

Civic Immortality: The Problem of Civic Honor in Africa and the West

Dan Demetriou¹

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Abstract From Thomas Hobbes to Steven Pinker, it is often remarked that cultures of honor are destabilizing and especially dangerous to liberal institutions. This essay sharpens that criticism into two objections: one saying honor cultures encourage tyranny, and another accusing them of undermining rule of law. Since these concerns manifest differently in established as opposed to fledgling liberal democracies, I appeal to Western and African examples both to motivate and allay these worries. I contend that a culture of civic honor is perfectly capable of offering those with soaring ambitions all the civic distinction they could hope for—including civic immortality—without tempting them to seize undemocratic levels of power. And as for rule of law and public order, an “irrationally” defiant response to the indignity of state-sanctioned oppression has often animated citizens to resist illiberal regimes despite great peril. Thus, cultures of civic honor are not only compatible with, but sometimes necessary to, founding and maintaining liberal institutions.

Keywords Democracy · Honor · Honor culture · Thomas Hobbes · Liberalism · Steven Pinker

1 The Problem of Civic Honor

On a summer’s day in 2000, under the shade of mango trees in a modest Nigerian village, then-President Bill Clinton donned a chief’s robe to speak about African liberalization. After being introduced by an effusive local elder as “the king of the world,” Clinton stood up and praised Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo as representative of a new generation of African leaders who stand for democracy and rule of law. Clinton clearly meant to honor Obasanjo and thus to encourage him and

✉ Dan Demetriou
ddemetri@umn.edu

¹ University of Minnesota, Morris, Morris, MN, USA

other African leaders to further democratic reforms. However, some liberal observers in Africa and the West criticized Clinton for playing into “big man” politics. As one reporter put it, they wondered whether

by focusing too much attention on promising African leaders rather than the frail democratic institutions that support them, Clinton may actually be perpetuating the continent’s old curse of one-man rule.... (Salopek 2000)

Liberal qualms about celebrating leaders will be more pronounced in the context of a Nigerian hamlet than the central square of a Western capital city. Yet this comical bit of political theater illustrates what many see as a universal and profound incompatibility of liberalism and honor culture.

Cast in terms of an argument, the *problem of civic honor* (POCH) can be formulated as so:

1. Liberal societies rely on and promote strong (liberal, public) institutions, whereas civic honor cultures rely on and promote highly agentic citizens.
2. The agency of citizens on the one hand, and the strength of liberal institutions on the other, are inversely related.
3. Weakening liberal institutions is *prima facie* illiberal.
4. Thus, promoting a culture of civic honor is *prima facie* illiberal.

In this essay, I will defend a fairly robust culture of civic honor against this line of thought. Specifically, I contend that premise (2) of POCH is false: although honor-mindedness is often destabilizing, there is good reason to think that inculcating citizens with a healthy thirst for honor from the right people for the right reasons is compatible with, and often necessary to, creating and sustaining liberal democratic institutions. Along the way I will discuss “civic immortality”—the highest possible civic honor—since it is the most obvious target for my opponents. I will also draw not only from the usual stock of Western examples, but some African ones as well. This is because (sub-Saharan) Africa may be uniquely instructive on questions of how liberal democratic impulses interact with honor-psychology—or at least the highly individualistic, “heroic,” and not particularly religious form of honor psychology that is our present concern—in both positive and negative ways.

2 Honor, Civic and Political

“Civic honor” here refers to the phenomenon of a community’s honoring, through official or unofficial means, some of its members in recognition of some civic performance demonstrating rare excellence or uncommon sacrifice. Honored citizens are not necessarily public servants, but their honored activity must be “civic”; that is, the honor cannot be a celebration of mere personal accomplishment, such as excelling in athletics, or something that merely redounds to the common good, such as brilliance in science or the arts. Rather, we award civic honor to those whose deeds are felt to demonstrate outstanding citizenship. Civic honors often go to leaders, both civilian and military, who show wisdom or courage in critical

moments. But they may extend to less exalted public servants, such as the first responders at the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, or civilian scientists, artists, and even entertainers for civic contributions, such as Manhattan Project scientist Enrico Fermi, recipient of the Medal for Merit, a WWII-era award for civilians who helped the war effort, or comedian Bob Hope, who dedicated much of his life to boosting troop morale through the USO, and who was made the first honorary veteran of the US armed forces.

Simply honoring excellence and sacrifice is not a problem for liberals. But we are not discussing cultures that “take a moment to thank” someone for their work and sacrifice with a little polite applause at the retirement party. The members of honor cultures often value honor more than material goods such as wealth, health, and even life. In their final moments, they ruminate on their honorableness and their honored achievements. Honor-driven people might work for money, but they do not take as much pride in goods earned as they do prizes won or gifted to them in recognition of extraordinary service. These cultures are much better than the current, say, American one when it comes to formality, protocol, pageantry, speechmaking, memorializing, and ceremony in general. So a culture of civic honor would be one where citizens cherish civic honors, care a great deal about who gets them and for what, and spend considerable time debating which honors are proportional to which deeds. The question is to what degree this ethos is compatible with the resilience and efficiency of liberal institutions.

Steven Skultety has recently argued that something he calls “political honor” is both common and vital to liberal society. (Skultety 2016) By “political honor” Skultety means the phenomenon public offices being (seen as) public honors. *Civic* honor is something different. First, if we understand “offices” broadly enough to include leadership positions occupied by people who don’t count as “citizens” in the normal sense—say, a king—then it is possible to have political honor without civic honor. Second, one can have a culture of civic honor without political honor. Academia provides us with a good analogy: in the academy, honor is won chiefly through the status competition of grant procurement, influential publishing, prize-winning, etc. High-status academics do not have real power in their departments or universities, nor do they covet such power—the administrative control possessed by deans, provosts, and presidents is seen as a lot of “thankless” (read: unhonored) responsibility. Thus universities must use extra pay and appeals to duty to recruit administrators from the ranks of faculty. Although administrators are not honored much during their tenure, they may be honored upon retirement, especially if they are viewed as having discharged their responsibilities particularly well. This amounts to a subculture that awards a sort of civic honor without political honor. It is analogous to a society that does not at all honor its political “administrators” and “functionaries,” but may honor them once out of office. That noted, civic honor is compatible with political honor.

Readers finding honor cultures at once both bizarre and familiar are perfectly positioned to consider POCH’s soundness. Why, precisely, should anyone think liberal institutions would be jeopardized by a culture of civic honor? I dwell on two main reasons: *upstartism* and *ungovernability*.

3 The Family of the Lion and the Tribe of the Eagle

Abraham Lincoln's 1838 address on "the perpetuation of our political institutions," given to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, was one of his earliest recorded speeches. Lincoln begins by noting that the nation had grown so strong it was immune from invasion: not "all the armies" of the world combined could "take a drink from the Ohio, or make a track on the Blue Ridge, in a trial of a thousand years." Nay, the greatest danger to our liberal institutions was simply our own weakened commitment to them. Lincoln felt the passage of time had cooled our allegiance to the principles of the republic, and he argued that we should fight this lackadaisical attitude by establishing a civic cult around the rule of law: "Let every lover of liberty... swear by the blood of the Revolution, never to violate [the law] in the least particular... [...] Let reverence for the laws... become the political religion of the nation." And who plays the role of the antichrist in this liberal faith? Lincoln's answer comes in a famous passage:

Many great and good men... would inspire to nothing beyond a seat in Congress, a gubernatorial or a presidential chair; but such belong not to the *family of the lion, or the tribe of the eagle*. What! think you these places would satisfy an Alexander, a Caesar, or a Napoleon? Never! Towering genius distains a beaten path. It seeks regions hitherto unexplored. It sees no distinction in adding story to story, upon the monuments of fame, erected to the memory of others. It denies that it is glory enough to serve under any chief. It scorns to tread in the footsteps of any predecessor, however illustrious. It thirsts and burns for distinction; and, if possible, it will have it, whether at the expense of emancipating slaves, or enslaving freemen. Is it unreasonable then to expect, that some man possessed of the loftiest genius, coupled with ambition sufficient to push it to its utmost stretch, will at some time, spring up among us? And when such a one does, it will require the people to be united with each other, attached to the government and laws, and generally intelligent, to successfully frustrate his designs. Distinction will be his paramount object, and although he would as willingly, perhaps more so, acquire it by doing good as harm; yet, that opportunity being past, and nothing left to be done in the way of building up, he would set boldly to the task of pulling down. (italics added)

Lincoln thinks passion can be good or bad for liberal institutions. Good, as he goes on to argue, insofar as the passionate hatred for British rule fuelled the new republic for decades after the founding. This passion had now cooled, and appropriately so. Passion can also be bad for liberal society, particularly in the form of grand ambition, and if we are not careful such a passion will enflame the heart of a great American citizen who will rise up and make the land his stage, with the rest of us his unwilling—or just as bad, willing—audience. So in place of passion liberalism needs reason: "Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defence. Let those materials be moulded

into general intelligence, sound morality, and in particular, a reverence for the constitution and laws....”

Lincoln’s Lyceum Address channels an ancient democratic and republican dread of the towering figure driven by a love of fame. The Greeks met this challenge with ostracism, a practice carried out in various city states but, specifically, in Athens from the 480s to the 440s BC. Ostracism consisted of an annual vote in which citizens decided if any of their fellows was well enough positioned to become a tyrant, whether or not he showed any such aspiration. If, by simple majority, the citizens thought that there might be such a person, a second vote was held to determine who that person was. If 6000 or more votes were cast, the man with the most votes was exiled for 10 years. As classicist Paul Cartledge put it, the ostracized citizen “might well be able to live quite comfortably on property he held outside the limits of the Athenian state. But politically, civically, he was dead, or at any rate in a state of suspended animation for the ensuing decade of his ‘sentence’.” (Cartledge 2006)

Ostracism was not reprobative or retributive. If anything, it scolded the Athenian public, for it was a way for the Athenians to say to themselves that they had let themselves become overly enamored with one of their members. And although there is something counterintuitive about exiling your best citizens because they are so superior, as Aristotle noted in his own complicated views on ostracism (Kraut 1989: 92f.; Rosler 2013), ostracism for mere excellence was not unique to the Greek democracies. It, and other leveling practices, are so widespread in foraging societies that they probably were practiced by our human ancestors for hundreds of thousands of years, as argued by primatologist Christopher Boehm in his seminal *Hierarchy in the Forest*. (Boehm 1999) In that book, Boehm synthesizes a great deal of anthropological and primatological research to make the case that modern humanity developed in very egalitarian societies. Our earliest *homo* ancestors were probably hierarchical, just as chimpanzees are today. But with advances in intelligence, communication, and weaponry, Boehm argues, coalitions of lower-ranked males were able not only to unseat alphas (as chimpanzees do) but also to keep any new alpha from emerging (as chimpanzees do not). The picture Boehm paints of such cultures suggests that men too prone to boasting, or overly self-conscious of their excellence, are to be humbled in various ways. “Say that a man has been hunting,” one !Kung is recorded saying,

He must not come home and announce like a braggart, “I have killed a big one in the bush!” He must sit down in silence until I or someone else comes up to his fire and asks, “What did you see today?” He replies quietly, “Ah, I’m no good for hunting. I saw nothing at all... maybe just a tiny one.” Then I smile to myself because I now know he has killed something big.” (Boehm 1999: 45)

The egalitarianism of small-scale human societies is pithily summarized by anthropologist Harold Schneider who, reflecting on his experience with the irascibly egalitarian herding tribes of East Africa, concluded that “All men seek to rule, but if they cannot rule they prefer to remain equal.” (quoted in Boehm 1999: 124) Boehm sees a U-shaped political history for humanity, one going from authoritarianism to

egalitarianism and then, in many societies, back to authoritarianism, as in the ancient cultures of Egypt or Sumer.

Some democracies on the state level have recaptured a sort of egalitarianism, but few of them are in Africa, which suffers from the most oppressive and corrupt authoritarian regimes of any continent. As noted at the beginning of this essay, commentators interested in the political psychology of Africa often blame honor culture for helping to encourage big man politics. For instance, historian and Africanist John Iliffe declares that “[u]ntil the coming of the world religions, honour was the chief ideological motivation of African behavior” (Iliffe 2005: 1), and he spends hundreds of pages adumbrating African honor and explaining how it helps us understand modern African politics. For our purposes, Iliffe’s most interesting distinction is between “heroic” and “householder” honor. Both sorts are familiar. Householder honor is bourgeoisie, stressing honesty, reliability, uprightness, patience, sobriety, independence, self-control, and industry. (Iliffe 2005: 44, 64) Heroic honor on the other hand concerns the prestige competitions among the warrior caste, and this hypermasculine, aesthetic, and agonistic culture calls for courage, aggressiveness, and swift, personal response to insults.

Iliffe’s numerous examples of heroic honor across Africa sound like passages from Homer or Mallory. Mounted Hausa knights (in what is now Nigeria) chose to abandon bows “for lance and sword” because “only when it is breast to breast does one know a great man.” (Iliffe 2005: 15) Aristocratic Songhai (in today’s Mali or Niger) saw war “as a means of accumulation and heroic action, to be fought with horse and lance, sword and shield, leaving bow and arrow to peasants... [a] captured peasant would be enslaved; a captured nobleman would often be ransomed” (Iliffe 2005: 19), and like the samurai of Japan, the Songhai resisted the cowardly musket, throwing any they found into rivers. (Iliffe 2005: 21) Across the continent, Ethiopian warfare was “highly individualistic” since single combat was more highly honored, and aristocratic war leaders would choose open terrain to fight (sometimes for prearranged battle) and traded courtesies before engagements. (Iliffe 2005: 59–60) Ethiopian *telek saw*—literally, “big men”—couldn’t appear in public without a retinue and could impoverish themselves through displays of competitive gift-giving and public feasts. (Iliffe 2005: 61–62) In the continent’s south, Xhosa groups would also sometimes fight scheduled battles in which the two sides exchanged volleys of spears; the retreating warriors would see their women and children taken but returned unharmed if they acknowledged the superiority of the victors. British colonialists praised Xhosa manners, one officer remarking that “no French marquis of the *ancien régime* could exceed their bow and expression of countenance.” (Iliffe 2005: 153) Their sense of battlefield courtesy was so fine that they warned the British of an assault they planned on Grahamstown in 1819. (Iliffe 2005: 153–154)

In European history, the golden age of honorable combat was the eighteenth century. It was battle-driven, sport-like, and clearly distinguished between those who lead (officer-aristocrats), those who rule (royalty), and rank and file men (“the merest scum of the earth,” according to Wellington). This ethos gave way to more Romantic notions of combat, which blurred the lines between battlefield glory and royal majesty, and replaced battle with war, a sporting attitude with one of spiritual

struggle, and class distinctions with nationalism. Napoleon embodied this Romantic ethos, and shocked traditional aristocratic sensibilities by doing things such as attacking in inclement weather, seeking permanent conquest, promoting officers on the basis of merit, and crowning himself emperor. (Bell 2007) Napoleon had Alexander as a precedent, who despite his obsession with Homeric heroism, sought his immortality by leading armies rather than winning individual combats, by fighting *and* ruling, and by fighting to conquer rather than to demonstrate superiority. The Napoleons and Alexanders of the world suck up all the honor for themselves. They are not firsts among even an elite set of equals, but rather outshine the rest of the elite as the sun does the stars. Importantly, the armies they command must become efficient, coordinated killing machines for them to make their mark on history. This means that masculine honor for the average fighter must become more “militarized”: warriors transform into soldiers, whose honor is predicated on the success of the group as opposed to personal performance, and manly courage comes to be seen in terms of grimly answering the call of duty where it once meant sprightly initiative and derring-do.

The African parallel here is Shaka, often called the “black/African Napoleon.” (e.g., Strobridge 2002) Like Napoleon, Shaka rose from obscurity, usurped rule, militarized his society, and ignored traditional limited modes of warfare in an effort to establish empire and etch his name in history. And once again, we see the same cult of personality emerge that, admittedly, has successfully immortalized the great conqueror. “As [Shaka’s] image crystallized during the nineteenth century,” Iliffe writes, “praise-singers surrounded Shaka’s name with ferocious metaphors and allusions... [such as] ‘You are a wild animal! A leopard! A lion/You are a horned viper!’” These virtues and their images stand in contrast to “the praise-poems of his eighteenth-century predecessors [which] said little of warfare” and more often praised qualities such as shrewdness or beauty. (Iliffe 2005: 146) As one scholar of Zulu praise poetry, or *izibongo*, notes, “the elevation of the war praises of the Zulu royal line and of Shaka himself would have played a crucial role in stamping his right to rule on the consciousness of his subjects,” while the “emphasis on war and... macho virility... may have been forced to the fore during the streamlining and building up of the regimental war machine under Shaka.” (Gunner and Gwala 1991: 7) Doubtless, Lincoln’s phraseology about being of the “family of the lion and the tribe of the eagle” would have earned him a place in Shaka’s court as an *izibongo* poet.

The brutal Ugandan dictator Idi Amin loved to give himself colorful titles, including “Lord of All the Beasts of the Earth and Fishes of the Seas and Conqueror of the British Empire in Africa in General and Uganda in Particular.” Another was “hero of Africa.” Iliffe sees strong precedent in the tradition of heroic honor for the post-colonial catastrophes in African leadership.

[The African] heroic legacy was essentially inimical to the stable democracy that most African states professed to seek at independence. Heroic notions encouraged excessive concern with appearances, unrestrained competition for personal supremacy, *inflated importance of individuals as against institutions*, display of wealth and power, refusal to compromise or accept defeat,

intolerance of criticism, and willingness to employ violence. (Iliffe 2005: 328; emphasis added)

African dictators are not (mere) kleptocrats: they do not simply plunder state coffers. They are ostentatious, often bedecked with jewels, feathers, and medals. Their palaces and monuments are garish. Their motorcades can extend a kilometer and rudely force common citizens off the road. To save face, they will even deny indisputable facts, such as a military defeat or a famine.

Everyday Africans have helped make this possible, for far too many are genuinely impressed by such displays. Julius Nyerere, the naively idealistic socialist but nonetheless principled Tanzanian president from 1961 to 1985 (when he stepped down), spoke out against political grandiosity as being the “reverse of democratic,” and admonished Africans high and low, saying,

We must begin to treat pomposity with the scorn it deserves. Dignity does not need pomposity to uphold it... Even if it were proved the people really did enjoy it—which I very much doubt—it would still be wrong; and as such it would still be our duty to put a stop to it, and to tell the people that what they had learned to enjoy was wrong. (quoted in Iliffe 2005: 334–335)

It is not always easy to know how much of the praise big men receive is heartfelt. But there can be little doubt much of it is. Many Africans are deeply impressed by the cunning, daring, and ruthlessness that it takes to cut one’s way to the top, and this contingent is prepared to tolerate and, if possible, profit from a dictator’s tenure, and to do so with astonishing good humor. One Cameroonian—his own country ruled by Paul Biya since 1982—recalled to me his contempt upon watching George Bush, Sr. transfer power to Bill Clinton at the latter’s inauguration in 1992. “What sort of *man* would lay down and give up the palace [White House] like that?” he wondered. “He controls the army and police. All Bush would have to do is shoot a few shots into the air to scare Clinton away!”

So as innocuous as it may sound, encouraging a culture of civic honor can be seen as feeding a latent impulse in our most dynamic fellows to seek supremacy. On this account, not only do these cultures—especially those encouraging the “heroic” mode of honor—incentivize tyranny with the promise of immortality, but they really seem to equip a class of people (traditionally men, but in principle people of any gender) with the initiative, confidence, and spirit necessary to accomplish amazing feats. No one can deny Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, or Shaka their achievements. The question is whether it is dangerous to create the conditions that make such men possible.

4 An Ungovernable People

Lincoln’s America never produced a man of the sort he feared. But it did produce hundreds of thousands of another variety of honor-minded individual who posed no less of a threat to the Union he swore to maintain as president. As the nation began to unravel and loyalties were yet unknown, Lincoln tapped his most capable officer,

one Colonel Robert Lee, to defend the capital and take command of the Union Army. Lee declined, for attacking his home state of Virginia would be dishonorable in his eyes, and although “there was no personal sacrifice” that he “would not make to preserve” the Union, dishonor was the lone exception. (Thomas 1997: 186) And just as the US military institutions crumbled because Southerners saw states’ rights as a point of honor, the Confederacy itself was hobbled by the same fractiousness it considered constitutionally guaranteed. This is the ungovernability worry in action. The ungovernability threat to liberal institutions is focused more on how a culture of civic honor undermines institutions period, not liberal institutions in particular. The simplest way to state this concern is by saying that honor is so compelling that it too-often hijacks the sense of duty citizens have to their liberal institutions. It is not only that the lure of honor can encourage insubordination, but also that there is something about the psychology of “honor-minded” people that makes them particularly difficult to keep in line.

The ungovernability worry is also an ancient one; it is in fact the premise of the West’s oldest epic, the *Iliad*. Agamemnon, the Greek expedition’s leader in their campaign against Troy, is forced to surrender a slave girl he stole from the temple Apollo. Agamemnon assuages his wounded pride by requiring Achilles to give up *his* slave girl to him. Achilles, without dispute the Greeks’ greatest hero, sees the demand as an insult and removes himself and his myrmidons from the fight, which in turn prompts a Trojan offensive that leaves the Greeks at the brink of disaster. Thus the *Iliad* is quite like a tragedy of civic honor and specifically civic immortality. The (then) unremarkable act of claiming a comely girl as a spoil of war ends up wedging apart two Greek goals to disastrous result: an institutional one of Greek victory, which requires a clear command structure of dutiful leaders and followers, and an honor-governed one, which in this case sees great battles as an opportunity to secure personal immortality. For his part, Achilles’ allegiances are wholly to the latter:

My mother Thetis tells me that there are two ways in which I may meet my end. If I stay here and fight, I shall not return alive but my name will live for ever: whereas if I go home my name will die, but it will be long ere death shall take me. (Bk. 9)

Pace Stephen Cave’s (2012: 205f.) analysis, for the Achilles of the *Iliad*, at least (the Achilles languishing in hades in the *Odyssey* sings a much different tune), the immortality of secured renown is not a consolation prize given the grim reality of our physical mortality. On the psychology of the warrior-aristocrat, being among the remembered honored is what makes life worth living in the first place, and an eternity of creature comforts without distinction is a far worse fate than glorious death. As Grace Jantzen has noted in her study of violence, to Homer’s audience, biological life, even immortal biological life without fame—such as that the goddess Calypso offers Odysseus—is a low-minded temptation for “unworthy” souls. (Jantzen 2004: 77) For this reason, Lee and Achilles are usually placed at opposite poles in honor scholarship, as Lee represents a highly internalized honor based on duty and sacrifice, and Achilles an outer honor propelled by personal aggrandizement. But for our purposes they fall into the same camp, insofar as the

insubordination of neither man is motivated by an ambition to rule. Their senses of honor, activated by perceived duty and insult respectively, transformed these men from their authorities' greatest assets into their greatest threats.

This honor-minded truculence was something perfectly familiar to Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes was interested in justifying a strong (indeed, authoritarian) government through a primitive social-contract rationale. For that rationale to succeed, subjects must be first and foremost self-interested, which meant viewing one's loss of life and property as the worst sorts of evil. Like Neyerere, Hobbes was lobbying not only for (what he saw as) a better type of government, but also a better sort of subject, one who could appreciate the form of government he was recommending. As noted by Leo Strauss (1952: 113f.) and more recently and in greater detail by political theorist Laurie Johnson (2009), aristocrats posed a problem for Hobbes' project, since honor-mindedness drives its subscribers to fight over "trifles," "vainglorious" pursuits, and "pride." They are suicidally brave on matters touching their honor, which means they were the sort of people even a Leviathan could not control. "It is not that [Hobbes] thinks that human beings are by nature always fearful," Johnson writes, *but that by nature they are not fearful enough*. (Johnson 2009: 106) Since the Leviathan depends upon subjects who can be cowed, a social engineering campaign is required to make subjects into the herd animals Nietzsche would later inveigh against:

Desire of ease, and sensual delight, disposes men to obey a common power: because by such desires, a man abandons the protection that might be hoped for from his own industry and labour. Fear of death, and wounds, disposes to the same, and for the same reason. (Hobbes 1996: Chapter 11)

From this Johnson concludes "The idea that there is nothing worth dying for is an idea whose time has come in Hobbes' thought." (Johnson 2009: 110)

One hears echoes of Hobbes' anti-honor position in contemporary social science. Steven Pinker (2011) discusses the biological and social mechanisms contributing to declines in violence, and begins with a takedown of honor on the grounds that it encourages disorder and lawlessness, and it is a theme Pinker revisits many times. Pinker accepts the theories of social psychologists Richard Nisbett and Dov Cohen (1996), who hypothesize, on the basis of their research showing that honor-minded whites from the US South are significantly more prone to respond violently to insult, that the "culture of honor" is really a self-defense strategy. For pastoral cultures like those US Southern whites hailed from—or any culture in which goods are easily stolen, or government protections weak or distant—it makes sense to develop a reputation as a tough customer, as someone who will swiftly retaliate to assault or even insult, and this is what cultures of honor amount to. Thus Pinker summarizes his view in one interview by stating that

Thomas Hobbes got it right when he said a Leviathan—that is a third party, a government, with a monopoly on violence—is probably the biggest violence-reducing technique our species has invented, because not only does it penalize you for committing aggression against your neighbors, but you know it penalizes your neighbors. So you don't have to adopt a belligerent macho

stance to deter your neighbor from attacking you, because the government will do that for you. Likewise, even if you are penalized for committing aggression, if it's the government that is fining or jailing you, you're not showing weakness to your enemies, and so it's a burden you're more likely to accept when it's coming from a disinterested third party. (Gates 2012)

Elsewhere I have registered my disagreements with the Nisbett–Cohen deterrence theory as an explanation for honor psychology. (Demetriou 2014) For instance, it does not explain the scrupulous fairness of dueling or the battlefield courtesies we have noted above. Particularly puzzling on this view is why honor-minded warriors go out of their way to put themselves in danger, even to the point of welcoming challenge. Setting all that aside, what is noteworthy here is that the Nisbett–Cohen account states that cultures of honor are not really about preserving or promoting what Pinker calls “fetishized virtues such as manliness, dignity, heroism, glory, and honor.” (Pinker 2011: 183) Rather, they are a coping strategy aimed at saving our property and our skins, which is right up Hobbes' alley. The problem (if the Nisbett–Cohen view is true) is that this culture has outlived its usefulness in circumstances of better law enforcement. It is as if an older evolutionary mechanism were militating against a newer, more advanced adaptation of the body politic.

There are other theories to explain honor psychology in development,¹ and it is possible that there are multiple different cultural or even biological systems being conflated by the umbrella term “honor.” But whatever the best explanation for honor psychology, we need to question the inference that just because—and we concede that there is truth in the claim—honor cultures are particularly defiant, that this is a bad thing.

5 Of fame and Founders

“As he was valiant,” eulogizes Brutus in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, “I honour him: but as he was ambitious, I slew him.” Thus to all tyrants, any lover of liberty might think. And yet Brutus would not have slain an Achilles, whose ambition was not one whit humbler than Caesar's, or a Washington, who himself defeated an empire and established a great state. The reason for this is that, like Alexander, Napoleon, and Shaka, Caesar sought preeminence *and* domination, while Achilles and Washington did not—both, in fact, consciously abjured kingship. The difference between these two sorts of ambitions is essential to any apology for civic honor against the upstartism concern.

Let us fix ideas here by clearly distinguishing between *power rankings* and *prestige rankings*. Power rankings are such that each rank has, or is supposed to have, control over those below. Prestige rankings, on the other hand, rank parties according to some excellence. Military rankings are power rankings: generals control colonels, colonels captains, captains majors, and so on. Sports rankings are

¹ See Forde (2016) and Demetriou 2015.

prestige rankings: the highest-ranked tennis player neither controls, nor seeks to control, the second-ranked player.

With this distinction in mind, we can begin to address the upstartism worry used to help motivate premise (2) of POCH. As athletics and academia demonstrate, it is perfectly ordinary to have an honor culture that confers prestige in a competitive context and drives its members to great accomplishment and sacrifice, and yet for its prestige distribution to have few implications for its authority distribution. But these are not cultures of *civic* honor, which may include societies that honor office holders, and even societies for which power itself is a status symbol. Is it possible to maintain a culture of civic honor that allows individuals—even great individuals consumed with ambition—to compete for honor in politics, and yet for the distribution of power to remain acceptably democratic?

There seems to be a growing sense among historians and political theorists that this is possible, and in fact goes a long way to describing the American founding.² The seminal essay on this point is Douglas Adair's "Fame and the Founding Fathers." (Adair 1967/1974) Adair's essay drove a wedge between the two dominant narratives about the Founders at the time: a somewhat populist, idealistic one, which saw them as disinterested patriots, and a more counter-cultural, Marxist one that portrayed them as opportunists who disliked taxes. (Wood 2006: 3–28) Adair called attention to the ambition the Founders had for fame, which in that context made them both self-interested and non-dominating. "Fame," Adair teaches us, meant something very specific in the intellectual climate of the Revolution. Fame was distinguished from glory and honor. Glory was a spiritual grace and could only be granted by God. Honor, then as now, had an external sense of prestige and good standing, and an internal sense connoting the ethic of the elite, one characterized by "competition, combat, [and] struggle for eminence and distinction" and the attendant agonistic virtues of nobility, magnanimity, courage, and high-mindedness. (Wood 2006: 14–15) Fame, in contrast, was seen as wholly secular, necessarily earned, and as concerning not local respectability but wider and lasting celebrity. "The love of fame encourages a man to make history, to leave the mark of his deeds and his ideals on the world," Adair writes. "It incites a man to refuse to be the victim of events and to become an 'event-generating' personality—a being never to be forgotten by those later generations that will be born into a world his actions helped to shape." (Wood 2006: 15)

Adair sees the "desire for fame" as "the desire for immortality." The eighteenth century European intellectual zeitgeist was increasingly classical in its ethics and skeptical in its religion, so the immortality fame could bring had become particularly attractive. As Diderot had put it, "posterity is for the philosopher what the other world is for the religious man." (Wood 2006: 17) And to yearn for fame wasn't scandalous in the eighteenth century because famous acts were supposed to impress an "audience that can recognize egotism transmuted gloriously into public service." (Wood 2006: 16) This was an era when ambitious young men read Plutarch's *Lives* to find models of life both good and great, and engaged in frequent debates about eminence and who had it. (Wood 2006: 20–21)

² E.g., Freeman (2002), McNamara (1999), and Wills (1984).

To Adair, the growing rift between Britain and the American colonies provided the men who would become America's founders with an opportunity to become immortal, and incited in them "an almost obsessive desire for fame" and concern for

posterity's judgment of their behavior. And since they are concerned with the image that will remain in the world's eye, 'that love of fame which the ruling passion of the noblest minds,' to quote Hamilton, becomes a spur and goad that urges some of them to act with a nobleness and greatness that their earlier careers had hardly hinted at.

Adair goes on:

Of course they were patriots, of course they were proud to serve their country in her need, but Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison were not entirely disinterested. The pursuit of fame, they had been taught, was a way of transforming egotism and self-aggrandizing impulses into public service; they had been taught that public service nobly (and selfishly) performed was the surest way to build 'lasting monuments' and earn the perpetual remembrance of posterity. (Wood 2006: 10)

Scholars influenced by Adair have explored in greater detail how the love of honor and fame animated the Founders, especially Washington. Washington presents us with the clearest-cut case of how a man fairly panting after immortality could find himself completely immune from the urge to dominate. Washington was always undeniably ambitious for renown and jealous of his honor. For instance, as a young officer, he sought honor in arms in the French and Indian War, but resigned from the British army for a time because—although his "inclinations strongly bent to arms"—he couldn't tolerate the slights suffered by colonial officers which culminated in a policy preventing colonials from exceeding the rank of captain. (Smith 2015) As war broke out between the colonies and Britain, Washington was deemed the only man suitable for supreme leadership because of his personal courage, his bearing, his steady, unshakable character, and his leadership charisma. But at the war's successful conclusion, in imitation of the Roman Republic's Cincinnatus, he resigned his command to return to his farm at Mt. Vernon, an act George III earlier doubted would happen, but admitted would make him "the greatest man in the world."

And yet, as Gordon Wood notes, "Washington was not naïve." (Wood 2006: 42) He deliberately cultivated a reputation for disinterest, noble aloofness, and high minded disregard for power. He worried about accepting public gifts for his past service or attending political events, and even whether he was being "too solicitous for reputation" or "ostentatiously disinterested" in his negotiation of these delicate matters. Washington agonized over the invitation to become president, since he felt assuming political power could sully his already historic reputation as the liberator of the US. Eventually it was prevailed upon him that the unsteady nation needed him to lead it precisely because it formed the opinion that no one else was less ambitious and yet so capable of leadership. He wrestled with the question again when begged to take a second term. When pressed to lead the country for a third

term, Washington finally refused, and thus established a tradition of two-term presidential limits that would not be flouted until the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt. (Wood 2006: 31–63) Considering the only pattern for executive leadership anyone had was monarchy—common citizens on the street would shout, “Long Live George Washington!,” and John Adams wanted him addressed as “His Highness”—Washington’s self-restraint deserves the continued admiration of those who believe in governments of and by the people. This self-restraint was made possible by Washington’s aspiration for immortal fame, yes, but fame among freedom-loving citizens, whose opinions were the only ones who mattered to him.

So great ambition for distinction can serve the cause of democracy, rule of law, and liberty. Even the young Lincoln of the Lyceum address understood this. (Rahe 1999) In that same speech, he says the Founders “sought celebrity and fame, and distinction” in their successful experiment.

Their all was staked upon it: their destiny was inseparably linked with it. Their ambition aspired to display before an admiring world, a practical demonstration of the truth of a proposition, which had hitherto been considered, at best no better, than problematical; namely, the capability of a people to govern themselves. If they succeeded, they were to be *immortalized*; their names were to be transferred to counties and cities, and rivers and mountains; and to be revered and sung, and toasted through all time. (Rahe 1999, emphasis added)

Lincoln’s concern was that equally ambitious and capable men in the future will not be able to achieve the same immortality unless through destroying what the Founders had wrought. Whether Lincoln is right about that has everything to do with us, however. There is no psychological law limiting our ability to honor, even to the extent of immortalizing, leaders who respect our rights and step down when their constitutionally-mandated terms expire. One way we have managed to honor retired presidents is through presidential libraries. These serve not only as a repository for materials relating to the presidency in question, but also as manufacturing centers for presidential legacies. Another way we honor former presidents is through the speaking circuit. Although eyebrows often rise at the fees former presidents can command for a speech—Clinton was once paid \$750,000 to speak to Ericsson executives in Hong Kong (Yoon 2012)—these speeches not only financially incentivize capable citizens to pursue a daunting, risky, and comparatively poorly compensated career, but also provide occasion for them to shape public opinion on their administrations. Without honoring mechanisms such as these and many others, it is unclear who would run—and relinquish—the US presidency. The rich and powerful crave honor as the poor and weak crave wealth and power.³ Citizens can lead even the rich and powerful by the nose if they are “liberal” with their honor by heaping honor on the great, but only if they stay inside the lanes of good liberal governance.

Although achieving civic immortality has always been an extraordinary feat, it is harder now than ever. At least three reasons for this are readily appreciated. First,

³ “The rich yearn for respect and popularity just the way the poor yearn for riches.” (Kiriāmiti 1994: 146)

information is easier to come by. Although the decline of professional investigative reporting is worrisome, it is nearly impossible for a small circle of propagandists to hide deleterious facts about a public figure. Second, investigative reporting itself represents a widely-held ethos in Western liberal democracies that everyone should know the whole truth about public matters. This makes perfect liberal sense since, insofar as government is justified by consent, that consent is impaired if uninformed not only of current but also of past facts, including personal ones that shed light on the character and motives of our leaders. Third, over the course of sixty or so years we have seen the rise and permanent establishment of an influential counter-cultural movement. This too is healthy for liberalism insofar as it helps upend cultural taboos that unofficially do much to impede new forms of life or perpetuate oppression.

I have no specific advice about how a modern culture of civic honor should go about immortalizing great citizens who could have destroyed our democracy and liberal institutions but chose to sustain them.⁴ George Washington's memory has weathered modern challenges much better than some other's, such as Thomas Jefferson's, but schoolchildren have not been taught Parson Weems' tale about the cherry tree for some time, and are more likely to know about his deplorable teeth than his remarkable fortitude. I cannot help but to feel something is lost here. Citizens deserve the whole truth. But does it really convey the "whole truth" to suggest that people such as Washington or Jefferson were "flawed human beings just like any of us," rather than truly great men, quite in another league, however little our fragile egos like to admit it? Egalitarian irrationality is just as epistemically vicious as hero-worship, and it seems to be the ditch that we have steered into.

The importance of honoring leaders who renounce power is even more pressing in places where liberal democratic traditions have not been established, such as Africa. Sure, we Westerners are (currently) so thoroughly liberalized that we wouldn't *want* to be immortalized for merely refraining to dominate our fellows. And as far as honoring our leaders for abjuring tyranny, we find the prospect vaguely undemocratic and potentially insulting, given the latent suggestion that we were not too sure if the recipients would stick to their most basic liberal democratic responsibilities. But this is not the case everywhere. For instance, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, endowed by Sudanese-British telecom magnate Mo Ibrahim, gained notoriety in 2007 when it handed out its first Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership to Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique. To be a candidate for the prize, an African head of state must be democratically elected and not have outlasted his or her constitutionally-mandated term. At \$5,000,000 with an annual \$200,000 for life, it is probably the biggest prize in the world, but it is a pittance to what a determined African dictator could loot, so it hardly serves as an incentive to leaders who care only about money. Rather, the size of the award reflects the Foundation's interest in drawing attention to African leaders whose relinquishment of their posts might not otherwise attract our notice. (They are just doing their duty by stepping down, right? Why is that newsworthy?) It also provides former African heads of state with the funding they need to retire in dignity, promote their legacies,

⁴ See Wingo (2003) for an extended discussion of the need for liberal mythologizing.

and advocate for their nations in global forums. (Delapalme 2014; Mo Ibrahim Foundation) The equivalent of an Ibrahim Prize for Western leaders would be an insult to offer or to receive today. But even if we have assumed subtler honoring mechanisms, we must not look derisively on those who have not. The British were tireless memorializers of nobility and royalty, but over the course of the nineteenth century they came to apply that same commemorative enthusiasm to their liberal heroes, many of whose monuments, such as William Wilberforce's, adorn Westminster Abbey to moving effect.⁵ As the exuberant celebrations of, and popular memorials to, Nelson Mandela demonstrate, Africans have retained the ability to unstintingly honor great citizens. Westerners have little right to suggest that venerating good African leaders will revive old habits of honoring big men and conquering heroes given that the British successfully transitioned to honoring liberal heroes almost two centuries ago.

6 The *Thumos* of a Liberal

So much for the upstartism worry. What can be said on behalf of civic honor to the ungovernability concern? We begin by noting deteriorating support for liberal values in the West. Blatant violations of constitutionally-guaranteed rights, a militarized police force, and illegal domestic surveillance are being justified by appeals to terrorism, domestic unrest, and criminality. These authoritarian measures cannot be objected to on Hobbesian grounds, but they are nonetheless wholly illiberal. The lesson is a familiar one: liberal society cannot be preoccupied with safety, because a high level of safety requires intolerable constraints on our freedom, constraints usually imposed on us by the government and difficult to remove once the threat has passed. Authoritarians are all too willing to play the part of saviors as a pretense to subjugate; and in the grand scheme of things, even our property and lives, let alone our civic dignity as free men and women, is threatened far more often by the government than it is by our truculent fellows.

It may even be, as argued by Sharon Krause (2002), that the very same testy pride that makes the honor-minded so problematic for (even liberal) institutions is essential to a healthy liberal society. For Krause, as for Adair and Johnson, the honor-motivated citizen is both self-interested and self-sacrificing. The honor-minded vigorously resist insult to their dignity and aspire to greatness and fine deeds, and yet their elevated sense of self also leaves them scornful of physical threat, material inducement, and unquestioning obedience to authority. On this way of seeing things, the ungovernability worry is psychologically correct but makes a false moral assumption. That honor makes us more difficult to control should be seen by liberals as a feature, not a bug.

Krause builds on the observations of Montesquieu, who argued that the pride and martial prowess of the nobility worked to limit monarchies inclining toward despotism. Her favorite Old Regime example of this is when the Viscount of Orte

⁵ See Chapter 3 of Appiah (2010) for a discussion of liberalizing honor in Great Britain and its contribution to ending the slave trade.

was sent by Charles IX to massacre Huguenots at Bayonne. Orte, whose aristocratic self-respect would allow him to happily kill a worthy foe on the battlefield but not a powerless one in cold blood, wrote back to his king, saying, “Sire, I have found among the inhabitants and warriors only good citizens, brave soldiers, and no executioner; thus, they and I beg Your Majesty to use our arms and our lives for things that can be done.” Orte “would not stoop so low” as to “kill innocents,” Krause observes, because “[h]e owes it to himself to uphold his code of honor [which] distinguishes him from those who are simply the instruments of someone else’s will, and he is proud that he is more than that.” (Krause 2002: 44)

Orte’s insubordination is based on his pride as an independent agent, which his noble upbringing bequeathed to him from an early age. Aristocrats *allow* monarchs to rule just so long as the monarch—the traditional “fount of honor”—distributes honors in accord with accepted rules and respects the aristocracy’s prerogatives.⁶ The feeling of pride offended, on the other hand, requires no pedigree if one is endowed with what is traditionally called “spirit,” or *thumos*. This is what fuels the “reflexive” (Stewart 1994) honor Nisbett and Cohen claimed was definitional of the “culture of honor.” For Krause, reflexive honor has served liberal society mightily. First wave feminists, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and black liberationists, such as Fredrick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr., were animated far more than usually recognized by a sense of outraged honor. These were great-souled men and women born into societies affording them nothing like the dignity they felt they deserved, so they fought, not for supremacy, but only their fair share of respect and recognition. Krause concludes that “modern liberal democracy has an aristocratic inheritance” (Krause 2002: 181), and that “the politics of distinction and disobedience has a role to play in any polity that takes the limitation of power seriously.” (Krause 2002: 189) As tyranny of various forms is a constant threat, we “occasionally will rely on the honor of the few who stand up to resist encroaching power, men and women willing to risk their necks to defend their liberties.” (Krause 2002: 190)

Average Africans are particularly poorly-placed to shape their government through the ballot box or political lobby. They are, however, highly attuned to honor. And honor is free, is something every citizen has to allot, and it cannot be stolen or coerced. So it stands to reason that honor is not a liability for Africans, but a natural resource. The promise of *honors* can do much to tempt African leaders away from cruder allurements, such as graft and supremacy. And *honor-mindedness* can supply citizens with the steely resolve—an “irrational” resolve, given the horrors a dictatorial regime can inflict on a dissident—to defy tyranny.

Both of these advantages coalesced in the extraordinary example of Nelson Mandela. Markedly unlike the vast majority of the first generation of post-colonial African heads of state, Mandela was not a commoner. His father was a respected Xhosa chief, and Mandela was reared in the South African countryside, away from whites, where he could develop a sense of pride for himself and his people. Mandela had excellent exposure to indigenous African leadership, which he describes as

⁶ The republican tradition can be seen as an effort to make an aristocratic democracy of dignified, agentive, dangerous and yet egalitarian and self-governing citizens [cf. Pettit (1997)].

consensus-oriented and driven by moral authority. These were certainly qualities of Mandela's own leadership style. His consensus-building skills enabled him to secure the trust of a genocide-fearing white minority whose governments had persecuted him, his family, and his people relentlessly—and he did this while imprisoned by them. His moral authority shamed not only the whites who opposed him, but on occasion even his black African base, whom he sometimes openly chastised when he felt they failed his expectations.

These accomplishments would seem impossible if we did not know them to be true, and Mandela's stature has no parallel today. But the drive for distinction seems to have motivated Mandela far less than a finely-honed sense of reflexive honor. Mandela was naturally thumotic, as he announces in the first paragraph of his massive autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* (2008), when he explains that his Xhosa name, Rolihlahla, fatefully means “troublemaker.” Mandela's gifts as a lawyer were constantly overshadowed by his agitation at the insult of apartheid, which offended against a mind he describes as “fired by the glory” of African warriors who resisted Western domination. In his autobiography he describes with approval how he was toughened by the traditional circumcision ritual he underwent as a young man and his training as a boxer. He frequently admits to taking fateful risks, and assuming heavy responsibilities, out of his sense of masculine obligation. He states that he could not tolerate certain forms of Christianity as they “taught passivity and submissiveness in the face of oppression, something I could not accept.” He was willing to forsake a successful (for a black man) career as a lawyer to help the underground ANC, and later its military wing in particular, disrupt the apartheid regime. Although a veteran litigator with urbane manners when representing others, he wasn't above appearing in court dressed as a traditional Xhosa warrior when he himself was in the dock. The pivotal moment of his life, his Rivonia Trial speech, begins by noting how his aristocratic roots spurred him to act on behalf of African liberation.

In my youth in the Transkei I listened to the elders of my tribe telling stories of the old days. Amongst the tales they related to me were those of wars fought by our ancestors in defense of the fatherland. The names of Dingane and Bambatha, Hintsa and Makana, Squngathi and Dalasile, Moshoeshoe and Sekhukhune, were praised as the pride and the glory of the entire African nation. I hoped then that life might offer me the opportunity to serve my people and make my own humble contribution to their freedom struggle. *This is what has motivated me in all that I have done in relation to the charges made against me in this case.* (Mandela 1964, emphasis added)

Upon being sent to Robben Island, Mandela wasted no time protesting even the smallest indignities, such as the fact that blacks had to wear shorts while other races were given pants. His jealous regard for his own dignity was, however, balanced with a perfect scrupulousness for the dignity of others, including that of his captors. That is why, by the time Mandela was (or more accurately, chose to be) released from custody, he won the allegiance of his jailors, most of his nation, and the world. And on and on: Mandela's story is one long litany of patient but determined, violent if necessary but always measured, refusals to accept undignified treatment.

The final demonstration of Mandela's liberal civic heroism was when he relinquished power after only one term. To the thoroughgoing liberal Westerner, political retirement isn't praiseworthy so much as expected. In some ways this blasé attitude is a testament to successful liberal enculturation—Westerners have forgotten how remarkable it is for a leader to let go of the reins. But unless the thrust of this essay is quite mistaken, we must not grow complacent about civic honor. A liberal society without a culture of civic honor would have no resources for honoring the liberal heroes who win and maintain citizen rule in the first place. Stripped of a sense of honor, liberals who extend their egalitarianism of *power* to matters of *distinction* are bound to resent the monumental buildings, statuary, and whitewashed histories that breathe life into civic immortals. Indeed, the Western hero-toppling of Mandela began before his body was even interred, with news articles from both the political right and left criticizing him as a communist sympathizer or a friend to dictators. (Graham 2013; Moynihan 2013) In cutting short their secular afterlives, liberalism without honor offers liberal heroes very little in return for their sacrifices. Would-be liberal heroes—especially those in cultures where liberal agency comes at a heavy price—cannot help but be discouraged by such disaffection.

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