

## Memories of violence: introduction

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*Abstract:* Violence is a near ever-present reality for much of humanity. This publication will seek to explore the ways in which violence has been defined, valorised, and inscribed on the imagination by providing an interdisciplinary discussion of some of the key themes related to our understanding of violence: commemoration and memory in the context of violence; dignity and violence; and violence and language. These themes aim to encourage a broader and deeper understanding of violence and the conditions in which its various forms may thrive, exploring what we recognise as violence, how we interpret and represent its many forms, as well as how we may assess its impact over time.

*Keywords:* Violence, commemoration, memory, memorialisation, language, dignity.

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Violence is a near ever-present reality for much of humanity, manifested in a variety of practices, physical and verbal, as well as institutional. Unsurprisingly, violence is also entwined in our languages, and entangled in the norms and rules by which we live. It thereby inhabits our imaginations, dreams, and cultures, framing individual and collective attitudes to its uses, its targets, and its aftermath. These are incorporated into narratives that seek to explain, to justify, as well as to condemn the many facets of violence. They have thereby selectively shaped our transmitted memories of violence. It is often the *post facto* reconstructions of these experiences, with all the normative judgments they may invoke and the passions they are capable of stirring, that inform both the public imagination and policy processes. In doing so, they can both reproduce violence and conceal the work that it is capable of doing, often in surprising ways.

For this reason, violence and its study can become a diagnostic of so much else. Most obviously, it can tell us not only about the ordering of power, but about its constitution, and about the nature of the relations that both enable and diminish human capacities. Examined over time, this brings into sharp relief historical processes and changes, in the different practices and evaluations of forms of violence, but also in their insidious legacies. It is here that the study of the languages used in multiple spheres and eras becomes important in assessing their involvement in the experience of violence: how it is described, how it is justified, how it can be encouraged and reproduced through the affective charge of the words used, but also how it can be sublimated and deflected. Just as violence can be seen as a form of language, a powerful medium of communication, so too can language be a form of violence itself. It can embody all forms of social discrimination, performatively bringing the reality of violence into the lives of men and women across the globe. Languages of and about violence therefore become a key to our understanding of how it works.

This publication will seek to explore the ways in which violence has been defined, valorised and inscribed on the imagination by providing an interdisciplinary discussion of some key themes related to our understanding of violence. The aim is not to present a comprehensive history of a common understanding of violence, but to provide a platform for a variety of perspectives from different disciplines on a selection of connected themes. The papers come out of the discussions initiated at a symposium held by the British Academy in partnership with the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, and the American Philosophical Society in February 2018. The papers presented here are grouped into three themes: commemoration and memory in the context of violence; dignity and violence; and violence and language. They are aimed at encouraging a broader and deeper understanding of violence and the conditions in which its various forms may thrive. In doing so, the intention is to explore what we recognise as violence, how we interpret and represent its many forms, as well

as how we may assess its impact over time, through memory and memorialisation, but also through the processes that it sets in motion.

In the first article in this volume, Fraser connects depictions of violence in literature, in this case cultural logic of late-19th-century superweapon fantasies, to current nuclear policy. He notes that 19th-century publishers, editors, and authors hoped that the advent of superweapons would mark the end of war by ending politics itself. The possibility of absolute violence, they imagined, would be so unthinkable as to prevent violence altogether. Nuclear policymakers repeat 19th-century assumptions because the nuclear device itself represents the fulfillment of an imagined 19th-century form. But literary and material forms do not exist in isolation. Cultural producers imagined that the superweapon—the ‘motor-bomb’, the ‘ghastly dew’, the ‘peacemaker’, the nuclear device—was a form capable of imposing order because it was singular, able to produce relations of hegemony and subjection. Instead as superweapons proliferate, threats of absolute, totalising violence proliferate.

Addressing the question of collective memory, Inall focuses on the memorialisation of military death in urban settings. The forms that memorials and commemorative practices take reflect the needs and objectives of the commemorating parties. Rather than the literary representations prominent throughout this publication, this article focuses on evocative material spaces. A biographical approach can be helpful in considering the needs of commemorating parties, and in tracing how they may change over time. For example, the biography of Arlington National Cemetery includes its beginnings as a memorial to a single individual, George Washington, becoming in due course the resting place for over 400,000 US service personnel and veterans, with a complex of memorials encompassing memories from the Civil War to the Challenger Space Shuttle disaster to contemporary conflicts. Such acts of re-memorialisation appropriate existing places or structures and embed new memories in contexts already rich with memory. Established memorials have a way of attracting new memorials to their proximity. The act of embedding a new memorial into an existing commemorative space transfers to the new monument a sense of the weight of memory and commemorative potency of the preceding monuments. The new monument is also legitimised through its acceptance or incorporation into a recognised place of memory and commemoration. Furthermore, memorialising activities play an important role in the formation of group identities and collective memory, which may also be contested or renegotiated over time.

Developing another aspect of commemoration, Phillips-Hutton suggests that the performing arts and embodied memory offer new approaches to the questions inherent in memorialisation: namely who, what, and for how long we should remember. She suggests that the participatory rituals of the performing arts offer opportunities not only for the creation and transmission of memory but also for integrating

such memories into a wider narrative via practices that can accommodate changing memorial needs. Moreover, the multitude of voices that can be presented in performed memorials engage audiences in a kind of memory work that is vital to communicating historical traumas in something approaching the fullness of their true contexts. She stresses that neither beauty nor traditional aesthetic pleasure is necessarily the goal for commemorative works in the performing arts. The representation of violence may provide a context in which the audience, shielded from its reality by the performing frame, is enabled to excuse or minimise violence, but the performing arts also stage and frame violent acts, thereby containing them within a space where they may be confronted and perhaps overcome.

Rimner focuses on a particular case, but in doing so takes a broad view when considering the output of the *Asian Review*—the English-language house journal of the Kokuryūkai, a pioneer amongst Japanese nationalist associations. The Kokuryūkai managed to appeal to collaborators in Europe broadly conceived: disenchanting Irish, French, German, and other supporters, strategic and unwitting participants in the first major propaganda drive on global themes of politics, injustice, and violence. Rimner notes that no other nationalist Japanese organisation flaunted itself more effectively as a sounding board for anti-imperialist grievances outside the Japanese empire, becoming a launch pad for unabashedly political critiques of the United States as an imperialist state and society, and providing a critical view of global politics and of social malfeasance. The Kokuryūkai developed a globalist agenda of exposing American racist violence and presenting it as an enduring point of contention between America and the world at large: African-Americans within the United States, non-White peoples within and outside the Atlantic world, or simply any reader of the *Asian Review*. This globally augmented agenda was one of interpretation as well as mobilisation. Without an aggressive and encompassing change of global norms and political practices, oppression and injustice as twin aspects of violence would keep asserting themselves. Fatally, the Kokuryūkai resolved to advocate one remedy which epitomises violence as little else: war.

The representation and narrativisation of violence is a prominent theme in this publication. In her article on the play *Richard III*, Lucas explores the way in which off-stage deaths allowed violence to be reported rather than enacted before the audience. She notes that the verbalisation of off-stage violence can do what the stage cannot: it demands that the audience mentally contribute to its imaginative creation, requiring them to participate in the drama in psychologically and theatrically profound ways. And, crucially, the off-stage allows for a multiplicity of images and metaphors to proliferate in ways that are impossible physically to embody or actualise. This article demonstrates the manifold ways in which massacre can be communicated by words alone, with all the resonance and power those words can convey.

Taking up the theme of the power of words derived from the imagination of violence, Carter examines how such words, and the concepts and the force associated with them, have entered into and shaped aspects of critical theory. In his essay he makes the unlikely but suggestive juxtaposition of some of the work of Jacques Derrida and of the contemporaneous military historian and theorist B. H. Liddell Hart. In doing so, he brings out the ways in which the thinking that produced Liddell Hart's 'indirect approach' in the study of warfare, also informed Derrida's critique of structuralism, entering into the language and metaphors used in critical theory, where modes of military thought did 'significant conceptual work'. This observation opens up the larger question of the extent to which the very language and theories used to scrutinise violence within the cultural field may themselves have been shaped that which they are claiming to critique.

In her contribution Byrne argues that a discussion of the violent punishments of past (now disappplied) law assisted medieval lawgivers in asserting both the 'lawfulness' of particular laws and the legitimacy of their law-giving exercise as a whole. Describing how past rulers had used violence to curb wickedness, in ways which had been legal in their own day but which were now in need of amendment, they sought to enhance the legal authority of those who had the capacity (intellectual or political) to intervene in the process of punishment. What is also evident is that the discussions described here about the legitimacy of law, both secular and canon, linked to the violence of the punishment of offenders, are similar to those which take place in modern polities. Those discussions take in questions about whether law punishes offenders in the 'right' way, whether penology is moving in the 'right' direction, towards a better-ordered society, and whether perceived changes in criminal behaviour should be reflected in changes in legislative and sentencing responses.

In the final article, Mueller focuses on the portrayal of violence in text, specifically on incidents of interpersonal trauma and violence and the ways in which such examples are embedded in a sociological understanding of structural violence. This allows literary studies, narratology, and sociology to work together to highlight the interrelatedness of different forms of violence as well as the function of the narrative. Violence is thus described as a complete lack of freedom or the ability to abandon a violent situation, as the experience of brutality, and as traumatisation by fear. Violence is thus a multilayered phenomenon which permeates the entire situation rather than being exclusively associated with the acts of its perpetrator.

This volume is far from exhaustive. Rather, it points to the range of ways in which violence is understood, framed, imagined, and represented. Encompassing a diversity of subjects and case studies, and coming from various disciplinary backgrounds, these authors have demonstrated the many forms that violence can take, the registers that it inhabits, and the conditions, material, verbal, and imaginative that allow it to thrive.

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