

*Introduction*  
*Violence and peacemaking in early modern Europe: a comparative perspective*

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The attempt to understand and come to terms with the problem of violence has always been integral to political thinking and philosophical enquiry in the West. Whether it concerned interpersonal violence, collective violence or inter-state relations, investigating the phenomenon necessitated asking fundamental questions and formulating answers about the most basic forms of human social organisation, such as the problem of civil living together, the nature of political sovereignty and the power and role of the state. Until the remarkable reformulation of thinking that occurred in the wake of the work of Hannah Arendt in the 1970s, which for the first time uncoupled the problem of violence from the state, violence was not marked out as an autonomous field of enquiry from the conceptualization of the state (Arendt, 1970). Before then, thinking about violence was underpinned by two theoretical assumptions: that state-building was predicated on the monopoly of violence (Max Weber) and that the taming of violence was the essence of civilization, or what is otherwise called the civilizing process (Norbert Elias). The early modern period was also one of radical departure. The natural law theorists were deeply concerned with the problem of violence; building upon the ideas first proposed by Montaigne, they argued for an ethics predicated on self-mastery and personal improvement. The new code of manners which was developed in the triangle formed by the commercial centres of London, Paris and Amsterdam at the end of seventeenth century went on to conquer the rest of aristocratic Europe in the next century.

It is only in the last generation that faith in the transformative and beneficent effects of political violence, the cornerstone of revolutionary ideology from the French Revolution, has faded in the West. For a large part of the twentieth century ideologically driven violence was seen as essential to achieving social and political change and was therefore given a positive valence, either on the political left or on the right. Despite the ascendancy of revisionist history, which sees all revolutionary violence as quasi-religious and inexorably leading to terror, it is still possible to argue that political and revolutionary violence has a coherent logic (Mayer, 2000). The post-war social history pioneered by left-leaning historians, which aimed to rescue 'history from below', had a particular interest and fascination in riots, unrest and popular resistance (Benigno, 2013: 115-139). But what of violence which is the product of more mundane enmity? The story of feud and 'vendetta' was much harder to fit into the story of human progress, or resistance to the social order. Interpersonal, as opposed to social unrest or political violence, always attracted less attentions from historians and thinkers, and this was largely due to the residual belief that violence was the inverse of civility, that violence was a passion that required taming and overcoming and that feuding was characteristic of societies with a weak state (Carroll, 2007). It has been, until recently, generally accepted that the primary function of the state was to discipline violence and that, as well as contributing to the public good, this necessarily improved social harmony and civil living together. For these reasons the story of interpersonal violence

was essentially the story of the state repression of criminality.

What this analysis failed to take into account was that the state was a great cause of the violence in the first place. Neglect of this truism is all the more puzzling given the history of the totalitarian state in the twentieth century. The role of the state in promoting violence is especially evident during the early modern period: the invasive nature of absolutist regimes with their insatiable fiscal demands caused widespread unrest and aggravated social tensions. The commonly held idea that homicide rates fell uniformly and consistently in the early modern period is misleading, because the statistics hide the extreme levels of violence caused by civil war. In France, during the Wars of Religion (1562-1598) and Germany during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) population loss may have been as much as 20% and 30% respectively. Recent history reminds us of the ways in which civil war transforms the social environment: «For the many people who are not naturally blood-thirsty, civil war offers irresistible opportunities to harm everyday enemies» (Kalyvas, 2006: 389). Rather than a steady and gradual decline homicide rates soared and then fell sharply during the early modern period. Across Europe, rates increased from the middle of the sixteenth century, peaking in the decades around 1600. This was followed by a very steep decline in the second half of the seventeenth. In England rates doubled or tripled between late 1570s and early 1620s and did not return to mid sixteenth century levels until last decade of seventeenth (Roth, 2009: 28).

This chronology raises the question as to why Europe emerged so rapidly in the second-half of the seventeenth-century from a previous half century of noble revolt, popular insurrection and civil war? It was not due to state repression. In recent years our understanding of the early modern legal system has undergone a 'Copernician Revolution', which had revealed the pervasive tolerance of interpersonal violence (Broggio - Paoli, 2011; Bellabarba, 2008). The ubiquity of pardons and the encouragement of arbitration were underpinned by the spread of Roman Law and its principle that crimes of blood could be satisfied by a monetary compensation. Even the more punitive English Common Law – which was responsible for 75,000 executions in the period 1570-1630 – overwhelmingly targeted thieves, who accounted for 87% of the victims. «All the textbooks report that Louis XIV subjugated the aristocracy by luring them to Versailles and tantalizing them with the status shorn of power, while transferring their authority to bureaucratic agents. But could such deep-seated dissatisfaction really have turned so rapidly to placid indifference? And what about all the aristocrats out in the provinces?» (Beik, 1985: 3).

One solution to the conundrum was offered by John Bossy in his postscript to the seminal collection, *Disputes and Settlements*, which appeared in 1983. He proposed learning from anthropology and writing «a social history which would be a history of actual people; a feeling that the record of law and especially litigation was a good place to find something about them; some experience in the history of social institutions of Christianity considered as peace-making rituals, and a wish to pursue the subject of arbitration and peace-making as an important matter in itself; and an interest in the theory of marriage represented in *Romeo and Juliet*» (Bossy, 1983: 287). The growth in our understanding of how pre-modern people consumed and accessed the law amounts to one of the greatest advances in historical understanding of recent years and is enabling us to rethink the nature of civil society and the basis of state legitimacy. While they resented the state's fiscal exactions, ordinary people craved justice and welcomed outsiders who settle their disputes and curb the excesses of rapacious local lords. Italy plays a particularly important role in this emerging narrative (Carroll, forthcoming). Early modern Italy experienced much higher rates of violence than elsewhere in Europe. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the homicide rates in the peninsula was consistently six or seven times higher than the rate in England. But all the evidence suggests that Italian states developed sophisticated mechanisms of social control. As Manuel Eisner has pointed out, «whatever the deficiencies of early modern Italian states may have been they were certainly not characterized by a lesser overall level of state bureaucracy and judicial control than, for example, states in England or Sweden during the same period» (Eisner, 2003: 128). Moreover, the inhabitants of Italian Renaissance cities were exposed to levels of social and economic interdependency far in advance of anything comparable in the North.

The traditional story of the rise of the state and its repression of the feud and 'vendetta' is now being rewritten. This was not the product of the absolutism. In the middle ages aristocratic violence was tempered by the code of chivalry and the laws of war and cities developed sophisticated mechanisms of social control, which were embodied in civic ritual. This is not to deny the significant changes wrought by the sixteenth century in the field of jurisprudence, public law, ethics and theology that impacted on traditional conceptions of revenge (Broggio, 2015b). However, to consider the history of interpersonal violence as a progressive banishment of vindictory violence in the face of an increasingly punitive and proactive criminal legal system is to ignore the work of the 'new political history', which highlights the continuing utility of violence for the social elite in pursuing its political and economic interests. This is particularly evident in recent work on France and Italy. One of the strongest features of the early modern political system across most of Europe was the blurring between the public and the private sphere. In Italy, in particular, the power of factions, kin-groupings and patron-client networks did not come at the expense of the state, but were intrinsic to state-building itself. Political history has ceased to be a story of the state and its apparatus and has become instead a more fully realised picture of a political culture in which the organs of the state are studied within the context of the law, the relations of power between centre and periphery, the structures of kinship and clientage, factional conflict, political idioms, access to and control of office, and the power of and control over the sacred (Chittolini - Molho - Schiera, 1994; Povolo, 1997; De Benedictis, 2001; Benigno, 2013: 141-184; Cantù, 2009; Gamberini - Petralia, 2007).

These advances in our understanding of how the modern state emerged have also enabled a more nuanced comparison with medieval developments. In fact, the tendency to study vindictory violence and the feud exclusively from the perspective of the public sphere and the state has not been confined to early modernists. As Andrea Zorzi has underlined, the debate about the endemic violence which characterized much of the history of Italy in the communal period was shaped by the excessive, if not indeed exclusive, attention paid by historians to the public dimensions of politics and the law. This was because the communes were seen essentially as incubators of the modern state, which was part of natural progression to the absolutist state of the seventeenth century and the nation state of the nineteenth century. Zorzi focuses attention on another development which has important lessons and implications for later periods. Alongside the endemic violence, there developed a simultaneous discourse in the public sphere, which was promoted by the emergent urban citizenry and mercantile elite, that sought to undermine enemies by attacking their legitimacy (Zorzi, 2009). During this period new forms of political and legal thought and moral philosophy were developed, which were transmitted by the Catholic Church in particular through iconography and preaching. It is possible to observe during these years of turmoil a renewal of the ideological underpinnings of what Aquinas and the other medieval disciples of Aristotle termed 'civil society', the essential ingredients of which were peace, justice, friendship, concord, the public good and social order. The followers of Aristotle learned the positive aspects of revenge: in contrast to sinful anger, revenge was the product of just *risentimento* (Broggio, 2015a; Broggio, 2015b). Since revenge was based on reason, it was preferable to arbitrate the matter and possible to find an alternative means of satisfaction to compensate for the offence. In Roman Law satisfaction meant to do enough to prevent an angry party from taking vengeance. The 1215 Lateran Council established that satisfaction was the means to content an injury, but that it should be done to God and not to a neighbour. This resulted in a penance that was a modest or token offering of prayers, alms or deeds which compensated the pain. The late medieval economy of confession and penance proved a highly effective means of promoting the peace in the feud (Bossy, 1975). It would be swept away by the Reformers who would have no truck with satisfaction, since the crucifixion was sufficient satisfaction for all our sins. The Reformation was to have major impact on what Bossy calls the 'moral tradition' (Bossy, 1998).

These new approaches to peace and violence in medieval and early modern Europe were the inspiration for two panels that we organized at the 2015 annual meeting of the Renaissance Society of America in Berlin. We wanted to bring together

scholars across Europe in a bid to promote dialogue and comparison across Europe and across the early modern period, broadly defined. The essays reveal the possibilities for rethinking social relations, the use of the law by contending parties and the nature and limits of state power through the lens of vindictory violence. One great benefit of these essays is to demonstrate the richness of still unexploited archives for doing so. Although the essays contained here reveal a diversity of approaches, they draw attention to the widespread practice of vengeance across Europe well into the early modern period and the possibilities of and potential for serious comparison between different states and regions across Europe.

Much of the thinking contained in these essays was inspired by John Bossy. He died on 23 October 2015, as we were writing this introduction. John taught us to look beyond institutions and study real people: «Human relations are one of the main things Christianity is about and any Christian notion of the world will include a notion about the state of human relations in it» (Bossy, 1989: 185). This meant taking the stories that people told seriously. John taught the feud to his undergraduate students not through law codes and court cases but by getting them to read Manzoni's *Promessi Sposi*. All too often, revenge has been seen as a stereotypically Italian phenomenon. John reminded us that the story of *Romeo and Juliet* is a universal one.

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Taking inspiration from the two panels organized on the occasion of the 2015 annual meeting of the Renaissance Society of America in Berlin, the Editorial Board of *Krypton. Identità, potere, rappresentazioni* decided to launch a Call for Papers on the topic 'Violence'. In compliance with the multidisciplinary approach characterizing the journal, many contributions, belonging to different fields of research, were submitted. Published in the second section of this double issue, the essays give us an idea of how violence is a major topic in both human and social studies and show how the heuristic categories used by scholars in order to interpret this universal phenomenon change significantly across time and space. In particular, the fact that a great number of contributions are focused on literary, linguistic, symbolic and performative aspects of violence demonstrates that 'narration', conceived as a process of construction of violence itself, is what scholars mainly take into consideration for a thorough understanding of human relations.

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