What I Think About when I Think About the Death Penalty

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WHAT I THINK ABOUT WHEN I THINK ABOUT THE DEATH PENALTY

JOHN D. BESSLER*

I. ALL THE BARBARITY

The death penalty has been used for centuries. The methods of execution have been gruesome, even monstrous, ranging from crucifixion, drowning, drawing and quartering, burning at the stake, beheading, and sawing in half.¹ In prior centuries, public executions took place with considerable regularity in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas, including during the Roman and Spanish Inquisitions.² Revolutionaries—opponents of tyrannous monarchs, or totalitarian or repressive regimes—were often beheaded, hanged, or shot by firing squad, with the heads of traitors sometimes displayed on spikes or publicly exhibited in cages as a terrifying example to others.³ Even today, authoritarian

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1. LILIAN CHENWI, TOWARDS THE ABOLITION OF THE DEATH PENALTY IN AFRICA: A HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE 17 (2007); see also NIGEL CAWTHORNE, PUBLIC EXECUTIONS: FROM ANCIENT ROME TO THE PRESENT DAY 6 (2012).


governments around the globe encourage or force people, including small children, to watch public executions. “In Saudi Arabia,” one contemporary writer, Garrett Fagan, observes, “the condemned are beheaded, normally on Fridays, in one of the main squares in Riyadh, at the rate of about one a week.” “In Iran, China, North Korea, Thailand, and elsewhere,” Fagan emphasizes, “executions can be staged before large crowds.”

The long, sordid history of the death penalty’s cruelty and torturous inhumanity is haunting. As one source—a history of the Middle Ages—emphasizes of the brutality of public executions that occurred in past centuries:

[T]he quartering of bodies and the posting of the resulting quarters in public places was taken up in the fifteenth century in Bologna, Siena, Foligno, Cesena, Naples and Rome and reached its most grotesque in eighteenth-century France, as illustrated by the case of Robert-François Damiens, would-be assassin of Louis XV. In 1757, Damiens was tortured with pincers, the wounds filled with a molten mixture of lead, oil, resin, sulphur and wax, and his body was then pulled apart—albeit with enormous effort, and only after the team of horses was increased from four to six and one of the executioners had cut deeply into the condemned man’s thigh and shoulder joints.

Not only were thought-to-be witches burned at the stake throughout Europe, drowned in Iceland, and, in 1692, hanged in Salem, Massachusetts, but people like Jean Calas, a Frenchman later posthumously exonerated through Voltaire’s dogged efforts, were tortured and broken on the wheel.

II. ALL THE WRONGFUL CONVICTIONS AND EXECUTIONS

It is impossible to catalog all of the wrongful convictions, death sentences, and executions associated with criminal justice systems around the world. Miscarriages of justice—once thought to be rare aberrations—are found throughout the ages, with the alleged victims of convicted murderers actually...

   In an echo of Medieval European practices, sentencing ceremonies are often staged in China as huge public rallies. In the North Korean city of Hamhung, the place of execution is located beside the town’s main bridge, and schoolchildren are brought along in groups to watch (the preferred method is firing squad). Schoolchildren attending for the first time are seated at the very front. Eyewitnesses report crowds in the thousands. As recently as 1988, a public hanging in Pakistan attracted 10,000 spectators.

Id.


sometimes showing up alive after the condemned individual’s execution. The New York-based Innocence Project, founded in 1992 by Barry Scheck and Peter Neufeld, has shined considerable new light over the past twenty-five years on the causes and frequency of innocent people being unjustly imprisoned and sentenced to death. However, the phenomenon of wrongful convictions is not new; it spans centuries and societies around the world. “To date,” the Innocence Project’s website reports, “350 people in the United States have been exonerated by DNA testing, including 20 who served time on death row.” These people,” that website points out, “served an average of 14 years in prison before exoneration and release.”

American death row inmates now spend an average of more than fifteen years between sentencing and execution, but it is, ironically, only because of such prolonged delays that, through newly discovered evidence, some exonerations are produced. Had executions been carried out more expeditiously after sentencing, scores of innocent people would have been put to death as a result of faulty eyewitness testimony, perjury by jailhouse snitches, false confessions, or for other reasons.

8. Robert J. Norris, Exonerated: A History of the Innocence Movement 16 (2017); Barry Scheck, Peter Neufeld & Jim Dwyer, Actual Innocence: Five Days to Execution, and Other Dispatches from the Wrongly Convicted xiii–iv, 222 (2000); Rob Warden, Wilkie Collins’s The Dead Alive: The Novel, the Case, and Wrongful Convictions 152–64 (2005) (discussing eleven wrongfully convicted defendants in “dead alive” cases known to have occurred in the United States, including that of William Marion and Charles Hudspeth, executed in Arkansas on December 30, 1892, before his supposed victim, George Watkins, was located alive and well in Kansas in June 1893); R. Michael Wilson, Legal Executions in Nebraska, Kansas and Oklahoma Including the Indian Territory: A Comprehensive Registry 19-21 (2012) (discussing the case of William J. Marion, executed on March 25, 1887, for the murder of John Cameron, who later showed up alive).


12. Id.


Men and women are wrongfully convicted everywhere, from the United States and Canada in North America to China and Japan in Asia, and there are plenty of examples of miscarriages of justice in death penalty cases, including in modern times. All one has to do is peruse the Internet—and look at websites for the Innocence Project, the Death Penalty Information Center, the National Registry of Exonerations, and the Death Penalty Worldwide—to read about all the horrifying circumstances that led jurors in particular cases to wrongfully convict men or women, convictions that show that justice systems regularly make mistakes and are hardly infallible. One recent headline, “Scalia Once Pushed Death Penalty for Now-Exonerated Inmate Henry Lee McCollum,” speaks volumes about the risk of executing those who were not, in fact, responsible for the crimes at issue.

Examples of miscarriages of justice are, in reality, incredibly easy to find—and they can often be found close to home. In Mankato, Minnesota, the place


17. Bedau & Radelet, supra note 10, at 25. See generally JAMES S. LIEBMAN, ET AL., THE WRONG CARLOS: ANATOMY OF A WRONGFUL EXECUTION (2014) (telling the story of a man named Carlos DeLuna who was executed after being mixed up with another man named Carlos Hernandez); RICHARD A. STACK, GRAVE INJUSTICE: UNEARTHING WRONGFUL EXECUTIONS (2013) (arguing against the death penalty through the examination of eighteen individuals who were executed but were likely innocent).


where I grew up, thirty-eight Dakota Indians were hanged simultaneously on December 26, 1862, from the same scaffold, in the midst of the Civil War. At that mass execution, still the largest in U.S. history, it was freely acknowledged shortly afterwards that a man by the name of Chaska (confused for another man, Chaskaydon) was hanged by mistake. Whereas Chaskaydon had killed a pregnant woman, Chaska had actually protected a woman, Sarah Wakefield, who had been held in captivity during what was then known as the Sioux Uprising. “In regard to the mistake, by which Chaska was hung, instead of another,” Rev. Stephen Riggs wrote to Mrs. Wakefield after the fact, “I doubt whether I can satisfactorily explain it.” And the error happened despite the fact that President Abraham Lincoln, who wrote out the execution order by hand, gave express instructions that the hanging be carried out in accordance with his order. Not wanting any miscommunication to occur, Lincoln had directed the telegraph operator: “[P]lease send this very carefully and accurately.”

III. ALL THE LYNCHINGS AND LACK OF DUE PROCESS

“The death penalty,” renowned lawyer, U.S. Supreme Court advocate, and Yale Law School professor Stephen Bright has declared, “is a direct descendant of lynching and other forms of racial violence and racial oppression in America.” Human beings have long engaged in violent acts, revenge-seeking, and the practice of lynching, with premeditated murders and other killings—whether illicit or state-sanctioned—taking place throughout the world. A spate of lynchings took place in America’s Deep South after the Civil War, and black


25. BESSLER, supra note 24, at 61–62.


28. BESSLER, supra note 24, at 58; see also BERG, supra note 24, at 226.


codes explicitly called for more severe punishments for blacks than for whites.\textsuperscript{31} As a recent report of Bryan Stevenson’s Alabama-based Equal Justice Initiative observes: “During the period between the Civil War and World War II, thousands of African Americans were lynched in the United States. Lynchings were violent and public acts of torture that traumatized black people throughout the country and were largely tolerated by state and federal officials.”\textsuperscript{32} The Equal Justice Initiative documented 4,084 racial terror lynchings in twelve Southern states between 1877 and 1950.\textsuperscript{33}

The adoption of the U.S. Constitution’s Fourteenth Amendment guaranteed “equal protection of the laws” and, as American courts subsequently determined, applied the guarantees of the Eighth Amendment against the states.\textsuperscript{34} But that didn’t stop Ku Klux Klan lynchings and other extra-judicial killings throughout American states, including in northern locales.\textsuperscript{35} One eminent scholar, David Garland, has defined \textit{public torture lynchings} as “lynchings that were highly publicized, took place before a large crowd, were staged with a degree of ritual, and involved elements of torture, mutilation, or unusual cruelty.”\textsuperscript{36} For example, in 1893, one black man, Henry Smith, was tortured and burned alive in Paris, Texas, in front of a crowd of 15,000, following the rape and murder of a white, three-year-old child.\textsuperscript{37} And in my home state of Minnesota, three African-American circus workers were lynched in 1920, with the three young men—Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie—pulled out of Duluth’s jail and lynched from a lamp post by a 5,000 to 10,000-member lynch mob.\textsuperscript{38} Just as public executions still take place in Asia and many Islamic countries,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{31} Joseph A. Ranney, \textit{In the Wake of Slavery: Civil War, Civil Rights, and the Reconstruction of Southern Law} 51 (2006).
  \item \textsuperscript{37} Cynthia Skove Nevels, \textit{Lynching to Belong: Claiming Whiteness Through Racial Violence} 113 (2007); Christopher Waldrep, \textit{Introduction}, in \textit{Lynching in America: A History in Documents} 23 (Christopher Waldrep, ed., 2006).
  \item \textsuperscript{38} Bessler, supra note 24, at 194–95. See generally Michael Fedo, \textit{The Lynchings in Duluth} (2d ed. 2016).
\end{itemize}
lynchings still occur in nations such as India and Pakistan. In September 2015—as one news report relayed with horror—“a Muslim man, Mohammad Akhlaq, was lynched in Dadri near the Indian capital, over rumors that he had killed a local cow and stored its meat in his refrigerator.”

Death sentences themselves are often the result of poor lawyering and ineffective assistance of counsel, egregious misconduct or due process violations, and other legal infractions such as the failure to turn over exculpatory evidence. The error rate in death penalty cases, as a study led by James Liebman of Columbia Law School found, is an astonishing sixty-eight percent. Death sentences are frequently overturned in post-conviction proceedings through the determined efforts of volunteer, pro bono lawyers, and oftentimes the inmates who get retrials are not sentenced to death at their second trials. The death-qualification process, which allows prosecutors to systematically exclude death penalty opponents in a process still sanctioned by the U.S. Supreme Court, is especially disturbing. It culls a disproportionate number of minorities, women, Democrats, Catholics, and Jews from sitting in judgment in


42. FRANK R. BAUMGARTNER, SUZANNA L. DE BOEF & AMBER E. BOYDSTUN, THE DECLINE OF THE DEATH PENALTY AND THE DISCOVERY OF INNOCENCE 36 (2008) (“In a comprehensive analysis of death sentences from 1973 to 1995, James Liebman and colleagues found that of all the cases that had been fully reviewed (i.e., not counting the cases still pending at the time of their research), only 32 percent of the death sentences were confirmed and carried out. Sixty-eight percent were ‘so seriously flawed that they had to be reversed and sent back for a new trial of guilt or punishment.’”).


capital trials, and the process results in conviction-prone and death sentence-prone juries. Not only that, it skews the Supreme Court’s own evaluation of the “evolving standards of decency” because jury verdicts are one of the “objective” criteria for gauging those standards. Jury verdicts cannot possibly be representative of societal views if death penalty opponents are routinely stripped from jury panels.

The death penalty is, at bottom, rooted in revenge. Although extra-judicial lynchings take place without any provision of due process whatsoever, both lynchings and state-sanctioned executions channel society’s collective rage against an offender (or supposed offender). Indeed, they both lead to the exact same outcome, whether at the hands of a mob or the hands of the state: a death.

In America, lynch mob participants often escaped arrest or prosecution, with local officials and newspaper reporters announcing that the lynching victims had died “at the hands of persons unknown.” As the Encyclopedia of Race and Crime summarizes the state of affairs that once prevailed in American life: “Sympathetic sheriffs aided mobs by failing to adequately protect their prisoners and by revealing transportation routes and arranging abductions. In some instances, they directly coordinated and openly participated in the execution.”

Actual state-sanctioned killings—the facts show—suffer from a wholly different kind of lack of accountability. Whereas nineteenth and early twentieth-century prosecutors often failed to prosecute lynch mob participants, death-qualified jurors—in voting for death sentences—say they are just following the law. Meanwhile, in a kind of moral shell game, governors let executions go forward on the basis that they are just deferring to jurors or the law even though death penalty statutes, in many cases, were put in place decades earlier by former


47. Furman v. Georgia, 408 U.S. 238, 245 (1972); see also Baze v. Rees, 553 U.S. 35, 84 (2008) (Stevens, J., concurring) (arguing the process of selecting a death-qualified jury has the purpose and effect of securing a jury in favor of death).


“Although death penalty statutes do remain on the books of many jurisdictions, and public opinion polls show opinion to be divided as to capital punishment as an abstract proposition,” the California Supreme Court once candidly assessed, “public acceptance cannot be measured by the existence of death penalty statutes or by the fact that some juries impose death on criminal defendants.”

IV. THE STRANGE CASE OF DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE

In 1886, the Scottish novelist Robert Louis Stevenson published his famous novella, The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The novella is about a London lawyer, Gabriel John Utterson, who investigates the case of Dr. Henry Jekyll—a respected doctor, client, and friend who is a pillar of the community known for his charitable works—and his alter ego, Mr. Edward Hyde, the violent and repugnant figure who commits cruel acts such as trampling a child and clubbing a man to death. In the story, the much-admired Dr. Jekyll develops a potion in his secret laboratory that allows the evil side of his personality to take over and transform him into the diabolical Mr. Hyde. “The story,” one commentator has written, “depicted a murderer with a divided personality, and alluded to a latent barbarity in everyone, with the idea that ‘man is not truly one but truly two.” While the global push for recognition, observance, and protection of human rights is a positive force, the death penalty’s use is corrupting and corrosive. As Justice Anthony Kennedy once cautioned: “When the law punishes by death, it risks its own sudden descent into brutality, transgressing the constitutional commitment to decency and restraint.”

Notably, many death row inmates themselves suffer from an array of intellectual disabilities and severe mental illnesses, with histories of head injuries, drug and substance abuse, brain damage, and childhood sexual abuse being commonplace. Those sentenced to death—people typically convicted for the most despicable acts of their lives—have, all too often, been known to suffer

from bipolar disorder, split personalities, schizophrenia, hallucinations, and severe—even suicidal—depression. In the United States, the U.S. Supreme Court’s Eighth Amendment jurisprudence has an eerily similar Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde quality to it. On the one hand, the Eighth Amendment’s prohibition against “cruel and unusual punishments” has been read to bar prison officials from using excessive force and subjecting inmates to inhuman conditions of confinement. For instance, the Eighth Amendment was read back in 1968 by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit to bar the lashing of Arkansas prisoners. The Eighth Amendment prohibition against “cruel and unusual punishments” has likewise been read to require that prison officials feed, clothe, and shelter inmates and not subject offenders to overcrowded prisons or inhumane prison conditions. On the other hand, the Constitution’s Cruel and Unusual Punishments Clause has not yet been read to bar the use of capital punishment, a much more draconian practice that inflicts far more suffering than non-lethal corporal punishments such as whipping.

While the majority of nations have moved away from capital punishment since Amnesty International began its anti-death penalty advocacy in 1977, America’s continued use of the death penalty continues to debase Eighth Amendment jurisprudence. Ironically, given the current state of affairs, the State of Arkansas is barred from subjecting inmates to the lash, but is still permitted by the law and the courts to carry out executions. In 2017, Arkansas did just that, choosing to execute prisoners one after another in what can only be described as a deliberate and calculated effect to inflict severe psychological harm.


64. Kathryn Sikkink, Evidence for Hope: Making Human Rights Work in the 21st Century 146 (2017) (noting that when, in 1977, Amnesty International included the abolition of capital punishment as one of its core mandates, “only sixteen countries had abolished it in law or practice”; “[t]oday . . . that number has increased to 140, nearly two-thirds of the countries of the world”).

torment.\textsuperscript{66} Originally, when faced with an expiring supply of midazolam, a sedative used at lethal injections, Arkansas had planned to carry out eight executions—two inmates at a time on April 17, 20, 24 and 27—in an eleven-day period.\textsuperscript{67} “The rapid schedule,” Allen Ault, a former commissioner of the Colorado, Georgia, and Mississippi Departments of Corrections warned, citing the risk of severe emotional trauma for the prison guards, “will put an extraordinary burden on the men and women required by the state to carry out this most solemn act, and it will increase the risk of mistakes in the execution chamber—which could haunt them for the rest of their lives.”\textsuperscript{68}

V. ALL THE RACISM, DISCRIMINATION, AND ARBITRARINESS

The death penalty has long been associated with the institution of slavery and with rampant discrimination. Revolting slaves throughout the Americas frequently were put to death,\textsuperscript{69} and slave codes once punished blacks much more severely than whites (e.g., for the crime of rape).\textsuperscript{70} In a speech he gave in Rochester, New York in 1852, the great abolitionist and writer Frederick Douglass took note of the fact that, in Virginia, seventy-two offenses were then punishable by death for blacks while only two were punishable by death for whites.\textsuperscript{71} As award-winning author Lawrence Friedman writes in \textit{A History of American Law} about laws in southern states designed to suppress slave riots: “Incitement to insurrection by free persons became a capital crime in Alabama in 1812; in 1832, the state authorized the death penalty even for those who published or distributed literature which might tend to arouse slave rebellion.”\textsuperscript{72}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{69} RAFAEL MARQUESE, TÂMIS PARRON \& MÁRCIA BERBEL, \textit{SLAVERY AND POLITICS: BRAZIL AND CUBA, 1790-1850}, at 139 (Leonardo Marques, trans. 2016); M. S. GILL, \textit{HUMAN RIGHTS HUMAN WRONGS} 162 (2004).
\item \textsuperscript{70} GREGG BARAK, PAUL LEIGHTON \& JEANNE FLAVIN, \textit{CLASS, RACE, GENDER AND CRIME: THE SOCIAL REALITIES OF JUSTICE IN AMERICA} at xxii (3d ed. 2010).
\item \textsuperscript{72} LAWRENCE M. FRIEDMAN, \textit{A HISTORY OF AMERICAN LAW} 156 (3d ed. 2005).
\end{itemize}
Although the U.S. Constitution’s Fourteenth Amendment was designed by its drafters to ensure “like punishment” for blacks and whites, as the Civil Rights Act of 1866 had explicitly done, 73 and although numerous international and regional human rights instruments, as well as domestic laws, call for equality of treatment under the law, 74 racial minorities still experience invidious discrimination in criminal justice systems around the world, including in the United States. 75 In fact, in American states that retain capital punishment, those who kill whites are much more likely to get the death penalty—and to be executed—than those who kill blacks. 76 The long-standing injustice and arbitrariness of who is selected to die, and who is actually executed, is only compounded by the fact that death sentences and executions have become increasingly sporadic and rare. 77 Very few American counties and local prosecutors actively utilize capital punishment, making death sentences more a function of geography—where the particular crime was committed—than anything else. 78 The title of Shirley Jackson’s famous New Yorker short story, “The Lottery,” provides an apt metaphor for America’s death penalty and, for that matter, the capital punishment schemes of other countries around the world. 79

79. SHIRLEY JACKSON, THE LOTTERY AND OTHER STORIES 281 (1976). As one source describes this short story:
VI. ALL THE TYRANNY, AUTHORITARIANISM, AND TOTALITARIANISM

Death sentences were once justified on the basis of the “divine right of kings,” and iron-fisted monarchs made frequent use of executions to quash uprisings or rebellions.\(^{80}\) Dictators such as Stalin, Hitler, and Pol Pot all made use of arbitrary killings, death sentences, and executions,\(^{81}\) and the death penalty is still employed by a number of totalitarian, autocratic, or one-party regimes. The People’s Republic of China—the country that ruthlessly squelched pro-democracy demonstrators in Tiananmen Square—is the world’s top user of executions,\(^{82}\) but other countries that make regular use of executions constitute a rogues’ gallery of human rights violators. Among the countries that top Amnesty International’s list of most frequent users of executions are Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Pakistan.\(^{83}\) “Often,” scholar Franklin Zimring writes in *The Contradictions of American Capital Punishment*, tracing the movement of Western representative democracies away from executions, “state killings in totalitarian regimes did not involve even the pretense of judicial process.”\(^{84}\)

The death penalty is an outlier, especially for modern-day Western democracies. When I was a kid, I used to go to a dental office in Mankato, Minnesota, that had copies of *Highlights* magazines in the waiting room. One popular activity, as I remember it, was to circle the object that did not belong in a grouping.\(^{85}\) If one examines the countries of the world that still use death
sentences and executions, it quickly becomes clear that a Western representative democracy like the United States should have abandoned capital prosecutions, death sentences, and executions long ago. Iran is still hanging people from construction cranes, and North Korea’s despotic ruler has ordered numerous executions by hanging, firing squad, and even anti-aircraft guns. But America’s next-door neighbors, Canada and Mexico, have abolished and long ago abandoned the death penalty, and the whole of Europe no longer uses capital punishment and now advocates its abolition worldwide.

When it comes to human rights, the United States of America should be a leader, not a follower or a violator. The Declaration of Independence, containing the historic proclamation that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed


87. MORSE TAN, NORTH KOREA, INTERNATIONAL LAW AND THE DUAL CRISIS: NARRATIVE AND CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT 47–48 (2015); see also Euan McKirdy, North Korea Executed 5 Security Officials, South Korea Says, CNN (Feb. 28, 2017), http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/28/asia/north-korea-officials-executed/index.html [https://perma.cc/7ZG5-4NP3] (“Five North Korean officials have been executed by anti-aircraft guns, according to South Korean lawmakers. . . . A report released at the end of 2016 claims Kim has ordered 340 people to be executed since he came to power in 2011 . . . The gruesome method of execution has also been used by the regime before—in May 2015, Kim had his Defense Minister Hyon Yong Chol killed with an anti-aircraft gun at a military school in Pyongyang, in front of an audience.”).


89. On European opposition to the death penalty:

Outside the UN system, the Council of Europe and the European Union have been endorsing the abolition of the death penalty and expressing their belief that abolition would contribute to the promotion and protection of human rights. In 1973, the issue of the abolition of the death penalty was tabled at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which gradually led to Protocol 6 to the European Convention on Human Rights concerning the abolition of the death penalty, adopted in 1983. Ever since, their position that the death penalty is a violation of fundamental human rights has been clearly stated. The European Union has been strongly committed to the worldwide abolition of the death penalty through diplomatic measures.

by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” was a milestone in the annals of human rights. It is time for the United States to outlaw the death penalty throughout the country—and to reclaim its leadership position in the world. Steven Pinker, writing of the U.S. Supreme Court and capital punishment in Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress, suggests how that might actually happen: “Court watchers believe it is only a matter of time before the Justices are forced to confront the caprice of the whole macabre practice head on, invoke ‘evolving standards of decency,’ and strike it down as a violation of the Eighth Amendment’s prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment once and for all.”

VII. THE LAW’S EVOLUTION

The Italian philosopher Cesare Beccaria was the first writer to make a comprehensive case against capital punishment. In his 1764 book, Dei delitti e delle pene, translated into French in 1766 and then into English in 1767 as An Essay on Crimes and Punishments, Beccaria sought proportionality between crimes and punishments. He also argued against both torture and capital punishment, albeit in separate chapters. “By what right,” Beccaria wrote, “can men presume to slaughter their fellows?” Beccaria’s book was admired by a host of intellectuals—from Voltaire in France, to William Blackstone and Jeremy Bentham in England, to John Adams, Dr. Benjamin Rush and Thomas Jefferson in America. In the more than 250 years that have passed since that book’s initial release in Livorno, mandatory death sentences for various felonies have largely given way to discretionary sentences. Moreover, the number of


94. Id. at 39; Arthur Shuster, Punishment and the History of Political Philosophy: From Classical Republicanism to the Crisis of Modern Criminal Justice 91 (2016).

95. See Bessler, The Birth of American Law, supra note 92, at 4–6; Bessler, The Celebrated Marquis, supra note 92, at 11, 81–82.

death-eligible offenses—more than two hundred at one time under England’s notorious “Bloody Code”—have shrunk dramatically throughout the civilized world. 97 In many places, death sentences and executions are no longer used at all. 98 In Kenya, the country’s president recently commuted the death sentences of more than 2,700 inmates, thereby completely clearing that nation’s death row. 99

The death penalty has gone from being a lawful punishment to being an unlawful one throughout the continent of Europe, as well as in a number of non-European countries and states. 100 As Oxford criminologist Roger Hood—a prominent scholar on the use of capital punishment throughout the world—has recently written:

Although the death penalty has yet to be declared unlawful throughout the world, concern for protecting human rights has become a powerful dynamic over the past quarter of a century since the Berlin Wall came down and the UN added Protocol Number 2 to the ICCPR, which banned the death penalty and committed ratifying states not to reintroduce it. 101

The Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights provides in Article 1(1) and Article 1(2), respectively: “No one...
within the jurisdiction of a State Party to the present Protocol shall be executed” and “[e]ach State Party shall take all necessary measures to abolish the death penalty within its jurisdiction.” Hood emphasizes of the current state of affairs:

The point has been reached where there is now a decreasing number of countries that defy the majority view that the death penalty cannot be practised without a breach of the principles embraced by almost all nations after the Second World War; namely that states should protect the right to life and human dignity of all persons and ensure that their criminal justice systems are free from torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading punishments.

Although public executions are still used in places like Iran to terrify the populace, other countries, including the United States, have moved executions behind thick prison walls to shield the activities of state officials from scrutiny. Instead of confronting the sheer brutality of state-sanctioned executions, American states have attempted to hide what is going on and to mask the death penalty’s inherent cruelty. For example, in 2013, Georgia passed the Lethal Injection Secrecy Act, a law that—in the words of one scholar—“shields the identities of lethal-injection-drug suppliers from disclosure to the public, the media, and possibly the courts, on the grounds that the information is a ‘state secret.’” Other death penalty states (e.g., Oklahoma), that scholar, Robert Bohm, explains, “have such state secrecy laws as well.” As the New York Times aptly opened a scathing editorial in 2014 about such new laws: “It is bad enough that the death penalty is barbaric, racist and arbitrary in its application, but it is also becoming less transparent as the dwindling number of death-penalty states work to hide the means by which they kill people.”

104. Hood, supra note 101, at 194.
106. BESSLER, DEATH IN THE DARK, supra note 100, at 76.
107. Burkart Holznier & Leslie Holznier, Transparency in Global Change: The Vanguard of the Open Society 155 (2006) (“There is a conviction among EU members that the death penalty is an unacceptable barbarism.”).
109. Id.
VIII. ALL THE TORTURE

The definition of torture in international law makes clear that torture can be either physical or psychological in nature. The Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment is a widely-ratified treaty that entered into force in 1987 and which the United States itself ratified in 1994. That convention specifically defines “torture” to mean “any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person” for a prohibited purpose, such as to obtain information or a confession or to punish. In the past, the death penalty and torture have largely been treated in separate legal silos, with the death penalty—a punishment—treated as something other than torture. Although certain methods of execution (e.g., crucifixion and drawing and quartering) have long been considered as being torturous in nature, and although courts have insisted that methods of execution not prolong human suffering or carry the risk of excruciating physical pain, many jurists have yet to grapple with the psychological torment associated with death sentences and executions. Only a few courts, beginning with a 1989 judgment of the European Court of Human Rights, have considered methods of execution to be cruel and inhuman.

111. Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 26 June 1987, 1465 U.N.T.S 85.
112. Michael John Garcia, U.N. Convention Against Torture (CAT): Overview and Application to Interrogation Techniques, in THE TREATMENT OF PRISONERS: LEGAL, MORAL OR CRIMINAL? 207, 211 (Ralph D. McPhee ed., 2006) (“The United States signed CAT on April 18, 1988, and ratified the Convention on October 21, 1994, subject to certain declarations, reservations, and understandings. Perhaps most significantly, the United States included a declaration in its instruments of ratification that CAT Articles 1 through 16 were not self-executing.”).
113. Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, art. 1, 26 June 1987, 1465 U.N.T.S 85; see also David Weissbrodt & Cheryl Heilman, Defining Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading Treatment, 29 LAW & INQ. 343, 354 (2011).
114. See, e.g., HOUSE OF LORDS & HOUSE OF COMMONS JOINT COMM. ON HUM. RTS., Nineteenth Report of Session 2005–06: The UN Convention Against Torture, Vol. II, at 107 (May 26, 2006) (capturing written testimony from Amnesty International, “Unlike torture or other ill-treatment, the death penalty is not per se prohibited under international law, and states carry it out openly as a punishment, under their own laws. Amnesty International opposes the death penalty absolutely, but as long as the death penalty is a lawful sanction under international law, diplomatic assurances with respect to the death penalty simply acknowledge the different legal approaches of two states and make an exception to one state’s declared policies to accommodate the concerns of the other.”).
Rights, have recognized the “death row phenomenon,” a concept which is associated with prolonged delays between sentencing and execution coupled with harsh conditions of confinement on death row.

But the vast majority of countries have moved away from the death penalty, and what was once lawful in many places is no longer so. For example, after a number of European countries abandoned the death penalty, the Council of Europe developed a policy opposing it. Protocol No. 6 to the European Convention on Human Rights, in which member states agreed to abolish the death penalty’s use in peacetime, entered into force in March 1985 when five states had ratified it. And Protocol No. 13 to the European Convention on Human Rights, which extends that bar to times of war, came into force in July 2002 when ten states had ratified that protocol. According to the latest statistics from Amnesty International, there are 141 countries that are abolitionist in law or practice versus fifty-seven retentionist countries. Indeed, threats of death (e.g., obtaining confessions by playing Russian roulette) and a host of non-lethal bodily punishments (e.g., the thumbscrew or pulling out one’s

119. JEROEN GUTTER, THEMATIC PROCEDURES OF THE UNITED NATIONS COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND INTERNATIONAL LAW: IN SEARCH OF A SENSE OF COMMUNITY 168 (2006) (“[T]he Special Rapporteur concluded that ‘lawful sanctions’ under national law (e.g. mutilation or other corporal punishments) may not be lawful under international law, including the Convention, and may be considered as torture.”).
120. ALASTAIR MOWBRAY, CASES AND MATERIALS ON THE EUROPEAN CONVENTION ON HUMAN RIGHTS 128 (2d ed. 2007).
121. Id.
122. Id.
123. Abolitionist and Retentionist Countries, supra note 98 (listing 104 countries as “Abolitionist for all crimes,” seven countries as “Abolitionist for ordinary crimes only,” thirty countries as “Abolitionist in practice,” and fifty-seven “Retentionist” countries). “Abolitionist for all crimes” means the countries’ laws “do not provide the death penalty for any crime.” Id. “Abolitionist for ordinary crimes only” means the countries’ laws “provide for the death penalty only for exceptional crimes such as crimes under military law or crimes committed in exceptional circumstances.” Id. “Abolitionist in practice” includes: (1) “[c]ountries which retain the death penalty for ordinary crimes such as murder but can be considered abolitionist in practice in that they have not executed anyone during the past 10 years and are believed to have a policy or established practice of not carrying out executions,” and (2) “countries which have made an international commitment not to use the death penalty.” Id.
fingernails) are already considered to be torturous acts.124 “Mock” or simulated executions, as well as other acts that create intense fear and awareness of one’s impending death and a helplessness to prevent it, are, likewise, already considered classic examples of “psychological torture.”125

In my new book, The Death Penalty as Torture, I argue that death sentences and executions should be classified as acts of torture. If a fake execution is an act of torture, then surely a real one must also qualify. Death sentences and executions have immutable characteristics, and the psychological torment associated with threats of death (be they made by non-state actors or as part of a judicial process) should lead jurists to categorize the death penalty under the rubric of torture.126 The “lawful sanctions” clause of Article 1 of the Convention Against Torture may have been placed there—in the words of one scholar—“to eliminate imprisonment and the death penalty from inclusion” as acts of torture “in countries where such things are lawfully employed.”127 But the law—and

124. Compare Hilao v. Estate of Marcos, 103 F.3d 789, 790–91, 795 (9th Cir. 1996), and Mehinovic v. Vuckovic, 198 F. Supp. 2d 1322, 1332–40, 1345–46 (N.D. Ga. 2002), and Daliberti v. Republic of Iraq, 146 F. Supp. 2d 19, 22–23 (D.D.C. 2001), and Cicippio v. Islamic Republic of Iran, 18 F. Supp. 2d 62, 64–66 (D.D.C. 1998), with NOAM LUBE L, EXTRATERRITORIAL USE OF FORCE AGAINST NON-STATE ACTORS 180 (2010) (“In addition to the ‘classic’ examples of torture such as electric shocks, examples of acts which have been determined as torture or other prohibited ill-treatment, include methods such as severe beatings; mock executions and mock amputations; sensory manipulation and deprivation, and forced positions causing severe pain; rape and other sexual violence.”).


126. JOHN D. BESSLER, THE DEATH PENALTY AS TORTURE: FROM THE DARK AGES TO ABOLITION 152 (2017) [hereinafter BESSLER, THE DEATH PENALTY AS TORTURE]; see also Ex parte Key, 891 So.2d 384, 390 (Ala. 2004) (“One factor this Court has considered particularly indicative that a murder is ‘especially heinous, atrocious or cruel’ is the infliction of psychological torture. Psychological torture can be inflicted where the victim is in intense fear and is aware of, but helpless to prevent, impending death.”); State v. Bonney, 405 S.E.2d 145, 156 (N.C. 1991) (describing the “infliction of psychological torture” as “placing the victim in agony, aware of but helpless to prevent impending death”).

state practice—has changed dramatically in the last few decades. “Today,” death penalty expert William Schabas writes, “the death penalty no longer exists within the territory of the Council of Europe.”128 The law rarely remains static, and courts should recognize the psychological torture associated with capital punishment.

The conclusion that threats of death—and capital prosecutions and death sentences would certainly qualify—should be classified as torturous in nature seems almost self-evident when one examines existing legal principles and modern-day definitions of torture. In Ex parte Deardorff and other cases, the Supreme Court of Alabama—in issuing rulings in the non-state actor context—has, in fact, already determined that “psychological torture” occurs where a victim of torture “is in intense fear and is aware of, but helpless to prevent, impending death.”129 That definition is, not surprisingly, consistent with how others think of psychological torture.130 In 1972, the California Supreme Court, in declaring the state’s death penalty unconstitutional (before it was brought back via a constitutional amendment), itself once ruled: “The cruelty of capital punishment lies not only in the execution itself and the pain incident thereto, but also in the dehumanizing effects of the lengthy imprisonment prior to execution during which the judicial and administrative procedures essential to due process of law are carried out.”131 “Penologists and medical experts agree,” that court determined, “that the process of carrying out a verdict of death is often so degrading and brutalizing to the human spirit as to constitute psychological torture.”132

129. BESSLER, THE DEATH PENALTY AS TORTURE, supra note 126, at 152 (citing Ex Parte Deardorff, 6 So.3d 1235, 1240 (Ala. 2008)); see also Ex parte Key, 891 So.2d at 390.
130. See Mohammed v. Obama, 704 F. Supp. 2d 1, 27 (D.D.C. 2009) (“Torture and ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’ employed by the Government during the War on Terror have been shown to be ‘geared toward creating anxiety or fear in the detainee while at the same time removing any form of control from the person to create a state of total helplessness.’”); Bonney, 405 S.E.2d at 156 (describing “the infliction of psychological torture” as “placing the victim in agony, aware of but helpless to prevent impending death”). See generally PAU PÉREZ-SALES, PSYCHOLOGICAL TORTURE: DEFINITION, EVALUATION AND MEASUREMENT (2017) (discussing the fear, terror, uncertainty, attacks on dignity and identity, and helplessness associated with psychological torture).
132. Id. In the wake of the issuance of the People v. Anderson decision on February 18, 1972, California’s constitution was amended to reinstate the death penalty. As one source notes: “An initiative measure was quickly proposed to amend the California constitution to abrogate the Anderson ruling by declaring the death penalty was neither cruel nor unusual. Proposition 17 was adopted by a 67 percent margin in the statewide election of November 7, 1972.” JACQUELINE R. BRATMAN & GERALD F. UELMEN, JUSTICE STANLEY MOSK: A LIFE AT THE CENTER OF CALIFORNIA POLITICS AND JUSTICE 160 (2013). The 1972 constitutional amendment provided that the state’s death penalty statutes in effect prior to the California Supreme Court’s ruling “are in full force and effect” and further declared that “[i]t[he] death penalty provided for under those statutes
A recent, botched execution attempt in Alabama, that of Doyle Lee Hamm, helps illustrate the point. Hamm, a convicted murderer but also a cancer survivor, was slated to be executed in Alabama in February 2018 after spending thirty years on death row. Before the execution, Hamm’s lawyer, Bernard Harcourt, had warned that due to Hamm’s prior illnesses and his history of drug abuse, it would be extremely problematic to find veins to deliver the lethal injection drugs. That, in fact, is exactly what happened after the U.S. Supreme Court, with three justices dissenting, declined to stop Hamm’s execution. In an NBC News article, the reporter began the news story, headlined “Lawyer describes aborted execution attempt for Doyle Lee Hamm as ‘torture,’” this way: “An Alabama execution team left a death-row inmate with more than a dozen puncture marks in his legs and groin and may have penetrated his bladder and femoral artery before the lethal injection was called off, the prisoner’s attorney said Sunday.” “This was clearly a botched execution that can only be accurately described as torture,” Doyle Lee Hamm’s lawyer, Columbia Law School professor Bernard Harcourt, said after state officials, after two and a half hours of efforts to find veins in Hamm’s feet, legs and groin, were unable to find a good vein before the expiration of the death warrant’s midnight deadline. In civil actions subsequently filed in state and federal court, Hamm asserted that the execution was called off after “hours of physical and psychological torture, forcing needles into his lower extremities” and “causing severe bleeding and pain.”

shall not be deemed to be, or to constitute, the infliction of cruel or unusual punishments.” THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF THE U.S. CONSTITUTION 883 (Mark Tushnet, Mark A. Graber & Sanford Levinson, eds., 2015).


134. The Alabama “intravenous team” at the execution repeatedly punctured Doyle Lee Hamm’s legs before a medical worker unsuccessfully tried to put a central line in through Hamm’s groin. “During this time Mr. Hamm began to hope that the doctor would succeed in obtaining IV access so that Mr. Hamm could ‘get it over with’ because he preferred to die rather than to continue to experience the ongoing severe pain,” Dr. Mark Heath, retained by Harcourt to examine Hamm, wrote in a report of what occurred. Tracy Connor, Doyle Lee Hamm Wished for Death during Botched Execution, Report Says, NBC NEWS (Mar. 5, 2018), https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/lethal-injection/doyle-lee-hamm-wished-death-during-botched-execution-report-says-n853706

IX. THE UNIVERSALITY OF RIGHTS

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”136 If nations are forbidden to torture ordinary citizens but are allowed to torture convicted offenders or prisoners, then what the world really has is the Almost Universal Declaration of Human Rights not the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Rulings of courts themselves have confirmed that no one—not even heinous offenders—should be subjected to acts of cruelty or torture. For example, in 2012, the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights emphasized and reiterated in discussing the European Convention on Human Rights: “The Court has confirmed that even in the most difficult circumstances, such as the fight against terrorism and organised crime, the Convention prohibits in absolute terms torture and inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, irrespective of the conduct of the person concerned.”137 In other words, consistent with the idea that freedom from torture is a universal, non-derogable right, no one is to be subjected to torturous practices.

To date, the U.S. Supreme Court has been narrowly focused on whether executions carry a risk of excruciating physical pain at the very moment of an inmate’s death. In Baze v. Rees and Glossip v. Gross, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of lethal-injection protocols in Kentucky and Oklahoma.138 In both of those decisions, the members of the Court focused on whether there was a substantial risk of a physically painful execution if the first drug in a three-drug cocktail was not administered properly at an execution.139 That narrow focus, however, totally ignores the severe psychological torment associated with confinement on death row140 and that associated with death

139. BREYER, supra note 77, at 12–15.
140. Compare Valle v. Florida, 564 U.S. 1067, 1067 (2011) (Breyer, J., dissenting from denial of stay) (“I have little doubt about the cruelty of so long a period of incarceration under sentence of death.”), and Furman v. Georgia, 408 U.S. 238, 288 (1971) (Brennan, J., concurring) (“[T]he prospect of pending execution exacts a frightful toll during the inevitable long wait between the imposition of sentence and the actual infliction of death.”), and Elle Klein, Flying Over the Cuckoo’s Nest: How the Mentally Ill Landed into an Unconstitutional Punishment in South Carolina, 68 S.C. L. Rev. 571, 590–91 (2017) (“Like most states, South Carolina enforces restrictions on death row inmates that isolate them from human interaction. These restrictions vary from facility to facility, but can include: confinement to a single-person cell with a steel bed, steel toilet, and small writing table, in an area ranging from thirty-six feet to one hundred feet for up to twenty-three hours a day; isolation during meal times (eaten in the same cell); isolation during exercise time; denial of access to religious services; denial of access to work or employment opportunities; and no-contact visitations with family members and loved ones.”), with Chad
sentences and executions (e.g., the issuance of multiple death warrants in individual cases).\textsuperscript{141} Capital charges and death sentences involve definitive and clear-cut \textit{threats of death}, and condemned inmates clearly experience tremendous fear and anxiety and have an awareness of their impending deaths, a critical aspect of declarations of “psychological torture” in the \textit{non-state actor} context (e.g., pertaining to “torture-murder” determinations).\textsuperscript{142}

X. THE FUTURE

I think about a world without capital punishment—a world in which human rights are honored and protected, not denigrated and violated. I think about a world in which jurists around the globe would not, as part of their jobs, have to decide whether to put people to death. I think about a world in which the United States no longer resorts to state-sanctioned killing, and in which the United States and other retentionist countries finally decide to reject the use of executions. If the United States and Japan (the other highly industrialized country that still uses executions) would get rid of capital punishment, that would put more concerted pressure on authoritarian and rogue regimes, whether in China, North Korea, Yemen, or Sudan, to abandon executions, too. In time, what was once a universally accepted, lawful sanction would thus become an unlawful practice—and the world would be rid of it once and for all.\textsuperscript{143}

\textsuperscript{141} Jessica Wolfendale, \textit{Torture and the Military Profession} 102 (2007) (“[A] Danish study found that 83 per cent of victims who had experienced mock executions (a common torture ‘lite’ technique) developed psychiatric symptoms, 20 per cent more than those who had not experienced that particular torture. It is therefore completely untenable to conclude that psychological torture techniques such as mock executions, hooding, noise bombardment, sleep deprivation, and forced standing do not constitute ‘real’ torture just because they do not involve much immediate or long term \textit{physical} damage.”) (emphasis in original); Linda A. Malone, \textit{The Death Knell for the Death Penalty and the Significance of Global Realism to Its Abolition from Glossip v. Gross to Brumfield v. Cain}, 11 DUKE J. CONST. L. \\& PUB’Y 107, 132 (2016) (“Given the long delays between entry of a death sentence and executions during which inmates on death row are kept in solitary confinement as well as the torment that the appeals process often causes, in which a prisoner might on multiple occasions have an execution date set only to have it delayed, it can be argued that the United States is imposing psychological abuse.”).

\textsuperscript{142} Shanklin v. State, 187 So.3d 734, 808 (Ala. Crim. App. 2014) (“Psychological torture can be inflicted where the victim is in intense fear and is aware of, but helpless to prevent, impending death. Such torture ‘must have been present for an appreciable lapse of time, sufficient enough to cause prolonged or appreciable suffering.’” (quoting Norris v. State, 793 So.2d 847, 861 (Ala. Crim. App. 1999) (emphasis in original)).