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**Our Dream and Our Nightmare:  
Anomie and Violence in Two Historical Periods**

By:

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4/23/04

Illinois Wesleyan University  
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Honors Research Paper

*Among the carnivores only rats and men have no innate inhibitions against killing  
members of their own species*

--Konrad Lorenz

*Man is a wolf to man*

--Latin Proverb

*Our society needs institutions that will strengthen the dignity and sanctity of human life,  
not degrade it*

--Judd Marmor

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*This paper explores outbreaks of violence in two American historical periods through the examination of Durkheim's theories on anomie. Core values behind the American Dream, individualism, and a frontier mentality are also examined. Both the American western frontier and the Post-Reconstruction South experienced periods of violent unrest among the general population. Both of these historical periods were under conditions of anomie associated with the lack of regulation from social institutions, anxiety over the removal (or sudden presentation of) existing opportunities, and the forces of individualism and the penchant for violence provided by American ethics.*

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## **Introduction**

The threat of violence dominates American thought and we often obsess over it. An examination of our history produces few periods that are not marked by the use of violence by the state, large groups, or individuals in order to achieve their own ends. We have used violence, we have admired violence, and we have also long feared its implications when used in a seemingly unpredictable manner (De Becker 15). Despite the American fascination with violence, we also seem to suffer a collective amnesia when it comes to our violent past and our violent roots. Horrified at the current state of crime and violence within our society, many of us look back nostalgically to the "good old days" as a time of comfort and relative tranquility (Zinn, "Violence" 70). However, this is an inaccurate representation of the American experience. The United States of America emerged through bloody revolution, and the same violent characteristics continuously mark our history. As Richard Hofstadter wrote, "there is nothing new in our violence, only in our sudden awareness of it" (3).

Our violent nature is not new, nor is it alien to us. Our violence is enmeshed in our society, just as our society itself breeds violence. We think of our violence as random and senseless, but to the perpetrator(s), violence “always has purpose and meaning” (De Becker 15). As the most powerful species on Earth, we face “not one single...predator who poses to us any danger of consequence [and so] we’ve found the only prey left: ourselves” (De Becker 8). Violence is part of America, just as it is part of our humanness. However, though all humans view violence as a potential resource, we need to look at what has shaped Americans to make us one of the most violent nations (at least among industrialized countries) on the planet. Statistics show that New York City reports nearly the same amount of gun related homicides in a single weekend that the country of Japan (population 120 million) reports in an entire year (De Becker 8). Americans are really no more inherently bloodthirsty than any other people, so what exactly promotes this type of behavior? Scientists would never observe a violent act in nature and conclude that this act was an aberration with no purpose. Instead, they would conclude that the occurrence must have some cause—and they would search to find the meaning behind it. This paper investigates the causes behind the use of violence in two periods of American history: the “Wild West” and the Post-Reconstruction South, by examining key social values and sociological theories on anomie. Ultimately, the causes of our violent nature function as a part of our society itself—and they have been developing along with our nation since its birth.

The very tenets of our society—the American Dream, the cult-like worship of the individual, and a frontier mentality—provide clues to the roots of our violence. These three factors, though perhaps noble in their own ways, form a lethal combination that is

quite literally killing us. The possibility for an individual to achieve limitless success has the potential to promote acts of violence in many sectors of society. By promising a better and successful life, America creates a condition in which he who does not achieve—or if achievement is threatened—may resort to the use of violence in order to rectify their less than satisfying situations. In many cases, the characteristics that breed Americans for success are the very same characteristics that push them toward violence.

### **Origins and Meaning of the American Dream**

The American Dream emerged through ideals put forth in the Declaration of Independence. Though the phrase was not coined until the 1930's (Messner & Rosenfeld 6), the images conjured by it have long represented the essence of America. Though most Americans may have never read the Declaration of Independence, a few famous lines continue to shape our lives over two-hundred years after they were written: "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness" (Cullen 38). To this date, the United States of America is the only country that has ever been founded on the unalienable individual right to pursue happiness (Simon 14).

These few words also dictate nearly every aspect of American life. Instead of making day-to-day choices in the name of God, or the betterment of society, or even in accordance with common sense, we make all of our choices with the sole purpose to pursue our own happiness (Cullen 38). We may be largely a selfish culture, and this is exemplified when we realize where those famous words originated. Thomas Jefferson borrowed them from the political and social theorist John Locke—whom had originally

written the phrase as “life, liberty, and the pursuit of property” in his 1689 work, *Second Treatise on Government* (Cullen 46). Whether or not Americans realize the true nature of these words, happiness was soon defined as property, and liberty was soon defined as the liberty to purchase whatever one could afford. And even though each generation defines its own dream, we still see the same characteristics driving the motivation: the “commitment to the goal of material success, to be pursued by everyone in society, under conditions of open, individual competition” (Messner & Rosenfeld 6).

The American Dream is a core societal value to which nearly every person living in America aspires. We all wish for wealth, and the document that founded our nation promotes this goal. Our founding fathers realized the problem they had created shortly after the Revolutionary War, in that the words that inspired the Dream were utterly ambiguous. Shortly after the words were written, people began twisting the meaning to suit their own purposes: for some, the right to happiness meant a right to life and freedom for all “men” in the pursuit of individual goals—for others, happiness entailed the right to own slaves. It soon became apparent that “the People in whose name they secured the Revolution weren’t much interested in virtue, natural aristocracy, and the rest” (Cullen 53). Americans were, and are, interested in achieving profit in the quickest way possible, and we are also socialized to “believe that the chances of realizing the Dream are sufficiently high to justify a continued commitment” (Messner & Rosenfeld 6).

Unfortunately, neither the Declaration of Independence nor the ensuing Dream offered any regulations with which to conduct this continued commitment—this was left up to the judgment and ethics of the individual. We all may have roughly the same goal in mind, but we do not have any guidelines to control our behavior when attempting to

achieve these goals. We tend to reward the ends in our society, and ignore the means used to reach them. This has allowed some people to create their own “shortcuts” to the Dream, and as Simon points out, “so important has the accumulation of wealth become that profit in America is frequently realized without the restraints” (14). As a result, we have a Dream, and a license to achieve this dream without many restraints on our actions. Just as these words and ideals inspire nearly every American to dream of success, we must remember that they also inspired the colonists to undertake a bloody revolution. The Dream may inspire us towards great heights and unbounded levels of achievement, but under the right—or perhaps wrong—circumstances, it may also inspire horrendous acts of violence.

The American Dream itself is not the sole driving force behind our money lust and willingness to resort to unsanctioned tactics in order to achieve. Another element of our culture, also engendered by our history, is our total and complete worship of the individual. We do not reach success in this country through family, or through dedication to society and its tenets; we are not attached to one another, we are not attached to our past, and we are not attached to our present. With desperation, Thomas Jefferson observed this drift towards the end of his life. He wrote to a friend that, “all, all dead, and ourselves left alone amidst a new generation whom we know not, and who knows not us” (Cullen 55). Jefferson seemed to realize that the document that he had penned would be invoked by many to achieve aims that were “unfathomable, if not offensive,” and his correspondence with John Adams reveals two men who were “awed, troubled, and finally amazed by what they had wrought” (Cullen 54-55).

The ultimate problem was that the Declaration of Independence did not declare the right of the community, or even the country as a whole, to pursue happiness—it reserved this right to each and every individual, to pursue this happiness however each saw fit. And since a failure to achieve wealth is ultimately a failure to achieve happiness, those who are not wealthy can be seen as failures—because they did not achieve the American Dream that is ultimately promised to all. This can create deeply rooted frustration and anger, as the failure to achieve wealth is ultimately a failure of American ideals. However, we cannot blame all of our problems on a seemingly simple dream that inspires the rights of every individual to pursue their own happiness. Our system of social solidarity also plays a large part in the creation of a dream gone wrong.

### **Organic Solidarity and the Division of Labor/ Individualism**

Our adulation of the individual is created through the dominating economic and social systems upon which our country is founded. As society progresses and its citizens become varied in their skills and backgrounds, that society becomes what Emile Durkheim labels as “organic” (*On Morality* 69). In fact, most industrialized nations fit the description of this type of society, and have for some time now. This division of labor forms the basis for our society and economy, in which all individuals have a specific role to fill in the functioning of society.

Durkheim’s description of organic solidarity seems tailored to the American lifestyle. He writes that within this type of solidarity, individuals are “grouped, no longer according to their relations of lineage, but according to the particular nature of the social activity to which they consecrate themselves...it is no longer real or fictitious consanguinity which marks the place of each one, but the function which he fills” (*On*

*Morality* 70). An organic society can only exist when each member of that society occupies his own specific role in that society, and maintains his own individualism and personality. There is perhaps no other way that Americans could consider to conduct their lives. Durkheim writes that, “whoever makes an attempt on a man’s life, on a man’s liberty, on a man’s honor, inspires in us a feeling of horror analogous...to that which the believer experiences when he sees his idol profaned” (*On Morality* 44). Of course, as we shall see later, not every “man” is considered to be worthy of life, liberty, and honor.

America is a nation of individuals. We lack a homogenous set of citizens, where each member of society is afforded the same opportunities. Our society has been called a melting pot over the years precisely because there are so many different individuals who have different value systems, backgrounds, and ways of contributing to society as a whole. Yet, it seems impossible for America to ever exist in a state where each member of our society held the same beliefs and sentiments. And so, we depend on each other and society, not through our similarities, but through our differences, and this is made possible through the economic division of labor in society (Durkheim, *On Morality* 68).

Ideally, Durkheim believed that this division of labor would not separate us from each other and society, but would create a fully functioning interdependent society. Organic solidarity was strong precisely because it allowed for individuals to be individuals, while creating a dependence on the actions of the other members of society in their own roles (Durkheim, *On Morality* 69). If each member contributes to society in a different role and capacity, we depend on each other for these differences, ultimately strengthening both society and the individual. A common social conscience will not disappear, but will develop into a multitude of individual differences within a general

way of thinking—in fact, the individual becomes a sacred object, a type of cult in the name of personal dignity (Durkheim, *On Morality* 51-52). Of course, this is the ideal organic society. While our society lauds individuals, and their unalienable rights, the undercurrent and experience of this country and its history are quite different. The fact that Americans are so willing to kill each other supports the notion that we are not wholly cooperating. Charles Cooley wrote that “it is apparent that both conflict and co-operation have their places in our process of organic growth” (36). Americans achieve—not through cooperation with each other—but through fierce economic and social competition.

As a result of this competition, conflict marks America’s process of organic growth more readily than cooperation. Because our values as Americans are largely dominated by our desire for wealth and recognition, we are taught to clamor for the desirable positions in this division of labor, where participation in this type of society and economy is the acceptable and legitimate way to goal attainment. We participate in our roles, abide by the norms provided us by these roles, and contribute to society (and provide for ourselves and our families) through these roles. However, America has a long history of excluding certain people from certain roles, and out of the legitimate economic/social system entirely. The underlying American Dream is still there—the attainment of wealth and prestige; yet when these legitimate routes are denied, illegitimate may will soon take their place. Ours is a culture governed by harsh competition—and when a position in society is threatened, the individual may go to great lengths to protect it. In essence, he will perform illegitimate acts in order to protect his legitimate place in society. Because the American ethos focuses on wealth and

achievement, the high “cultural pressures to achieve at any cost are thus very intense...a strong achievement orientation...is very conducive to the mentality that ‘it’s not how you play the game; it’s whether you win or lose’” (Messner & Rosenfeld 70).

Americans have created an economic system in which every member of our society must participate in order to legitimately achieve the American Dream. They must also achieve through their own individual strivings, with little help from society. No American is exempt from this ethos, because to refuse to make an attempt would be un-American. Though we can continue to make attempts, no one is guaranteed success—in actuality, anyone could just as easily fail. And unfortunately, a failure to achieve the dream is also a failure of the American culture. We have created a culture in which an individual must succeed by any means necessary; if he does not, even if he did follow legitimate routes, he has betrayed the Dream and failed himself and his country.

### **Anomie and an Anomic State**

Anomie was not a clear sociological theory until Emile Durkheim’s work *Suicide* was published in 1897 (Turner, Beeghley, & Powers, 321). The term anomie refers to a normless state, experienced by an individual who does not feel wholly connected to the collectivity in which he lives. His/her behavior is thus not as strongly regulated by the general beliefs and norms of that collectivity. Rapid transformations in a society often produce an “enfeeblement” of values; and thus, people within that society are less likely to be attached to, and regulated by, these same values. Two scenarios can result from this situation: the individuals feel alienated because of a sense of detachment, or, the individuals experience increasing frustration and deprivation due to underregulation. The

second scenario is often marked by greater incidences of revolt, unrest, and general unruliness (Turner, Beeghley, & Powers, 321).

By creating a society in which there is an “exaggerated emphasis on the goal of monetary success in American society coupled with a weak emphasis on the importance of using the socially acceptable means for achieving this goal,” we are pushed towards a state of anomie in our striving (Messner & Rosenfeld 12). This anomic state is largely responsible for outbreaks of violence, as people experiencing anomie are not under the cultural and societal restraints that keep people within the legitimate bounds of action. In fact, “a society...will be rife with pathologies” if there are no limits to individual aspirations and if there is no strong attachment between an individual and a collectivity with “higher purposes and common goals” (Turner, Beeghley, & Powers, 347).

Of course, when societies are governed by norms and important social institutions are active in providing sanctions for those who disobey these norms, illegal and illegitimate routes for achievement are not as readily perpetrated. However, we tend to value success more than we value the legitimate routes used to achieve this success. Cooley noticed how this can incite crime and violence in that:

Those cases of successful wrong-doing where a lack of group standards is involved can be understood if we take account of the network of relations in which the man lives. The view that success and morality go together supposes that he is surrounded by fairly definite and uniform standards of right kept alive by the interplay of minds in a well-knit group. This is the only guarantee that the individual will have a conscience or a self-respect which will be hurt if he transgresses these standards, or that the group will in any way punish him. (104)

If there are no strong governing institutions or cohesive groups available to repress acts of violence on the parts of individuals, violence may erupt much more easily. In many cases, few formal norms exist that proscribe violence, and there are many informal norms that encourage violence. No country explicitly endorses outbursts of violence among its people, but violence may sometimes be the only alternative. When people are not provided roles to achieve legitimately, or when there are perceived threats to current roles, they may resort to violence out of frustration. Taylor and Soady suggest that, “in a moral sense, violence is not power but an act of despair, an admission of failure to find any other way to gain a goal. By definition, every society is committed to non-violence; the violent are suicidal, for society must repress acts against law and order” (53). However, this threat of punishment may have little bearing on the minds of people who believe that nothing except violence will allow them to reach their ends. The very fact that they perceive that society has alienated them (or is threatening to alienate them) from legitimate roles, makes them less susceptible to the norms of society itself. Without roles, there are no norms governing their actions within society, and without norms, violence can result.

Emile Durkheim linked the ideas of anomie to suicide. Although Durkheim never made the connection between suicide and violence, Taylor and Soady suggested that violence *was* a type of suicide (53). Durkheim wrote on several types of suicide, all dealing with anomie theory, and the situation he describes that ultimately results in “egoistic suicide” reflects the situation that America has been in since its birth. Egoistic suicide refers to a situation in which the individual fails to integrate him or herself into society (or, put in another way, the society fails to integrate the individual into the social

fabric). The society throws the individual onto his or her own resources, not providing any mediating or normative factors to control them in their striving (*Suicide* 14).

Of course, as Americans, we reject any notion that does *not* allow the individual to strive for the self, relying only on the self. We stress individual achievement, and when someone is able to achieve with as little help from society as possible, we laud that person. Durkheim addresses one of the consequences of this emphasis on individuality in that, “the greater concessions a...group makes to individual judgment, the less it dominates lives, the less its cohesion and vitality” (*On Morality* 159). However, this individualism can also lead to despair and a lost sense of personal and collective direction. These things can cause people to resort to violence against the self (as in suicide), and it may also lead them to perpetrate acts of violence against others (as in homicide). Freud believed that all humans are predisposed towards violence, and that this violence must find an external outlet lest it is turned inwards upon the self. Other psychological theorists have refined this thought, stating that whereas humans do have the capacity for violence, whether (or not) it is expressed outwardly is dependent on external factors (Marmor 338). So, in essence, humans will turn their aggressive and violent tendencies against themselves, unless there are norms in society that allow them to turn it against others. The United States seems to consistently endorse the use of violence against others to achieve certain ends. Americans may claim to give rights and freedom to every individual, but it is a fact that those people who we do not view as being part of our economic and social structure have little protection from persecution on the part of the larger society. We may embrace the ideas of individuality, but by no means do we practice them. “The system permits disturbing the inner peace of millions

of Americans who are too poor, or too colored, or too different in one way or another to be treated with respect by government and society” (Zinn, “Violence” 78).

### **Violence as a Sanctioned Alternative**

This willingness to violate those who obstruct the path to success has been developed and defined throughout our history. Violence provided the catalyst for the birth of our nation. The United States of America would not exist except for the multiple unlawful acts that ultimately led to bloody revolution. We continue to laud this experience and encourage other “oppressed” nations to overthrow their controllers with brute force in the name of democracy (Taylor and Soady 81). While the purpose of this paper is not to argue whether or not the American Revolution, or any revolution for that matter, was a “good” endeavor or not, the point is that “the use of violence as a corrective is so ingrained...that we don’t even question it...The American Revolution took seven years and tens of thousands of lives, [and] we are so infatuated with the results that we don’t dare question its desirability” (Zinn, “Force” 21). Aside from reports of British oppression and acts of cruelty against the colonists, we must remember that legitimately, the colonials were under Britain’s rule. And, in order to relieve ourselves of this unjust and unfair tyranny, we resorted to lawbreaking, riots, intimidation of royal governors, and violence (Hollon 7-8).

Our nation’s birth and history show the American people that violence is a necessary and legitimate way to achieve certain ends. Though we may recoil at the seemingly “random” acts of violence that permeate our culture, though we may hold nothing but utter contempt for our “inhuman” murderers, we also lift some violent acts up to the status of legend, and lift some of our most heinous outlaws to the status of hero.

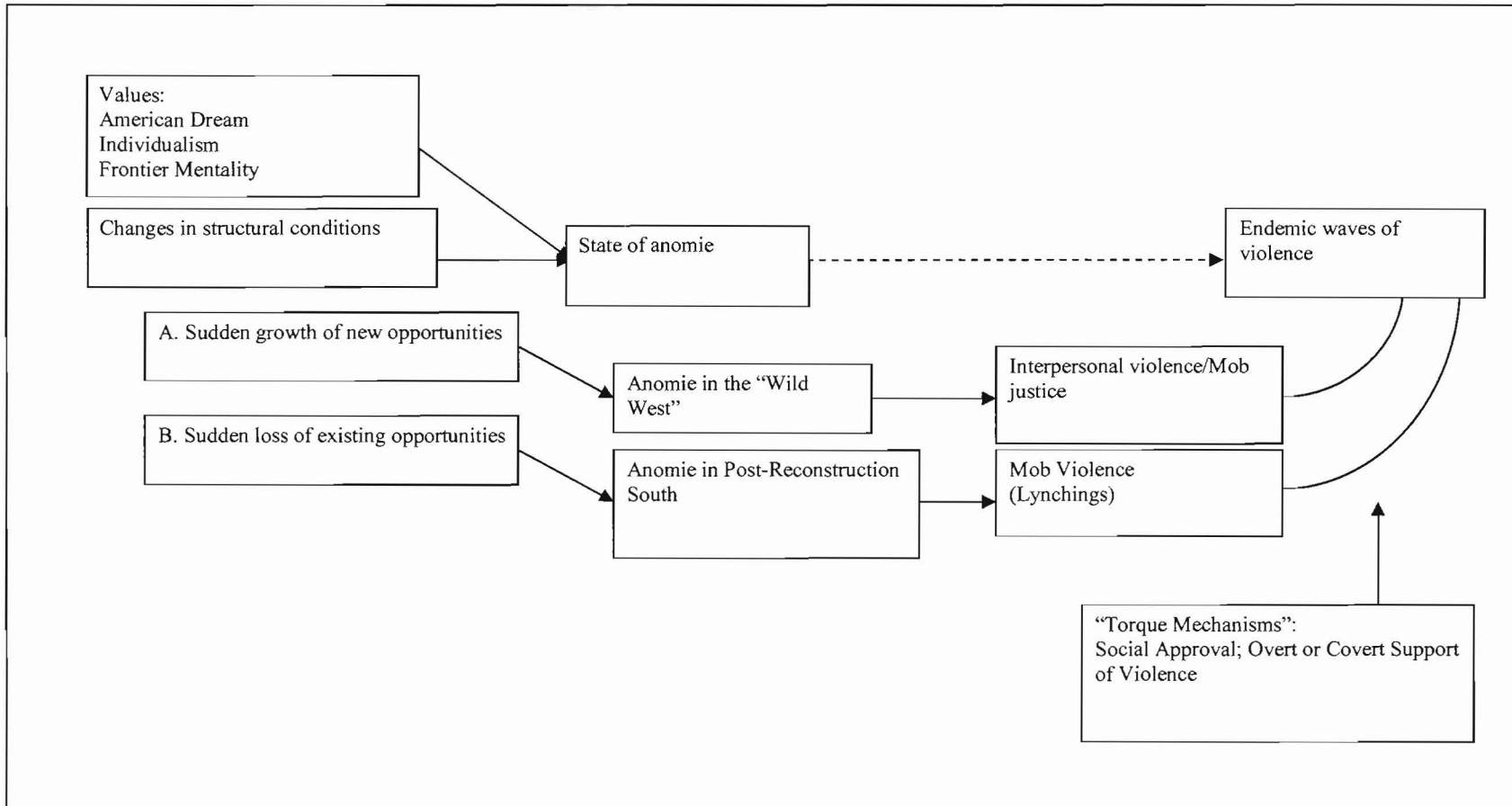
An examination of our “frontier” mythology reveals this. As the American Revolution showed, in order to get what they wanted, Americans needed to be “tough, aggressive, and unafraid...real go-getters who tamed the wild frontier and never lost a war.

‘Winning is not just important, it’s everything!’ Success depends upon aggressiveness” (Hollon, x). Americans needed to go out and get what they wanted—and if necessary, they must use violent means (Hollon x). These mythic acts of violence founded our nation. In turn, our nation fails to provide social institutions that consistently regulate and provide guidelines for acceptable behavior. When you add to this a failure to allow some segments of society routes to legitimate achievement within the division of labor—violence may erupt—and we should not be surprised when it does.

### **The Explanatory Model**

By exploring the ideas of the American Dream, individualism, anomie, and the sanctioned use of violence, we can attempt to construct a working model that begins to explain the roots of the American epidemic of violence on both macro and micro levels. As we will see later, certain changes in the structural conditions of society can combine with the aforementioned values to produce a state of anomie, which can itself produce violence and aggression. Two types of social situations have been shown to produce anomic conditions: the sudden presentation of limitless opportunities, and the sudden removal (or threat of removal) of already existing opportunities. We can see each of these situations at work in the American frontier and the Post-Reconstruction South, respectively (please see Figure 1 on page 15).

**Figure 1--Two Types of Anomic Situations**



\*Torque Mechanisms are a type of “feedback loop” that bring individual actions back into the social situation—they may also serve to speed up the events occurring in the situation.

Of course, this is only a limited overview of the origins of societal violence—to truly understand it, we must construct the details of everyday life in these certain situations at the micro level. As more details are learned, models presented later in this paper will be expanded and elaborated upon to further explicate and include the details of these two different social situations.

More than any other period in our history, the “Wild West” (mid to late nineteenth century) may represent American culture most accurately. The western frontier required hard work, the individual drive to sever ties with the “respectable” cities of the East to get rich, and the willingness and ability to use violence to gain this wealth and to survive. In this, the American frontier clearly exhibits the underlying individualistic and goal-orientated mentalities that create the foundation of our society. As Americans, we also look back to this time in our history with a sense of utmost pride. In a way, we still like to think of ourselves as this universal cowboy—taming the wilderness and gathering wealth and prosperity through our sweat, hard work, and blood. However, our perceptions of the West are far from accurate—and the battle between good and evil was never as clear cut as Hollywood portrays. In reality, the lack of social institutions and restraint marked the western frontier. It was a land of excess, where lawmen and outlaws were largely interchangeable, and where men resorted to the use of violence whenever the situation seemed to suit them.

### **Violence on the Frontier—“Frontier Mentality”**

*“If you want distinction in this lawless country...kill somebody” (Hollon 53)*

The American frontier exhibited all of the intrinsic American values of gaining wealth and individual action discussed earlier; its citizens were also subjected to a severe

anomic situation due to the physical distance from formal governing institutions. The frontier expanded as more and more people decided to pull up their roots and seek their fortunes in the western territories of the United States. The average settler was there to realize the American Dream of unlimited wealth and property, and he did so using whatever means necessary. An observer at the time mentioned that “here men come to make money—make it *quick*...no matter how” (McGrath 11-12). Along with this desire for wealth was a high regard for those individuals who were able to take care of themselves. Because they were so far from *any* regulating social institutions, the settlers were expected to take care of themselves and their own problems and disputes. The man that asked for help was not a man—while the man who spoke alone (with help from his guns) *was*. This is precisely the situation Durkheim describes in his theories on egoistic suicide (*Suicide* 14), in which the individual is not integrated into society. This failure to integrate sets the individual adrift, and “the stronger the forces throwing the individual onto his own resources, the greater the suicide-rate in the society in which this occurs” (Durkheim, *Suicide* 14). And, as we saw earlier, suicide is merely violence against the self that occurs when there is no external outlet. Unfortunately, the settlers had many external outlets to express their frustration at the seemingly limitless amount of opportunities (and the equally limitless opportunity for failure) in an environment bereft of any strong social institutions. Violence was not only a sanctioned alternative in the West, it was *the* alternative.

During the westward expansion, the territory being explored and cultured was not populated by families, but by single young men seeking their fortunes. Most of these settlements were thousands of miles away from a centralized government, and the

dominant social institutions consisted of the local saloons, gambling parlors, and brothels (Courtwright 38-39). The western frontier was permeated with competition for wealth, as well as general attitudes conducive to the use of violence to attain and keep wealth, honor, and prestige. Violence was a sure-fire way to gain notoriety, and Hollon observed this in that, “the reputation for having ‘killed his man’ became a passport to general recognition and respect...[this] create[d] a climate of barbaric lawlessness. To ‘die with one’s boots on’ was proof of one’s game quality; to ‘have a man for breakfast’ was an ambition that inspired every bully in the gold fields” (110).

The American West exemplifies a culture that prided itself on distributing “justice,” not to the letter of the law, but through largely illegal means. The law enforcement of the time was either too unjust itself to mete out punishment to wrongdoers, or too weak to keep the general citizenry from doling out their own punishments. Above all, we have the failure of governmental restrictions along with a society composed mostly of young males who were largely after one thing: the acquisition of wealth and money. It has long been recognized by many researchers that males not under the influence of societal restrictions and family life are much more likely to commit crime than any other segment of society. Lykken observed that “the surest way to reduce crime would be to put all able-bodied males between the ages of twelve and twenty-eight into cryogenic sleep” (qtd. in Courtwright 36). Tellingly, it is the young males that made up most of those who went west towards California during the gold rush in 1849—nearly 95% of these emigrants were men (Courtwright 36). The typical emigrant was far away from home, but close to the “hurly-burly of camp life...his immediate social environment, which consisted of uprooted young men thrown together

with opportunists and vice peddlers, shaped his sense of what was permissible and appropriate” (Courtwright 39). It has also been noted that within six months one in every five of these men were dead (Courtwright 38). Death could result from any number of causes, including disease, suicide, and the many complications that came from imbibing too much alcohol.

Besides the lack of family and government structures to regulate behavior and provide norms for action, there was also a lack of legitimate opportunities. Mining, gambling, and operating services that pandered to the miners were three of the few legitimate routes towards cash in these fledgling towns, while many other members of society earned their livings through more nefarious channels. A newspaper of the time commented on this situation, reporting that “there are a number of men...who have no visible means of support, but who always dress well, and are seldom without money...we believe that a few of them would not only rob a man, but murder him were it necessary to do so in order to get his money and escape detection” (McGrath 74). These men wanted wealth, and many of them resorted to violent tactics in order to get wealth and then keep it safe from other bandits and outlaws. Surprisingly, rates of burglary and robbery were no more than rates exhibited in eastern towns, probably because nearly every citizen carried a gun—and was not afraid to use it. The killing of an “outlaw” did little more than garner the “law abiding” citizen some highly favorable press. In the majority of western settlements, these homicides were judged as justifiable, and most townspeople were not troubled over the death of “badmen” (McGrath 85).

However, many of these badmen did take on mythical status, and their illegal acts were lauded and admired by regular society and many respectable newspapers of the

time. Even today, the names of the infamous outlaws, like Jesse James and Billy the Kid, conjure images of bravery, fearlessness, and heroism. The cowboy mentality represents America, precisely because it relies on independent action as well as individual reliance. These outlaws were daring men, risking nearly everything in order to achieve their goals. Frantz writes that:

The whole history of the American frontier is a narrative of taking what was there to be taken. The timid never gathered the riches, the polite nearly never...the emphasis naturally came to be placed on gathering and not on procedures....the heroes are not the men of moderate attitudes, not the town planners...nor the ministers nor the teachers...the heroes of the period...[are those] who ran without looking back, without concern about social values or anywhere they might be going except onward (128-129).

And while these heroes were sometimes captured, sometimes gunned down, and sometimes executed, their deeds preceded their names in many instances and created a value system that endorsed the glamorous use of violence in order to gain fame and fortune.

We see a prime example of this in the legends surrounding Frank and Jesse James. Even though these men committed their very violent crimes nearly one hundred and fifty years ago, modern society is still enraptured with their deeds of “bravery,” as evidenced by the many television documentaries and movies that have been made detailing their adventurous lives and deaths. One incident, largely attributed to the James brothers, garnered them much favorable press, even though their attempt at robbery resulted in the theft of about \$1,000 dollars and the severe injury of a little girl caught in

their gunfire. Despite these consequences, the Kansas City Times soon reported that the action was “so diabolically daring and so utterly in contempt of fear that we are bound to admire it and revere its perpetrators” (Frantz 128). Two days after the robbery, it was said that the “bandits had come to us from storied Oldenwald, with the halo of medieval chivalry upon their garments...nowhere else in the United States or in the civilized world, probably, could this thing have been done” (Frantz 128). We can detect a sense of pride in this publication, that such a daring and yet violent act could have only occurred in that part of the United States—as if it was not our violent nature that needed changing, but that the rest of the world should wistfully look upon our violence, and change themselves to better match it. The Kansas City Times was right about one thing, the United States did provide a unique place for violence to be bred and celebrated.

Of course, as time passed, the West became more settled. Areas were declared states, incorporated into the greater union, and subject to the laws of the federal government. More and more women began journeying west, and with them came an increase in the establishment of traditional families. Also, traditional lines of work were more and more common, as doctors, lawyers, and schoolteachers became necessities (though it should not be assumed that these “higher class” members of society did not participate in occasional vigilantism). David T. Courtwright notes that, “no frontier region, however notorious, escaped this process. Cowboy watering holes like Dodge City and Fort Griffin, murder-a-day railroad boom-towns like Julesburg and Laramie—all eventually succumbed. When families replaced bachelor laborers and vice-parasites, things quickly settled down” (6).

Despite this reported settling down, many old ways did die hard, despite the presence of formalized judiciary systems in the West. The underlying acceptance of violence was still very much a part of the culture, as it is still a large part of American culture even today. It had been told that a judge in Texas, known as Three Legged Willie, quoted from the Revised Statutes of the State of Texas while trying a man who was accused of assault and battery. The accused laid a bowie knife on the table, said, “here’s the law of Texas.” To which Judge Willie replied, “Yes, and by God here’s the constitution of Texas,” while laying a six-shooter right next to the knife (Hollon 106). The gun-culture and penchant for violence were still very much alive, even if the presence of formalized social institutions seemed to now inhibit many violent acts.

As mentioned earlier, crime and violence in the West did not seem to bother many law-abiding citizens as long as “innocents” were not harmed. We should never forget that through the settlement of the western United States, our government and citizens committed acts against Native Americans that were nothing less than outright genocide. It is estimated that anywhere from 4,000 to 10,000 Native Americans were murdered, with many more dying of complications from disease and alcohol (Hollon 124). All of this murder was justified in the name of “Manifest Destiny.” Americans would extend their superiority to these people, even if it meant the murder of thousands. The American west exhibited that whenever anyone got in a white man’s way, death would result (Hollon 124-126). There was never a large public outcry against this violence—at least not large enough to stop it. This was also the attitude held by the general citizenry towards anyone accused of committing a crime. Vigilantism and mob justice were facts of daily life.

As stated earlier, lawmen and outlaws were largely interchangeable—and both were more than willing to resort to violence if needed. In the frontier town of Aurora (located in what would now be the state of Nevada) an underling of the infamous Daly Gang won the election in 1863 for city marshal. With the vote of more *respectable* citizens divided between the numerous candidates, this outlaw was able to carry the majority of votes (likely from his fellow gang members). The Esmeralda Star, a local newspaper of the time, asserted that “No sooner had the Marshal been sworn in, than the worst villains that ever infested a civilized community were appointed policemen, and with but few exceptions they were composed of as hard a set of criminals as ever went unhung” (McGrath 88). The leader of the gang was himself appointed deputy marshal, and policemen began to pocket most of the fees collected from citizens. The gang was eventually ousted after several of its leaders were arrested for murder. Afraid that a trial would allow the outlaws to escape justice, a crowd of vigilantes overpowered the sheriff, took control of the jail and its prisoners, and vigilante justice soon demanded punishment. A day later, the men were hanged (McGrath 95).

### **Aurora, Nevada—The “Real” Wild West**

In order to attain a better understanding of what the social conditions of these “wild west” towns were like, we now examine in further detail the town of Aurora, Nevada—where the Daly gang ruled and the law was largely suspended (if only for a short period of time). Aurora sprang up like many other towns on the frontier—hastily founded by the sudden and opportune discovery of exceedingly rich silver mines. On August 22nd, 1860, three men accidentally stumbled upon some of these rich deposits, and hastily spread the word at the nearest mining village. About twenty men followed

them back to their camp, and just eight days later the mining district of “Esmeralda” was born. A mere two months after the original discovery, 357 individual mining claims had been recorded—Aurora was officially a boom town (McGrath 1-2).

The crude encampment itself grew rapidly, with many settlers building shanties out of mud, straw, canvas, and stone because lumber prices were far too expensive for most of these young prospectors. Jobs were available at every turn, for wherever the miners went, business followed. So, while most men were “miners” by trade, many took other jobs in order to pay for day-to-day living expenses. Only a few individuals had the good fortune to strike it rich on their first day of prospecting (McGrath 5). Because the demand for labor was so high, wages were nearly quadruple those found back east. Of course, riches came quickly and departed just as easily “through speculation in stocks and dissipation” (McGrath 5).

It did not help that nearly every social institution in the town operated for the pure purpose of relieving the general citizenry of their money. At least twenty-five saloons set up shop in downtown Aurora, and nearly as many gambling parlors and brothels. The average man spent his nights visiting the bars and playing at the card tables. If he had any gold or silver dust left over after these exploits (for there was no paper money, and solid ore was the medium of exchange), he was sure to lose it to the prostitute. A visitor to the town described Auroran night life quite vividly, stating:

Aurora on a Sunday night...one sees a hundred men to one woman and child.

Saloons—saloons—saloons—liquor—everywhere. And here the men are—

where else can they be? At home in their cheerless lonesome hovels or huts? No,

here in the saloons, where lights are bright, amid the hum of many voices and the

excitement of gambling. Here men come to make money—make it *quick*—not by slow, honest industry, but by quick strokes—no matter *how*, so long as the law doesn't call it *robbery*. (McGrath 11-12)

Perhaps this scandalous night life can be traced back to the fact that Aurora was not a town populated by families. In 1861, nearly 800 people called Aurora home, of which only about a dozen were women. As the town grew, these proportions stayed relatively the same; at its height in 1863 Aurora boasted 5,000 residents, including between 200 and 300 women (half of whom were prostitutes) and about 80 children (McGrath 7-9). What the town lacked in women and children it also lacked in church services—the first service was not held until more than three years after the town's founding. However, one thing did manage to keep pace with the booming male population: real estate prices. Choice town lots sold for \$5,000 a piece or more. However, this “prosperity” soon ended, as prices plummeted by 95% only a year and a half later. The sudden and stagnating death of the town hit as quickly as the spectacular beginning (McGrath 11).

Even though the town experienced a boom for about four years, Aurora developed a remarkably advanced system of law and order. Because it was the county seat, there existed not only a local constable and his band of appointed policemen, but also a sheriff and a county jail (however, a grand jury constantly cited this jail as in dire need of repairs and unfit to hold prisoners—nothing was ever done about this). Aurora also boasted a district attorney (McGrath 16). Despite these relatively modern advances, Aurora was plagued with violence, and it is estimated that 27 people were murdered in one year alone. Other estimates place the murder rate at about 67 per 100,000 residents (Beeghley

58). And, of course, we also must consider that the murderous Daly gang ran the system of law and order—legally—for a short time in 1864 (Mineral County Museum <<http://web0.greatbasin.net/~mcmuseum/page4.html>>).

The full story of Aurora's love/hate affair with the Daly gang began in 1863, when John Daly and several of his friends found work as hired gunslingers for The Pond mining company (who was then feuding with the Real Del Monte mining company over claim disputes). Their main duties included opposing the rival hired guns, and intimidating the rival company's executives and witnesses. Despite Daly's reputation for killing at least four men in his exploits before he reached Aurora, the citizens idolized him. The Aurora Times wrote that he was "rather fine looking...nature had done enough for him to have entitled him a position of respectability" (McGrath 87). The year 1863 was eventful for the gang, since it was the year that the town elected a gang member to the office of city marshal (John Daly himself served as deputy marshal). And 1863 was also the year that saw John Daly and a few of his followers meet their untimely deaths.

The beginning of the end came when John Rogers shot and killed one of John Daly's good buddies during an attempted horse theft. Daly swore revenge, and was incensed after the station keeper, William Johnson, would not tell Daly where Rogers had escaped. As far as Daly was concerned, there were now two men who were soon to be dead—though he would not get his revenge immediately (McGrath 86). After this incident, the Daly gang continued to perform their duties for The Pond, as they managed to shoot and kill numerous men over the ongoing claim feuds mentioned earlier. Drunkenness and infighting increased over time, and John Daly even killed one of his own. However, as the Esmeralda Star noted, "So long as they did not molest peaceable

citizens, their shooting and killing one another was borne with by the people with utter indifference” (McGrath 88). What was not to be borne by the people of Aurora was the seeming thievery of their elected marshal and his outlaw deputies. While Daly was absent (he followed the claims feud trial to Carson City) the town elected a new city marshal. After this loss of power, Daly then set his sights on settling the old score with William Johnson (McGrath 90).

After one of the Daly gang members ostensibly befriended Johnson, they treated him to several drinks in one of Aurora’s many local saloons. After a night of partying that culminated in Johnson drunkenly stumbling towards home, three members of the gang ambushed him, shot him twice, and severed his jugular vein. Of course, this time, an “innocent” man had been murdered—and this incident ultimately pushed the town over the edge (McGrath 91). After several gunfights (some citizens began taking potshots at the accused) the town formed a 400 men strong “safety committee” to aid with the general apprehension in the town. This committee—in essence vigilantes—soon declared martial law and began ruling the town. After Daly and three of his underlings were captured, tried, and found guilty of murder, the safety committee rushed the jail, overpowered the law men, took possession of the prisoners, and condemned them to death. The safety committee quickly erected a gallows, and summarily hanged John Daly, William Buckley, “Three-Fingered” Jack, and James Masterson (some might argue that the men were lynched). Only two days had passed from verdict to hanging—vigilante mobs were, if anything, swift in their retribution (McGrath 94).

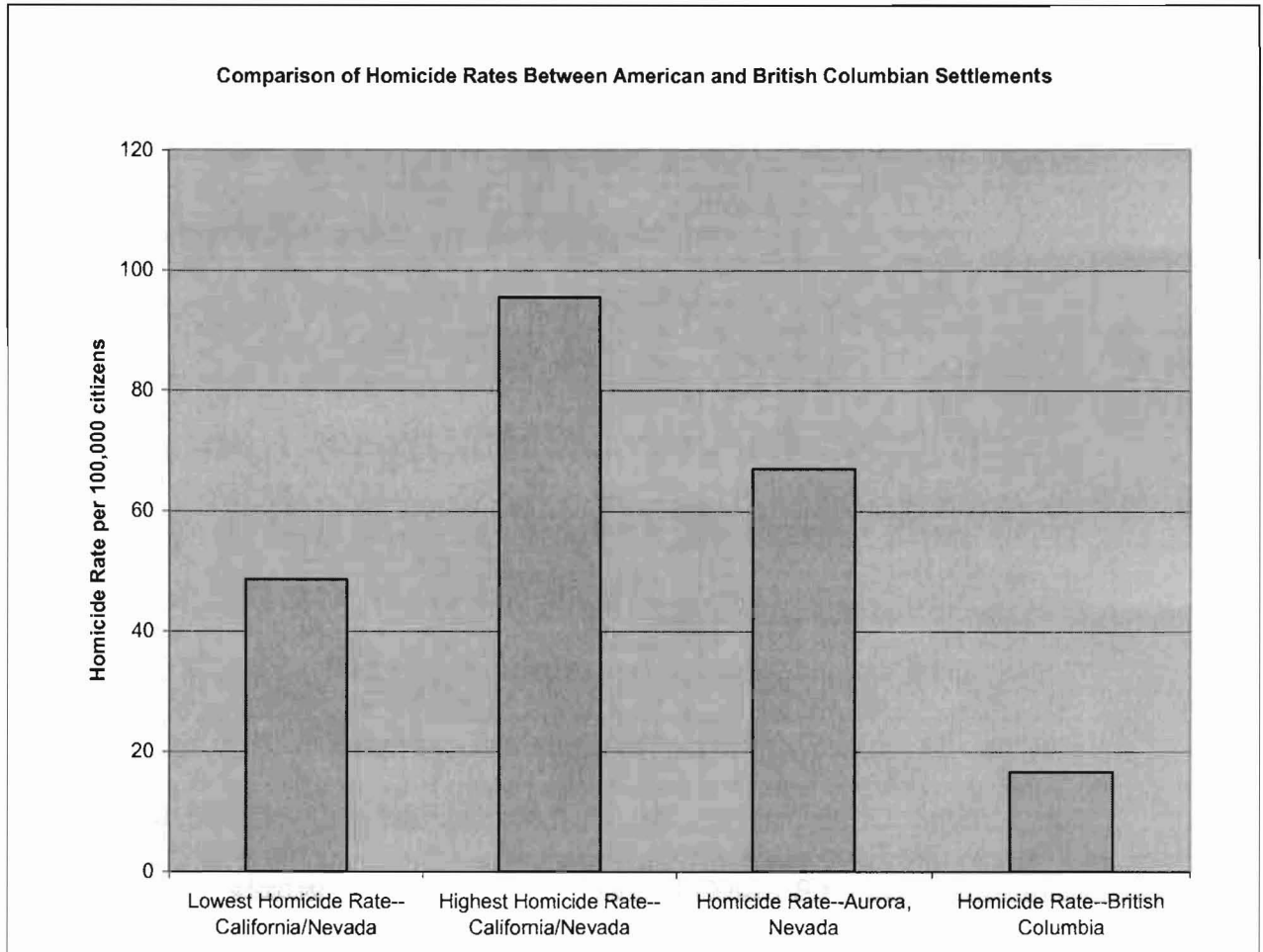
Gun-slinging and mob action were not unique to Aurora. Virtually every “wild west” encampment went through a period of violence and unrest before settling down (or

being abandoned entirely): “the truth is, every frontier State went through its period of lawlessness and its corresponding period of mobocracy designed to bring the lawless element under control” (Frantz 145). Every state had this, because every state had much of the same conditions that breed violence. Far from intervening, large scale governmental authorities, and far from family life and the responsibility it brings, these young males were faced with a land brimming with the hope of new opportunities. This was a dangerous land, with unpredictable conditions that forced men to be willing to kill in order to keep their tenuous hold on survival. The weak succumbed, and the strong survived—and being strong involved the ability to take control, take chances, and the possession of a general air of toughness. However, there was one region that did not experience the general lawlessness that marked the American frontier, although it was a part of the West. This region was not in America at all—but in British Columbia.

David Peterson Del Mar writes that, “British Colombia had all the makings of a lawless frontier: wide expanses dotted with settlements of unattached and mobile males. Yet leading British Columbians styled themselves as tradition-minded colonials” (47). These colonials were appalled at the lack of civilization displayed by their counterparts south of the border. Despite being on the frontier, these British Colombian settlements required an extremely organized, regulated, and law-abiding society. While homicide rates in these encampments were higher than rates observed today (and also higher than rates observed in the Eastern colonies of the United States), they were as much as six times lower as rates observed on the American western frontier. Homicide rates (during the mid-nineteenth century) per 100,000 individuals in the mining areas of California and

Nevada ranged from 48.6 to 95.5; British Columbia's rates were a mere 16.6 per 100,000 (Del Mar 51). (Please see graph 1)

**Graph 1--American and British Columbian Homicide Rates (mid nineteenth-century)**



\*Data from Del Mar (51) and Beeghley (58)

The explanation for this difference lies in the broad cultural differences exhibited by the settlements lying on both sides of the American-Canadian border. To put it succinctly, the "law preceded settlers in British Colombia. [In America] it followed them" (Del Mar 48). The British were also much less likely to accept ideals of individual freedom, and much more likely to punish the offenders who threatened society. The settlement's needs ultimately came before the individual—a decidedly un-American

thought. A British justice observed that, “[American settlers] look upon liberty as a condition of life which gives them the right to defy the laws of their country, and to govern it according to their wishes by the might of the bowie knife and Colt’s revolver,” while a British newspaper wrote that it was “reassuring...that in a British colony, and even in such an isolated portion of it as this, such wretches will not be permitted the exercise of such horrible instincts with impunity” (Del Mar, 48).

In American settlements, the public expected men to look after themselves, and those who took matters into their own hands were dealt with quite leniently. Not so in British Columbia, where legal channels executed men like this quite quickly. Whereas the American outlaw had to fear the equally lawless vigilantes, the British outlaw had to fear his country’s strong judicial system (Del Mar 49-50). In essence, British settlements focused on building law abiding and lasting communities, whereas American settlers focused on the sole purpose of making money and then leaving again as quickly as possible. So, without the “strong” American values of individualism, and without the culture of the “Dream” pushing individuals to achieve at the expense of the needs of the whole, the settlers of British Columbia managed to live a (relatively) peaceful existence.

American settlers were not integrated into the larger community precisely because they had no interest in being so. Again, their sole purpose was to get rich quick and then move on—and so there was not much time for strong value systems and social connections to form in these shiftless mining encampments. Durkheim predicted that this type of social situation would produce unrest and riotous behavior because individuals were not bound by any collective normative systems. If the collectivity was weak, individuals had to depend on themselves, producing a situation in which every person

recognized “no other rules of conduct than what are founded in his private interests” (Durkheim, *Suicide* 209). The society must integrate a sense of morality (values, beliefs, and norms) into the individual’s psychological structure if that individual is expected to continue acting within the social order (Turner, Beeghley, & Powers, 341). However, these things cannot be integrated into individuals when the collectivity itself is not integrated. However, “when society is strongly integrated, it holds individuals under its control, considers them at its service and thus forbids them to dispose willfully of themselves”—or others (Durkheim, *Suicide* 209). So, while the American Dream encouraged people to achieve, excessive individualism and the absence of strong community ties did little to prevent the excessive use of violence often used to achieve the dream.

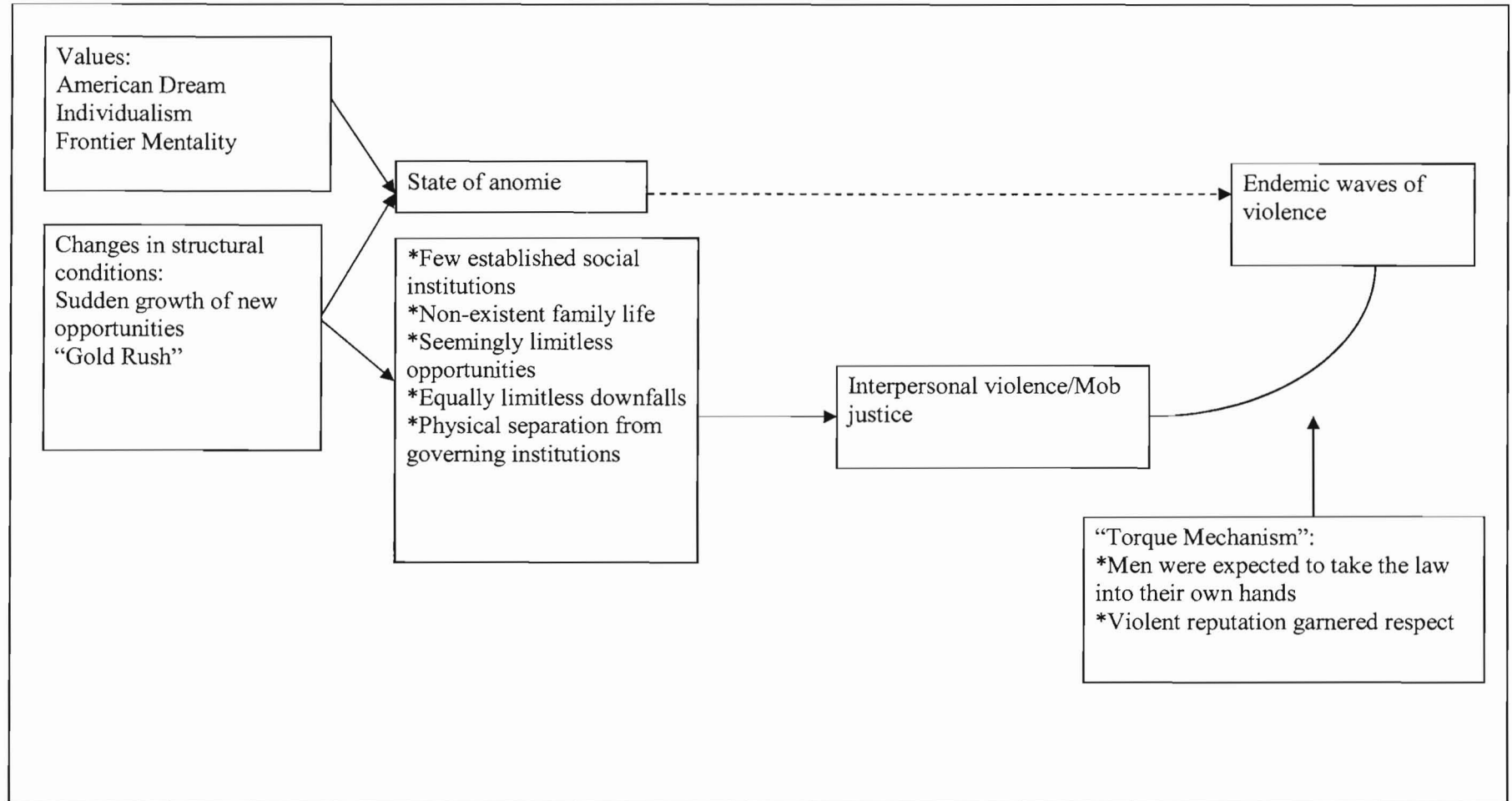
We see the theories presented earlier in the paper at work in the mining town of Aurora. The town sprang up quickly, and out of the pure desire of the founding individuals to procure wealth in the fastest way possible. The area was so rich, that there were seemingly limitless opportunities that drew thousands of young men to seek their fortunes. There were also very few social “roles” for these men to legitimately occupy. As stated before, many listed miner or gambler as their occupation—there were no limits as to how to make money, only that it should be made quickly. Furthermore, the institution of the family did not provide the often moderating roles of husband and father, because this institution was largely non-existent. The only real norm for life was to shoot first and ask questions later; the real man did not obey any rules but *those of his own device*. These normatively unclear conditions produced a thoroughly anomic situation

that was further exacerbated by the almost god-like deference afforded to anybody who was willing to kill.

We can now construct a detailed model of the anomic situation present in the Wild West town of Aurora (and present on the American Frontier in general) that was first presented in Figure 1 (please see Figure 2 on page 33).

The difference between British and American settlements has already been explored in the preceding discussion. Precisely because governmental authorities in the British Columbia settlements were able to provide settlers with appropriate legal channels, there was no need to resort to vigilante justice and “lynch law.” However, lynching as a type of law enforcement was neither rare on the American frontier nor to our country. Lynching was actually invented in the late eighteenth century, during a time when “the inefficiency, or nonexistence, of local courts made apprehension and punishment out of the question” (Hollon 17). Because the people could not rely on social institutions to provide meaningful and consistent sanctions to those who chose to break the laws, they resorted to circumventing the law. Colonel Charles Lynch and several wealthy citizens of that time organized a system in which suspected criminals would be captured, tried in the colonel’s home, and if found guilty, summarily punished. Despite the fact that this procedure was highly illegal, it gained popularity because the people saw no other way to deal with the problem of crime (Hollon 17). And while lynching was initially used to control crime, it merely perpetrated more violence by denying the accused the right to due process and life itself.

Figure 2--Anomic Situation in the "Wild West" as exhibited in Aurora, Nevada



Essentially, lynch law translated into a culture of “taking the law into one’s own hands.” It was used and developed widely in the western territories, as law enforcement was not largely present and the locals sought means to control crime. Lynch law was also often used in the South as an informally sanctioned license to murder, and it is its usage against thousands of African Americans that gives lynching its horrible connotations.

### **Lynching in the Post-Reconstruction South**

*“This may be ‘Southern brutality’ ...but in polite circles, we call it Southern chivalry, a Southern virtue that will never die” (Litwack 24).*

While the Post-Reconstruction South and the western frontier seem like two very different environments, there are many underlying cultural similarities between the two. Both lacked social institutions, either by their physical presence or by their unwillingness to regulate behavior; both were marked by many people who were concerned with personal gain in the face of unstable social and economic roles; and both were willing to use violence at the slightest provocation and overlook this violence as long as it did not affect anyone *important*.

The Post-Reconstruction South was marked by all of the American values discussed earlier, as well as struggling under difficult anomic conditions. Like every citizen of the United States, southerners also aspired to wealth and prestige. Unfortunately, much of this prestige was forfeited after the devastating loss to the Union in the Civil War, and (what the southerners saw as) the humiliating reparations enacted during Reconstruction. Wealthy white plantation owners were faced with a total dissolution of their opulent way of life—as well as dissolution of their economic well-being. The “division of labor” in the South was tightly regulated, and the elimination of

one of the most important roles in the plantation economy (the slaves) threatened the roles of all the other individuals living under this system. As Durkheim claimed, the division of labor created a societal and individual dependence on the actions of every other member of society within their own roles (*On Morality* 69). In turn, this dependence created communities that were hell-bent on keeping certain people within their subordinate roles—even through the use of violence and intimidation. Of course, the use of violence was not a great leap for these southerners, as racial bigotry allowed violence against “inferior” races. Southern planters were also expected to use violence in order to keep their slaves under constant control. The violent man was a strong and successful planter—and a strong, successful planter was revered by all. The use of violence against slaves easily translated into using violence against tenant farmers and share-croppers (whose status relegated them to little more than servants).

While the American Civil War in itself resulted in devastating consequences to all people living in southern states, it is the outbreak of violence that occurred after the Civil War that shocked and disgusted. Whereas the Civil War only lasted from 1861 to 1865, violent acts against African Americans continued for decades afterwards. However, our history books largely ignore this violent period of our past.

After the end of the Civil War, Reconstruction paved the way for a new South. The union demanded reparations and instituted new laws that fundamentally changed the way of life in the South. Slavery was no longer legally tolerated, and with its banishment, the heart of the southern way of life and economy was banished as well. The South lay in ruins both figuratively and economically. Ironically, during “Reconstruction” the South ultimately veered toward disaster as old fissures between

northern and southern states were again widened, and southern political leaders largely condemned the federal government. They believed that this government was tainted “by the memory of the Civil War’s ‘coercion’ and invasion and Reconstruction’s ‘radical and negro misrule’” (Kantrowitz 6). The federal government (in their view) no longer had a legitimate role in the Southern way of life.

To add to the pressures of a land transformed by war and devastation, sweeping social changes were underway. Women were fighting for more rights out of the home, and perhaps hardest for southern whites to handle, blacks were now considered equals (Kantrowitz 5). However, formal norms did not translate well into everyday southern life, and the unwritten laws of the land soon resurfaced. Technically, the social conditions of the south were improving as blacks and whites stood on more equal footing. However, the racial etiquette that had dominated southern life died hard—and violence resulted from the white’s unwillingness to change. While violence was perpetrated much more than many realize during the days of slavery (what else is slavery *but* a type of violence?), the sudden upheaval of traditional racial relations, norms, and roles of society is what ultimately caused an explosion in violent acts (Taylor and Soady 64). Whites were no longer able to control the black population through the “legitimate” channels of slavery, so they simply resorted to illegitimate ones to keep their coercive authority in tact. Aside from mass intimidation and terror tactics, white mobs invented one of the most violent of all (as Mark Twain called it) American pastimes—lynching.

Anarchy reigned in the Post-Reconstruction South—at least where law was concerned. Blacks had to tread carefully, as wild accusations of rape, murder, or merely insolence spawned from any minor infraction—culminating in a trip to the local hanging

tree or pyre: “varying only in degrees of torture and brutality, these execution rituals were acted out in every part of the South” (Litwack 11). And this is the key. In no other geographical location were more lynchings observed than in the Deep South—and this tradition continued well into the twentieth century. It is not that lynchings were not observed in other parts of the United States—as stated before, lynching itself was invented as a type of necessity during the eighteenth century—but the South exhibited such a high concentration of these atrocities that it is obviously a product of that particular time period and the social systems of that particular region. Approximately 80% of recorded lynchings between 1882 and 1968 occurred in the South; 90% of those lynched in the South were African-American. Only 5% of those lynched in the western states (which had a long established tradition of this type of “justice”) were African American (Patterson 176-178). Obviously, something statistically different was going on in these southern states to produce such a large amount of interracial violence.

Not only were lynchings enacted with alarming frequency in every part of the South, but they were also perpetrated and attended by nearly every social class. Some mobs were composed of the drunken lower classes, while others were made up of the most somber and revered members of the southern gentility (Tolnay and Beck 56). Some victims were clearly guilty of heinous crimes and snatched from the hands of the lawmen, while others were only guilty of their skin color. However, all of these lynchings had at least one thing in common—the mob was acting illegally, “choosing to circumvent the formal system of criminal justice in order to carry out the lethal punishment personally” (Tolnay and Beck 56). Furthermore, these illegal acts went unpunished. If by chance an inquest was made, cause of death was more often than not at the hands of

“persons unknown” and the case was dropped (Dray ix). Whites were able to murder whomever they so desired with impunity. They may have been in control, but they were certain not in control of themselves.

It has been estimated that in the half-century between the end of reconstruction and the start of the Great Depression, at least 2,462 African Americans died at the hands of lynch mobs (Tolnay and Beck 17). These crimes continued into the late 1960's, though in far less numbers (Patterson 175). Federal laws were largely ignored, and new laws were enacted by the southern states in order to support the oppression of black people. The southerners feared the freedom granted to blacks, and many whites felt that a life unstructured by slavery would prove too much to handle. So, as whites grew frightened at the violent potential of blacks uncontrolled by the conventional norms of slavery, they imposed severe restrictions on their activities (namely the Jim Crow laws) (Litwack 11).

Of course, this fear of violence may have simply been hiding other motives to control the behavior of these people who were newly thrust into the economic, political, and social systems of the South. Southern life was dominated by agrarian culture, wherein cities and towns were not dominated by factories, but by small farms and large plantations (Kantrowitz 1). This system left open few legitimate roles. Whites were terrified at losing their control over the only means available in the South to achieve the American Dream; and sometimes they reacted violently against those whom they viewed as a threat. Attacks (both verbal and physical) on the federal government and on blacks illustrated the “anger, anxiety, and alienation that many white men felt” (Kantrowitz 7)

Whereas a highly controlled state dominated the lives of blacks, whites were left in an era without government supervision. The federal government was reluctant to interfere with state and individual rights in a region that seemed on the brink of collapse, and the local “criminal justice system operated with ruthless efficiency in upholding the absolute power of whites to command the subordination and labor of blacks” (Alan et al. 12). Anyone opposed to the harsh practices was best advised to keep quiet, or suffer the pain of death themselves. Whites were uncontrolled, unchecked, and unsanctioned in their persecution of blacks, and this state of normlessness resulted in one of the most violent and depraved periods of American history to this day.

Examination of the social conditions of that time and place reveals a dual society. One group of people had their actions constantly monitored, and were punished severely for any minor infraction. However, the group of people that were imposing these norms and sanctions were largely free to act in whatever means possible to exert their will. Blacks faced the threat of lynching for using boastful or disrespectful language, impertinence or “improper demeanor,” resisting assault, theft, political activities, and unionizing. Merely having a relative who had fallen victim to the lynch mob was an invitation to be lynched oneself (Litwack 24-25). It is the supreme irony that whites imposed so many norms on the newly freed blacks because of the fear of the “murderous, savage, and lustful” nature of African Americans (Litwack 23). Whites left themselves no solid norms (either formal or informal) governing their conduct towards the newly freed slaves, and they were thus turned into the savage, anomic, murderous mob they feared. White men believed themselves to be at the pinnacle of modern civilization. However, “when the purity or superiority of the white race was threatened, white men

became capable of the most savage violence,” and they used this violence to protect their place in the Southern hierarchy of power (Kantrowitz 8).

Interestingly, these white southerners were not alienated from legitimate channels of achievement, and the people who perpetrated these murders were not considered deviants or outlaws. W.E.B. DuBois observed that the mob’s “nucleus of ordinary men continually [gave] the mob its initial and awful impetus” to indiscriminately kill otherwise innocent citizens with alarming frequency (Patterson 173). Wealthy and poor whites alike committed these atrocities, and the dominant social institutions of the time did little to nothing to stop these atrocities. In fact, both influential politicians and church leaders encouraged these murders. In some cases, the lynching itself was presided over by a clergyman (Patterson 173). Local community leaders were also intensely involved in the legitimization of the lynch mob and the use of terror tactics. Benjamin Tillman, once Governor of South Carolina and United States congressman, was one of the foremost proponents of lynch law as a solution to the race “problem” (Kantrowitz 2).

Simply put, the roles of whites were unchallenged by blacks during the days of slavery. However, with the abolition of slavery, thousands of newly freed blacks were thrust out of their former “role” in society—that of property—and into economic and social competition in the division of labor that whites had traditionally dominated. Understandably, the newly freed slaves were taking every opportunity. This, naturally, panicked many whites. Their places in society were being threatened even during the Civil War as thousands of “slaves began to run away...farms and plantations fell into disrepair, and the age-old etiquette of racial deference began to break down...[some]

slaves obliquely or directly challenged their once-powerful masters. Slavery was indeed collapsing, and perhaps white supremacy would go with it” (Brundage, *Under* 115)

Ironically, it was during slavery that planters put their full trust in the court systems to deal with black crime, and though black offenders were surely not treated with any measure of fairness, they were dealt with in accordance with the “legitimate” laws of the land because the white southerners still had trust in their government and law practices (Brundage, *Under* 110). After the Civil War, the former slaves were taking advantage of their newfound citizenship, and turned out to vote in record numbers. For the first time in the history of southern politics, black men were being elected to all levels of political office (Tolnay and Beck 66). This not only threatened the political hegemony previously enjoyed by the southern white elite, but also threatened the poor whites, who had little influence themselves on the body politic. Mob violence also increased as white discomfort in the face of black achievement grew. Black homes, schools, churches, and club buildings were often the targets of mobs and arsonists (Brundage, *Lynching* 110).

It is not entirely surprising that violence erupted after the domination and economic prosperity of white landowners was undermined and threatened by new federal laws and the thousands of freedmen who were thrust into the legitimate division of labor. Roles in society were also being reversed, and the formal norms that marked slaveholding times were no longer legitimately applicable. The southern whites were suddenly faced with a situation that was completely foreign and threatening to them. Senator Ben Tillman described the situation as “the greatest crisis in history” (Kantrowitz 1).

In order to keep their social, economic, and political systems in tact, these people resorted to violence—they saw no other way. The values of the South did not include

concepts of racial equality; either one race or the other would dominate, and so white men needed to do whatever necessary in order to prevent themselves from being subjugated (Kantrowitz 2). The residual values from the slavery era made violence a ready and easily perpetrated solution. Domination on the plantation depended on “the credibility of each planter’s perceived capacity for violence,” and this was seemingly no different in the post-bellum South (Kantrowitz 13). In part, the murders were able to continue for so long purely because they were based on such old ideas and values—in the South, the old ways died very hard. We also see values comparable to the frontier mentality discussed earlier.

The post-bellum South was a world in which men had to be men, and political and social spheres were dominated, not legitimately, but at the barrel of a gun. Old values proclaimed that the individual worth of a white man far surpassed the worth of a black man, and so the individual rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness did not apply to the freedmen. The situation may best be summed up by the comments of a southern mayor in 1898: “If you find the negro out voting, tell him to leave the polls, and if he refuses kill him; shoot him down in his tracks. We shall win tomorrow if we have to do it with guns” (Tolnay and Beck 67). Even the white men who encouraged black votes were not safe. Marsh Cook, a white republican, carried the black vote to win a political office in July of 1890. His body lay in the middle of a street soon after—he had been shot to death (Tolnay and Beck 67).

It would be easy to simply dismiss these acts as an anomaly—simply a product of racist sentiment within a base of ignorance. And, while racism and ignorance certainly played their own part in this period of our history, they were not the sole cause. If we

label these perpetrators as unnatural and evil, we ignore the fact that this type of atrocity could very well occur again, whether at the hands of large groups, or individuals.

Kantrowitz wrote that, “historic prejudices, however powerful and pervasive, do not by themselves do the work of political organization” (3). There were many factors at work in the South to allow these types of atrocities to happen—namely the frustration of individual whites in their attempts to keep their hold on the “American Dream,” and the alienation felt by a whole region as a result of complete social and political upheaval.

The South exhibited many factors that contributed to the outpouring of violence. While many other parts of the nation have undergone change and have exhibited extreme forms of prejudice and racism, it is telling that only the South displayed such a large outburst of interracial violence at that time in history. An examination of certain towns and cities in the South allows us to explore these ideas even further. We have seen that the North did not exhibit the high levels of lynching that occurred in the South. Of course, the North did not have a long-standing history with slavery, did not undergo a drastic social upheaval after the Civil War, but did have many jobs available due to urban industrialization. Did cities in the South that did not have many newly-freed slaves (and thus had more jobs available), and in which the political hegemony of whites was not threatened, show a much lower rate of lynching? We will explore this through an examination of several different regions in Post-Reconstruction Georgia.

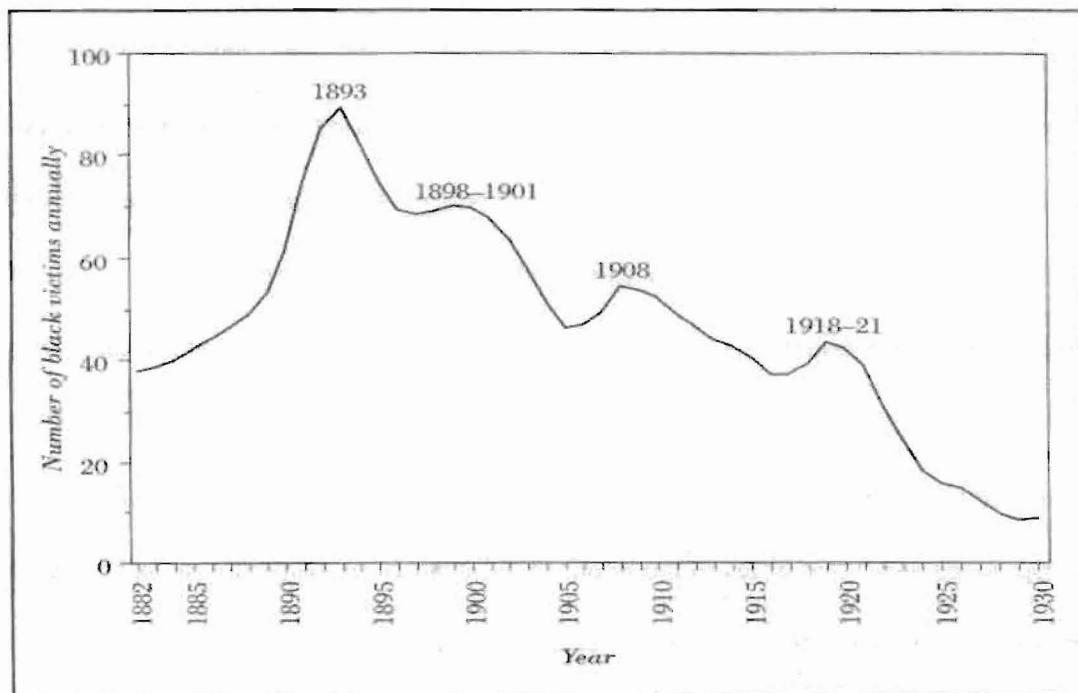
### **The Cotton Belt of Georgia**

Not surprisingly, research on the numbers of lynchings that occurred in the Post-Reconstruction South form a pattern corresponding with several key economic downturns that affected the whole country. While lynching declined sharply after the mid-1890's,

graphs presented by Brundage show three sharp peaks in lynching activity after this time. The first, occurring from 1898-1901, corresponded with the turn of the century business recession. The second, occurring in 1908, was also accompanied by an economic downturn. The third, and last, peak occurred between 1918 and 1921—which coincided with the end of World War I, another economic recession, and the return of hundreds of black troops from Europe (Brundage, *Under* 133-134):

#### Graph 2--Peaks in Lynching Activity

FIGURE 1A. *Trends in Black Victims of White Lynch Mobs*<sup>a</sup>



<sup>a</sup>Twice smoothed statistically

\*Graph reproduced from Brundage, *Under* (134)

While these data certainly provide some interesting points, to achieve a full understanding of the mechanism of lynching, we must examine in detail the types of places where these activities occurred with greatest frequency. While the phenomenon of lynch mobs was not confined to any one particular area, economic condition, or social

group, certain conditions did exist that seemed to precipitate greater instances of these unruly and unlawful murders. An examination of the differences in the social and economic structures present in the regions of Post-Reconstruction Georgia may help to illustrate the factors that most often precede mob violence.

Many different speculations are offered about what types of social situations precipitated the greatest amounts of mob violence and lynching in the Post-Reconstruction South. Some argued that lynchings occurred most frequently in towns where the number of whites far surpassed the number of blacks—after all, mob violence does tend to be bolstered by sheer numbers. However, this later proved to be the exact opposite of the harsh reality (Brundage, *Lynching* 103-104).

Surprising at the time (though not after our previous examination of the willingness of many Americans to resort to violence when opportunities are threatened), statistics showed that lynchings were more likely to occur in those towns and cities where the African American population far surpassed that of the white population. An examination of social conditions in Georgia confirms the model put forth by this paper earlier—lynchings most often occurred in those Georgian communities that were dominated by a black population (threatening white opportunity), and marked by growing poverty and isolation. These were rural communities that were unaccustomed to settling disputes through “untrustworthy” legal means, had weak (if any) social and educational institutions, and lacked a proper police force (Brundage, *Lynching* 104).

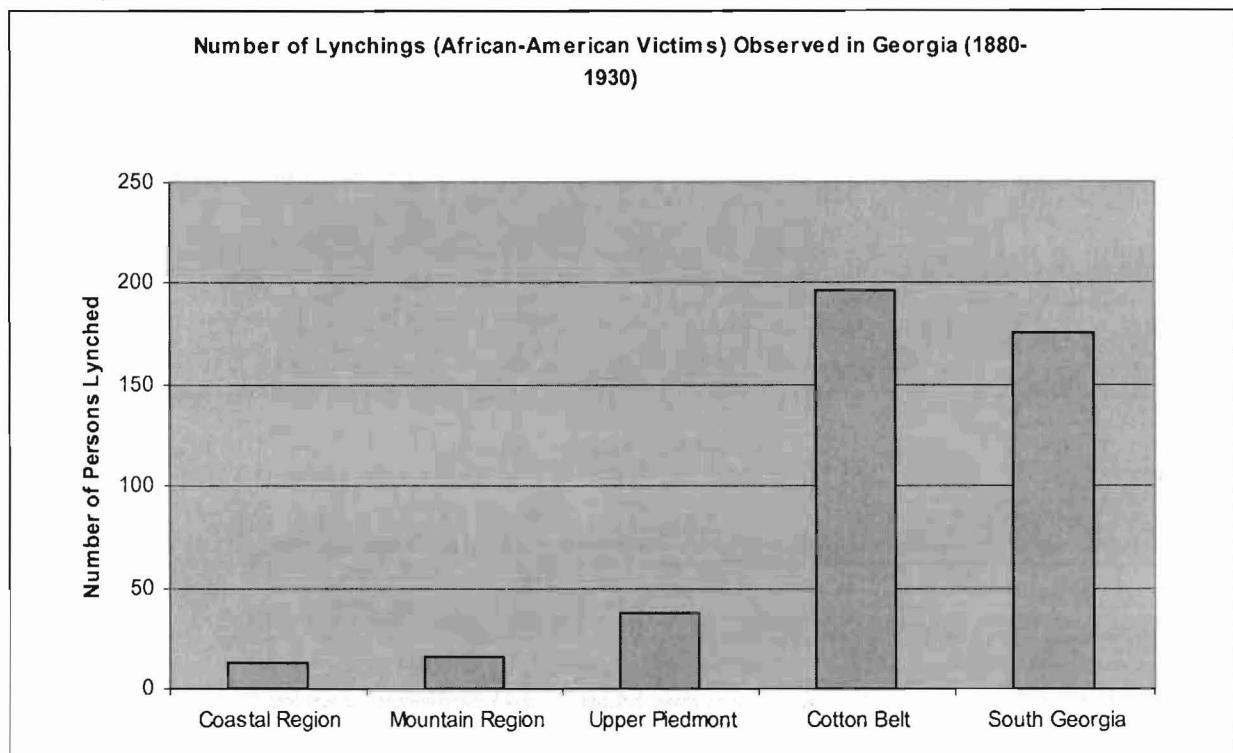
While Georgia exhibited high levels of lynchings overall, there were several regions that were well above the norm, while several others were well below. All of the regions that experienced larger numbers of mob violence held many, if not all, of the

characteristics described in the above paragraph. The state of Georgia can effectively be split up into five distinct geographical regions, encompassing different economic and social groups. Two of these regions each experienced far more lynchings than the other three *combined*. From 1880 to 1930, the far northern Mountain Region experienced 16 lynchings, the Upper Piedmont experienced 38, and the Coastal Region saw the least at 13. In stark contrast are the Cotton Belt and South Georgian regions, which witnessed 196 and 176 lynchings, respectively (Brundage, *Lynching* 107). While even one lynching is too many, there are obvious differences in the social conditions of these regions that produced the wide range of observed numbers (please see graph 3 on page 47).

Brundage asserts that “the pattern of mob violence can be explained by both subtle and conspicuous variations in the place of blacks in various local economies. At the heart of race relations throughout much of the rural South was agriculture and the role that blacks played in it” (*Lynching* 106). The varying degrees of the role that blacks played in the agriculture (or business) economy ultimately set the tone for either a semblance of racial “harmony” or a violent outpouring of racial strife. Whereas the areas in which lynching occurred the least were largely marked by a more modern “citified” economy, the two regions where lynching occurred most frequently were dominated by (and dependent upon) cotton cultivation—and ruled by the traditional ways of the plantation society and paternal system of race relations (Brundage, *Lynching* 106).

The Cotton Belt lay at the heart of Georgian agricultural society both before and after the Civil War. However, what was once a prosperous and lively society under the days of slavery soon stagnated and declined after the traditional plantation society was legally, and finally, terminated. Essentially, the Cotton Belt was a region possessed by a strong,

**Graph 3--Lynchings in the Five Regions of Georgia**



\*Data from Brundage, *Lynching* (107)

ingrained need in the white community for dominance, competing with an equally strong will in the black community to finally live a life of freedom. Aside from a few “overgrown towns,” small hamlets marked the land—large cities, and the business life that went with them, were largely unknown. Large black majorities populated most counties of the Cotton Belt, and it testifies to white determination (and brutality) that they were able to maintain control over the political structure (Brundage, *Lynching* 108).

While times were changing throughout the South, the Georgian Cotton Belt stubbornly held onto the farming and plantation way of life. There was limited access to landownership, creating a small white elite and forcing many blacks (and poor whites) into debt peonage, tenant farming, and share-cropping. Despite the abolition of slavery, many rural workers were relegated to the status of indentured servants, as the few white

elite controlled every aspect of the planting. This system created an atmosphere of “stagnation, poverty, frustration. . . [and] suspicion” (Brundage, *Lynching* 109). White landlords also held onto old systems of punishment for wayward workers, often turning to the whip and other violent intimidation tactics, only to be met with growing black frustration and resistance. Despite this, blacks still managed to establish churches and other social institutions—actions that also managed to stir up increasing white uneasiness at these former slaves who were “carving out an independent social life” (Brundage, *Lynching* 110). White planter prosperity depended upon the subordination and the labor of the thousands of blacks in the region—and these planters would do anything to keep their dominance and their pocketbooks full. Violence, along with poverty and disenfranchisement, became the preferred choice for maintaining the status quo.

Talbot County, typical of counties that lay in the Cotton Belt, was dominated by cotton cultivation. It was a small farming county, whose population was made up of about 11,000 people. Like many counties in this region, the white and black populations were highly skewed. Sources estimate that there were 8,000 blacks to 3,000 whites—and somehow, the whites dominated. This county experienced a lynching in 1909 that embodied the paranoia and urge to remain in control that marked most lynchings in the Post-Reconstruction South (Brundage, *Lynching* 111).

Because of the uneven distribution of power among the population, an air of general unease and unrest permeated the lives of the few white landlords of Talbot County. Because the white planters depended upon black subordination and labor in order to maintain their own agricultural and monetary interests, they saw any sign of “uprising” or ambition within the black population as a direct threat to white hegemony

and continuing monetary success. It was precisely this type of situation which spurred the mob violence and lynchings that resulted in the death of two blacks and one white man in the spring of 1909.

Trouble began when an elderly, affluent (and blind) black man arrived in the area and took up residence with one of the few black landowners, William Carreker. While being an affluent black man itself was enough to spur violent acts in many cases, the white landowners soon accused the elderly man of being a “disorganizer;” apparently because the white landowners sensed a general dissatisfaction among their black tenants (Brundage, *Lynching* 112). With no other provocation, a group of white men bent on putting down this insurrection gathered after church services with the intent of capturing, and lynching, both Carreker and his elderly visitor. When the mob (led by prominent planter William Leonard) reached Carreker’s door, Carreker firmly refused to turn the old man over and consign him to a certain death. As Leonard and the rest of the vigilante mob continued forward, shots were fired from the house, killing Leonard on the spot and dispersing the crowd (Brundage, *Lynching* 112).

Of course, while stirring up dissatisfaction among black tenants was certainly dangerous during these times, the death of a white man nearly always brought immediate death on the perpetrator. This case was no different, as the original mob grew to hundreds of men (quite a feat, considering the county consisted of only 3,000 whites—men, women, and children alike). When the mob found the old man, they “smashed his head with rifle butts, carried him...to a bridge, shot him several times, and threw his weighted body into the creek below.” His death was officially recorded as accidental—due to the fall from the bridge—and the spot of his demise was christened with the name

“Blind Man’s Bridge” (Brundage, *Lynching* 112). Hearing of the old man’s death, Carreker surrendered to local authorities two days later (obviously hoping for some protection), but that same night another mob comprised of about one-hundred men demanded the prisoner—who was readily turned over—and swiftly hung him from a telephone pole (Brundage, *Lynching* 113). No one was ever punished for these murders.

Unfortunately, lynchings of this type were evident and common all over the Cotton Belt of Georgia. Brundage asserts that “virtually every county in the Cotton Belt experienced at least one lynching, many more in most counties” (*Lynching* 110). These figures stand in stark contrast with the Coastal Region, which witnessed a mere 13 lynchings over a 50 year period to the Cotton Belt’s 196. Before the Civil War, the Coastal Region was, much like the Cotton Belt, dependent upon huge plantations. The coast was also marked by strong social and economic changes during the war and the ensuing Reconstruction. However, instead of relying on the old (and obviously stagnating) planting economy to sustain the region, the population forged new economic roads. Lumber and shipping industries emerged, along with many naval stores. There were many emerging opportunities for both blacks and whites, and though equality was still nowhere near desirable levels, “flexible labor relations” and a growing, accommodating economy seemed to prevent the violence that was raging in the Cotton Belt (Brundage, *Lynching* 130).

Georgia’s Cotton Belt is fairly representative of the general dynamic at work in the Post-Reconstruction South that ultimately produced the multitude of lynchings witnessed during this period. In the Cotton Belt, we see a predominant distrust of, and separation from, federal governing institutions. We also see an absence of other social

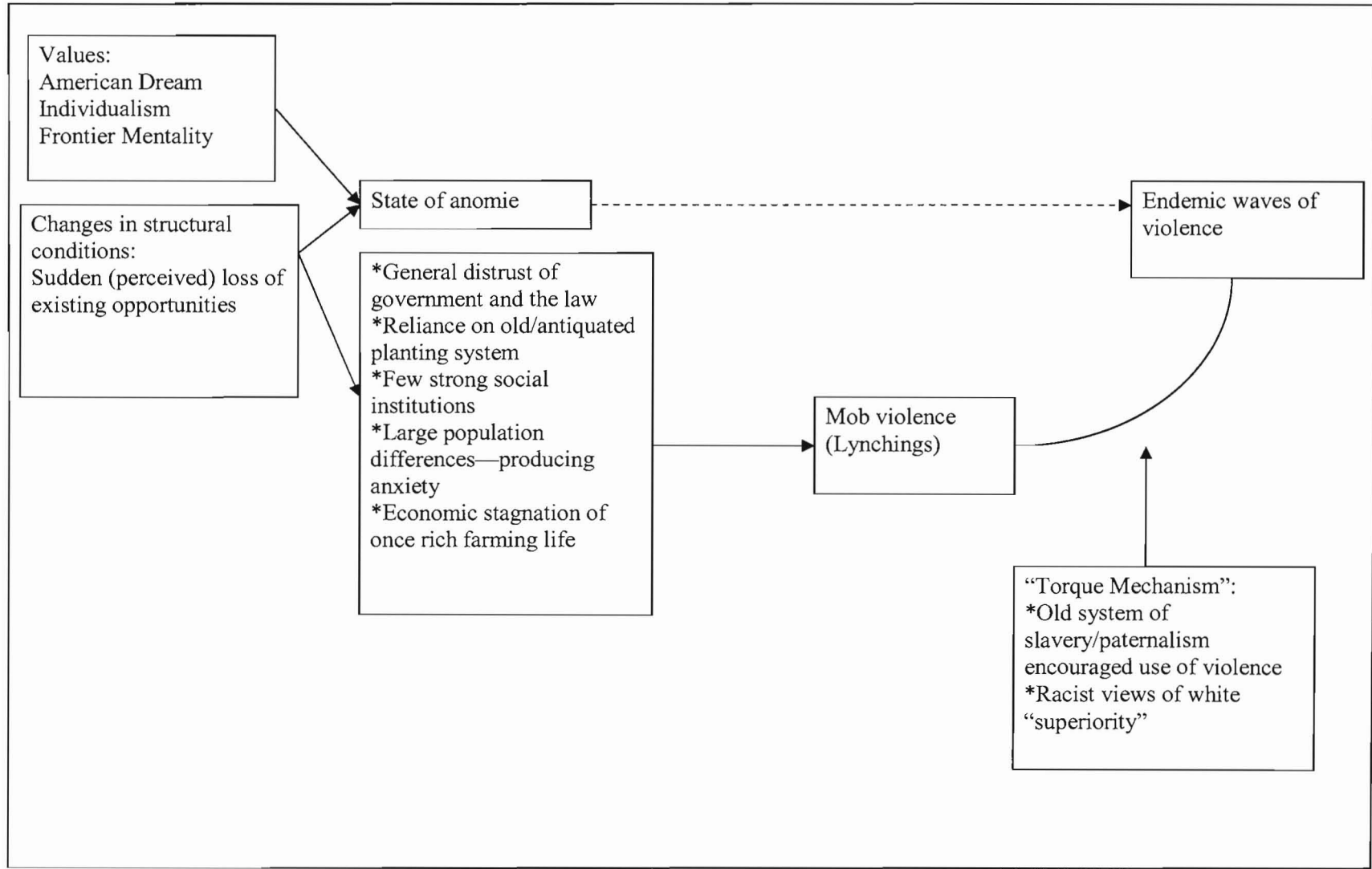
institutions such as schools and churches. Durkheim theorizes that without these modulating social forces (though in some cases, pastors did advocate lynching) the chance for anomie rises. These individuals felt that they were abandoned and scorned by their country—and that they were solely responsible for rectifying their situation. To borrow a quote from Durkheim, these southerners felt that they “[had] no reason to endure life’s sufferings patiently (*Suicide* 209).

The Cotton Belt was also a region marked by the continuing anxiety of stagnating economic opportunity—the only way to make money in this region was through the harsh dominance and exploitation of the lower classes. As the old plantation system declined, the region stubbornly refused to forge new economic paths. The “wealthy” whites wanted to keep their status and money in the face of a larger population of now free slaves who were seen as threatening to their social, political, and monetary survival. Add to this the violence that was traditionally used to punish wayward slaves in the past, and we can begin to understand how the “lynching tradition” arose. Keeping these facts in mind, figure 3 (please see page 52) shows the details of how the anomic situation in the South led to these endemic waves of violence.

## **Conclusion**

Through the lynching tradition in the South, we can see how American ideals integrated to produce their worst. Understanding why groups and individuals commit violence is the only way to possibly understand violence itself. While this paper does not hope to explain all acts of violence, it does attempt to explain why several periods in American history seemed to be plagued with this problem. Until we finally realize that our violence is not entirely perpetrated by the criminally insane and socially deviant, we

Figure 3--Anomic Situation in the Post-Reconstruction South



will never hope to control our violence. Because it is our very ideals that shape the use of violence among “normal” sectors in society, we cannot simply eliminate violent offenders in hopes that the problem will eventually stop. If our core social values continue to shape our beliefs and behavior, as they *will* do, violent outbursts will continue among every sector of society that feels threatened in their strivings. Judd Marmor wrote that “violent behavior on the part of masses of people represents a kind of crude signaling device or communication to the body politic that something is wrong” (343).

There *is* something wrong, not necessarily with our killers, but with our very culture itself. Further examination of certain periods in our history that were riddled with violence will most likely reveal the same kinds of social and economic phenomena that marked both the American frontier and the Post-Reconstruction South. This paper is not attempting to remove the blame from those individuals who have committed these acts of violence, but merely trying to explain how these people could have committed (and how others condoned) such unthinkable atrocities—and how we are all vulnerable to the social conditions of our time. Robert Merton believed that “*socially deviant behavior* [is] just as much a product of social structure as *conformist behavior*” (Merton 175). In essence, “motivations for crime do not result simply from the flaws, failures, or free choices of individuals. A complete explanation of crime ultimately must consider the sociocultural environments in which people are located” (Messner & Rosenfeld 11). Violence does not depend merely on the failure of the individual, but also on the flaws and failings of society as a whole.

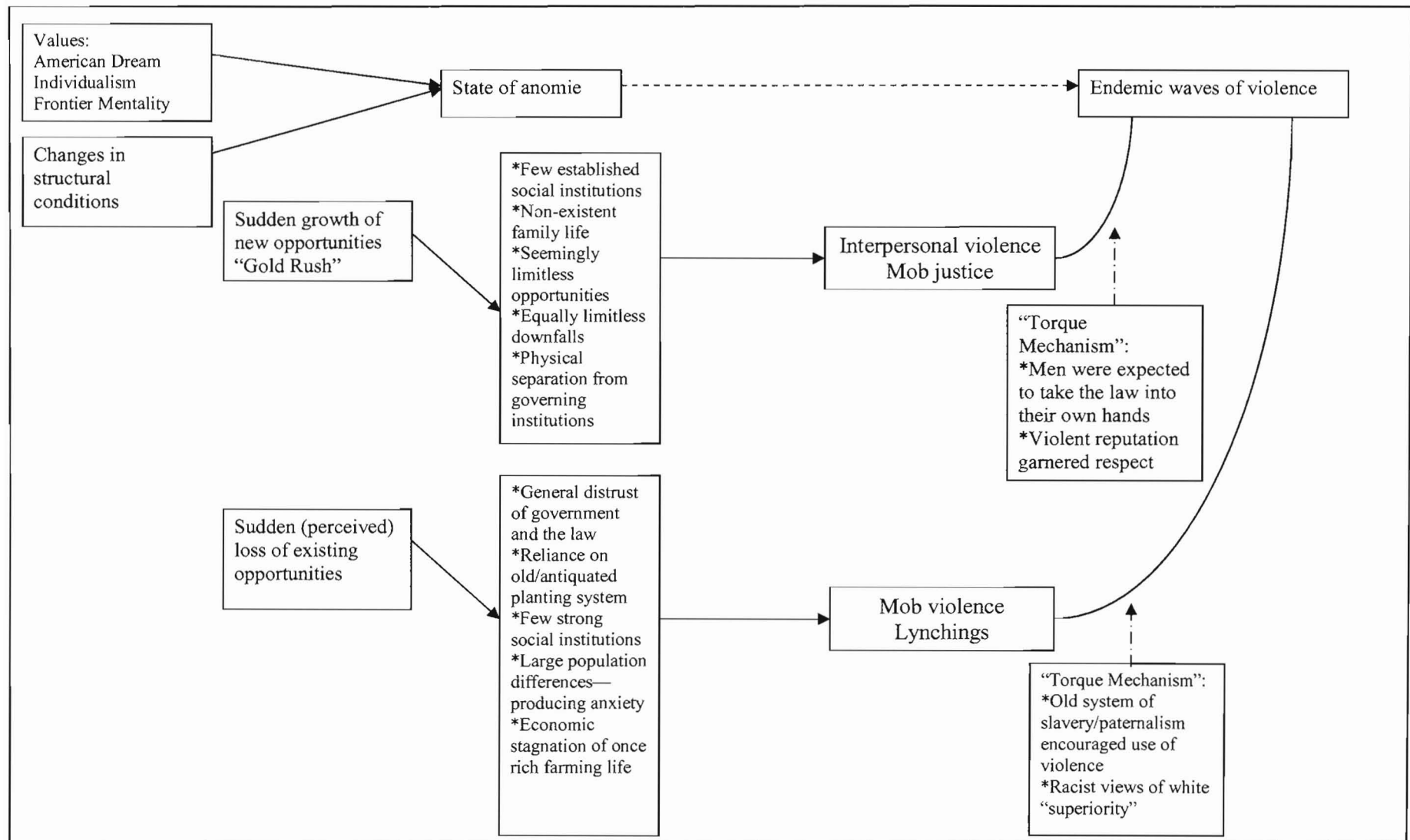
Perhaps if the flaws and failures of our own society had been understood, the deplorable acts of violence in the South could have been largely avoided.

Our government and court systems can continue to punish violent offenders, but this will not solve our social situation. By understanding the factors that cause people to commit violent acts, we can hope to eventually address these factors in order to prevent many instances of violence. However, this will never occur unless we fully understand and acknowledge our societal values and our history. Kantrowitz wrote that, “human beings rarely understand all the ways their history has shaped them,” and just as our prevailing history shaped the actions of those in the post-bellum South and the wild west towns of the American frontier, they are still shaping our actions today (4). More research is needed to fully understand exactly how our culture breeds and promotes the use of violence. However, finding peace as a nation is impossible without finally understanding the part of ourselves that we largely ignore. In essence, we have to wake up to the realities of “The Dream.”

Of course, now that we have a notion of what kind of values and structural conditions spark mass outbreaks of violence, we can use these ideas to predict future outbursts. Other periods (and places) in American history may have shown many of the same conditions that created the interpersonal violence of the American West and the lynching tradition of the Post-Reconstruction South. Further research could continue to explore violent events such as the Pullman Strikes or the Haymarket Affair to deduce whether or not the model presented in this paper is present in other group outbursts resulting in violence. If this is the case, then we are close to understanding what lays the foundation for violence in America. Further research may also deign to discover how we are brought out of these violent periods in history. Obviously, the gunslingers and posses of the American Frontier (and the lynch mobs of the South) have disappeared—though

they do live on in legend. However, we are now faced with urban gangs and sometimes violent riots. We would do well to not only understand how these violent outbreaks are started—but how they are effectively ended. Was the arrival of the family, as David Courtwright (6) suggested, the end of the deadly gun violence of the West? Did the eventual reintegration of the South into the larger Union (and subsequent exposure to governmental authority) quell the lynch mobs? Perhaps it was the very release of aggression over time that ultimately ended the violence. This paper does not have the scope or the resources to explore these issues at this time. However, we have made considerable headway into showing how anomie, individualism, and a frontier mentality make up the American penchant for violent acts—and this is the first of many steps towards grasping a full understanding of how this violence may eventually be quelled, if not prevented entirely. Please see page 56 for an integrated model of the social situations present in frontier towns and the Post-Reconstruction South.

Figure 4--American Values and Anomie (Macro and Micro Levels)



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