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VIOLENCE AS CULTURAL PROJECTION:  
THE SOCIOLOGICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, AND  
EPISTEMOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE  
JAMESTOWN MASSACRE

I

This paper combining several social science vantage points viewing the Jamestown Massacre as a collective action, a terrorist act, a manifestation of human aggression, and the work of a rational actor, will perform an interdisciplinary examination of the event. Consequently, the applied model consists of four strands, the sociological one including the contagion, convergence, and resource mobilization theories, in addition to explaining the conditions facilitating terrorism, a psychological segment attempting to chart the terrorist mindset through the application of such concepts as frustration-aggression, negative identity, and narcissistic injury along with Konrad Lorenz's views on human aggression, the third component of the model is the rational actor concept of history, and the fourth one includes Althusser's notion of interpellation and a Merleau-Ponty-inspired analysis of violence. The applied model facilitates a diversified interpretation of the events in question, its interdisciplinary approach leads to a more profound understanding and helps to interpret the Jamestown Massacre not only on the collective, but on the individual level as well. The Jamestown Massacre is located at a curious historical intersection as while the events took place in North America, the Jamestown Colony's subordination to the political will of the British Crown also qualifies it to belong to the

annals of British history. As Andrew Marr wittily pointed out, that “once upon a time the Americans were the British, lost. On the narrow lip of a distant continent, clutching their faith, songs, customs and memories, they were 17th-century space travelers, cut off from Planet Europe with its corruptions and tyrannies” (39). Also, at this time the edifices of a racial hierarchy so characteristic of American history had not yet been in place, thus in fact this tragic encounter between two hostile cultures occurred in a yet to be racialized cultural arena.

Any researcher dealing with this event has to overcome several obstacles, one being the classification of the very episode. A massacre is not a scientific category, as it is informed with substantial emotional content. At first glance due to the tripartite definition of a riot: “a tumultuous disturbance of the peace’ resulting from unlawful assembly aiming ’to strike terror into the public mind” ([www.lectlaw.com/def2/q053htm](http://www.lectlaw.com/def2/q053htm)), the events do not qualify as such. Certainly the Jamestown Massacre did not originate as an unlawful assembly, as no laws could prohibit the gathering of Native Americans at that time. However, the brutal attack in fact created “a tumultuous disturbance of the peace” and the method employed definitely fulfilled the third requirement.

Another possible approach would involve the comparison of the events of the Jamestown Massacre to the definition of terrorism, established by the U.S. Code of Federal Regulations as “the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives” (28 C. F. R. Section 0.85 in [www.terrorismfiles.org/encyclopaedia/terrorism.html](http://www.terrorismfiles.org/encyclopaedia/terrorism.html)). Whereas the application of the terrorism label would immediately give rise to charges of presentism, the events of March 22, 1622 certainly resulted in violence both against the government of the Jamestown colony and the individual inhabitants as well. Furthermore, the attackers attempted to realize both political and social objectives demonstrated by the desire to eliminate the English presence and the conversion efforts respectively. Moreover, the premeditated coordination of the attack and the method of its execution resist unequivocal labeling.

Also, the events cannot be seen as an example of traditional crowd behavior, as the Powhatan Indians did not form “a gathering of people

reacting to a nonroutine event” (Brinkerhoff–White 556). Collective behavior, defined by Lofland as “a non-routine action by an emotionally aroused gathering of people who face an ambiguous situation” (qtd. in Brinkerhoff–White 556), or a social movement, defined as “an ongoing goal-directed effort to change social institutions from the outside” (Marwell and Oliver qtd. in Brinkerhoff–White 556), however, contain elements relevant to the events of the Jamestown Massacre. Therefore for the purpose of this paper the Jamestown Massacre will be viewed as a historical event to which the components of riots, terrorism, collective behavior, and social movement would be relevant.

## II

The Jamestown Massacre was a carefully planned attack masterminded and put into execution by Opechancanaugh, the deputy chief of the Powhatan Indians on March 22, 1622. The pretext of the event was the death of Nemattanow, or Jack the Feathers, a prominent member of the Powhatan tribe, at the hand of white settlers resulting from a dispute over Nemattanow being charged with a murder of a trader, called Morgan. The death of Nemattanow served as a right cause for Opechancanaugh to carry out his plan of revenge. Opechancanaugh harboring a lifelong determination to drive out the colonists was motivated by a fear of cultural deterritorialization, the rejection of the English conversion efforts, and a resolution to protect the Amerindian land. Opechancanaugh’s career intersected more than once with the British settlers as he was one of the captors of John Smith and afterward was entrapped, held at gunpoint and imprisoned for ransom by the latter during trade negotiations between the two peoples (Dockstader 196–197).

By 1622 the settlers of the Jamestown colony had been lulled into a feeling of false security, believing that peaceful relations with the Indians would last indefinitely. Having felt that the Indian threat has abated, the settlers ventured to move farther away from each other. Also, as Smith reports the colonists would invite Amerindians to their homes and offer them food and lodging. Opechancanaugh’s declaration of ending previous hostilities: “He held the peace so firme, the sky should fall or he dissolved it” (Smith 294) reinforced the

impression of a lasting peace. As reported by Smith, on March 21, the night before and on the very morning of the Massacre as well, the Powhatan Indians pretending to sell “Deere, Turkies, Fish, Fruits, and other provisions” (Smith 294) entered the settlers’ homes unarmed, and sat down to eat at the breakfast table, then suddenly turned against their hosts and “immediatly with their own tooles slew them most barbarously” (Smith 294). Two days earlier they guided the settlers across the forest and even borrowed one of the colonists’ boats to transport themselves. Also people were attacked while working on the fields, and the bodies were severely mutilated. Especially noteworthy and gruesome was the murder of Master George Thorp, a Deputy to the College Lands in charge of the conversion of Indians to Christianity, a process during which he treated the Indians like children, punishing them if they misbehaved and dispensing rewards for accepting his instructions. The total death toll was 347, the largest casualties were suffered at Martin’s Hundred (73) and Edward Bennett’s Plantation (50) (Smith 301).

The following sociological theories can be helpful in explaining the dynamics of the attackers’ behavior. The contagion concept holds that crowd situations lead to “unanimous and intense feelings and behaviors that are at odds with the usual predispositions of the individual participants” (Turner 1964 in Brinkerhoff–White 557), the convergence theory asserts that crowd action is based on the presence of people sharing a common set of predispositions (Brinkerhoff–White 558), and according to the resource mobilization theory, social movements arise “when organized groups compete for scarce resources” (Brinkerhoff–White 565).

The contagion theory provides an explanation to the brutality of the Indians, as they acted in a group, under the command of Opechancanough. The gruesome mutilations appear to be at odds with the generally amiable relationship the Indians maintained with the settlers. The spread of the violence was indeed contagious as a result of circular stimulation originating from Opechancanough’s character. Opechancanough’s determination can be deduced from previous events, such as the humiliation he suffered at the hands of John Smith. Opechancanough’s career, perpetually playing a secondary role first to Powhatan, next to Opitchipan filled him with a tremendous desire to

prove himself and demonstrate his capability as a warrior. In fact, masterminding the attack provided ample proof for his mettle as a military leader and his capability as a strategic planner. The sheer brutality of the attackers is demonstrated by the murder of Master George Thorp as he was not simply killed but his corpse was “abused with such spight and scorne...unfitting to be heard with civill eares” (Smith 295). In this case not only the Indians’ rejection of the settlers’ religious conversion efforts is discernible, but a repressed anger as well leading to an open dismissal of the settlers’ treatment of the Native Americans as children. Thorp exercised physical, spiritual, and sexual control over the natives as he was able to punish them for misbehavior, yet “never denied them any thing,” (Smith 295) if they complied. Furthermore, the religious conversion effort attempted to superimpose a new framework of belief over Indian spirituality, and Smith’s remark that Thorp “would have had all the rest guelt, to make them milder” (Smith 295) suggests a degree of sexual control as well. Thorp also built a house for the King, that is Opitchipan, in fact superimposing European housing patterns over Native American ones. The mutilation of Thorp’s body represents a total rejection of this benevolent father figure. Whereas the “circular stimulation” originates from Opechancanough, a person committed to fight the English intruders throughout his life, Blumer (1934), and LeBon’s (1896) concept of the irrational and instinctual behavior of crowds (in Brinkerhoff–White 557) cannot properly describe the events of 1622. On the other hand, the attack resulted from precise planning and careful weighing of one’s options enabling the contagion theory to offer only a partial explanation.

The convergence theory’s assertion that crowds are made up by like-minded individuals “selectively drawn” (Brinkerhoff–White 558) towards an objective further highlights the significance of the synchronized timing and simultaneous execution of the attack plans. The previously mentioned common set of predispositions entailed the hatred of English settlers, and the desire for revenge. Having applied the resource mobilization theory to the events, in case of the Jamestown Massacre the resources in question are faith, land, and culture. The Jamestown Massacre appears to meet the requirements of a violent social movement as well, that is it was indeed “an ongoing

goal directed effort” to change social institutions from the outside. Whereas the existence of a definite social structure is debatable, the intensity of the organization of the Indians in fact corresponds to an indigenous social movement reaching the white level stage of the mobilization process (Lofland 1979) demonstrating that all members of the organization are fully dedicated to the movement and the resources and the number of members expand dramatically (Brinkerhoff–White 568). Also Opechancanaugh’s organizing efforts can be labeled as micro-mobilization, a process in which frame alignment takes place during which the prospective members of the movement “are convinced that their interests, values, and beliefs are complementary to those of the social movement organization” (Brinkerhoff–White 568). Moreover, within the frame alignment process, frame amplification can be discerned during which a structure is given to previously unfocused dissatisfaction (Snow et al qtd. in Brinkerhoff–White 569) singling out the settlers as the cause of the Indians’ suffering.

Treating the attack as an early form of terrorism, several theories or models are at the researcher’s disposal. There are two basic categories within this approach, precipitants, or events that led to the outbreak of violence and preconditions, or factors that allow the participants to start the terrorist action and violence. The death of Nemattanow, or Jack the Feathers would serve as the precipitant and the cultural deterritorialization of the Indians, the white encroachment on Native American land and the religious expansionism of the English serve as the main preconditions. According to Chalmers Johnson (1978) and Martha Crenshaw (1981) the preconditions can be further subdivided into permissive factors promoting the terrorist action or making it the only attractive option, and direct situational factors that function as the main motivators for violence. The permissive factors include such components as transportation systems, weapon availability, communication capabilities and lack of security measures. (Hudson <http://lweb.loc.gov/rr/frd/>) In case of the Jamestown Massacre the Indians took advantage of the rudimentary transportation capabilities of the settlers by borrowing their boats, they had a limited weapon availability manifested by the usage of tools and utensils in the perpetration of the violent acts and demonstrated excellent commun-

ication skills by arranging the attack. The fact that the settlers moved far from each other compromised their security in addition to displaying a rather relaxed attitude concerning the protection of the colony. The looming loss of Indian land, traditional life style and spirituality functioned as direct situational factors.

Following Crenshaw's organizational approach model holding that acts of terrorism are committed by groups who reach collective decisions via commonly held or shared beliefs while the degree of individual commitment to the group's objective varies, the divergent intensity of the killing and brutality can be examined (Hudson <http://lcweb.loc.gov/rr/frd/>). Smith reporting on the escape of such settlers as Nathaniel Causie, "they hurt not any that did either fight or stand upon their guard" (295) reinforces the varying intensity of individual commitment to the goals outlined by Opechancanaugh. The commonly held belief is the enemy image of the settlers, the random acts of violence demonstrate the diverse degree of commitment to group objectives. According to David G. Hubbard's physiological approach terrorist acts can be regarded as a "stereotyped, agitated, tissue response to stress" (Hudson <http://lcweb.loc.gov/rr/frd/>) making Opechancanaugh's actions qualify as a response to the stress brought on by the threat of cultural dislocation. Hubbard also points out the defining role of the *fight or flight syndrome*, an experience Opechancanaugh definitely had undergone in the rough treatment suffered in the hands of John Smith previously.

One of the most interesting research tools is provided by the psychological approach. Three hypotheses appear to be applicable in this case. Ted Robert Gurr's (1970) and J. C. Davies' (1973) Frustration-Aggression hypothesis holds that violence is caused by the so-called revolution of rising expectations, or a gap between increasing demands and need satisfaction (Hudson <http://lcweb.loc.gov/rr/frd/>). The fact that the relationship between the Indians and settlers in Jamestown appeared peaceful in the surface increased the Indians' expectation for fair and dignified treatment and created an expectation gap, eventually leading to the violence. Inspired by Erikson, Jeanne N. Knutson elaborated a Negative Identity hypothesis suggesting a "vindictive rejection of a role regarded as desirable and proper by an individual's family and community"

(Hudson <http://lcweb.loc.gov/rr/frd/>). Opechancanaugh's past sheds light at the sources of the formation of the Negative Identity, as he was always compelled into a secondary role, first the planned execution of John Smith was frustrated by Pocahontas' intervention, second he was not able to acquire the supreme command of the tribe, forced to play second fiddle behind Powhatan, later Opitchipan. Masterminding the brutal attack in fact goes against the tribe's primary policy of maintaining peaceful relations with the settlers. According to Jerrold M. Post, John W. Crayton, and Richard M. Pearlstein's Narcissistic Rage hypothesis terrorist acts, or the proclivity to such violence can be motivated by the presence of the "Grandiose Self" resulting in sociopath, arrogant behavior. Narcissistic injury can lead to a rage aiming at the elimination of the source of the former (Hudson <http://lcweb.loc.gov/rr/frd/>). In case of Opechancanaugh being ambushed and battered by John Smith qualifies as a narcissistic injury. According to Post the Grandiose Self operates the psychological mechanism of splitting as a narcissistic injury results in a damaged self, in fact a split self, a dual model of *me and not me* thereby externalizing the less desirable latter part and blaming the enemy. Eric D. Shaw's Personal Pathway Model (1986:365) (Hudson <http://lcweb.loc.gov/rr/frd/>) can also be helpful. This tripartite structure including early socialization, narcissistic injury and escalatory event can explain Opechancanaugh's progress to violence. The planned execution of John Smith testifies to a violent social environment in childhood and early adulthood, the ambush by Smith later functions as the narcissistic injury and the increasing cultural deterritorialization of Amerindians along with the death of Jack the Feathers operate as an escalatory event.

Konrad Lorenz's theory on communal aggression or military enthusiasm appears to be relevant as well. According to his four part theory military enthusiasm is preconditioned on the presence of the following factors: a threatened social unit, the existence of the respective threat, the presence of an inspiring figure, and the occurrence of many individuals agitated by the same emotion (397–398) The first requirement is met by the looming cultural deterritorialization of the Amerindians, the coexistence of settlers and Indians on the same land or in the same area satisfies the second



condition, the charismatic determination of Opechancanaugh qualifies him as an inspiring leader, and it is beyond doubt that the hatred of the whites and the rejection of their cultural and religious expansion fired up the participants in the attack on Jamestown.

The rational actor model elaborated by Davidson and Lytle (172) holds that historical characters' actions result from weighing several options and subsequently choosing the most effective ones. Consequently, individuals behave rationally and as a result of an internal cost and benefit analysis they select the most effective method to reach their goals with the least possible effort (172). The application of the rational actor model of course is only possible to the individual actions of Opechancanaugh. His goal, as demonstrated by a lifelong determination, is to drive out the settlers seen as foreign invaders. The options at his disposal were a full frontal attack, guerilla warfare, or sporadic violence. The fact that he chose the surprise attack method is one example of the thinking of the rational actor. The Indians used the surprise or ambush method to counterbalance an obvious military and technological inferiority, and to inflict psychological damage in addition to a military strike. The fact that the settlers were attacked in their homes planted the seeds of insecurity and weakened the psychological foundation of the settlement for good. The availability of weapons for the attackers was also limited, as they had to resort to using utensils and tools. The brutality in fact is calculated to strike terror into the hearts of the settlers. Opechancanaugh also had to find an effective answer to the aggressive religious expansionism of the colonists. The available options entailed an array of peaceful and violent solutions including the "re-education" of Indians via the refutation of the teaching of Christian missionaries, negotiations with the colonists to reduce the intensity of the conversion efforts, and using force to eliminate the source of the attacks on Native American spirituality. The effectiveness of the first option, however, was frustrated by the Indians' acceptance of Christianity. Smith reports that the King of the Indians confessed to Master George Thorp that the white settlers' God was "better than theirs" (295), also one could point to Chanco, a converted Indian, whose eventual warning to the settlers helped to avoid a greater loss of human life during the Massacre. Furthermore, Opechancanaugh's

determination to drive out the settlers precluded the use of negotiations to achieve his goals. The question, whether the massacre of 347 settlers, roughly 1/5 of the population of the colony (Davidson 51) could be considered a success, however, inevitably emerges. While the settlers suffered a considerable setback, and the revocation of Virginia's charter in 1624 was partially justified by the Jamestown Massacre for "the colony hath not hitherto prospered so happily as was hoped and desired" (Douglas 235), the revenge campaign or the Second Anglo-Powhatan War (1622–1632) brought a tragic defeat to the Amerindian population (Fausz 69).

The Jamestown Massacre can be seen as a violent clash of bodies, thereby facilitating the relevance of Merleau-Ponty and Althusser's theories. Following Merleau-Ponty, the body is represented by a system of double helixes forming an incomplete loop consisting of two images: intercorporeality, that is being a thing among things, and the body's perception of itself. Althusser's theory of interpellation, that is the introduction of the self into the social order, explains how the self becomes a social subject (Doyle 342–44). In case of an interpellated person, enjoying the fruits of the acquisition of the social self the two helixes are not in conflict with each other, that is the image of the respective self corresponds to the image held by society. While Opechancanaugh's double helix contains the corporeal component of an Amerindian and his perception of himself as a warrior, he is seen by white society as a bloodthirsty savage and his interpellation process is prevented and frustrated. Consequently, attacking the settlers, the beholders and generators of such negative images, can be interpreted as an interpellation, or the superimposition of one helix over another. Opechancanaugh's double helix is juxtaposed to the colonists' epistemological model of *immigrants of European, primary British stock and individuals on a mission to promote the "Glory of God and advancement of the Christian Faith and Honour of King and Country"* (Urofsky 12). One of the primary causes of the attack on Jamestown is the Indians' rejection of the colonists' perception of the self. In fact from the competing self-images, temporarily the Indian image of the *defender of Native American culture* emerges victoriously. The *Amerindian-warrior* double helix eliminates the "*messenger of European culture*"

component of the settlers' identity and emerges a new pattern entailing such concepts as *the Amerindian-warrior-defender of Native American culture and eliminator of a foreign culture*. The superimposition of Opechancanaugh's helix onto his victim, or by extension a multiple imposition of Native American helixes on the settlers' in fact eradicates the creator or source of the negative image. Thus a certain form of cultural projection is achieved, which following Merelman, does not call on the Amerindian community "to place new images of itself before other social groups or the general public (3)," but eliminates the very proponent of the negative image. Therefore, it can be concluded that the primary goal of the Jamestown Massacre was not the removal of the settlers, but the reconstruction of the Native American self shattered by the threat of cultural dislocation and negative stereotyping.

The massacre can also be seen as another episode of a virtual duel and rivalry between Smith and Opechancanaugh as the fate of these two historical figures intersected earlier. Smith was captured by Opechancanaugh and it was largely at his behest that the English adventurer had been sentenced to death. Smith's brutality toward Opechancanaugh during trade negotiations following their first encounter signifies retaliation for the previous humiliation. Consequently, the Jamestown Massacre can be seen as a response to Opechancanaugh's ordeal and Smith's reporting on the events figuratively condemns his Native American counterpart. In describing their first encounter Smith refers to Opechancanaugh as the King of Pamunkey to whom he gives an ivory double compass dial representing the globe. In fact similarly to Columbus' encounter with the natives, a cultural exchange takes place as both participants offer certain artifacts or elements of their culture. By presenting the globe to Opechancanaugh Smith implies the very possession of the world in which the Powhatan Indians live. The Indians return the favor with the offer of food and the subsequent threats to Smith's life. Both of these acts are subconsciously designed to fight against the notion of the settlers' superiority. The offer of food represents the wealth of the land which the settlers have not been able to enjoy fully, the eventual death sentence passed on to Smith amounts to a reclaiming of the dominant status in the Indian-colonist relationship. Also in Smith's

description of this treatment in the hands of the Indians it is noteworthy that he was always feasted before attempts at his life were made. Having been transferred from Opechancanough's custody he is taken to Orapak, where he is fed, than he is almost killed by an Indian planning to revenge his son. Furthermore, he is also invited to the house of Opitchipan and fed "many platters of bread, fowl, and wild beasts" (19). This episode is soon to be followed by Powhatan's execution order. Therefore it can be concluded that the method employed during the Jamestown Massacre, while at first appears to be treacherous, in fact is rooted in the Powhatan tradition of feasting the victim, or having a meal with him before execution. Thus the Jamestown Massacre seen from the victim's point of view as a treacherous attack, can be considered from the angle of Native Americans a form of cultural projection.

### III

Whereas the research objective outlined at the beginning of this paper included the performance of a multifaceted examination of a historical event, due to a lack of reliable historical reporting and sources, the researcher has waded onto the territory of myths and has been confronted with several questions. The approach utilized during the writing of this paper treated the Jamestown Massacre both as a collective action and as a brainchild of an individual. The first difficulty encountered is the categorization of the respective events as in the mechanism and inner dynamic of the attack elements of riots, social movements and terrorist violence are discernible. The crux of the researcher's argument is that the Jamestown Massacre is a violent collective action, thus sociological and psychological theories relevant to riots and terrorist acts are applicable in this case. As it was mentioned at the beginning of the paper the primary purpose was not the actual examination of the events, but revealing the underlying sociological, psychological, and epistemological processes. Consequently the paper employed a dual level model. On the collective action level the sociological explanations, Lorenz's aggression theory and Chalmers-Crenshaw's organizational approach to terrorism are located, while the rational actor, the psychological and physiological explanations of terrorism along with Merleau- Ponty

and Althusser's theories are functional at the individual level. The Jamestown Massacre is not simply a violent act or the beginning of America's wars, but a form of a cultural projection aimed at a dual audience, the Native American community and the white settlers. In the first direction it functions as culture protection and in the second as culture elimination. Taking Coronil's notion of culture as producing the Self and the Other (qtd. in Turner 418), it is clearly an attempt at Othering the settlers and healing the injured Native American self. The Massacre either treated as a riot, collective action, or terrorist attack, in the final accounting reinforces the Native American self as the relevant explanations and theories all emphasize group cohesion singling out the colonists as hostile to the interests of the victimized Powhatan Indians.

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