

## **Introduction: the Authoritarianism-Political Violence Nexus\***

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Violence and democracy are not given social phenomena. They are contested, ever changing concepts. In a recent and polemic statement, David Cameron, leader of the United Kingdom's Conservative Party and current prime-minister, declared Jeremy Corbyn a "threat to national security" (Jones 2015). Cameron did not refer to a convicted criminal, the leader of a terrorist group or an invader from outer space with a rather Anglicized name. The prime-minister was talking about the recently elected leader of the Labour Party, the second largest political force in the British parliament. For Cameron, Corbyn's electoral success signaled the opposition party had become "a threat to our national security, our economic security and your family's security" (Ibid). Such remarks, as expected, spurred reactions across the political spectrum. From members of the Parliament to comedians, many questioned, and ridiculed, the harsh approach of the prime-minister (Gunter 2015). A vivid, interesting response came from the Russian embassy in the United Kingdom: "Just imagine UK media headlines if Russian President called a leading opposition party threat to national security?"(Russian Embassy UK 2015). The affair is not only an example of the sassy usage of social media by politicians, but incidentally sheds light on the contentious grounds surrounding the concepts of violence and democracy. Cameron's remark invites a reflection on how everyday political practices, even those we accept as inherently democratic, can conceal expressions of violence.

According to traditional political thought, democracy is a political regime in which the use of violence is or should be precluded or taken to the lowest possible level. The Weberian definition (Swedbergh 2005) of the democratic state places violence as, at most, a possible backdrop to be avoided. For Williams (2010), theories of liberal democracy presuppose the non-convertibility of uncontrolled violence in institutions of representative rule or direct participation. Assuming a postconflictual ethos "the logos of democracy has been ushered in, despite the realities of its historical record, as the very antithesis to state violence" (Ibid: 92). In this sense, liberal democratic institutions, in tandem with the rule of law, should be efficient

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enough to accommodate and solve disputes before their physical settlement (Cunningham 2002).

The idea of democracy as non-violent form of political organization has significantly influenced the state of international politics in the post 1989 world. With the demise of the Cold War in the global north, and the reckoning with the Dirty Wars in the global south, the non-convertibility of violent practices in democratic institutions became the major tenet conveying the possibility of international peace. This liberal, democratic peace (Richmond 2006; Richmond and Mac Ginty 2014) presented the cornerstone supporting and endorsing the search for justice and reconciliation in the wake of conflict (Nagy 2008), the quest to enforce human rights standards across the globe (Evans 2005) and the project of humanitarian peacebuilding (Andrieu 2010).

In that sense, the United Kingdom is regarded as a beacon of democratic institutions and behavior. As a symbol of liberal peace, Britain is envisioned by its intelligentsia as spearheading the humanitarian, global fight against the enemies of mankind. This conflation is not a mere coincidence. Instead of merely incorporating democratic values and goals, the British political and legal arrangements helped cement the modern notion of democracy. The 'Westminster Model', coined by Lijphart (1999), describes the characteristics of the British political system and uses it as a basis for comparison regarding other democratic regimes. Of course, Lijphart's traditionally accepted equation between democratic tolerance, peaceful settlement of disputes and "Britishness" is a strongly political gesture.

In rendering the United Kingdom, or the larger West, as it were, as the beacon of democratic values, traditional liberal thought creates a double myth that operates a double exclusion (Campbell 1992). First, it produces a process of othering that relegates inhumanity – the source of "evil", violence and violations of rights – in the idea of the non-west. In the example aforementioned, the role of the evil other, the rogue state part is occupied by Russia, the inherently violent and uncivilized bear. This image ignores the variations of the Russian political scene, identifying as equals moments such as the neoliberal experiment of the Yeltsin years and the increasingly authoritarian Putin presidency. In accordance with this external exclusion, the failures of the democratic arrangement spurred the rise of yet another category, the "illiberal democracy": a structure of respect to the formal democratic procedures, as regular and periodic elections, but disregard to institutional and legal aspects (Zakaria 1997). Now, discursively, the idea of illiberal democracies serves a very particular function, related to a second form of exclusion. By identifying the non-west with illiberalism and authoritarianism traditional liberal thought, and more specifically the liberal peace thesis, raise protective boundaries surrounding the very idea of democratic, non-violent rule. At the same time the spotlights of the international community are turned to authoritarian dictatorships and illiberal democracies, a shadow is cast upon the violence that is perpetrated within western democratic societies, every day. In circumscribing political violence to the outskirts of the

western world, liberal thought blindfolds analysts and practitioners to forms of violence constitutive of the democratic project; modes of suffering that are never deemed “political”.

Along this vein, the liberal, humanitarian developments of the past decades show paramount political importance, in a rather contentious way. Immersed in a postconflictual ethos, transitional justice initiatives, processes of re-democratization and humanitarian interventions exhibited an interesting feature. They protected the general idea of democracy as a peaceful, political arrangement from its constant and irrefutable failures. They did so by representing the widespread use of violence by non-state groups (the breaking out of civil wars, terrorist attacks and other explosive instances of violence) as a failure of particular governmental institutions. This, consequently, frames political violence as the result of failure attempts to implement democratic rule, rather than a failure of the liberal, democratic project itself. In global rankings of failed states, western democracies still figure as the most efficient forms of political organization. They are well above their authoritarian nemesis – states of exception where violence is a constant feature of the social realm – and also political entities incapable of ensuring the due rule of law and the monopoly of the so-called legitimate violence (The Fund for Peace 2015).

Back to our introductory anecdote. The contrast between democratic recognition of the two countries’ political systems has not prevented a Russian official from making a refined, ironic observation about this hypocritical double myth, and its correlate double exclusion. We could see the reply as a mere diplomatic glove slapping, funny but politically irrelevant, or maybe hypocritical in itself. Or we could go beyond that, analyzing the whole episode as disclosing the many possibilities in which the opposition between democratic rule and a specific form of violence is withheld. By associating a political opponent to a security threat to the nation, David Cameron established a whole chain of signification which point, at the limit, to the necessity of excluding Jeremy Corbyn from the political scenario. As a menace to British society, Corbyn must be handled as befits menacing individuals; his actions must be contained, his words must be policed and ultimately his figure must be ousted from politics. In other words, the statement by the prime-minister is, *ultima ratio*, the vocalization of a desire to deny Corbyn the possibility of participation in the democratic game: an authoritarian wish, as it were. The observation made by the Russian embassy is the Hegelian – to present something that is natural, but no familiar - de-naturalizing of an authoritarian practice that underlies the seemingly democratic routine. If we, as analysts, disregard the episode as mere rhetoric, we fall back into a traditional obliviousness to the exclusion at the core of democratic rule. If, on the other hand, we take it seriously, it destabilizes the common sense associations between democracy/peace and authoritarianism/violence. All it takes is to re-signify the concept of violence – assuming that it might happen where it is least expect – and to question the unquestionable equation between liberal democracy and a *postconflictual ethos*. The latter is the task that fuels this special edition of the *Political Perspectives*.

In “Authoritarianism of the Everyday: Identity and Power in Public Space”, Trenbath (2015) develops an exquisite case analysis. The debate on the construction of a net around Hale Barns, proposed on the grounds of its symbolic importance to the local Jewish community, becomes the starting point to the dismantling of the democratic rhetoric of multicultural tolerance. Rooted in the poststructuralist tradition, the work unveils the authoritarian practices in the everyday routines of democratic deliberations, bringing to the fore how a majoritarian identity and its adherents reject as illegitimate groups perceived as *the other*. The focus on a contemporary issue establishes a dialogue with urgent questions that the European academia, political decision-makers and the public in general will need to face as soon as possible, considering the major changes in habits and self-perceptions brought by the current wave of immigrants from the Middle East and Northern Africa.

Leong (2015) approaches central concepts of the critical in “Divine violence and reparative justice: the spheres of radical democracy” in order to assess how the notion of political violence can be placed in the grammar of the authoritarianism/democracy relations. Covering modern classics of the Frankfurt School and state of the art authors, the work sheds a necessary light on subjects as the difference between the modes of violence and justice which can and must be used to counter the authoritarian rule. The debate does not limit itself to contemporary themes, but is provoked by the context of political polarization, whose causes can be imputed to many factors, from the acceleration of the speed of digital communication to the aforementioned limits of the liberal worldview and democratic governance.

Finally, Pimenta (2015) problematized the assumptions of democratic peace research in relation to the weary, longstanding trope of South American peacefulness. “The third margin of the river: International Relations narratives and authoritarian violence in South America” looks into contemporary politics in the region in order to reveal stark contradictions in the discipline of IR. Pimenta shows, contra democratic peace theorists, how South America was “pacified” throughout the 1970s via the systematic use of intra-state violence. He explains the absence of inter-state conflict not as a sign regional peace – as usually accepted in the field – but as an expression of the volatile socio-political cleavages guiding modern warfare. His paper recalls the pivotal role played by Operation Condor (a secret counter-terrorist network) in the fight against the international communist movement (ICM) during the Cold War. If South American, authoritarian regimes were in peace with each other, it is because they were jointing fighting a common enemy. His provocative remarks invite a serious reflection on the focus displayed by IR theorists on interstate violence.

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