

Torture and Populist Masculinity: Political Prospects of Ostentatious Illegitimate Violence

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Abstract: The contribution starts from the observation that several male populist leaders prominently endorse torture as a political means. While political sociology has mostly, and fruitfully, concentrated on analyzing strategies and mechanisms of legitimizing violence (and, more generally, domination), and of hiding rather than showing off illegitimate violence, I will focus on the political benefits of politicians publicly associating themselves with torture – which is in most contexts an epitome of illegitimate violence. Drawing from empirical examples, I argue that there can be a specific payoff for a politician to avow himself to torture precisely because it is a largely delegitimated as well as illegal form of violence. The readiness to do ‘whatever it takes’ regardless of the limits of legitimacy pairs up with the capacity of violence that is commonly associated with masculinity, feeding into a heroized political fighter figure. At the same time, the open disregard for established rules – framed as being developed and monitored by mainstream international ‘elites’ – caters for a populist anti-establishment stance, which can be further supported by the coarse language these politicians use for endorsing torture. Thus, publicly embracing torture may cater both for a populist stance and for political masculinity and thus form an ingredient of ‘populist masculinity.’

In recent years, politicians convincingly categorized as populists have publicly and repeatedly supported torture as a political means. On an everyday basis, many observers might already be used to them uttering all kinds of disagreeable, not to say abhorrent, standpoints. From a sociological perspective, however, it seems puzzling that politicians ostentatiously endorse a not only illegal, but also illegitimate and widely condemned form of violence like torture. Why would they do that if it can be assumed they want to optimize their political influence, and win supporters? Starting from this question, I will present my thoughts about connections between torture, visibility, and populist masculinity. They are developed drawing on discussions in two research projects funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation): one on “Torture and Body Knowledge” (see Inhetveen et al. 2020), and one on “Negotiations of Violence in South African Popular Music,” which is part of the SFB 1472 “Transformations of the Popular,” research area “Populisms,” at the University of Siegen.² Based on rather anecdotal empirical references, my correspondingly modest aim is to develop some ideas that could incite a more systematic empirical endeavor on the role of illegitimate violence for populist masculinity.

As a starting point, I briefly introduce my reference examples of populist politicians publicly endorsing torture (1). I then develop my argument – concomitantly clarifying the respective concepts – in three steps: In looking at torture as illegitimate violence (2), at the association between masculinity and violence (3), and at the connection between populism and the display of transgression (4). I conclude (5) by discussing the potential political payoffs of visibilized, even ostentatious support of torture for populist masculinity.

1. A fancy for torture: Torture appealing to populist leaders

One case in point for the argument I develop here is the Brazilian politician Jair Bolsonaro, who was the country's president from 2018 to 2022.³ Bolsonaro has been supporting torture for a long time, here in a TV interview from 1999:

... I am even in favor of the CPI, in the case of Chico Lopes, having had the parrot's perch there. He deserved this: parrot's perch. It works! I am in favor of torture, you know about that. And the people is in favor of this as well.⁴

Here, Bolsonaro refers to a parliamentary investigation committee (“Comissão parlamentar de inquérito” – “CPI”), in front of which Chico Lopes, a former president of the Brazilian central bank, has refused to give a witness statement. Bolsonaro thus argues for the use of torture by the CPI to force Lopes to “open the mouth” (see Tavares 2021). More concretely, Bolsonaro advocates the use of the “parrot's perch” (“pau de arara”), a torture technique in which the victim is hung, head down, from a horizontal pole by the hollows of the knees, with the arms cuffed around the upper and lower legs, thereby fixing the position. This technique was widely used and well-known in the Brazilian military regime, so that it can be seen, especially when referred to by its euphemistic colloquial name, as a synecdochical reference to torture in general (see for example Keilt 2019). I will get back to this quote below, moving on now to the next case I address, that of Donald Trump.

When Trump became president of the United States, it turned out that any assumption that the Obama administration had put an end to considering torture as a means of US politics had been naive. During his campaign, Trump repeatedly adorned himself with his readiness to use waterboarding and, as he emphasized himself, even “tougher” (quoted in BBC 2017) means (see also FAZ 2017). At a campaign event in a retirement community in 2016, for example, Trump (quoted in Johnson 2016) stated on waterboarding:

Some people say it's not actually torture — let's assume it is. But they asked me the question: ‘What are you going to do on waterboarding?’ Absolutely fine, but we should go much stronger than waterboarding. That's the way I feel.

In a similar vein, Trump stated on several occasions that he would readily use even tougher techniques, for example in media interviews or during a Republican debate, when he stated that he wanted to “bring back a hell of a lot worse than waterboarding” (quoted in Johnson 2016).

A third example of a populist politician who displays an affinity to torture is Rodrigo Duterte, president of the Philippines between 2016 and 2021. Nicole Curato (2016) has associated Duterte with the concept of “penal populism,” as conceptualized by John Pratt (2007; see also Pratt 2023: 13). Duterte is well known for his policies involving extreme violence, and he openly, almost offhandedly, suggests the use of torture, as in a speech at a peace and order summit in front of several thousand local officials participating in a summit (as quoted in Al Jazeera 2019):

Let's just kidnap people from COA [Commission on Audit; KI]. Let's bring them here, then we will torture those sons of w*****.

This quote differs from the ones of Bolsonaro and Trump, as Duterte does not state whether or not he supports torture generally, but suggests (framed as a joke) an act of torture of concrete, identified persons – leaving no need to explicate that torture seems to him a handy means against political ‘enemies.’ The concrete targets of his torture suggestion are staff of the Commission on Audit, the central Philippine auditing agency controlling government expenditures. While not stating that ‘the people’ equally support torture, as Bolsonaro does in his quote above, Duterte verbally constructs a torturing community by inviting the audience (“*Let's just kidnap ... then we will torture ...*”; emphases KI) to be part of the proposed actions.⁵

Bolsonaro, Trump, and Duterte have in common that they draw on repertoires of political masculinities, presenting themselves as decidedly masculine political figures, as has been repeatedly addressed by social-scientific research.⁶ While certainly not all elements of their performances that are widely understood as ‘masculine’ are intended as such, it is plausible that, as Roose (2021: 6) states, in looking for an ideological condensation point for their program of social change, “populists are particularly keen to use and adept at mobilizing masculinity to strengthen their deployment of populist tactics.”⁷

While acknowledging that at a deeper level of analysis, there are obviously manifold differences between the ‘populist masculinities’ of these three politicians (see, e.g., Parmanand 2022 on a comparison between Duterte and Trump), they serve as exemplars for developing my thoughts on populist masculinity based on their noticeable commonalities in publicly supporting torture in combination with other elements of populist masculine self-presentation.

2. Torture as illegitimate violence

In the sociological literature on violence, the socially constructed distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence plays a significant role.⁸ Moreover, it is commonly assumed that violent actors face the action problem of legitimizing the violence they perform or endorse.⁹ This notion probably stems not only from empirical observation, but also from Max Weber's (1978: 54-55) conceptual focus on *legitimate* violence in his reasoning about the state (see also Koloma Beck and Schlichte 2014: 50-53), as well as his basic tenet that stable domination (*Herrschaft*) depends on its legitimation.¹⁰ Consequently, it is a common assumption in sociological literature that violence, as an act of power (Popitz 2017a: 29), generally ‘needs’ legitimacy, that “the concept of violence (...) lies at the heart of the constitutive need for legitimation by power and violence” (Trotha 2007: 5195).

In the context of this distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence, torture is regularly categorized as illegitimate (and not only illegal). While “regularly” falls short of “invariably,” there are arguments for assuming the illegitimacy of torture to be its dominant categorization in global discourses and in the social contexts of the cases addressed above. At a global level, international law, international and human rights organizations including UN and NGOs, as well as far-reaching media discourses (see, for example, Barnett and Finnemore 2004: 7), serve as the main carriers of the categorization of torture as illegitimate. At state level, this globalized discourse has an impact and makes it difficult to just ignore the institutionalized illegitimization of torture – even for regimes employing torture. Obviously, there *are* public

debates about the potential legitimacy of torture in specific situations, as in the US during the ‘war on terror,’ with a focus on fictitious ticking bomb scenarios (for example Levinson 2006: 257-327), or actual cases corresponding to such a scenario, as the one of the former Frankfurt police vice-president Daschner in Germany.¹¹ In these discussions, however, even participants who argue for torture being legitimate in these scenarios are aware of torture being illegitimate by default, and in need of justification should one employ it anyway. These cases would then represent exceptions to a generalized categorization of torture as illegitimate. I will thus start my argument with the assumption that torture is dominantly categorized as illegitimate, even though the possibility of counter-standpoints will become relevant below, in the context of distinguishing audiences and claims of redrawing borders, between legitimate and illegitimate violence, as well as between social groups.

In accordance with the illegitimacy of torture, many torture regimes, beyond trying to normalize detainee abuse and torture (Chwastiak 2015), employ discernable strategies to make torture invisible. These strategies include, among others, hiding torture from view via spatial arrangements (see for example: Andermann 2012), or recategorizing torture techniques as being something different than torture (Breger 2022a: 123-127)¹², or classifying information on torture and denying its utilization (Breger 2022a: 7, 88; Huggins 2005: 169-170). In the same vein, scholarly literature traces developments from torture techniques that leave visible marks on the victims’ body to a stronger emphasis on torture techniques leaving no bodily traces (Rejali 2009), such as psychologized techniques (Breger 2022a), stress positions, and similar practices (Ron 1997; Goldstein and Breslin 1986).¹³

These findings are grounded in thorough research and highly plausible, even though there is no linear or all-encompassing historical process of invisibilizing torture. For example, Budi Hernawan (2016) analyzes torture as theatre in a case of openly displayed torture, which he distinguishes from prominent contemporary cases of secretive torture, as in the Americas. Looking at common patterns in torture complexes, strategies of invisibilization are not omnipresent, but clearly frequent, pointing to a historically increasing problem of legitimacy that torturers face.

Given this challenge of historical illegitimization, however, the invisibilization of torture is not the only observable reaction among actors who utilize or support torture. On the contrary, I argue that the very illegitimacy of torture makes it suitable as an accessory of certain figures of masculinity,¹⁴ for which I use the concept of “populist masculinity.” It has been employed earlier by, among others, Marion Löffler in a research on Austrian politics, and she sees it as “a kind of protest masculinity. Populist political masculinity thus is characterized by aggressive rhetoric, breaking taboos and pushing the boundaries of the politically sayable and thinkable” (Löffler 2020: 21; on “populist masculinity,” see also the collection edited by Hakola et al. 2021). I will get back to notions of ‘aggressive rhetoric’ and ‘breaking taboos’ later, in the context of coarse language and (strategies of and/or lust for) transgression. With regard to ‘pushing boundaries,’ though, my argument will focus less on the ‘pushing’ (this is, a repositioning of existing boundaries the limits of which populist actors disapprove of) and more on the construction of boundaries (this is, as establishment or strengthening of boundaries approved of or aimed at) as a feature of populist masculinity.¹⁵

3. Masculinity and violence

As Heinrich Popitz has argued, violence – understood as a power action that intendedly inflicts bodily harm on others (Popitz 2017a: 29) – is a general human resource, a capacity that comes with our embodiment and imaginativeness (Popitz 2017a: 11). Human beings are capable of willfully using violence, they “never must but always can act violently” (Popitz 2017a: 31). However, this capability to violate is not evenly distributed among humans, it is not a general resource in the sense that everyone has equal access to violent means. Different categories of people are socially constructed as unequal in their ability to execute violence. Most importantly for my argument, there is a widespread and close association of masculinity with the ability to violate, while femininity is rather associated with being easily subjected to violence (see, for example, McCaughey 1997) – another, corresponding gendered ascription of what Popitz (2017a: 11) sees as a general element of the human condition. Michael Meuser points out that violence by men (not by women) is legitimate in the *gender* order (which is to be distinguished from the *legal* order). To women, in contrast, violence is also an available resource, but an *illegitimate* one (Meuser 2002: 73; see also Messerschmidt 2000: 10-13). Extending this thought, I argue that the legitimacy of male violence calls for differentiation as well: Also for male violence, and within the gender order, there exists a boundary between legitimate and illegitimate violence. At least (but not only) in the societies the three cases stem from, some, but not all male violence is seen as legitimate. Thus, the social distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence is present, and can be referred to and utilized, by male actors such as the populist politicians introduced above.

On the other side of the coin, a (perceived) *inability* to perform violence seems to threaten a person's masculinity, as observable in cultural manifestations like the manifold expressions colloquially used for men unable to perform violence. Derogatory terms such as “sissy,” “pussy,” or the German “Weichei” explicitly target – and question – the masculinity of the men so denominated (James 1998: 403). The association between masculinity and the ability to employ violence is also directly visible in our everyday, for example in cultural styles and practices in sports, music, film, games, or literature.¹⁶ Closer to our case, in the military, a “refusal to continue torturing” can be “couched in terms of the individual combatant's weakness or failure to be ‘man enough’” (Wolfendale 2007: 164). Whereas such a refusal to torture is emically interpreted as a lack of manliness, Rejali (2007: 151) shows, based on literature on the Franco-Algerian war, how writers as Lartéguy reason that

it is democratic life that makes men weak, particularly soldiers, and that being tortured and in turn torturing others is an antidote to this weakness, allowing men to return to themselves as men and overcome the weaknesses engendered by democratic life.

Not only is this view based on a close cultural association between violence (endured and committed) and masculinity.¹⁷ Moreover, refraining from violence appears as connected to both (non-masculine) weakness *and* democracy.¹⁸ This observation may support my following point, the connection between (also violent) transgression and populism, in the sense that the political ‘establishment’ (of, in these cases, democratic countries) seems to be among the targets attacked by the quoted populists’ open endorsement of torture.

4. Populism and the appeal of displaying transgression

Connecting the illegitimacy of torture with the association between violence and masculinity, I now get to my suggestion that an ostentatious support of torture, as illegitimate violence in an established normative order, entails political prospects for self-presentations of populist masculinity. For the purposes of this paper, my working definition of ‘populism’ is focused on what Rogers Brubaker (2017: 362-364) calls the “core element of the populist repertoire,” namely “the claim to speak and act in the name of ‘the people,’” which “is better understood in relation to a *two-dimensional* vision of social space, defined by the *intersection* of vertical and horizontal oppositions. Populist boundary drawing thus refers to both ‘elites’ and ‘outsiders.’” (Brubaker 2017: 362) – which both, in contexts of torture discourses, can be constructed as ‘enemies’ and thus “torturable.”¹⁹

When a politician displays his readiness to employ torture, this implicates the will to ‘do whatever it takes’ when facing challenges (in this case mostly imagined as threats to the polity). In this context, it is noteworthy how both Trump and Bolsonaro emphasize that “torture works”: This claimed effectiveness of torture is a precondition of including it in the repertoire of ‘whatever it takes.’ The ‘doing whatever it takes’ produces what Heinrich Popitz (2017a: 161) calls “basic legitimacy,” a recognition of an order value going “beyond what Max Weber understands as conformity based on sheer habit or on interest,” but not reaching “the specific contents of his types of legitimacy.” As Mario Krämer (2015: 160), drawing on Trutz von Trotha, emphasizes, violence is not inherently opposed to legitimacy, but contains chances for gaining legitimacy by creating social order and making this ordering tangible (see also Trotha 1994: 39-40).

For the connection between torturous violence and a superior power to produce order, it is crucial that torture is illegitimate. Only by utilizing *illegitimate* means, you can show that you really ‘do whatever it takes,’ without prioritizing established “mainstream” limits of legitimacy, which would imply corresponding limits to the power to produce order. Acting within the limits of legitimacy is proof of neither braveness nor special capabilities. Donald Trump, on the contrary, explicitly points to transgressing limits when stating that “we’re going to have to do things that are unthinkable almost” (quoted in Visser 2016).²⁰

The ostentatious support of torture as purposive violence beyond limits takes place against the backdrop of a universalized norm of refraining from violence (Koloma Beck and Werron 2013). In their paper on the role of violence in global competitions for attention and legitimacy, Teresa Koloma Beck and Tobias Werron (2013) distinguish three types of ‘competitions of violence,’ each characterized by a different strategy of positioning oneself in relation to violence, in order to gain attention and/or legitimacy in front of an (imagined) global audience. The first one frames the respective actor’s violence as defense against violent attacks in the attempt of gaining legitimacy and attention via such ‘narrations of justification’ (Koloma Beck and Werron 2013: 267). The second type seeks attention and legitimacy by ostentatiously abstaining from violence. Relevant for the argument in this paper is the third type Koloma Beck and Werron outline, in which actors openly break the norm of non-violence and thereby produce attention. In its subtype of ‘paradox violence,’ violence is employed in ‘drastic’ ways clearly in excess of established norms (Koloma Beck and Werron 2013: 271), and it is by this transgressive violence that its perpetrators ‘gain visibility’ and might become recognized ‘as political actors,’ being ‘able to make claims’ and ‘to gain access to political negotiations’ at an international level (Koloma Beck and Werron 2013: 271). The ‘paradox’ Koloma Beck and Werron see here is that by ostentatiously breaking global criteria of legitimacy, the violent actors gain a ‘second-order advantage of legitimacy’ (Koloma

Beck and Werron 2013: 271)²¹. Even though the two authors pursue a different focus in their paper and thus address this process rather like a conceptual silhouette, their point of legitimacy gained by violence can be linked both to the notion of a ‘basic legitimacy’ thought violence, as discussed by Trotha and Krämer, and, empirically, to the case of populist masculinity. The latter might lend itself to specify the phenomenon of norm-breaking violence being socially productive, this is, entailing chances to build, order, and reproduce social relations.²² In a similar vein, I follow up the question which specific benefits illegitimate violence holds for populist masculinity. Illegitimate violence thereby links populism and masculinities. I point this out because “[c]onceptually, populism has no specific relationship to gender” to start with, as Mudde and Kaltwasser (2015: 17) emphasize – while at the *empirical* level, crucial interrelations between (especially right-wing) populism and gender can be traced, for example concerning anti-genderism, ethnicized communication on women’s rights, anti-abortion, or family policies.²³

Concurrently with the argument of Koloma Beck and Werron, it creates attention when a politician displays a readiness to torture, especially in an environment identifying as liberal democracy (Rejali 2009). Supporting torture sticks out from commonly legitimate political attitudes toward torture, so that headlines and debates follow suit.²⁴

However, while attention is clearly something politicians strive for, the open support of torture can also be functional in a more specific way, beyond the ‘second-order legitimacy’ of illegitimate violence that Koloma Beck and Werron (2013) outline (without addressing specifically torture).²⁵ In this respect, I would like to depict ideas on two populist functionalities of a visibilized readiness to employ torture: 1) populist anti-establishment boundary drawing and 2) the construction of populist masculinity.

4.1 Populist anti-establishment boundary drawing

Visibly associating oneself with torture facilitates an anti-establishment boundary drawing which fits in with a populist self-positioning outside and against established elites. Here, the relevant parts of these elites are the very carriers of the universalized (imagined) ‘world public’ that Koloma Beck and Werron (2013: esp. 257-252) conceptualize based on a critical application of new institutionalism, more specifically world polity research. Associating oneself with torture defies the universalized claim of refraining from this form of extreme violence, even if we concede that other forms of violence are widely seen as legitimate even against the backdrop of a universal norm of non-violence. Supporting torture implies a refusal to acknowledge the established boundary between legitimate and illegitimate (undoable) violence, and this refusal goes along with drawing a line between “us” (populist actor and followers) and “them” (the ‘establishment’ prohibiting and legitimizing torture).

Such an offensive particularization of a norm that is constructed as universal points us to a need, in the case of populism, to analytically distinguish between audiences when looking at negotiations of (il-)legitimacy. Such an emphasis on differentiating between audiences seems to deviate from Luckmann (1987: 111), who assumes that “legitimation which makes sense to *both* [those who exercise and those who are subject to power; KI] is the most frequent case in human history,” as well as from Koloma Beck and Werron (2013), who acknowledge the relevance of different audiences, but clearly focus on a ‘world public’ toward which actors in global competitions orient themselves. In our case, this is, for the populist pursuit of political gains, it is crucial which audiences are addressed by the quoted politicians, and who, in contrast, is imagined as “other”

beyond the (self-drawn) boundary – as a torturable enemy, in the sense of a horizontal opposition, and/or as the political establishment disapproving of torture, in the sense of a vertical opposition (as distinguished by Brubaker 2017). Bolsonaro addresses a TV audience, participating in a public media discourse – and calls for the use of torture against a former head of the Brazilian central bank, this is, a member of the political ‘establishment.’ His statement also implies a criticism of the parliamentary committee, again a part of the ‘establishment,’ for *not* employing torture. He thus relates to the TV audience that he distances himself from established politics, apparently seeking support among those TV viewers who can be mobilized by criticizing the elite as well as by being ready – unlike this elite – to use violent means to sort out the supposed misdeeds of a high office holder like the former director of the central bank. Trump, in the statement quoted above, speaks during a campaign event in front of his political supporters, who are probably also his primary target audience in media statements during the election campaign. By envisioning to “bring back” torture, he distances himself from the Obama government’s political stance towards torture and positions himself in a line with the George W. Bush government – even though he aims at employing even “worse” than waterboarding, the torture technique most prominently associated with Bush’s ‘war on terror.’ In this sense, Trump promises to take things further, to be even less concerned with established limits than the Bush administration. Other than Bolsonaro, though, the people Trump imagines as tortured, and proposes as torturable (see Jefferson *in this issue*), are ‘outside enemies’ of the United States – ‘terrorists’ depicted as extremely violent. Finally, and in contrast to the ones of Bolsonaro and Trump, the quotation of Duterte stems from an incumbent head of government at the time. He speaks to *local* officials, attacking a *central* public agency, which is part of a democratic system of checks and balances. Even though Duterte is himself the president in this system, he creates a unit including himself and the audience, joking and laughing together with lower-level officials against an institutionalized control organization. This organization outlasts the president’s terms of office and thus may represent even more an ‘establishment’ to be targeted by populist rants.²⁶

Summing up, all three politicians can be seen as addressing audiences which they perceive as potentially critical of established political elites and practices, and therefore possibly open to considering violent means of politics against internal or external ‘enemies.’ Populist suggestions of torture draw boundaries with reference to a twofold foe against which the addressed audience is to be mobilized: first, the political establishment, which is depicted as not acting to the best of ‘the people’ (among other things: by refraining from torture), and second, the ‘enemy,’ which needs and deserves to be tortured. In such populist self-positioning relating to torture, in its ostentatious support, we thus find both the vertical and the horizontal boundary drawing that Brubaker (2017) distinguishes in his concept of populism. Notably, as the quotes by Bolsonaro and Duterte show, the two adversaries against which boundaries are created in the quoted statements can consist of the same group of people.

4.2 Constructing populist masculinity

In addition to boundary drawing, visibly associating oneself with torture also facilitates the construction of ‘populist masculinity.’ As a form of violence, torture is connected to an assumed masculine readiness for violence. While women are expected to shy away from violence in the cultural contexts of the cases addressed here, the decision to physically hurt others counts as a manly thing, for better or worse.

Moreover, torture is not any violence, but extreme, illegal, and *illegitimate* violence. In this case, the ‘doing whatever it takes’ (this is, a readiness for illegitimate violence) feeds into a heroic image and might lend itself to a connection with the “heroic masculinity” (Szele, cited in Naerland 2020) especially common in right-wing populism (Sauer 2020: 25).

Trump has argued in similar ways, stating that unless the US became much ‘tougher,’ terrorists would “probably think we’re weak, we’re stupid, we don’t know what we’re doing, we have no leadership” (quoted in Visser 2016). Here, Trump not only points to tactical advantages of torture, in a rationalizing way.²⁷ Moreover, what seems to be at stake for him is a loss of face of the United States, as perceived by the ‘enemy.’²⁸ Not being tough enough for torture seems, in this quote, not only weak, but akin to ridiculous.²⁹

During the ‘war on terror,’ it was, so to speak, men who did not ‘take their gloves off’ who refrained from breaking the limits of mainstream legal understandings and legitimacy on the international stage.³⁰ To spin that thought further: Only weak men, with questionable masculinity, refrain from ‘doing whatever it takes.’

Thus, populist supporters of torture present themselves as masculine *beyond* what Aharoni and Féron, drawing on Iris Marion Young, identify as cases of “protective masculinity” in the context of Finnish national-populist vigilantism (Aharoni and Féron 2019: esp. 94). Even though the trope of military and intelligence units as protectors of the country is clearly present in populists’ reasoning about torture, the explicit recommendations do not limit themselves to protective actions. They seem more pro-active, in line with antagonist depictions of the respective ‘enemy,’ and seem to go beyond a rational argument for the ‘necessary,’ pairing it up with a lust for transgression³¹ and enjoyment of illegitimate violence, thereby connecting to the dimension of affectivity in masculinist identity politics as focused upon by Birgit Sauer (2020). Also the concept of “hypermasculinity,” which Elizabeth Wood (2016) explores in connection with Vladimir Putin, ties in with our cases, for example with the limitlessness of Trump’s violent imaginations.³² These concepts of “protective” or “hyper” masculinity, however, do not focus decidedly on the ostentatious connection between populist boundary drawing and representing a transgressive violent masculinity. Looking at torture and its visible support, I thus concentrate on how the examples I introduced can be understood as manifestations of a specific “populist masculinity.”

The mentioned lust for transgression catches the eye especially when the displayed fancy for torture – itself a transgression – is accompanied by further transgressions with masculine connotation, namely coarse language and sexist transgression (including sexual violence and violence against women). Coarse language is a regular accessory of populist politicians, as among others Moffitt (2016) has pointed. Out of the three examples introduced above, especially Duterte is well-known for his coarse language (Curato 2016: esp. 94f).³³ But also Bolsonaro (El-Jaick 2020: 539-540) and Trump (Voss et al. 2018: 109) are not demure. One function of such language might be that these politicians seem closer to the “commoners” among the target population they want to mobilize.³⁴ It might be argued that such language is also associated with masculinity, as in the norm not to use it ‘in front of ladies.’ Beyond that, though, coarse language is part of the aggressive rhetoric typical for populist political masculinity as coined by Löffler (2020: 21; see above), and it serves to transgress the boundaries of legitimacy, joining forces with other transgressions. Finally, and relating to Sauer’s concept of “masculinist identity politics” and their use of affects (Sauer 2020: 24), coarse language can be part of rhetorical affect management, lending itself to attune emotions to it, like rage, fear, or, especially in connection with violence, triumph.

One more of these transgressions of legitimacy concerns a self-association with sexual violence against women – the transgressive character resulting in media attention and criticism, which does not seem to impress, but possibly rather encourage the respective populists. While Trump admittedly did not mean to publish his statement that as a rich man, he was able to “grab [women] by the pussy” (Martin 2021: 61), the media attention did not make him defensive about it. Rape jokes by both Duterte (Curato and Ong 2018) and Bolsonaro (Poder360 2021) were made in public situations with media presence. Another case in point (stemming from the material of the aforementioned research project on negotiations of violence in popular music in South Africa) would be Jacob Zuma, former South African president and mostly categorized as a populist, who at least toyed with the limits of legitimate violence when he sang an old struggle song, his ‘signature song,’ in front of the court building during his rape trial, the lyrics “umshini wami” translated most often as “bring me my machine gun,” but allowing for translating “umshini” also as penis (Suttner 2009: 229)³⁵. Other examples of populist politicians joking about sexual transgressions against women, as invoked by Martin Reisigl (2020), are the Austrian former FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache joking about ‘bunny hunting’ at a hunters’ ball with clear sexual connotations (Reisigl 2020: 223-224), the Italian Lega-Nord politician Matteo Salvini comparing a female politician to a blow-up doll (Reisigl 2020: 205) – or, evading clear left-right categorizations, the Italian 5-Stelle populist Beppe Grillo insinuating sexual aggression against the same female politician (Reisigl 2020: 205). Such toying with sexual violence against women, in its often joking mode, clearly signals more lust for transgression than a framing of rational calculation (as it characterized attempts to legitimize torture during the Bush era, see Hooks and Mosher 2005). It also pairs up with the well-known anti-feminist stances of right-wing populists (Graff and Korolczuk 2021), and again enforces a transgressive populist masculinity clearly distinct from a protective masculinity.

5. Conclusion: Torture, visibility, and the thriving of populist masculinity

In conclusion, I will formulate some tentative ideas drawing on what I discussed. As I am well aware of the sketchy empirical examples, these ideas should be understood as suggestions for further study rather than as definite findings.

Sociologists mostly assume that violence, or more generally power, always needs and seeks legitimization. Also, existing studies have made us aware of the hard work some political and legal actors perform in trying to legitimize torture (see, for example, Breger 2022b). However, a number of populists have been advocating for torture in an ostentatious manner, even though torture is a largely illegitimized form of violence. Based on this observation, I argue that the ability of violence to create social order does not depend on its legitimacy. Rather, this case brings the social productivity of decidedly *illegitimate* violence into view: In publicly supporting torture as a political means – this is, in referring to practical political options, potentially realized by their own agency, rather than merely theoretical debates – populist political actors not only might gain support,³⁶ but partake in the construction of social order also by displaying a readiness for (unbound) power and by drawing social boundaries.

This process becomes plausible when one differentiates the audiences which are addressed by the statements of support for torture and connects this audience differentiation with the vertical and horizontal boundaries that are typically drawn by populism (Brubaker 2017). The political

prospects that a visible support of torture might promise rest on the clash between different orders of legitimacy within the respective audiences, this is, by the different distinctions they make between legitimate and illegitimate violence. Contradicting this distinction as made by the ‘establishment,’ and connecting this contradiction to a ‘fight’ against an ‘enemy,’ facilitates a twofold prospect, with regard to both vertical and horizontal oppositions. By saying torture is commendable, populists produce a double distinction: from the ‘establishment,’ which condemns torture, as well as from the ‘enemies,’ against whom torture is suggested. Supporting torture can only emphasize such a boundary towards the establishment if this establishment upholds the institutionalized view that torture is illegitimate. Thus, populist actors strategically utilize the illegitimacy of their visible actions – here: open support and readiness of employing torture as a political means – in the eyes of one audience to seek support in the eyes of the other.

Moreover, via the association between masculinity and violence, an ostentatious support of torture can contribute to the construction of populist masculinities. The transgressive character that torture has in most contemporary normative orders, its categorization as illegitimate violence, makes it a suitable identifier of a man capable of extreme violence *and* the courage to do ‘whatever it takes’ – to othered enemies, against whom a horizontal opposition is constructed, and unhindered by limits upheld by the political ‘establishment’ (national or international), towards which a vertical opposition is constructed. The transgression regarding violence is not isolated, but part of a bundle of transgressions, some of which emphasize masculinity even more as they target women. Thus, the manly capability of torturous violence and readiness, even lust, for transgressions pair up to a populist masculinity in which both horizontal and vertical boundary drawing, as core elements of Brubaker’s concept of populism, are combined.

Situating populist masculinity in heterogeneous fields of masculinities afforded by the respective societies, both the (limited) material addressed here and the social-scientific literature point to populists drawing on modes of masculinity that claim dominance over others. Rather than falling clearly into a category of (regional) “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), populist masculinity becomes part of battles of definition within populist agendas, challenging not only established boundaries of legitimate violence, but also – and in connection with that – established hierarchies of masculinities (as addressed by Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 832–833). In agreement with Löffler (2020: 21; see above), populist masculinity can be understood as a “protest masculinity” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 847)³⁷ in its own way, as populist politics include a fight about what is a superior mode of being a man – which is for them not a side issue, but a substantial element of populist political agendas.³⁸

Finally, and most tentatively, one could extrapolate the implications of ostentatiously supporting torture for populist prospects of gaining followers. Connecting the productivity of violence for social orderings (Popitz 2017a; Inhetveen 1997) on the one hand with a transgression or even inversion of the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate violence on the other hand, a transformation of the limits of legitimacy in the use of violence would facilitate transformations in the social order (co-)produced by (formerly illegitimate) violence. At the same time, the populists in our cases present themselves as politicians on their way to power, or in power, as men “of strength, courage, power, and willingness to decide and act” (Löffler 2020: 20). Thereby, their transgressive support of torture appears as part of an imagined autonomous agency (see Löffler 2020: 20)³⁹, unrestrained by established rules and limits such as the prohibition and illegitimization of torture. Thus, the visible support for torture might be read, also by an audience of potential supporters, as going beyond the immediate question of violence, and as signaling both a readiness and an ability of shaping (a new) social order by means of (hitherto)

illegitimate violence, communicating extensive political power, in the sense of saying: If I can change the boundary between legitimate and undoable, undefendable, illegitimate violence, then I can change social order, then I can change the world.

What remains for now is to point out some open questions and ambivalences that make the outlined triad of torture, populism, and masculinity all but a smooth and unambiguous conceptual construct. First, when I discussed ‘political prospects’ that populist actors associate with visibly supporting torture, I avoided a statement as to whether these actors actually reach their aims to gain political support and followers, this is, whether the public support of torture is indeed politically functional. Are there observable political gains in a presentation of populist masculinity, based on an explicit readiness to endorse torture? This is an empirical question that cannot be answered in the realm of this article. There are indicators for an increased support of torture for example in the US population (Steele 2023), but it remains to be researched if, and how, this support of torture among the population relates to following, in this case, Donald Trump and his presentation of populist masculinity, especially the display of being ready to use violence beyond established limits of legitimacy. A simple and linear relation seems improbable, though. While the violent attacks on parliaments in the US and in Brazil after the defeat of Trump and Bolsonaro respectively might point to an affinity to (transgressive) violence among groups of their followers, the picture seems ambivalent when one considers, for example, the findings of Arlie Hochschild (2016: 228-230). She describes mixed feeling towards the presidential candidate Trump among Tea Party followers – especially admiration for the businessman mixed with being ‘scared’ by “what he’d do” (quoted in Hochschild 2016: 229).⁴⁰ Relativizing the picture laid out by Steele,⁴¹ other scholars point out that at least “public opinion polls between 2001 and 2009 consistently showed that the US population was opposed to torture” (Chwastiak 2015: 949, referring to Gronke and Rejali). Even though there is considerable literature on the followership of Trump (for example, on the rather counterintuitive case of evangelicals, Thompson 2022), the relevance of his explicit support of torture is still to be explored.

Another open question pertains to the references and inspirations populist politicians use in their support for torture, and their connection to masculinity. This would lead research into the realm of media discourses including popular entertainment. Scripts of masculine violence from the side of practitioners and from the side of popular media seem to have mutually influenced each other, producing reliable reference points, also for the association between torture and masculinity, in public media debates. As for example Jane Mayer (2008: 196) recounts, the show “24” with its fictional character Jack Bauer gave Guantánamo staff “lots of ideas” (military lawyer Diane Beaver, quoted in Mayer 2008: 196) about how to torture inmates in a way producing the outcome desired by the staff (on Bauer’s masculinity see Scott 2018: 77).⁴² As populist politics is (always: also) a media discourse, it could be asked how the political populist discourse intersects with negotiations of torture and masculinities in (not the least: popular) media.

Finally, and maybe most obviously, there is the question of female populists: If visibly supporting torture, as illegitimate violence, is conducive to a representation of populist masculinity, what is to be expected from female populist leaders? I excluded this from my discussion partly because of the very few prominent public references to torture by female populists. Even though some statements support illegitimate violence like torture (on Marine Le Pen, see France24 2014) or gun use at EU borders against forced migrants (on Frauke Petry, see Hamberger 2016), these statements seem less systematic in the establishment of a public political persona. One might also ask whether the women in question frame their support for illegitimate violence more by rationalizing arguments than by relishing a manly readiness for transgressive violence. However,

sufficient data for such a comparison still would have to be collected, especially since the empiric references of this article are reduced to a few prominent cases. What can be emphasized here – if we follow Geva’s (2020) analysis on Marine Le Pen’s charisma “between political masculinity and political femininity” – is that constructing and employing populist masculinity is not necessarily restricted to male populists.⁴³ Rather, populist masculinity can be regarded, to get back to the populism concept of Brubaker, as an element in a populist repertoire, which is arguably more prone, but not restricted to being employed by politicians ostentatiously embodied as men, displaying the socially ascribed masculine affinity to violence. In the context in populist self-positioning, then, the ostentatious support of torture, as violence dominantly defined as illegitimate, affords political gains by function as a well-fitting element of populist masculinity.

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Notes

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³For a contextualization of Bolsonaro within Brazil and a comparison to Trump see Prutsch 2019.

⁴Translation by the author; the original statement (as quoted in Araujo Castro 2022) says "... Eu até sou favorável que a CPI, no caso do Chico Lopes, tivesse pau de arara lá. Ele merecia isso: pau de arara. Funcional! Eu sou favorável à tortura, tu sabe disso. E o povo é favorável a isso também."

⁵The "we" in populist rhetoric can be read as part of the distinction between "us" and "them" commonly associated with populism (see below on Brubaker 2017), but the concrete imagination in specific contexts is more difficult to trace and cannot be decided for the cases invoked here. While Birgit Sauer (2020: 25) depicts the right-wing populist "we" as "homogeneous, morally pure, and ethnicized people," this homogeneity is relativized by an upheld distinction between men and women, important, according to Sauer (drawing on several scholars), as "the paradigm for dividing societies into two distinct groups," eventually legitimizing "the fundamental inequality of people and thus of social hierarchies" (Sauer 2020: 34). The question if the collective violence of torture as suggested in this Duterte quote, or other cases addressed, is imagined as homosocial violence in the sense of Meuser (2002) and part of male bonding (Diken and Laustsen 2005; for a differentiated, critical view on the focus on perpetrator groups see Wolters 2022) between a populist and his followers must therefore remain an open empirical question.

⁶See, for example, Aiolfi and Champion 2023 on Bolsonaro; Roose 2021 on Trump; Encinas-Franco 2022 on Duterte.

⁷See also Sauer 2020 on right-wing populism as masculinist identity politics

⁸See for example Lindemann 2014: 24; Hanser and Trotha 2002: 325; or Reemtsma 1997.

⁹Explicitly for example in Popitz 2017a (for power in general); in the context of global norms research Koloma Beck and Werron 2013: 249-250.

¹⁰Weber depicts legitimacy as a condition for stable rule both in relation to the subjects and, more importantly, to the administrative staff, see Weber 1978: 212-215.

¹¹Wolfgang Daschner was vice-president of the Frankfurt Police Department when, in September 2002, law student Magnus Gäfgen abducted 11-year-old Jakob von Metzler, son of a family owning an old-established private bank in Frankfurt. The police arrested Gäfgen some days after the kidnapping, but Gäfgen refused to disclose the place where Jakob was. Assuming the abducted child might still be alive, but in danger of death, Daschner ordered that a subordinate should threaten Gäfgen with inflicting pain to make him tell the truth, and if he didn't, to follow through with the threat, under medical supervision and without causing injuries. Under this threat, Gäfgen disclosed where Jakob was and took the police to the place. They found the child dead, it turned out that Gäfgen had killed him already on the day of the abduction (see ECHR 2010; Bernstein 2003; Maxeiner 2006, also for more detailed accounts of the incident). This case was intensely debated not only in the media, but also among scholars of law and political philosophy (see, for example, Förster 2008; Kinzig 2011; Cakal 2021). Gäfgen took the case to the European Court of Human Rights, the decision of which included the statement that "the method of interrogation to which the applicant had been subjected was found to be sufficiently serious to amount to inhuman treatment prohibited by Article 3" (ECHR 2010).

¹²Max Breger (2022b) addresses this as "legalizing torture as non-torture."

¹³Daxecker (2015) argues that the visibility of torture marks on victims' bodies has not only to do with questions of legitimacy, but also influences the ability of armed groups targeted by torture to recruit new members.

¹⁴On the concept of a "figure," as opposed to a role, see Popitz 2017b.

¹⁵Both pushing and constructing boundaries can cooccur in populist practices, such as an explicit verbal support of torture: On the one hand, boundaries are pushed by extending the options of what counts as legitimate standpoint in a specific context (the 'limits of the sayable'); on the other hand, the transgression itself is functional for drawing boundaries of another kind, this is, group boundaries imagined between "us" and "them," both vertically (the people vs. an elite shying away from torture) and horizontally (friend and (torturable) foe) in the sense of Brubaker (2017, see below).

¹⁶Assuming that most readers will spontaneously think of relevant examples, be it from football goal celebrations, from certain genres of rock or rap music, or other cultural practices, I limit myself to some exemplary references on violence and masculinity: in operas, see Redepenning 2013; in film, see Grønstad 2008; in sports, see Messner 1990; see also Hatty 2000.

¹⁷At a more general level, Birgit Sauer points out that contemporary right-wing populism is characterized by the allegation of an "endangerment of masculinity" (clearly referred to for example by Anders Behring Breivik) which is again connected to "the use of affects in right-wing populist political mobilization" (Sauer 2020: 24).

¹⁸In a slightly different perspective, Löffler (2020: 15) discusses a "feminization of democracy" as populist strategy, constructing the need of a male savior.

¹⁹As Andrew Jefferson (*in this issue*) points out, different kinds of populations might be rendered 'torturable' in different contexts and situations. Often affected are structurally marginalized and disadvantaged people, but the 'enemies' against whom the populists addressed here want to employ torture can also include resource-rich

categories of persons. This is made more probable, in the case of populist support for torture, by the anti-elite stance displayed as a rhetoric and programmatic focus.

²⁰While this argument, connecting notions of bravery and rule breaking, to a certain degree ties in with male populist leaders' performances as "brave bad boys" (see, on Orbán and Wilders, Sayan-Cengiz and Akyüz 2021), supporting torture seems to exceed a 'bad boy' image.

²¹Translation K.I. In their article, Koloma Beck and Werron speak about "Fälle in denen der drastische Verstoß gegen die Norm im Vordergrund steht. Es geht um Situationen, in denen bestimmte (...) Gruppen durch auffallende 'Gewalt'-Täterschaft überhaupt erst als politische Akteure sichtbar werden. Hier kann das als intentional beobachtete Verletzen fremder Körper letztlich zur Voraussetzung dafür werden, in einem bestimmten Konfliktrahmen Ansprüche überhaupt geltend machen zu können. Denn als exzessiv beobachtete 'Gewalt' stellt ein probates Mittel dar, die Aufmerksamkeit von NGOs und anderen 'universalisierten Dritten' zu gewinnen, und diese Aufmerksamkeit kann zur Grundlage dafür werden, an politische Verhandlungstische geladen zu werden. (...) Mit Blick auf solche Fälle kann man auch von 'paradoxe Gewalt' sprechen, insofern hier gerade der ostentative Verstoß gegen globale Legitimitätskriterien eine Art Legitimitätsvorteil zweiter Ordnung sichern kann."

²²This is to say that violence is not necessarily disruptive of social relations, but also constitutes a means of constructing relations (not only with those bodily affected by violent acts). Among others, Heinrich Popitz points out that violence (including threats of violence) entails a relevant capability of social ordering and of maintaining social orders: "social orders that lay limits on violence (...) themselves need violence – a violence inherent in order itself – if they are to contain violence and be able to defend themselves." (Popitz 2017a: 40) On the social productivity of 'sociable' violence, in an argument based on Simmel, Durkheim, and Popitz, see also Inhetveen 1997 (esp. 236-237).

²³See for example Linders, Dudink, and Spierings 2023; Lobban et al. 2020; Löffler 2020; Sauer 2020; for overviews see Dietze and Roth 2020 or Löffler, Luyt, and Starck 2020: 3-4.

²⁴The newspaper articles quoted in this contribution are only a small part of the media discourse around the positive statements on torture made by Trump, Bolsonaro, and Duterte.

²⁵In a similar theoretical figure, Elisabeth Wood (2016: 2) traces an "instrumental deployment of hypermasculinity, that is, an exaggerated set of cultural norms and behaviors usually associated with males, as a strategy for creating not just legitimacy, but also a scenario of power itself."

²⁶Getting back to the point of 'democratic life' controverting masculinity, one might add that both Trump and Bolsonaro did not easily accept their eventual election defeats, and while Trump was obviously involved in the subsequent violent attack against the Capitol in January 2021 (for example Pratt 2023: 54), also Bolsonaro's possible involvement in his followers' storm on the Brazilian Parliament, High Court, and Presidential Palace in January 2023 was investigated (Johnson 2023). In October 2023, a Joint Parliamentary Inquiry Commission concluded that Bolsonaro has been "intellectually and morally" responsible for the assault, as well as for a 'conspiracy to commit a crime, political violence, a violent attempt to abolish the rule of law, and a coup d'état'" (as quoted by Andrade and Castanheira 2023).

²⁷This rationalization is in line with patterns of argumentation in the US torture complex since the Cold War, see Breger 2022a: esp. 128-151.

²⁸I use the term "face" referring to Goffman (1967), although not with the same strong focus on direct, face-to-face interaction, as knowledge about US forces not being ready to use 'tougher' means (as hypothesized by Trump) would most probably be transferred via media coverage. The 'loss of face' Trump depicts as a danger here would thus be visible to a realm of spectators including, but not limited to the 'terrorists' Trump refers to – possibly a 'world public,' to get back to Koloma Beck's and Werron's (2013) conceptualization.

²⁹This again points to the relevance of affects in populist mobilization (Sauer 2020), here most probably in the realm of shame and pride.

³⁰The expression that one had taken or needed to take the 'gloves off' is associated with different people and occasions within the Bush government and administration in connection to the so-called 'war on terror' (Titunik 2009: 273).

³¹I limit myself here to pointing to "lust for transgression" as an observable enjoyment of transgressive populist actions and self-positioning; for an encompassing discussion of pleasure, enjoyment, or lust in connection to cruelty and unbounded power, more concretely in the context of (transgressive) punishment, see Hörnqvist 2021. As for the question of torture, Steele (2023) analyses an increasing US support for torture, using a Lacanian approach and stating that the support of torture in the US moves away from rational or moral arguments towards a sheer "enjoyment – *jouissance* – of norm transgression." (Steele 2023: 59)

³²When Trump demands that one had to do "the unthinkable almost," the "almost" is not an unequivocal part of his expression, but can be read as him claiming for himself the ability to think of violent techniques that not everybody could imagine – this is, as a part of an especially pronounced capability of violence.

³³See also the recent encompassing study by Vicente Rafael (2022), who observes: "Those critical of Duterte have called him out on his use of obscenities and misogynistic remarks. But as far as Duterte is concerned, his sexual banter is yet another way of asserting his sovereignty. It is for him an enactment of his freedom from the constraints of responsibility and the norms of decency. Unrestrained, he takes great delight in spewing profanities. He recounts

bawdy stories about masturbation, jokes about rape, publicly kissing women and admiring their anatomy, making references to vaginal odor, and much more.” (Rafael 2022: 78)

³⁴This observation points to populist masculinity’s ambivalent relation to the symbolic code of the sacred and profane in discourses on populism and democracy; see Enroth 2020.

³⁵Suttner (2009: 232) further explains: “In fact, many of Zuma’s supporters outside the court-room, who reacted so enthusiastically to militaristic symbolism, may themselves have been nowhere near the battle-field nor have had any role in the liberation struggle. This has developed into a wider threat with the Zuma leadership representing violent masculinities, engaging in war talk and threats. This comes mainly from the youth, but is condoned by the leadership.”

³⁶Recent research follows up the possibilities of winning (measurable) political support by communicating one’s readiness to torture (on the US case, see Steele 2023: 60-61) or, more generally, one’s affinity to employing (extreme) violence for political causes (on the cases of Brazil and the Philippines, see Lero 2023).

³⁷In this sense, the notion of “protest” against established gender orders should not be understood in a normative way that assumes that protest necessarily implies a quality of liberation of the structurally marginalized and oppressed. In any case, these protests mostly go along with their own competing narratives of repression; see also Meiering, Dziri, and Roroutan (2020: 11-13) on the “resistance dispositive” in group radicalization.

³⁸See, for example, the abovementioned contributions by Meiering, Dziri, Roroutan (2020) and Roose (2021).

³⁹This could also be seen, in the words of Sauer (2020: 32), as (another) “way of de-responsibilizing men and re-sovereignizing masculinity by re-establishing dominance through anger and aggression.” While torture plausibly can be categorized as aggression, its support is also, in several of the quotes cited in this article, connected to a display of anger – against the non-employment of torture in the case of Bolsonaro, or against the ‘enemy’ deserving torture even in the case it didn’t really help gaining information during interrogations, as in the case of Trump (Steele 2023: 61).

⁴⁰These ambivalences suggest that the “use of affects” as dimension of “masculinity identity politics” in right-wing populism (Sauer 2020: 24) can be part of political strategies, but that steering an audience’s emotions, including those of a populist’s followers, seems to complex to ever be completely controlled.

⁴¹Steele (2023) does discuss the methodological difficulties in researching US support for torture; a systematic meta study would be needed to assess the structure and conditions of US (and other countries’) population’s attitudes towards torture over time.

⁴²I thank Max Breger for pointing me to this question and information.

⁴³The ambiguous relations between female populists and political instruments associated with masculinity – namely (political) violence – is beyond the scope of this paper, but certainly a topic the importance of which is highlighted by the argument.

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