

**Robin Wagner-Pacifici**

**The Art of Surrender: Decomposing Sovereignty at Conflict's End.**

University of Chicago Press, 2005, 224 pp.

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At the ceremonies marking the end of hostilities against Japan in 1945, John Dower reports, "Tokyo Bay was clogged with hundreds of powerful, well-scrubbed American fighting ships. At a thunderous theatrical moment, the sky was all but obscured by a fly-by of some four hundred glistening B-29 bombers accompanied by fifteen hundred Navy fighter planes." Nothing could more clearly have marked the "decomposition of sovereignty" to which the Japanese were being subjected by the Americans in the aftermath of defeat. The predominance of the American occupying force was not called into question by the fact that the Emperor was allowed to stay on the throne; indeed, that arrangement was a strategy decided upon by the victors in the interest of political stability.

In *The Art of Surrender*, Robin Wagner-Pacifici shows that the rituals attendant upon the conclusion of military conflicts involve a broad range of actions, gestures, and statements that may be considerably more delicate and fragile than those suggested by the darkened skies over Tokyo Bay. Her inquiry into this intriguing subject constitutes an exhaustive – and in certain respects exhausting – effort to plumb the ceremonies of conflict-ending for their sociological meaning.

Very much a product of the "linguistic turn" in the social and cultural sciences, the author mobilizes Austin's understanding of "how to do things with words" in order to develop a "political semiotic" for analyzing contexts such as the surrender. Wagner-Pacifici builds her analysis around the notion that surrenders must be *demonstrated*, *performed*, and *represented*. The investigation is built on a close examination of the archival and artistic legacies of the surrenders at Breda (1625), where the renegade Dutch were forced to submit to the Spanish Habsburgs in one of the battles of the Thirty Years' War; Lee's surrender to U. S. ("Unconditional Surrender") Grant at Appomattox at the conclusion of the Civil War; and the aforementioned submission of the Japanese on the USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay in 1945.

Appropriately enough, given one of the principal purposes of surrender, the book reflects on the relationship between violence and its opposite (whatever that might be). It suggests that one way to describe the "zone of surrender" is "as one in which overt, illegitimate violence hands off to the realm of covert or legitimate violence that is, precisely, law" (108). Whereas social life previously tended to be seen as an arena in which relatively pacific relations were interrupted by the scourge of warfare, violence is increasingly perceived as predominating over peace. This is an interesting (and troubling) thought, but it's not obvious that it turns law "precisely" into violence.

One also wonders a bit about the overall undertaking when the author offers a somewhat puzzling interpretation of her own experience to make sense of certain aspects of surrender. The situation is that her 17-year-old son wants to get his "senior driver's license," which will allow him to drive without adult supervision after 11pm. The parent must sign relevant documents in the presence of a notary. Something about the situation induces in the author a great anxiety, and she ruminates about what the cause might be. She suggests, "My own authority to name, demonstrate, and perform my identity was being tested and given over to another. The state and its surveillance and licensing

privileges hovered like a specter in the room.” One imagines that the sense of impending doom may just as well have been provoked by the thought of an unsupervised 17-year-old out driving past one’s own bedtime, but this doesn’t seem to be among the possibilities. Clever as Wagner-Pacifici is, methinks she doth invent too much.

There may also be some danger in focusing so intently on the moment of surrender, rife with significance and social symbolism though it may be. One thinks, for example, of the consequences of the surrender at Appomattox. As the historian David Blight has shown, the end of the Civil War was merely the prelude to a compromise among northern and southern whites about the “erring and misguided” – not damnable – project of the Confederacy that underwrote another century of legal and quasi-legal white supremacy. Wagner-Pacifici is aware that what appears to be an end may only be an intermezzo, but the problem of emphasis is real enough.

This is in many ways a brilliant book, but it also wears its learning rather heavily. An inventive exercise in cultural sociology, it may not be found rewarding by those not already privy to the preoccupations and jargon of that particular tribe. If a discussion of “gestural deixis” (92) is not your cup of tea, for example, it might be best to stay away. The volume also suffers from some annoying repetition of quotations toward the end. Still, *The Art of Surrender* shines a light on a context of intrinsic social and political import, and offers a sophisticated analytical apparatus with which to make sense of it.

John Torpey  
CUNY Graduate Center  
jtorpey@gc.cuny.edu

John Torpey is author of *Making Whole What Has Been Smashed: On Reparations Politics* (Harvard University Press, 2006), and editor of *Politics and the Past: On Repairing Historical Injustices* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

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