

DISMANTLING THE IMPERIAL BOOMERANG

A Reckoning with Globalised Police Power

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PHILIPPINES, 2017: The coffin of Enrico F. Bernal, a 35-year-old tricycle driver at his wake in Navotas. Enrico was killed on October 11, 2017 in Navotas, just a day after Duterte issued a memorandum removing the Philippine National Police from the drug war operations to let the PDEA take over after a 15-month campaign in which officers have killed thousands of suspected drug users and dealers in organised police operations. The family of Enrico reject allegations that he was involved in drugs and say that the killing was a case of 'mistaken identity' but the funeral home is sure that this was a Tokhang killing (extrajudicial killing) and Enrico was targeted as an alleged drug user. This image is shared with the consent of Enrico's family. "These bodies will be buried in the public cemetery. For many it will be like going home, where their mothers and children are. Maybe they will even be buried on the same ground they were born on," comments a funeral assistant as Enrico's body enters the incinerator for cremation. Credit: © Lynzy Billing / IG: @lynzybilling / Twitter: @LynzyBilling

President Duterte's ordered killings and wanton use of police violence can not be understood without understanding the ways US imperialism shaped the Philippines, which in turn shaped US and ultimately global policing. Empire's boomerang demands a stark transnational response of reimagining and transforming the coercive powers of the state.

In the early morning of 30 December 2020, joint police–military units embarked on two simultaneous operations in the mountainous regions of Panay island in western Visayas in the Philippines. Their assignment was to quell the spread of firearms allegedly proliferating across the region's provinces by capturing 28 supposed members of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). What the police described as a 'regular law enforcement activity'¹¹⁵ ended up in the brutal killings of nine Indigenous community leaders. Council members of the Tumandok tribe were reportedly asleep¹¹⁶ when they were gunned down in front of their families, yet police claimed that they fought back and resisted arrest. Days later, residents of the town where the killings took place fled their homes in fear of more state violence.

The brutality that led to the extrajudicial killings and exodus of the Tumandok people is just one of the latest in a series of high-profile police–military incidents that fuel the debate on the role of counterinsurgency and policing in Philippine public consciousness. About two weeks before this incident, state security forces executed five farmworkers¹¹⁷ in a small town in Manila's neighbouring province of Rizal in what was described as a counterterrorism operation against suspected members of the CPP's armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA). Without citing any evidence, the country's interior secretary insisted they were part of 'death squads'¹¹⁸ charged with assassinating top government officials.

State-sponsored violence in the Philippines has been going on for decades, and crackdowns against suspected subversives have heightened under the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte. His promise to wage a 'war' on drugs has resulted in thousands of dead bodies lying in streets across the country, most of them poor. In his five years in office, Duterte has extended this 'war' by mobilising the government's coercive apparatus to clamp down on dissent – from critical journalists to environmental defenders to the parliamentary opposition. In this 'war', those on the frontline are the agents of the coercive state – the Philippine National Police and the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

Colonial vestiges of the coercive state

The vicious nature of the police and the military, unmasked in violent anti-communist crusades and the extrajudicial killings of marginalised groups, may be traced back to the Philippines' colonial history. The country's national police as it is today was preceded by the Philippine Constabulary, a US-era colonial military police with civil policing powers. In his authoritative work on the history and aftermath of US imperial policing in the Philippines, Alfred McCoy chronicles how the establishment of the Constabulary was partially built on the Philippine regiment of Spain's *Guardia Civil*, which was also military in nature and was tasked with cracking down on revolutionary activity among the civilian native population in the last decade of Spanish colonial rule.¹¹⁹

The US victory in the Philippine–American War led to the establishment of what McCoy describes as 'the most modern police and intelligence units found anywhere under the US flag', which crushed Asia's first anti-colonial movement.¹²⁰ He highlights how this construction of imperial surveillance pacified the

Philippine Revolution by annihilating rebel armies and conducting covert operations to corrupt and discredit Filipino revolutionary leaders, crushing the movement from within.

Indeed, as McCoy documents, imperial practices in the former colony were to prove ‘an ideal laboratory for innovation’.¹²¹ Even after independence, the Philippine state inherited this coercive apparatus, with the Constabulary working alongside the country’s armed forces and sustaining continued repression against Indigenous peoples’ movements in the south of the country and communist guerrillas in the provincial highlands.¹²²

This immense reliance on police power characterised the Philippine state’s methods of handling dissent and conducting governance throughout the twentieth century. The repercussions on the colonised were evident, but it also left a durable mark on the coloniser as its institutional engineering pushed US colonial policy to its limits, which would then rebound to the heart of empire and eventually construct the world’s first modern surveillance state.

Empire’s reciprocity of repression

The US imperialist experience was ‘mutually transformative’ according to McCoy; it even made the metropole ‘more self-conscious, more calculating in the application of power’.¹²³ US experiments with imposing hegemonic influence in the Philippines then imported repressive policing to the United States itself – a process Connor Woodman refers to as the ‘imperial boomerang effect’,¹²⁴ which led to the consolidation of modern coercive state power. He describes this phenomenon as imperial mechanisms of using ‘colonies as laboratories for methods of counter-insurgency, social control and repression, methods which can then be brought back to the imperial metropolis and deployed against the marginalized, subjugated and subaltern within’.¹²⁵

The concept of the boomerang effect of empire can be traced back to the writings of several political thinkers, such as Aimé Césaire, Michel Foucault and Hannah Arendt. While Césaire mentioned that the imperial project would result in a boomerang effect on the coloniser, he also especially characterised US domination as the ‘the only domination from which one never recovers ... unscarred’.¹²⁶ This scarring goes both ways for the US and what was once its largest formal colony.

Indeed, imperial projects left long-lasting legacies in the colonies, particularly in the Philippines, where the remnants of the US empire led to the institutionalisation and legitimisation of the coercive aspects of the postcolonial liberal regime in the country as Filipino post-independence leaders sought to mimic imperial language and perpetuate their own version of domination. But, as Césaire indicated, it was also very much a mutual experience. It was what McCoy describes as a ‘reciprocal process, shaping state formation in Manila and Washington while moving both nations into a mutually implicated, postcolonial world’.¹²⁷

Red Scares and Red Summers

As US imperialists succeeded in policing experiments on the other side of the world, irrational hysteria gripped domestic elites that were threatened by a boiling US labour movement. In response, they sought support from the coercive state by applying repatriated methods first developed in the Philippines towards its own domestic citizens.

Alex Vitale documents that the first US state police agency, the Pennsylvania State Police, was modelled on the Philippine Constabulary and was established with the aim of siding with the interests of capital. Vitale notes how the newly institutionalised police force brutally cracked down against migrant workers and unionists struggling for an eight-hour working day in the Westmoreland coal miners' strike that began in 1910.¹²⁸

In addition to being an instrument of sustaining social and economic inequality, policing during this period of US history was also used to maintain racist policies of segregation and the criminalisation of the African-American population.¹²⁹ Having its origins in the slave-patrol system that was prevalent in US southern states before the formal abolition of slavery, and thus highlighting the pre-existing racialised practices of US law enforcement, these police forces were tasked with the brutal imposition of the Jim Crow laws.

The atrocities of the Jim Crow era involved lynching, racist vigilante murders, and white-supremacist violence. These culminated during the 'red summer'¹³⁰ of 1919 when intensified racial and labour unrest simultaneously swept across the US, triggering dozens of race riots and hundreds of casualties. The African-American historian Rayford Logan regarded this as the 'nadir' of US race relations, marking one of the most racist epochs in US history alongside the antebellum period.¹³¹

Recognising the gravity of this historical era requires acknowledging the role of US empire. How the US state responded to domestic unrest is also – and especially – linked to how it practised its foreign policy, by experimenting with exploitative and repressive policing. The double subjugation against dissidents and minorities in the US as well as against Filipino rebels in the colony would build up to consolidate processes of racialisation that were inherent in coercive state practice. Woodman underlines the notion that this process of constructing race is 'embedded within colonial structures and histories'.¹³² This construction is not only entangled with imported methods of repression; it is also shaped by it.

Moreover, the coercive state and its repressive practices of policing and racialisation were also marked by civilian involvement. What McCoy terms the 'state-civilian security nexus'¹³³ is exemplified by local police joining white supremacists in crushing the race riots in urban centres across the US, while state police forces sided with capitalists in quelling organised labour. There was a paranoia among the US elite that saw Black Americans' struggle for racial equality as a Bolshevik-inspired rebellion. The immediate response was counterinsurgency and coercive control; and the US government had a model in the Philippines that would serve as the groundwork for the installation of a violent national security state.

The globalisation of US counterinsurgency crusades

The boomerang would keep rebounding throughout the twentieth century, consolidating US ideological hegemony marked by racist domestic policy and imperialist foreign policy. Even after independence, the US elite collaborated with their counterparts in the Philippines to sustain a partnership of developing repressive counterinsurgency strategies against guerrilla movements – methods that would be enacted beyond the Philippines in Southeast Asia, from Africa and the Middle East to Latin America and the Caribbean.¹³⁴

These methods are what Stuart Schrader refers to as ‘[security assistance](#)’,¹³⁵ which was an inherent component of US foreign policy during the Cold War. Schrader points out how such security services were offered to governments overseas to subdue both criminal and communist activity. Established under the Kennedy Administration was a programme called the Office of Public Safety (OPS), which was part of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID); the ‘aid’ administered had the aim of ‘professionalising’ policing across the globe through training in countering insurgency, gathering intelligence, and strengthening law enforcement.

The OPS did not last long as social movements at that time exposed its repressive elements and the fact that USAID was aiding authoritarian governments from Marcos’s Philippines to Somoza’s Nicaragua. Through mass demonstrations and legislative scrutiny, the programme was forced to shut down 13 years after its inception. As Schrader writes, this did not put an end to the practice, but merely privatised it. A public–private security coalition surfaced through commercial contractors offering similar training, including even former OPS trainers. The fact that this became a civilian initiative enabled the practice to bypass certain legal constraints, which continues to this day to make it a successful and profitable enterprise.

Nonetheless, the Reagan Administration revived state involvement in training foreign police by escalating the US ‘war’ on drugs domestically and abroad, especially targeting Latin American countries. This time, it involved various federal government agencies, particularly the Department of Defense, which according to Schrader was given new competences in combating narcotics by empowering the military to train foreign police. This militarisation of policing abroad was euphemistically termed by police experts as ‘professionalisation’, which would become an ever-expanding and perpetual process with no end in sight.¹³⁶

Its goal is to take on the task of developing innovative ways of policing abroad in order to ‘domesticate the foreign through modularity of practice’.¹³⁷ This domestication entailed defining the coercive state as the primary protector of a fragile society prone to insurgents – from independence movements to civil rights activists to workers’ unions. As Atiya Husain points out, ‘counterinsurgency to anticolonial, antiracist, and anti-capitalist struggles, whether or not they actually hurt or killed people’ would fundamentally shape our modern understanding of the [concept of terrorism](#).¹³⁸

The development of policing in the US is marked by its transnational elements that underpin the country’s self-styled role as the ‘[global policeman](#)’.¹³⁹ Territorial conquests led to experiments with repression and control in the colonies which then led to the expansion of a security state apparatus in the US. This was repackaged and offered to the world as ‘aid’ by training the world’s soldiers to be cops, and in effect

training cops to be soldiers. Indeed, this practice has been like a boomerang that kept on spinning, leading Schrader to call it a 'perpetual motion machine of US empire.'¹⁴⁰

It is worth noting, however, that this endless motion machine incorporates a certain multidirectional aspect to the boomerang effect. Concretely, it affirms that pre-existing racialised policing in the US co-existed with its colonial experiments abroad, and that these circumstances would both regenerate violent law enforcement domestically as well as advance counterinsurgency practices overseas, exporting those practices as training and importing the experiences back again.¹⁴¹

It is this reconceptualised notion of the boomerang effect that Jeanne Morefield refers to, one that exposes the complex intertwined web of imperialism and racism and explains the entanglements that underpin the US forever wars of today.¹⁴² The expansion of the National Security Agency's mass surveillance operations and the unprecedented use of drone strikes – ushered in by the Obama Administration – amplified 'the "feedback" between power projection abroad and at home'.¹⁴³

Domesticating the boomerang in the carceral archipelago

In the Philippines, the US empire's perpetual motion machine left a permanent mark. As McCoy notes, the Philippine postcolonial experience included further subjugation by US post-imperial experimentation – 'collaborating in the development of new military doctrines to meet a succession of challenges to US global hegemony'.¹⁴⁴ The surveillance regime established in colonial Philippines would see an intensification in the US occupation and war in Vietnam and culminate in the ongoing US 'war on terror' in Afghanistan, the Middle East and beyond.

The Philippines has always played an essential role in these wars. In Mindanao in particular, the atrocious legacy of US military presence continues to the present day. In what was one of the bloodiest conflicts of the Philippine-American War, the Bud Dajo Massacre saw US counterinsurgency forces kill hundreds of local residents, leaving their inhabited island almost empty. One could argue that this conflict against the Moro people in the south was the main front of *America's first forever war*.¹⁴⁵ Shortly after the 9/11 attacks in New York and the Pentagon, the Bush Administration would label the region as the '*second front*'¹⁴⁶ of its 'war on terror' by deploying hundreds of US soldiers in Zamboanga to train alongside Philippine troops and prepare them for battle against Islamist separatist groups.

The imperial boomerang effect would generate a modern domestic version in the Philippines, the most pertinent example of which is the ongoing 'war' on drugs spearheaded by the Duterte Administration. As a presidential candidate, Duterte, who then was mayor of Davao City, promised to apply his model of urban crime control nationwide. And he fulfilled this promise. With his blessing, as soon as he assumed office, police as well as vigilantes engaged in a killing spree that resembled Davao's notorious 'death squads'.

While this gives an impression that the ongoing drug 'war' had roots in Mindanao's largest city, Anna Warburg and Steffen Jensen highlight how ongoing police repression of suspected criminals in the urban capital are inspired by counterinsurgency operations, usually conducted in Mindanao, against the CPP-NPA and Moro nationalists.¹⁴⁷ This development of the role of policing in one of Manila's poorest areas strongly suggests that repressive counterinsurgency policing in the southern provinces boomeranged back to the burgeoning metropolis.



Inside the home of Seventy-year-old Ricardo Medina, a caretaker who lives and works in Pasay cemetery. Medina found out his 24-year-old son, Ericardo, had been killed in an extrajudicial killing after seeing him on the television with his head wrapped in packaging tape and a sign tied across his chest that read "pusher" on November 16th 2016.
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Yet, as mentioned previously, the Philippine police has always been a ferocious institution, functioning as the muscle of the coercive state. For Sheila Coronel, the Philippine police has consistently been 'a ready, willing, and able killing machine' specialising in violence as it 'is the only type of policing they know'.¹⁴⁸ She also underlines that in a country with a broken justice system, fighting crime has also created opportunities for dubious financial gain, and thus the line that separates the criminal from the cop is often breached, usually to pursue profit rather than dispense justice. Duterte's drug 'war' further empowered law-enforcement institutions to completely dismantle this line, often with the help of hired goons, death squads, and vigilante cops.

Outsourcing of engagement in extrajudicial means to tackle the drug 'war' gives a modern depiction of the 'state-civilian security nexus' that McCoy describes – which now includes the recruitment of ordinary citizens to actively participate in these extra-legal activities. The well-documented incidents of local residents and officials putting up [drug-related hit lists](#)¹⁴⁹ and sending them to the national police as evidence are a case in point.

This is where coercion and consent intersect, and as Warburg and Jensen point out, this nexus – the 'civil-military partnership' – is 'where civilians are drawn in (and forced) to participate in the war on the side of the state'.¹⁵⁰ At the same time, a climate of distrust creeps in, albeit in paradoxical ways. While recent polls suggest that Duterte's presidency enjoys steady mass approval, this is accompanied by surveys of Filipinos thinking that it is [dangerous to be critical](#)¹⁵¹ of the current administration's policies.

Spaces for dissent further diminish as a result, and the carceral state takes advantage of this atmosphere of fear as it steps up the securitisation of protest and resistance, resorting to extraordinary repressive means of exhibiting force, either by callously ‘red-baiting’ progressives, or by ruthlessly killing them outright. On 7 March 2021, just two days after Duterte reaffirmed his directive to execute communist rebels, government forces mounted coordinated raids in Manila’s neighbouring regions against activist groups. They succeeded with ruthless efficiency that left nine people dead in what was termed as another ‘Bloody Sunday’¹⁵² that marked one of the biggest and deadliest police–military offensives against activists under the current regime. This pattern of incidents continues to nakedly expose the ineptitude of state security forces in their inability to distinguish grassroots movement organisers from armed insurgents.

Breaking the boomerang from Manila to Minnesota

From the Trump Administration’s deployment of federal agents to violently subdue Black Lives Matter (BLM) protesters across a number of US cities, to Duterte’s ongoing crusade to label all activists as terrorists and silence or assassinate them, state-sponsored violence from the streets of downtown Portland to the highlands of Panay are the embodiment of the intensifying crackdowns on dissenting voices in both countries.

At the same time, these developments have been met with strong defiance. The past decade has seen mass political protests and movements proliferate worldwide. Such events are unprecedented in the twenty-first century. An early 2020 report by the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#)¹⁵³ points out that the period between 2009 and 2019 saw the frequency of mass revolts increase annually by an average of 11.5%.

The report did not foresee the remaining events of 2020, which would lead to the further radicalisation of public consciousness on the issue of policing and the coercive state. Indeed, the past year saw a radical revival of anti-imperial and anti-racist sentiments among the US population in the wake of the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. We have seen how these movements for Black lives fought back, raising calls to [defund the police from Minneapolis and beyond](#).¹⁵⁴

But these calls are not enough. Rather, they must be backed by the notion of acknowledging the entanglements of domestic and foreign experiences – a strategy that entails recognising that US policing has never been limited to the national sphere as one cannot ignore its global extent.¹⁵⁵ As Schrader argues, this is the [fundamental link](#)¹⁵⁶ between unchecked aggressive foreign policy and unchecked aggressive domestic law enforcement. Therefore, dismantling the boomerang effect –the perpetual motion machine – through defunding initiatives must be proactive and include cutting back on playing the role of ‘global policeman’.

This strategy of breaking the boomerang’s spiralling movement means that domestic demands in the US to reduce police power need to also encompass the calls for a foreign policy that seeks to end the globalisation of coercive state practices that is being repackaged as aid or assistance. Confronting globalised police power is therefore integral to confronting US foreign policy.

Crafting a counterhegemonic response

Imperial continuities have sustained unequal power relations and reproduced indignities, engendering people's uncertainty about their capacity to act and resist.¹⁵⁷ These sentiments are also an ambivalence – of maintaining conflicting attitudes towards the coercive state; of both accepting and opposing it simultaneously.

The task for progressive movements is to overcome the contradictions that comes with articulating counterhegemonic responses to the predominance of the coercive state. This requires recognising how power is won and sustained through consent and coercion. Thinking in the context of hegemonic relations also helps generate an understanding that such conjunctures can be broken and challenged; and that strategies can be forged on how to successfully confront the coercive state, reclaim it and subsume it under popular control in order to pursue radical policies.

This effort also entails 'living' with the ambivalence, particularly in countries whose postcolonial states remain 'the prime addressee for vulnerable citizens, with the national arena being indispensable for those struggling for rights and justice'.¹⁵⁸ As Janet Newman and Nikita Dhawan argue, 'living' with this ambivalence towards the coercive state creates a space for 'progressive projects of reimagining' that involves 'a more positive orientation to creating new resources, practices and political formations'.¹⁵⁹

Towards abolitionist futures

'Progressive projects of reimagining' must thus be grounded in radical imaginations. Such imaginations prevail through an abolitionist stance that demands people 'to envision an "impossible" future'.¹⁶⁰ Envisaging such alternative futures consequently generates a public consciousness that insists on a more people-centred restructuring of the carceral and coercive state – all in an effort to disrupt the very conditions that create and recreate the most brutal modes of repression. Such a shift in perspective *invigorates a political imagination* emboldened by the pursuit of human flourishing.¹⁶¹

Globalised police power is historically linked to imperial domination; and at the present conjuncture, it has intensified to facilitate the most callous means of coercive control manifested in counterinsurgency on the streets where dissent is securitised and the marginalised are suppressed. Liberal calls for incremental reform that do not tackle systemic roots of recurring state violence will not go far and may even sustain brutal practices. Therefore, and though it may be regarded as an extreme position, the radical abolitionist vision would actually be the least violent of all solutions. As Husain *convincingly argues*, this is 'because it grasps at the root of the problem and would not trade in partial remedies that simply reproduce the problem'.¹⁶²

Empire's boomerang cannot be demolished at the domestic level, but instead demands a stark transnational response – one that entails reimagining. And a stark reimagination requires transformative practices that take on the task of confronting racist structures and neo-imperial influence which characterise the current conjuncture.

The present moment thus serves as an opportunity for social movements to reimagine coercive powers of the state in the service of counterhegemonic emancipatory politics, especially as calls by abolitionist movements for defunding the police and the radical overhaul of repressive institutions grow louder.

Césaire may be right that we cannot recover unscarred from imperial dominance, but this does not mean that recovery is impossible. On the contrary, pursuing a recovery grounded in abolitionist activism is a path full of potential towards a transformative society. This is the kind of radical future for which we should be fighting. A world without the need for policing is a world without the most vicious manifestations of imperial practice – the liberation of humanity from domination.

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