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Restorative Justice and the Challenge of Perpetrator Accountability

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Mass violence – atrocity, systemic torture or terror, genocide – invites the characterization “monstrous.” Such episodes combine the two features at the core of that notion: immense scale and extreme abnormality, deformity, or deviation. Yet episodes of mass violence are in fact horrifyingly ordinary. In the world as we have it, they are things that happen, somewhere, practically every day. When these things happen, they fail our hopes and violate our sense of moral decency, but we cannot realistically say that they violate our well-informed expectations.

When monstrous violence occurs, it can give rise to the corresponding thought about those who perform or participate in it: that they, or some of them, are “monsters.” We know from social psychology studies (most famously those of Stanley Milgram), however, that many otherwise ordinary people can be induced to behave badly. Study of actual atrocity crimes confirms what the lab experiments suggest: there are situational dynamics and circumstantial features that create conditions for many people to go drastically out of bounds in perpetrating violence. James Waller calls this the “ordinariness of extraordinary evil” (Waller 2007, xvii). This is not to say, nor has it been shown, that “anyone” can be induced to engage in extreme, indiscriminate, or mass violence given the “right” circumstances. It is sobering enough to accept the more modest but well-established conclusion: many otherwise ordinary people will, under certain kinds of conditions, behave violently. They will do so by their own initiative, in conformity with a group, or under orders from authorities. They may do so in discrete episodes such as massacre or mass rape, or routinely, as in the case of torturers and executioners where torture or extra-judicial execution is a systemic practice. Mass crimes and systemic violence require mass or systemic participation; if even a portion of participants are “monsters,” there turn out to be a lot of those.

The charged idea of the “monster” who commits or contributes knowingly to atrocity is arguably unhelpful. Alexander Hinton, in his close study of the trial of “Duch” (originally Kaing Guek Eav), commandant of the Khmer Rouge torture center S-21, suggests that the image of the monster “naturalizes” genocidal violence as either the natural behavior of a lower, animal-like creature or the sadistic cruelty of a psychological deviant. No doubt there is, as Hinton says, an impulse to affirm the “we are not like that” (Hinton 2016, 30). But “monstrous” is also a term of extreme moral opprobrium, an ascriptive category for people and acts that are beyond the human moral pale, even if they are the acts of human beings. This use is not entirely misleading or misplaced. These crimes strain our ordinary ways of scaling wrongs and challenge notions like “proportionality” in punishment or compensation. Atrocity crimes yield many perpetrators of monstrous violence with greatly varied kinds of responsibility, awareness, and motivation. They tax our understanding, ingenuity, and humanity in trying to fathom appropriate and just responses. Widespread participation in these crimes can threaten us with accepting the fact that, in many cases, “they are very much like us.”
The theory and practice of transitional justice has developed rapidly in recent decades to address the question of dealing with mass atrocity and repression in ways that are just and meaningful for victims of violence, perpetrators of violence, and communities riven by, but also often complicit in, violence. In practice, transitional justice has fallen woefully short of addressing the needs and rights of victims. I argue here that it has fallen short in theory and practice on the issue of dealing with perpetrators in just and meaningful ways as well. Aside from criminal prosecution, (inevitably the fate of few participants in atrocity), opportunities for alternative forms of accountability and for just and meaningful reintegration of perpetrators, sensitive to individual differences, have been little explored, despite hopeful appeals to “restorative justice.”

Restorative justice-based practices, I argue, do have potential to expand the scope, complexity, and depth of perpetrator accountability, with distinctive benefits to victims, communities, and perpetrators themselves. The practices needed, however, have so far been barely imagined. —The emerging multidisciplinary field of perpetrator studies promises to deepen our understandings of the psychology, sociology, politics and ethics of perpetrator accountability and restoration (Critchell et. al. 2017).

**Transitional Justice and The Challenge of Perpetrator Accountability**

Given the alarming but predictable frequency of mass violence, we ought to be prepared to deal purposefully with its aftermath. Only in recent decades has a dedicated body of theory and practice attempted to define a general and concerted approach to the occurrence and consequences of mass violence and systemic repression, the field called ‘transitional justice.’

Paul Seils of the International Center for Transitional Justice identifies transitional justice with “justice-focused processes that societies undertake in the aftermath of large-scale human rights violations, normally in the relatively recent past,” under “fragile conditions, where the justice system and protection of rights have significantly or totally failed” (Seils 2017, 2). I foreground this definition because it keeps in focus how transitional justice is about justice. For my present purposes, it helps to narrow the question of how adequately transitional justice is prepared to address perpetrators, what it means to require of perpetrators what they owe to others, and to acknowledge what may be owed to them.

I believe that the ‘justice’ in transitional justice is most usefully understood to refer to varied practices of accountability in response to a violent past. ‘Accountability’ means being liable to answer to others in the matter of one’s conduct, and thereby being exposed to the consequences of their judgment, which may include assignment of responsibility and retributive or reparative demands. Demands may include penalty or punishment; restitution, compensation, and social, psychological, and moral support; respectful acknowledgment and remembrance; and reform of institutions that allow or harbor abuse. Practices of accountability attempt to assess and to render what is “due” to those affected. In the case of putative wrongdoing, failure to render what is due is itself an injustice added to the original wrong. What is due in these cases includes acknowledgment of the reality of the wrong and responsibility for its redress and repair (Walker 2006b). While liability to punishment following criminal prosecution and conviction may be the most obvious institutional example, accountability practices can take varied forms. The standard “menu” of transitional justice practices privileges trials, truth commissions, multiform reparations (including gestures of apology and memorialization), and guarantees of nonrepetition (including institutional reforms and perpetrator vetting).
There is an evident shortfall of perpetrator accountability in contexts of mass violence and repression. Criminal prosecution, a perpetrator-centered practice whose point is to impose individual legal responsibility, has enjoyed premier status as an accountability measure, at least among international experts. The fact remains that only a small (and often a minuscule) number of responsible individuals will ever be subject to a criminal process after mass violence. Vetting, programs that screen actors involved or complicit in human rights abuses to be excluded from eligibility for public positions, often suffer from weak and inconsistent implementation or political manipulation that undermines their status as a justice measure, by failing to penalize perpetrators in a meaningfully discriminate way. At the same time, amnesty from criminal prosecution is the most widely used response to mass violence and political repression in comparison to transitional justice mechanisms (Olsen et. al. 2010, 181-188). In practice, amnesties and programs that demobilize and reintegrate combatants (DDR) are pragmatic, non-justice-focused measures that (whether or not justifiably) either bypass or conflict with justice demands by allowing perpetrators to evade accountability. They can effectively reward perpetrators with impunity and, in the case of DDR, material benefits. There is a missing piece in the accountability matrix of transitional justice as conventionally understood. It elevates practices of accountability to victims by states (access to justice, truth-telling, and reparations) and accountability of perpetrators to states (criminal prosecution for a few and vetting). What is missing in both theory and practice is the requirement and the opportunity after mass violence for direct accountability of perpetrators to their victims (and to society more generally) in ways that can reach more widely and that offer morally meaningful reintegration of perpetrators in ways recognizable as justice. What might such practices be like?

Restorative justice has been widely advanced as an alternative framework for approaching transitional justice (Llewellyn and Philpott 2014). Restorative justice thinking originated in response to ordinary criminal justice systems as “a progressive alternative to the increasing use of imprisonment and other exclusionary measures to control crime and dispense justice” (Johnstone 2013, xi.) Despite its emergence in response to too much, not too little, criminal prosecution, restorative justice has potential as a response to the perpetrator accountability gap. The proposal at the core of restorative justice is to connect the victim and the offender directly (when both are prepared and willing) with the support of relevant communities so that the victim and the victim’s harm is addressed directly by the perpetrator. Restorative justice practices, such as victim-offender dialogue or community conferencing or circles, create dynamics that can break down emotional distance and denial in offenders confronted with the reality of their victims (Braithwaite 2002, 73-136). They have potential to “leverage responsibility,” as I have put it, by moving offending parties from denial or defensive self-justification toward a more demanding perception of the effects of what they have done (Walker 2006a, 385). By doing so, they can produce a deeper or more satisfying experience of justice for victims (Strang 2002). The perpetrator’s active accountability contributes to redress, affording the victim validation, vindication, and possibly agreed upon forms of amends or atonement. In the best case, the perpetrator earns an opportunity for self-respecting reintegration into the community as one who has accepted responsibility and become an agent, rather than a target, of justice. At the center of restorative justice is repair of relationships: victim and offender; victim and community; offender and community. Rather than victim-centered or perpetrator-centered, restorative justice is relationship-centered (Llewellyn 2006, 94).
South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission appealed to restorative justice as the self-described ethos of its proceedings, injecting the idea into transitional justice thinking. But South Africa’s claim to restorative justice at the TRC is tenuous. Perpetrators of gross violations of human rights were accountable to the TRC, to whom they submitted their applications for amnesty in exchange for their confession of politically motivated crimes, not directly to the victims of those crimes. The benefit of perpetrator accountability went to the perpetrator, who might receive amnesty, not to the victim. Victims participated in parallel by giving reports of human rights abuse they suffered to a separate committee of the TRC. While perpetrators got relatively speedy amnesty verdicts, victims waited years for a meager reparations payment from the South African state. Victims were at one point publicly criticized by then-President Thabo Mbeki for seeking reparations at all (Hamber 2009, 103-108). Direct interaction between victims and perpetrators was not part of the formal structure of the TRC (Llewellyn 2006, 99-100). Yet restorative justice depends on what victims and perpetrators do together to produce accountability and a satisfactory experience of justice. The TRC in fact roughly reproduced the incomplete accountability matrix mentioned earlier: perpetrators were invited to be accountable to a state-authorized mechanism and victims were given a platform and ultimately slight reparations by the state. This is not restorative justice in either process or outcome.

Restorative Justice for Perpetrators

Despite the gap between the restorative justice principle and its actual practice, the TRC prompts a valuable question. Can and should restorative justice in some credible form be implemented more widely in the aftermath of mass atrocity and repression? There are many reasons why truly restorative practices could be a desirable development for victims and communities. Many individual restorative meetings might produce more, and more detailed, information about particular crimes, patterns, and policies, extending and enhancing the work of truth commissions, while responding more fully to individual victims. Victims of political violence might reap some of the benefits that controlled empirical studies have shown that crime victims get from restorative practices, including greater satisfaction than with conventional criminal process, reduced negative feelings, and (surprisingly) empathy for offenders. Here, I explore three possible contributions that restorative transitional justice practices, suitably scaled and implemented, could make for perpetrators of violence.

First, “reintegration” of perpetrators after violence is a practical necessity that is most often handled by amnesties (formal or de facto), DDR programs, or some combination of these. These procedures, as remarked earlier, are not justice measures, but rather expedient attempts to redirect and neutralize actors previously involved in violence. An attempt at “just reintegration” would look to modes and terms of reentry that offer perpetrators the possibility of asserting agency in positive ways that justify self-respect, as well as deal with intense feelings or troubling memories with which some previously violent actors may struggle. Although the topic of what perpetrators need (much less deserve) will provoke resistance from some, it is a core principle of restorative justice that the experience of justice is to be shared among all parties to its practices. Even if offenders deserve punishment for serious crimes, they also deserve recognition of their humanity, citizenship, and needs for self-respect and belonging. Yet some practitioners question how adequately restorative justice practice in criminal contexts attends to the needs of offenders. Among needs identified by many offenders are the need to explain their behavior and the world
from which they come, to better understand the reality of harms they have caused, to express remorse and sadness, to apologize, and to have their experiences heard and acknowledged along with the victim’s (Toews and Katounas 2004, 107-118).

Restorative formats that allow direct engagement between victims and offenders can enhance fulfillment of these needs. Perpetrators of violence can gain, in many cases for the first time, a true and full grasp of the nature and extent of the harms they have caused to others. Given the organized, systematic, and even routinized nature of much political violence, confrontation with the consequences of one’s actions may be even more demanding (and the pull to resist or rationalize more tempting) for the perpetrator than in purely individual cases. John Conroy, writing on the practice of torture, records this comment of one torturer: “Everybody did these things all the time. It wasn’t something so bad. It wasn’t something that dropped from the sky. It was something that you saw every day” (Conroy 1990, 204). Conroy himself observes, “The man who feels ‘nothing personal’ against his victim, who takes comfort in the belief that he is not as bad as some other torturer, who believes that he was not so bad because his victim did not die, never sees the extent of the damage, never considers that he has assaulted generations yet unborn” (Conroy 1990, 183). One price that offenders typically pay in restorative justice participation is what some researchers call the “shock” of being confronted with what they have actually done (Sherman and Strang 2011, 156). These encounters open a path to earned self-respect by motivating offenders to take responsibility but also to contribute actively to a mutually agreed outcome that might include concrete reparation or constructive action. At the same time, victims get to reach offenders directly with their anger, pain, and loss, and to witness genuine moments of remorse, as well as apologies.21

Second, restorative processes offer an opportunity to deal with the challenging reality of “complex victims” or perpetrators of crimes who are themselves also victims (Borer 2003 and Bouris 2007). Some “child soldiers,” adolescents or children accepted, induced, coerced, or born into participation in armed conflict, commit atrocities. These cases trouble the clear victim-perpetrator binary that tends to be assumed in accountability practices, for they are at once coerced or exploited victims but also perpetrators of serious crimes. Mark Drumbl, who advocates restorative practices such as community work projects and local reinsertion rituals for the reintegration of child soldiers, cautions against the tendency to insulate these actors from accountability, treating their age as a uniformly exculpating factor. To do so is to treat these individuals as “fungible,” creating reintegration hurdles for communities who “care about conduct during conflict, that is, why and how did the child join fighting forces and, once there, what did he or she do” (Drumbl 2012, 22). Virginie Ladisch concurs that the role of passive victim “does not allow [the young soldiers] to deal with their own possible feelings of remorse or their community’s potential resentment” (Ladisch 2017). Adult perpetrators, too, may have acted under various degrees and kinds of duress, as when locals are coercively pressed into paramilitary activity but also commit crimes against other community members (Martinez et. al. 2016, 17-19). In Timor-Leste, before it achieved independence from Indonesia, occupying Indonesian security forces extensively and coercively recruited Timorese, while the resistance organized secretly, leaving a legacy of profound mistrust, since it was “impossible to know with certainty who was doing what for or against the cause.” (Drexler 2013, 88).

Societies emerging from insurgency, civil conflict, or violently authoritarian regimes, face politically controversial decisions about whether those who have themselves committed crimes,
or were members or supporters of armed groups responsible for atrocities, can in turn be seen as victims when their own rights are grossly violated. In the striking case of Cambodia’s infamous torture center, “many S-21 guards were recruited as children and about one-third of the staff was eventually executed there,” as were many intellectuals and cadres of the Khmer Rouge regime itself (Bernath 2016, 54). In Northern Ireland, a proposed “recognition payment” to relatives of all those killed in the protracted civil conflict, regardless of their political association, was rejected by all sides in a hail of public criticism (Moffett 2016, 158).

Cases of victimized perpetrators, complex mixes of participation and resistance, and loyalties that forbid recognition of those on opposing political or ideological sides create large gray zones in many conflicts. In cases of complex perpetrator-victim statuses, there are strong temptations either to see the victimhood aspect as wholly exculpating (child soldiers) or the perpetration of (or complicity in) wrongs as wholly disqualifying for “real” victimization (tortured insurgents). Participatory restorative practices could offer flexible and plural modes of accountability to victims and communities, allowing for nuanced responses to this complexity. Drumbl suggests, in the case of child soldiers, “endogenous ceremonies, reinsertion rites, reparative mechanisms, and community service,” as restorative paths (Drumbl 2012, 207). It might be possible for individuals to participate in distinct (and distinct kinds of) encounters that address both their responsibilities for harming others and their suffering at others’ hands. Restorative justice conferences often do lead to examining serious victimization in the background or circumstances of the wrongdoer as well as his or her culpable wrongdoing.

Third, and finally, restorative practice opens up the possibility of meaningfully differentiating among those responsible for violence, and giving violent actors agency in differentiating themselves from others by their willingness to respond to their victims. Restorative justice practices provide an opportunity to discover whether monstrous conduct in fact reveals hopelessly depraved, callous, or malignant character, or instead something more mixed, ambiguous, or uncertain. It does this by inviting those responsible for terrible harms to become accountable and take responsibility by directly engaging with the victims of their wrongdoing (or their survivors), addressing the consequences of what they did and the suffering it caused. Broad availability of restorative practices for willing victims and perpetrators is a uniquely effective path to fairer judgment by victims and communities of perpetrators’ candor, awareness, and sense of responsibility. However various or confused were the intentions and motives of violent actors in the event, restorative practice allows the same offenders to make clarifying moral judgments about their responsibilities after the fact and to act as those judgments require. John Braithwaite says, “Restorative justice is not about picking good apples for reconciliation and bad apples for deterrence; it is about treating everyone as a good apple as the preferred first approach” (Braithwaite 2002, 120.)

At the same time, anyone who has studied mass violence and repression knows how routine it is for those responsible to continue to defend themselves and their conduct or to deny or misrepresent it. I have argued that moral repair is always a communal responsibility regardless of where individual responsibilities lie, precisely because relief and justice for victims cannot be hostage to the unavailability or intransigence of those individually (or collectively) responsible (Walker 2006b, 29-34). A community’s support for the availability of restorative practices, however, seems not only an effective but a just way to prompt offenders to discover and demonstrate, for themselves and others, which kind of apples they actually are.
Conclusion

I have suggested some possible virtues of implementing restorative practices in contexts of mass political violence. But as with transitional justice generally, there is the theory and then there is the – often disappointing – reality. There have been a number of (more or less) restorative experiments in transitional contexts that merit close study as models: Rwandan *gacaca*, Timor-Leste’s Community Reconciliation Process, Sierra Leone’s Fambul Tok, Indonesian *gotong royong*, and locally adapted traditional practices in Mozambique, Uganda, and Burundi. These approaches, often adopting and adapting traditional practices with cultural legitimacy, embody a varying mix of restorative features such as direct engagement of victim and perpetrators, moments of truth-telling, offers of material or symbolic amends, rituals of cleansing or reacceptance into community. At the same time, all can function as cautionary tales: compulsory and routinized participation and inadequate protection for victims (Rwanda); limited duration and restriction to low-level offenses, such as property crimes (Timor-Leste); gains for communities at the expense of the well-being of victims (Sierra Leone); reliance on traditional or religious authority structures weakened by conflict or on hierarchical and exclusionary social relations of age or gender (Uganda, Mozambique); or emotional and practical conciliation without individual accountability or truth (Indonesia). A core conundrum is the problem of scale; sheer numbers of victims and perpetrators invite innovation in designing practices (where possible) that are widely but effectively repeatable, invite flexible local adaptation, allow for participation in groups, or can be kept available within communities for longer-term or serial use.

Restorative practices, of course, cannot replace other accountability practices. They are additions and enhancements, not replacements, for the established repertory of transitional accountability measures. Criminal prosecutions, at the very least for those who command and control mass death and suffering or those who show particular dedication, pleasure, or zeal in carrying out atrocities, is an indispensable testament to the resolve to combat impunity. But it is universally understood that this resource-intensive device will ever reach only a small fragment of those responsible. Restorative practices create a wider net, and can be open even to those subject to criminal sanction. Truth commissions are absolutely necessary for comprehensive public accounting and societal reckoning, as well as to identify the nature and extent of violence and target reparations and reform. Truth commissions, however, can neither offer participation to, nor guarantee investigation on behalf of, the entire universe of individual victims. Financial and political commitment to reparations, the transitional measure that alone speaks directly and unilaterally to the rights and needs of victims, needs to be extended and fortified. Preventive institutional reform is owed to society as a whole and victims alike; its absence mocks the pretension of redress. Restorative practices, however, could add to these other measures dimensions of individual accountability for more perpetrators, greater satisfaction for more victims, and opportunities for empowerment and agency for both. The field of perpetrator studies provides the multidisciplinary resources to explore the psychological effects, social meanings, cultural fit, political dynamics, legal propriety and moral adequacy of such practices in specific contexts.
REFERENCES


ENDNOTES

1 Glover 2012 presents a set of case studies of war, atrocity, and repression that span the twentieth century.

2 Central studies are: Milgram 1974; Kelman and Hamilton 1989; and Zimbardo 2007.

3 Studies include Conroy, 1990; Browning 1992; Staub 2003; and Waller 2007; Klusemann 2012.

4 Waller 2007, 269, succumbs to this generalization: “The unsettling truth is that any deed that perpetrators of genocide and mass killing have ever done, however atrocious, is possible for any of us to do—under particular situational pressures.”

5 Seils 2015, 10, says, “If a maximum sentence, for example, is 40 years in jail, regardless of whether the convicted committed 1 murder or 100 murders, the proportionality from a retributive point of view is doubtful.”

6 See, for example, de Greiff 2017, para. 81, on a reparations implementation gap of “scandalous proportions.”

7 Llewellyn and Philpott 2014 represent this thematic turn.

8 The literature now is vast and overlaps with work on “reconciliation.” General works on transitional justice include: Minow 1998; Teitel 2000; Daly and Sarkin 2007; Eisikovits 2010; Olsen et. al. 2010; Winter 2014; Maddison 2016; Murphy 2017; and McAuliffe 2017. Human societies, of course, have always navigated the aftermath of conflict; what is new is the idea of principled approach with claimed cross-societal application. See Elster 2004 and Arthur 2009.

9 A definition of transitional justice by the UN Secretary General includes justice, accountability, and reconciliation as aims (UN Secretary General 2004, para. 8). Seils (2017, 2-4 and 10-12)
argues, persuasively in my view, that reconciliation has distinct aims and entails processes, like trauma healing and community development, that are not inherently justice-focused. Olsen, et. al. (2010, 35-36), an influential empirical study of the impact of transitional justice measures, includes amnesty as a relevant measure while conceding that amnesty is not standardly defined as a transitional justice measure, but is rather a “practical mechanism” to secure peace. de Greiff 2012 is a deeply thought argument for how transitional justice measures in concert can embody justice. See also Murphy 2017.

10 On accountability, see Walker 2014 and Van Ness 2014.
11 Arthur 2009, 355, reports that a 1988 field-defining conference at the Aspen Institute had already focused on “a particular set of measures,” including prosecutions, truth-telling, reform of an abusive security apparatus, and victim compensation; the strong impression, however, is that criminal liability was the driving issue.
12 On vetting, see Waldorf 2017, 54-59. For a broad ranging examination, see Mayer-Rieckh and de Greiff 2007.
13 Freeman 2010, 1, notes that amnesties are “uncontroversial” in security focused DDR thinking, while viewed as “sources of impunity” from a transitional justice perspective. See UN High Commissioner for Human Rights 2009 on acceptable amnesties under human rights constraints.
14 Zehr 1990 is a classic statement. Braithwaite 2002 provides sophisticated theoretical treatment. Johnstone 2013 is a useful compendium. See also Winter 2014, 190ff., on the role of redress for authorized state wrongdoing.
15 On the role of emotional and interpersonal dynamics in restorative justice practice, see Sherman and Strang 2011 and Rossner 2011.
16 On restorative justice at the TRC, see Hamber 2009, 132-133 and the studies in Chapman and van der Merwe 2008. Llewellyn 2006, 98-100, defends the TRC’s exercise of restorative justice. Waldorf 2010 gives an overview of the importance of information from perpetrators.
17 Sherman and Strang 2011. Whether restorative justice reduces re-offending longer term, and hence is a beneficial form of reintegration for communities, is an unsettled matter. See Rosser 2011, 169.
18 Sherman and Strang 2011, 156, describe this breakthrough moment as typical in victim-offender conferences.
19 On the problem of “innocence” as a criterion of victimhood, see McEvoy and McConnachie 2012. For a model of the politics of victimhood, see Druliolle 2015.
20 Sherman and Strang 2011. On the role of “innocence” as a criterion of victimhood, see McEvoy and McConnachie 2012. For a model of the politics of victimhood, see Druliolle 2015.
21 Sherman and Strang 2011, 156, emphasize that this occurs; see also Toews and Katounas 2004, 109-110, on neglect of the offender’s own deprivation or victimization.
23 On Rwanda, see Clark 2010 and Brounéus 2008. On Timor-Leste, see McAuliffe 2008. On Sierra Leone, see Cilliers et. al. 16. On Uganda and Mozambique, see Huyse and Salter 2008. On Indonesia, see Braithwaite 2011.