The Eclipse

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'It is the only democracy in the Middle East'—this is a standard refrain about Israel.[1] Some stand by it; others refute it. Many argue that Benjamin Netanyahu has been eroding democratic values in Israel over the last decade; others insist that so-called Israeli democracy is premised on the oppression and killing of Palestinians, which thus undermines the universalist principles of liberal democracy. While many disagree on Israel's democratic credentials, what underpins these debates is an implicit understanding of democracy as an inherently pacifying political and social system, one that has 'if not banished brutality and physical violence, then [it has] at least brought them under control'.[2] Violence is not necessarily external to democracy, but something that democratic societies have learned to manage through a variety of political, social, and legal institutions.

Of course, such an assumption is only true if we pay no attention to the history of democracy, and paying no attention—or perhaps selective attention—to history seems to be in vogue today. For the postcolonial theorist

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2 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 16.

Achille Mbembe, this pacifying vision represents democracy's 'solar body', the one that sees the light of day, the one that we most often invoke in debates such as those around Israel's democratic status.[3] In fact, even if we accept that war punctuates movements towards democracy, there is the assumption that once democracy has been reached, history bends toward justice through largely non-violent means.

But the solar body conceals a history that is lodged in '*the nocturnal body*' of democracy, a body that has grown out of the 'plantation and the penal colony'.[4] As Mbembe puts it, 'the brutality of democracies has simply been swept under the carpet. From their origins, modern democracies have always evinced their tolerance for a certain political violence, including illegal forms of it'.[5] Further, '[t]o dissimulate the contingency of its foundations and the violence constituting its hidden aspects, modern democracy needed at its inception to envelop itself in a quasi-mythological structure'.[6] Even if we are to ask, for instance, 'what kind of democracy kills children?'—to quote a 2021 *Jacobin* headline on Israel—we are infusing democracy with a 'quasi-mythological' aura, as if it is democracy itself that protects against violence. But democracies have been killing children for decades, sometimes directly through military violence, sometimes indirectly through enforced famines and the like.[7] Israel is not a unique case; it is a pariah amongst a host of pariahs.

The ongoing practice of settler colonialism, especially when intermingled with surveillance technologies and ever more sophisticated death machines, only further problematises the relationship between democracy and violence. As Mbembe insists, colonial wars 'give rise to

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3 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 22.

4 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 22; original emphasis.

5 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 16–17.

6 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 23.

7 Nick Turse, 'For a Century, the American Way of War has Meant Killing Civilians', *The Intercept*, 12 November 2023.

a violence that obeys no rule of proportionality'.[8] Thus, contrary to the solar body of democracy, which disguises the violence of such wars, or makes such wars appear as proportionate and just, '[d]emocracy bears the colony within it, just as colonialism bears democracy, often in the guise of a mask'.[9] Violence is the *flesh* that intertwines democracy and colonialism.

But the solar body cannot hide its nocturnal sibling forever. Eventually, this 'violence, latent on the interior and exteriorised in the colonies and other third places, suddenly resurfaces, and then threatens the idea that the political order was created out of itself (instituted once and once and for all) and had more or less managed to pass itself off as common sense'.[10] What happens in these moments is a version of what Aimé Césaire called the 'boomerang effect', where the brutal history of the exterior returns to the present of the interior, and violence returns to its origin.[11] In these moments, the nocturnal body of democracy *eclipses* its solar body. To quote Césaire: 'One fine day the bourgeoisie is awakened by a terrific boomerang effect: the gestapos are busy, the prisons fill up, the torturers standing around the racks invent, refine, discuss'.[12] The violence that had been exported to the peripheries, to the colonies, to the nocturnal body, is suddenly right there at the heart of the democratic state. And the solar body, since it is committed to its own pretensions of civilisation, is somehow surprised when those it has violently oppressed respond with similar violence.

This eclipse could, and should, precipitate a reckoning with the history of violence that undergirds liberal democracies. But it usually

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8 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 25. Lara Montesinos Coleman critiques Mbembe's position here, arguing that, historically, colonial war took place within existing legal structures and was often aided and abetted by these structures; *Struggles for the Human: Violent Legality and the Politics of Rights* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024), 7.

9 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 27.

10 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 27.

11 Aimé Cesairé, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000); The boomerang metaphor is also a central theme in Kojo Karam's recent book, *Uncommon Wealth: Britain and the Aftermath of Empire* (London: John Murray, 2022).

12 Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 36.

engenders a reflexive, blood-thirsty will to revenge, to annihilate, to massacre. Judith Butler made this point in discussing the US response to 9/11, in which the exposure to vulnerability, precipitated by the violence of the attacks, led the US 'to produce itself as impermeable, to define itself as protected permanently against incursion and as radically invulnerable to attack'.[13] And in pursuit of an invulnerability that is ultimately impossible, widespread massacre becomes the dominant mode of war because only utter and irrevocable annihilation of the Other can get close to producing the impermeability desired on the part of the revenging subject.[14] Mbembe notes that '[i]t is the death of the Other, the Other's physical presence as a corpse, that makes the survivor feel unique. And each enemy killed makes the survivor feel more secure'.[15] But such security is only ever a chimera because behind every supposed enemy killed lies the possibility of another. Absolute security requires the absolute death of the Other.

If the act of violence reveals the nocturnal body, if it brings into view the violent history of democracy, then the response to such violence also seeks to annihilate this history, to make the act of violence a temporal *tabula rasa*. Butler writes, in the context of 9/11: 'In order to condemn these acts as inexcusable, absolutely wrong, in order to sustain the affective structure in which we are, on the one hand, victimised and, on the other, engaged in a righteous cause of rooting out terror, we have to begin the story with the experience of violence we suffered'.[16] The act of violence engenders a desire not only for revenge but also for *de-historicisation*, to rip the act of violence from its historical foundations, to de-contextualise it, and to render it completely unthinkable.

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13 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009) , 47.

14 For more on (in)vulnerability in this context, see Simone Drichel, 'Towards a 'Radical Acceptance of Vulnerability': Postcolonialism and Deconstruction', *SubStance* 42, no. 3 (2013): 46–66; Neil Vallelly, 'The Relationality of Disappearance', *Angelaki* 24, no. 3 (2019): 38–52.

15 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 88.

16 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: New York, 2004), 6.

The violence enacted on behalf of democracy is conceived very differently to the one enacted against it. The democratic state is 'able to render [its] own destructiveness *righteous* and its own destructibility *unthinkable*'.[17] You only have to listen to Christopher Luxon say that he wants to see 'proportionate, controlled, targeted and precise action from Israel' to see how liberal democracies legitimise Israel's right to inflict violence on Palestinians as necessary, just, and legitimate.[18] It exposes the moral relativism that underpins the so-called rules-based international order.

What we learn in these moments of eclipse is that democracy is a flimsy basis upon which to mount a defence of Israeli violence, or, as Chris Hipkins and many other leaders put it at the time of the October attack by Hamas, 'Israel's right to defend itself'. In fact, the democracies that are so invested in accentuating Israel's democratic credentials are the same democracies that sell billions of dollars of weapons to Israel so that they can kill tens of thousands of unarmed civilians, while starving tens of thousands more to death. Those who hide behind democracy to legitimise Israeli violence are complicit in this genocide. The scenes in Gaza today are not liberal democracy's Other, a momentary and violent blip that will eventually lead us back to a non-violent future in which democracy will be fully realised. Gaza is liberal democracy manifest.

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17 Butler, *Frames of War*, 47; original emphasis.

18 Anna Whyte, 'New Zealand Urges Israel Not to Attack Raffah', *The Post*, 12 February, 2024.