The Exorcism Motif in the Philosophy of Sovereign Citizen Movements

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Introduction

Adherents of “sovereign citizen” ideology reject the traditional principles of social contract theory, instead positing that they exist beyond the jurisdiction of any legal authority. Such a mentality has been linked with violence and white supremacy, placing at risk law enforcement officers who must engage with “sovereign citizen” movement adherents.\(^1\)

In the following Essay, I aim to deconstruct a key part of the sovereign citizen movement’s perspective on legitimate authority. I argue that the core underpinnings of sovereign citizen mentality (as applied) operate according to an anthropological framework similar to that used in an exorcism: namely, the ceremonial divestiture from an oppressive authority into whose service one has been subtly pressed. However, in an exorcism framework, the act of divestiture can only occur pursuant to the authority of the agent conducting such an exorcism. Because of this, one way to philosophically defeat the sovereign citizen paradigm is to recognize that the mode of ceremonial divestiture employed is a de facto concession to the authority of the system within which one works—despite the fact that the sovereign citizen paradigm claims not to recognize any authority above the individual.

I begin by considering the concepts of sovereign citizen movements that align with the theory I sketch here, before proceeding to discuss the sociological parallels between such movements and traditional exorcism practices. Last, I consider the core presumptions regarding authority structures that undergird both types of practice, and the implications of these presumptions for the philosophical cogence of sovereign citizen theory.

Framing Sovereign Citizen Movements and the Dissociation Phenomenon

My use of the term “sovereign citizen movements” refers here to a loose affiliation of persons and groups united in their belief that the extant civil authorities are per se illegitimate, and that individuals ought to be treated as independent legal sovereigns for jurisdictional purposes. Accordingly, sovereign citizens allege that statutory laws do not bind them. The rationale for this perspective rests on a belief that the entity over which the state exercises jurisdiction is a fictional construct. Thus, the sovereign citizen properly asserts his sovereignty by dissociating himself from a figurative “person” that is contingent upon his human identity but not indivisible from it. In practice, this looks like a belief that JOHN DOE (note the capitalization) is a fictional, “corporate” construct tied to the “real” John Doe.² For the sovereign citizen, while JOHN DOE may be the name on the birth certificate issued to “John Doe,” the two must be

treated as distinct. Accordingly, court orders and taxation duties incumbent upon JOHN DOE are nonbinding upon John Doe.

As noted, sovereign citizens seek to engage in an act of conceptual divestiture by which a sovereign citizen separates himself from the governmental construct bearing his name. This process may also be described as a ritualistic or ceremonial dissociation from a malignant person-concept, one that has attached itself to one’s human identity and exercises a negative influence. Sovereign citizen literature describes this idea as “Redemption Theory.” Significantly, this dissociation occurs through a process of complicated legal maneuvers that are designed to liberate the sovereign citizen from any existing legal duties possessed towards the state.

Core Shared Presumptions of Redemption Theory and Exorcism

I suggest that a cognizable parallel exists here between such dissociation and the anthropological/sociological concept of exorcism, in which a malevolent spirit is driven out of a suffering victim through the acts of a religious or spiritual authority. In both

3 Id.


5 See New Multi-Million Dollar Scam Takes Off in Antigovernment Circles, supra note 4 (“By filing particular government forms in a particular order, and by using precisely the right language (don’t worry: the redemptionists will tell you how), you can redeem your stolen assets, reclaiming your God-given freedom and a whole lot of money, too.”).
cases, the identity of an undesirable entity (in exorcism, a demon; in Redemption Theory, the “corporate person”) is formally detached from the identity of the individual undergoing an act of personal reconstitution, restoring the individual’s autonomy after a period during which such autonomy was abrogated.7

But more crucially than this, the act of exorcism cannot be undertaken unilaterally: it must occur under the auspices of a religious or spiritual figure.8 The act of state dissociation operates similarly: sovereign citizens seeking to divest themselves from their “legally fictional persons” must do so by engaging in a complex series of behaviors within the fabric of the contemporary legal system.9 By so doing, the sovereign citizen believes that the “system” will grant him deliverance and restore his illegitimately co-opted autonomy. At base, this constitutes a tacit acknowledgement that the divesting agent, one whose authority is invoked to exorcise the victim in question, is possessed of legitimate authority.

Put another way, the exorcist possesses a unique power to identify, challenge, and expel a malevolent external influence (an agency which has possessed the victim, such that its removal is an act of restoring the victim’s agency). Individuals lacking the authority to carry out such an action ought not attempt it: the identity of the entity doing

6 See id. (“Importantly, any document to which your name is affixed in all capital letters is not legally binding, the redemptionists say.”).

7 See id. (noting “financial liberation for those who manage to follow its arcane rules”).

8 See CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, ¶ 1673 (1993) (“The solemn exorcism, called "a major exorcism," can be performed only by a priest and with the permission of the bishop. The priest must proceed with prudence, strictly observing the rules established by the Church.”).

9 See supra notes 2-4 and accompanying text.
the exorcising *actually matters*. Similarly, sovereign citizen John Doe seeks to effect redemption (i.e. liberation and a reinstatement of individual autonomy) through triggering a process by which another entity actually conducts the identification, challenge, and dissociation of the JOHN DOE construct. In the case of the sovereign citizen, that entity is not a priest, but instead is the very government whose authority John Doe claims to personally supersede.\(^\text{10}\) Thus, Redemption Theory is self-defeating, possessed of an endemic circularity in reasoning which becomes clear when its principles are juxtaposed alongside those present in traditional discussion of the rite of exorcism.

**Conclusion**

Throughout the United States, public interest in sovereign citizen ideas continues to spread, and does not appear to be dying out. Adherents to these ideas pose a potentially significant danger to the existing constitutional order: while the substance of their views lacks legal merit, the violently anti-authoritarian proclivities of some adherents constitute grounds for concern. Though courts may roundly continue to reject the legal pretensions of the sovereign citizen movement, such decisions may simply be rejected by adherents as further manifestations of illegitimate state control.

Accordingly, I suggest that sovereign citizen ideas may be most effectively rebutted by philosophically uprooting the illusion of absolute personal autonomy.

Understanding the sociological parallel between the Redemption Theory narrative and the

\(^{10}\) *Cf. New Multi-Million Dollar Scam Takes Off in Antigovernment Circles, supra* note 4 (describing a ritualistic process in which a governmental official is said to have ceremonially “call[ed] [the sovereign citizen’s] name several times and [gotten] the question over and over . . .”).
frameworks within which traditional exorcisms occur—and the pivotal roles played by authority figures in each, whose authority is both presumed and foundational to the acts of deliverance sought—constitutes a first step toward that uprooting.