, and confusion. All of these engender the fear of death through both physical annihilation and the panic of not understanding and knowing the mechanisms of the world around them.

Further, such institutions not only protect individuals from anxiety, and from intracommunal violence, but provide containers for paranoid anxiety in the compartmentalization of moral categories into good and evil. Schizoid defence is characterized by rigidly compartmentalizing into good and evil. In this way, the good remains untainted by badness and flourishes in an idealized, perfect state, while the bad is allowed to exist in its own complete and predictable container. Hence evil is understood, recognizable, and can be destroyed completely. The paranoid-schizoid defence allows evil to be identified as specific and all bad. Hence there is no mystery and anxiety over where evil is, and one can destroy it with impunity and without doubt or guilt (cf. Grotstein 1981; Meissner 1978).
The good, as stated, also remains isolated from any suggestion of or contamination by badness. In this way, fantasies of good and evil are engendered, go unquestioned, and become excessively hostile when threatened. There is the fantasy of the all good (god, leader, mother, lover), and the evil, which is comprised of displaced anger toward those same needed figures. If one can isolate and destroy the evil components of reality by projecting them into a negative image, one can rescue reality from the terror of helplessness and death. And the community, ideology, eschatology, etc., now becomes the absolute good, while the evil is displaced onto victims who now contain the bad qualities schizoidally separated from the formerly both good and evil. Hence we now understand that we need enemies, and create them to contain our own terror and ambivalence. Without them, we would have to encounter the inherent ambiguity and duality of things we need to be solely benevolent, protective, nurturing, rescuing, preserving, and redeeming.8

This is again why collective violence allows individual members of the group not to feel guilty. Anonymity and social sanction dissipate guilt and the fear of individual punishment, but the social structure has been engendered as a defence against paranoid-schizoid anxiety. The banality of evil is not just ignorance, callousness, being an unwitting participant in the system. Again, by staving off terror and anxiety through creating a victim, we can rationalize the evil we do and simultaneously experience the joy of power and mastery.

It is no surprise that the community serves a protective function. What needs to be recognized is its function as the source of fantasies that perpetually confirm the isolated and projected badness of the enemy. Thus enemies are not always monsters, nor are they simply those with whom we have unfortunate and irredeemable conflicts. We will create enemies when we have none, and this rescues us from our own terror. It is not just ‘Otherness’ which scares us, as though we were naturally aroused by strangeness. This may be true. But we will actively look for enemies to contain our own hostility and preserve our fantasies that our lovers, leaders, or communities are not a threat. Thus we might experience evil in the world around us, but we can pinpoint it, hate it, define it, and isolate it from where it really is. And again, this allows us to keep our fantasies and not feel guilty when we inflict violence on that evil.
One might also object that we are simply socialized to believe what our society tells us. This is true, yet it does not explain the hideous joy people experience in mass violence, nor does it begin to account for atrocities which are completely superfluous to the stated objectives of warfare, nor how people can actually witness bloodshed without it occurring to them that this is somehow nasty or horrifying or immoral. Ignorance is not merely unawareness, but a defence that allows us to enjoy violence without guilt. Milgram’s (1974) experiments ostensibly demonstrated that people will follow their leaders and perform violent acts if socially sanctioned. But the experiments do not explain why people chose to obey.

We do not just follow leaders, as Milgram suggested. We invent them. They flourish because they allow us to enact our fantasies. They also sanction violence and remove the threat of punishment, and that’s why we need them. They are the pretence of guidance and morality. And that’s also why we massacre leaders when they fail us. We place the leader on the cross and force him to suffer the consequences of evil and misfortune. Totemic societies kill the king when disaster besets the community (Frazer 1922; Freud 1913). This is one aspect of Freudian thinking that is often forgotten when taking the psychoanalytic approach to the dynamics of mass psychology. It is often thought that Freud followed LeBon in ascribing a hypnotic influence to leaders, and we tend to attribute mercurial powers to them without understanding the volitional quality of servitude. We often choose servitude and prefer to escape freedom (cf. Fromm 1941, 1955, 1973).

As Freud said, we would like nothing better than to regress to a childlike state where we did not have to feel the guilt or responsibility of adulthood. We wish to be protected and guided by a surrogate parent. In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud (1921) explains the readiness of individuals to be ruled and controlled by leaders as deriving from the Oedipal wish for a protective father. This renders individuals susceptible to a sort of hypnotic manipulation. By regressing to infantile dependence on the leader, we become as irrational as children. Dependence and need for guidance make us more suggestible, less rational, and less critical.9

Further, through the adoption of a parental surrogate, we now identify with a new source of authority and morality, thus adopting a new superego. This is why individuals
in groups can enact brutal violence and transgress their own ordinary standards of morality, because they have now adopted a new standard of morality and punishment. The leader who sanctions such violence dissipates much of the guilt we might feel under ordinary conditions: ‘The mask compelled them’ (Golding 1954, p. 64).

However, Freud is not just claiming that the leader has a hypnotic effect on us. By claiming that we regress to infantile dependence Freud is asserting that we have unmet Oedipal needs. Hence there is an element of choice involved, and we wish to be hypnotized. We choose, albeit unconsciously, to regress because we want guidance and protection. Freud presents us with two pictures of the individual who regresses into infantile dependence in a group. Initially, Freud evokes an anxious adult with unresolved Oedipal issues who regresses out of fear and need. This makes him manipulable. It explains why we can be seduced into irrational, reprehensible, and even self-destructive acts. We are hapless puppets depending desperately on the guidance of our leaders. However, Freud presents us with a second image. Freud suggests that we are far less manipulated than we wish to admit, that we have insidious motives to be ‘controlled.’ We also want an excuse to commit malignant acts without being punished.

Freud thus concludes Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego with the dramatic thesis that such regression is a ruse, and we actually regress so as to avoid punishment while enacting fantasies of violence. We just save ourselves from guilt and have a ready-made victim to bear the cross of our sins. We hide behind the leader and prop him up for the consequences, but we also hide this manipulativeness from ourselves. Our willingness to follow the leader is our willingness to commit our own evil acts under his supposed auspices. This is known in psychoanalysis as projective identification. We project our fantasies on the leader, identify them as his own qualities, and find those characteristics sympathetic sources of protection and guidance. We may adopt the pretense that the leader is the source of authority, control, morality, and decision, but we unconsciously pull many of the strings—the leader responds by introjecting and identifying with our fantasies and expectations, subsequently conforming to our manipulation though believing he is in control (cf. Bion 1959; Grotstein 1981; Ogden 1982, 1989, 1994). We just don’t want to be caught, and we also want that feeling of paternal protection.
It does not matter that we have created that feeling. It is part and parcel of human relationships to create illusions about others we love so as to rescue them from reality, from the disappointment we will experience when they are not what we wish, because we need someone to play the role of lover, nurturer, protector etc. It does not matter that it is a fiction, and we are unconscious of the fact that we are lying to ourselves. Thus we again emphasize the volitional quality of irrational violence. What seems like manipulation by the leader is often the deception that provides an excuse, despite the fact we have no knowledge of our machinations. And once again, what we wish to hide is the fact that we are enraptured and seduced by violence.

This much is clear in *Lord of the Flies*. The children who follow Merridew are invigorated by the violence, not just coerced by a pernicious leader: ‘‘Kill the pig. Cut her throat. Spill her blood’’ (p. 69). And neither is violence just innate or instinctive, but must be seen as a displacement of terror and anxiety. The joy of the ritual and hunt in the novel derives from these feelings of mastery and conquest over helplessness, and thus enemies are necessary for the ‘tribe’ to conquer that helplessness. The violence in *Lord of the Flies* is the ‘civilized’ violence of Milgram’s experiments, of the ecstatic joy of *Krystallnacht*, of Japanese soldiers bayoneting children for amusement in Nanking. The human animal feeds on death and sadistic conquest to abreact his own terror, and for this reason, he invents victims and enemies. Or such is the tendency, as anxiety, anomie, and helplessness become immanent.

Merridew and his savages eventually hound Ralph through the forest. If Ralph were eventually found and sacrificed, we could virtually guarantee that a victim would be chosen from within the tribe, and executed with appropriate rationalizations justifying the murder as the result of the victim’s heresies or crimes. He must be executed to maintain social order. The failure of the perpetrators to admit their culpability through such justifications is what allows such paranoid hostility to exist on the planet as though mature adults were merely doing what they had to, instead of playing a violent game with people’s lives. The irony is that we think that only children play games. As adults, we play games in deadly earnest, but the game is still a deception. That’s why we can play them—to simultaneously commit atrocities while believing their fictional pretences.
Golding is saying that we are playing games, only we refuse to acknowledge the fact. And he is also demonstrating that even games can be devastatingly violent. Indeed, it is only the human animal which can play games as sublimations, displacements, disguises, symbols of human wishes and anxieties. Like ‘The Murder of Gonzago’ in *Hamlet*, the play within a play, sometimes it takes a simulacrum to rouse our recognition, conscience, and understanding. I believe this was Golding’s project. It might just take the absurd and shocking murderous play of children to catch our consciences and shock us into recognizing the fact that our adult civilization is often just as bloody and just as irrational.

A few final words on the psychology of violence as it relates to terror and gender. One must wonder why the only children marooned on this island are juvenile males. One may suggest that this is merely the story of a particular group of school boys, ordinarily sequestered from female classmates. One could plausibly dismiss sundry absences in any story, without assuming that what seems to be a glaring omission means anything in particular. Isolating a single gender from fictive parable on violence would seem profoundly significant, however, when a fable on the genesis of slaughter is a reflection of the atrocities blighting the world outside the island. This gendered absence is also rendered more perspicuous when we recognize that biblical images are invoked, including the prelapsarian child in a pastoral garden and the ensuing descent into sin and violence.

One may retort that men have committed most of the violence throughout history, and hence Golding is merely reflecting honestly on those who have actually gutted and butchered one another over the millennia. And yet Golding has provided a deceptively nuanced parable on why people become violent. If the children are not slaughtering one another merely because the veneer of civilization has been dissolved, because some animalistic or bloodthirsty instinct has asserted itself without the inhibiting and punitive threats of law and society, then we cannot fall back on human nature or even masculinity as sufficient explanations for the genesis of carnage.

Rather we have seen how the children are placid and peaceful until infected by anxiety, fear, and panic, the realization of their helplessness, the contagious terror that
begets fantasies of uncanny monsters and predators. Only then do we see (among some of them) uniforms, order, imitation of adult behaviour, and ritual murder.

Masculine violence often erupts from the terror of death, weakness, and vulnerability, and is a masculine protest against such loathsome feelings, a rageful defiance of fear and panic that would bash others into pulp to demonstrate one’s strength and power. Hence that hatred and loathing of Piggy’s weakness and softness, as mentioned earlier. Becker (1973) invoked Spinoza’s notion of the ‘causa sui’ project to explain how children react to their own helplessness by trying to master their own bodies, deny their neediness and dependence, and fantasize their self-sufficiency through narcissistic inflation. The fantasy of being an autochthonous being that is not a weak, defenceless infant is a reaction to the terror and anger of actually being a frail child who runs into his mother’s arms and weeps in terror, who cannot fend for oneself and is ever conscious of one’s smallness. Children are not equally afflicted by the dread of their own frailty, and nor do they all react with the same frenetic masculine protest against it. If there is a spectrum of responses to the infantile dread of weakness and annihilation, the degree of aggressiveness and dominance are an index of that dread, how much one panics in the face of a frightening world, and needs to control and punish others to endure that threat.

Herein lies the absence of the feminine. In numerous cultures the feminine is equated with weakness and vulnerability. One may argue that misogyny is a cultural trope, but misogyny is also a complex of dread, envy, and rage. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) wrote of the male fear of the woman’s body, the vaginal folds that too much resemble the soft viscosity of carrion and inspire the dread of death and decay. Klaus Theweleit (1977) wrote hundreds of pages on the Nazi dread of the feminine, of weakness, helplessness, bodily infirmity, disease, decay, floods, and women’s bodies. Theweleit described how Nazi fiction devoted to pummelling women into bloody pulps was so popular because it resonated with men filled with dread and rage over the fleshy weaknesses, excrescences, and mortality of the body. The female body in all its weak, flooded, sanguine frailty was horrifying, and domination, control, power, invulnerability, mastery of the body, and deification of masculine power were the sadistic responses to that dread of death.
Clearly there is little in *Lord of the Flies* to suggest that the children become sadistic maniacs because they dread the vagina. That’s amusing, but is hardly the issue. Golding *does* seem to be exploring how the dread of our fragility and death may impel some toward vicious, predatory, authoritarian behaviour that seeks out those who are weak and frail, to punish and batter that which they despise in themselves. Thus when Golding engenders a parable about civilization and massacre, he portrays the childish feelings of helplessness and dread that resound within secretly quivering adults, that make some rise up in monstrosity as if to scream and bludgeon away their own timorous child through postures of masculine power, control, and domination. These postures to eradicate terror through bloodshed become some of the driving motives of history.

**The Historical View: The Nightmare of Recurrent Massacre**

This is where sociology, psychology, and history intersect. The Second World War is an appropriate backdrop for a book on the violent ironies of civilization and childhood. But this war is not essentially different from the mass slaughter that comprises human history. The scale may be different, but history is replete with senseless strife and massacre. This is not to argue that there are no necessary conflicts, or that combating Hitler was a senseless quarrel. Rather, the ceaseless historical eruption of violence and its frenzied ubiquity are implicated. The universality of Golding’s message consists in the spontaneity of the violence. There is no necessary cause, merely the sufficiency of unchanging human desire and frailty. Remove the influence of culture and history and human beings will still invent war. Cleanse human beings of their education, acculturation, ideology, political and religious loyalty, and place them on a beautiful island devoid of enemies and ideologies, and they will become violent to dominate one another and master that same helplessness which motivates the civilized species off the island.

One might object that these children cannot possibly be regarded as the *tabula rasa* of human nature, and this is correct. These children have been minimally socialized and acculturated. Indeed, they have been exposed to the stringent rules regarding how they should act and what they should be by their families and educators, they have learned about other cultures, like the Indians, they have been told bedtime stories and
folktales, thus being able to visualize monsters and have nightmares, and they have observed adults. Again, it is this exposure itself that enables them to construct a rudimentary society. The older children have learned enough to understand the necessity of building huts, gathering food, and preserving fire.

However, the fact that they have learned from their parents in a rudimentary fashion does not mean that their violence is an imitation of reality. It means that their innocence is betrayed by the fact that they can kill one another in imitation of a story in a book rather than actually behaving according to the example of their parents. These children do not imitate the Nazis or the British:

‘we can have a good time on this island….’
‘It’s like in a book’
At once there was a clamour.
‘Treasure Island—‘
‘Swallows and Amazons—‘ (p. 34)

Thus it is not the acculturation that has produced the violence. These children are obviously bereft of ideology, and the fact that they are imitating Indians indicates precisely that they have not learned violence from watching their parents.

Thus while they have learned from their society, the emergent disorder and violence contradicts what they have been taught and arises not from their desire to imitate their parents, but once again as play which provides feelings of power and mastery. The historical dimension resides in the fact that innocent children spared any genuine indoctrination will create their own brutality anyway. The savagery is ahistorical, but if they are imitating anything, such as the Indians, it is from one of an infinite variety of historical instances of violence. Take your pick. Violence is universal. Golding’s reading of history is an indictment of the nauseating human propensity to massacre one another for essentially arbitrary reasons.

Further, the violence of children is an obvious metaphor for the genesis of the species. The children on this island might as well be the virtual infancy of the human race. Just like our ancestors, who had minimal scientific knowledge, these children
attempt various means of survival and social organization. They soon learn violence, and history proceeds from that ‘loss of innocence.’ One might object to this reading of our ancestors as infants, and it has indeed been frequent for ‘civilized’ people in the West to envision tribal societies and our ancestors as mere children. However, this particular case is not a metaphor glorifying Western enlightenment. Golding is saying that we have been violent since our inception as creatures complicated enough to actually create ‘civilization,’ which is an indictment of *homo sapiens* rather than our ancestors or those living in ‘uncivilized’ societies. This can’t be a derogation of ‘non-civilized’ people, since it is civilization as a murderous institution that is under attack.

In other words, since the advent of human consciousness, human beings have invented massacre, and it is not the particular culture, politic, ideology, or pedagogy which matters. Yes, some societies are significantly more brutal than others, but human beings invent societies and ideologies to sanction violence, and it is precisely the so-called ‘civilized’ societies, as we have been saying, which commit murder but refuse to recognize it as such. Thus the choice of children in Golding’s novel serves the purpose of telling us that human beings are violent regardless of the particular society, since civilization is created violently, and that without instruction, human beings will invent violence.

**The Theological View: Biblical Parables for Secular Strife**

*Lord of the Flies* recreates the genesis of ritual, sacrifice, and ideology in its symbolism. What happens now among adults will recur spontaneously in human relations, and happened eons ago in founding murders. This is where sociology, psychology, history and theology intersect. The genesis of society through violence is symbolized here as the invention of violent ritual by children, just as Freud envisions parricide at the heart of human consciousness and guilt, and the Bible depicts the murder of Cain as the foundation of civilization.

A final category necessary to fully appreciate the depth of *Lord of the Flies* is thus the theological symbolism inhereing to the text through its vivid imagery. This symbolism requires no extensive explication, but is an essential aspect of the text that cannot be separated from the sociological, historical, or psychological strata. The imagery is
biblical in nature, and this is what provides an epic quality to a deceptively simple text. To place a story occurring at one period in time in a theological context raises its significance to a cosmic and tragic level.

This is no mere single insignificant mishap that will be forgotten. Biblical imagery extends the microcosm beyond the human mesocosm into the eternal time and space of Heaven and Hell. A cosmic battle is being re-enacted here. Shakespeare has the ghost of Old Hamlet tell his son that while sleeping in his garden, a serpent stung him and poured venom into the porches of his ears (Act I, scene v). Just as the death of Hamlet’s father is not merely one murder but a cosmic recreation of good and evil through biblical imagery, so *Lord of the Flies* uses the theological to remind us that this is the struggle of souls against their own devastation.

The oasis is Eden, and the children the naive, uncorrupted, innocent progeny of God. Ralph is described as Adamic, beautiful, guileless. The island abounds with serpentine vines, mysterious darkness. And the children dine on fruit. This is no recreation of *Genesis*, merely a recapitulation of its symbols to provide us with imagery of innocence and the imminence of corruption. This is a metaphor for man in his ‘natural state,’ and the foreboding of a fall from grace. His corruption need not be sexual, as Golding has no intention of repudiating sexuality. Rather, it is man’s corruption and violence that are at issue. This is why the adversary is Merridew, so that a Manichean duality between good and evil can be established.

However, the story is no folktale either. Merridew is no Claggart, and Ralph is no Billy Budd. He is complicated, and thus the psychological complexity of violence now takes on the theological and historical dimension through the unlikely and disproportionate analogy with biblical events. Merridew is in fact just a child. That’s what makes his violence so disturbing. Biblical imagery makes the violence of children uncanny by augmenting its significance to the level of a moral tale about humanity. We now see a parable about ourselves rather than a story about marooned kids or a sociological criticism.

The uncanny character, its *Unheimlichkeit*, as Freud might call it, is in the irony. We tend to think of children as innocent and powerless, and yet here they are capable of murder. The acts of children are games, yet this game recalls biblical imagery and
reminds us that evil lurks where we would like not to see it. A violent child is uncanny because we expect naiveté. And to imply that children are struggling with violence of biblical proportions makes it difficult to redeem them from our own perhaps Oedipal fears. Our narcissism, our projective identification is threatened because we see our own evil where we need to see the benevolence of our creation.

One final biblical image is Simon in the forest. His ascetic isolation gives him a monastic character. One of the most powerful images of the novel is Simon, face to face with the decaying head of a pig mounted on a spear, like Christ in the wilderness facing the Lord of the Flies himself. Here we have the human being confronting the evil of his nature, witnessing the barbarism of his kind, attempting to understand himself through the face of death. Looking into the face of death seems to be a popular medieval image, and it appears in Hamlet as the skull of Yorick. Facing one’s own death means recognizing one’s finitude, the inevitability of one’s mortality, one’s essential nature, and coming to terms with death. For Simon the decaying pig becomes either the confrontation with human violence, its recognition, and redemption, or temptation by violence, which Merridew and his company fall into. Emergence from the dark wood is return from death, from the underworld, from the struggle with evil in the depths of the soul.

This confrontation with a deified decapitated pig entails a further irony. If Simon confronts the Lord of the Flies in the wilderness, this bloody, bloated, grotesque symbol of human violence is what the sadistic children actually worship. This is a sinister reflection of our own ‘civilization,’ that what we actually divinize and revere is death bloated with maggots and flies—massacre, slaughter, our own grotesqueness hallowed and adorned with ridiculous pomp and costumes and ceremony. However we might bask in the cosy fantasy of an adoring God, the beneficence of our religion, and our own superior morality as devotees of the true and righteous Lord, this sanctimonious self-delusion doesn’t negate the nightmarish history of slaughters, pogroms, persecutions, and inquisitions, nor all the self-righteous acts of imperialism, colonialism, enslavement, conversion, and enlightenment inflicted on those deemed inferior, ignorant, heathen, or savage. We feign subservience to God when we have glorified our own bloated narcissism. It is a game of make believe, of pretending that all our acts of conquest, ruin, and slaughter are His will, not ours. We continue pretend that it’s actually God who
mouths our own jejune pronouncements and condemnations, and pretend that divine writ gives us the right to liquidate others in the name of all that is good and true. We may believe we worship the God of compassion, but Golding is unveiling the God we truly revere, and revealing our religion as a symbol of our own hideousness gilded with delusions of grandeur.

The ostensibly peripheral character of Simon provides Golding an alternative to gilded grotesqueness, and to the kind of Manichean dualism that disgorges evil, that dislocates evil entirely outside the self. If Simon’s encounter with death and the temptations of violence discloses this human ugliness, it also situates the reader at the brink of recognizing this all too human viciousness instead of merely attributing brutality to others. For Golding, of course, this is an ideal, since the world outside the island is at war. It seems Golding does allow for the possibility of a more humane humanity, if we genuinely look into the nature of our own violence instead of being seduced by it. The children had adults to rescue them, and the adult world of reason was itself in upheaval. The adults may also believe they will be saved by their protectors. But the analogy here serves the purpose of dispelling that illusion. It is confrontation with one’s own evil that is necessary.

‘Maybe,’ [Simon] said hesitantly, ‘maybe there is a beast….’

‘What I mean is … maybe it’s only us.’

Simon became inarticulate in his effort to express mankind’s essential illness. (p. 89)

There is nothing revolutionary about the idea that evil exists within us (it has even become a cliché in popular films and even cartoons). However, situated in a narrative where adults in the world off the island are combating Hitler, this is an extremely provocative thing to say, especially for a child. Beyond clichés, human beings are seldom inclined to perceive their enemies as targets for the displacement and projection of their own malice and unresolved conflicts. Golding’s indictment is all the more scathing if uttered by a child, when adults cannot recognize this wisdom. This has palpable significance in any era, perhaps especially today, and requires far more introspection than
cinematic and popular clichés inspire—for these are ineffective postures. I doubt whether very many of us can see our contemporary enemies as fantasies. They do sometimes really exist, but that does not exculpate our insidious malady.

**Conclusions**

Golding is presenting us with a complex reading of the human organism. *Lord of the Flies* is a deceptively simple text which can be read as an indictment of human nature and civilization itself. Golding is not disparaging human instincts, however. Rather he is implicating the human tendency to commit senseless atrocities concealed by the civilized deceptions and inventions of morality, justice, and ideology. History itself is the nightmare from which we must awaken. Golding is not just showing us that violence erupts when social controls weaken. He is contrasting an ostensibly idyllic image of naïve children on a sequestered island with the violent society outside, and asserting that innocence will be transformed into massacre when children invent their own society. Civilization is founded upon murder. There is a spectrum from relatively peaceful societies to those that are despotic and genocidal, but there is truly insidious cruelty even in the most benign society. *Lord of the Flies* is a parable that is pertinent to the understanding of violence within our culture, and to atrocities inflicted by governments on external enemies. But it can also evoke the genesis of violence in cultures considered more ‘savage’ and insular. This parable can resonate with recent enactments of violence and murder. It is a literary evocation of the gestation of brutality and contagious violence, and may enable us to envisage the spawning of murder and sacrifice, the very birth of atrocity. The culture inflicting such slaughter, which invents, fantasizes, and murders its enemies in savage madness, need not be named here.

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**Notes**

1 Merridew’s first name is Jack, but he prefers to be called by his surname and refuses the name of a child. This establishes the division between the Adamic nature of Ralph and the aggressive, defiant postures of his antagonist (p. 21).
2 This is of course a psychological phenomenon, not just a sociological one. The psychodynamics of violence and sacrifice will be discussed shortly.
3 See Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred* for a similar and comprehensive view of sacrifice.
As will be seen in the last section, I term the outer world a mesocosm instead of macrocosm because the biblical imagery evokes the cosmic, or macrocosmic world beyond civilization.

Just how many Germans were actively violent against Jews or were ‘willing executioners’ is still debated, but evidence strongly suggests pervasive antisemitism and massive support for Hitler (cf. Arendt 1963; Beisel 2005; Breiner 2002; Goldhagen 1996; Gonen 2003; Gruen 2002a, 2002b; Victor, 1998).

There is consistent evidence that torture is an unreliable source of actionable information. For more on this see Danner (2004), Piven (2007, 2009) and Soufan (2009).

to call Golding a Freudian does not require him to reduce violence to the externalization of the death drive. Throughout the Freudian corpus violence can be seen to be the result of the rage and malignance of a civilization requiring the sacrifice of pleasure and desire, the consequence of ‘civilized’ relations, strife, the need to displace intracommunal hostility, the fear and narcissistic injury of nature and death.

While this is described in Bion’s language, the idea can be found explicitly in Freud. For example, on p. 79 of Civilization and its Discontents (1930), Freud writes that the Jews displaced evil onto the figure of a devil in order to rescue God from their own aggression. The theological equivalent of Oedipal conflicts, the Jews would rather turn their aggression against themselves and ascribe all the badness in the universe to the Devil rather than admit God (father) is not all loving and protecting. Melanie Klein (1946) believed this defence was pre-Oedipal and described it as ‘schizoid,’ and central to psychological functioning. In either case, such a defence occurs on personal, theological, and social levels, and is a quintessential component of violence.

Studies have even suggested a correlation between dependence, suggestibility, and the predilection to believe in God. See for example Juni and Fischer (1986).

Especially pertinent, of course, since World War II was not merely the product of equally violent and insidious cultures. One cannot exculpate Hitler, or claim that all countries were equally responsible. Nevertheless, the ‘good’ countries have committed atrocities on their own, and it is the failure to acknowledge this fact which is part of the problem. It is not just ‘them.’

Perhaps a Comptean or even Nietzschean turn.

These are all etiological myths, not to be taken literally, but they all create a trans-historical image of origination. The myth does not have to be literally or historically accurate to instruct us. Just as children need not actually kill one another, and just as our ancestors were not perpetual children, we may still take this myth as a parable whose irreality and irony is most instructive. Freud may have taken his myth literally, of course. For relevant discussion of Freudian myths, see Robert Paul’s Moses and Civilization.

References


