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Making Sense of State Violence: Understanding Public Inquiries as Political Devices¹

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Abstract

Whenever a political scandal or controversy erupts, one is likely to hear a familiar demand: “There must be a public inquiry!”. Inquiries are institutions of last resort, instigated only when something has gone wrong or must be urgently done, where the usual mechanisms of the state are found wanting. Often the focus of inquiries has been that which the state claims as its monopoly: the use of violence. There is a long and chequered history of inquiries appointed to investigate the state’s use of violence in (post)colonial contexts, military interventions and police actions. This special issue interrogates this history, contributing to wider debates in Critical Military Studies on war and violence. Inquiries are acts of epistemic sovereignty that seek to establish authoritative interpretations of events, and this has sometimes led to a dichotomous representation of inquiries as either promising fora for democratic accountability or tools for elite interests. This special issue seeks to overcome this dichotomy through interdisciplinary dialogue and a granular examination of the political cultures and epistemic practices of inquiries into state violence. In so doing, these articles offer a nuanced analysis of the political functions of inquiries and their potential for democratic accountability and justice.

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Introduction

Whenever a political scandal or controversy erupts in Britain and the Commonwealth, one is likely to hear a familiar demand from those across the political spectrum: “There must be a public inquiry!”² Inquiries have been part of British political and public life for centuries. They have been exported and mimicked internationally, especially within the Commonwealth, as ostensibly trustworthy, impartial mechanisms of truth. For states, they are an integral technology in governing a liberal democracy and a means of correcting failure whilst retaining public trust in state institutions. They take different forms but simply defined, inquiries are “temporary working groups created, mandated, and made independent by governments in order to fact-find, hold actors to account or develop policy lessons” (Stark, 2019; 397). The appointment of an inquiry signals two things: firstly, the existence of widespread concern that something has gone wrong and/or something must be done concerning an issue in which the state is implicated; secondly, that this problem cannot be resolved through business as usual. An inquiry is therefore an institution of last resort, instigated only when there is widespread suspicion from a large or powerful enough group that relevant state authorities lack the requisite powers and independence necessary to do the job. Unsurprisingly then, the focus of an inquiry is that which, as Weber (1970) claims, is the state’s monopoly: the use of violence. The British state has a long and chequered history of inquiries appointed to investigate its use of violence in (post)colonial contexts, military interventions, and police actions (see Thomas et al., 2024 for a list). There is an irony that while alleged wrongdoing invariably provokes calls for an inquiry, there is a pervasive scepticism that inquiries do not hold the state accountable for its use of force.

Our aim in this special issue is to subject the politics of inquiries to the kind of interdisciplinary dialogue and critical debate that characterises Critical Military Studies (CMS) (Basham et al., 2015). To date, scholarship on the political function of official inquiries has often been siloed within disciplines or case studies (Thomas et al., 2024). This special issue not only includes perspectives from History, Politics, International Relations, Law, Peace and Conflict Studies, and Transitional Justice, but it has also sought to extend across these academic boundaries

² Recently, for example, with the demands for the creation of a COVID inquiry since March 2020: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/227/unequal-impact-coronavirus-covid19-and-the-impact-on-people-with-protected-characteristics/news/115181/coronavirus-covid-19-inquiry-launched/>.

and create interdisciplinary reflection on common themes and questions. The volume was developed through two workshops organised by the University of Exeter in September 2021 and April 2022, as part of “Warnings from the Archive”³. Our aim was to place the study of historical events and political cultures with the conceptual and methodological rigours derived from multiple disciplines. Influenced by scholars, including in CMS, who creatively seek to close the gaps between political and strategic studies of global power on the one hand, and studies interested in the cultures and discourses of violence and imperialism, on the other, the project is part of a broader scholarly ambition to break down barriers between “ultra-empiricist and overtheoretical” analyses of empire and state-led violence (Howe, 2009: 16; see also *inter alia* Nagy, 2008; Welland, 2015; Thomas and Toye, 2017; Caddick, 2018; Reeves and Heath-Kelly, 2020; Dolan 2021; Hearty, 2021; Catignani and Basham, 2021; Redwood, 2021; Basham, 2022; Bennett, 2024). This special issue is an attempt to contribute to this crucial, interdisciplinary wave of new scholarship and *Critical Military Studies* was, therefore, the natural home.

As our discussions and approach to inquiries evolved over the workshops, a set of questions emerged as the special issue’s focus: How have inquiries been shaped by political context and culture? What has counted as an “inquiry”? What problems and limitations have arisen when inquiries investigate state violence? What is the political potential of public inquiry? Before setting out these questions and contributions, this introduction first develops our interpretation of the problems posed by and for inquiries.

Public inquiries have always indicated social complexity, political discord, and the state’s need to re-assert itself as the architect and producer of the good life (Gilligan, 2003; Brown, 2004; Cagri, 2009). They have long been entangled with the deep-set legal and political traditions in Britain. Indeed, some scholars have traced the principle of an inquiry back to the Domesday Book, in advance of common law innovations in the 12th century, while the first “post-mortem” inquiries took shape in the second half of the nineteenth century to reassure a society “unprepared for the revolutions overtaking it” (Wraith and Lamb 1971, 27).⁴ Inquiries were also a symptom of print and bureaucratic technology. An inquiry depends upon the ability to gather information, create archives, and publish reports about the state and society. In this way, the modern state could craft

³ “Warnings from the Archive: A Century of British Intervention in the Middle East” was an interdisciplinary research project – funded by the Leverhulme Trust – that brought the disciplines of History, International Relations, and Political Science together to examine two official inquiries, one hundred years apart, into controversial military interventions in Iraq: the 1917 Mesopotamia Commission and the 2016 Iraq Inquiry. Visit <https://warningsfromthearchive.exeter.ac.uk> for more information.

⁴ The regularity of fatal incidents on the railways, for example, led to the establishment of some of the first ad hoc inquiries that would hear public testimony, find facts, and make recommendations. They indicated public anxieties about the risks of the industrial revolution, competing political interests as to its regulation and, perhaps most importantly, that it was the role of government to do something about it.

narratives about itself (Frankel 2006, 1-2). Inquiries have often been employed to investigate issues that are deeply intertwined with the contradictions of liberalism and its postcolonial past. They arise from public anxiety about uncontrolled or transgressive harm, inequality, or injustice; uncertainty or disagreement about the past, present and future; and disagreement about the reality, nature, and resolution of such crises. Examples range across arms sales, industrial disasters and transport accidents, unlawful killings, police violence, mistreatment of detainees and internment practices, human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law in conflict, misuse of intelligence, and security scandals where the boundary between disciplined and undisciplined violence is often unstable (inter alia Stavrianakis, 2018; Danewid, 2020; Hearty, 2020; Bennett, 2023; Duriesmith, 2023; Schlembach 2024).⁵ Many instances are included in this special issue, such as concerns about the executive's war powers (Strong), the policing of the Brixton riots (Peplow), or war crimes committed in Iraq (Williams) and Northern Ireland (Richards) in which the state stood accused of transgressing the liberal principles upon which international reputation and moral authority are claimed. This volume also includes examinations of public *enquiry* processes conducted to address topics of liberal anxiety, such as perceived disorder in Afghanistan (Drephal) or the postcolonial future of Malaysia (Saunders). Inquiries begin from an impetus that something must be done, but what must be done is uncertain.

Amidst this uncertainty, an inquiry is a mechanism of crisis management to (re)establish power and trust. Through the creation of knowledge, an inquiry shows how an event can be controlled: how a failure is temporary or no failure at all; how a scandal is a deviation from an otherwise orderly political and administrative system; or how a seemingly existential crisis can be managed without radical societal change (Burton and Carlen, 1978: 48; Ashworth, 1990; Cagri, 2009). This is an act of epistemic sovereignty: it is authoritative sensemaking in a manner that only the state has the power to achieve (Brown, 2004). An inquiry cannot subdue public unease by validating competing perspectives about what happened. It must distil the complex social relations that exist around the controversy into discrete causes. As the papers by Henrique Tavares Furtado and Andrew Williams show, for instance, often this occurs through individualising responsibility and refusing intersectional approaches. It must produce a single official account from the wide variety of available interpretations favoured by different individuals and social groups. In this way, an inquiry imposes an order where there might otherwise be “several orders or even disorders” (Cook, 2011: 626). This need for epistemic order is critical for the legitimacy of the state and its use of violence. Force is one of the most basic exercises of sovereign power; illegitimate force

⁵ See, for example, lists of pre-2005 inquiries from House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee (2005) and post-2005 inquiries from the Institute for Government (2017).

threatens the social contract, which is premised upon the assurance that life within the political community is more secure than it would be outside its borders or under a different sovereign power. If the state's use of force leads to life just as "nasty, brutish and short" as what is threatened by the sovereign's absence, the legitimacy of the state is at risk (Waldron, 2001). And there is a further consideration for ostensibly "civilised" states of the Global North who, as Iris Marion Young (2003: 8), notes, justify their use of force "with the point of view of the defendant", or, by positioning themselves as protectors.

This has profound consequences for inquiries that are claimed to be "objective" or independent of political weaponisation. As Donna Haraway (1988: 589) highlights, "objectivity" is a myth that fosters a "partial perspective", thus limiting evidential scope and leading to "power-sensitive, not pluralist, conversation[s]." In keeping with the feminist methodological principles of CMS (Basham and Bulmer 2017), the truth of an event can be told in myriad ways and from a range of different data sources and methodologies. Clear preferences, even hegemonic adherence, to particular methodological outlooks can be seen in public discourse. In this way, the contours of public outrage shape both issues that are deemed worthy of an inquiry, and the methods and voices included in any investigation (Johnson et al., 2021). Often, claims of truth-telling or fact-finding are not more or less accurate reflections of an external brute reality. Rather, as Law and Urry (2004: 395) have claimed, the truth that arises out of the methods "make social worlds". Through different methods "certain kinds of social realities are performed into being". Those same methods, albeit often implicit and unconscious, underpin the design and execution of an inquiry. Inquiry officials have agency and discretion over which voices or narratives are deemed credible, important, and worthy of preservation in societal memory, and therefore the production of "new social realities" (Stoler, 2002: 104). To investigate and prepare their inquiry report, these officials build archives of evidence that are just as vulnerable to the inequalities identified in the preservation politics of national archives. These inequalities are then reproduced and sanitised by historians who rely upon inquiry testimony or documents to construct their analysis (Chiam, 2021; Lambert, 2022: 10C). Awareness of these methodological processes complicates the presumption that commissions of inquiry can be sites of apolitical truth or fact.

There are similar implications for inquiries that are ascribed legitimacy based on having a public dimension (Finn, 2021; Kniep et al., 2023). But what does it mean for an inquiry to be public? There are various conventional answers: an inquiry is conducted to some degree *in* public, it reports *to* a public, and it may provide an opportunity for members of the public to *participate*. CMS scholarship has shown how any public activity is situated and performative (McGarry, 2022). And as scholars of secrecy and revelation have shown (inter alia Birchall, 2012; Stampnisky, 2020;

Rappert, 2021), exposure is never neutral. The idea of inquiry as excavation (unveiling of secret information from a dusty or digital government archive) should be treated with caution (Ferrara, 2021; Dolan, 2021). Exposure is never neutral. The state's commitment to transparency masks a multitude of epistemological processes through which knowledge is actively produced by an inquiry and preserved for future analysis. For instance, anecdotal or non-establishment evidence is rarely recorded or made available as part of a public inquiry.

For these reasons, existing scholarship is divided on whether inquiries deliver democratic accountability or are instead processes of social control that reproduce elite interests. Large swathes of existing literature argue that inquiries often close down the space for scrutiny and accountability, particularly of systemic or structural harms and inequalities (Brown, 2004; Rolston and Scraton, 2005, Williams, 2018). At first glance, the contributions in this special issue support the claim that inquiries can be “a convenient mechanism of legitimation for the state” (Gilligan 2004: 8-19), but the papers also provide nuance to such a critique and avoid a dichotomous framing of inquiries as either “panacea or placebo”: a rigorous investigation or an establishment whitewash (Sedley, 1989; Elliott and McGuinness, 2002; Critch, 2023). The articles—such as Peplow's examination of the Scarman inquiry, Rangwala's analysis of Iraq War inquiries, or Richards' account of anti-inquiry activism—reveal the political functions of inquiries through a granular account of the epistemic practices that are employed through, around and against inquiries. There has been limited attention to this question of knowledge production, with some notable exceptions (Farson and Phythian, 2011; Hearty, 2021; Thomas et al., 2023). As an interdisciplinary exploration, this special issue recognises the significance of the context, culture, and practices of inquiries. Attention to this context reveals the value systems and limits of inclusivity at work (Johnson et al, 2022). Examining the current and historical political culture, as well as the role of individuals and their shifting interests, can complicate what might otherwise be a totalising critique of inquiries: it can reveal, for example how inquiries are shaped and contested by multiple publics or political cultures; it can generate new insights into methodological approaches that have prioritised some expertise and voices over others, and how such exclusions can be avoided in the pursuit of justice.

This special issue is structured around four key themes, each of which offers a distinctive perspective on the epistemic practices and political functions of inquiries into state violence. We now introduce each theme, the logic for its inclusion, and the contributions of each paper within it below.

How are inquiries shaped by political context and culture?

Exploring historical inquiries helps us to understand how legacies of past inquiries reverberate within, shape, and constrain their present-day descendants. It makes sense, therefore, to start with a paper that interrogates Britain's first recognisably modern public inquiry into the use of military force abroad: the Sebastopol Committee of 1855. James Strong's **"A Radical Inquiry, Tamed: The Sebastopol Committee of 1855"** is a detailed interrogation of the aftermath of this battlefield disaster (as part of the Anglo-French invasion of Crimea). His work encourages us to think more broadly about the origins of the modern inquiry. For all its shortcomings, the Sebastopol Committee established not only the precedent that MPs could legitimately investigate ongoing military operations but also the knowledge that such investigations would not necessarily disrupt Britain's ability to wage war (see also Thomas et al, 2024). Originally a radical project, driven by the Radical MP John Arthur Roebuck, the Sebastopol Committee wound up tamer than its origins implied, foreshadowing later accusations that justice 'by committee', as with inquiry commissions, would always render conservative results. However, Strong argues that the *act* of establishing a committee had much more of a political impact – both immediate and lasting – than the eventual report itself. By taking the longer view of public inquiries we can trace how the model has evolved, towards ostensibly apolitical formats led by judges that we are more familiar with today. Strong's reflection on this nineteenth-century example enables us to see more clearly the way partisan influence imbibes the inquiry process from its very inception. By showing how Roebuck sought the inquiry to reassert parliamentary powers over the executive rather than for specific concerns related to the war in Crimea, Strong allows us to see how an inquiry can emerge from – and influence – everyday politics for reasons unrelated to their ostensible objects. As a result, truth-seeking does not necessarily have to be the main political purpose – or consequence – of an inquiry.

What counts as an 'inquiry'?

The special issue not only expands our understanding of inquiries temporally, as with Strong's article, but also geographically and conceptually. Most scholarship on public inquiries reinforces a narrow definition of the instrument as a state-led institution, typically operating in society and led by political officials. In contrast, we have not only included articles on post-event state-led inquiries, but also pre-emptive *enquiry* processes as well as non-state inquiries led by doctors, colonial administrators, and, even, activists in contexts far beyond British soil. This broadening of the "inquiry" enables this special issue to explore the political power and potentiality of inquiries. We reveal how an inquiry is shaped by factors that significantly predate the inquiry. For example, an inquiry's epistemological and methodological approaches are rooted in custom and doctrine

(such as the traditions of law or history, and the influence of Enlightenment ideas). Similarly, what counts as a crisis or scandal requiring an inquiry is prefigured by existing national values, self-image and perceived role in international politics (and the image and understanding of the “other” - often the victim of the transgression).

Nowhere is this broadening of “inquiry” more evident than in Maximilian Drephal’s **“Colonial enquiry, pathology, and the making of the ‘Afghan Crisis’ (c. 1857-1878)”**. His intervention encourages us to consider colonial enquiry as a process by which interventionist rationales for military violence are created. Taking the Second Anglo-Afghan War of 1878-1880 as his case study, he foregrounds colonial sense-making before the fact, thus inverting traditional approaches to the study of the practice of inquiry. His piece starts in 1857 with the colonial Indian diplomatic mission to Afghanistan in the 1860s, which resulted in a diagnosis of Afghanistan as “the sick man of Asia”. The use of medical expertise and language created a situation that “needed curing”, thus fuelling – and justifying – the military violence eventually unleashed in 1878. Drephal allows us to see how colonial *enquiry* and modern public inquiry are linked. The causes of imperial warfare are rooted in an empire’s own sense-making exercises and its pathologisation – a medicalised form of othering – of foreign populations. A critical investigation of inquiries must acknowledge how military intervention still operates on the paternalistic assumption that there is a problem that needs to be “cured”, “fixed”, “excised”, or “contained”, enabling colonists to make claims to humanitarian justifications for military force (see also Manchanda, 2020). Indeed, this medical rhetoric in imperial military strategy became popular in the decades after Drephal’s case, as European colonial powers waged counterinsurgency campaigns against populations deemed to require “rehabilitation”. A modern public inquiry that avoids querying the origins and legitimating epistemologies of violence “directly upholds the coloniality of the modern international state system and the political relations that are built on them”.

The workings of an inquiry thus reveal the values and lives that are deemed the most important in society, and this consequently directs the inclusion and exclusion of voices within an investigation. Many of our papers consider the politics of elitism and class, gender, expertise, and race to unpack this power dynamic between those voices amplified and those marginalised. Similarly to Drephal’s article, David Saunders moves our focus from *post factum* inquiries to a pre-emptive inquiry by examining the Cobbold Commission led by the British government in South East Asia in the early 1960s. His paper, **“Brokering a postcolonial Malaysia: how local elites shaped the Cobbold Commission, 1961-63”**, explores a Commission of Enquiry that was set up by the colonial British administration to determine whether the people of North Borneo (now Sabah) and Sarawak supported the proposal to create the Federation of Malaysia consisting of

Malaya, Brunei, Singapore, North Borneo, and Sarawak. Saunders employs fresh archival evidence to counter orthodox scholarship that suggests the commission delivered a decisive cross-section of public opinion in support of the imperial power's plans for post-colonial sovereignty. Instead, Saunders argues that the inquiry became a vehicle for local elite advancement, the prioritisation of an Anglo-Malayan geopolitical agenda, and the perpetuation of political marginalisation for non-elite populations in the region, rather than the transparent democratic legitimisation promised to them.⁶ The inconclusiveness of its findings legitimised narratives that Sabah was “incapable” of making decisions about its future, mirroring racialised accusations levelled at other indigenous communities in the region, such as Papuans in West Papua during their plebiscite in 1968-9. It enabled Britain and Malaya to push ahead with *Projek Malaysia* (the Malaysia plan), while prioritising certain elite voices, thus cementing their influence in the post-colonial period. While pre-emptive investigations, like the Cobbold Commission, often claim to be neutral, objective fact-finding exercises in truth-telling (not dissimilar to the King-Crane Commission in the Middle East four decades prior), Saunders' article encourages us to view them as political devices with a technocratic power to shape public opinion and produce (mis)information to achieve political goals.

What problems have arisen when inquiries investigate state violence?

The next three papers focus on whether inquiries can scrutinise the underlying causes or justifications for state violence. Indeed, this is a common argumentative theme across all the articles in this special issue, as many explore how the state variously attempts to draw a line under such scandals and “move on”—in short, to “represent failure as temporary, or no failure at all” (Burton and Carlen, 1979:48). This line-drawing culminates in the recognition (and occasionally formal apology) for lapses of judgement, tragic accidents, acts of good failure; the excision of “bad apples”; or sometimes the inquiry itself is dismissed as a failure, whitewash or betrayal.⁷ All these responses are acts of line-drawing that deny a link between transgression and business-as-usual liberalism and encourage a temporal disconnect with the crisis.

⁶ Saunders' work is thus an important addition to scholarship on the decolonisation period of the 1950s and 1960s. Marked by plebiscites, referendums, and elections, this was a complex era where the quest for post-colonial sovereignty was intertwined with neocolonial ideals and the aspirations of local elites. Despite the ostensibly democratic processes that characterized this period, the influence of external powers and internal elite ambitions significantly shaped the outcomes of these decolonisation efforts. The complexity captured by Saunders complements existing scholarship that challenges the simplistic narratives of a linear transition to independence and reveals the layered realities of national sovereignty, international influence, and local agency that shaped decolonisation processes in countries such as Cameroon (Terretta, 2013; Ketzmerick, Lüder, & Heise, 2022) and West Papua (Kluge 2020, Tudor, 2022).

⁷ Consider, for example, the Saville Inquiry that overturned the findings of the rushed and highly controversial 1972 Widgery inquiry into the killing of 26 unarmed civilians during Bloody Sunday. Saville concluded none of those who were killed or injured posed a threat of causing death or serious injury to the British soldiers, prompting a formal apology from then-Prime Minister David Cameron.

Yet, as this special issue shows, participants and audiences of inquiries often claim that transgressive state violence is not exceptional but rather part of a “deep imperialism” whereby violence is intrinsic to liberalism (Hearty, 2020). Audience response and societal belief in the broad-stroke efficacy of the investigation are critical for the survival of public inquiries. Even whilst weathering criticism, inquiries project a carefully curated narrative of democratic engagement to retain support as a state mechanism for truth-telling, regardless of the limitations of inviting the public in. These three papers demonstrate how inquiries make significant attempts to perform publicness. Such a performance is not a passive act. The appeal to publicness facilitates the legitimisation of epistemological practices, ethical judgments, and recognition, and provides a compelling rebuttal to accusations of privilege or inequality. These next articles also show the existence of multiple publics (Warner, 2002). Through the determination of terms of reference (that is, the specific issue or scandal under scrutiny), the employment of exclusionary methods, and the inclusion of credentialed expertise and valued knowledges, inquiries implicitly impose limits on political participation, examining the hierarchies of publics that participate in inquiries to different degrees.

A core concern for this special issue is therefore how far inquiries are capable – if at all – of grappling with this question of systemic harm. Many of our articles interrogate the idea that the inquiry is itself an instrument of coloniality. Examining these themes in the context of 1980s Britain, Simon Peplow’s **“A deadly weapon aimed at our hearts’: The scope and composition of Lord Scarman’s 1981 public inquiry”** provides a rich exploration of the Scarman inquiry into the Brixton disorders. He argues that this case exemplified a core function of inquiries to “depoliticise issues and provide the appearance that ministers share public concern, arguably acting as a political device to maintain the state through apparent declarations of unfailing commitment to ‘accountability’ and ‘legitimacy’.” Peplow shows how Scarman’s inquiry rendered the anti-police uprisings as violence belonging in “less-civilised countries”. This diagnosis, however, was developed by marginalising certain voices (such as those of Brixton’s predominantly Black community who sought an inquiry into police misconduct) and limiting the inquiry’s scope to concentrate upon the “consequences, rather than the causes” of racial disadvantage in Britain. Indeed, it also revealed how the inquiry staff neglected to recognise Britain’s responsibility for disorder and violence. As a result, the inquiry rejected complaints of institutional racism and “the uprisings were characterised by the state as a ‘crisis of law and order’ and were thus utilised to legitimise an increasing militarisation of the British police rather than tackling the impact of racism.”

If inquiries are – in an ideal world - to be an instrument of accountability seeking, as Peplow challenges, they must be capable of concluding whether the powerful acted responsibly. In his article, **“Locating political responsibility for war: the Iraq inquiries, 2003-2016”**, Glen Rangwala turns our attention to the issue of political leadership and responsibility. Comparing three major UK public inquiries appointed to investigate alleged policy failures and wrongdoing related to British involvement in the Iraq war (Hutton, Butler, and Chilcot), Rangwala astutely demonstrates how each inquiry neglected to make judgements about political responsibility. While offering some assessment of managerial competence or respect for political institutions, all three inquiries shied away from assessing the political judgment made by the British Government—and Tony Blair in particular—that participating in the war was in the public interest. Rangwala shows how the inquiries were “treating judgement as if it were a characteristic that political leaders have a unique claim upon” and that inquiry members “who were not ‘there’ at the time” cannot grasp or, more fundamentally, should not ask given their non-political character. This unearths an institutional deference to those in the room regardless of the consequences of their decision. Rangwala’s investigation into the triad of Iraq Inquiries focused on whether actors made decisions in good faith and followed procedure, but ultimately paid insufficient attention to whether Britain or Iraq were left better or worse off in the aftermath of the invasion (a point echoed in Andrew Williams’ paper that inquiries fail to engage in serious ethical scrutiny). Such political judgements are crucial, Rangwala argues, because they open up a terrain to address injustice: to acknowledge historical wrongs that were hitherto justified as acts of good faith or unforeseeable tragedy, and thereby prevent future acts of illegitimate violence.

Finally, in this section, Hannah Richards shifts our attention from the inner workings of inquiries to the publics that engage with them. In **“Backlash of the “Betrayed” Squaddies’: Representations of Veteran Anti-investigation Activism on British News Websites”**, Richards investigates the activist movement that protested the continued state-led investigation into the conduct of certain British military personnel during the Northern Ireland conflict. This “anti-investigation activism” is situated alongside - as well as reproducing - a narrative that demonises inquiries as amounting to a national betrayal of “our boys” and a dismissal of their sacrifice. Williams later suggests in this special issue that this framing is perhaps a consequence of a preoccupation with narrow, legalistic concerns with individual responsibility for wrongdoing at the neglect of systemic factors. Richards shows how the activist movement is a powerful political force with its own audience(s). Rather than simply objecting to the process of investigation, the activists reframed the violence that is alleged to have been committed by those under scrutiny. Echoing Rangwala’s claim that inquiries are deferential to elite political judgements, Richards

draws attention to the activists' perception that soldiers should not be investigated as they were merely "doing their duty" under difficult circumstances. Rather than a transgression of the law, violence committed by the military against civilians is recoded as mere "calamities of war". As such "instances of extreme military violence are obscured and contained through an understanding of this violence as natural, necessary, and benevolent", which has the dual effect of calling into question the necessity of an inquiry *as well as* seeking to redraw the boundaries of legitimate violence in war. For these anti-investigation activists, moral outrage is inverted away from the identified scandalous transgression of the laws of war and instead redirected toward the demonization of "left-wing activist lawyers" and even the formal processes of truth recovery itself.

What is the political potential of public inquiry?

In our final section, Henrique Tavares Furtado and Andrew Williams return us to the question raised in the introduction: what is the political potential of an inquiry? Neither Furtado nor Williams argue against the use of inquiries. Rather, they both recognise and seek avenues to move beyond, what Williams argues is, insufficient care and attention to consideration of the epistemic duty of an inquiry: "what it is that we are seeking to know (the aims of inquiry), what questions we are seeking to answer, who frames those questions, who responds to them". Examples of this lack of care include: a lack of attention to determining the human cost of the Iraq War or the ethics of the British decision to participate in that conflict; a preoccupation with determining individual causal responsibility for failures, rather than systemic causes; and a lack of inclusivity within ostensibly 'public' inquiries whereby patriarchal and establishment avoids are overrepresented while those who suffer directly are not heard. These blind spots and preoccupations, Williams argues, present a "real risk of failing any epistemic duty owed to victims, their families, or society as a whole, to know and understand what has happened and why".

At first, Furtado appears to offer an even more pessimistic outlook for the future of inquiries in **"The Monstrous and the Miscount: A Radical Theory of Accountability"**. Drawing on insights from the literature on Transitional Justice (TJ) as well as scholarship on Anglosphere inquiries, Furtado argues that extant inquiries are bound to fail due to prefigured ideas about victims and perpetrators and an unyielding assumption that the wrong is consigned to the past with little relationship to present society. Drawing on Rancierian and Lacanian thought, Furtado argues that inquiries ought to be understood as practices of "counting" in which suffering is translated into a formalised account of victims and perpetrators (the monsters), and a determination of how violence was wrongful (the monstrous). Just as the crime of genocide was retroactively invented to provide a form of legal remedy to recognise the suffering of the

Holocaust, we do not formally know the names of the victims, the perpetrators, and the transgressive acts, until the inquiry has happened. This approach encourages an international hierarchy of harm and works to decontextualise or isolate the event from past or ongoing patterns of violence. Furthermore, scholars of political violence and international criminal justice have demonstrated in recent years how unhelpful the binary categories of “victim”, “perpetrator”, or “rescuers” are for understanding behaviour in contexts of genocide, challenging the hegemony of the individualistic, punitive approach as adopted by the international criminal court (Fujii, 2014; Redwood, 2021). Furtado argues that this arithmetic accountability “fails to name all monsters, demonstrate their monstrosity, remember all the suffering experienced and fails to get everyone on board” and “this unescapable failure that ruptures the fantasy of a just society at the very moment it is being promoted.” Furtado thus identifies how events of state violence often, in his words, “promote” a swing to nationalism to re-unite and repair the post-conflict community, as in Rwanda, failing to acknowledge those who slipped between the victim/perpetrator binary as well as that nationalistic logic will inevitably present as another act of state violence in the future.

Yet both Williams and Furtado offer hope for the future of inquiries as an engine of political transformation. Williams argues for inquiries to be constructed on a clear and epistemically just basis, in **“Public Inquiry into State Violence: the Epistemic Question”**. This construction acknowledges that inquiries can and should conform to well-developed social science research norms that have often been anathema to previous inquiries. These norms include principles of reflexivity, methodological pluralism and transparency, and inclusivity. Furtado finds optimism less in the improvement of the inquiry’s *process* than in an inquiry’s *end*. For Furtado, inquiries are doomed to fail but, paradoxically, within this inevitable failure one can find the space of political transformation: “it is precisely in the gulf opened between the naming and shaming of monsters and the inevitable miscount that this practice incurs that political change happens.” Activism can be catalysed by such failures. Arguing that an inquiry will never fully acknowledge the suffering that is experienced by the victims of state violence nor produce a fully reconciled polis that can move on from a traumatic past, we should embrace - rather than despair - that the struggle for accountability remains complete and can be fought for. This requires the active struggle and resistance to show that as, a line-drawing activity and an example of social science research, an inquiry is never complete. In this regard, Williams’ and Furtado’s contributions should not be read as opposing diagnoses of inquiries. The authors agree that inquiries are “imperfect creatures” of sovereign knowledge production, and they offer different, even complementary, avenues for the future of justice and accountability.

This special issue's interdisciplinary examination underscores the inherent complexities and potential of inquiries to challenge or reinforce state violence. We thank the contributors, whose dedication and scholarly rigor have enriched this project immensely. It is our hope that the questions and themes explored here will not only advance understanding but also inspire further research into the critical role of public inquiries in shaping political and social realities.

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