

Prologue

Not “Not Another Book about the Death Penalty”

What more could possibly be said about the death penalty in the United States? Seemingly interminable numbers of scholarly books, editorials, op-ed pieces, screenplays, political speeches, and talk show rants have, for generations, analyzed the topic (no pun intended) to death. The issue recently has again taken center stage. Former Illinois Governor George Ryan’s remarkably bold decision to commute all death sentences in his traditionally pro-capital punishment state has intensified the debate anew.

Yet ironically, the questions that animate the current death penalty debate continue to be anything but new: Can the innocent be protected from the death sentence? Is the death penalty racially biased? Is it a deterrent? Does it satisfy the victim family’s desire for retribution?

These utilitarian and retributive claims at the center of America’s death penalty debate miss one crucial point: Rhetoric is a far cry from the realities of making the decision to impose a death sentence. The failure of contemporary death penalty rhetoric is that it relies too much on abstractions. It is devoid of any measure of the cold, hard reality of having to take the awesome responsibility for another human being’s life.

Jurors’ Stories of Death is unique in that it explicitly attempts to enter the world of those who do make the awful life-or-death decision: former capital jurors. Hearing the words of those citizens enlisted by the state injects a new and original voice into what has arguably become a debate characterized by boilerplate for or against claims.

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In contrast to death penalty rhetoric, *Jurors' Stories of Death* indicts state-sanctioned death sentencing as more than a “broken” legal institution. The interrelated argument advanced here is as follows.

1. By ordering citizens to make life-or-death sentencing decisions, the state invests in cultural understandings that are chained to racist, classist, sexist, and homophobic ideology, beliefs that a vast majority of Americans today would like to see made obsolete.
2. If the United States is striving to embrace the twenty-first-century goals of multiculturalism, including a greater appreciation for cultural diversity, the state's continued use of the death penalty profoundly undermines those goals.