



2014-06-05

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/46664>



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Culture Wars The Menace of Menace [Anna Simons](#)
The American Interest, Published on June 5, 2014

Two years ago there was “Kony 2012.” This spring we have #BringBackOurGirls. The Lord’s Resistance Army and Boko Haram have both engaged in barbarous acts. But then, so have various affiliates of al-Qaeda. And so, too, have Los Zetas in Mexico, where the path to success for young members “[lies in beheadings, castrations, and immersing foes in vats of boiling grease.](#)”

I bring up the Lord’s Resistance Army and Los Zetas because Boko Haram’s actions are no more attributable to Islam than they are to the perpetrators’ identities as Nigerians or Africans. They instead have everything to do with what happens when societies don’t put the brakes on men—or menace.

Unfortunately, we Americans bear a certain degree of responsibility for this. By having helped market to the world the notion that menace is an acceptable lifestyle choice, we have helped make atrocities more rather than less likely. This is not to say that savagery hasn’t always occurred. It has. My point is that savagery *should* be a thing of the past by now—as in, it should be historic and no longer even thinkable. But instead, what do we find? When it comes to what some people are willing to do with and to other human beings, innovations abound.

Consider the terror people inflict on their “near enemies” with car bombs, mass rapes, amputations, and the prospect of kids being turned into child soldiers and not just war brides. The fact that some acts, like beheadings, are filmed for public consumption bespeaks swagger rather than shame. And while inflicting terror may be the most expedient way to intimidate and control others, or to prove how little security inept governments provide, its crudeness hints at another kind of contest. Namely, the competition among young men once menace is unbound.

As for what I mean by menace, menace intimates power. The message those projecting menace transmit is: “Defer, or else.” Or, in vulgar terms: “Look at me/don’t look at me, I can f— you up.”

We Americans have come to lionize menace on the big screen, the small screen, and the computer screen, in the music industry, the fashion industry, and the sports industry. Look at how legions of Americans dress, and listen to how they talk—with expletive-laced vitriol. Consider, too, who we reward with untold sums of money, attention, and status. It is not just those who portray menace, but also those who produce and direct menace-as-entertainment. Purveyors of menace now live so large that their profiteering only adds further luster to menace’s social cachet.

Without question, the ability to be physically intimidating on the mean streets or in schoolyards and high school hallways has long served useful force protection purposes. However, once upon a time, societies went out of their way to distinguish between individuals who acted menacing for reasons of self-defense and those who acted menacing by choice. The latter—thugs and bullies—may have always been able to command respect, but in civilized societies thugs and bullies never attained public adulation. Today they too often do.

In traditional systems, where age earned elders respect *and* authority, standards for behavior weren't just clear-cut, but the role of being an elder demanded a certain kind of decorum. One had to act with gravitas. One was also expected to pursue one's responsibilities, not fun. Contrast this with what adults in the U.S. idolize today: youth culture. We then market youth culture abroad, along with entertainment and weapons systems—which for years have been among our top exports. In fact, watch our movies, television shows, or music videos and what you all too often see is armed and menacing youth, lots of pyrotechnics, mayhem, and carnage.

Although everyone acknowledges that sex sells, as does violence, it turns out that the longest-lasting exhilaration we humans can experience comes from fighting for or against something bigger and more powerful than ourselves. Outwitting, undermining, or undoing a stronger force also appeals to youth for at least two reasons. First, nothing represents a more worthwhile or impressive Cause or offers a greater sense of Purpose. Second, there is no faster way to prove your worth and thereby earn status than to outperform your audience's (never mind your adversary's) expectations.

Among the dynamics that can rip societies apart are five that involve menace. Dynamic number one is that, as anthropologist Lionel Tiger noted decades ago, young males are wired to like violence and illicitness. Dynamic number two is that just enough females are drawn to “bad boys” that this helps make being bad worth bad boys' while. Most societies have developed methods to control or divert young people from turning into Bonnies and Clydes or followers of Charles Manson. The catch comes when those controls break down or too many people think being bad (or should we say “breaking bad”?) is all right. Most societies have developed methods to control or divert young people from turning into Bonnies and Clydes or followers of Charles Manson. The catch comes when those controls break down or too many people think being bad (or should we say “breaking bad”?) is all right. Alternatively, and equally problematic is when those who don't approve of society's slide stay silent.

In either case, acquiescence or reticence juices the third dynamic, which goes something like this: While engaging in illicit and violent acts may prove challenging for some young men, *excelling* at illicitness and violence motivates others; for still others nothing is better than organizing, orchestrating, and *prevailing* at organizing and orchestrating illicitness and violence.

Not only does this help explain the difference between those who remain foot soldiers, as opposed to those who become capos, in entities like the mafia, but professional militaries make use of these very same propensities. Just consider: while serving in combat units and getting to engage in combat is sufficient for some, excelling at combat and climbing the rungs into ever more elite units motivates others. Leading such organizations is better still, though best of all—for the select few—is getting to build and then operate them. The past decade has illustrated this in spades, with Joint Special Operations Command and SEAL Team Six earning all sorts of glory.

The fourth dynamic is a mirror to the third. Because all societies need outlets in which humans can compete for status, people will devise substitutes whenever there are too few outlets or those that exist exclude them. The venues the alienated and disenfranchised then come up with will, by definition, rock the status quo. And, as is true for anything that upsets the status quo, one by-

product will be friction—which brings us back to violence. When *acting* menacing is treated as an acceptable source of status, the door to being able to *act on* menace opens without anyone needing to push against it. Then, violence results. As levels of violence ratchet up, so does the competition over who can be more daring and edgy in the acts they commit.

All societies need sanctions to apply to those who engage in bad behavior. But at the same time, for sanctions to work they need to mean something to would-be perpetrators. Otherwise, youth won't see any need to act with restraint. For instance, in the documentary [*Shake Hands with the Devil*](#), former UNAMIR commander Roméo Dallaire is asked why he thinks young Hutus in Rwanda engaged in such gratuitous acts of violence against Tutsis. Why, for instance, did they escalate from chopping off people's feet to severing their legs? Dallaire suggests they did so out of one-upmanship, experimentation, and a sick sense of humor: Once young males had machetes in hand, they competed against each other to see how much a body could (literally) withstand.

Clearly, youth who lack strong moral convictions to not behave in certain ways will be more susceptible to engaging in unspeakable acts. But violence (or menace) is never only attractive to the young. Those whose reputations are built on intimidation, coercion, or sadism (like Los Zetas' leaders) have to continue to feed the beast, and keep burnishing their credentials. This has a further (d)evolutionary effect on the nature of shocking acts, especially when, over time, audiences grow increasingly numb.

Here is where we can't forget society's role: Dynamic number five. The broader context always matters. For instance, one downside to so few of us living in small-scale, face-to-face societies, villages, or communities is that bad social actors used to be objects of withering scorn and thus served as object lessons for how to not behave. Today, we send and receive all sorts of mixed signals—with certain behaviors acceptable on-screen but not, presumably, in real life. Standards are murky, if they exist at all. And again, this is partially thanks to what we have come to consider “entertaining.”

Perhaps nothing better epitomizes our confused messaging than the debate that recurs whenever celebrities in the U.S. are caught engaging in inappropriate or illicit behavior. One question that is invariably asked in the wake of significant transgressions (like rape) is whether those we elevate to celebrity status should be held to a higher standard than regular Americans. After all, if kids look up to athletes, singers, actors, and presidents, don't these individuals bear some responsibility as role models? While some argue yes, others contend that just because someone swings a club or bat and makes a lot of money doesn't mean he also has to live like a saint. Indeed, many celebrities and plenty of politicians would no doubt aver that whatever they do in their off-time is really no one else's business. And numerous citizens clearly agree. Yet, it is still curious that whenever something occurs to provoke one of these debates, no one points to the global figures who everyone already agrees *do* exemplify moral rectitude. Nelson Mandela was one. The Dalai Lama is another. No one points to them and says that *here* are the individuals societies should extol and children should model themselves after.

Perhaps the reason no one does so is because status is all about attention. And while, on the one hand it has become harder to hide bad behavior, thereby making it easier for others to expose your transgressions, the penalties for getting caught have also become less severe. There is

probably no good way to determine whether the rate of bad behavior is higher among members of today's "elite" than it was in the past, but illegitimate behavior is certainly more easily legitimized. Indeed, it is as if (with a few exceptions like child molestation), the more illicit acts high profile celebrities are caught engaging in, the fewer the long-term consequences for those who get caught.

Or, to be rhetorical about it, with scandal itself a source of fame, why *should* young people gravitate toward good behavior?

Clearly, youth who excel at playing by society's rules will try to best each other according to those rules—athletically, scholastically, artistically, and eventually professionally. But what about those who can't excel or have no interest in trying to perform in socially acceptable ways? For instance, what accommodation is made for the need (or desire) of some males to prove just how effectively they can literally dominate others? I ask because if literal (as in physical, coercive) dominance will always matter to at least some men—as well as to the females they hope to attract—then the much ballyhooed remedies that are usually offered, like sports, won't work. Competitive endeavors like boxing, basketball, or chess might help channel some at-risk youth, but they don't address the ineffable appeal of getting to be bad, an appeal that Hollywood and other sources of infotainment increasingly hype.

Nor is it just males who present a problem. The paradox young women represent is that what many, if not most, want in a male is someone who *can* take charge (whether women articulate it this way or not). This means society's challenge remains no different than it has ever been: how to set parameters for competitions that enable males with the most disruptive potential to outdo each other *and* impress young women *without* subverting the social order. Not only do the venues society comes up with have to permit the strongest, smartest, and fastest males to win; if not—and if the decks are stacked against them—these will then become the individuals most bent on defying society, while the more of them there are the more violent and spectacular their competition over status and attracting followers will be.

The difference, again, between traditional societies—or societies oriented toward traditions—and the situation we find ourselves in today is that the competition over status has itself become unmoored. There is no longer a clear hierarchy of statuses. Any means of gaining attention has become just as good as any other. And menace—rather than hard work in school, at a sport, in an art, or in a profession—presents the ideal short cut. Not only is menace easy to project; it holds out the promise of immediate gratification, all of which turns it into an incredibly seductive meme.

Consequently, the allure of getting to be menacing has to be considered part of what keeps Boko Haram, the Lord's Resistance Army, Los Zetas, and every other violent movement alive. The looser societal norms can be made to be, the more leeway this grants those who are prone to violence. Of course, since nothing loosens societal norms faster than violence, the natural selection this sets up is vicious: Individuals who are willing to experiment with ever edgier violence do especially well, particularly since these are usually individuals who have no moral qualms and feel no remorse. Perhaps the people they are targeting already exist outside their moral frame, or they consider those they victimize legitimate targets. Equally likely these days,

however, is that the idea of “society” itself doesn’t stretch sufficiently to include those being victimized or is so overstretched it has become meaningless as a concept.

Here is where, again, the marketing of menace deserves more of the blame than we Americans might care to admit, since one of its more pernicious effects is to collapse the concept of honor. Not so long ago, honor was associated with how well people treated those they *didn’t* know. Menace takes what once would have been considered chivalrous (offering protection) and turns it inside-out (“don’t you dare dis’ *me*”), but no matter how “big” acting menacing may make individuals feel, it actually diminishes everyone’s world.

Meanwhile, though I am pretty sure few Americans fear we might ever see something similar to Boko Haram or the Lord’s Resistance Army emerge here in the United States (which explains in part both our outrage and our fascination), is there anyone who thinks that the fantasy of getting to *be* menacing doesn’t help explain school and workplace shootings?

Thus far, we Americans have been fortunate. School and workplace shootings remain acts carried out by only one or two individuals. Perhaps one reason no group of American males has done anything more gruesome is that, whenever one of these tragedies occurs, it still troubles and shocks us. That reaction bespeaks a degree of lingering social health. However, if we look at others’ reactions to troubling acts over time, they suggest that eventually we too will become inured—which is why it would behoove us to be far more proactive now. Step one would be to recognize the trend. Step two would be to curtail the glamorization of menace.

In fact, the only effective way to rescue future generations here and abroad from further innovations in crude violence, which is all that terrorism really is, is to make less of menace. Otherwise, without doing something about the proliferation of this meme, the menace *from* menace will only intensify.

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