Pigs, Politics and Social Change in Vanuatu

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Pigs have long held great symbolic import for the people of Vanuatu, a sprawling archipelago 1,000 miles northeast of Australia. In most of the indigenous, small-scale communities which comprised traditional Vanuatu society, pig ownership and pig killing conveyed status, wealth, and informal power. Such rituals were the sole measure of social standing and political rank. In this study, I show how the cultural valuation of an animal, in this case the pig, can evolve as a society undergoes socio-economic development, and also how it can be used to foster nationalistic, partisan, and other political ends. I show how competing nationalist leaders used pig symbolism in their struggle to create a unified national identity for varying island groups, and how even today, local leaders derive their legitimacy through the manipulation of traditional animal rites.

In 1991, after ten years of incarceration, Jimmy Stevens was released from prison. Stevens still had four and a half years to serve on his sentence, but he was ailing. The very same government leader who had originally called for Stevens’ conviction now summoned him, still in his prison blues, to explain the terms of his release. Among other stipulations, the official, an ordained minister, intimated that he expected Jimmy to deliver over twenty pigs. Responding to Jimmy’s protests that he did not have the means to gather such a large quantity of swine on his own, the official promised to provide government assistance so that Jimmy’s son could do so. Stevens was more than happy to comply with this arrangement (personal communication, August 18, 1991).

The government official who proposed this unusual deal was Father Walter Lini, an Anglican priest and prime minister of the Pacific island-nation republic of Vanuatu. Jimmy Stevens was a customary chief, founder of the traditional Nagriamel movement and leader of a secessionist movement at the time of Vanuatu’s independence in 1980. It was for his acts of political rebellion in 1980 that Stevens had, at Lini’s behest, been imprisoned for a full decade.

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ownership conveyed status, wealth, and informal power. In a subsistence, cashless society, pigs were the sole medium by which social significance was measured. Culture contact in Melanesia throughout the last 150 years greatly eroded much of indigenous custom, however, and money, often tied to politics, increasingly came to supplant pig ownership as the relevant index of wealth and power. Nevertheless, as the above compact between Vanuatu’s prime minister and his erstwhile nemesis underscores, pigs still possess significant political capital, even to the point of facilitating national reconciliation between ardent unionists and former secessionists.

Research on the cultural and political uses of animal symbols tends to be historically static, examining the nature and place of a particular animal symbol during one particular time (Shanklin, 1985). A smaller body of research focuses on the biological (Davey, 1994), ecological (Harris, 1966) or cultural (Geertz, 1972) origins of these symbols. While a few researchers have examined the evolution of animal symbols over time in modern societies, as in the case of horses (Lawrence, 1985) or primates (Sperling, 1988), researchers have generally neglected to study the continuity, or lack thereof, of specific animal symbols as preindustrial societies undergo change over time.

In this article I show how the cultural valuation of an animal, in this case the pig, can evolve as a society undergoes socio-economic development, and also how it can be used to foster nationalistic, partisan, and other political ends. Indeed, while Rappaport (1968) has described the importance of pigs in human ceremonial and social life, his work does not consider the facility with which pigs can be used as political symbols. Thanks to its ancient and profound place in the cultural psyche of the Vanuatu people, the symbol of the pig, in the hands of adroit leaders, helps transcend disruptive cleavages which have emerged as a result of political modernization.

The Origins of Vanuatu

Anthropologists believe that the prehistoric origins of the peoples of Melanesia – the band of Oceania west of Polynesia and south of Micronesia – lie in Southeast Asia. The original migration to New Guinea probably occurred as long as 30,000 years ago; a secondary migration from New Guinea to the islands of Vanuatu began 26,000 years later. Less reliable than the reasons and dates for these maritime migrations was the mode: the mariners and their families used wooden, dugout canoes which could transport only the barest of essentials. During these perilous oceanic treks, pigs (as well as chickens) were crammed next to people; that Sus

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papensuis was the only mammal to populate the islands simultaneously with Homo sapiens has certainly contributed to the Melanesian people’s enduring relationship with it.

Unlike the kingdoms of Polynesia, most polities of Melanesia never developed centralized political systems or unifying indigenous languages. Vanuatu is a prime example. Clans evolved in such social and political isolation from each other that several mutually unintelligible communities often lived on the same island. What contact they did have was often antagonistic, culminating in raiding parties, outright warfare, and triumphal cannibalism. Social customs, too, were distinctive from clan to clan, island to island, and region to region.

Though the islands of Vanuatu had been “discovered” and named by Western explorers in the early 1600s, it was not until the nineteenth century that Europeans and Australians began taking an active interest in what Captain Cook had christened the “New Hebrides.” Sandalwood traders, labor recruiters, and Christian missionaries found the islands rich in trees, bodies, and souls. Merchants and planters, particularly of French, British, and Australian provenance, also found reason to put down stakes throughout the New Hebrides group of islands. So as to better arbitrate disputes among their nationals, and so as to clarify the political status of the islands, Britain and France came to an unusual accommodation by which they would jointly administer the New Hebrides. The agreement, known as the Condominium, lasted from 1914 until 1980.

Throughout most of the Condominium, the natives of the New Hebrides were stateless, powerless, and exploited. During the 1960s and early 1970s, two parallel movements arose to contest foreign domination. Nagriamel, led by the unschooled but charismatic Jimmy Stevens, began as a localized, populist land rights movement with a strong nativist, anti-modernist, and autonomist tinge. Father Walter Lini’s Vanuaaku Pati (VP), or Our Land Party, whose leadership came from the emerging English-speaking and ecclesiastical indigenous elite, was a self-consciously anti-colonial and somewhat socialistic national liberation movement. Whereas Jimmy Stevens and Nagriamel claimed ownership over ancestral land, Walter Lini and the VP demanded outright political independence. Though their movements’ aims were not inherently contradictory, mutual suspicion came to divide the staunchly indigenous Stevens from the church-based and Westernized Lini.

What both Nagriamel and the VP did share was a rhetorical recourse to traditional kastom (custom) as the basis of legitimacy for their respective movements. Given that no common set of custom rituals or beliefs applied throughout
the archipelago, however, each movement had to invent, or reinvent, its own version of kastom. For Nagriamel this was an amalgam of pre-contact rural communalism and naturalism, as practiced on Jimmy Stevens’ native island of Santo. For Walter Lini and the VP, kastom implied a Melanesian socialism informed by enlightened and progressive Christianity. Identity politics lay at the core of both versions of kastom, and for both, kastom remained an open-ended, vague, and malleable concept. One symbol of Melanesian identity which nevertheless brooked all conceptual disparities about kastom was the pig. (Other symbols of kastom were yams, woven mats and kava, a beverage, extracted from the root of a tuber plant, that possessed semi-narcotic properties and was originally reserved for ritual usage.)

In the lead-up to independence in 1980, Nagriamel, under the influence of American libertarians and francophile, anti-VP elements, formally seceded from the rest of the archipelago. New Guinean soldiers with Australian logistical support helped the newly established government of Vanuatu to quash the rebellion. Jimmy Stevens was tried, convicted, and sentenced to fourteen and a half years’ imprisonment for treason. His 1991 release ended his legal debt to the Republic; but, as Prime Minister Lini informed him, only a pig-killing ceremony, conducted according to the tacit rules of kastom, would formally bring the enmity associated with the Santo rebellion to a close.

The Place of Pigs in Indigenous Vanuatu Societies

In traditional Vanuatu society, pigs confer power. Leadership—the status of bigman— is achieved through the accumulation of pigs, whose ceremonial sacrifice is a means, particularly in the northern and central islands, to ascending a progressive scale of chieftainship (graded society). Killed pigs are distributed and eaten throughout the community, but they are not valued chiefly for their nutritional or economic benefits: pig worth is a function not of size or taste but of teeth and sex.

Through a painstaking and protracted process, the lower canines in a boar’s jaw are teased to grow in a circular pattern. This is accomplished by knocking out the animal’s upper canines, thereby eliminating grinding resistance and providing space through which the lower canines can grow. So as to protect these elongated tusks from breakage, the animals are fed by hand. By carefully nurturing the pig and its teeth, a task which takes years, the owner is rewarded with a curved tusk. Masters of the tusk even tease a double circle out of the boar’s mouth; the greatest experts can even cultivate three round turns of teeth. These are the pigs whose sacrifice, accomplished by a deft blow to the spot where the snout meets the head, confers
status. The tusks are thereby accrued, and confer the right to wear other insignia of rank.

In Vanuatu's polygamous societies, pigs were the essential medium of dowry and pig ownership enhanced men's marital eligibility. Adultery, otherwise a capital offense, could be mitigated by pig-giving. In one group in which females predominated, men unceremoniously traded women for pigs (Harrisson, 1938). Potential wives were valued in terms of their ability to care for the household pigs, who themselves usually shared family quarters. It was not unknown for lactating women to suckle piglets and for pig-caring to take precedence over child-bearing (Harrisson, 1936a; Jolly, 1994). Understandably, for such women the killing of pigs was as much a cause for sorrow as for celebration: "women cry and wail as for an eldest son. Some have loved these pigs" (Harrisson, 1937, p. 32).

Indeed, the relationship between person and pig is so intense in the Melanesian context that it has been characterized as "pig love," worthy of psychoanalytic, and particularly Jungian, analysis (Jolly, 1984). Pigs are not esteemed as living beings because they are valued commodities; rather, they possess material value on account of their intrinsic being. Pigs are given personal names for reasons that transcend the anthropomorphic equivalent of pet-naming in Western society: in Melanesia, the pig is considered to have a soul. Pigs are regarded as family members, albeit non-human ones (Jolly, 1984).

For Melanesians, identification between person and pig is intense and is in no way compromised by the periodic ritual obligation of the former to kill the latter. Indeed, it is the combination of pig love with death which invests the human-porcine relationship with such intensity. "Identification with the beast one has nurtured is stressed in several ways: by caressing the unfortunate beast while tethered to the stakes, by crooning special songs about its life, and by sharing a special sacred pudding with the pig just before its death (a sort of Last Supper?)" (Jolly, 1984, p. 96).

Human-pig relations also carry strongly gendered overtones:

Since pigs, like humans, are alive and procreate, they can readily convey the reproductive as well as the productive character of human existence....

The pig thus embodies the pattern of relationships between men and women, and between male and female qualities. (Jolly, 1984, p. 176)

The sexual parallelism inherent in the human-pig relationship goes beyond the scope of the present paper, except to underscore the intensity of pig symbolism for Melanesian men and women and the deeply held place of the pig in the traditional
Melanesian world-view.

Depending on the local political system, all of a village’s pigs and women could officially belong to the bigman (Harrison, 1936a). Among the Big Nambas on the island of Malekula, pigs had names where wives did not (Gourguechon, 1977). Female beauty was believed enhanced by a tooth knock-out ceremony reminiscent of that performed upon the domesticated boar. Yet on other islands, women had their own ranking scales and related pig-killing rituals (Hume, 1985; Rodman, 1981). One group on a northern island traced its ancestry to a woman born of a sow (Rivers, 1914). Elsewhere, to the south, another group which believed itself to be descended from the son of a sow used as its group label the word for calling pigs. Inter-sexual or hermaphroditic pigs were particularly rich in symbolic power, with the “whole culture” of one group revolving around them (Marshall, 1937).

In rituals reminiscent of the North American potlatch, villages competed with each other for status through a system of mass pig-exchange and sacrifice. Pig-exchanges were also used to ratify peace agreements between warring villages. These agreements put a halt to “payback” killings by substituting a tusker pig for each unavenged enemy. Among anthropophagic islanders, pig sacrifice was associated with cannibalism; and (good) human flesh is today still likened to succulent pork (Harrisson 1936a; personal communications). With regard to the most awesome and power-conferring of all Melanesian practices – the eating of killed or captured foes – pigs thus became surrogates for human beings. Indeed, “Pig business, with a climax in sacrifice, became the central theme of life, modifying cannibalism; with it came equal opportunity for all to ascend the social ladder of piggery…” (Harrisson, 1937, p. 110).

Similar to the sacrificial lamb or the scapegoat in Old Testament theology, pigs in Melanesia were killed as penance for taboo violations that occurred during sojourns in the white man’s world (Harrisson, 1936a). They were needed to celebrate birth as well as death; and for those who did not give pigs their due, a special devil awaited in the afterworld (Harrisson, 1937). Secret societies revolved around them (Rivers, 1914). Pigs could be paid as tolls to permit passage through a village’s land to the coast; on occasion they were traded for penis-wrappers; and, as the ultimate goal of plantation labor, tusked pigs were eventually given a standard monetary value by white traders (Harrisson, 1936a; Harrisson, 1936b). “Pigs are our life and our progress. Without pigs we should only exist” (Harrisson, 1937, p. 24).

It is important to stress the group-specific nature of these pig-related beliefs and rituals. While pigs had relative importance in virtually all of the indigenous societies which made up the archipelago now known as Vanuatu, the aforemen-
tioned practices were not universal. Even with regard to pig-killing for rank-taking, the names of the tusks, the details of the ceremony, and the actual system of bigman hierarchy change considerably from island to island and group to group. In some Vanuatu communities, particularly in the southern islands, bigman hierarchies did not even exist and pigs lacked the same ritual value, as has been described above. Not coincidentally, it was in these islands that ranking in the Christian church came to supplant virtually all other criteria of indigenous leadership.

Missionization, Nationalism, and Kastom

Just as the specificities of pig importance differed from group to group throughout Vanuatu, so did Christian missionaries diverge in their views of indigenous Melanesian society. Accordingly, they varied in their tolerance for pig fetishes. Presbyterians, Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses were emphatic about expunging the most satanic elements of indigenous religion, and this included pig-related norms of community leadership and wife-taking. Anglicans and Roman Catholics believed in a more syncretic process by which Christianity would better “take” among peoples who did not deem their cultures to be under foreign evangelical attack. Theology did not operate in a materialistic vacuum, however; modernization and monetization of Vanuatu society (spearheaded by Protestant mission-traders and driven by copra-driven cash cropping) also came to erode the primacy of the pig.

As a national society in Vanuatu emerged in the 1970s, leadership arose largely among the indigenous Anglican and Presbyterian, mostly English-speaking, cadres in the Condominium. These were both ordained clerics and lay but Church-educated civil servants. (French-speaking, mostly Catholic, leaders also surfaced, but mostly in reaction to the anglophone Protestants; francophones advocated a “go-slow” policy on independence.) Thus, national leadership became a function of education, church prominence, and mastery of the English language, eclipsing such traditional and localized criteria of leadership as boar-tusk possession and frequency of pig-sacrifice.

At the same time, reacting to the alien and Westernizing ethos that threatened indigenous lifestyles and land claims on his native island of Santo, Jimmy Stevens’ Nagriamel movement strove to revalidate kastom as a basis for constructing a new polity. (The movement took its name from two kinds of leaves found in the jungles of Santo which together created a kind of yin-yang holistic symbolism). Nagriamel eventually expanded to other islands in the archipelago, but its core belief system remained a loose and idiosyncratically interpreted combination of beliefs, symbols,
and rituals familiar to, or created by, Jimmy Stevens himself. A group of like-minded islanders carved out a settlement in the “dark bush” of Santo and established an agricultural community organized around customary and communal principles. Stevens, whose own lineage was far from indigenous (he was a métis, a descendent of a Scottish sailor and a Tongan princess), built up his legitimacy by associating with a traditional Santo chief and staging annual pig-killing fêtes (Beasant, 1984). In Santo language, he thereby achieved the chiefly rank of moli. Condominium authorities viewed the success of Nagriamel and the popularity of Jimmy Stevens with alarm. Stevens eventually came to play the British off against the French by accepting the latter’s support.

One of the best examples of Stevens’ idiosyncratic use of pigs-in-kastom to achieve political capital occurred in April of 1976. So as to end a volatile confrontation between francophone Catholic and anglophone Presbyterian islanders on Santo, Stevens arranged a kastom ceremony in which the main actors were the local French and British representatives of the Condomonium. Stevens had the British government official dressed in a grass skirt (traditional female garb), while his French counterpart donned a loincloth (strictly male apparel). Stevens presented the European couple with a hermaphrodite pig with circular tusks, which the officials took turns bludgeoning to death. The animal’s innards were then inspected to verify that it was indeed intersexual; that being the case, the colleagues-in-Condominium brought the sex organs, tusks, and split carcass to the local capital for public display.

Stevens’ opponents criticized the unorthodox and imaginative ceremony on customary grounds. According to one critic, true Santo tradition did not permit such a spectacle. By leaving the hair on the skin of the pig, claimed another, Stevens had insulted the officials, who were now bound to avenge the affront by force. Stevens, for his part, later claimed that by jointly killing the pig and dividing its halves, the participating couple were now unknowingly “divorced” and the Condominium thereby nullified (MacClancy, 1988).

On another occasion, Stevens arranged a reconciliation between the families of two men, one of whom, incited in part by political animosity, had killed the other. The reconciliation ceremony included the exchange of pigs, among other items, and it prompted this denunciation by scandalized Christian islanders: “You can’t exchange a man’s life for one, or two, or three pigs.... Do you think that a PIG can replace one of God’s children?” (MacClancy, 1988, p. 105).

More nuanced than either Nagriamel kastom revivalism or indigenized Christian fundamentalism was Father Walter Lini’s brand of Melanesian liberation theology. As an ordained and practicing Anglican minister, Father Lini wholeheart-
edly accepted church doctrine on moral and religious issues. Conversion to Christianity of fellow islanders was a good thing, as was the missionaries’ eradication of such pre-Christian practices as cannibalism, wife strangulation, and infanticide. At the same time, Lini believed in the importance of retaining indigenous Vanuatu culture, such as it had evolved in the previous century and a half. Only through political independence – a theological imperative on its own for the colonially oppressed – could his people’s identity be preserved. Vanuatu identity, for Lini and his National Party (later Vanuaaku Pati) comrades, meant an indigenous and authentic amalgam of Christianity and kastom.

Pigs were indisputably part of this picture, for they figured prominently in many of Vanuatu’s indigenous societies. More than the Santo-centered Stevens, however, Lini’s nationally minded movement had somehow to synthesize the diversity of practices, customs, and symbols into a single, archipelago-wide version of kastom. On some of the islands, this actually meant reviving customs which had become dormant, if not “reinventing traditional culture” outright (Mankind, 1982). To the extent that tusked boars, pig-exchange, and pig-sacrifice could be used to forge national unity, so much the better.

Walter Lini and Jimmy Stevens – or, more broadly, the V.P. and Nagriamel – were thus in agreement over the value and importance of kastom. Nor was religion much a factor in their eventual split. Stevens never overtly repudiated Christianity, and indeed forged close alliances with Church of Christ and Seventh Day Adventist communities. What divided them was politics, as aggravated by external actors: Stevens, egged on by French settlers, officials, and American investors, demanded autonomy for his Nagriamel federation; Lini, supported by Britain and Australia, would accept nothing less than a unified and centralized nation-state. The outcome was the aborted secession of Nagriamel from Vanuatu, the death of one of Jimmy Stevens’ sons, and Stevens’ own long imprisonment.

**Pigs and Independence**

During the first decade of its independence, under the helmsmanship of Walter Lini and the Vanuaaku Pati, Vanuatu pursued a policy of Melanesian socialism under the rubric of a democratic parliamentary system of government. Invocation of kastom values and objects to strengthen national unity was common. Curved pig tusks figured prominently in official symbols of Vanuatu sovereignty: on the national flag, the pig tusk envelopes fern fronds (symbols of peace); on the official emblem it serves as background to a spear-holding warrior and the country’s motto, *Long God Yumi Stanap* (“We Stand Before God”); and on the nation’s currency.
representations of pig tusks are displayed liberally. Travellers to the nation’s second-largest airport walk between a giant replica of a pig’s tusk and slit gong (statue drum). Even beer drinkers are reminded of the pig’s importance as they imbibe, for Vanuatu’s national brew is called Tuskers!

National arts festivals are important occasions for bringing together the people of Vanuatu’s far-flung islands and allowing them to exhibit their specific variety of kastom through song, dance, arts, crafts, magic, and so on. From a political point of view, even more important is that arts festivals are occasions to forge a common framework of national kastom. That the opening ceremony to the festival includes the clubbing to death of a pig by the president of the republic, bedecked in traditional regalia, is thus considered only natural; that it was performed in 1991 by the usually prim, bespectacled, Presbyterian pastor President Fred Timakata illustrates the accommodation that Protestantism has come to make with kastom.

In December of that same year, a fierce electoral contest was fought among a splintered Vanuaaku Pati and the longtime opposition Union of Moderate Parties (UMP). The campaign featured promises of free health and education benefits, higher copra prices, the distribution of bags of rice, and a UMP pledge to bring television to the nation. The Economist (Pig of an election, 1991, p. 43) reported that the “pig population suffered a dramatic decline as local ‘bigmen’ threw feasts to persuade anyone still undecided.”

As a result of that election, Maxime Carlot of the UMP became prime minister. In several respects, Carlot is the antithesis to Walter Lini: he is French-speaking and pro-French, holds no position of religious authority, and espouses progressive capitalism as opposed to Melanesian socialism. Nor has the UMP ever attached the partisan importance to kastom that the VP has. Yet, as prime minister, Carlot has sought like his predecessor to enhance his legitimacy through kastom symbols and ceremonies. Shortly after the election, he added a kastom name to his Christian one; and in his travels to the outer islands Prime Minister Maxime Carlot Korman has publicly clubbed many a pig, thereby accumulating traditional chieftaincy titles. In Vanuatu, ceremonial pig-killing remains good politics.

It is not only electoral politics in which pigs play a role in modern-day Vanuatu; government officials may use pigs in the course of regular business. When traditional norms are applied to contractual matters, however, normative conflict may result. Witness this account of a government deal gone awry:

The Supreme Court has ordered the Government to pay compensation of about £100,000 to landowners in Malekula whose property was damaged when the company building the Hydroelectric Project ran transmission
lines over their land without seeking prior agreement.... The Minister of Lands...seems to have thought it enough that an agreement with the chief had been sealed by the killing of a pig. (British Friends of Vanuatu, 1995, p. 45)

Conclusion: Animal Symbolism and Human Power

Pigs and their teeth are by no means the sole symbol of Vanuatu cultural identity. Slit gongs, woven mats, and club houses, along with kava and yams, are also prominent in Vanuatu kastom. Sows and boars are, however, the only animals in the panoply of Vanuatu ritual. This alone imparts a special power to them. Nearly human according to traditional cosmology, their symbolistic recuperation by modern, nation-building statesmen is more powerful than that accomplished by artifacts derived from plant, wood or fiber.

Even though Christian teachings have supplanted many indigenous ones, including a porcine-derived genesis, the pig still resonates profoundly in the Vanuatu psyche. Natural phenomena remain subject to supernatural interpretation, and local leaders derive authority from their manipulation of traditional rites. "The people of Ambae are greatly relieved [that the nearby volcano is cooling down]," it was reported recently, "but what perplexes them now is whether it this is just a natural phenomenon or whether it is the happy result of a ceremony in which the West Ambae chiefs had sacrificed a pig...in a bid to appease the god Tagaro who, they believed, had stirred up the volcano after being angered by the abusive behavior of some local louts" (British Friends of Vanuatu, 1995, p. 45). Leaders prominent in the modern sector still seek status in the traditional one: such was the case of Vanuatu's Director of Basic Education who, in 1995, made island history by killing one hundred pigs – including ten double circle tuskers – on a single day (British Friends of Vanuatu, 1995, p. 46).

From village to capital, as circumstances and era demanded, leaders have successfully used the pig to promote personal authority, community solidarity, national identity, and political reconciliation. Despite their very conflicting politics and divergent interpretations of kastom, Jimmy Stevens, Walter Lini, and Maxime Carlot – customary chief, liberation theologian, and francophone politician – have all understood how to parlay pigs into political capital. This animal, more than any other living icon, has helped join pre-contact tradition with modern day politics.

The Vanuatu experience demonstrates the power of animate symbols, at least in divided and developing polities in search of unity. Customs involving animate symbols, more so than inanimate ones, may play a vital role for societies in
transition whose members have totemistic attitudes toward other species and longstanding beliefs in their cultural importance. This is not surprising; as Wilson (1984) has noted, people frequently turn to animals for symbolic expression, because animals are inherently more interesting than are inanimate objects.

Prior research has found that humans selectively transform animals into symbols that their behavior and/or bodies suggest (Lawrence, 1997). Totemization of the pig does not in and of itself fully explain its politicization. Future research might examine why, in Vanuatu and elsewhere, specific animals are chosen to achieve political ends.

Note

1. Correspondence should be addressed to William F. S. Miles, Department of Political Science, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. I wish to express my appreciation to Arnold Arluke, Kirk Huffman, and two anonymous journal reviewers for their comments and improvements on a draft of this article.

References


