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Citation for published version:

Mihai, M & Thaler, M 2019, 'Political violence and the imagination: An introduction', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, vol. 22, no. 5, pp. 497-503.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2019.1565691>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/13698230.2019.1565691](https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2019.1565691)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy on 10 June 2019, available online:
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13698230.2019.1565691>

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Published In:

Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy

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Political Violence and the Imagination: An Introduction

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This is the pre-print, pre-proofread version of a paper published as:

Mihai, Mihaela, and Mathias Thaler. "Political Violence and the Imagination: An Introduction." *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 22, no. 5 (2019): 497–503. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2019.1565691>.

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It serves as an introduction to a special issue with the following papers:

Special issue: 'Political Violence and the Imagination'

- 'Understanding complicity: Memory, hope and the imagination' by Mihaela Mihai, Politics and International Relations, University of Edinburgh, UK.
- 'The arts of refusal: Tragic unreconciliation, pariah humour, and haunting laughter' by Bronwyn Leebaw, Political Science, University of California, Riverside, US.

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- 'How America disguises its violence: colonialism, mass incarceration, and the need for resistant imagination by Shari Stone-Mediatore, Philosophy, Ohio Wesleyan University, Delaware, US.
 - 'The subversive potential of Leo Tolstoy's "defamiliarisation": A case study in drawing on the imagination to denounce violence' by Alexandre Christoyannopoulos, Politics and International Relations, Loughborough University, UK.
 - 'Our wildest imagination: Violence, narrative, and sympathetic identification' by Jade Schiff, Politics, Oberlin College, Oberlin, US.
 - 'On Representation(s): Art, violence and the political imaginary of South Africa by Eliza Garnsey, Politics and International Studies, University of Cambridge, UK.
 - 'The Art and Politics of imagination: Remembering mass violence against women' by Maria Alina Asavei, International Studies, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic.

Grappling with political violence is a complex task, involving several operations, from examining the social macro-structures within which actors engage in violence, to investigating their concrete motives as perpetrators, collaborators and bystanders. This issue focuses on the faculty of imagination and its role in facilitating our critical and political engagement with violence. It interrogates how the imagination can help address past and present instances, practices and structures of violence. Several questions guide the contributions: How does the imagination restrict or enable the ways in which we respond to political violence? What is the relationship between the individual imagination and the shared pool of meanings – the social imaginary – we tap into when we act in the world, including when we act violently? What elements in a social imaginary fuel, and what elements thwart, political violence? How can we destabilise dominant, violence-generating narratives within social imaginaries? What role do victims' testimonies play in this process? Can we envisage a role for artworks as well, and if so, what kind of artworks are suitable? How exactly can artworks foster solidarity, catalyse resistance and nurture habits of denouncing violence within a community, but also beyond its boundaries and trans-generationally?

Building on insights from political thought, social theory, history, aesthetics, literature and visual arts, this issue provides a forum for an inclusive and reflexive debate on these questions. The papers combine theoretical reflection with in-depth analysis of case studies, ranging from ideologically and economically motivated violence in Vichy France, mass incarceration in the United States, sexual violence against women in the Former Yugoslavia and Egypt, colonial violence and violence against animals.

Complicity with systemic, institutionalised violence is a central theme for all contributors. While a vast literature in political and legal philosophy offers rich conceptualisations of complicity, Mihai kick-starts the issue by arguing that we need to leave behind mainstream philosophy's methodological individualism, its time-slice approach to wrong-doing and implausible account of human agency. She proposes that the interplay between individuals' socially mediated memories, the scope of their political imagination and the intensity of their hopes and fears influence their position on a spectrum of involvement in systemic violence. Moreover, this position should be understood relationally, dynamically and temporally. Mihai's paper envisages individuals as socially embedded beings, located within a temporally and intersubjectively experienced social world, with which, in a deep sense, they are inescapably complicit. This embeddedness influences their participation in practices and patterns of complicity with political violence. An individual's positionality in the social world (at the intersection of class, gender, religion, among others) influences her horizon of expectations, her views of her own agency and the others', her memories and the memories she shares collectively through the social imaginary, the type of social relations she inhabits, her level of social trust, as well as the extent of her political imagination. Most importantly, this position changes over time, reflecting transformations in both context and the agent herself. A temporally sensitive analysis of several forms of complicity in Vichy France – ideological collaboration, working for repressive police institutions and *délation* (the systemic practice of denouncing Jews, communists, masons and other 'undesirables' to the authorities) – gives concreteness to these theoretical proposals.

Leebaw, too, is interested in complicity with violence, which she captures through the language of reconciliation in three different ways: 'reconciliation to one's role as a participant in, or bystander to abuse, reconciliation as self-abnegating assimilation, and reconciliation as compromise, scapegoating, or denial.' (p. XX) The first form of reconciliation/complicity is exemplified by Adolf Eichmann, the second by assimilationist refugees, and the third by soldiers who participate in war crimes. Like Mihai, Leebaw thinks of complicity temporally: 'If people feel that action is futile, they begin to make compromises that can grow larger over time.' (p. XX) Trying to understand why people 'become reconciled to what they should refuse or resist' (p. XX), she is particularly puzzled by the deadening of emotions, thoughtlessness and the failure of the imagination to inspire options beyond those that one is faced with. Building on Hannah Arendt's work, Leebaw reflects on how we can awaken emotional responsiveness and get the imagination moving to avoid problematic reconciliations to a violent and unjust reality. Against Eichmann's cog-like mentality, Leebaw argues that tragic accounts of resistance can combat resignation and despair, by inviting critical thinking and pushing our imagination to conjure alternative courses of action. Against those who internalise the role of the pariah in order to assimilate to the very communities that reject them, she proposes the antidote of pariah humour – Heine's and Chaplin's – which invites the affective identification with the marginalised 'little man'. While precariously successful, pariah humour exposes the absurdity of all human hierarchies and assimilationist aspirations that require the marginalised to renounce their identity just to be recognised as human and equal. Against the tendency to reconcile with the 'fact' of war atrocities – and the myths of heroism that obscure

them – Leebaw introduces anti-war veterans’ haunting testimonies of being actively trained to disregard the other’s humanity. Veterans who refuse to resign themselves to their role as participants in atrocities – ‘winter soldiers’ – thematise the meaninglessness of violence, thus destabilising social imaginaries of wartime heroism. Implicitly, they mobilise public shame and invite civilian bystanders to confront their own complicity in the reproduction of such mythologies.

Stone-Mediatore tackles the issue of complicity by investigating how a society’s imaginary – and especially its resilient narratives about various categories of human beings – sustains and reproduces systemic violence. She is particularly interested in the US’s ‘common sense’ about criminal justice and traces its similarities to the colonial imaginary, as problematised by Enrique Dussel, Anibal Quijano, and Roberto Rodriguez. Her intention is not, however, merely interpretive. Like Mihai and Leebaw, Stone-Mediatore aims to reveal how communities become insensitive to the victims of systemic violence, accept and self-righteously exalt it, thus becoming complicit with it. The link between insensitivity and complicity is central to her drawing of parallels between the colonial and the criminal justice imaginaries. Within both these frames, violence is justified as having a noble end that would justify the means. It targets an unworthy, dehumanised subject, and is applied pedagogically. While colonisers invoked ‘progress’, supporters of mass incarceration invoke ‘security’ – hollow categories with no grounding in historical or contemporary reality. Both imaginaries ‘contribute to an ensemble of institutional practices that regularise the abuse of people defined as violable subjects.’ (pp. XX) The colonised and the incarcerated are silenced and, should they dare speak, presented as threats. The coloniser’s imagination – as

much as that of the tough-on-crime politician – is stunted as no identification with the colonised or the inmates seems possible. Not all hope is lost, though, and Stone-Mediatore argues for recuperating imagination's power to help us see what we have been trained to ignore. Like Leebaw, she trusts stories' capacity to dislocate reified ideas about the other. Building on Arendt's account of world-travelling through the imagination, Stone-Mediatore argues for 'close engagement with the work of incarcerated writers and artists, reaching out through letters to incarcerated individuals, or joining practical struggles with incarcerated people or their families.' (pp. XX) By training our imagination to take the perspective of demonised inmates, we can end up productively 'destabilising the divisions between "good" and "bad" people, and between law and violence, around which many of us have oriented our lives.' (p. XX)

Stone-Mediatore's suggestion that storytelling and art produced in prisons can help those on the outside see what the world looks like from the inmates' perspective opens up the space for Christoyannopoulos's and Schiff's contributions. Both examine literature for its capacity to move complicit readers towards potentially progressive political action. Christoyannopoulos invites us to engage with one of the giants of Western literature, Leo Tolstoy, not as a novelist, but as a Christian anarcho-pacifist. Christoyannopoulos asks a pressing question: How can our imagination be engaged critically in order to come to terms and resist our own complicity with systemic violence and oppression? The answer is through 'defamiliarisation' or *ostranenie* – an artistic device meant 'to shake readers into recognising the absurdity of common justifications of violence, admitting their implicit complicity in it, and noticing the

process which numbed them into accepting such complicity' (p. XX). Theorised by Viktor Shklovsky as a tool to disturb our naturalised, automatic perceptions of social reality, defamiliarisation refuses to name the familiar by its name, breaks it down into its components and re-assembles it again, as if perceived through the eyes of a child who sees it for the first time. Tolstoy successfully deployed defamiliarisation to denounce entrenched practices of violence (flogging, deportations to Siberia, imprisonment) and their central, unquestioned place in Russia's imaginary. The social, conventional acceptance of norms that reproduce violence – the institutions of war, criminal law and conscription, or the practice of decorating military 'heroes' responsible for mass atrocities – is rendered questionable through *ostranenie*. Thus, those who, 'hypnotised by habit' (p. XX), are complicit with state-sponsored and ideologically-sanctioned violence, are encouraged to reflect on how they implicitly authorise it. Along similar lines to Leebaw's 'pariah humour', *ostranenie* can disrupt routine thinking, using laughter to prompt a recognition of routinised violence, subverting hierarchies and facilitating empathy.

Schiff is equally interested in literature's power to build solidarity through the imagination, but she aims to expand the range of beings with whom solidarity should be felt and cultivated. Motivated by the polarisation of US society in the wake of Trump's election, Schiff argues that 'there are no bounds to our capacities for sympathetic identification' (p. XX) – and that, though we may resist it, we can identify with those we share a world with, even with those we fundamentally disagree with. Through a discussion of Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, she invites us to ponder how encounters with narratives can push readers to identify with those who inflict

cruel violence on their victims. Carefully reading *Animal Farm*, she proposes that we can even identify with animals, provided we let go of our attachment to the idea of human distinctiveness and control over non-nature. Such processes of complex identification presuppose the reader's overcoming her psychological resistance to accepting her own capacity for inflicting violence. This also involves accepting what is animal-like in humans: not just our embodied fragility, but also aggressive instincts. Through these new ways of seeing ourselves, we learn something about our imbrication in institutionalised practices of violence, such as torture or factory farming. Just as Tolstoy's defamiliarisation and Heine's humour enlightens us about our complicity with systemic violence, Coetzee's and Orwell's novels illuminate how we also have, within us, the capacity for cruelty and aggressiveness. Yet, whereas for Tolstoy the public's ignorance of their own complicity in violence was a matter of automated, habituated perception, for Schiff this is a *willed* ignorance – a willed reigning in of our imagination – that renders us complicit in the very cruelty we wish to deny, lest our sense of the self be endangered. If, however, we soberly reckon with the cruelty and aggressiveness that lie in us, Schiff suggests, we might hope to attenuate them, rather than unleash their destructive power on the other of our anxieties.

While Schiff, Leebaw and Christoyannopoulos examine single-authored literary works and their capacity to trigger individual and collective processes of transformation, Asavei and Garnsey shift the focus to visual art and its role in politicising received ideas about colonial, postcolonial and war-time violence. While Garnsey follows into Schiff's, Leebaw's and Christoyannopoulos's steps by focusing

on single artists, Asavei examines the critical potential of collaborative-participatory art projects that tackle political violence.

Garnsey theories of political and aesthetic representation to bear on ethnographic work done at the Venice Biennale, where she explored how South Africa's pavilion engaged with the issue of political violence. Garnsey examines three artworks – David Koloane's *The Journey*, Sue Williamson's *For Thirty Years Next to His Heart* and Zanele Muholi's *Faces and Phases* – to show that, first, at the Biennale artistic representation is enmeshed with political representation: the artists were enlisted by the state to become its cultural ambassadors. Second, the artists' representations of violence challenged the national imaginary and its entrenched myths about the past, thus undermining the representative role the state had assigned them. Koloane's *The Journey* chronicles Steve Biko's death at the hands of the police, and was created as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was hearing his murderers' application for amnesty. While their application was rejected, Biko's murderers were never prosecuted due to lack of evidence and expired statutes of limitations. Thus, the painting 'complicates the progressive narrative of the TRC by drawing attention to its limitations.' (p. XX) In contrast to Koloane's engagement with brutal violence, Williamson's *For Thirty Years* tackles institutional violence. It depicts a *dompas* – an identity document that, during Apartheid, every black South African over 16 had to carry at all times. It contained private information including the bearer's work situation, and had to be endorsed by the employer. The *dompas* was the instrument through which the government legally enforced spatial segregation. Williamson's piece reveals and denounces violence in its structural guise – as law that regulates and restricts access to space and work – but

also as a web of complicity in which many who upheld the system of apartheid participated: the *dompas* features various administrators' and employers' signatures, not all of them in official capacity, thus highlighting the implication of large swathes of the white population in the institutionalised violence of apartheid. Muholi's *Faces and Phases* completes Garnsey's analysis by directing attention to a specific category of victims of violence: LGBTI victims of hate crime. The artwork consists of several rows of portraits, from which those of hate crime victims have been removed: 'The simultaneous presence and absence of the portraits draws attention to this violence.' (p. XX) Black queer identities are thus rendered visible through a mix of 'celebration and bereavement' (p. XX) in a way that does not relegate violence to the past of apartheid, but reveals its continuation into the present.

Asavei's article further deepens Garnsey's interest in the power of visual art to call upon the spectator's imagination to unsettle social imaginaries. However, she expands the framework of reference (the 'nation') and steers our attention to collaborative and participatory artworks that can, through a productive interplay between memory and the imagination, foster transnational, collective political memories. Asavei focuses on violence against women perpetrated during war or by repressive political regimes. This emphasis is important since women's voices tend to be silenced in the national imaginaries that frame processes of memory-making and redress. It is the 'nation', and not the various groups within and beyond it, that is usually the locus of political remembering. Violence against women often escapes the national framework – it traverses national frontiers, as Asavei's examples poignantly demonstrate. In looking at collaborative artworks, she argues that 'the focus is not on the relationship art

object-art spectator, but on a communal experience of co-authoring, which prepares the ground for a dialogue'. (p. XX) Building on Augusto Boal's ideas, Asavei argues that certain collective artistic practices can transform passive spectators into engaged 'spect-actors', who, even though they have not experienced the violence first-hand and thus are only 'post-witnesses', can nonetheless build solidarity with victims of violence across national borders. Spect-actors participate in new forms of grassroots politics through the very act of co-authoring an artwork. The use of the imagination in these artistic collaborations culturally mediates the collective memory of those who have not themselves directly witnessed the violence, helping them learn about it, but simultaneously fueling their hope for a different world without violence. Imagination hence interacts with memory in instructive ways: it assists spect-actors in acquiring knowledge about the victims' experience but also enables them to develop a hopeful vision of the future. A close reading of Alketa Xhafa-Mripa's *Thinking of You* (2015) and *The Blue Bra* (2011) substantiates Asavei's theoretical claims.

To those looking for unambiguous, clear guidelines about how political violence should be engaged with, the articles in this issue will fall short of bullet-proof solutions. As all the authors show, political violence is always underpinned by institutionalised patterns of exclusion and recalcitrant hierarchical social imaginaries, relationally embedded and emotionally anchored. We cannot put all our trust in the sheer power of testimonies, artistic encounters or co-production of artworks to dislocate all forms of collusion with cruelty and marginalisation. Moreover, we know that exposure to artworks and testimonies is not uniform, nor do people experience them in the same way. And of course, defamiliarisation, pariah humour, identification,

engagement with testimonies by perpetrators and victims, and spect-actorship will not of necessity lead to progressive action and solidarity. There is no guarantee that our proposals for kick-starting the imagination will be successful. However, they can contribute – and have historically contributed – to expanding our sense of justice to include various victimised beings, human and non-human. It is from these precedents that we take hope and learn how to cultivate political solidarity.

Acknowledgements

We warmly thank our contributors for their contributions. Some of them participated in a workshop on political violence and the imagination which we convened at the ECPR Joint Sessions 2016 in Pisa. We are grateful to all the workshop participants for the valuable discussion. Special thanks are owed to Alex Livingston, Verena Erlenbusch, Yves Winter and to the anonymous reviewers, who offered their views on the submitted papers. The ECPR workshop and this issue were supported financially by two research grants: an ERC Starting Grant (637709 GREYZONE – PI: Mihaela Mihai) and a Marie Curie Career Integration Grant (618277 JUDGEPOL – PI: Mathias Thaler). We wish to express our gratitude to the funders, and to Richard Bellamy for endorsing our idea for this special issue.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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