



La Vengeance et la Paix [Revenge and Peace], written by Marie Robin

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Marie Robin, *La Vengeance et la Paix* [Revenge and Peace], Paris, Editions du CNRS, 261 p., ISBN: 9782271151216

What is the common phenomenon driving the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the war in Gaza, and the elimination of Al-Qaeda leaders by US military forces? It's vengeance. Putin claims to take revenge for the 1991 disbanding of the USSR, Hamas uses the Nakba to justify its 7th October 2025 attacks, while Israel vows to "take mighty vengeance" from it, and both Obama and Biden announce that "justice has been done" when reporting the killing of 9/11 instigators. Although reproved in contemporary discourses as a backward and futile practice, vengeance is used to legitimise violent action on the international scene – even by liberal actors. How can we understand this paradox? Could this understanding help build lasting peace in intractable conflicts? Answering these two questions is the ambition of Robin's *La Vengeance et la Paix*. The book follows a dialectical structure: vengeance against peace, peace through vengeance, and from vengeance to peace.

In the introduction, Robin defines the key concept of the book: "Vengeance is the act committed in order to generate a certain level of pleasure and satisfaction of hurting or punishing someone in response to a previous offense suffered by the avenger or someone (something) to whom the avenger is attached and identifies with" (p. 21).¹ The author also introduces the liberal myth of the exclusion of vengeance, a concept deconstructed throughout the book. This is the idea that our current political systems are the result of progress from a state of nature where vengeance was the law, to a civilised one. The state now has a monopoly on legitimate violence where "all forms of private justice [are rendered] useless, unacceptable, and immoral." (p. 31). Finally,

¹ All direct quotations from *La Vengeance et la Paix* are based on the reviewer's own translations.

peace is defined in the sense of Galtung “as the absence of structural violence resulting from violence in society.” (p. 32).

Firstly, vengeance is described in Chapter One as a cause of political violence: at the heart of the notion of forming a group (i.e., if you attack us, we will respond), vengeance breeds both intra- and inter-state wars and leads to extreme violence (i.e., via a triple mechanism of contagion, refusal to negotiate, and acceptance of extreme acts). Vengeance also plays various roles in supporting terrorist action: it is a driving force, a desired goal (e.g., pushing the adversary to overreact), and a tool for legitimisation. Chapter Two explains how vengeance perpetuates conflicts over the long term. On the one hand, vengeful desires call for the memory of past offences to be preserved. “In vengeance, the past is present and seeks to dictate the future.” (p. 79). On the other hand, memory politics can reopen old wounds and associated demands for vengeance. This leads to the crystallisation of polarised views, making dialogue unlikely, if not impossible. Chapter Three portrays vengeance as an obstacle to peace by analysing (systems of) vengeance policies. Nazi Germany is used to illustrate how this form of totalitarianism was intertwined with demands for, and policies of, vengeance. Marie Robin then shows that vengeance can structure a state's foreign policy. Two paradigms are detailed: the policy of responding to offences (i.e., punishing all offences aims to prevent the occurrence of future existential threats), and the policy of power assertion (i.e., where honour, prestige and reputation take precedence).

In the second part of the book, vengeance is presented in its best light. As a means of expressing legitimate demands, it becomes moral. Chapter Four reveals how private vengeance can be compatible with a certain conception of justice. In fact, vengeance can be tolerated (i.e., when it becomes the only way to combat impunity), integrated into justice decisions (e.g., punitive damages), or established as a legal system (e.g., Chechen or Albanian customary law). Chapter Five then sets out three moral elements that legitimise acts of vengeance. Firstly, “it is the

asymmetry between the two parties [to a conflict] that seems to lend legitimacy to vengeance.” (p. 169). Vengeance becomes a struggle to restore equality between the victim and the criminal, between the weak and the strong. Secondly, vengeance is said to have a virtue in the emancipation it allows. By acting, the individuals, or even the groups, manage to overcome their trauma and transcend their victimhood. Thirdly, vengeance is legitimised by its deterrent effect: blood is shed so that it will not be shed again in the future. To conclude the antithesis, Chapter Six reflects on the criteria for identifying legitimate vengeance on the international stage. Six characteristics are cited: legitimacy of the avenger, asymmetry of power, serious or existential offence, proportionality in the act, vengeance publicised as such, and last resort measure.

The synthesis of the book consists of two chapters and a general conclusion. In Chapter Seven, the author analyses the ambivalence of the UN, an institution dedicated to peace, which rightly identifies acts of vengeance as obstacles to its mission but seems to integrate some into its operational practices (e.g., the death of peacekeepers in Somalia in 1993 led to a more severe intervention). Chapter Eight and the general conclusion propose the following reasoning. On the one hand, all acts of vengeance must be rejected as undesirable for peace. On the other hand, legitimate demands for vengeance should be integrated into peace processes within a structure of ‘vengeance dialogue’. This dialogue must enable “adversaries to become interlocutors.” (p. 252). Otherwise, silencing vengeful passions risks producing an imperfect peace that destroys social cohesion and freezes victims in their trauma. The paradigm of reparative justice is cited as an example from which to learn.

The main merit of this book probably lies in the nuance it brings to the question of the legitimacy of vengeance. Marie Robin deconstructs parts of the taboo surrounding the liberal myth of the exclusion of vengeance, showing why it is essential to consider vengeance within modern societies and to include it in any process seeking to establish a lasting peace. In doing

so, it will become easier to identify the norms underlying what actors consider to be just, and to prevent violent acts of vengeance. Furthermore, the text is enjoyable to read, the arguments are well structured, and the numerous examples help to maintain a certain pace. The effort made to synthesise the arguments should also be highlighted, resulting in a dense although relatively short work (i.e., 258 pages). In contrast to the content of the chapters, the book's three-part structure is more difficult to follow. Taken individually, the thesis and antithesis would each merit a dedicated work. Taken together, the construction is somewhat unstable, and the synthesis leaves a lot of doors open. This very short section (i.e., 32 pages) raises the question of vengeance dialogues without really exploring or highlighting the conditions under which it would be truly possible to create “interlocutors rather than antagonists.” (p. 252).

This leads to an apparent limitation of the book, namely the lack of articulation between the individual, collective and political levels. Indeed, if there were to be dialogues of vengeance, at what level would this promote peace? Would these be dialogues at the inter-individual or inter-group level, or within the political negotiations leading to peace? If it is a question of negotiations, it would have been interesting to contrast the importance of past-oriented demands for vengeance with present and future oriented claims.² Throughout the book, it is also difficult to distinguish political exploitation and vengeance discourses from individual and collective vengeful passions. So, when the author calls for vengeance not to be ignored at the risk of missing out on peace, which passions are referred to? Political demands or individual grievances? Those of the elites or those of citizens? Those questions will have to be addressed if the conclusion of the book is to produce the effect it seeks.

Finally, one element of the antithesis that justifies the book's conclusion deserves to be questioned. It concerns the supposed necessity for an individual to confront their trauma in

² Rosoux, “Peace Processes as a Double Promise: The Risk of Linking Memory and Hope in Times of Distrust”, p. 354.

order to be freed from it through a cathartic process.³ In this case, this Freudian theory leads to the conclusion that it is desirable for a victim to seek vengeance – whether violent or symbolic – in order to escape their victim status and overcome their trauma. This theory is open to criticism in many respects.⁴ In the book, to demonstrate that vengeance brings a certain “inner peace” (pp. 173-174), a study is cited.⁵ Contrary to what is claimed, this study does not prove that vengeance actually brings inner peace, but rather the opposite. It reports that believing in the effectiveness of vengeance to feel better leads individuals to behave more aggressively. It only opens up the possibility that symbolic aggression might have a short lived ‘mood repair effect’, that does not reverse the evidence pointing towards the inefficiency of cathartic-based processes to bring wellbeing.⁶ If peace at the collective level depends on peace at the individual level, then this leaves the question open on how dialogue about vengeance can bring lasting inner and collective peace. The answer probably lies in the level of analysis: as the collective and the individual have each their specific logics.

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³ Rubenstein, Duek, Doran, and Harpaz-Rotem, “To Expose or Not to Expose: A Comprehensive Perspective on Treatment for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder”, p. 331.

⁴ Sturmey, *Violence and Aggression: Integrating Theory, Research, and Practice*, p. 219.

⁵ Chester and DeWall, “Combating the Sting of Rejection with the Pleasure of Revenge: A New Look at How Emotion Shapes Aggression”, p. 426.

⁶ Bushman, “Does Venting Anger Feed or Extinguish the Flame? Catharsis, Rumination, Distraction, Anger, and Aggressive Responding”, pp. 724-731. Lohr, Olatunji, Baumeister & Bushman, “The psychology of anger venting and empirically supported alternatives that do no harm”, pp. 53-64.

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