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Modern serial killers

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Abstract

The study of serial killing has been dominated by an individualized focus on the aetiology and biography of particular offenders. As such, it has tended to downplay the broader social, historical and cultural context of such acts. This article addresses this lacuna by arguing that serial killers are distinctively modern. It highlights six modern phenomena related to serial killing: (a) the mass media and the attendant rise of a celebrity culture; (b) a society of strangers; (c) a type of mean/ends rationality that is largely divorced from value considerations; (d) cultural frameworks of denigration which tend to implicitly single out some groups for greater predation; (e) particular opportunity structures for victimization; and finally (f) the notion that society can be engineered. Combined, these factors help to pattern serial killing in modernity's own self-image, with modernity setting the parameters of what it means to be a serial killer, and establishing the preconditions for serial murder to emerge in its distinctive contemporary guise.

Key words

anonymity; celebrity; modernity; narcissism; rationality; serial killing

INTRODUCTION

Modern mankind found itself in the midst of a great absence and emptiness of values and yet, at the same time, a remarkable abundance of possibilities. (Berman, 1988: 21)

As recently as the 1980s serial killers were understood to be a unique recent development, a phenomenon frequently attributed to the excesses of a pathological American culture. Today this sentiment has been reversed. It is now recognized that all societies have instances where people kill sequentially. Efforts to historicize this practice have also accentuated the considerable historical lineage of this form of murder (Leyton, 1995). The pendulum has consequently swung in the opposite direction from the views that predominated less than 20 years ago. We have arrived at the point that there are claims

that serial killing is a universal, a practice that is 'at least as old as the human species' (Schechter, 2003: 318).

The literature on serial killing is dominated by a few themes. First, in both public and scholarly discourse, serial killers are routinely presented as unknowable, and their actions beyond comprehension. Irrespective of how many case studies we analyze, or how much data we collect, the heart of serial killers remains a black hole. While we might identify a serial killer's motivations, we will never comprehend their behavior.

The second major theme concerns questions of definition (Dietz, 1996; Hale, 1998; Holmes and DeBurger, 1998; Ferguson et al., 2003; Canter and Wentink, 2004). By convention, a serial killer is someone who has killed three or more people who were previously unknown to him.¹ There must also be a 'cooling off' period between each murder. This definition has been accepted by both the police and academics and therefore provides a useful frame of reference. Nonetheless, it also presents difficulties because the definition encompasses killings that few people would suggest are instances of serial murder. For example, dictators who initiate a procession of murders would be deemed to be serial killers on this definition. Likewise for pirates who repeatedly murder captured crews, and soldiers who kill surrendered enemy combatants, operate death camps or oversee forced death marches. While we have terms of approbation for such individuals, their actions do not cohere with common understandings of serial murder.

The definition also does not include attributes of serial killing which, although not inevitably present in every instance, are familiar attributes of this form of murder. Many serial killers demonstrate recurrent patterns which are recognized by even casual observers. The following analysis concentrates on such common, but not inevitable, qualities of serial killing.

The final dominant focus of research on serial homicide that is relevant here involves the search for the causes of such behavior. Given the monstrous quality of such crimes this attention to etiology is both expected and laudable. Researchers have produced a profusion of studies trying to delineate the pathological characteristics of serial killers; studies that range widely over the usual social-psychological factors that are now part of the criminological canon. Almost every major social, biological, psychological or behavioral factor that has been seriously suggested as playing a role in causing crime has been advanced as potentially contributing to the behavior of serial killers (Wilson and Seaman, 1991; Giannangelo, 1996; Keppel and Walter, 1999; Levin, 2008).

One upshot of this literature is that serial killing can appear a-historical and a-cultural. Reading these diverse works it is easy to assume that these traits would manifest themselves in identical ways irrespective of context. This tendency prompts a continual return to considerations of individual etiology, something that systematically ignores the broader social context in which such killings occur. Tithcott (2006: 444) nicely captures this tendency when he notes that in contemplating serial killers,

an unthinking distinction is made between the individual and the social context, and the latter fades from view . . . We might think social groups, but we see individuals . . . Figured as acultural, isolated from a cultural context, the serial killer is the spectacle whose brilliance dazzles us. Focused on him, we fail to see beyond.

This article is a direct response to such neglect of broader social and cultural factors in attempts to understand serial killing. Towards that end, it brackets questions about the causes of serial murder in order to situate such behavior in the context of a series of broad historical transformations that have occurred over the past three to four centuries; changes commonly identified with the rise of modernity. As such, this argument is loosely connected with Elliott Leyton's (1995) well-known work on serial killing, particularly his attempt to explain the long-term fluctuations in the classes of people who tended to perpetrate this crime. Leyton, in turn, takes his lead from the otherwise forgotten early work of Philip Lindsay, who in *The Mainspring of Murder* (1958) observed that 'mass murder is largely a modern phenomenon' (quoted in Leyton, 1995: 264), with Lindsay equating modernity in an unspecified way with the rise of industrialism. Leyton, in contrast, sets out a three-part periodization where, he argues, each period is characterized by mass murderers who were disproportionately drawn from different social groupings. During the pre-industrial era the multiple killer was an aristocrat who preyed on peasants, while in the industrial era he tended to be drawn from the new bourgeois and attacked prostitutes, homeless boys and housemaids. In the mature industrial era the multiple murderer is typically a faded bourgeois who stalks university women and other middle-class individuals. Leyton advances a form of Mertonian strain theory (Merton, 1938) to posit that at each historical moment these different social groupings were experiencing a crisis to their social standing, something that culminated in an anomic normlessness and manifested itself in a disproportionate number of multiple murderers being drawn from each group.

While I am not trying here to duplicate Leyton's efforts to explain the backgrounds of serial killers – and I also have reservations about his characterization of the types of victims that serial killers prey upon (see Wilson, 2007) – my analysis shares Leyton's concern to understand serial killing in the context of modernizing processes. My focus, however, is on some of the preconditions that channel the act of killing sequentially into its characteristic contemporary forms. The argument is that several distinctively modern phenomena, including anonymity, rationality, and the mass media, provide the key institutional frameworks, motivations, and opportunity structures characteristic of contemporary forms of serial killings. In so doing, I draw attention to phenomena which, due to their conventionality, have a taken-for-granted quality; a familiarity that has itself led analysts to overlook the centrality of such factors to the contemporary dynamics of serial killing.

Rather than emphasize the enigmatic quality of serial killers, then, our focus here is on the attributes of such homicide which are all too familiar. The argument is that serial killing is patterned in modernity's own self-image. Modernity, understood as a long-term historical process that is typified by characteristic – but not uniform – developments, provides a number of elective affinities between serial murder and contemporary civilization. The question of periodization here, however, is obviously open to alternative readings. Modernity is not a single coherent thing that arrived fully formed in different locations. Even in those places that underwent a modernizing process, this did not necessarily produce the same types or extent of change (Lyon, 1999; Punter, 2007). For my purposes, I treat modernity as entailing a series of distinctive changes in the

nature of science, commerce (the rise of capitalism), urbanism, the mass media and personal identity. Consequently, the aim here is to trace how the rise of such modernizing processes over a comparatively long time frame of several hundred years set the parameters of what it means to be a serial killer, and established the preconditions for serial murder to emerge in its distinctive contemporary guise.

In accentuating the modern face of serial killing the analysis employs a form of 'historical ontology,' a term first introduced by Michel Foucault, but which Ian Hacking (2002) has formalized as an explicit field of inquiry. A study of historical ontology involves examining the conditions of possibility for the emergence of certain kinds of phenomena. Among the things that can be analyzed in terms of their historical ontology are particular 'kinds' of people, including psychopaths and 'multiples' (people with multiple personality disorder). The starting point for this orientation is a recognition that personal identities and subjectivities – our sense of self and our life project – are themselves forged from various discourses and symbolic resources. As Hacking (2002: 3) notes, 'we constitute ourselves at a place and time, using materials that have a distinctive and historically formed organization'. He provides an example drawn from Sartre's description of the class of French waiter known as a *garçon de café*, an individual easily identified by his characteristic flair, eagerness and over-attentiveness, making the point about the historical and cultural specificity of this, and other, 'kinds' of people:

As with almost every way in which it is possible to be a person, it is possible to be a garçon de café only at a certain time, in a certain place, in a certain social setting. The feudal serf putting food on my lady's table can no more choose to be a garçon de café than he can choose to be lord of the manor. (Hacking, 1986: 232)

This article therefore considers the 'serial killer' as one 'kind' of person, examining some of the cultural and institutional factors that shape the dynamics of this form of killing. Serial killing is contextual, and any biological predispositions, individual desires or personal pathologies that might play a role in motivating killers or shaping their actions are conditioned by larger structural factors. Most of the characteristic attributes related to the dynamics of serial killing are unique to modern societies.

While people have probably always killed others sequentially, 500 years ago it was not possible to *be* a serial killer as many of the forces which give serial murder its particular shape, rationalizations, opportunity structures and ideational frameworks are characteristically modern. We engage in a form of ontological slippage when we work backwards, imposing our contemporary classifications of types of people on historical figures, assuming, for example, that long-ago murderers were *really* serial killers operating *avant la lettre*. Ultimately, then, the article also works against Schechter's (2003: 318) claim that serial killing is 'at least as old as the human species'. In the absence of modern contexts, institutions and classifications, serial killers did not exist.

This analysis draws from the extensive secondary literature on serial killers to tease out themes that tend to be lost or misplaced in the fixation on the individualized and pathologized instances of serial killing (Zagury, 2002; Silva et al., 2002), or on how such killers are depicted in the media (Schmidt, 2005; Gibson, 2006; Jarvis, 2007). It is necessarily a provisional argument which aims to spark debate about the broader

social, cultural and institutional factors implicated in the dynamics of serial killing. To make the argument presented here more conclusive would require overcoming what are perhaps intractable questions of evidence. Ideally, one would present a kind of before-and-after historical analysis to demonstrate how killing sequentially has changed with the advent of modernity. Given the secretive nature of sequential killing we are inevitably limited in our knowledge about the contemporary and historical dynamics of serial killing. The dearth of historical resources from antiquity means that this account is necessarily open ended; it offers a series of markers that deserve greater exploration in light of what others might be able to offer from their existing research or dredge from the historical record.

MODERN MURDER

In his acclaimed *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Bauman (1989) develops a sociological analysis of the Holocaust. Acknowledging that pogroms, ethnic cleansings and genocides have existed throughout history, he argues that the Holocaust was distinctive because its key attributes were bound up with some of modernity's greatest accomplishments:

The truth is that every 'ingredient' of the Holocaust . . . was normal . . . in the sense of being fully in keeping with everything we know about our civilization, its guiding spirit, its priorities, its immanent vision of the world – and of the proper ways to pursue human happiness together with a perfect society. (p. 8)

Modernity, here, refers to a series of institutional, social and cultural transformations typically associated with the rise of capitalism, but not reducible to that development. The thrust of Bauman's analysis involves demonstrating how modern factors such as bureaucratic rationality, the division of labor, a centralized state, industrialization, science, and characteristic forms of modern racism were inextricably linked to the Holocaust. Modernity is not advanced as the cause of the Holocaust, as it would be difficult to suggest that something as amorphous and multifaceted as 'modernity' caused anything. Instead, he posits that modern civilization was a *necessary* condition for the unfolding of the Holocaust: 'It was the rational world of modern civilization that made the Holocaust thinkable' (Bauman, 1989: 13). Bauman's analysis provides the stimulus to examine the extent to which modernity might be implicated in serial killing – a form of homicide which, on its face, appears to entail an entirely different set of dynamics than those apparent in the Holocaust.

Bauman advances several reasons why bureaucracy was crucial to the ultimate unfolding of the Holocaust. One of the most important was that for genocide to assume its full modernist potential, the mob had to be replaced with the bureaucracy which helps render murder both dispassionate and efficient. It is a theme that Marshal Berman (1988: 67) echoes when he posits that evil is 'characteristically modern' to the extent that it is 'indirect, impersonal, mediated by complex organizations and institutional roles'. Modernity, however, is multifaceted and multidimensional and, as such, structures the act of killing in various ways. The characteristic dynamics of serial

killers in particular suggest that modern forms of evil need not assume a bureaucratic form. Later, I detail six important preconditions for serial killing which are distinctively modern. Those are:

1. The mass media and the attendant rise of a celebrity culture.
2. A society of strangers.
3. A mean/ends rationality that is largely divorced from value considerations.
4. Cultural frameworks of denigration which tend to implicitly single out some groups for greater predation.
5. Particular opportunity structures for victimization; and finally,
6. The notion that society can be engineered.

Combined, these factors provide a sense of how specific individual instances of serial killing also connect with broader modern processes.

MEDIA, CELEBRITY AND IDENTITY

How many times do I have to kill before I get a name in the paper or some national attention? (Complaint of a serial killer contained within his correspondence with the Wichita police; Braudy, 1986: 3)

The mass media are one of modernity's great accomplishments (Thompson, 1995; Garnham, 2000). At their best, the media have helped advance public literacy, fostered a greater understanding of distant cultures, undermined traditional authority structures and buttressed democratic processes through the development of a public sphere (Habermas, 1989). At their worst, the mass media feed public appetites for the sensational, cynically capitalize on the horrific, and institutionalize a culture of celebrity.

Serial killing is predominately a media event (Gibson, 2006). It is among the most statistically rare forms of crime (Jenkins, 1994), meaning that most people thankfully have no first-hand experience of serial killers. Without the mass media, individuals certainly could not have the intimate familiarity that they often demonstrate with both the general dynamics of serial killing and the appetites of particular killers. While this mediated capacity to experience otherwise unknown phenomena characterizes our relationship with many things, the prominence of serial killing in the media makes it an extreme example of this tendency. Few other topics have been so persistently exploited over the past quarter century. Accounts of serial killers are a staple of true crime and detective novels, and figure prominently in movies and police dramas, as well as in comic books and even collector cards (Schmidt, 2005; Jarvis, 2007).

This animated public discourse on serial killing also feeds back on the dynamics of serial killings itself. It does not, however produce a straightforward 'media effect' whereby people become killers due to their exposure to television or other media. Instead, the media's influence is more oblique, in that they provide the basic institutional framework and cultural context for the operation of modern forms of serial killing. The Zodiac killer, for instance, was not the only serial killer to use the media to communicate

with the public and taunt the police (Gibson, 2006). Other killers have been known to collect newspaper clippings that recount their crimes or their trial (Hickey, 2002).

The more common and consequential influence of the mass media on serial killing concerns how the media foster a culture of celebrity. Rather than simply reporting on the activities of prominent individuals, the media are in the celebrity-making business. Systems of mass communication have helped transform celebrity from a status reserved for heroic individuals, to the simple fact of being talked about (Braudy, 1986). Fame is no longer the exclusive purview of individuals who have accomplished virtuous feats (Marshall, 2006), but has been democratized as more people are now 'known' and celebrated than ever before. Even slight figures responsible for dubious or inconsequential accomplishments are elevated to celebrity status. Fame has become a generalized standard of success, connecting billionaires, actors, sports figures, but also a plethora of lesser lights. In modernity celebrity promises to liberate people from a powerless anonymity and make them known beyond the limitations of class and family. In a largely secularized society, fame also offers citizens the prospect of surviving beyond death. Not securing some degree of celebrity can be experienced as a profound failure, and 'the terror of insignificance, of remaining unrecognized by others, might now reign supreme as the most potent and extractable source of human energy' (Hall et al., 2008: 172). For some the promise of celebrity is appealing, while for others it is consuming.

As the Internet and hundred-channel universe obliterate the distinction between fame and notoriety, there are few quicker routes to celebrity than committing a sensational crime. Rather than being shamed by their actions, serial killers often revel in their celebrity and actively seek out media attention. Ted Bundy, for example, basked in the media's fascination, and maintained constant contact with the global press, even after a judge sought to limit such access. Likewise, Schechter (2003: 198) notes how John Wayne Gacy 'took pride in his sinister celebrity, bragging that he had been the subject of eleven hardback books, thirty-one paperbacks, two screenplays, one movie, one off-Broadway play, five songs, and over 5,000 articles'. After they committed their first murder, Kenneth Bianchi remarked to his accomplice Angelo Buono, 'We really did it this time. Wait till they find her. It'll make the papers. It'll be on every channel' (Gibson, 2006: 86). These are not isolated examples. As Egger (2002: 235) demonstrates in his analysis of seven of the most notorious American serial killers, the majority 'seemed to enjoy their celebrity status and thrive on the attention they received'.

A symbiotic relationship exists between the media and serial killers. In the quest for audience share the media have become addicted to portrayals of serial killers. Such killers offer rich opportunities to capture public attention by capitalizing on deeply resonate themes of innocent victims, dangerous strangers, unsolved murders, all coalescing around a narrative of evasion and given moral force through implied personal threats to audience members. Serial killers were apparently ready-made for prime time.

For some murderers the media is one of the most important factors in helping to fashion a serial killer identity. While identities are always constructed, one distinctively modern dynamic in this process concerns how the mass media provide more and new opportunities for identity construction. Historically, our sense of self was constituted

in local contexts and drew upon a highly circumscribed set of discursive resources. The media dramatically augmented these potentialities for self-creation by exposing people to a wealth of new resources that provided novel opportunities for being which would otherwise never have been encountered or contemplated. Hence, whereas in pre-modern societies killing sequentially might have been something that someone *did*, today a serial killer is something that someone can *be*. As Dietz (1996: 111) observes, for serial killers

reading their own press clippings helps them to complete an identity transformation in the same way that reading their press does for athletes and entertainers. Further, their knowledge of the characteristics of those they can view as similar others helps them create themselves and construct their emergent killer identities.

In antiquity, individuals who killed sequentially were largely working in the dark in terms of any prospect of fashioning an identity that revolved around killing others. Today, the enduring media prominence of serial killers habitually puts the category of 'serial killer' on display as a form of subjectivity (King, 2006). Troubled individuals now have readily at hand a host of serial killer exemplars as a point of reference that would have been unavailable prior to the development of the mass media.

What we see here, then, is the first instance of how a distinctively modern phenomenon – the mass media – is a vital component of serial killing. To reiterate, there is little in the way of direct causality at work here, but instead a process whereby the mass media foster a culture of celebrity while simultaneously placing on offer the category of 'serial killer'.

ANONYMITY

A second distinctive characteristic of modernity is the rise of urbanization, something which, among other things, profoundly altered the nature of human relationships. It also helped establish the interpersonal context for the emergence of serial killers.

In pre-modern villages individuals knew one another by name, and often had deep subjective knowledge of their neighbor's family history and personal predilections. Such familiarity was not true of all relationships, but strangers were, by today's standards, rare and a source of rumor and suspicion (Simmel, 1971). Pre-modern individuals typically lived in a local environment that would appear insular and sedentary to contemporary eyes. Indeed, the average medieval citizen might only encounter approximately 100 individuals during the course of their entire life (Braudy, 1986).

All of this changed with the rise of capitalism and related processes of mass migration and urbanization. Individuals were increasingly immersed in an ocean of strangers (Nock, 1993), a development that shattered a multitude of long-standing social practices. Notions of private selves and private spaces expanded, conceits that would have been alien to pre-modern individuals who often resided in a single room, shared a familial bed and were subjected to the regular scrutiny of neighbors. In the 1600s Puritans in the United States, for example, had a civic duty to monitor their neighbor, and in many

towns people were prohibited from living alone. Anxieties about the status of strangers accelerated the development of official credentials and identity documents (Caplan and Torpey, 2001; Groebner, 2007). While it was hoped that these documents would speak to a person's true identity, they actually produced comparatively thin bureaucratic identities and modernity remains predominantly populated by unknown others.

Increased social anonymity is also a fundamental precondition for the rise of serial murderers. Indeed, a defining attribute of serial killers is that they prey on strangers. Prior to embracing the phrase 'serial killers' in the 1970s, the police categorized such behaviors as 'stranger killing'. Thomas O'Reilly-Fleming (1996: 6) succinctly captures this attribute in characterizing serial killers as 'the quintessential anonymous, seemingly benevolent stranger'. It is hard to over-emphasize how unique this characteristic is, as outside of killings by hired assassins, the vast majority of homicides involve a prior relationship between the killers and their victim (Smith and Zahn, 1999).

Dense urban environments represent ideal settings for the routinized impersonal encounters that are the hallmark of serial killing (Sampson, 1987). Strangers are candidates for potential victimization, and prior to the emergence of environments teeming with unknown others there was simply fewer opportunities to kill in this fashion. Modern notions of privacy also operate here, in that a private sphere free from the prying eyes of officials and neighbors provides a space where serial killers can operate comparatively freely. Indeed, people who discover they have been living close to a serial killer mimic western neighborly dynamics more generally in that they often profess to have known their murderous neighbor in only the most perfunctory fashion, and frequently appeal to notions of privacy to justify why they failed to investigate the blatantly bizarre behavior that was often demonstrated by the killer next door.

RATIONALITY

Modernity is typically associated with the Enlightenment and the rise of scientific thought and practice. The distinctively dispassionate style of rational thought that ideally characterizes scientific inquiry extended beyond the laboratory and, in different guises, has come to pervade how people think about and plan their day-to-day lives. Such styles of thought, taken to their most radical extreme, often characterize how serial killers approach their actions.

In terms of mass killings, the Holocaust is infamous for how it employed a distinctively modern form of reason. Bauman (1989) accentuates how the rational processes of the efficient German bureaucracy, when applied to the task of mass murder, allowed for killing to reach an unprecedented scale. The institutionalization of instrumental reason in bureaucratic structures fostered a physical and emotional distance between bureaucrats and victims, insulating officials from the full human consequences of their actions. Depersonalized bureaucratic language dehumanized victims, transforming the murder of people, families and entire communities into the 'processing' of 'units' or 'cargo' and rendered the excreta that accompanies sudden death into 'fluids' to be prospectively managed by the Nazi death machine.

Bauman (1989), however, concentrates his discussion of rationality to its bureaucratic manifestation. In so doing he forestalls consideration of how modernist forms of rationality shape a very different form of killing. This can be appreciated if we return to Max Weber's (1920/1978) seminal work on this topic. Weber identified four different forms of rationality. Most relevant for our purposes is his distinction between substantive and formal rationality. For Weber, substantive rationality involves comparatively greater consideration of the ends to be accomplished in human action, including reflection on the ultimate values that inform such behavior. These values can include such things as security, social justice and equality. In contrast, formal rationality tends to evacuate value considerations, something that is done in order to best calculate the most efficient means to secure particular ends.

Weber details the ascendancy of formal rationality and presents it as a defining characteristic of the modern world, something that is largely explained by the demonstrated ability of formally rational processes to control the natural and social world. The implications of that development have been far reaching, but for our purposes its relevance derives from how it helped transform ethics and modify individual cognitive orientations.

In a largely secularized modernity, value-guided action tends to be disparaged as irrational. This is most evident in science, which tries to evacuate value considerations from research. Modern citizens also have few intrinsic value structures handed down to them from antiquity to help guide their actions and fashion life projects. Ethics, in such a context, becomes a matter of individual choice. And while modern subjects often commit passionately to the rightness of their specific ethical decisions, the sheer heterogeneity of alternative moralities and ethical systems on offer cannot help but accentuate the chosen character of moral systems. Serial killers exemplify the unbearable lightness of the moral position of modern subjects compelled to fashion a personal ethical life project in the absence of unquestionably received ethical standards. Embedded within the imperative to choose is the possibility that the choice will be at odds with social expectations and formal law.

The full flowering of formal rationality occurs in bureaucratic processes – the point emphasized by Bauman (1989). Such amoral life-and-death decision making has become a routine aspect of corporate behavior – with corporations being modernity's most characteristic legal form (Douglas, 1986; Bakan, 2004). However, Weber also realized that formal rationality must first be manifest in individual thought and action. In their routine cognitive processes, modern subjects become more formally rational as a form of means/ends calculation comes to inform even the most mundane life projects.

Serial killers reproduce this rationalist framework and push its distinctive form of value-free means/ends rationality to its most fantastic extreme. This is apparent in several respects. First, serial killings are planned killings. While perhaps obvious, this point is worth accentuating because most killings are impulsive (Waters, 2007). Even within the realm of planned murder, serial killing is unique because, from the killer's perspective, the rational strategizing about the murder can be one of the most integral and pleasurable aspects of the killing itself. This can involve detailed planning of the abduction, torture, killing and disposal of the body, all of which can be part of a highly sexualized fantasy of absolute control repeatedly played out in the killer's mind. Hence,

formal rationality is not only central to the 'success' of such killings, but can also be part of the pleasure that the killer derives from his acts.

The personalization of instrumental rationality is most typically apparent in the unremarkable day-to-day encounters between individuals. Goffman's (1959) analysis of social interaction as a form of theatre suggested that modern subjects are involved in an elaborate process of role playing. Most of these roles are entirely instrumental, and involve dealing with unknown others exclusively as a means to secure an end – as a way to get a seat on an airplane, acquire course credit, or purchase a meal. Serial killers emulate but radicalize this instrumentalization of social relationships. Victims, for them, are reduced to a means towards a particular end – typically a means to fulfill a psychic desire for control and self-aggrandization. Their victims are only valued to the extent that they fulfill such purposes. Moral and emotional considerations are typically evacuated, allowing them to torture and kill others without considering the human dimensions of their actions. Such an attitude is expressed in the following chilling description of how serial killers relate to their victims, written anonymously by a serial killer:

... it is almost always true that he knows absolutely nothing about the person who is fated to become his next victim. And, in truth, he really doesn't care. He doesn't care whether the stranger he'll soon encounter is a person of hopes and fears, likes and dislikes, past disappointments and goals for the future. He doesn't care whether the person loves or is loved. Indeed, he doesn't even care whether the person has a name. All such personal characteristics fall within the sphere of real-live human beings. And, as far as he is concerned, his next victim is not a human being in the accepted sense of the term ... each one is nothing more than a mere object, depersonalized in advance, with each existing only for himself and only to be seized and used as he sees fit. (Anonymous, 1998: 126)

It would be difficult to find a more concise description of reducing individuals to an instrumental means towards personal ends. The serial killing literature is replete with cases that confirm this general assessment. Leonard Lake and his colleague Charles Ng, for example, killed at least 18 people. For them, women were solely domestic servants and a source of sexual gratification. Towards those ends they maintained a steady supply of slaves who they kept 'as long as they were appealing and satisfying and then violently discarded them as human trash' (Fox and Levin, 2001: 105).

Such an instrumentalization of relationships is, in turn, an extreme psychological manifestation of the emergence of narcissism as a general mode of modern existence. Lasch (1979) uses the concept of narcissism to typify the dominant personality type of our contemporary culture. This, in turn, is attributed to the operation of a series of modern phenomena, most notably the emergence of an extremely individualized hyper competitiveness (Hall et al., 2008), the continual expansion of a mass media dominated by fleeting and decontextualized images, the accelerating pace of technological change, and the rationalization of inner life. The upshot has been the undermining of established communities and traditions (Heelas et al., 1996). For Lasch (1979: 50) narcissism therefore represents 'the best way of coping with the tension and anxieties of modern life, and the prevailing social conditions tend to bring out narcissistic traits that

are present, in varying degrees, in everyone'. Modern narcissists display a psychological orientation that fixates on the self and fluctuates between exaggerated and consuming forms of self-love and self-hatred, and is apparent in such things as a need to be in control, a devaluation of others and feelings of emptiness. The self-absorption and lack of empathy displayed by serial killers is the most stark manifestation of this modern psychic orientation.

To summarize, the horrific calculations of serial killers, as alien as they might first appear, can also deploy the familiar instrumental means/ends rationality that finds its highest form in science and corporate decision making, modernity's distinctive epistemological and organizational achievements. For individual serial killers this culminates in the most extreme manifestation of an amoral self-absorbed narcissism, which is itself a distinctive psychic feature of modern culture.

CULTURAL FRAMEWORKS OF DENIGRATION

One of the most unnerving aspects of serial murder is that such killings appear random, a theme that media accounts reproduce endlessly. In fact, the victims of serial killers are not at all haphazard (Wilson, 2007). Again, modernity operates here in terms of how modern forces subtly (sometimes not so subtly) encourage both institutions and citizens to single out some groups for censure and reprobation.

Unlike Nazi bureaucrats, the 'hands-on' nature of their murders means that serial killers cannot delude themselves about the immediate consequences of their crimes. Serial killers do, however, secure some psychic distance from their actions by dehumanization their victims. This is apparent in the tendency of serial killers to characterize their victims as vermin, insects or as a plague on society. As Gerald Stano remarked, killing his victims was 'no different than stepping on a cockroach' (Holmes and DeBurger, 1998: 8). It is now well known that such language helps remove victims from the universe of creatures to be afforded human consideration. We return to this point later.

Modern citizens are understood to differ from one another according to a host of criteria relating to such things as their cultural heritage, race, gender, sexuality and economic status. Such distinctions routinely inform day-to-day interactions, and can become formalized in official categorization structures (Bowker and Star, 1999; Haggerty, 2001). Not all such distinctions, however, are equally valued. In the cultural circulation and reproduction of meaning some of these groups implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) serve as a benchmark for idealized citizenry, while others are censored and marginalized. As Agamben (1995) has noted, western legal systems routinely treat some categories of people as pariahs, effectively positioning such individuals beyond the law and, as a result, providing few, if any, legal consequences should they be killed.

Shalinsky and Glascock (1988) have detailed common dynamics involved in these cultural valorizations, and their often monumental human implications. Their cross-cultural analysis of non-industrial societies accentuates how groups operate with

culturally specific markers of what count as normal, acceptable or lesser forms of human life. This involves an attendant set of distinctions reserved for individuals or populations removed from these ideals. Such individuals are 'liminal' in that they reside outside of or in between esteemed cultural classifications. Being so positioned signifies that such individuals, to varying degrees, are lesser humans and less socially significant. The specifics of what constitutes valued and devalued categories vary across cultures and also vary in terms of the specific meaning and importance ascribed to such differences. All societies, however, employ categories of liminal groups.

Appreciating the dynamics of liminality and the denigration of particular populations is particularly germane to the study of serial killers because, as Shalinsky and Glascock (1988) demonstrate, individuals assigned to liminal categories are often disproportionately likely to be killed or left to die (see also Scheper-Huges, 1984). So, in their analysis of the killing of children in non-industrial societies, for example, Shalinsky and Glascock accentuate the complex cultural codings that mark certain children as liminal, and which contribute to them being disproportionately likely to be killed or left to die. Across cultures, these can include children who demonstrate a host of biological or social abnormalities, including irregular paternity or the fact that the mother does not want the child. In some societies children are more likely to be killed when their birth is premature, extraordinary in some way, or even if the infant is born with teeth, too much hair or defecates during birth.

Modern societies deploy fairly consistent markers of symbolic denigration. Among these devalued populations are the extremely poor, homosexuals, women, the mentally ill, specific racial minorities, and children. To varying degrees, each is removed from the idealized wealthy, heterosexual adult male that is the esteemed benchmark in western societies.

Tellingly, the victims of serial killers are disproportionately drawn from disparaged groupings. Victims are typically modernity's cast-offs, stigmatized and 'lesser' individuals; populated by vagrants, the homeless, prostitutes, migrant workers, homosexuals, children, the elderly, and hospital patients (Wilson, 2007). Steven Egger (2002: 88) designates these individuals the 'less dead' to accentuate the persistent pattern whereby serial killers victimize individuals drawn from modernity's disposable classes. Indeed, rather than attempt to comprehensively list the axes of marginalization that distinguish the victims of serial killers, it is easier to point out who they do *not* kill. In North America serial killers very rarely murder wealthy Caucasian heterosexual males – those individuals who are iconically positioned in the most esteemed cultural category.

This victimization pattern suggests another way that modernity influences the operation of contemporary serial killers. Such murderers embrace and reproduce the wider cultural codings that have devalued, stigmatized and marginalized specific groups. Through a distorted mirror, serial killers reflect back, and act upon, modernity's distinctive valuations. Little wonder that a serial killer responsible for the murder of a procession of female prostitutes 'verbalized a sense of pride because of rendering the community such a great service' (Holmes and DeBurger, 1998: 12).

OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES

Differential valuations of social groups connect with specific opportunity structures for murder. Criminologists use the concept of opportunity structure to accentuate how criminal behavior is more likely in certain contexts, specifically when there is a combination of a possible victim, a motivated offender and a lack of competent guardians (Felson, 2002). So understood, the serial killer is perhaps the most terrifying case of a motivated offender searching for potential victims.

For serial killers to successfully target particular classes of people such individuals must be readily accessible to predation. The factors that influence differential levels of accessibility are themselves produced by modern developments. Consider the fact that approximately 60 per cent of the victims of serial killers are women. What makes this pattern of victimization distinctively modern is that it is contingent upon the greater historical presence of women in the public sphere. Where women have always been victimized by men, the nature of that victimization – its characteristic forms and dynamics – has changed. Historically, violence against women occurred behind the closed doors of the domestic sphere.² Modernization, however, entails the rise of a greater democratic sensibility. The emancipation of women has been one of the most notable manifestations of this trend. Although domestic abuse of women continues, more women than ever before have escaped domestic servitude and the attendant systems of familial oversight that regulated female sexuality. In assuming their place in the public sphere, however, women have also become more available as targets for public forms of victimization, including serial killers. Put another way, if we assume that a subset of men have always harbored a latent desire to kill women, there were greater opportunities to act upon this drive as women became more accessible for such predation.

The play of opportunity structures in the killing of women is most readily apparent in the penchant for serial killers to victimize female street prostitutes. Serial murderers find such individuals desirable targets for several reasons, one of the most important of which relates to their relative accessibility. Few other occupations force women to work at night in dangerous neighborhoods in a job that requires them to enter the vehicles of unknown men. Combined, such factors establish an opportunity structure that has made street prostitutes among the most common victims of serial killing. Brewer et al. (2006: 1106) estimate that of all the prostitutes murdered in the United States, an astounding 35 per cent were killed by 'serial perpetrators of prostitute homicide'.

Members of dispossessed classes are typically outside of effective systems of guardianship. Authorities tend to view such individuals as members of the dangerous classes, and are more apt to construe them as threats than as potential victims needing protection. By preying on the dispossessed, serial killers reduce the likelihood that their actions will be detected, and if detected, that they will be investigated with any degree of urgency or effectiveness. A prominent Canadian case provides a telling example of this tendency. Starting in the 1990s women began to disappear from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. It was only after more than 60 women had gone missing and in the face of intense pressure from the local community that the police began to seriously

investigate these disappearances. In 2005 local pig farmer Robert Picton was finally charged with murdering 27 women. The police's initial reluctance to investigate this case can undoubtedly be partially attributed to the fact that these victims bore multiple marks of stigmatization as most were prostitutes and many were also drug addicts, mentally ill and/or members of aboriginal communities.

A comparable indication of how official relations with stigmatized groups can blunt the effectiveness of police responses to serial killing is also evident in a notorious incident from the Jeffrey Dahmer case. In 1991 Milwaukee police officers were called to investigate a disoriented 14-year-old boy. Police found Laotian teenager Konerak Sinthasomphone walking naked in the street, bleeding from his rectum. Dahmer claimed that Sinthasomphone was his adult homosexual lover who had drunk too much. The police returned the boy to Dahmer, and subsequently joked among themselves about how having to deal with this homosexual 'lover's spat' left them feeling like they needed delousing. Dahmer murdered the teen soon after the police departed.

Certain classes of individuals are disproportionately targeted by serial killers because of their greater accessibility and the degree to which they are removed from systems of effective oversight. In itself, this is not surprising, as if serial killers did not capitalize on such 'easy prey, they would not survive in freedom long enough to become serial killers' (Jenkins, 1996: 103).

In terms of the connection to modern processes, this and the preceding section point to the mutually reinforcing operation of modernist frameworks of denigration and victimization opportunity structures. Frameworks of denigration single out assorted 'lesser' groups for sometimes veiled and often quite explicit revulsion, something that serial killers reproduce in the most extreme forms imaginable. At the same time, such valuations can be apparent in processes of exclusion and marginalization which can make such people more available for predation.

SOCIAL ENGINEERING

Bauman (1989) accentuates that one of the things that distinguished the Holocaust from its genocidal predecessors, and which made it characteristically modern, was that the Holocaust was undertaken in the name of progress. The murder of Jews, Gypsies, gays, blacks and others was certainly yet another reactionary vendetta, the likes of which have been played out through history, but it was also different because of how it was embedded in a utopian project that sought to create an ideal society. For the Nazis, the full flowering of a pure Aryan race could only be accomplished by ridding the world of such 'lesser' people.

In this, the Nazis engaged in a characteristically modern project of social engineering that drew upon an imagined planned society. The perversions of the Third Reich were related to the specifics of the Nazi plan, not their social engineering ambitions. All such plans envision some individuals as potentially polluting and undermining their efforts. Bauman (1989) suggests an analogy between how modern social visionaries approach 'society' and how gardeners tend their plots. In the garden, which is itself a planned

and nurtured project, some plants are carefully cultivated while unwanted segments (weeds) must be removed to fulfill the gardener's grand design. Societies are modern to the extent that they are envisioned as being 'man made' and amenable to such human designs. These projects also imply and produce their own characteristic forms of human 'weeds' or 'waste.' Here, the notion of 'weeds' is relational, in that weeds only exist in the context of a plan. It is modern social planning processes themselves that relegate some social groups to the status of being undesirable. In pursuing dreams of a better society, such individuals must be segregated, contained and sometimes eliminated to keep them from spreading.

While pursuing such utopian progressive ambitions is often the purview of the state (Scott, 1998), individual serial killers can also entertain their own modernist utopian aspirations. This is explicitly the case with the sub-category of serial killers which Holmes and DeBurger (1998) identify as 'mission-oriented' killers. One of the four main typologies of serial killers identified in their influential work, a defining characteristic of such murderers is that they see it as a calling to rid society of particular types of people. Here the murder of members of the disposable classes is explicitly connected with progressive social objectives. Expressions of these ambitions can be found throughout the literature, and in a single textbook Egger (2002) documents numerous instances. Russian serial killer, Ilshat Susikov, for example, claimed that 'I am a nurse of society. I am cleaning up all the rubbish. At work, I swept streets. Now I'm cleaning up a different kind of rubbish' (p. 15). Yorkshire Ripper, Peter Sutcliffe, reproduces this sentiment almost exactly when he noted that 'I were just cleaning up the streets' (p. 83). Charles Sobhraj, who killed at least eight travelers on the drug trails running through Thailand, Turkey, and India also called his acts 'cleaning'. After his capture John Wayne Gacy suggested that he was just ridding the world of some bad kids and that 'all the police are going to get me for is running a funeral parlor without a license' (p. 120).

Such statements are not simply extreme manifestation of delusional callousness. In a perverse fashion, they articulate uniquely modern ambitions of social betterment. To the extent that their killing is connected with utopian designs for social improvement, 'visionary' serial killers are distinctively modern. Rather than comprehending and justifying their acts exclusively as a means to satisfy their own desires, such individuals are self-consciously killing people on behalf of 'society'. As such, they draw upon and reproduce dominant rhetorics about designing a 'better' world which provide them a vocabulary of motive and which allows them to believe that their acts are in the service of a greater social good. In the pre-modern world it would have been inconceivable for killers to conceptualize their actions as being in the service of 'society'. Pre-modern allegiances were to family, clan or village. The concept of 'society' did not arrive in Europe until the 18th century, and is itself a product of modernity.

CONCLUSION

The study of serial killing is dominated by an individualized focus on the etiology and biography of particular offenders. As such, and with some notable exceptions,

it is one of the few domains that has remained untouched by the attempts of critical criminologists to place individual crimes in their more general social, historical and cultural context (Soothill, 2001).

By presenting serial killing as a modern phenomenon, this article has offered some insights that address this lacuna. As I have stressed, modernity is not just the context in which serial killing occurs, but entails a host of discrete processes, none of which arrives fully formed or unfolds uniformly. I have detailed how six different phenomena combine in the case of serial killers to pattern murder in modernity's own self-image. None of the this implies a causal process. Neither the culture of celebrity or greater anonymity, for example, cause people to become serial killers. Instead, modernity provides a series of elective affinities between serial murder and contemporary civilization. Modernity sets the parameters of what it means to be a serial killer, and establishes the preconditions for serial murder to emerge in its distinctively contemporary guise. Portraying such murderers as unfathomably different elides the disconcertingly familiar modern face of serial killing.

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Notes

- 1 The male pronoun is appropriate here as almost all instances of serial killing have involved male perpetrators. That said, some authors are uncomfortable with how women who kill sequentially have been effectively written out of the serial killer designation because they do not conform to the stranger-to-stranger dynamic noted later. The sequential killing done by women, for example, typically involves killing people with whom they are familiar, if not intimate, including their own children, spouses or, in the case of nurses, killing patients. Typically this intimacy with their victims means that they will not be designated as serial killers (Hale and Bolin, 1998) This is an important qualification that accentuates the problematic definitional issues surrounding serial killers. For our purposes, however, we are not concerned with inevitable characteristics of serial killers, but with commonalities related to the structure of modern society. In this regard, the stranger-on-stranger dynamic remains one of the most distinctive attributes of serial killing.
- 2 This excludes the notable exception of the European witch burnings which were highly public killings of women.

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