Violence: State Practice Editorial

Jane Tynan, Mick Wilson

It all started with a conversation on torture techniques the British colonial administration employed in Kenya in the 1950s to suppress the Mau Mau uprising. We were struck by the extent of suffering that Kenyan people had to endure under British occupation, but even more astonished by the occupying forces' efforts to hide evidence upon their retreat from this East African country. The British colonial venture in Kenya started in 1920, and subsequent restrictions on land ownership and local agricultural practices gave rise to a popular movement for land justice by members of the Kikayu tribe; without financial backing from outside Kenya, Mau Mau insurgents launched a violent campaign armed with homemade weapons. As Caroline Elkins argues, draconian measures to suppress Mau Mau transformed the colonial enterprise from "simple white supremacy, to one that was overtly eliminationist".[1] Elkins found memoranda from late colonial Kenya filled with descriptions of local people as "vermin", "animals" and "bestial", designations that seemingly normalised the creation of vast detention camps.[2] Suspects were rounded up and held in these "screening" centres where they were subjected to electric shocks, whipping, burning, shooting and mutilation, purportedly to "gather intelligence". While we exchanged thoughts on state brutality in Kenya in the 1950s, the 2021 PARSE conference agenda on the matter of violence emerged, and it seemed a useful framework within which to elaborate our basic interest in state violence as practice; how it is planned, trained for, augmented, strategised and systematically deployed through various bureaucratic, technocratic and socio-technical frameworks.

Of all the brutal techniques that Kenyans remember from this time, the practice of using pliers to squeeze women's breasts and men's testicles carried out by colonial police and the army but directed by British settlers, one of whom, Dr. Bunny, was credited with developing the sinister method in his very own screening camp was the most despised.[3] If, as news reports from the time suggest, these pliers were originally developed for castrating bulls, what were they doing in the hands of the Crown forces? "Castration pliers" were a peculiar weapon for waging a colonial war given the sophistication of British military hardware, something that surfaced in our discussions on the architecture of state violence. Why would non-military weapons appeal to the colonial imagination? Does the specific threat of insurgency undermine the surgical precision of modernity's official forms of violence? Internal military discourse in Kenya betrayed a concern with the brutalising effects on those who administered the punishments, as if these crude forms of violence were a contagion that threatened to engulf perpetrators. So what drove the routine use of crude farm tools to torture those suspected of disloyalty to the Crown? The answer might lie in the provenance of the "castration pliers", most likely made in Europe as products of industrial modernity. The tool was just one of a host of colonial commodities that reached east Africa in the twentieth century under the rubric of "free trade". Such sinister objects attract little attention in histories of design and technology, but material culture is pivotal to understanding how infrastructures of violence operate within colonialism and what the global circulation of commodities really means, then and now.

This story of colonial violence visited upon the Kenyan people in the mid-twentieth century reveals a lot about

state violence. What becomes clear is that violence rarely surfaces spontaneously, but rather is the logical outcome of technologies that are systematic and resilient. Neither should the brutality nor the crudity of weapons used by state actors divert attention from the structural character of state violence. For Michel Foucault, the normative contours of disciplinary practices constituted an ontology of power that made use of material infrastructures to shape behaviour and set the limits of useful existence.[4] However, his emphasis on non-violent forms of power, no matter how intense and oppressive, is only useful insofar as it offers insights into how relations of power are characterised by the bureaucratic assessment, regulation and control of bodies. This infrastructure anticipates or lays the groundwork for physical pain, suffering and often death. In this issue of *PARSE Journal* we are concerned with the meticulous crafting of state violence, our purpose being to highlight its operation beyond the symbolic, but we also consider why violences are routinely disavowed and projected onto the targets of violence. Efforts to create vivid images of Kenyan people as animals followed the same logic that drove the colonial administration to use farm tools to torture them. Violence has a material life and legacy, even though in Kenya it was disavowed in the most spectacular fashion. The British recklessly abandoned their established practice of meticulous record-keeping overnight when, just before their 1963 retreat, a vast amount of colonial records was deliberately and hastily destroyed. Faced with the prospect that the infrastructure of oppression might see the light of day, large bonfires destroyed such records, and along with them, what could be seen and known about the brutal violence of their colonial project.

Violence, according to Hannah Arendt, always requires the use of *implements*; instrumental to consolidating power and eliminating resistance, they are the last residual elements in any quest for power.[5] Might we then view dehumanisation as a form of work, an ongoing project given depth and texture through the design of spaces, objects and bodies? As Achille Mbembe argues, it was modernity that gave rise to multiple concepts of sovereignty the origin of Foucault's notion of the biopolitical licensing states to make claims on bodies to instrumentalise human existence.[6] As Mbembe posits, death-in-life existence was legitimated by the characterisation of the state as a "model of political unity" and "principle of rational organization" enacting war, terror and dehumanisation within a spatial organisation of splintered geographies and asymmetrical life-worlds, aligned with necropolitical modes of material-spatial-visual organisation.[7] We see vivid examples of necropower in the casual cruelty of police and military troops in disputed territories, brutally violating civilians, indifferent to cameras or threats of prosecution under international law. The state is supreme when it comes to violence. This journal issue explores violence as a technocratic process with policy, administrative, logistical, design and planning dimensions orchestrated in system building. State violence is intimately bound up with bureaucratic state operations; as David Graeber pointed out, "Police are bureaucrats with weapons".[8]

Violences are not irruptions of the irrational nor of chthonic forces but rather are the programmatic unfolding of rationalities and nurturing of brutal techniques over time. We witness news media outlets willing to disavow structures of state violence when IDF forces target civilians in Palestine, or when BLM protests in the US are disrupted by right-wing groups. It does not go unnoticed that when a mountain of evidence emerges detailing unprovoked violence, it makes no difference and certain groups continue to get a free pass. Reports of "clashes" are all too familiar; we are given to believe that violence simply "erupts" as if this is sufficient explanation for what is often orchestrated state violence against a dispossessed and disenfranchised minority. We are remarkably ignorant about how violence works. Often, it is not merely a question of what can be seen but what fits the authorised discourses and established structures of governance, which can be remarkably resilient to external pressure. Inconvenient truths are all too often discarded once it becomes clear that the image is not bound to a taken-as-given sense of reality. As Nicholas Mirzoeff has shown, "the authority of coloniality required visuality to supplement its use of force", binding what could be seen with what can be legitimately done, in the name of a seemingly self-evident reality.[9] Such authoritarian modes of visualising the geopolitical rely on an

epistemic field to reproduce classifications, objects, procedures and technologies that ultimately decide where bodies end up. For Mirzoeff, such population control is contingent on an aesthetic sustained by visualities of imperial governance and the claims they make on reality; painting counterinsurgency as non-violent and technical in character gives necropolitical separating practices the aura of normality.[10] Elsewhere though, Mirzoeff sees effective opposition in acts of persistent looking “against the prohibitions of the carceral state”, exemplified by BLM tactics that reflect a deep understanding of these material-spatial-visual operations of power.[11] Resistance is always a possibility.

This issue comprises a series of seven contributions emerging from the “State Violence as Practice” strand of the 2021 Biennial PARSE Conference on Violence (17 19 November 2021). These range from visual-textual and artistic interventions by Lisa Godson, Björn Larsson and Carl Johan Eriksson, Ola Hassanain and Jumanah Abbas, to extended articles by Lou Barzaghi, Eleni Michaelidi and Patricia Lorenzoni. Informed by the colonial state’s administration of violence as outlined above, our concern in convening this strand was to address the question of violence as a matter of practised techniques and knowledge work, as an integral part of the normal quotidian working of the state, rather than as an exception or form of state action under duress or *in extremis*. This emerges in different ways across the contributions: in the considerations of spatial production in Barzaghi’s description of the process of borderisation within the urban reform of Medellín and in Hassanain’s description of space as political discourse and the resistant spatial practices of the tea sellers of Khartoum. It is also more subtly apparent in Lorenzoni’s “Nine Fragments on The Art of Reading Asylum Documents” and in Larsson and Eriksson’s artistic response to the medical age assessment practice in asylum cases by the Swedish Board of Forensic Medicine. The police complicity in the assault on a young queer artist and activist, ZackiO, described by Michaelidi, and the national mass media’s normalisation of this murderous violence, discloses a public lynching as extrajudicial but *not* as external to the state. Godson’s contribution on the material history of the vaginal speculum tracks the juridico-medical policing and production of the female body as an object of power-knowledge In the Shadow of the State.[12]

Lorenzoni’s performative writing mixes theory and fiction to reflect on the cruelties of the Swedish asylum system. By highlighting the systematic production of indifference in asylum documents, the author shows violence being enacted on the level of language, a technocratic process with administrative power and logistical certainty. Neutral and lifeless words constitute practices of indifference to the pain of others, but Lorenzoni breathes new life into them, interpreting contradictions and silences as spaces of possibility, undermining the instrumental role of asylum documents in the dehumanizing process. For Larsson and Erikson, public documents, too, form the basis of their film on medical age assessment undertaken by the Swedish Migration Agency, whereby young people seeking asylum in Sweden who cannot prove their age with identity documents undergo a dental X-ray and magnetic camera examination of the knee, to determine age and thereby asylum status. Here, the workings of state power and the exercise of authority are shown in a new light. A limited part of the Swedish state bureaucracy is viewed through the production of an information film, *En film om medicinsk åldersbedömning*, that illustrates contemporary ideas about rationality and the legacy of physical anthropology as a science in Sweden, with roots in the early twentieth century.

Michaelidi explores artistic responses to the murder of Zak Kostopoulos in 2018 as a body of work that acts as a critical tool in queer politics. Such artistic responses to violence make visible what is hidden, the potential to counter the violence systematically visited upon the LG—T—Q+ community through personal and political acts. State structures might designate bodies that hold value and marginalise and violate those deemed to be excess, but in the work that Michaelidi examines, state violences are given sharp critique. Identifying points of convergence in how these artworks engage with and empower individuals and communities affected by

systemic state violence, we witness shared experience and civil practices affirming the collective desire to reclaim safe space and foster cultures of acceptance.

Through the interaction of script and image, derived from primary research into biographical, medical, political and commercial sources, Godson unfolds a series of scenes from the development, design and use of a specific medical instrument the vaginal speculum and the historical vicissitudes of the state's attempt to regulate the female body. Hassanain in turn provides a spatial-critical reading of the state ban against the Women's Food and Tea Sellers' Cooperative operating in public spaces in Khartoum whereby the tea ladies in the street in the open-air are seen to generate a resistant spatial practice operating outside the terms of formal architecture and summoning state repression. Barzaghi elaborates on the "borderisation" of urban space in the neoliberal reform of Medellín and describes a shift in the terms of diffuse systems of necropower that re-distribute violence in ways obscured by the overarching narrative of the containment and reduction of violence. Abbas contributes a hybrid visual narrative that is part of a larger undertaking to collectively document the Jawlani's resistance to the Israeli occupation in the Golan heights. The symbolic and practical actions of the Jawlani communities in resisting their inscription into the Israeli state speaks simultaneously to the state practice of violence working on both sides of the border of inclusion/exclusion.

The material assembled here is of a nature that is often termed "difficult" in the sense that it concerns the kind of punctal murderous violence that appears to kill with impunity whether on the streets of Athens, Greece, or of Medellín, Colombia as well as the slow durational and systemic violences of state apparatuses that are simultaneously corporeal and symbolic. Placed under this second heading are the extended processual violences evident in the contemporary asylum vetting practices; the invasive medico-juridical examination of women's bodies in public health policing, the state production and policing of space, and the perpetual violence of occupation and the erasure of the Arab Jawlani identity in the Syrian Golan Heights occupied by Israel.[13] Writing and speaking about such violence is typically understood as difficult. We insist that this "difficulty" must be seen as ideological, given the relative ease with which such violence is so broadly distributed and reproduced as a condition of our societal existence unequally distributed, but nonetheless pervasive.

This contrast of punctal and systemic violence is not proposed as a dichotomy, but simply as a heuristic device that tries to crack open the ways in which violence may be habitually represented as exceptional and simultaneously produced as the quotidian normal. The intensity of punctal violence often serves as a paradigmatic representational trope of violence as spontaneous disorder the irruption of unreason. It also affords a seemingly easy distinction between those who are legible as the specific agents and objects of violence and those who are recognisable as witnesses, onlookers and non-agents. The attribution of agency with respect to forms of dispersed, durational and systemic violence may often seem less clear, and so we often revert to the uneasy grammar of "society is responsible", "the state is responsible" and other invocations of distributed and abstracted agency and responsibility.

However, our point of departure in framing this theme of state violence as practice was not so much a matter of pursuing an ethical critique of the agency of the state as perpetrator of violence, but rather an effort to posit a different grammar of relation with respect to the state and its violence. Our turn to state violence as practice was an attempt to consider the physical force that is specific and intrinsic to the state, not as a matter of the conceptual niceties of political theology or theories of sovereignty and exception.[14] Our intention was to approach the state as an ensemble of approaches within which techniques of violence are integral without seeking to claim that the state can be exhaustively specified as practice.[15]

This insistence on seeing violence as integral to the ensemble of practices and techniques that constitutes the state, seemed necessary to counter a recurrent tendency to posit violence as intrinsically a matter of spontaneous unreason and a fundamental lapse from discursivity, as a matter of “disorder” and “meaninglessness”. Our sense was that the automatic reflex within Western liberalism to disavow violence as a kind of unwelcome excess or rupture and only accord it legitimacy as a response *in extremis* by constituted authority, is effectively a widely adopted form of unthinking that obscures the daily banality of well-crafted and generative violence.[16] This disavowal operates as an ideological screen; on the one hand, it seems fundamental to disabling analysis of the relentless reproduction, asymmetrical distribution and normalisation of vast oceans of quotidian violence. On the other hand, it seems to effect a fundamental misdirection as to how violence should be constructed as a matter of enquiry, specifically as a matter of ethical enquiry. In prefacing their plenary intervention at the 2021 conference, Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh, Denise Ferreira Da Silva and Doreen Mende expressed a wish “to problematise violence as an inextricable condition from which there is neither an escape nor an excuse nor an apology”. It is in the hope of contributing something to that problematic that we present this final fifth instalment of the *PARSE Journal* issue on Violence.

Footnotes

1. Elkins, Caroline. *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya*. New York: Holt & Co. 2005. p. 73.
2. Ibid., pp. 73–74.
3. Ibid., p. 95.
4. Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: Penguin. 1977.
5. Arendt, Hannah. “Reflections on Violence”. *Journal of International Affairs*. vol. 23. no.1. 1969. p. 1.
6. Mbembe, Achille. “Necropolitics”. *Public Culture*. vol. 15. no. 1. 2003. pp. 13–14.
7. Ibid., pp. 24–28.
8. Graeber, David. *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*. New York: Melville House. 2015. p. 73.
9. Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Durham, NC: Duke University

Press. 2011. p. 6.

10. Ibid., p. 302.

11. Mirzoeff, Nicholas. “Tactics of Appearance for Abolition Democracy #BlackLivesMatter”. *Critical Inquiry*. 2018. Available at https://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/tactics_of_appearance/ (accessed 2024-08-27).

12. Godson’s text builds upon a reworked script produced in the wider context of a collaborative artistic project by the artists Jesse Jones and Sarah Browne at the 2016 Liverpool Biennale, titled In the Shadow of the State.

13. United Nations, “Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 7 December 2023”. 11 December 2023. Available at https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4030267?ln=en&v=pdf (accessed 2024-08-27).

14. The concept of the state as rooted in the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence was first presented by Max Weber in 1918 as part of a lecture at Munich University given at the request of the student union, first published in 1919 as Politic als Beruf: “Ultimately, one can define the modern state sociologically only in terms of the specific means peculiar to it, as to every political association, namely, the use of physical force… Today the relation between the state and violence is an especially intimate one. In the past, the most varied institutions—beginning with the sib—have known the use of physical force as quite normal… Today, however, we have to say that a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.” Weber, Max. “Politics as Vocation” [1919]. In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Ed. Hans Heinrich Gerth and Charles Wright Mills. New York: Oxford University Press. 1946. pp. 77–128.

15. For an example of an approach to the state “as a differentiated cultural practice composed of all kinds of contingent and shifting beliefs and actions, where these beliefs and actions can be explained through a historical understanding” employing a “set of aggregate concepts appropriate to historical studies of the state: situated agency, practice, power, narrative, tradition and dilemma” see Bevir, Mark and Rhodes, R.A.W. *The State as Cultural Practice.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2010.

16. As Arshad Isakjee et al. remark in their 2020 article “Liberal Violence and the Racial Borders of the European Union”: “If liberal societies would like to see themselves as peaceful and fair, then the presence of violence must be disguised, displaced or rendered just.” Isakjee, Arshad et al. *Antipode.* vol. 52. no. 6. 2020. pp. 1751–1773. https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12670.