Gladiator, Violence, and the Founding of a Republic

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ABSTRACT Ridley Scott's 2000 film *Gladiator* presents a view of the transition from dictatorship to the republic that one also finds in the discourses of certain political leaders today. I argue that we can learn about violence and the founding of a republic from an analysis and, especially, a critique of *Gladiator*.

WHY FILM?

Why should students of politics also study film? Film—and other forms of art—reflect developments in society, and, in the case of mainstream films, they often reflect the dominant ideology of the times (Franklin 2006). To study film is to study the (dominant) thoughts of a period. Moreover, films influence the way we see historical and contemporary events. This is the case with wars. For instance, films about the Vietnam War influenced how it was assessed by contemporaries and subsequent generations. Another recent example is Clint Eastwood's films about World War II—*Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006)—which challenge older filmic depictions of soldiers in World War II. Thus, films provide images and reference points for the way people think about certain events or epochs. Films reflect and influence the dominant views of the times, and as such they are important for students of politics to study.

There is one additional case for students of politics to study film. As Daniel Lieberfeld (2007; see also Kiasatpour 1999) showed in this journal, films are useful tools in the classroom. Films are not only important representations for the reasons given above, they are also pedagogically useful in rendering otherwise dull and difficult topics more interesting and easily accessible. Lieberfeld's examples are war films; my example is a single film: Ridley Scott's 2000 blockbuster *Gladiator* (see also Gram 2000). I am not a film theorist, and my aim is not to say anything about the film as a film, although using the film for the study of politics necessarily involves some interpretation of it. My interpretation of *Gladiator* is framed by the questions I want to elucidate with the help of the film. Specifically, I want to illustrate a theoretical problem from the field of politics, namely the way we think about violence, especially the violence that founds a republic. But the aim is not just to illustrate, that is, to claim that the film reflects a certain problematic; the aim is also to criticize a particular view of violence as it is found both in the film and in larger discourses about the role of violence in founding a republic. As such, the idea is to use the analysis of the film as a way into the analysis and critique of those discourses, thus illustrating the way in which films can be used in the classroom to make otherwise difficult topics more easily accessible to students.[1]

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DICTATORSHIP

The message of *Gladiator* is clear: dictators are bad, and democracy and the rule of law are the best way to organize a society. As such, the film reflects the dominant view across the world today. In addition, we learn from the film that the institution of democracy and the rule of law only requires an agent with the right attitude.

The film begins with the old dying Caesar, Marcus Aurelius (Richard Harris), who chooses the Roman soldier-turned-general, Maximus (Russell Crowe), as his successor with the purpose of re-instituting the republic in Rome. Unlike the politicians in Rome, Maximus is uncorrupted, innocent, and, in addition, an outsider. He is at one and the same time the most ordinary person (because he was originally a common soldier) and a foreigner (because he was from the Roman provinces in Spain) who has never been to Rome. Maximus is foreign to the politicking of Rome, but, as a common soldier, he is not foreign to the people and the cause of the Republic of Rome.[2] In the words of Marcus Aurelius, as the protector of Rome, Maximus is "to hold [Rome] in trust until the Senate is once again ready to rule," and presumably Maximus will be the one to judge when the Senate is "ready to rule." Through his temporary dictatorship, Maximus is supposed to lay the foundations for the restoration of the republic and the rule of law. In this sense, he is supposedly the soldier of the people, but his relationship to the people is an ambiguous one. On the one hand, Maximus is supposed to serve the people: he is the soldier of the people, its defender and representative against the corrupt politicians. Although he is a reluctant draftee for the cause of restoring the republic, he is nonetheless committed to the cause to the extent that the cause is tattooed on his body as SPQR: Senatus Populusque Romanos (The Senate and the People of Rome). On the other hand, Maximus is going to serve the people by leading it, albeit temporally, in a dictatorial fashion. At one and the same time a soldier of, and a general for, the people.

Things do not turn out as expected. Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix), the son of Marcus Aurelius, kills his father and seizes dictatorial power, and Maximus is made a gladiator slave. However, Maximus becomes an increasingly popular gladiator, and some well-minded senators, led by Glacchus (Derek Jacobi), put their faith in Maximus's power to sway the people and his old army. At

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one point, Maximus is given the chance to overthrow Commodus by leading his former army into Rome. However, Glacchus will not let Maximus enter Rome with his army: "I will not trade one dictatorship for another," he says, and explains to Maximus that he does not believe that "[o]nce all of Rome is yours, you'll just give it back to the people" and retreat from Rome with the army. Glacchus does not trust that Maximus has no will of his own to become a new dictator and that he will act as a transparent medium for carrying out the last wishes of Marcus Aurelius and reinstating the republic. This is the sort of dilemma arising from General Pervez Musharraf's claim that he will secure democracy in Pakistan, a promise that he was not able to meet. The West was banking on Musharraf's ability to restore democracy, yet Musharraf merely extended his temporary dictatorship.

At this point it is useful to examine the similarities and differences between Commodus the dictator-emperor and Maximus the dictator-general. As Commodus says to Maximus: "Are we so different, you and I? You take life when you have to, and so do I." They both use violence: Maximus as a general and as a gladiator, Commodus as a dictator. Of course, according to the film, the difference is that Maximus's violence is legitimate and Commodus's violence is not. Commodus has some authority, but it is shallow because it is only based on providing theatre for the masses. Maximus, on the other hand, supposedly has the true well-being of the people at his heart, and his violence also gains legitimacy from the fact that he is reinstituting the republic, that is, the rule of law and some form of democratic self-rule.

This is related to what Maximus and Commodus wish to rule in the name of. Maximus wants to rule in the name of the restoration of the republic, and Commodus in the name of his desire to be loved in order to compensate for the love he never received from his father. They both want to rule in the name of nature, albeit in different ways. As the son of Marcus Aurelius, Commodus believes that it is only natural that he becomes the next Caesar. Ironically, though, Commodus can only continue this "natural" line of blood by killing his father, Marcus Aurelius, and thereby letting him die an unnatural death. Maximus, on the other hand, is the bearer of what the film presents as the natural progress toward a democratic republic; he can thus lay claim to the natural progress of History conceived as a teleological movement toward democracy and freedom.

Another and decisive difference between Commodus and Maximus is that Maximus does not fear death. Unlike Commodus, Maximus accepts death as a condition of life, and he gives his body and life to the Republic of Rome. Even when the plotting senators and the mob identify his particular body with the future and the people of Rome, Maximus is only the fleeting and transparent medium for the idea of Rome as a republic. His body—his life and death—only matters as the bearer of that idea (which is literally tattooed onto him); and, importantly, the particularity of his body does not contaminate the universality and rationality of the idea of the republic he is going to reinstitute. Commodus, on the other hand, is preoccupied with himself. To him, he is all that matters about Rome, and so he wants his sister, Lucilla, to give him a son. For him it matters *which* body will represent and incarnate Rome. For Maximus, exactly the opposite is the case: for him, his particular body does not matter, and it is entirely subsumed to the anticipated restoration of the republic. He does not care if he lives or dies; all he cares for is that the republic will live, and he readily sacrifices his own life for it.

It is not surprising that the film takes the side of Maximus in the comparison between him and Commodus (who wouldn't?). In this way, the film is a critique of dictators who make the people a toy in their hands, as does Commodus when he buys himself popularity by giving the people theatre, and a celebration of the republic and of benevolent leaders such as Maximus.

FROM DICTATORSHIP TO THE REPUBLIC

Final scene: Maximus kills Commodus in the gladiator arena. Maximus himself dies of his wounds, but only after pronouncing the wishes of Marcus Aurelius to restore the republic. The republic and the power of the Senate is reinstated, and Lucius, the son of Commodus's sister, Lucilla, is selected to become the next emperor, literally and metaphorically bringing light back to Rome. The references to light in the names of Lucilla and Lucius echo the conversation between Marcus Aurelius and Maximus at the beginning of the film where Marcus Aurelius asks Maximus "What is Rome?," and Maximus answers "The light." The Republic of Rome is associated with light and with breath or speech, whereas Commodus's dictatorship is associated with blood and bodily desire. Rome is presented in the film as a pure idea, and the violence used by Maximus to restore the idea of Rome is concealed behind the purity of the idea.

Maximus's death has important implications. Had he not died, but lived as a general or a common soldier, this would have been problematic from the perspective of the newly reborn republic, because the republic could not be certain that Maximus would not return with his army or as a populist dictator. Maximus is necessary for the restoration of democracy and the rule of law. Yet, his role is ambiguous because he is the one who leads the people to the republic—the one who intervenes with force to (re)institute the republic. The republic, where the people lead, and Maximus, who leads the people, could not exist side by side. Indeed, it is at the moment when he vanishes that Maximus retroactively legitimizes his own temporary dictatorship: the trust placed in him by Marcus Aurelius assumed that Maximus would only lead the people *to* the republic; that is, that he would only take care of the transition to democracy, and that after the transition is fulfilled, the people—not Maximus—will rule again.

It is important to be clear about what distinguishes Commodus and Maximus. Both are dictators and use violence, but Commodus is informed by his narcissism, while Maximus uses violence for the sake of the noble cause of restoring the republic. Nonetheless, Maximus's use of violence is not lawful because that violence is what institutes the rule of law by breaking with the current order and restoring the republic. Maximus's actions are only lawful in the sense of adhering to a higher law: the law of the republic of the past expressed in the will of Marcus Aurelius and the law of the republic that will be restored in the future. Here one may note that the same structure arises in relation to civil disobedience. The civil disobedient makes a claim in the name of a higher law (the Constitution or her religion, for example), but the problem is who is to make the judgment about the legitimacy of the act of civil disobedience: the existing regime or the civil disobedient herself? This is precisely where the difficulty arises: who is to decide what that higher law is? Who is to decide what the content of the idea(l) of the Roman Republic is, and whether Maximus's actions will actually take Rome toward it? To be sure, Maximus speaks in the name of the republic, but today even the worst of dictators will speak in the name of democracy and freedom, so that cannot

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be what distinguishes Maximus's violence from that of Commodus and other dictators. In other words, it is not enough that Maximus, the provisional dictator, claims not to be interested in anything but restoring Marcus Aurelius's Roman Republic.

The difficulty is the lack of a firm basis upon which to judge Maximus's restoration of the republic. The people—and the senators—must put their fate in his hands, and they must judge Maximus from the perspective of the future republic that is to be instituted. Yet the future is uncertain; only time can tell if they were right to trust Maximus, whether his attempts to restore the republic will bear fruit and whether he will not simply be a new dictator. The judgment of Maximus is a retrospective one, and the act of instituting democracy and the rule of law has the structure of a future anterior: it will have been the event that instituted democracy and the rule of law. In the same way, the War in Iraq will (or will not) have been the war that introduced security for all and democracy and freedom for the Iraqis. And Musharraf's dictatorship will (or will not) have been the decisive factor in reestablishing democracy in Pakistan. But any such claim about Maximus, the Iraq War, or Musharraf is limited by the uncertainty of the future, that is, the contingent link between the actions and the fulfillment of the stated goals of those actions.

In the terminology of Jacques Derrida that I am following here, there is an ineradicable tension between the future anterior (when Maximus will have reinstituted the republic) and the future to-come (*l'á-venir*), which is ultimately unpredictable and unprogrammable.[3] Even if, in the film, Maximus succeeds in ending Commodus's dictatorship, it is not certain that the republic will return in an uncorrupted version, or that the same would not have happened without Maximus's intervention. In the film, Maximus's intervention is presented as both necessary and sufficient for the restoration of the republic. Similarly, Musharraf's rule may not be sufficient, let alone necessary, to bring back democracy to Pakistan. We will never know for certain whether Maximus's temporary dictatorship will have been the event that reestablished the Roman Republic.[4]

In the case of *Gladiator*, there is an added complication because one must distinguish between we, the audience, and the Roman people and Senate. The audience has a privileged knowledge about Maximus's motives to which the Roman people and senators are not privy. This makes it easier for the audience to judge Maximus's proposal to enter Rome with his army. In real life, however, claims to have access to such privileged knowledge are more problematic. This is the case, for instance, when political leaders claim to have direct access to God or to have a privileged insight into the workings of history as part of an orthodox Marxist analysis of society. Believing that this sort of privileged insight is unavailable, and that other views on the matter deserve respect, introduces an element of doubt when it comes to judging the violence that is meant to institute democracy and the rule of law.

VIOLENCE AND CRITIQUE

In the film, the transition to democracy is presented as the natural course of History, as teleological progress. The dictatorship of Commodus is represented as something unnatural: he came to power by unnatural means (murder) and wanted to continue his rule by unnatural means (incest). The dictatorship of Commodus is thus represented as an aberration from what should have been the normal course of History. The transition from dictatorship to the republic is the point where history catches up with History understood as teleological progress toward the ideal of the republic, and where history joins the path of its natural and rational progress again. The means of that transition—namely, Maximus—is the central character of the film, but at the same time he has to die, to vanish. On the one hand, he is central to the restoration of democracy; on the other hand, he is a problematic figure because he is also a kind of dictator.[5]

We can also understand this in terms of means and ends. There is a potential contradiction between the end and the means to achieve it: between the democratic republic as the end and the violence and dictatorship of Maximus as the means to achieve that end. The end could not be achieved without the means, and yet the means are also alien to that end. One way in which the film overcomes this is by letting Maximus die and thereby making him and his intervention a thing of the past rather than a part of the democratic present and future. In short, Maximus dies in order for the end (the republic) not to be tainted by the means (violence and dictatorship).

The film also overcomes the problem of transitional violence by creating continuity between the old rule of Marcus Aurelius and the newly instituted democracy. It was Marcus Aurelius's wish that the rule of the people be restored, a wish that he utters in what is practically his last breath. The rule of the people is later restored through the last breath of Maximus when he repeats Marcus Aurelius's wish. Thereby, Maximus is reduced to the bearer of the wishes of Marcus Aurelius, merely citing the latter's will. Maximus's performative act of bringing back democracy is, then, justified and also partly concealed by the reference to Marcus Aurelius's will. By inscribing Maximus's act into the continuity between the old and the new republic, his act appears to be not a merely subjective decision or preference on his part, but an answer to the dictum of the higher rationality of History represented by the will of Marcus Aurelius, who, according to the film, is the incarnation of the idea of the Roman Republic. The restoration of democracy is presented as just that: not something new, but the *re*storation of the original and pure idea of the Roman Republic.[6]

What, then, is the problem with *Gladiator*? The problem is that the violence of Maximus—the violence that (re)founds the republic—goes unacknowledged as what it is: founding violence. This violence may appear rational and justified from the retroactive perspective of what it institutes (when it *will have been* the violence that institutes the republic, and so on). However, at the moment of the institution of the new order, it is not clear that the violence is sufficient and necessary; and even after the new regime has been instituted, it is not clear that the violence was sufficient and necessary. Musharraf and Pakistan provide an example of the latter: Musharraf may at some point be able to claim that democracy has returned in a more stable form to Pakistan. Yet, Musharraf's opponents may claim that his dictatorship was not necessary and that, in fact, his dictatorship was insufficient because, in the long run, a stable democracy must grow from the bottom up and not be imposed. The same issues arise in relation to the imposition of democracy in Iraq by foreign troops.

The blurring of the distinction between Commodus and Maximus may at first seem to lead us into an impasse. If even the best of republics requires some element of violence for its institution—symbolic or physical violence whose justification is not straightforward—then, some will argue, we end up in the untenable position that it is impossible to criticize violence, for

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instance the violence of dictators such as Commodus. We are left with arbitrariness and Schmittian decisionism, where might is right, they may argue. This is not the place to solve this debate, only to point out how a Hollywood blockbuster, *Gladiator*, provides a way into a discussion of difficult questions at the heart of political theory (about violence, authority, and the legitimacy of law) and also speaks to contemporary political events (in, say, Iraq or Pakistan). *Gladiator* may at first reinforce the students' preconceptions, but through a critique of the film, those preconceptions can also be put into question.

It may be possible to pursue another form of critique, however, one that starts from the premise that any political regime will rest on some instituting violence whose justification is problematic. Similarly, it may still be possible to pursue critique even if one accepts that there is always an element of vanguardism, or "dictatorship," involved in the transition to a republic or indeed in any emancipatory project. That is, those who are supposed to be emancipated from dictatorship may need some intervention from outside because they have been pacified by the dictatorship and so do not have the resources to free themselves. This may, for instance, be said of the Roman people in *Gladiator* because Commodus has successfully pacified them with theatre.

This may sound as an argument that condones violence and dictatorship, but quite the opposite may be the case. To say that violence and dictatorship are constitutive in the sense argued here does not mean that one has to accept any *particular* instances of them. There will be violence, and that violence will take some particular form, but it is impossible to derive the necessity of any *particular* instance of violence from the fact that *some* violence is unavoidable. So, the argument here does not give dictators around the world a *carte blanche* to continue doing what they are doing. If there is a contingent link between the republic and particular instances of violence and dictatorship, and if the republic is not the inevitable and natural outcome of the progress of History, then this opens a discussion over the desirability and feasibility of the means we think are necessary to achieve the ends we think worthy. What is problematic about *Gladiator* is that the film tries to naturalize Maximus's violence and dictatorship. In the film, the violence at the point of the (re)institution of the republic goes unacknowledged, and Maximus is represented as the transparent medium for Marcus Aurelius's will and the reemergence of the Republic of Rome. My argument here is that we should be skeptical about any claim to represent the good society, for instance, Maximus's claim to represent the idea(l) of the Roman Republic. Even if some element of violence and dictatorship may be inevitable, we cannot rely on good intentions alone. ■

NOTES

I would like to thank Beatriz Martínez Fernandez and the two anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier draft.

1. What I present here is just one possible interpretation of *Gladiator*. Alternative interpretations of it may stress, among other things, its Biblical themes, or the convergence between the political aspects of the film and the parts of the narrative that relates to the family and love life of the main character, Maximus.
2. This is reminiscent of Rousseau's legislator, who founds the laws of the republic. He, too, is a foreigner and not part of the demos supposed to make their own laws. His foreignness is both the solution to Rousseau's problem of how to found a republic (because the legislator is not marked by the limitations suffered by the people) and a problem for the republic (because his lawgiving is not part of the people's self-legislation). See Rousseau (1987, Book II, Chapter 7) and Honig's (2001, 18–25) perceptive analysis of this problem.
3. On this and the normative argument below, see Derrida's "Force of Law" (1990). Also relevant here is Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" (1978).
4. On the structure of the future anterior in relation to the founding of the American republic, see Derrida (1986).
5. Here I pass over another relevant aspect of the film and of Maximus's character: the fascination with the leader. Maximus is strong, smart, good-looking, and good-hearted, and perhaps the film is driven by the audience's fascination with him, a fascination similar to the people's fascination with a populist leader. On the relationship between the people and a populist leader, see Laclau (2005, Part II).
6. For a similar example—in the context of the founding of the American republic—of how the performative aspect of an act can be justified and hidden by reference to reason, nature, and God, see Derrida (1986).

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