

Old Sparky: The Electric Chair as Spectacle, Symbol, and State Power

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Introduction

In 1964, acclaimed artist Andy Warhol began commissioning a series of one of America's most infamous creations: the electric chair. His portfolio highlights the death chamber at New York's Sing Sing prison. The canvases show a vacant electric chair in an empty room, emerging slowly from the shadows in the background. The series reflects Warhol's preoccupation with violent death; he observes, "when you see a gruesome picture over and over again, it doesn't really have any effect" (Buchloh and Warhol). Such is the attitude of most Americans flooded with media accounts of violence, whose desensitization have allowed for the prominence of the electric chair in popular culture. This paper provides a multidimensional analysis of "Old Sparky," the nickname given to many of the country's electric chairs. Outlining the chair's history, symbolism, and legal properties, I highlight the power relations at work in capital punishment via electrocution in the United States, which are deeply intertwined with notions of capitalism, American exceptionalism, and biopower. Ultimately, these forces suggest a dark side to the American creed of democracy, equality of opportunity, and justice, drawing into question the legitimacy of such values in American government and culture at large.

The Road to Hell is Paved with Good Intentions: The History of the Electric Chair

The electric chair was born partly in response to growing public aversion to hanging, reflecting changing notions of modernity and civilization in America in

the early 1800s. Long considered the preferred method of execution, hanging offered a few advantages: it requires little equipment and allows the body to be displayed postmortem as a deterrent to others (Galvin 19–20). However, the suspension drop involved must be calculated precisely so that the victim is not decapitated, which U.S. law considers “cruel and unusual punishment” (Galvin 21). This proved challenging to the era’s executioners, as several botched executions widely publicized in newspapers helped turn the tide of public opinion against hanging. In 1866, the *Cork Examiner* reported that onlookers “find appalling the spectacle of common criminals being publicly hanged in front of the jail” (Galvin 29–30). Framing this past methodology as barbaric, the Supreme Court would eventually write in 1958 that the Eighth Amendment, prohibiting cruel and unusual punishment, “must draw its meaning from the evolving standards of decency that mark the progress of a maturing society” (Varland 313). Such standards of decency would serve as the test for the gallows’ replacement: the electric chair. During its first use in 1890, death by electricity proved humane enough.

Scientific advances in the mid-19th century seemed to answer the public’s call for greater conscience. After observing an accidental electrocution, which killed the victim instantly, Alfred Southwick began lobbying in favor of electrocution. His occupation as a dentist, where patients were seated when operated on, gave him the idea to use a chair for electrocutions. Governor David Bennett Hill recommended the idea to the New York legislature in 1885, declaring, “the present mode of executing criminals by hanging has come down to us from the dark ages...it may well be questioned whether the science of the present day cannot provide a means for taking the life of such as are condemned to die in a less barbarous manner” (Brandon 49). His statement reflects the perceived brutality of past executions and intended transition to a new Gilded Age, where “science” can

provide a dignified death. Electrocutation, which sanitized the killing process through its veneer of technological perfection and achievement, was the answer. While abolitionists still called for the end of the death penalty, the discourse of Southwick's humane methodology of execution helped justify and perpetuate capital punishment in America, which remains one of the few industrialized countries who endorse it today. Seeking a "scientific alternative" to hanging, the public soon rallied around electrocution, with the *New York Tribune* claiming that "there is no reason to doubt the ability of modern science to devise a mode of swift and really painless execution. Electricity would certainly furnish the means" (Brandon 49). However, these sentiments reveal a seemingly unbreakable faith in "modern science," which as a discipline is by nature experimental and, at times, unreliable. A reasonable level of doubt and willingness to ask questions is fundamental to the scientific method. Like its predecessor, hanging, the electric chair would endure its share of malfunctions, which I will explore later in this paper.

To manufacture a working electric chair, Southwick turned to the expertise of Thomas Edison, inadvertently embedding the device in the war of the currents as Edison and his rivals sought to standardize their preferred type of electric power. Losing the battle for America's electricity, Edison used this opportunity to try to smear rival George Westinghouse by linking alternating current—associated with Westinghouse—to executions. Edison's profit motives and competitive ambitions not only cast doubt on the legitimacy of the "humane" defense of electric execution but reflect an abuse of power. His misleading account of the workings of electric power reflects scientific hubris at its worst, showing wanton disregard for the lives at the mercy of his creation. It also draws into question the credibility of scientific expertise as a source of knowledge, tarnishing the reputation of the "scientific expert" far and wide. Thus, by politicizing how electric

power would be delivered during execution—Edison for direct current, Westinghouse for alternating—the electric chair became embroiled in a commercial battle for dominance. Moreover, prisoners became pawns in what was ultimately a corporate and political dispute; neither Edison nor Westinghouse even supported the death penalty. But Edison had already unleashed Pandora’s box; in 1886, Senator Daniel MacMillan of New York appointed a commission to investigate the most humane method of capital punishment, including electrocution (Brandon 51). Edison's testimony was crucial to the Gerry Commission’s report, which ultimately endorsed electric execution. Speaking at a public hearing about the commission’s findings, committee member Elbridge Gerry "testified that he thought Edison knew more about electricity than anyone else in the United States and that Edison’s endorsement was the major factor in persuading him” (Brandon 58). These findings prompted new legislation, and on June 4th, 1888, Governor Hill signed the Electrical Execution Bill into law (Galvin 65). Thus, Edison leveraged his status as an expert, manipulating information for commercial advantage in a demonstration of knowledge as power. The war of the currents continued as New York’s first electric chair began construction, with Westinghouse determined to prevent alternating current from being used. The New York Legislature consulted the Medico-Legal Society of New York to help ensure the chair’s mechanics facilitated a quick and painless death. The society’s chair, Dr. Frederick Peterson, and engineer Harold Brown began experimenting with different currents to determine lethality, using small animals for test subjects and Edison’s laboratory as facilities. They soon moved their demonstrations to the public arena, experimenting on larger animals in front of reporters, doctors, and government officials. The spectacle paid off; after frying a 1,230-pound horse with alternating current, the *New York Times* declared, “the alternating current will undoubtedly drive the hangman out of business in this State” (Galvin 82). The

society followed suit, recommending electrocution with alternating current a few days later. As with hanging, which was driven out by public disenchantment, the theatrics of execution remained a strong force in maintaining the integrity—and support—of execution method, regardless of the scientific or medical processes at work. Still, as Brown began gathering the physical materials for the chair, he encountered resistance from Westinghouse, who refused to sell him the generator needed to power the apparatus (Galvin 83). His efforts to prevent alternating current from being used confront the politics of ownership in science. The conflation between a person and a technology—Edison and direct current, Westinghouse and alternating current—suggests an ownership between creator and creation. This legacy is what inspired Edison to smear Westinghouse, so that alternating current would be synonymous with lethality and criminality. It seems that whoever “owns” the property (physical or intellectual) or data bears some responsibility for its use in public imagination. Yet if inventors struggle to gatekeep their inventions—Brown eventually secured Westinghouse generators on the second-hand market—can they still be held accountable for consequences of their use? Hindsight is 20/20. The science and innovation of the past few centuries seems to have opened a Pandora’s box. Edison sparked a myth—the lethality of alternating current—and a monster was born.

An Eye for an Eye: The Electric Chair as a Symbol of Retributive Justice and American Exceptionalism

The electric chair’s prominence in the American cultural imaginary reflects a clash of morals, amplified further by the public’s morbid fascination with death. Having become a symbol for the death penalty itself, the electric chair holds a contentious narrative position in public discourse. In its defense, advocates for capital punishment evoke phrases like “an eye for an eye.” Others contend, “let the

punishment fit the crime.” These popular sayings convey the principle of retributive justice: “a system by which offenders are punished in proportion to the moral magnitude of their intentionally committed harms” (Carlsmith and Darley). Retributive justice operates under the notion that people deserve punishment and must pay accordingly for their crimes. The more serious the crime, the more serious the punishment. Criminology, an art more than a science, then boils down to a simple equation: balancing the moral magnitude of the crime with the punishment. This logic seems almost common sense; there is a basic human instinct for retribution when wronged. However, transcending such primal instincts may in fact be the hallmark of a civilized society. Though killing a murderer may be “just” under this framework, the question of civility is different altogether. Jeffrey Reiman, faculty at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, offers the following remarks: “though the death penalty is a just punishment for murder, abolition of the death penalty is part of the civilizing mission of modern states” (Reiman 115). Though the electric chair was conceived of as humane, the evolving standards of decency today—where laws are no longer inscribed in stone—demand abolition in accordance with the development of the modern state. The nickname “Old Sparky” suggests a barbaric relic of the past, seemingly at odds with the supposed dignity capital punishment prescribes. On one hand, “old” emphasizes how the electric chair remains entangled in its controversial history, which had different standards for notions of modernity, civility, and justice than today. Holding onto this history through references to “Old Sparky” (sometimes abbreviated as “Ol’ Sparky”) suggests a fondness for it, an approval of the way we unveiled our killing machine outside the Jackson state capitol in 1940, displaying it in a show of strength— “tough on crime.” While “old” is often synonymous with powerful—reinforcing the state’s authority as executioner—it also describes something antiquated and run down. The image of broken power lines emitting

sparks (“sparky”) comes to mind. The electric chair has malfunctioned numerous times over the years; in recent times, convicted murderer Pedro Medina’s head burst into flames during his execution in 1997. These botched executions draw into question the chair’s efficacy in providing an instant and painless death. Some even champion its brutality as a supposed deterrent to crime. In response to Medina’s death, Florida attorney general Bob Butterworth warned, “people who wish to commit murder...better not do it in the state of Florida because we have a problem with our electric chair” (Brandon 2). Such willful ignorance frames “Old Sparky’s” defects as an advantage, making it a symbol of not only vengeance but deterrence. However, relying on the “old” also suggests rejecting the “new”: advances in medicine and technology that might offer a more humane alternative to electric execution, like lethal injection. Moreover, new forensic methods, like DNA testing, reveal that the electric chair is not the only institution that malfunctions. The criminal justice system itself falls victim to wrongful convictions, uncovered by organizations like the Innocence Project, which uses DNA testing to exonerate wrongfully convicted individuals. Rather than reckon with these failings, nostalgia for “Old Sparky” uncovers neglect in the criminal justice system. The chair’s nickname also personifies the technology, using flippant humor in an ironic portrayal of the device as a familiar friend. This affectionate discourse sanitizes the execution process, effectively making references to “Old Sparky” euphemisms for the death penalty and desensitizing the public to the chair’s lethality. With a long history of public execution as spectacle, the American public was a natural audience for death by electrocution. However, the Gerry commission recommended that executions be held in secret, free from news observers. The report’s authors feared press broadcasts to the public would feed a “vicious and morbid appetite” for horror (Galvin 63). In his critical commentary “American Exceptionalism and the Death Penalty,” sociology professor Tony Poveda argues

that capital punishment is embedded in the cultural ethos of the American Dream, justifying punitive sentiment. A supposedly meritocratic society, America champions equality of opportunity. However, the “double-edged sword” that prizes individual achievement inevitably tolerates extremes of inequality, where “the cultural emphasis on winning and getting ahead also requires “losers” and “failures” (Poveda 255). It is these “losers” and “failures”—overwhelmingly the poor and racial minorities—who pay the ultimate price of competition. As an eager spectator, the victorious American becomes executioner, upholding the values of exceptionalism in its perverted notions of liberty, egalitarianism, and individualism.

Often described as “peculiar,” America’s electric chair is apt for comparison to that other “peculiar institution”: slavery. The cruelty of slavery also seems at odds with America’s supposed egalitarian and democratic values. However, a strong cultural logic perpetuates slavery as a tradition of social exclusion, with the same forces at work to continue justifying capital punishment today. Poveda describes the historically disproportionate share of executions on minorities, particularly African Americans, that occurred in the South in the “regionalization of the death penalty” in the post-Furman era (Poveda 257). The administration of capital punishment thus became embedded in the legacy of slavery, especially in the South. In a national study of Texas executions in the 20th century, James Marquart “argued that a ‘cultural tradition of exclusion,’ deriving from slavery and its legacy of racial discrimination, accounted for the disproportionate lynchings and executions that occurred in the South” (Poveda 258). Linking slavery as a precedent to disproportionate lynchings and state executions of minorities, Marquart’s “tradition of exclusion” values the elite white body, providing the cultural basis in America for the death penalty.

Conclusion

Conceived of as a shining “city upon a hill,” America champions itself as a beacon of hope for the world, helping to promote democracy across the globe. However, the multidimensional analysis of the electric chair outlined in this paper reveals a darker history underpinning American exceptionalism, drawing into question the legitimacy of its claims to justice, equality of opportunity, and modernity. The capitalist forces that propelled the electric chair’s construction, and the American government’s enthusiasm to put it to use, reveal perverse motivations for power at odds with the democratic ideal. Moreover, the American public’s morbid interest in “Old Sparky” reflects broader cultural values less concerned with life and rehabilitation than punishment and retribution—even when culpability remains doubtful. First carved out of an oak tree by prisoners in 1923, Florida’s electric chair has killed more than 200 people (Brandon 1). Reflecting nearly a century later, it seems our labor might be put to better use elsewhere.

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