
Introduction: Violence, Redemption, and the Liberal Imagination

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Violence haunts liberal political thought. The defining image of early modern European social contract theory—and an image that remains potent in contemporary contractarian moral and political theory—locates the possibility of civil society in a compact among men who are long accustomed to the use of force in the bloody business of self-assertion and self-preservation. These men, so the story goes, surrender their right to fight one another (and to dominate the defenseless), investing a common, sovereign power with the right to command obedience for the sake of peace, justice, prosperity, and reasonable expectations of security. In turn, their consent legitimates this common power—the state—at least as long as its use of coercion serves the welfare and good future of a voluntarily toothless citizenry.¹

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1. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), chaps. 13–18; John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pt. 2, secs. 4–21, 77–131. For an exemplary trace of this story in contemporary contractarianism, see John Rawls’s account of the “circumstances of justice,” which include scarcity, conflicts of interest, and vulnerability to attack. For Rawls, the circumstances of justice help guide deliberation in his hypothetical “original position”—that is, the position from which the social contract is negotiated, in which citizens are supposed to be deprived of any knowledge of their concrete socioeconomic circumstances; see Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), sec. 22. For a neo-Hobbesist account that makes the Hobbesist state of nature central to a

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This is an image of redemption from violence. Casting the state as the bringer of peace and prosperity into a disorderly world, this picture replays, in secular terms, the Christian theme of an epochal transformation in the human condition that the *Oxford English Dictionary* unsurprisingly lists as the first definition of *redemption*: “deliverance from sin and its consequences by the atonement of Jesus Christ.”² At the same time, however, this is also an image in which violence persists, though often reorganized, renamed, or repressed. While the liberal state aims to control our violent tendencies by depriving us of the right to use force against one another, it also takes into itself the right to use violence in pursuit of this goal, exemplifying the capacity of redemptive aspirations not only to suppress but also to motivate and direct the coercive use of force. And often to disguise it: when one arm of society is elevated to a position of dominance over, and putative difference from, all others, its uses of force can easily come to be euphemized—as “patient justice,” for example, something altogether different from the pathological “violence” it combats.³ Similarly, since the liberal state thus conceived derives its legitimacy from the lingering threat of interpersonal violence, its redemptive promise must coexist, uneasily, with a portrait of the liberal individual as a very dangerous person. Without the benefit of a coercive sovereign power holding everyone in check, the liberal individual will use any means necessary in the pursuit of material benefits, will struggle to the death for the sake of recognition, honor, or self-esteem, and can have no good reason to expect decent treatment from his fellows.

In short, even in one ideal world of liberal political imagination—a world where all questions of legitimate authority are addressed *in foro interno*, where no one is expected to give up anything without good reason, where superstitious dread and vainglory are banished and rational scrutiny holds sway, where each citizen can reject or accept governance and will allow considerations of peace and prosperity to decide the matter, and where every state is established for the sake of the common weal—the potential for coercion, cruelty, outrage, disorder,

liberal moral and political theory, see David P. Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), especially 158–65. Gauthier marries a reading of Hobbes to work in game theory and rational choice theory to produce a model of both the Hobbesian problem and an alternative solution.

2. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.v. “redemption.”

3. “Fellow citizens, we’ll meet violence with patient justice—assured of the rightness of our cause, and confident of the victories to come.” George W. Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People,” 20 September 2001. Available on-line at www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html.

and brokenness are abiding aspects of social life. This seam in the liberal imagination points to the need to broaden our sense of the ways in which the terms *violence* and *redemption* are tied to each other. For example, how does the pursuit of redemption *from* violence relate to the pursuit of redemption *through* violence? Or, recalling that redemption may also refer to more mundane acts of buying back, freeing, recovering, or making recompense for some particular loss or wrong, we might wish to distinguish between redemption from violence—the radical deliverance of humanity from the affliction of violence as such—and those concrete acts of compensation and counterbalance that, in assigning meaning and value to violence suffered, enable agents to project possible futures (though not necessarily fundamentally transfigured ones) in its wake. To survive violence, to find a way forward under its weight: is this less or more radical than to dream of overcoming violence in a final, exceptional stroke?

Some of the essays collected in this special issue were originally presented in fall 2001 at a conference organized by the Late Liberalism Project at the University of Chicago's Center for Gender Studies in conjunction with the Center for Transcultural Studies. The Late Liberalism Project was initiated in 1998 by a group of scholars from across the humanities and social sciences who shared an interest in the intersection between liberal ideas and social forms, as well as a frustration with the usual ways of approaching that intersection. Liberalism is often treated either as a set of norms or principles (typically rooted in foundational moral or political theory) or as a constellation of institutions, practices, movements, identifications, and modes of affect and desire. This is a troubling division of labor, founded on a distinction (itself greatly valued by some liberals) between the mobility of abstraction and the immobilizing grip of the concrete. Too often, this division merely sustains a tired controversy between those who celebrate the power of liberalism's normative content to transcend its own historical limitations and those for whom the history of liberalism's concrete social forms merely reveals the essential bankruptcy of liberal ideas. It was unclear to us that the customary ways of separating concrete from abstract matters could be sustained in the face of careful historical work on liberal forms. Moreover, the whole of the intellectual conversation about liberalism tended to focus on North American and European contexts. We wanted to open a different kind of conversation about liberalism.

Seeing ourselves as neither partisans of "the liberal project" nor its debunkers, we resolved to consider more carefully the relations among liberal ideas, liberal desires and aspirations, and liberal forms, giving special attention both to liberalism's colonial and postcolonial contexts and to the relationship between liberalism

and globalization. Through what dynamics of imagination and desire do certain institutions and practices come to represent liberal ideas? What modes of feeling and subjectivity have liberal ideas authorized, opposed, or rendered unintelligible? How are liberal ideas themselves disseminated, multiplied, or transformed through the reproduction of the social forms in which they are vested? How do emergent, alternative social forms and ideas interact with various strands or species of liberalism? Do they inflect liberal ideas and practices? Are they deflected or suffocated by them? The essays collected in this issue attend to this nexus of idea, desire, and practice across a number of different social and historical contexts. Zeroing in on the relationship between redemptive promises and the organization, experience, and effects of violence, these essays study the ways in which ethically charged political desire, both liberal and nonliberal, sometimes organizes violence and sometimes attempts to heal the breach that comes in its wake.

In different settings and in different ways, Michael Warner and Claudio Lomnitz each take up cases in which the state fails to operate as a common power capable of guaranteeing the security and prosperity of those citizens who are most accustomed to taking for granted the coincidence of their interests with the general welfare. In both cases, the U.S. Civil War (Warner) and the Mexican socioeconomic crisis of the 1980s (Lomnitz), the failure of the state to provide peace and stability opens onto questions about how to conceive a better future. Although lingering Christian tropes of sacrifice and justice haunt the scenes of disaster with some promise of suturing present injury, death, and grief to a well-ordered better world to come, the sacred fails to underwrite the troubles of the moment.

Warner's essay brings to light the coincidence and inadequacy of two traditions of redemptive thought. One is represented by the ideology of the modern state, which purports to make civil society possible by monopolizing legitimate force. The other is represented by Herman Melville's unorthodox and distinctly nontriumphalist Civil War poem "Shiloh," which, with its pastoral image of swallows skimming indifferently over a freshly bloodied battlefield, sets up (but does not settle for) a categorical contrast between the goodness of nonhuman nature and the violence of humanity.

Civil war is the clearest possible indication of the state's failure to compel obedience by monopolizing the legitimate use of force, and a lyrical image of pastoral serenity played out across a war zone might seem to point a finger upward to some possible higher source of justice. But while Warner gives Melville's story a Christian genealogy, it is nevertheless a secular poem; and if no redeemer god

dies for our sins in “Shiloh,” how are we to be delivered from such a radical outbreak of violence? For Warner, Melville’s parenthetical line—“(What like a bullet can undecieve!)”—both answers and fails to answer this question. The line suggests that the experience of suffering itself may expose the futility of the wish to overcome violence through violence. Yet Warner shows that this sort of redemption is both uselessly belated (since the bullet kills those whom it enlightens) and problematically negative, leaving us with a subjectivity that seems empty in its undeception.

Warner’s concern about the emptiness of undeceived subjectivity is echoed in Lomnitz’s account of the Mexican crisis of the 1980s. There, chronic and widespread economic and social insecurity generated, among other things, a crisis in the meaning of sacrifice: personal loss and suffering could no longer be easily articulated into a larger, purposive story of future recompense through national progress. In this context of “present saturation,” Lomnitz argues, sacrifice is turned back on itself, becoming merely self-destructive. Sacrifice here testifies to a subject’s inability to imagine a viable future rather than operating as a painful but potent means to a better world. By pointing to the futility of suffering cut free from any promise of a better future, Lomnitz suggests that narratives of redemption may be an irreducible condition of meaningful human activity.

Here, however, recall the distinction we have already suggested between narratives of redemption from some fundamental affliction—“violence” as such, for instance—and the ordinary activities through which people redeem losses, reweaving continuities between past and future over the interruption of injury or suffering. Perhaps the trouble with the first sort of redemptive narrative is its false promise to overcome the potential for violence under the conditions of anonymity, autonomy, and scarcity that jointly set the terms for liberal social interaction. The hope for complete deliverance from social instability was never, as Lomnitz puts it, “realistic.” But the work of “undeceiving” ourselves about redemption may leave room for a more modest sort of redemptive imagination as a necessary part of projecting a possible future. And here we might broaden the sense of smaller-scale redemptive practices to include not just the patient business of repairing damages, paying debts, and making it possible to move forward in the wake of violence, but also the business of disrupting the chains of assumption and flows of circumstance that can make violent breaks seem inevitable.

As Warner hints, for instance, Melville’s “Shiloh” does leave us with two interlocking modes of sociality that are neither empty nor fundamentally redemptive, at least in the more strongly transfigurative sense of the term. One is the relationship established between author and audience through the poem itself, whose

“undeceiving” effects on its readers might be thought to parallel the work of the bullet, though without its deadly consequences. The experience of reading lyric poetry—at least as long as this is understood as an experience of “suspended conviction,” and not merely as the retreat from worldly violence into the insular pleasures of the beautiful—may have the potential to transform the reader’s investment in violence-inspiring redemptive narratives. The other is the relationship among the “suddenly bonded mass of male friends” who lie upon the battlefield, not yet dead but instead—like all of us—still only dying, and whose suddenly impending death has thrown them into a different, more “worldly” relation of “mutually witnessing physicality.”

The latter image pulls us toward Ken Graves and Eva Lipman’s photographic meditation on the physicality and rituals of late-capitalist, heteronormative, American masculinity in the making. These photographs capture strangely unguarded moments in such highly disciplined contexts as military academies, boot camps, Boy Scout jamborees, and wrestling matches. If Tim Blackmore’s “Rotor Hearts,” for all its sensitivity to the *jouissance* of helicopter violence, resonates with Melville’s pastoral, implying that the unique pleasure of helicopter motion—its swallowlike maneuverability, delicate and fluid—is always already defeated precisely by its deployment in military contexts governed by terrestrial logics, Graves and Lipman invite us to imagine scenes of gender pedagogy as scenes that solicit intervention. By focusing on the failure of fit between subjects and the highly competitive heterosexual masculine ideologies that would interpellate them, Graves and Lipman suggest the always live possibility of alternatives to managing the violence of militarized masculinity, alternatives simultaneously more interesting and less predictable than plain disavowal or epochal redemption. The image of a subject caught off guard—in an instant of excess, longing, self-irony—underscores the uninevitability of masculinity turned toward the task of realizing a policy of violent intervention, a “before” that bears an uncanny resemblance to Warner’s exhausted, but not quite completely exhausted, “after.” Both the photo-essay and Melville’s lyric suggest the possibility of disrupting the production of masculine investments in American violence.

Of course, the civil war witnessed in Melville’s “Shiloh” might be dismissed as an exceptional instance of instability (though Warner does not do so), one that need not disturb the larger liberal aspiration of redemption from violence. With its single setting and its undifferentiated mass of men, Melville’s poem might also seem to pass over the ways in which the social field itself can come to be differentiated into spaces of peace and spaces of violence, the former secured in part through the establishment of the latter. In “Necropolitics,” Achille Mbembe

invites us to consider the (typically colonial) political spaces in which the familiar narrative of the sovereign state as the agent of its citizenry's redemption has no traction, where the mutilation and destruction of human beings without redemptive pretense has become the normal mode of the exercise of state and nonstate power.

The early modern European theory of the state's monopoly on legitimate violence, secured and maintained for the sake of peace, prosperity, and the security of citizens, coexisted with the emergence of plantation slavery. Mbembe traces continuities between the institutions of plantation slavery, colonization, and the emergence of independent states as war machines in Africa, institutional structures that neither secure conditions of prosperity for citizens nor effectively monopolize the means of violence. On this view, there is no reason to think that such state monopolies would effectively promote the general welfare. Mbembe suggests that necropolitics—an image of political sovereignty as dealing directly in the destruction of existing modes of sociality, in murder, maiming, and the management of multitudes under conditions of all-out war—shadows and belies the European philosophical promise of the redemptive potential of liberal politics. He draws on nineteenth- and twentieth-century European thought to develop models of social interaction and aspiration adequate to the violence of contemporary political practice and struggle. In effect, he invites us to theorize social interaction from the perspective of necropolitical casualties. In such circumstances, Mbembe suggests, martyrdom (as opposed to purposive sacrifice) emerges as a possible expression of agency.

Taking up this theme through an example that Mbembe also discusses, Ghasan Hage's essay asks us to imagine an ethnography of Palestinian suicide bombers (PSBs). Stressing the symbolic and practical dimensions of political struggle between Palestinians and Israelis, Hage works to untangle the knots of slightly incoherent, morally charged rhetoric that have made it virtually impossible to discuss PSBs in the West without first condemning the practice. (Of course, as Hage points out, condemnation, once given, tends to supplant further discussion.) Hage locates the practices of the PSBs symbolically, ideologically, and historically in the scene of colonial violence. He offers no answers as to how a practice of suicide bombing might embody future-directed modes of sacrifice, what the relation between the theological and political contexts of such practices might be, or even how the successes and failures of such practices might be gauged. His point is rather to suggest that no one has ever undertaken to examine PSBs in a way that could yield solid answers to such questions; the situation of struggle itself prevents social scientists from undertaking this study. Nevertheless, the kind of

thought experiment involved in imagining a PSB ethnography is in itself politically important, if only as a technique of working to understand what solidarity or opposition could involve for those of us operating at a distance from the colonial scene.

Like Hage's essay, Gillian Cowlshaw's treatment of the befuddlement of white Australians in the face of Aboriginal violence reminds us that identifying violence as meaningless or merely self-destructive is often a political act. (Importantly, Cowlshaw also suggests that atonement is never simply a matter of even exchange, which calls into question some of the economic metaphors—assigning value, buying back—that sometimes frame even what we have referred to as the small-scale and mundane work of redemption.) Highlighting the tensions between secure social groups and those whose access to established paths of social and economic mobility is at best tenuous, Cowlshaw considers the recent shift in liberal discourse about Aborigines. Liberal policies of recognition, apology, and reconciliation, she notes, have recently given way to expressions of disappointment at the apparent failure of such strategies to improve Aboriginal life and harmonize racial relations.

The liberal Australian social imagination wanted its Aborigines to be one with nature, sympathetic victims of settlers, needy people anxious to accept the helping hand of a benevolent elite, or all of these. Against this background, socially sanctioned displays of physical force in Aboriginal townships—for example, a good fisticuffs on the weekend—come to seem like merely pathological violence. The persistence of this violence has led liberals to question policy changes that had been designed to extend the guarantees of a liberal state to its indigenous citizens. Yet Cowlshaw suggests that reading Aboriginal violence as pointlessly destructive overlooks the possibility that Aboriginal violence is not only meaningful, but politically meaningful, representing, in part, a refusal of the specific modes of recognition and atonement that liberal Australians have offered to Aboriginal people. Indeed, that such a refusal remains unimaginable to the liberal establishment is itself evidence of the superficiality of the recognition they have proffered. Agents only really come to share a world in common when they acknowledge the possibility of loss within that world—in this instance, when they acknowledge their own vulnerability to the prospect that others might reject their efforts at reconciliation.

If Cowlshaw's Aborigines refuse the recognition of the liberal state, Abidin Kusno's essay on the historical shadow of the 1998 anti-Chinese riots and gang rapes in Jakarta studies the equivocal consequences of the state's refusal to recognize an instance of violence and its legacy. Kusno begins by considering the

architectural reconstruction of a key Chinese business district that was heavily damaged in the riots. His analysis demonstrates the failure of new buildings and spaces to work through or even to acknowledge the trauma of 1998, either by orienting themselves resolutely toward the future or by making reference to the past only in the decontextualizing manner of the theme park or the tourist town. Kusno then takes up an illustrated story, set in 2039, that tracks the ways in which, despite (or perhaps because of) the absence of official recognition and the public effort to forget, both the memory of 1998 and some trace—however partial—of the lineages and relations established by that trauma are preserved and transmitted through private stories.

Kusno's account suggests that the consequence of the state's failure of recognition is not that it produces genuine forgetting, any more than the state's acknowledgment could (as Cowlshaw's liberal Australians imagine) simply transcend historical injustice in a single act of compensation. Instead, the state's suppression of the riots and rapes has a subtler consequence: it leaves people with an unusually fragmentary understanding of who they are, how they came to be, and what they have done. People are instead figuratively (and sometimes literally) orphaned in relation to their own contexts of production and activity, just as the explicitly "Chinese" architectural referents in contemporary Indonesia tend to be orphaned from the historical contexts through which Indonesian Chinese culture has been formed. To return to Warner's Melville, it is as though the dying bodies on the field at Shiloh—bodies that the poet imagines as physically mingled—were stretched out toward one another but could not quite touch.

Taken together, these essays raise new questions about violence and redemption, social justice and optimism. What does it mean to imagine a better future in a present marked by violence and suffering? Is such an imagination necessarily redemptive? Are redemptive imaginations necessarily deceptive, and deceived? What would it mean to move toward such a future without the confidence that, in achieving it, we would find our scars erased and our debts cancelled, or even that we could get there without suffering and incurring new ones? And in what social and political forms, liberal and otherwise, could such an undertaking find expression?

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