Reimagining the Social Bond: Review of Kevin Duong's *The Virtues of Violence*

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Kevin Duong. *The Virtues of Violence: Democracy Against Disintegration in Modern France*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 256 pp. £36.45 (hc).

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Social contract theory has tended to associate violence with chaos, disorder, and irrationality. In *The Virtues of Violence*, Kevin Duong directs us towards an alternative lineage of "redemptive violence" that is inherently neither illiberal, nihilistic, nor anti-democratic. It responds rather to a problem identified with (nineteenth-century French) modernity: "democratization as an experience of social disintegration" (128). In various guises, thinkers have diagnosed the dissolution of inherited social bonds in the process of citizen-making as having the potential for social atomization and moral fragmentation. Redemptive violence derives its appeal from its attempt to regenerate or redeem a "thick" social bond, i.e., a form of fraternity or solidarity, enabling a multitude to achieve popular self-government through unifying collective self-transformation. In the French Revolution, the imperial conquest of Algeria and the 1871 Paris Commune, images of redemptive violence are marshalled to constitute and redefine the boundaries of a sovereign "People." For Duong, the French republican tradition is paradigmatic, because of the clarity and self-consciousness of its theorists, who made explicit these problems of democratization. This type of violence is of particular interest because it appears across the spectrum of political thought and therefore, he argues, speaks to the character of the modern democratic experience.

To comprehend the pervasiveness of this form of violence in "France's long nineteenth century" (168), Duong undertakes four impressively researched and thoroughly readable studies. In each Duong examines an episode of redemptive violence: Jacobin interventions in debates about the regicide of Louis XVI, Tocqueville's justification of "total war" in colonial Algeria, the Communards' conception of the "people in arms," and appeals for moral regeneration among diverse critics of the Third Republic in the years preceding the First World War. Duong suggests that the idiom in which the problem of social disintegration is expressed in these moments can be linked to contemporary developments in scientific discourse. Thus, the Jacobins employ metaphors of natural catastrophe to describe the action of the people, Tocqueville interweaves new theories of psychological fragmentation with those of social disintegration, and Bergson's vitalist critique of positivism is politically weaponized by thinkers like Sorel.

Chapter one analyses the relationship between social bonds and violence that emerged during the French Revolution. Duong establishes the wider intellectual landscape: in the eighteenth century, he argues, the disappearance of the corporate system and the questioning of the ideology of the "king's two bodies" as guarantor of social cohesion (36), raised the question what new social bonds could look like. Events such as the storming of the Bastille and the women's march on Versailles, according to Duong, "cemented the link between popular agency and violence" (28). This link was crystallized in debates about the prosecution of Louis XVI. Duong contrasts the Girondins' legalistic approach with the Jacobins' concern that the king's trial further the Revolution's task of "reconstructing the moral foundations of the social" (37). In short, a violent attack on the king's body was needed for a new social body to emerge. Duong's nuanced depiction of the Jacobins and their arguments for regicide might surprise some readers: interested in concrete social bonds and not abstract ideals as is conventionally assumed (38-9), the Jacobins mobilized a religious vocabulary

sacralizing regicidal violence while adopting naturalistic images such as lightning to portray democratic agency.

The second chapter examines Tocqueville's concern that individualism reduces social bonds to a "*société en poussière*." Duong understands Tocqueville's solution, the creation of social bonds through "modern national glory," in the context of Cousin and Guizot's rejection of Lockean "sensationalism" (55, 62). Instead of viewing humans as fragmented bundles of sense perceptions, these thinkers respectively stress the subject as "unified volitional power" and the interdependence of social and inner life. Tocqueville concluded that the people had to relearn to exert a collective will, which could best be achieved through pursuing national glory. On Duong's reading, Tocqueville not only viewed colonial conquest as a vehicle for this pursuit, but moreover shifted from advocating comparatively peaceful settler-colonialism to supporting policies of extermination and "total war" (73). (Although, one might argue that "peaceful" settler-colonialism, too, represents a form of violence.) Duong thus demonstrates provocatively that Tocqueville's specifically liberal concern for social bonds by no means excludes the use of violence. He discusses the relevant discrepancy between the brutal events in Algeria (including their psychological effects on the soldiers of the *Armée d'Afrique*) and efforts to portray them as glorious domestically. It would have been interesting to explore further this relationship between myth and event with regard to the other episodes in the book, and to consider to what extent these differ from the case of colonial Algeria.

Duong's reconsideration of the Paris Commune focuses on its oft-overlooked "minoritarian" character (86). Discussing the "conceptual mutation" of socialist thinking from 1848 to the Commune (100), this chapter documents the disappearance of *quarante-huitard* enthusiasm for universal suffrage as synonymous with social revolution. Duong notes the "democratic death"-blow dealt to republican hopes in 1852 by the plebiscitary referendum legitimating Napoleon III's coup (86). While many earlier socialist demands resurfaced in the 1870s, disillusion with mass balloting persisted with Communard skepticism about parliamentarism in a degenerated society. During the Franco-Prussian War, Communal organizations faced their immediate inability to win mass support in elections. Duong argues that they therefore sought legitimacy not through "the people" as electorate, but through street insurrection and the concrete prestige of "the people in arms." This image of redemptive violence "symbolized universalism," "voluntarism," and the "idea of a continuous revolutionary tradition" (103-4). Having set the context of nineteenth-century critiques of market competition arising from the industrialized division of labor, Duong unpacks this conception utilizing diverse Communard accounts (Lissagaray, Michel, Vallès). He analyses their common creative vision of the barricades as emblematic sites through which France could be socially and morally regenerated (121).

Duong's final example concerns French intellectual ferment in the years preceding the First World War. Radical thinkers from both the syndicalist Left and the nationalist Right unexpectedly found mutual philosophical inspiration in Bergson's vitalist critique of positivism, which counterposed the principle of life and creation to mechanicism and the inertia of matter. Their "political Bergsonism" sought to overturn the utilitarian mentality of the Third Republic and regarded violence as a means of salvation from the disenchantment of modern life (135). Duong maps the contours of this milieu (Lagardelle, Péguy, Sorel), suggesting that their "pursuit of moral regeneration […] was rooted in the conflictual experience of democratization that they all shared" (145). He reads Sorel's *Reflections* as advocating, not an anti-democratic irrational violence for its own sake, but a dialectical value-productive conception of the "cunning of violence" (148), in Sorel's terms, "a mechanism capable of guaranteeing the development of morality" (157).

The book deploys a fruitful combination of political theory and historical analysis. Duong's incorporation of visual cultural products alongside his textual analysis deftly conveys the reciprocity

between everyday cultural practices and intellectual history, probing the social anxieties not always fully expressed in texts. Moreover, Duong's use of evidence beyond canonical texts, e.g., from the "public meetings" movement preceding the Commune (102), illuminates the collective authorship of this tradition of political thought. While Duong does not claim to evaluate normatively these episodes or redemptive violence in general (3), his conclusion gently impels us towards this task. Duong adopts LaCapra's definition of "redemptive violence" as a "radical […] rupture with the past," parsing this as "a normative sociology of the human bond with a moral commitment to forging those bonds anew" (3). We might ask whether further conceptual analysis of this term could have established whether French colonial violence is a redemptive expression of the agency of the people of the same type as that of the Revolution or the Commune.

Duong's book brims with references from across disciplines. His adroit style makes engaging with these studies a rewarding and enjoyable experience. They also challenge conventional wisdom. The conclusion foregrounds the relevance of these episodes for understanding the failures of dominant contemporary approaches to social fragmentation. For example, one might conceive UK anti-racists' 2020 relocation (without legal niceties) of a monument to slave-trader Edward Colston to the bottom of Bristol harbor differently after reflecting on republican notions of spontaneous popular agency. These studies frame unthinking suspicion of notions of fraternity and solidarity as arising from a restricted conception of democracy. For Duong, democracy is not simply a "set of laws or institutions" but an invitation to reimagine the social bond.