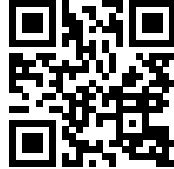


STATE OF POWER 2021

COERCIVE WORLD

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BECOMING BLACK

*Coercive power, the state and racism
in a time of crisis*

Interview with Olúfémi Táíwò and Achille Mbembe



The Movement for Black Lives not only exposed the brutality of US policing, it has stimulated conversations on systemic racism and coercive state power everywhere. For TNI's tenth edition of State of Power, we were therefore delighted to bring together two brilliant thinkers on racial capitalism today. Achille Mbembe is a groundbreaking philosopher, whose many books since the mid 1980s have exposed how coloniality has shaped democracy, identity and modernity. Olufemi Taiwo is an emerging thinker, writer and activist whose theoretical work draws liberally from the Black radical tradition and anti-colonial thought. He has written extensively on climate justice. In this fascinating wide ranging conversation, they help us to understand modern day coercive state power, tracing its roots in colonialism and examining the way it has shaped our contemporary security.

Olufémi Táíwò



Photo by [Jared Rodríguez](#)

Achille Mbembe

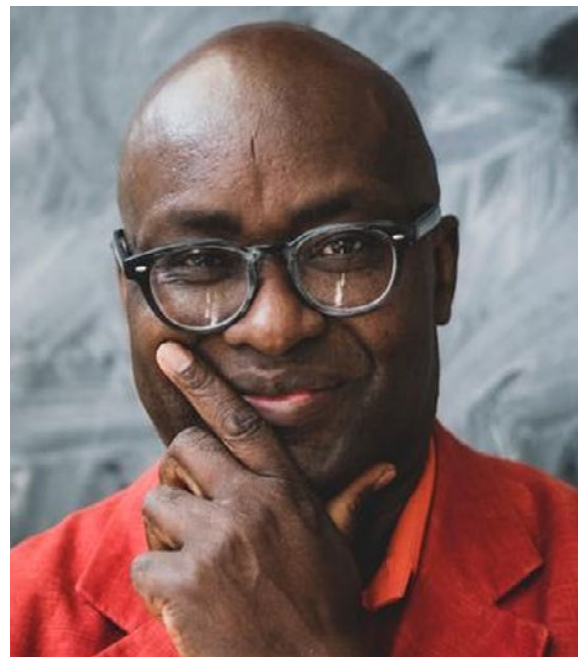


Photo: ©DW/Stefan Möhl

Nick: *Why has this become an age of rising authoritarian state control? It seemed a few decades ago we were moving away from a world of authoritarianism with the fall of the Berlin Wall. There was a sense of the world opening up. And yet today we seem to be going in a different direction. How do you understand what is happening today?*

Achille: It is a very complex question. One way of looking at it is that Capitalism and Democracy have always been at loggerheads. In the aftermath of World War II, both systems came to a kind of compromise. There was a kind of tacit peace, as colonial systems were brought to an end, new states were integrated into a global system, even while the system remained deeply hierarchical. But since the end of the 20th century with, first globalization and the ongoing transformations of neoliberalism, both democracy and to some extent the state itself have been hollowed out.

Through a number of mechanisms, such as debt, states have become indebted to corporations and corporate power. What remains of the state is a coercive apparatus, put at the service of an economic system, whose main function is to trade on all life.

Together with a technological escalation, this has resulted in the acceleration of predatory practices. The explanation for the authoritarian turn, including of so-called liberal democracies, lies at the intersection of these multiple crises: the predatory take on life, technologisation and the plundering of the planet.

Olufemi: My understanding is quite similar. I suppose the only thing I would add is the larger backdrop of the five or so centuries of colonialism., where colonies were under a very explicit authoritarian rule and guided by explicit systems of racial apartheid.

The expectation that we were moving towards a period of freedom and liberal democracy reflects an exceptional time, based on geopolitical battle lines between the US and the Soviet Union. It was nonsensically portrayed as freedom loving liberal democracy against the freedom hating communist regimes, ignoring that so many states were under direct colonial, autocratic, imperial, racially-hierarchical control by the so-called liberal democracies.

And so when the geopolitical Cold War fight for hearts and minds was no longer in play, it's not surprising that what followed 1989 wasn't a period of serious liberal democracy and freedom, but rather unfettered state and private repression.

So in that context, how can we best understand coercive state power and violence as it is playing out today?

Achille: It seems to me that there are varying modes of state violence, inflicted on specific categories of populations – Blacks, minorities, women, the most vulnerable – by the police, prisons, military, border guards everywhere. Let's call it a machinic violence. It is direct, immediate, visible and is often murderous – as we saw with George Floyd and Brianna Taylor. The list is endless and it happens to masses of people who are killed, dislocated or expelled.

But we also have another 'slow' violence that is more distant, gradual and less perceptible. Here I'm drawing on [Rob Nixon's work](#) who describes a delayed destruction dispersed across time. That's how I perceive racism.

So we have these two forms of violence – the immediate visible form and the slow and delayed one, that together form an attritional apparatus which attacks not only the body but also the nerves. This apparatus is also more and more technologized, more and more algorithmic. Algorithmic racism will be the form of racism we will experience in the future, irradiating and becoming viral like a mutant power.

Contemporary racism lies in this interconnection between the radioactive and the viral. The challenge will be how fight this.



The violence of policemen against a demonstrator in the Maldives. A planned peaceful protest in November 2006 to express frustration with the slow pace of constitutional reforms required for fair multiparty election faced a brutal crackdown on freedom of assembly, travel and speech and the detention of over a hundred MDP activists, office holders and supporters in the run up to the demonstration. ©minivan

So could you define the agents of this brutality and what different roles do they play?

Olufemi: We have to understand what institutions such as the police were designed to do. I think that the answer to the question is pretty clear. They emerged from institutions such as slave patrols and *paramilitary groups* intended to discipline labor, and surveil and discipline immigrants and slaves.

In other words, they are largely about distributing insecurity. They don't exist to make society safe as a whole; they exist to make certain people, certain elements, certain groups within society safe, which is quite different.

And in terms of other institutions such as the army, I consider them different institutions that serve the same function. They have some distinctions in terms of how bound they are geographically, but these institutions fundamentally serve the same purpose and not surprisingly also share tactics, information, resources and information.

There are a lot of stark examples of how these institutions distribute insecurity, but as a Nigerian American person and with the rise of the #EndSARS protests, looking at Nigeria makes sense. [Afrobarometer did a survey recently](#) in which more than three quarters of Nigerian respondents reported paying bribes to the police. Many of them had paid bribes just to get regular police assistance, so it's clear that it's more of an institution of extortion rather than a security presence. It's hardly an institution that is 'serving and protecting', as they say here in the United States.

And so once we think of this aspect of coercive state power as about distributing security by distributing insecurity, it is no longer contradictory that we see the rise of militarized policing, incarceration and coloniality at the same time as the welfare state recedes. Because both of those are actually moving in the same direction to make some people secure while and by means of perpetuating the insecurity of other people.

Achille: I think what we are seeing rising in various societies across the world is the rise of armed racism. Of course armed racism is nothing new. The function of the police, of the army, of all the coercive arms of the state has to be understood within the racist architecture in which it emerged.

But we are seeing an increasing blurring of the divisions between the police and army, where the police has never been so militarised and is acting like an army against its own people. In the traditional political dispensation, the army deals with foreign enemies and police deals with internal order. But these divisions are breaking down, as well as the divisions between police and militia.

We are witnessing a worldwide and universal rearrangement of power and discriminatory violence. This leads some to being put to death prematurely and others not. You could also call it security or insecurity as Olufemi has discussed. It also reminds us once again that it was born in colonialism, which was the laboratory in which this modern order was experimented with and developed.

In terms of where it is going, I think the agents of brutalisation have become more decentralized than they have ever been before and more abstract. They still proceed through the traditional apparatuses of the state, such as the police, judicial system, the incarceration system. But beneath this lies the increasing role played by programming, as coercion is technologized.

In the way it redistributes brutality, programming is abstract as it codes people. This isn't just turning people into numbers, but rather turning them into a code, into data, that can be stored, circulated and also speculated on, including by finance capital. So there is a dematerialization of the state itself, as it cedes some of its functions to these technologies, which may seem neutral but are not. So although, we still have a policeman grabbing a black man in Minnesota and killing him by putting his knee on his neck, destruction of those deemed to be superfluous is also being outsourced to new machines.

Shaun: *How do we understand how this plays out in the Global South, both in terms of the colonial history but also post-colonial leaders and structures that continue to repress their peoples?*

Olufemi: In the longer history of colonialism, it has always been difficult for empires to project power outside of their actual geographic and social terrain so they have always sought to recruit natives into middle management positions and divide the people by empowering one section of the population. The trans-Atlantic slave trade could not have happened if it had only relied on European knowledge of trade networks and social relations.

Today important aspects of global social structures related to economic production and distribution of wealth are decided at multinational levels through the Bretton Woods institutions and in forms like the Doing Business Index. Their goal is to economically liberalize these countries, to facilitate the transnational governance of capital in the form of the corporation. So it is Microsoft and Motorola and Alphabet and steel manufacturers and big agribusiness that are from a materialist perspective, governing the world. Unless and until we grapple with that, I don't think we'll be in a position to understand the role of the state.

Achille: I think Olufemi explained it extremely well. Although there have been waves of decolonization, it is important to remember that even at the tail end of the 20th century, places such as South Africa (and much of Southern Africa) were still under a rather vicious form of colonialism, settler colonialism, predicated on the idea that certain races are superior to to to others.

So while a kind of decolonization has happened, it doesn't mean that colonialism has ended. Some parts of the world are still under colonial occupation, places like Kashmir, Palestine and others. But more importantly, coloniality has remained. This is a mode of ruling in which certain people are deemed disposable and yet indispensable. This is how racial rule worked. We need your muscles, your work, but we are also entitled to dispose of you in the way we want. It's this dialectic of dispensability and indispensability that is accelerating today, leading to a politics of abandonment, a politics of neglect.

Shuan: *So how do we escape that coloniality in the South as well as the Global North?*

Olufemi: We need to develop a genuinely structural politics. The solution is clearly not as simple as putting someone who looks like you in power. The trouble with identity politics is its focus on who's bad and who's good, who's the oppressor and who's the oppressed, who is the victim and who is the victimizer. But any sensible history of colonialism shows the contribution and complicity of African merchants, slavers and state bureaucrats. We need to understand the structural reasons for domination, racism, and forge a less predatory form of politics.

So if you look at housing insecurity or incarceration, for example, here in the US or internationally, you will see stark racial divisions. But the reasons for that are complicated and the solutions will be too. We need to structure our political world so that we defend each other's safety rather than defend some people's profit margins or some people's pretensions to control or desire to perpetuate a colonial politics, as Achille has explained.

Nick: *How should social movements relate to the state in this struggle? In the face of corporate power and market forces, the state is seen as an important bulwark to protect its citizens from from capital, yet as we have discussed social movements also face the most violence from from the state.*

Olufemi: It's right that there is something of a tension, but it's worth pointing out that It's not coercive power as such that movements for justice should oppose. The Cuban revolutionaries, the Mozambican Liberation Front, the fighters of Cape Verde, Angola and Zimbabwe all used coercive power in order to rid themselves of colonialism. Sometimes the conversation about coercive power in the guise of the state or anyone else gets excessively moralized. Power in general is a tool, and how we morally evaluate it depends on how it's used and to what ends.

Having said that, I think what we should focus on is finding ways to exploit the state and more specifically, exploit the differences between the interests of the state and of capital. State and capital have been too 'buddy buddy' over the past few decades, and the inability of social movements to play one off against the other has led to the neoliberal consensus. And that has led to the politics of abandonment and to contractions in state responsibilities without compensatory gains for most of the people on the earth.

And so I think demands for public control of the state and for assigning the state responsibility for roles that have been taken up by purely extractive corporate colonial institutions is a good tactical option.

Nick: What do you consider are some of the changing dynamics you see going forward related to coercive state power?

Achille: In a book I published a few years ago, I referred to something I called the 'Becoming Black of the World'. In the western Atlantic world under plantation slavery, people deemed to be black used to be ruled under very specific dispensation, the *Code Noir*, the Black code. This was a juridical mechanism that allowed rulers to treat so-called Black people in a way no one else was treated.

Today we can see neoliberalism is in crisis and thus has to rely more and more on an illiberal state to buttress its goals. This means that more and more people will be ruled under the Black Code. More people will be governed as if they were Black people, with all that entails: wanton violence, disenfranchisement, exposure to all kinds of risks, premature death.

This universalisation of the Black code will be going on as the world is burning, the planet is burning, having reached its limits. So because of ecological breakdown, our world is becoming more and more inhospitable to life itself. So if we reflect on planetary habitability, then we have to think seriously about how to create convergences between the struggle against racism and ecological struggles to regenerate our planet. The two are inseparable.

The third dynamic will be technological change, which has become our biotope, the milieu or environment which is increasingly defining who we are as well as our future. This will involve new struggles to recapture technology for human emancipation as well as emancipation at large. We need an emancipation, which includes humans and non humans, because the fate of the humans is now more than ever before tied to the fate of other species. The times we live in require a multi-species project.

Olufemi: I could not possibly agree more with what Achille said. If I could, I would shout it from an air horn everywhere in the world.

I think the analysis of the *Code Noir* and the way it has led to a racially stratified world is key. One thing that people may acknowledge but don't seem to integrate into their more systemic picture is that actually being Black did not necessarily mean you were enslaved in the sense of chattel slavery. There were also populations of freed people, mixed race people who experienced a different mixture of political restrictions and political rights. Yet being Black meant that that it *could* happen to you and that it was very likely if you were in the wrong part of the world in the wrong century.

That is not to diminish the history of racial domination, but clarify the nature of the system. Similarly, if we look at the other end of the pole of the racial hierarchy, being white didn't mean that you were in charge, it meant that there was a floor, a level of labor exploitation that you wouldn't get below, that you wouldn't be treated as property.

I think reconfiguring these categorical terms into probabilistic terms helps make sense of [Ruth Wilson Gilmore's definition of racism](#) as group differences and vulnerability to premature death as well as Achille's point about how the world in an era of ecological and climate crisis is becoming blacker.

A lot of the rights and privileges that some people treated as built into whiteness are in fact contingent on the particular social structure they live in, their wealth and power to distribute it in discriminatory ways. So it's because the United States has the wealth that it was able to create a middle class that had

economic privileges above and beyond its racialized underclass. Rights and freedom are contingent upon a people's nation, its geopolitical position, which is contingent on economic production. These in turn are contingent on the sky, the rain, the air and the water, the plants and the animals, things that we will no longer have the luxury of taking for granted in this century.

And so the rights and protections that people think are categorically built into their position in the social hierarchy are in fact contingent on the particular ways that the world has developed and also changing.

Most of us who are able bodied and resourced have long had the privilege of going outside unmasked, and yet now find ourselves unable to do the things that we thought were built into our social position. We find ourselves being denied that expected privilege for reasons related to happenings in the natural world and responses from our social system. That's increasingly going to be the story of the politics of the century.

We have to realise our fate is linked to the fate of the entire human species – and not the fake species that race portrays itself as – as well as tied to our dependence on the larger ecology, animals, plants, air, the water. Until we can see our fates are connected, we'll be in trouble.

But there's reassuring actions in that direction. To give just two sets of examples: In the United States, where I'm based, there are exciting trends in labor movements. There's been a resurgence of "[Bargaining for the Common Good](#)" – a practice of organized workers making contract demands in partnership with and in pursuit of benefits for a broader community. What's more: last year in Minneapolis, thousands of members of the Service Employees International Union (many of whom were immigrants from countries including Somalia, Nepal, Mexico, and Ecuador) led what some are calling the "[first climate strike](#)" in US history: bargaining explicitly over wages, gender discrimination, *and* changes to working conditions to lower the carbon emissions of their work.

In South Africa, there are attempts to build broader, people-centered social and political ecologies: from community kitchens and public food gardens at the University of the Free State to the wider struggle for food sovereignty throughout the country. These [efforts are important](#) alongside the national [Climate Justice Charter's](#) (CJC) attempts to combat corporate control over water. The CJC also connects these to community ownership of renewable energy. Taken together, it's a really instructive set of struggles that is worth learning from. And if we can learn from it, we can develop a version of it in our own locations.

This is an edited transcript of a conversation with Olúfémi Táíwò and Achille Mbembe led by Nick Buxton and Shaun Matsheza of TNI. **Achille Mbembe** is a philosopher, political scientist, and public intellectual and a professor at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research in Johannesburg, South Africa. His many works include *On the Postcolony* (2001), *Critique of Black Reason* (2016), *Necropolitics* (2019), *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (2020) and *Brutalisme* (2020). [Olúfémi Táíwò](#) is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Georgetown University and a frequent writer on issues of climate justice, racism, and colonialism.

NO BUSINESS WITHOUT ENEMIES

War and the arms trade

Jordi Calvo Rufanges



The arms trade is one of the world's most successful corporate enterprises. Not only has it created an economic system that grows regardless, it has normalised war and security responses to every social crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed how ineffective the armed forces are in dealing with a global crisis. They divert resources and distort our response. The pandemic – which is obviously first and foremost a health issue – has been managed by using a security-focused approach. Armed forces in some countries have been deployed rather than health workers to administer health-related interventions and logistical tasks as well as to enforce quarantines. The language of war has been used to describe efforts to tackle the pandemic rather than the language of human rights, public health or solidarity.¹ This militarisation of responses to social crises emerges not only in relation to global health risks, such as the current pandemic, but also in many other areas such as migration policies or climate change. *Securitisation has become the framework for tackling ever more crises and situations.*

Securitisation in the context of the essay sees all social, human and environmental domains as security threats which have military solutions. (Another use of the term 'securitisation' refers to the creation of complex financial instruments, an issue that will not be explored here.) If everything is subsumed under a securitisation approach, and at the same time not enough resources are allocated to cope with disasters triggered by natural hazards, health emergencies or environmental crises, then the most likely response will be to deploy the military.² Securitisation, built on a military security logic, is a mechanism that triggers fear. This fear is projected in terms of threats and enemies. Fear of climate change, fear of economic crisis, fear of uncertainty, fear of the unknown, fear of the outsider, the other, the migrant. Fear that justifies military preparedness for any threat to our security. Fear that confirms the need to defend – and arm – ourselves. Fear as the ideal marketing strategy for the products and services of the arms industry.

All this happens perhaps because ultimately governments tend to have a traditional military and political understanding of security, for which the reference point is the state and in which existential threats are interpreted primarily as affecting the essential organs of the state and its sovereignty.³ These understandings sideline or ignore the human security approach of the United Nations. In any case, securitisation uses fear as its political backbone.

This means that securitisation is both the cause and effect of a structural fear that leads to more resources being devoted to defence, the existence of which in turn is legitimised through cultural fear, with discourses that portray a world full of threats against which we need to defend ourselves.

In a society where fear⁴ is inculcated in citizens' minds, few question the existence of a nefarious business like the arms trade. Moreover, the production and sale of arms is perfect from an economic perspective, as the supply of arms to one party invariably provokes arms races and so increases demand, while the widespread fear and insecurity thus created legitimises the permanent need for them.

It should also be pointed out that those who participate in and benefit from this business, who finance, invent, manufacture, buy and export arms are considered by most mainstream politicians, media and corporate leaders to be engaged in a respectable business that generates progress, employment and security.

Worldwide, people are participating directly or indirectly in the manufacture, sale and proliferation of arms. Despite its human impacts, the arms trade is also legal, legitimate and generally considered to be a normal business activity. Moreover, its unquestioned function has also facilitated a normalisation of war and the use of the armed forces to achieve political and often humanitarian ends.

The normality of war

According to Uppsala University, in 2019, 50 active armed conflicts caused more than 150,000 combat-related deaths.⁵ In Syria there have been at least 384,000 casualties related to armed violence⁶ and in Yemen 233,000,⁷ to mention two of the wars most reported in the media. In addition to these are the thousands of people who die while fleeing from war and the destitution caused by conflict.⁸ According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 79.5 million people were forcibly displaced in 2019, often due to armed conflict.⁹ It has become tragically 'normal' for wars that cause thousands of deaths and millions of casualties every year to continue, with little done to stop them.

Armed conflicts have two main characteristics. They require considerable planning and organisation, and they invariably need their main tool: arms. Although arms or armies, private military companies or various types of armed groups do not cause wars, these would be impossible without the more than 27 million troops, paramilitaries,¹⁰ mercenaries, and guerrilla and other non-state fighters. Nor is it likely that they would be possible without the collusion between arms manufacturers and politicians, whose close relationship is epitomised in the so-called revolving door, whereby former high-ranking military officers join the boards of directors and management of the military industry and vice versa. There are many examples of this all over the world, but an emblematic case is that of Pedro Morenés, who was Spain's Minister of Defence from 2011 to 2016. Shortly before his appointment, he held top-level positions in various arms-manufacturing companies, including MBDA, one of the leading producers of missiles. Shortly before leaving his ministerial post, his legacy included the highest number of annual arms-export permits in Spain's history.¹¹

Just as ministries of defence maintain and renew military structures and arms systems to defend their countries against identified security threats, these same ministries prepare to go to war, or to deploy their armed forces elsewhere in the world. Preparedness for war may be one of the factors that encourage the use of military muscle to achieve political objectives. This has been demonstrated in a quantitative panel data analysis that shows how military spending, the arms trade and armed conflicts have evolved in all countries for which data are available. It finds a clear correlation between global military expenditure, arms exports and the number of armed conflicts.¹² In other words, the cycle of arms production is consistent overall with the logic that more military expenditure equals more arms exports and therefore more wars.

The economics of weapons production

War requires economic preparation, among preparation in other areas. It is here that the military-industrial complex and defence economics come in. Defence economics is defined as the set of measures that lead to a country's economic transformation to meet its security and defence needs.¹³ It is the part of the economy that incorporates military-industrial policies related to the arms manufacturing sector.¹⁴ The term 'military-industrial complex' was first used in US President Eisenhower's farewell address in 1961, when he referred to the huge influence of the sector's lobbying on the White House. The military-industrial complex is thus the set of military corporations and to a lesser extent union organisations that try to influence government policy decisions with regard to arms purchases. As their income depends on defence budgets, one of their main areas of focus is to increase annual defence expenditure.¹⁵ An industrial complex has evolved from conventional arms manufacturing to combine the production of weapons using the latest technology with input from the security services, leading to a shift in the military-industrial complex towards products and services that respond to the needs identified in the securitisation approach. A new market and a new sector have emerged as a result, in which traditional arms manufacturers like Lockheed Martin or Leonardo share the space with these new companies in the security sector.¹⁶ This new military-industrial-security complex is likewise engineering the expansion of the securitisation doctrine, seeking to achieve multi-million defence and security budgets for the purchase of its products and technologies for areas such as cybersecurity. This includes the control of big data or the militarisation of borders and the securitised management of movements of people.

It is therefore logical that one of the key interests of the military-industrial complex is to lobby for policies that increase the defence budget, in order to secure its current and future business. As well as arms firms and intermediaries, the role of trade unions is also very important. By defending their job security, they put pressure on governments to increase military spending and allocate funding to the military industries in which they work.¹⁷

If this was not enough, there is also a network of security think tanks located in the main policy decision-making centres. In Brussels alone there are hundreds of arms industry lobbyists,¹⁸ who influence politicians and officials as they develop laws related to the defence industry. Their objectives include pushing for arms manufacturing, sale, promotion and publicity to respond to a seemingly limitless number of threats. Some of the most relevant examples of the numerous think tanks that have a huge influence on security and defence are¹⁹ the Atlantic Council, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Brookings Institution, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Center for a New American Security, the Council on Foreign Relations, Heritage Foundation and RAND Corporation (US), the International Institute for Strategic Studies and the Royal United Services Institute (UK), the European Union Institute for Security Studies (France), the National Institute for Defense Studies (Japan), the Institute for National Security Studies (Israel), the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, and the Institute for International Strategic Studies in China.

The arms trade cycle

Within the defence economy there is the arms trade cycle or military economic cycle. This is the economic path followed by the arms industry, from a government's decision to allocate budgets for arms spending to their ultimate use. The cycle encompasses everything related to a country's military structure: security and defence policies, the national defence strategy, the military model, infrastructure, facilities, equipment and the required size of the armed forces.²⁰ The arms trade cycle begins with public discourse and discussion that augments perceptions of threat, legitimises weapons and armies, and justifies high levels of militarisation and defence spending. While the neoconservative ideology most vigorously pushes for militarisation, 'progressive' governments have invariably moved in the same direction. The Olin Foundation is one such foundation in the US advocating for militarism, giving \$370 million in subsidies to neoconservative ideological projects, with the funds coming mainly from the US military industry.²¹

The arms trade cycle has several phases in which the main governments, corporations and financial institutions promoting the arms trade can be identified.

The first stage is military spending: the budget allocated to ministries of defence and others to support the military industry, military operations of all kinds and even paramilitary forces. In 2019, military spending reached its highest level since the end of the Cold War: \$1.9 trillion according to calculations by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), equivalent to 2.2% of global gross domestic product (GDP).

Defence budgets also serve to maintain and promote the military sector of the economy through funds for Research and Development (R&D), as in the case of the European Defence Fund, which plans to allocate €13 billion of the EU budget for 2021-27 to European military R&D. Since governments are practically the only clients the arms industry has, they do all they can to ensure high levels of military spending. The ten governments with the highest levels of military spending account for 75% of the global total. They are, in order of magnitude, the US, China, India, Russia, Saudi Arabia, France, Germany, the UK, Japan and South Korea.²²

The arms industry forms part of the next phase in the arms trade cycle. The top 100 firms produce arms worth about \$400 billion per year, according to the SIPRI Top 100 database. The main arms-producing companies are based in countries with high levels of military spending and arms exports: 57% are based in the US, 9.5% in Russia, and 22% in western Europe, but there are also significant companies from Japan, Israel, India and South Korea. In 2019 sales by the 25 most important arms-manufacturing firms were worth \$361 billion. The biggest exporters by sales volume were the US corporations Lockheed Martin Corp, Boeing, Northrup Grumman Corp., Raytheon and General Dynamics; the Chinese firms Norinco and AVIC; the European companies Airbus, BAE Systems, Leonardo, Dassault and Thales; and the Russian firm Almaz-Antey.²³



Russia, Moscow, 2012, The head of the Syrian delegation to Russia's biennial arms bazaar shakes hands with a representative of Rosoboronexport, the Russian state weapons export monopoly. © Yuri Kozyrev / NOOR / IG: @noorimages / Twitter: @noorimages

Arms exports are the next phase of the cycle. The annual volume of global exports is unknown and the information provided by governments is incomplete. Even so, it can be estimated that the EU member states²⁴ and the US²⁵ alone exported arms worth around €200 billion in 2018. The volumes tend to increase, despite EU and US laws to control the arms trade and the international Arms Trade Treaty itself. These all contain criteria to restrict the award of export licenses when the weapons are destined for countries where there is armed conflict or human rights violations. Nevertheless, arms are still exported regularly to most countries involved in armed conflicts, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Israel, Egypt, Turkey, Iraq and Afghanistan. We know from the EU alone that 22% of arms exports were destined for countries involved in armed conflicts and 25% for countries experiencing political tension.²⁶ The main arms-exporting countries in the 2015–2019 period are, in order of importance, the US, Russia, France, Germany, China, the UK, Spain, Israel, Italy and South Korea.²⁷

How is it possible to sell arms to countries in conflict when there are laws prohibiting it? The answer is very simple. The judgment regarding whether a country is involved in an armed conflict is subjective and sovereign. Each government decides which countries are affected by armed conflict based on the information at its disposal and its own interests, without needing to follow any objective criteria or refer to any formal – but in fact non-existent – international list. Nor are they required to take any account of reports produced by university departments specialising in peace and conflict studies. The same applies to judgments about whether human rights are violated in the country that imports arms. In every case the decision is political, rendering the system of arms control and associated legislation incapable of reducing arms sales to countries in conflict or where human rights are violated. In fact, the system promotes arms sales and provides them with legal backing.

There is one other aspect critical to the arms trade cycle: the financing of the corporate military sector. Arms-producing companies are financed by banks, insurance companies and all kinds of financial institutions, in the form of loans, credit, bond issues, shares, and the whole range of banking products that make their business possible. According to the Worldwide Armed Banks Database, part of the Military Economic Cycle database of the Centre Delàs for Peace Studies, 37 of the world's main arms-manufacturing companies – the most important of which are Boeing, Honeywell, Lockheed Martin and General Dynamics – have received \$903 billion in funding from more than 500 banks in 50 countries. The main financial institutions involved in the arms trade are based in the US, France and the UK, and the top ten in the ranking of the main providers of finance to the industry worldwide are²⁸ Vanguard, Black Rock, Capital Group, State Street, T. Rowe Price, Verisight, Bank of America, JP Morgan Chase, Wells Fargo and Citigroup.

No business without enemies

Before and during the arms trade cycle, there is the need to justify the use of public money for military spending to citizens and avoid ethical and moral scandals related to arms manufacturing and exports that could undermine the arms business. This is why states and multilateral organisations in the military and security sector are constantly carrying out security and defence analyses. Their main objective is to identify what threats to security exist at any given time, the likelihood that they will occur, and how they should be addressed. Threats to security are the principal necessary (but not sufficient) step to then identify enemies against which a country must be defended through existing military structures and policies.

But, as mentioned earlier, the obsession with seeking threats in the securitising discourses typical of militarised security leads to creating a narrative that portrays a world dominated by fear and mistrust – the ideal scenario for militarisation.

The risks and threats to security identified in current defence strategies of the US, the EU and NATO²⁹ are terrorism, violent extremism, armed conflicts and the so-called fragile states, as well as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, organised crime, threats to cybersecurity, energy security, maritime security, as well as climate change, irregular migration, management of external borders and economic crises. There are other threats and risks about which there is far less consensus and which are often not addressed in security strategies. They include global outbreaks of infectious diseases, epidemics and pandemics; poverty and inequality; human rights violations; globalisation, interdependence and changes in economic equilibrium. This calls into question the very existence of defence structures, as these are areas in which the armed forces can play no role whatsoever.

In addition to these, there are also the more traditional geopolitical manoeuvrings: all western nations consider Russia and North Africa the Middle East (MENA) region as especially worrying regions from the perspective of security. Other places often mentioned are North Africa and the Sahel, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Iran, Turkey and China.

Together, the strategies portray a world riddled with threats against which we must defend ourselves, where even the maximum precaution is not enough. But are military structures useful for combating these threats? What exactly do we have to defend ourselves against? In the case of international terrorism alone, which has been used to justify many of the foreign military interventions in recent

years, particularly with the expansion of the Global War on Terror, we can see that the threat that could most easily justify a defence system has been neither reduced nor eliminated by means of military interventions. On the contrary, all they have done is to make things worse. The Global War on Terror, launched in Afghanistan in 2001 to put an end to the terrorist threat posed by Al Qaeda after 9/11, continued in Iraq 2003 and still continues in the Sahel. Rather than putting an end to terrorism, these wars gave rise to terror on an even greater scale perpetrated by ISIS/Daesh, which has and continues to be active in the most violent conflicts of recent years.

With regard to the other threats and risks, military responses are marginal, as they are more appropriately addressed by diplomacy, environmental policies, humanitarian action and international development cooperation, social services, economic measures, health and education policies, police, the justice system, etc.³⁰

Security analysis is never morally or politically neutral, as it is not a matter that can be objectively measured but is open to multiple subjective interpretations.³¹ Due to the power structures in society, however, interpretations of security are heavily skewed towards the interests of governments and elites. We find that security and defence doctrines are weighted towards the military and state defence structures. Furthermore, those with the greatest vested interest in promoting military responses to anything that could be considered a risk or threat to security are the corporations involved in the arms trade, as their business depends on it. The best scenario for maintaining their profits in the long term is to make the military industry the source of all solutions to the security challenges facing a society. In some countries, they can achieve this directly, by making donations to candidates and political parties. In the 2020 US election, they donated \$30 million³² to both Democrats and Republicans, with some of the major donors being Northrop Grumman, Boeing, Lockheed Martin, General Dynamics and Raytheon. They can also achieve it indirectly, through the work of the security and defence lobbyists and industry groups created and financed by the corporations themselves. The European lobbyists AeroSpace and Defence Industries Association of Europe (ASD) and the European Organisation for Security (EOS) are good examples of this.

Unlearn war, disarm security

The UNESCO Constitution states that 'since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed'. Seventy years after that certitude that war must be eliminated from people's minds, military responses continue to be promulgated as the principal response to security threats, even though reality has demonstrated that they are counterproductive. Military budgets, the profits of the arms manufacturers, arms exports, and armed conflicts continue to expand, even while their contribution to security is increasingly in doubt. We need to dismantle the beliefs that serve to normalise war, the arms used to fight it and the business it creates. The militarisation of societies and international relations perpetuates the wars of today and is the breeding ground for those of the future.

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BLURRING THE MONOPOLY ON VIOLENCE

Private Military and Security Companies and coercive state power

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The state's role in security has been progressively privatised, from the military to the prison system. The result is a shadowy corporate world in which violence is facilitated, accountability is diminished and human rights violations and impunity abounds.

The growing alarm over the security situation in Cabo Delgado (Mozambique), where more than half a million people have been displaced by the violence of the clashes between Islamist armed groups and state forces, [has recently been reported](#) in the media. The conflict, which has also left more than 2,500 people dead and has worsened risks of famine illustrates the nature of the alliance between states, Private Military Security Companies (PMSC) and companies involved in extractive industries, since the Wagner Group and the South African PMSC Dyke Advisory Group [have been deployed in Cabo Delgado](#) to help to combat insurgent groups who are threatening the gas deposits exploited by the French transnational Total.

Indeed, the progressive privatisation of the state's role in security is part of a worldwide phenomenon of deregulation, which has stripped the public sector to the bare bones. As states outsource increasing number of their roles and responsibilities, leaving these at the mercy of maximising profit rather than prioritising the public interest, this has left them unable to provide economic protection and social welfare ravaged by the very neoliberalism they espouse. As the French philosopher Michaël Foessel notes, enacting criminal laws and building walls helps hide the weakness of nation states.³⁴

It allows weakened states to take refuge in the rhetoric and practice of security, appealing to the social pact that underpins the state itself. It is ironic therefore that even this sector is being outsourced to private corporations. Security has become both a legitimisation for the state and another source of profit maximisation. Understanding this complex and seemingly contradictory nexus is critical to understanding coercive power today.

This essay examines the sector of private military and security companies (PMSCs) that provide personnel for military and security services. The deregulation of security functions has enabled them to expand dramatically in recent decades. They have become service providers linked to coercive power – the standard, legitimate and legal power, visible or not, that states exercise through their armies and security forces.

PMSCs are essentially a new kind of mercenary. They differ from the traditional mercenary, as defined by international law, for three reasons. First, they are by their very nature private companies registered in one state but often working in another, offering their services on corporate websites and with international networks of offices and facilities. Second, their personnel may be foreign or nationals of the country in which the PMSC operates. And third, in relation to the broad and complex range of services they offer, from security tasks such as protecting physical spaces and patrolling public or private areas, to military functions including participating in combat, operational support, intelligence, logistics, etc, as well as humanitarian work, clearing landmines and organising the rescue of hostages.

Although governments often refer to them as private security companies, PMSCs also include companies that differ from these by virtue of their military and coercive state functions, their international reach and their vast operational capacity, including the military equipment – such as heavy weapons, combat helicopters and armoured tanks – such as any modern army would have at its disposal.

KEY SERVICES OFFERED BY PMSCS & PROMINENT COMPANIES

1. Security and protection: G4S, Garda World
2. Intelligence: Control Risks, Amarante International, Tigerswan, RSB group
3. Consulting and training for police: Garda World, Academi, Dyncorp
4. Military operational support: Constellis, KBR, CACI
5. Construction and maintenance of military infrastructure: Reed Inc., KBR/Halliburton
6. Military logistics support: Agility, CACI
7. Maritime security: Seagull Maritime Security, Hart International, Mast
8. Provision, maintenance, and disposal of weapons/explosives
9. Other (legal support, hijacking management, etc.): Control Risks,
10. Military assistance: KBR, CACI
11. Mine clearance and demining: Constellis group, Dyncorp
12. Quasi-police tasks: G4S
13. Humanitarian aid: Saracen, Dyncorp, G4S
14. Provision and maintenance of surveillance systems, remote control. Cybersecurity: CACI
15. Combat and military operations: Wagner group, Academi, Reed Inc., Hart Group
16. Prisons, detention center: CoreCivic, GEO group, MVM Inc., G4S

This capacity, together with their highly versatile ability to be deployed anywhere in the world, has made PMSCs essential for many governments. They are used both for international missions in conflict zones, where they support conventional armies or oppose insurgents (control and protection of extractive industries, counter-terrorism, etc), and to provide domestic security services alongside or instead of the state's own security forces (border control, protecting critical infrastructure, prison security management, etc).

Although western countries, especially the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK), have historically dominated the world of PMSCs, in recent years companies based in countries such as China, Russia, and – to a lesser extent – Turkey have come to the fore. Their activities appear to accompany these countries' geostrategic ambitions and their drive to expand their economic and political influence.

The outsourcing of foreign policy through PMSCs

States' efforts to further their geopolitical interests have traditionally been based mainly on military power, meaning the capacity and size of their armed forces and the strength of their technological and weapons capability. Today, PMSCs have become a key player in foreign policy. They are functional, flexible and multi-faceted actors whose close involvement in the new types of armed conflict – asymmetric and hybrid – breaks with one of the premises that supposedly characterise the modern state, according to the classical authors on state power such as Max Weber: the exclusive monopoly on violence. Comparative analyses of the [involvement of PMSC personnel and US Army troops](#) in the most privatized conflicts in recent history, Afghanistan and Iraq, for example, show that in 2013, for every US soldier there were three private security contractors.

Moreover, the new operational settings in which these firms provide their services have led them to develop a dual nature. On the one hand, PMSCs are mere 'instruments' in the service of the states that hire them to implement a specific political agenda. On the other, they have become independent non-state armed actors under the umbrella of fragile states that contract them to perform many roles formerly carried out by their own public security forces, thus undermining those forces' legitimacy.

PMSCs and extractivism

The end of the Cold War brought a halt to the military build-up by the two former super-powers, leaving vast defence facilities and stockpiles of equipment and materiel, as well as large armies, without a purpose. The ending of various national conflicts had a similar outcome, such as the end of the Apartheid government in South Africa, which had developed huge structures of repression and racial segregation based on the state security forces. A transformation of the military and security industry was inevitable. The military surplus was reabsorbed by private firms, contributing to the emergence of PMSCs.

The South African firm *Executive Outcomes* and the British company *Sandline*, considered the first examples of modern PMSCs, came to prominence in the 1990s due to their active role in the civil wars in Sierra Leone and Angola, including their participation in [the so-called "blood diamonds" business](#). Later, the involvement of the PMSC *Blackwater* in the occupation of Iraq and the massacre of civilians in Nisour Square in Baghdad turned the spotlight on these companies once again, reviving the debate on the use of mercenaries in wars.

There has been no reduction in the use of PMSCs in armed conflicts since then. In fact, they have become an extension of the state security apparatus in national and international conflicts. Some governments have attempted to justify this policy by claiming that it is a strategy to reduce military spending, arguing that, in contrast to professional armies, it is not necessary to maintain these military contractors in 'peacetime'. In reality, the use of PMSCs allows governments to intervene in armed conflicts while avoiding public scrutiny and taking advantage of the 'grey areas'³⁵ that evade international regulation, where the new types of mercenaries have ample room for manoeuvre.

The so-called 'proxy wars', such as recent wars in Libya and Syria, have been fertile terrain for the use of PMSCs in international conflicts, whereby third countries participate by contracting these non-state armed actors. In February 2015, the media reported that hundreds of employees of *Wagner Group*, one of the largest Russian PMSCs, had died [in an airstrike by US troops](#) in the Deir Ezzor region of Syria. In fact, this episode was the most lethal – albeit indirect – clash between the US and Russia since the end of the Cold War. Following their usual strategy, the Russian authorities denied any connection with the Russian mercenaries.

The concealed involvement of PMSCs, through contracts with governments and/or transnational corporations (TNCs), allows them to secure control of geostrategic territories for the exploitation of natural resources, thus reinforcing the extractivist economic logic in many armed conflicts.

In the highly fragmented civil war that has afflicted Libya from 2014 to very recent times, dominated by the confrontation between the militias of the former Libyan colonel Khalifa Haftar and the Government of National Accord (GNA) recognised by the United Nations, both parties have been supported by PMSCs. The armed forces of the official government had between [3,000 and 6,000 Syrian mercenaries](#), formerly

providing their services to the Turkish government and [trained](#) by the Turkish PMSC *Sadat*, while Khalifa Haftar has the support of about 200 combatants from the Russian PMSC Wagner Group, financed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and equipped with Russian weapons.³⁶ This has allowed the Russian PMSC to extend its control over oil facilities, revealing its clients' interest in Libya's energy resources.

Evading public government oversight

Wagner Group is one of the military and security companies whose tentacles are most entwined with conflicts and tensions in African countries, often in collaboration with Chinese TNCs. US General Thomas Waldhauser, quoting an opponent of Kabila, then president of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), says that, regarding PMSC, '[the Chinese bring the money and the Russians bring the muscle](#)'.

Although China and Russia may be similar in terms of governance, they have taken very different paths regarding the regulation and control of their private military and security companies. China has signed the 2008 Montreaux Document, a non-binding international regulatory framework that assigns responsibilities to governments based on International Humanitarian Law (IHL), while Russia remains reluctant to make any such commitment. This makes it impossible for the international system to exercise any control over the actions of Russian PMSCs that may be involved in illegal activities or abuses.

Indeed, one of the factors that has led to states preferring to use PMSCs is the extremely lax national and international legislation governing the sector. There is no binding system for holding them accountable, nor any transparency regarding the services they perform, due to their private status and the confidential nature of their contracts. This opaqueness makes it difficult for the authorities to know where PMSC are operating, even in their own territories. It also clouds their relationship with the state contracting or supporting them, as the ties that link these companies to government institutions in their home country are less than transparent, as we have seen in the case of Russia.

This opaqueness has its advantages, of course, because it is politically less costly for governments contracting these companies to perform services of a sensitive nature, where there may be heavy casualties. Governments know that citizens do not react in the same way to the death of a contractor working for a military and security company as for the death of a soldier, who may be seen as fighting to defend their country. The state contracting the PMSC is able to avoid parliamentary or congressional scrutiny and a public scandal while also achieving its operational objectives.

This is the reason why the Russian private military services market can be seen as a hybrid, due to the Russian government's involvement – albeit concealed – in the PMSCs' missions. Indeed, a strategy the Kremlin habitually employs to deny its participation in conflicts abroad is to describe the PMSC personnel involved in these conflicts as 'armed volunteers of Russian origin'.

The current legal vacuum that has led to states secretly contracting PMSCs in almost all active armed conflicts makes it enormously difficult to hold them accountable for the human rights abuses and violations committed by their employees (torture, kidnapping, rape, murder – especially during their deployment in Afghanistan and Iraq), which could be considered infringements of IHL. The most recent instance of this impunity is [Trump's pardoning of the mercenaries](#) working for Blackwater (now called Academi) who were serving a prison sentence for the civilian massacre in Nisour Square in Iraq.

Private policing

As governments in the two largest privatised wars, Afghanistan and Iraq, regained control of their political institutions while their national security forces took control of their territory, the major PMSCs have begun to focus on other emerging sectors in the arena of national security, including in advanced economies.

Responding to the political chorus warning of 'new threats' to national stability such as terrorism, cyber-attacks or migration, PMSCs have boosted their supply of services related to the protection of critical infrastructure, management of migration flows, the institutions of punishment such as prisons and migrant detention centres, cybersecurity and national intelligence, and other quasi-policing tasks.

Once again, PMSCs have found governments willing to collude. For example, in the context of widespread public protests in France, companies such as Groupe DCI provided training and advisory services for the government's security forces. Groupe DCI is one of several companies whose services include training and advice to riot police in locations as diverse as the US and Bahrein, despite the heightened sensitivity that their deployment may arouse in public opinion.

PMSCs have also been an instrument in the US-funded international "War on Drugs", such as Plan Colombia and the 2006 Mérida Initiative in Mexico. They have also engaged in and continue to perform tasks such as [training, maintenance, and providing logistical support and equipment to state actors](#) that are directly and indirectly responsible for human rights violations.

The last bastion of these companies' penetration of state security is the role of maintaining public order. They are increasingly used not just to guard elite housing developments, but also public spaces too. Some majority-Jewish neighbourhoods in Jerusalem, for example, [are protected by PMSCs such as Modi'in Ezrachi](#), which perform roles that could properly be considered to be those of public security forces. In some cases, such as Cape Town, where the exercise of public security often continues to reflect the inequalities of the Apartheid era, private security companies such as Professional Protection Alternatives not only patrol wealthy white neighbourhoods but also public areas such as beaches, carrying out operations to [evict people from public spaces](#). Paradoxically, this challenges the state's monopoly on coercion and force but with the state's open connivance.

Feasting on punishment

One of the trends that best illustrates the privatisation of security as another niche business opportunity for unbridled capitalism is the privatisation of prisons, internment facilities and migrant detention centres. This business is worth billions of dollars a year and it often implies not only handing over management of the state's prisons and other punitive institutions to private companies but also opening the door to PMSCs offering these services.

This is the aspect of their involvement in public security that sparks the greatest opposition and alarm among human rights defenders and in civil society, to the extent that the United Nations Working Group on the use of mercenaries published a report in 2017 on the impacts of the [privatisation of prisons and migrant detention centres](#) on human rights. The UN was concerned about the widespread increase in the prison population that resulted from increasingly punitive policies, such as the expansion in offences punishable by a prison sentence or involving the deprivation of liberty, as well as – of course – the right to migrate or seek asylum being treated as a criminal offence.

The UN report pointed out that PMSCs involved in incarceration come from several countries including Austria, Australia, France, the Netherlands, New Zealand, South Africa, Spain, the UK and the US. In the case of the US, the three PMSCs that dominate the market – *CoreCivic*, *Geo Group and Management and Training Corporation* – have a long history of complaints about degrading treatment, forced labour, abuse, violence and sexual assault in prisons, correctional facilities, and detention centres holding children and migrants.³⁷



Portraits of undocumented Latin American immigrants inmates in Maricopa County's Tent City Jail in Phoenix, Arizona. It became notable particularly because of Phoenix's extreme temperatures, with its daytime temperatures inside the tents reported as high as 150°F (65°C). From 2006–2016, Joe Arpaio calling himself 'America's Toughest Sheriff' focused increasing energy on criminalising the undocumented Latin American community in Maricopa County. Arpaio was convicted of criminal contempt of court in 2017, for which he was subsequently pardoned by Donald Trump. Tent City Jail was finally closed in 2017. Credit: © Jon Lowenstein / NOOR

Their actions and the profits they make by locking up migrants have given rise to major advocacy and civil protest campaigns led by organisations such as Worth Rises, which has achieved notable victories such as the [decision taken by the city of Denver](#) (Colorado) in 2019 not to renew the \$10.6 million contracts with GEO Group and CoreCivic. Recently, the new US President [Joe Biden announced his commitment to end federal funding of private prisons](#).

These privatisations involving the handover of facilities to security companies with dubious human rights standards grew during the second Obama administration and were intensified with the anti-migrant policies of former president Trump. The pandemic made this situation even worse, leaving migrants' health and safety at the mercy of PMSCs such as MVM Inc. Before the Covid-19 crisis, this company used to transport migrant families from the US border to detention and internment centres. In the wake of

the pandemic, it has been [using hotels overseen by a PMSC to detain](#) and confine children and babies before deporting them, as The New York Times revealed in August 2020.

Despite the numerous scandals in prisons and migrant detention centres, privatisation continues, thanks to the perceived win-win relationship between the public and the private sectors, whereby the companies obtain highly profitable public-sector contracts while governments outsource public security roles that are highly sensitive in human rights terms in order to evade effective accountability. Protection is thus shifted into the background as priority is given to private-sector profits and the absence of public scrutiny.

Cases of human rights abuses and violations place the spotlight on the company rather than the public authorities responsible for the outsourcing, while terminating its contract may sometimes quell the media outcry without having to change the underlying policy. In October 2020, the British firm G4S, very recently [acquired by the PMSC Allied Universal](#), with a presence in 90 countries, was awarded a contract to [run the Wellingborough mega-prison for ten years](#), despite the fact that a contract running two migrant detention centres had been terminated the previous year after images of inmates being attacked and assaulted were made public.

G4S has been involved in multiple scandals and accused of repeated human rights violations in the UK and elsewhere. Consequently, along with Blackwater, G4S is one of the most frequently criticised PMSCs, facing resistance from organisations such as the Palestinian [Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions \(BDS\) movement](#) and the British NGO War on Want. It has faced multiple campaigns for its involvement in providing services to the [US base in Guantánamo](#) where torture occurred, and for staff abuses at an Australian-funded migrant detention centre on Manus Island (Papua New Guinea). A campaign focused on its involvement in the occupied territories, including [providing equipment to Israeli checkpoints](#) in which Palestinians frequently have their rights violated, led to a successful boycott of the company, forcing G4S to announce their withdrawal from Israeli prisons.

From traditional intelligence to cyber-mercenaries

Forms of state power have been changing, not only in alignment with contemporary conflicts but also with the digital age and so-called 'hybrid threats'. Since 9/11, the US has invested massively in intelligence work as part of the fight against international terrorism, and has gradually stepped up the outsourcing of these services to PMSCs. Tim Shorrock, author of [Spies for Hire: The Secret World of Intelligence Outsourcing](#), states that 70% of the US intelligence budget in 2007 was outsourced to security contractors. A year later, an investigation by [The Washington Post](#) found that 1,931 private companies were collaborating on national security, counter-terrorism and intelligence tasks from 10,000 US locations.

Government intelligence agencies contracting from corporations producing surveillance technologies is nothing new. What is unusual is the contracting of specialised staff for intelligence and national security work. The database of the [Shock Monitor network](#) records 216 PMSCs, out of a total of 770, providing intelligence services to governments, TNCs and private clients.

These services have evolved with the use of new technologies and now also include threats from cyberspace. Private security contractors supply and maintain software technology and hardware systems; gather data related to national security by intercepting calls, hack mobile phones and IT systems; analyse and systematise data related to national security; produce risk-assessment reports

for the military high command; operate reconnaissance drones during protests or in armed conflicts beyond borders; and conduct secret operations that involve illegal activities such as infiltrating social movements or interrogating suspects.

Some PMSCs have also set up their own cybersecurity departments to meet their clients' new requirements. Booz Allen Hamilton, one of the main US intelligence contractors, offers cybersecurity services that enable it to carry out attacks in the cyber domain. The Russian PMSC [RSB Group](#) has specialised in intelligence and cybersecurity since 2016, and the British firm G4S set up a Cyber Consulting and Security Operations Centre in the same year. Other companies, such as the French firm *Amarante International*, the Danish firm Risk Intelligence, which specialises in maritime security, and the British firm *Control Risks*, have developed sophisticated big-data tools to produce international security reports that identify specific risks to their clients.

The involvement of PMSCs and private security contractors in data-analysis places them in an ideal position to influence perceptions of the threats faced by their government clients, which means that they can also influence public policies or security plans. The profit motive and their military and technical security approach shape the results of PMSCs' investigations and their proposals for how to neutralise the identified threats. Ultimately, this approach influences their clients' perception of insecurity and ignores the social and political dynamics in the situations analysed, side-lining non-military responses involving diplomacy or mediation.

Cyber-espionage has thus become one of the PMSCs' key services, involving contracting large numbers of hackers – or what the United Nations Working Group on the use of mercenaries calls [cyber-mercenaries](#). The outsourcing of intelligence services to PMSCs reinforces the logic of impunity, diminishes supervision and accountability, and deliberately complicates democratic oversight of these operations, as the researcher [Armin Krishnan has pointed out](#). These services include highly sensitive and controversial work, as PMSCs are used as proxies to evade public scrutiny and meddle in the domestic affairs of other countries.

The Russian military intelligence agency (GRU) used the services of the Internet Research Agency, also known as the [Troll Factory](#), linked to the oligarch Yevgeny V. Prigozhin, to interfere in the 2016 US presidential election by hacking into Democratic Party email accounts and computer networks and spreading disinformation on social media in order to favour Donald Trump's presidential campaign.

The Troll Factory's data-hacking activities are not an isolated case. On a lesser scale, numerous PMSCs provide offensive services such as active cyber defence (ACD) or hacking to recover stolen information and disrupt or damage potential enemy infrastructure networks. These hackers also [perform tasks remotely](#), such as using drones to conduct reconnaissance thousands of kilometres away, offensive actions on the internet, or supporting authoritarian governments in actions to repress their citizens. In other words, security contractors are able to act on the frontline of contemporary conflicts from the comfort of their living room. Both situations make it challenging to regulate PMSCs' cybersecurity activities in terms of applicable jurisdiction and involvement in cyberwarfare.

At the same time, cooperation in the field of intelligence implies that private security contractors have access to sensitive information related to national security and to the databases of government agencies that contain citizens' personal information. This clearly has an impact on civil and political rights. For example, investigations made by [The Intercept](#) revealed shadowy intelligence activities by the

PMSC Tiger Swan who gathered data by infiltrating the Standing Rock indigenous and environmental movement protesting against the oil pipeline project of the firm Energy Transfer in North Dakota. The reports produced by Tiger Swan were used by the local police, the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Fusion Centers set up after 9/11 to combat international terrorism.

Such practices like these are also widely used in low- and middle-income countries, where complicity between state security forces, security contractors and hired killers is responsible for the death of numerous human rights defenders, such as [the case of Berta Cáceres in Honduras and many more in Colombia and Brazil](#).

Finally, the privatisation of intelligence has meant that experts from government agencies work for the highest bidder, whether a company, another government or a private tycoon. In 2019, a former NSA agent uncovered the [Raven project](#), an intelligence unit set up by the UAE and staffed by cyber-mercenaries, including some previously hired by US intelligence agencies. The Raven analysts also had a very sophisticated system – of unknown origin – for hacking into iPhones, known as Karma. The Raven project [spent years monitoring dissidents and others critical of the Abu Dhabi government](#), such as the British journalist Rori Donaghy, the Emirati activist Ahmed Mansoor, and Tawakkol Karman, leader of the ‘Arab Spring’ protests in Yemen.

Threats to civil and political rights

Social movements, trade unionists, activists, journalists and indigenous leaders have frequently been targeted by governments, TNCs and private intelligence agencies. That work may now be carried out by a PMSC. There are numerous cases of TNCs contracting the services of PMSCs to spy on activists: *Kroll* was contracted by Texaco Chevron in Ecuador, *Academi* (formerly Blackwater) became the intelligence department of Monsanto, and [Stratfor](#) worked for Coca-Cola. PMSC intelligence services have been crucial for identifying social leaders and launching campaigns to discredit them. Tragically, such practices are widespread in Latin America, where they are conducted on the orders of oil and mining companies with the complicity of local authorities.

The symbiosis between governments, economic elites and PMSCs has led to [scandals involving conflicts of interest and revolving doors](#)³⁸ with the top brass of government intelligence agencies going to work for PMSCs and vice versa. But more worrying still is the political and ideological alignment between the public and the private sector, leading to a worldview and interpretation of international security that favours the geostrategic interests of western governments.

There is an organic relationship between states and the major TNCs registered in their jurisdiction. Governments prioritise economic security by promoting and protecting their companies, including the PMSC sector, and this leads to business loyalty even though the companies may have contracts with third countries. The case of Russia illustrates the strong ties that bind these companies to the country’s political and economic establishment, and the same tendency is also found in western countries.

Towards the end of 2020, Iranian prosecutor Ali Al-Qasi Mehr accused the G4S of being involved in the assassination of General Qassem Soleimani and Commander Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis on 3 January 2020. According to Al-Qasi Mehr, G4S provided information to the Trump administration [about the arrival of top Iranian military officers](#) at Baghdad airport, where G4S has been providing security since

2010. G4S rejects the claim but clearly is able to use its privileged position to conduct intelligence tasks for many western governments.

The connivance between economic and political elites, typical of this world of privatised security, was crystallised during the Trump administration. The US tycoon Sheldon Adelson, a close friend of Trump, used his influence to spy on Julian Assange at the Ecuadorian Embassy in London through the Spanish firm *Undercover Global S.L.* This firm recorded private conversations between Assange and his lawyers for the CIA, infringing the activist's right to privacy and also formally invading the territory of Ecuador.

Underlying these relationships and structures is an alignment with the economic, social and moral agenda of neoliberalism in its most advanced state, which sees the public sphere solely as an economic opportunity to be exploited, with no concern for its social consequences. The outsourcing of security by governments and their agencies is not simply based on mere efficiency and devoid of ideology. The evidence shows that the tendency to leave the private sector in charge of matters as sensitive – and fundamentally political – as security, and issues so intrinsic to the foundations of the liberal capitalist state as the monopoly on violence and coercive power, is a deliberate process, and also very dangerous. It endangers the physical integrity of people in the situations of armed conflict and tension where these companies operate, but also for the civil and political rights of those who live in the states that contract them.

Ekaterina Zepnova, Giulia Campisi, Felip Daza, Carlos Díaz and Nora Miralles are part of the investigation team for the Observatory on Human Rights and Business in the Mediterranean Region (www.odhe.cat) and Shock Monitor (www.shockmonitor.org), projects led by Suds and Novact. Twitter: @fdazza @ObservatoriDHE & @ShockMonitor

Notes

- 33 Observatory on Human Rights and Business in the Mediterranean Region (www.odhe.cat) and Shock Monitor (www.shockmonitor.org) are projects led by Suds and Novact.
- 34 Foessel, M. (2011) *Estado de vigilancia: crítica de la razón securitaria* (trans. État de vigilance: la banalité sécuritaire). Madrid: Lengua de Trapo.
- 35 These grey area are used to refer to certain dynamics in political conflict whereby states deploy 'undercover' actions of a coercive nature but which remain too small to escalate into a military conflict.
- 36 Fabricius, P. (2019) 'The proliferation of outside forces in the conflict, with different and obscure agendas, complicates peace efforts. Institute for Security Studies. issafrica.org/iss-today/russia-throws-more-weight-behind-haftar-in-libya
- 37 Information drawn from the Shock Monitor database. shockmonitor.org/
- 38 Chatterjee, P. (2013) 'How Booz Allen made the revolving door redundant'. Inter press Service. www.ipsnews.net/2013/06/how-booz-allen-made-the-revolving-door-redundant/ [consulted 18 December 2020].

ISRAEL: THE MODEL COERCIVE STATE

*and why boycotting it is key to
emancipation everywhere*

Alys Samson Estapé



Israel's arms and security industry has become an intrinsic part of the apartheid regime. It is not only present in the brutal violence of the bombing of Gaza and the constant harassment and dispossession of Palestinians, it is also shaping the coercive dimensions of states everywhere, bringing the politics and methodology of occupation to other countries and regimes.

Amid the horror of Israel's escalation of violence in May 2021, from bombing in Gaza to lynch mobs of Israeli settlers assaulting Palestinians, there was also coverage of a weapon Israeli forces are currently using for "crowd control", skunk water, developed by the Israeli company Odortec. Palestinian author Yara Hawari detailed how "the skunk" was developed against the popular protests in the West Bank and has been widely used including in the siege off Palestinian families resisting expulsion from Sheikh Jarrah in Jerusalem that sparked the latest round of violence. Skunk water is a concoction of chemicals smelling of sewage and rotting corpses that causes intense nausea, violent gagging and vomiting.

It is also a weapon available in the United States, supplied by the company Mistral Security, which recommends its use at "border crossings, correctional facilities, demonstrations and sit-ins". Several police departments have already bought it, including in Ferguson, Missouri, following the 2014 protests against police brutality and institutional racism after the murder of Michael Brown. As Hawari puts it, "Israeli arms manufacturers do not even have to invest in marketing their weapons; news channels running footage of brutal attacks by the Israeli army do the job for them."

The story (and stench) of skunk water reveals the way Israel's arms and security industry has itself become an intrinsic part of the apartheid regime – present in both the brutal violence of ethnic-cleansing neighbourhoods as well as the constant harassment and dispossession of Palestinians. As Hawari writes, "the Israeli forces do not only use [skunk water] to suppress protests. Skunk trucks [also] pass through Palestinian neighbourhoods spraying buildings in retaliation for local residents protesting Israeli occupation and apartheid. As a result, businesses have to close for days and families have to leave their homes for long periods of time until the stench is gone. This is what makes it a brutal collective punishment tool."

So while Israel's attacks are motivated by extreme racism and colonialism, which lie at the roots of the Israeli state, it is also clear that Israel's oppression of Palestinians is highly profitable for the apartheid regime. The Israeli state and its military enterprises show how savage capitalism and colonialism intertwine. Through its exports Israel in turn is also shaping the coercive dimensions of states everywhere, bringing the politics of occupation to other international arenas. Those states buying military and security products from Israel are therefore complicit in both the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, and for importing its brutal politics and methods of coercion.

Israel and its allies' profit from oppressing Palestinians

Israel is one of the world's most militarised and securitised countries. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), in 2020 Israel was among the five countries with the highest military budgets in the world, at 5.6% of its GDP.³⁹ Israel is also the eighth largest arms exporter in the world. Israeli arms exports accounted for 3% of the global total in 2016–20, 59% higher than in the period 2011–15.

Israel has made itself central to the international arms and homeland security industry by exporting cutting-edge military equipment, technologies and tactics to other countries. Israel exports to an estimated 130 countries worldwide – the graphic below captures arms exports to 65 of those countries since 2008. As Sahar Vardi mentions, it is impossible to find a full list of those countries. Apart from its reports to the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms, Israel releases no official information about its arms exports. Some of Israel's clients have involved dictatorships and human rights abusers; including apartheid South Africa, the military Junta in Argentina, the Serbian army during the Bosnian genocide, and Rwanda in the years leading up to the genocide in the country. Recently Israel has sold arms to South Sudan and the military junta in Myanmar. Countries like Morocco, Mexico, Saudi Arabia and others have begun using Israeli spyware against journalists and political opposition.

But Israel doesn't only export arms, it also exports policing and surveillance technologies to repressive regimes and 'liberal' democracies alike. Israel has forged a strategic role in deploying a level of daily surveillance and control that has marked it out internationally as the cutting edge of states' counter-insurgency and population control efforts everywhere. As Maren Mantovani and Henrique Sanchez argue "In a globalized world, any analysis of militarization and repressive ideologies, methodologies and technologies has to take into account the dynamics of import and export of these concepts and tools across borders. One of the world's most prominent exporters of ideology and technology of repression is undoubtedly Israel".⁴⁰

A report by the Spanish NGO Novact in 2014 showed how the Israeli company Guardian-Homeland Security had organised trainings for Spanish police forces in Israel⁴¹. Various Spanish police force bodies were listed as clients on the company website. In videos⁴² published by the company, you can hear a Mosso d'Esquadra (Catalan national police) who has done the two-week training in Israel saying "We have learned a lot during these two weeks [...] we have learned from the best". This caused a huge public uproar at the time as it emerged after Spanish state police had brutally repressed the post financial crisis 15M protests. In Catalonia, during pro-independence protests in 2019, the police used a tank armed with high-pressure water to disperse protests for the first time⁴³. The tank had been bought from the Israeli company Beit Alfa Industries in 1994⁴⁴. These tanks are also used in the Occupied West Bank and had been used by the Apartheid South African regime before.

EXPORTING OCCUPATION AND WARS

Since Israel's 2008 Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, Israel has exported arms to more than 65 countries in the world.

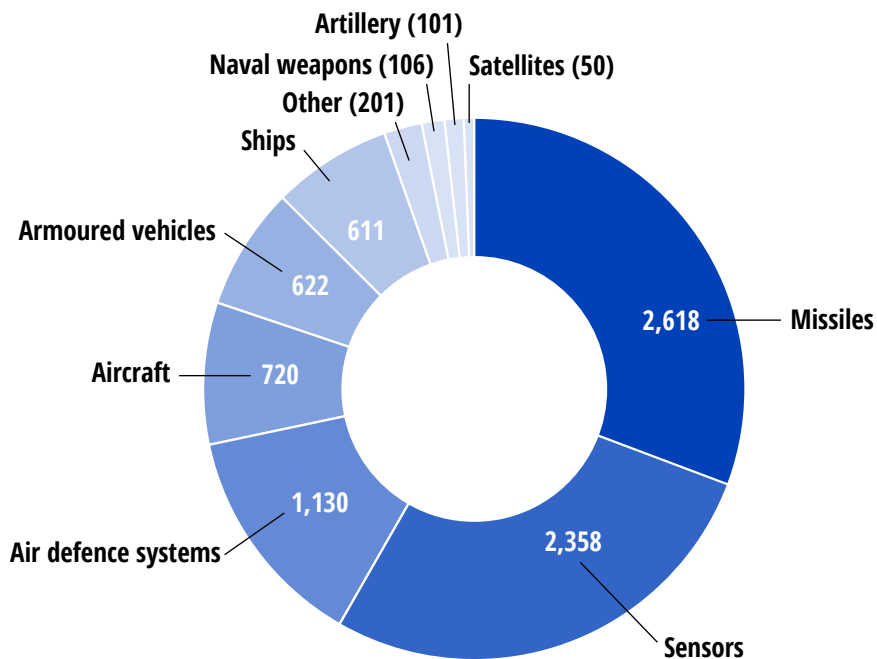
ARMS EXPORTS FROM ISRAEL

Volume of arms exports (TIV* in millions), 2008-2020



*Trend Indicator Values (TIV) is SIPRI's measure of arms transfers.
Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database

WEAPON EXPORT CATEGORIES



Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database

By maintaining the regime of occupation and apartheid over the Palestinian people, Israel gains economically by having a testing ground for the development of weapons, security systems, models of population control and tactics without which Israel would be unable to compete in the international arms and security markets. It gives Israel status as a major military power.

Occupation allows Israel to try out new military and security hardware, to then export. For example, Israel's largest military and security company, Elbit Systems, which markets itself as a supplier of the Israeli Defense Force, saw its profits increase by 6.1%, in the month of July 2014 alone, at the peak of Israel's last assault on Gaza. Elbit Systems sells security systems and weapons to the USA, Brazil, India, the Philippines, and Azerbaijan, among many others⁴⁵.

The company markets its products as 'battle-tested' and claims "outstanding capabilities" based on "operational experience gained through tens of thousands of operational sorties by the IDF"⁴⁶. In other words, they boast about the way their technologies have been tested on the Palestinian population, to improve the degree and speed of killing and maiming.

In the aftermath of the 2014 bombing, the CEO of Israeli arms manufacturer Meprolight was equally blunt about [profiting from war](#). "After every campaign of the kind that is now taking place in Gaza, we see an increase in the number of customers from abroad." He added, "Of course, we are marketing abroad aggressively, but IDF operations definitely affect marketing activity."

But Israel hasn't made it to where it is on its own: the US played a pivotal role in the emergence of Israel's arms and security industry. Since President Lyndon Johnson in 1967, all US presidents have reiterated the US commitment to maintain Israel's "qualitative military edge" (QME). This is a core Israeli concept defined by Ben Gurion stating that Israel can only ensure its existence if it can defend itself militarily. The US has sought to ensure the survival of its ally in the Middle East by arming it militarily, by directly providing weapons as well as enabling it to create its own military industry. Furthermore US aid also facilitates the development of Israel's international military ties, which have helped it export worldwide.

Israeli-Guatemala military relations provide an illustrative example. In 1977 the US cut off military aid to Guatemala based on human rights violations committed by the military. Israel then began selling arms to the Guatemalan government and by 1980 Israel had become the country's largest supplier of weapons, military training, and surveillance technology. The Israeli Economic Coordination Minister Ya'aeov Merider was quoted in 1981, saying that Israel would act as a proxy to U.S. military aid in countries where for political reasons the U.S. had suspended the sale of arms. In many Guatemalan military circles admiration for Israel's military was so public that many right-wing leaders in Guatemala "spoke openly of the 'Palestinianization' of the nation's rebellious Mayan Indians".

With US support, Israel's military and security sector has boomed. In 2017, the Israeli Ministry of Defence [issued](#) 29,655 export licenses to 1,546 private companies and independent traders. In 2020, Israel's defense export deals totalled [\\$8.3 billion](#), the second-highest figure ever, making up about 15 percent of its total exports. The same year, Israel allocated [\\$2.508 per capita](#), or 12 percent of total government spending, to defense.⁴⁷

Companies are created through military knowledge acquired in a context of prolonged occupation, which is then traded and spread to the rest of the world. The Israeli military even encourages high-tech workers and employers to use the knowledge gained during military service to build their own start-ups⁴⁸. Close collaboration between security enterprises and the state is crucial for Israel's security and surveillance sector and creates a culture of revolving doors: a senior position in the army will open doors to a position in a national security company.

Israel and the cyber technology market

The Israeli military high-tech sector has also become a key player in the global cyber technology market, much of which focuses on population surveillance and control.

Research from *The Guardian*, *El País* and Citizen Lab, the cybersecurity institute of the University of Toronto, [concluded](#) in 2020 that pro-independence Catalan politicians had been spied on through Pegasus, a programme created by the Israeli technology company, NSO Group Technologies. Two years earlier, Citizen Lab had warned⁴⁹ that Pegasus was in use in more than 45 countries, including Bahrain, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, all countries known for their persecution of human rights activists. Citizen Lab also revealed NSO Group's role in journalist Jamal Khashoggi's murder.

NSO Group claims it sells its products to governments to fight "terror and crime," but as the Euro-Mediterranean Observatory to Prevent Extremist Violence⁵⁰ has pointed out, this blanket statement means little given the lack of consensus on what terrorism is and the way the term is misused politically to condemn dissent and weaken respect for human rights. More often than not, hegemonic narratives of terrorism and 'national security' are deployed to defend geopolitical and especially racist aims and are used to repress entire populations, deeming certain group as dangerous 'internal enemies'. The use of security narratives is typical of governments seeking to justify their actions or minimise questions. Israel resorting to this discourse to persecute Palestinians is not unique.

Israel making profits including from the COVID-19 pandemic

While the COVID-19 pandemic was a health, not a security crisis, it has not stopped Israel from seeking to sell its same security technologies for tracking and surveillance of populations. In August 2020 the Israeli army was given a high-profile role in the country's fight against the coronavirus⁵¹. The Israeli company NSO Group, previously mentioned, also advertised its services to monitor the COVID-19 health crisis and control population movements around the globe⁵². Now Israel is even marketing its technologies to deal with the social consequences of the pandemic. A tender⁵³ by the International Defence Cooperation Directorate of the Israeli Ministry of Defence (SIBAT), which showcases Israeli military technology internationally, argued⁵⁴ that states would need to control and repress populations due to economic devastation as a result of COVID-19. It offered potential buyers its biometric data collection technology, human and vehicle tracking systems, facial recognition, licence plate monitoring, cellular and cyber-surveillance, as well as information blocking and interception software that it has further fine-tuned during the pandemic. The only countries excluded from the offer were Iran, Lebanon and Syria.

Meanwhile, Israel's own highly praised vaccination programme has excluded millions of Palestinians and suppressed any Palestinian initiatives⁵⁵ to deal with the pandemic. Israel's latest attack on Gaza has worsened the health situation. It damaged 17 hospitals and clinics, wrecked its only coronavirus test laboratory, sent fetid wastewater into its streets and broke water pipes serving at least 800,000 people. Among the 280 people killed, including over 60 children was Dr Abu al-Ouf who was in charge of overseeing the pandemic response in al-Shifa hospital in Gaza City.

Shaping and extending the coercive dimensions of states worldwide

As long as states are buying and selling military products from Israel, by adopting its repressive measures they are implicitly approving Israel's settler-colonialist state and financing its military industry.

Following a recent civil society campaign, the European Union ended its contract with Israel's drones provided by Elbit Systems to control migrants seeking refuge⁵⁶, and pressure continues to push the EU to rescind two further Frontex contracts with Elbit Systems⁵⁷. During Obama's presidency in 2014, Elbit Systems received \$145 million to install a "virtual wall" of 24/7 surveillance towers in the US border zone of southern Arizona, including on indigenous Tohono O'odham Nation land. Even though Biden is defunding the physical wall built during Trump's mandate there are no signs that Biden will cancel the so-called 'smart' wall that Elbit's technologies were involved in building.

We see a similar and even stronger collusion between Israel and many far-right regimes: India's Narendra Modi, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, Hungary's Viktor Orbán and Duque's Colombia have all supported Israel's policies.

Not only is the far right impressed by the efficiency of Israel's military and security apparatus in repressing opposition and resistance, they are also ideologically aligned and building strong military relations. And these regimes' importing of Israel's framework of security hits marginalised groups the hardest.

Close economic ties go hand in hand with sharing military know-how, including military training with Israel, social mobilisation repression techniques, dissent control strategies, intimidation of human rights defenders, strategies for judicial and extrajudicial mechanisms of torture and disappearance.

In the US, [the Deadly Exchange campaign](#) has highlighted the longstanding US and Israel collaboration in police training through exchange programs that bring together police, ICE, border patrol, and FBI from the US with soldiers, police, border agents, etc from Israel. The "worst practices" of discriminatory and repressive policing practices are shared in these programmes, which include racial profiling, massive spying and surveillance, deportation and detention, and attacks on human rights defenders. These exchanges are organized by a range of governmental and non-governmental actors including the neo-conservative Jewish Institute on National Security of America (JINSA), the Anti-Defamation League, and even Birthright.

Israeli methodology and technology have the biggest impact in the Global South. Currently [India buys 50% of Israeli weapons](#) exports.⁵⁸ The Modi government also recently amended India's citizenship law, expediting it for non-Muslims from neighbouring countries, closely mirroring Israel's 'law of return'. Abrogation of Kashmir's special status paves the way for Israel-style settlements in the valley. The Indian consul-general to New York City, Sandeep Chakravorty, in 2019 even cited Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank [as an example of what India is hoping to achieve](#) in Kashmir. There are strong ideological affinities between Zionism and Hindu nationalism (Hindutva). Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, Hindutva's ideological father, said he was inspired by Nazi Germany and the Zionist movement in advocating for India to become a Hindu ethnocratic state that treated Muslims "like negroes" in the United States of his time.

Colombia, for example has received Mossad support for decades, and relations between Israeli mercenaries and far-right paramilitary groups have been proven in court. A Bilateral Working group on Political – Military Dialogue has been established between the Colombian and the Israeli government, which the Colombian Ministry of Defence says, “is not only to exchange knowledge and technology, but also intelligence information and doctrines”⁵⁹. Israeli army instructors have provided training in counter-terrorism and combat techniques to soldiers of the Special Forces Division of the Colombian Army⁶⁰. Many Israeli companies operate in Colombia including Elbit Systems, IAI and NSO Group – Elbit has been involved in leading workshops at seminars of the Colombian army⁶¹.

Brazil is moving ahead to “Israelize” its policies, adopting more of its practices. For example, when the former Minister of Defence of Israel, says that there “are no innocent people in Gaza” this has an echo in the favelas in Brazil where every assassinated black person is labelled a ‘drug trafficker’ by the Brazilian government and where streets are ever more militarised and surveilled.⁶² Gizele Martins, activist and community communicator from one of Rio de Janeiro’s largest favelas says that, “The central objective that Israel and other allied governments like the one in Brazil pursue is the control over the impoverished population in order to gain land, to colonize their lives, to dominate the land and the culture. I see this project advancing rapidly here in Rio de Janeiro. To achieve this plan, the world’s elites work together, and Israel and its weapons and practices are very useful for these governments⁶³”

Similarly, in August 2016, the president of Honduras, Juan Orlando Hernández, announced that he would establish a military agreement with the government of Israel: “I am sending a very important agreement to the National Congress fundamental for the growth of the Honduran nation, an agreement with the State of Israel; This will give rise to the strengthening of our Armed Forces, which is something we never had”⁶⁴. The agreement included the provision of equipment as well as training by Elbit’s cybersecurity specialists. Their trainers arrived at a time of intense repression of Honduran social movements by the government in response to protests against the lack of transparency of the last presidential elections.⁶⁵

Conclusion: boycott Israel

Israeli military technology is spreading death and repression across the globe. In the context of Israel’s 73-year-old regime of apartheid, settler-colonialism and occupation, it also underscores the connections between the struggles and the connections between the oppressors. The crimes Israel commits against the Palestinian people do not stay in the occupied territories. They are transformed into knowledge which is then sold so that Israeli and international companies can profit from them.

As US Congresswoman Cori Bush stated,⁶⁶ “The fight for Black lives and the fight for Palestinian liberation are interconnected. We oppose our money going to fund militarized policing, occupation, and systems of violent oppression and trauma.” The almost \$4 billion the US sends to Israel every year could be used to fund schools or a proper health system in the US.

As long as Israel profits from repression, the violence against Palestinians will continue. A ceasefire in Gaza has not ended Israeli apartheid repression and colonial brutality against all Palestinians. Even though Israel’s violence only occasionally surfaces in international media, Palestinians endure brutality on a daily basis.

That violence is part of the ongoing Nakba, Israel's ethnic-cleansing of Palestinians which has now lasted 73 years. It is part of a racist and colonial project aimed at expelling, repressing and subduing the Palestinian people. It also constitutes Apartheid, a description Palestinians have long articulated, which is now supported by Israeli and international human rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch⁶⁷.

This understanding of the Palestinian struggle as a fundamentally anti-racist and anti-colonial effort, has brought movements from across the world together for Palestine in intersectional solidarity. In recent weeks, we have seen a huge display of such solidarity and there is a shared feeling that something has shifted as many who didn't dare speak on Palestinian rights before have taken a stand against Israeli apartheid. The success of the General Strike that occurred on 18 May is proof too of increased unity between Palestinians, whether Palestinian citizens of Israel or Palestinians under siege in Gaza, despite the many years of Israel trying to divide and conquer the Palestinian people by giving slightly more rights to some Palestinians than others.

But as the people of Gaza try to rebuild their lives after untold devastation and in the context of an ongoing siege, we can be sure that Israel will once again market its security and military industry, which as Yara Hawari said has been on full display on every TV screen. The media gushing over the efficiency of Israel's "Iron Dome" is testament to this. Already in 2017, the UK bought an Israeli defense system known as the Sky Sabre, based on technology developed for the Iron Dome, for \$92.3 million to help defend the Malvinas Islands off the coast of Argentina⁶⁸. It won't be long before government representatives pour into Israel to buy the latest 'combat-proven' Israeli weapons and technology for their own wars on neighbours or their own people.

Since 2005 the Palestinian-led, nonviolent and antiracist Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (BDS)⁶⁹ has called on the international community to take action until Israel respects Palestinian rights. More and more groups such as trade unions, artists and student organisations are taking a stand on Palestinian rights. Pension funds⁷⁰ and companies have decided to divest from Israeli apartheid. Civil society can and must put pressure to end Israel's impunity. Like with apartheid South Africa, it won't be until Israel is isolated politically, economically and culturally that it will be obliged to end its apartheid regime. Given that Israel is also a linchpin in the exporting of repression of dissent elsewhere, BDS as an intersectional and anticolonial tool can also contribute to end ties with oppressors all over. That is why an urgent boycott of Israel is needed, for the sake of Palestinian people, and for all of us.

Alys Samson Estapé is a sociologist, feminist, anti-racist activist and currently the European coordinator of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions in Israel (BDS) movement.

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FROM XINJIANG TO MISSISSIPPI

Terror Capitalism, Labour and Surveillance

Darren Byler



KAZAKHSTAN, ALMATY, APRIL 2019: Gulzira Auelhan, an ethnic Kazakh, returned to China's far western Xinjiang in 2017 to visit her ailing father. Instead, she was detained for 437 days in China's sprawling new system of incarceration and indoctrination. Instead, over the course of 437 days, she was detained in five different facilities, including a factory and a middle school converted into a centre for political indoctrination and technical instruction, with several interludes of a form of house arrest with relatives. The Chinese government has said it offers free vocational education and skills training to people such as Ms. Auelhan. But over more than 14 months, "that training lasted one week," she said, not including the time she spent forced to work in a factory. IG: @noorimages / Twitter: @noorimages

The Chinese state within Xinjiang has forged a form of capitalist frontier-making based on data harvesting and unfree human labour that exploits ethno-racial difference in order to generate new forms of capital accumulation and coercive state power.

'Where is your ID!' the police contractor yelled at me in Uyghur. I looked up in surprise. I had been avoiding eye contact, trying to attract as little attention as possible. In April 2018, in the tourist areas of Kashgar – where there were checkpoints every 200 metres – the contractors usually recognised a bespectacled white person as a foreigner. But over the years that I had lived and worked as an anthropologist in Northwest China I had often been mistaken for a Uyghur.

'I don't have a local ID. I'm a foreigner. I only have a passport', I responded in Mandarin. At another checkpoint, a Uyghur police contractor had advised me to stop speaking Uyghur if I didn't want to raise suspicion. So, I had adopted the tactic of only speaking or writing Chinese at checkpoints.

'Oh! Well show me your passport then', he said, switching to Mandarin, his tones nearly as flat and imprecise as my own. He leafed through my passport, pausing at my picture. 'That's a big beard', he commented. 'That's the style of a lot of young people in my hometown in the United States', I responded.

Other police contractors had also given me trouble at checkpoints because of the beard, which, for [men under the age of 55](#), in 2014 [state authorities had identified](#) as a possible sign of religious extremism. I had watched them scan my passport photo and run it through an image-recognition system looking for matches with individuals on the watchlist. The beards that usually populated the screen looked as though the men might be from Afghanistan or Pakistan, though sometimes they looked like pictures of me.

He didn't seem convinced.

'Wait here', he said.

I stood there for nearly an hour, becoming increasingly worried. I did not like the idea of the police seizing my passport and holding it for such a long time. As I waited I saw dozens of young Uyghurs line up, waiting to hand over their IDs and phones for inspection. I peered over their shoulders trying to see the app that the police contractors were looking for after the smartphone owners told them their access code. I couldn't quite tell if the app was made by the digital forensics companies [Meiya Pico](#) or [FiberHome](#). Both companies were working in the region to turn smartphones into devices that tracked movement and communication.

Eventually a Han man, a 'real' police officer who carried a gun, showed up. He asked me about my background, why I was travelling, how I learned Chinese. He said they had looked me up in the system, so they knew all about me.

I thought about the hundreds of Uyghurs I had interviewed since 2011. Some had already disappeared into the camp system, but most of my closest Uyghur and Kazakh friends had not yet been detained. I thought about the images of checkpoints, camera systems, signs and technical equipment that I had not yet uploaded to the cloud. The pages of notes on disappearances they might find hidden behind firewalls on my laptop. How they would force me to give them my email passwords. I imagined being shackled and thrown into a crowded concrete cell, forced to sign a false confession saying I was secretly

working for the US intelligence agency, that anthropology was just a front, and that my real mission was to incite Uyghur terrorism.

'Stand here', he pointed to the back of a nearby taxi. He pulled out his smartphone and took a picture of me next to the license plate. Then he told me to hold my passport open and he took a close up of me next to it. 'Get in', he said.

He turned to the Uyghur taxi driver and, switching to thickly accented Uyghur, said, 'take him back to his hotel. Don't go anywhere else. We are watching this car'.

I was allowed to leave. Unlike so many people I knew I was not held in a camp or assigned a low-wage factory job. My data had been harvested, but I had the protection of my US passport to prevent my property and labour from being expropriated – or legally stolen. In a general sense, as a fact of life in a system of global capitalism, I was implicated in the system of control and 're-education' I was studying. The digitisation of social life, the Global War on Terror, and the drive for low-cost commodities, is a fact of life almost everywhere. But as a protected citizen the fear I felt was a momentary glimpse of the terror that dominated the Uyghurs I saw at the checkpoints. For them, there was no way out.

'Terror capitalism'

Over the past years, in analysing my ethnographic research findings from the Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang) I have developed a conceptual framing which helps me to explain the political and economic forces at work in the checkpoints, camps, and factories of Northwest China. I call the concept 'terror capitalism' – a form of capitalist frontier-making that exploits ethno-racial difference in order to generate forms of capital accumulation and state power. The term centers on the role of military-industrial complexes in building national economies from the US, Israel and elsewhere; and places it in conversation with thinking on the role of racialised difference in expanding corporate technology industries and deepening forms of labour exploitation. In many places worldwide, information infrastructure – digital forensics tools, biometric checkpoints, and image-recognition systems – are intensifying the power of the state and of international corporations.

In my case, the term 'terror' in this conceptual frame names the way Uyghurs and other Muslim citizens native to China's Central Asian colonial frontier have been deemed an **irrational other** and intrinsic threat to the 'civilized' non-Muslim majority. As in many other countries, the Chinese mainstream view of Turkic Muslims as potential terrorists – a socially acceptable way of talking about 'savages' or 'barbarians' – opened up a state of exception to the normal rule of law. Once someone has been named a terrorism suspect, or what **anti-terrorism theorists** refer to as a 'pre-criminal', normal civil protections no longer apply. The 'threat' component also allows the state to justify placing the nation and citizens from the majority population of the country on a war footing. This state of emergency means that private industry and citizens can be mobilised as proxies for the state.

So far what I've described is a particular kind of contemporary military or security industrial complex. My argument goes further to consider what sort of capital is actually produced by this complex and how it fits in the global economy. The first form of capital that is produced beyond the intellectual property inherent in systems of surveillance and policing infrastructure is *data*.

Defining Xinjiang as a war zone has created a data-intensive environment that allows some of China's largest private and state-managed technology companies to develop new tools in digital forensics, image and face recognition, and language recognition – something which in turn allows them to expand into other domains and markets for 'smart' business and security solutions. This was facilitated by data-collection programmes that provided the companies with a base dataset that is unprecedented in its scale and fidelity. From face portraits, to iris scans, to voice signatures, to digital histories the companies are continuously collecting patterned data from the 15 million Muslims in the region.

This system mirrors and expands on data-harvesting done by private corporations in Europe and North America, from Google to Palantir, but in the case of the Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other Muslim populations in Northwest China the tacit consumer consent and legal rights available to protected citizens have been stripped away. In both cases, however, the information infrastructures make the intimacy of social behaviour and daily movement available to the gaze of the state and technology companies.

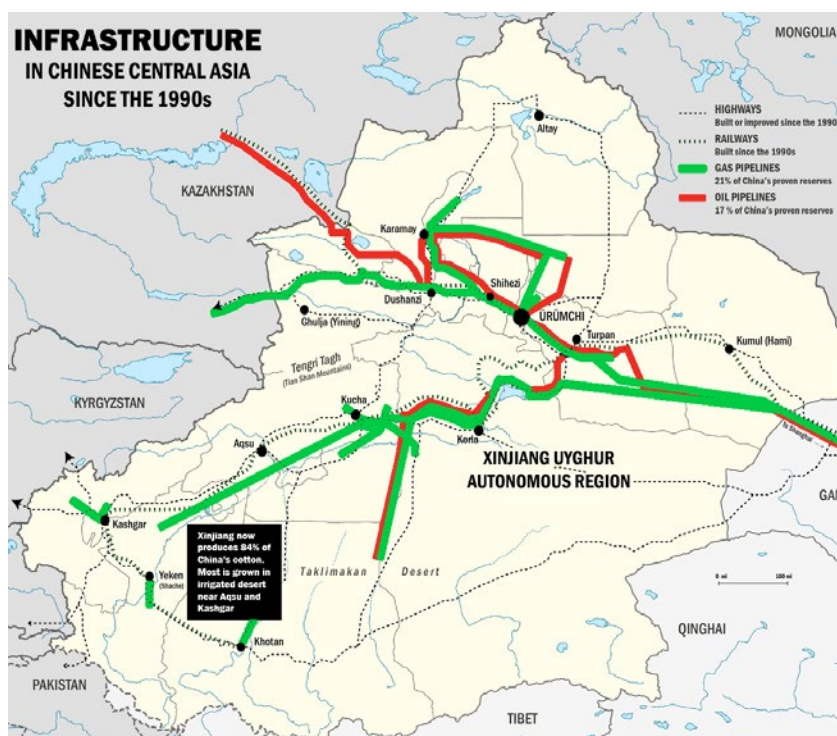
The second form of capital is in the unfree human labour that is facilitated by the digital enclosure system. Since 2018 Xinjiang's regional development authority has been describing the camp and re-education system as a 'carrier of the economy', on the same scale as oil, natural gas, cotton, and tomato resources that had drawn Han Chinese settlers to the region in the 1990s. These internment camps held hundreds of thousands of detainees in a camp-to-factory pipeline. The threat of detention along with infrastructural power of a complex surveillance system held others in forms of assigned labour.

The state documents suggest Uyghur and Kazakh 'surplus labour' has become an additional resource in the Xinjiang economy because state subsidies – ranging from rent-free factory facilities to payments for training workers, had combined with political pressure from local governments in Eastern China, and the subject population of workers to incentivise so many private companies to relocate parts of their production to Xinjiang. The information infrastructure system – smartphone tracking, checkpoints, face scans and so on – along with the fear of arbitrary detention, a form of state terror – held Uyghurs and Kazakhs in place, ensuring a docile workforce, and creating endemic conditions of unfreedom.

In this context, freely chosen work is impossible for most Uyghurs and Kazakhs. Instead, local authorities assign groups of former detainees and others deemed part of the 'surplus labour force' due to their lack of formal employment to jobs in state-designated factories. There is no space to negotiate wages or protest against them being withheld – which appears to be widespread throughout the system. In many cases, people are 'free' to choose to work in low-wage assigned jobs far from their families or 'free' to be interned. This false freedom – a condition beyond dependence on the 'free' market – is what I mean by 'unfree labour'. Importantly, much of what is produced in this system is destined either directly or indirectly for global export. This is why it is important to understand that Uyghur unfree labour is a frontier of global capitalism.

Terror capitalism uses the rhetoric of 'terror' to justify state and private capital investment in data- and labour-intensive industries. Like sequences of racialised capitalism in other locations, the ethno-racialised threat of Uyghur and Kazakh bodies and societies allows their land and labour to be legally expropriated, or stolen, creating a new frontier in global capitalism. In my book *Terror Capitalism: Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City* (Duke University Press, 2021) I elaborate on the way colonial projects act as frontiers of capitalist expansion, arguing that colonialism and capitalism are co-constitutive.

In my current work, I examine how the systems that Uyghurs confront are linked to infrastructural power in locations around the world and how these systems open up the labour of unprotected populations to intensified forms of exploitation.



Map: Infrastructure in the Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang) since the 1990s.
Map by Darren Byler. Data source: National Geographic, Gro Intelligence

A history of structural antagonism

The Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang) is located in contemporary far Northwest China. It borders eight nations from India to Mongolia. The largest group of people native to this Alaska-sized region are the Uyghurs, a Turkic Muslim minority of around 12 million who share a mutually intelligible Turkic language with a population of 15,000 Uzbeks and, to a lesser degree, with the 1.5 million Kazakhs and 200,000 Kyrgyz who also call parts of the region their homelands. Like the Uzbeks, Uyghurs have practised small-scale irrigated farming for centuries in the desert oases of Central Asia.

At the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the population of Han-identified inhabitants of the region was around 6%, with Uyghurs comprising roughly 75%. Prior to 1949 it was unclear whether the region would become an East Turkestan republic within the Soviet Union or whether the imperial boundaries of the Qing dynasty would turn Uyghur and Kazakh lands into an internal colony of the People's Republic.

In 1949, Stalin and Chinese Communist Party leaders agreed that China should 'occupy' the region. Over a period of several years the Chinese state moved several million former soldiers to work as farmers on military colonies in the Kazakh lands in the northern part of the region. Today Uyghurs comprise less than 50% of the total population and Han more than 40%.

It was not until the 1990s, as China developed a market economy oriented to global capitalism, that the Uyghur majority areas of Southern Xinjiang – where Uyghurs represented more than 90% of the population – became the target of an internal settler colonial project. It was during this period that the oil and natural gas reserves of the region became the focus of profit-oriented state-owned or managed corporations. Since then, Xinjiang has become the source of around 20% of China's oil and natural gas. It had an even higher percentage of China's coal reserves and now produces around 20% of the world's cotton and tomatoes.

This economic system produced what the anthropologist [Andrew Fischer](#) calls 'disempowered development', referring to the ways development projects in Tibet disenfranchised Tibetans. The process of placing settlers in positions of power had the effect of capturing Uyghur economic and political institutions, such as the banking system and grassroots governance.

Over time it created a system of domination that pushed Uyghur teachers out of the education system and restricted religious practice. At the same time the cost of living began to rise, buoyed by the natural resources sector, but Uyghurs were largely excluded from working in the new economy by systemic job discrimination. Uyghur scholars working within the Chinese academy have shown that as corporate settlers began to take over local government they created highly exploitative systems of [tenant farming](#) and Uyghur [forced migration](#). This in turn led to [under-employment](#) among Uyghurs.

These structural antagonisms rose to a head in 2009 with large-scale Uyghur street protests, police violence and rioting in Urumqi, the Uyghur region. The local authorities responded with militarised 'hard-strike' campaigns across the region. This led to the [enforced disappearances](#) of several thousand Uyghurs, and began to build deeper forms of resentment about police brutality and state control. At the same time, land seizures increased across Southern Xinjiang as the state incentivised Han settlement in Uyghur-majority areas – another major source of tension.

These increased forms of control and legalised theft were the primary causes of increased Uyghur protest and violence directed at state actors. Many such incidents were described by state media as 'terrorism', but often the majority of the people killed or hurt in these incidents were Uyghur demonstrators. They typically were unarmed or had improvised weapons and were killed or injured by the police using automatic weapons.

Along with the rise in police violence and Uyghur protest the arrival in 2011 of smartphone-based internet services began to shape Uyghur religious practice in new ways. Many Uyghurs used WeChat to discuss their place in the Muslim world. Because state authorities did not then have the technological capacity to regulate Uyghur digital speech, this new media platform precipitated a flourishing in Uyghur religious instruction. Many became more pious in their practice as Muslims, which my research shows was both a form of symbolic protection from the increasing pressure of rising Han settlement in Uyghur-majority areas and also a form of escape from state control of movement, education, and economic success. Several of the Uyghurs I interviewed at that time said they became pious 'because it gave them hope'.

In late 2013 and early 2014 there was also a rise in violent attacks carried out by Uyghur civilians aimed at Han civilians. Several incidents in cities such as Beijing, Kunming and Urumchi stand out. These coordinated, planned attacks – using knives, vehicles and explosive devices – were quite unlike many other so-called terrorist attacks that Chinese state media ascribed to Uyghurs, which were often spontaneous protests that turned violent and targeted state representatives rather than civilians. In May 2014 regional leaders declared the 'People's War on Terror' in response to these attacks.

However, the People's War on Terror targeted far more than the criminals who carried out attacks and those who supported them. Rather, it precipitated a criminalisation of basic religious practice and Uyghur ethnic affiliation. Initially it was only religious leaders who were sent to camps, but by 2017 the state began to assess the entire Muslim adult population.

It was not simply about preventing terrorism. In response to the rise in pious practice among Uyghurs, and global forms of Islamophobia that spread with the rise of terrorism discourse and the establishment of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, state authorities began to describe normative Muslim practices such as regular mosque attendance and fasting during Ramadan as signs of the spread of the 'mental illness' of religious extremism. The People's War in effect became a programme of preventing Uyghurs from being Muslim and, to a certain extent, from being Uyghur.

The state agencies outsourced authority to private companies and police contractors to attempt to transform the native populations of the region, and building hundreds of massive internment camps. Private industrialists and Han settlers, who had benefited from the natural resource economy, were mobilised through a dramatic increase in Private–Public Partnerships (PPPs) to develop a surveillance industry at the cutting edge of contemporary technological systems.

In 2016 and 2017, the state invested an estimated \$7.2 billion specifically in the Xinjiang information security industry as part of an increase of over 90% in public security spending.⁷¹ Over the same years the state awarded an estimated \$65 billion in private contracts to build infrastructure and \$160 billion more to government entities in the region – an increase of nearly 50%. The majority of this increase in construction spending was centred on the building of detention facilities and related systems.⁷²

Global Discourses of counter-terrorism

As the scholar [David Brophy](#) has shown, the system established in the region was grounded in the logics of counter-terrorism as practised by many state agencies across the world, from [Israel](#) to the [United States](#). Chief among these influences was counter-insurgency theory or COIN. This dominant form of military and policing science is premised on three elements: full-spectrum intelligence of the entire population, fracturing the social network of those identified as insurgents, and 'winning the hearts and minds' of the remaining population.

Soon after the Petraeus Doctrine of COIN was introduced in Afghanistan and Iraq in the late 2000s, policing and military theorists in China began to think about how it could be applied in the country. They also began to consider how so-called preventive policing programmes in Europe and North America – often called Countering Violent Extremism or CVE – could be used among Chinese Muslim populations.

As scholars of critical terrorism studies such as [Arun Kundnani](#) have shown, these programmes centre on the fallacy that pious Islamic practice necessarily leads to violent action. They can also be used to institutionalise Islamophobia in social institutions.

As I show [in a recent article](#), in police academies across China and in Xinjiang in particular, theorists and state authorities began to combine both of these models and apply them to Chinese counter-terror strategy. In China, counter-terrorism really only applies to Turkic Muslims and primarily the Uyghurs, so in essence this new body of theory and application was being used to target Uyghurs. The Xinjiang Public Security Bureau adopted these frameworks to normalise and systematise intelligence operations

and their assessments of the population. Even the use of camps mimics and expands on the way the US military reinvented the category of the [detainee](#) in Iraq and the 'pre-criminal' spaces created by CVE programmes.

What made the camp system in Xinjiang unique, however, was the way it emphasised 'thought reform' or transformation of detainees. Here they were building on a Maoist legacy of re-education camps. In the case of the US in Iraq, 'winning the hearts and minds' of the nation the US armed forces had just destroyed and occupied was less about installing an American settler colony and more about installing a US franchise government that would protect the interests of US capital. As such it was presented as a freely given 'gift' and was instituted by leaders drawn from the Iraqi population but with US military support. In contrast, in the context of Xinjiang there is both a punitive and 'transformational' aspect to the programme and it is imposed and managed by non-Muslim state authorities and their settler proxies.

In the policing literature, [Chinese theorists](#) refer to this aspect of the preventive policing programme as its 'Chinese characteristics'. So, while an older Maoist-era logic of mass revolution does play an organisational role, it is also important to remember that Xinjiang is an internal settler colony of China. Thought reform implemented by Han colonisers on colonised Muslims turns revolutionary struggle *and* the 'winning the hearts and minds' of COIN into a colonial project.

In this sense, then, the colonial relationship between China and Xinjiang and the imperial relationship of the US towards Iraq are moving on distinct colonial trajectories – in Iraq, a movement towards a franchise colony ruled by an installed government with a surveillance and checkpoint system that was abandoned before it reached its full capacity, while in Xinjiang a movement towards a settler colony with a settler government and more elaborated system of infrastructural power.

Despite these differences, in both contexts information-driven militarism and extra-legal detention in the guise of preventive policing play significant roles. And, as I will explain in the final section of this essay, the logics and technologies that emerged out of both projects are creating novel forms of state power and unfree labour around the world.

Holding People in Place: Infrastructure and State Power

The checkpoint I described at the beginning of this essay is the type of space that exemplifies how state power and corporate experimentation are mobilized through flexible enclosure systems. It is at digital checkpoints that the population is sorted. As I myself experienced, it is at these moments of encounter that the police yell 'hey you', interpellating people as subjects of state power. Often, though, the information infrastructures perform this work for the police, sorting people into what anthropologists of technology refer to as 'scripts of action' that function according to gendered and ethno-racial guidelines.⁷³ Most of the individuals who entered the checkpoint handed over their phones and IDs automatically, as they did on a regular basis. The infrastructural system shaped the movement of watch-listed people, detaining anyone who appeared suspicious. The phone checks served to ensure that nobody downloaded banned Islamic materials and instead actively supported government policies by posting them on their WeChat walls.

The panoptic effects of both visible and invisible architectures of control, whether walls and watchtowers or cameras and checkpoints, both held those they targeted in place and extended the power of those who designed and were protected by these technologies.

Taken together, *the infrastructural power* of this system, as Michael Mann might refer to it, begins to arbitrate the possibilities of life itself – slotting individuals into defined roles on the factory floor, dormitory, surrounding community and nation.⁷⁴ This efficiency is further accomplished by informing inhabitants of the proper rules of action and conduct within the space and thus establishing self-discipline.

The Re-education Labour Regime

What I have described so far is the way private technology companies expand their market share and harvest data in the service of state power and their own economic interests. But how do such systems of control work to extend capital accumulation in relation to labour?

Since 2017, factory owners from cities across Eastern China have arrived in Xinjiang to take advantage of newly built industrial parks associated with a re-education camp system and the cheap labour and subsidies that accompany them. By relocating part of their manufacturing base to the frontier, factory owners ensure that the political standing of their businesses will be protected by state authorities in their home provinces, while at the same time they can safely expand their production with the assistance of camps and security systems – something that is often described as a ‘win-win’ opportunity.

By late 2018 the Xinjiang Reform and Development commission issued a statement announcing that the camps or ‘vocational skills education and training centres’ (*jiaoyu peixun zhongxin*) had become a ‘carrier’ of economic stability in the Uyghur region.⁷⁵ The commission also mandated local authorities to ‘establish a development mechanism linkage between the industrial management of rural collective economic organizations and *the industry of education and training centres*’ – the euphemism used for re-education camps and associated factories (my emphasis).⁷⁶

My interviews with former detainees indicate that this ‘development mechanism’ refers to the way camp administrators and factory owners coordinate detainee transfers with local authorities in the detainees’ home communities. Sometimes, factory owners themselves select workers from the detainee populations, in other cases local authorities select the workers and arrange the terms of the labour contract for the group of assigned workers.

It is important to note that not all Uyghur and Kazakh labour directed towards these new factories had been camp detainees. A significant aspect of the People’s War on Terror was a broader process of state-mandated proletarianisation of Uyghurs across the region. In order to meet centrally determined ‘poverty alleviation’ goals, which focused on placing Uyghurs and Kazakhs in Han-owned factory jobs and isolating the Muslim population through dispersal and family separation, local officials and their counterparts from Eastern China were tasked with creating jobs.



Migrant workers eat their lunch during a break from their construction job. Credit: © Andrea Bruce / NOOR / IG Handels: @andreabruce / Twitter Handels: @abruce_noor

The workers who were held behind the checkpoints of the factory complexes would be taught to speak Mandarin and embrace state political ideology while they learnt to work on an assembly line. Yet, though some of the new workers – called ‘surplus laborers’ – were simply farmers from nearby villages, many of them were the relatives of detainees. And all of them knew that overt refusal of these job assignments could result in their internment in the camps. According to state security guidelines, refusing ‘poverty alleviation’ (*fupin*) schemes was to be regarded as a sign of untrustworthiness, or pre-criminal religious extremism.⁷⁷

The entire world of these workers took place inside the factory complex. Like migrant workers in other parts of China, they are housed in the same compound as the production site. The labour scholars Pun Ngai and Chris Smith have described this as a ‘dormitory labour regime’.⁷⁸ Their work shows that this type of arrangement allows factory owners to exploit their workers to a greater extent, demanding overtime and weekend work, garnishing wages to compensate for housing costs and so on.

In her more recent work Pun shows that a system of subcontracting further insulates company owners from workers, making non-payment for work increasingly common.⁷⁹ The same is true in the re-education labour regime in Northwest China. Unlike migrant workers in other parts of China, however, Uyghur and Kazakh workers are prevented from leaving by the infrastructural power of surveillance systems, material barriers and the threat of internment. Rather than a system of subcontractors, factories in 'Xinjiang Aid' industrial parks are often managed by a combination of low-level police and civil affairs ministry personnel who also work in the camps – a management scheme that further blurs the line between private enterprise and the internment camps.

Throughout the region, local authorities had also established comprehensive 'safe county' surveillance infrastructure systems that used real ID checkpoints and camera systems to monitor the movements of registered citizens in the county.

The factory compounds typically feature 'convenient for the people police stations' (*bianmin jingwuzhan*) or surveillance hubs where movements of detained workers are checked and monitored. Inside the factories, camera systems and minders watch the workers – applying the logics of 'smart' factory and warehouse systems used around the world. In some cases, the factory floors are divided into cubicles locked from the outside, restricting the movement of workers who are deemed to be dangerous owing to the stigma of their previous detainment.

In the re-education labour regime, Uyghur and Kazakh workers can neither protest at having wages taken from them to pay factory owners for their housing, food and transport, nor even stage minor protests such as assembly line slowdowns without incurring the threat of detention. In addition, the surveillance infrastructure in the factories means that all aspects of their lives are monitored. Factory authorities decide if and when workers can go to the toilet, what food they eat, if they are permitted to carry or use phones, what language they speak, when and how long they work, when and how long they sleep, even what they do when they are not working.

The Uyghur region is the source of more than 80% of Chinese cotton, and is where the state hopes to relocate around 10% of garment-manufacturing jobs. This means that the drive for ever cheaper commodities – such as clothing – implicates consumers the world over at this frontier of global capitalism. In this sense, terror capitalism – the forms of economic productivity that are opened up by tying populations to the figure of the terrorist – produces a population of unfree workers at colonial frontier of labour exploitation.

Is Terror Capitalism Global?

While the system that is being implemented in Northwest China is unique in terms of its scale and the depth of its systemic cruelty, the Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims are not the only marginalised groups of people who are being partitioned by similar surveillance infrastructure and unfree labour systems.

In many countries, these new forms of power are consistently aimed at controlling minorities and refugee populations, many of whom are Muslims. In the West Bank, for instance, Palestinians are targeted by similar forms of Israeli infrastructural power through checkpoints, biometric surveillance and data harvesting. In my [current research project](#) in the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur examines the way face-recognition enabled cameras designed by the Chinese firm Yitu shapes the lives undocumented

Muslim immigrants. The cameras which are worn by auxiliary police at the entrances of mosques and other high traffic areas, restrict movement of targeted populations—such as Rohingya and Uyghurs who have fled to Malaysia as refugees.

As the geographer Shae Frydenlund has shown in her work, fear of surveillance in turn pushes refugees into low wage contingent work butchering chickens and construction at the margins of the city.⁸⁰ Likewise across Europe and North America similar tools of information infrastructure managed by state agencies and surveillance companies have shaped the lives of hundreds of thousands of Muslims as part of CVE programmes. Since these systems first unfolded as part of the 'Global War on Terror' they have also begun to target other racialised minorities.

Over much of 2020 I have collaborated with the anthropologist Carolina Sanchez Boe to understand the parallels and differences between these systems, whether in Xinjiang or the West Bank or the US. She shows that in the US, asylum seekers from Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and South Asia who enter the country at the southern border, are being released from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention centres with GPS monitors attached to their ankles, under an Intensive Supervision and Appearance Program (ISAP), which has been promoted as an 'alternative to detention'.⁸¹ They, like terrorism suspects, are placed on differentiated watch-lists which prevent them from travelling. Increasingly, they are required to submit face scans using an app that they are made to install on their smartphones, which in many cases is supported by the private technology company Behavioral Interventions Incorporated with partnerships with Verizon, Sprint and Google Maps.⁸²

In the US the surveillance infrastructures that arose from counter-terrorism systems after the attacks of 11 September 2001 – 9/11 – push unprotected refugee and immigrant populations into grey zones, at the margins of cities and into low-wage work. They produce forms of banishment and structural violence, so they are out of sight, but – unlike in Xinjiang – they generally do not colonise immigrants' own social institutions or begin to transform their knowledge system or religious practices in an intentional or overt manner.

In the US and Europe, systems of infrastructural power appear to centre less around transformation than to halt the circulation of individuals and ideas deemed harmful or racially threatening in prisons, detention centers and forms of electronic monitoring – simultaneously reducing potential friction for protected individuals and protecting the interests of capital.⁸³

In Xinjiang, the goal of the surveillance system is to include the minoritised population in order to monitor them, rather than exclude them by pushing them out of public view. In both Xinjiang and elsewhere, the labour of populations controlled by surveillance infrastructure is devalued and becomes a source of heightened exploitation.

The Xinjiang case is unparalleled due to its scale of detentions and the role of the state in job assignments, but the re-education labour system in China and contingent undocumented work in the US are part of the same continuum of unfreedom. For asylum seekers in the US, the stigma associated with tracking devices is combined with the sense of threat they feel from not knowing about the way their movements are being tracked and how the data might be used.

A Guatemalan asylum seeker told Carolina Sanchez Boe that she feared that the digital *grillete* (the Spanish for shackle) was allowing ICE agents to look 'at where I meet with other people, to know where

undocumented migrants congregate'. Three weeks after she voiced this fear, ICE conducted one of the largest immigration raids in a decade at a poultry manufacturing plant in Mississippi, [arresting 680 workers](#), leaving their children to come home from school to empty houses. [The affidavit](#) of the arrests reveals that federal agents relied on surveillance data from GPS monitors strapped on the ankles of Latin American women who had found work at the factory.

The simultaneous occurrence of racialised surveillance and exploitation in Mississippi and Xinjiang reminds me of an older moment in racialised global capitalism described in the historian [Jason Moore's](#) reframing of the words of Friedrich Engels: 'behind Manchester stands Mississippi'. The reference to Engels was that what made Manchester the heart of global textile manufacturing in the nineteenth century—itsself a site of tremendous exploitation, was the unfree labour of slaves in Mississippi, working in the cotton plantations. As today's 'terror capitalism' is eating into the social fabric of unprotected populations around the globe, Mississippi is standing alongside a new site of global capitalist frontier-making. Perhaps, under conditions of 'terror capitalism', we might say that 'beside Xinjiang stands Mississippi'.

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Notes

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THE 9/11 COMPLEX

*The political economy of
“counter-terrorism”*

Azfar Shafi



'Counter-terrorism' is a set of policies, an ideology, a political project and, increasingly, an industry. Understanding and confronting the underlying political economy of counter-terrorism will be critical to any strategies to address police, state violence and the security industry.

As Hilal al-Jedda fled to Britain in 1992, seeking asylum from Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq, he would not have detected the tectonic plates of world politics shifting underfoot – nor guessed that one day he would be caught in their convulsions.

Over the following decades, Iraq was to become the theatre on which a new post-Cold War era would play out. Ushered in by the first Gulf War – which ended the year before al-Jedda arrived in Britain – it reached its devastating apogee with the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Bracketed by these twin brutalities was a series of political and security realignments – global, regional and domestic – which would come violently to shape the lives of al-Jedda, and others like him.

The post-Cold War world still turned, as before, on the exploitation of the Global South. Decades after formal independence, states of the South found their fragile sovereignty shattered by political, economic and military policies enforced by the North. IMF-imposed structural adjustment policies (SAPs) embedded a global neoliberal order to enrich the North, while the creation of regional bodies like the European Union (EU) enshrined their political and economic dominance. The Cold War's victorious side needed mechanisms for both maintaining a global hierarchy of states, while containing the human fallout within the South.

The frameworks of 'national security' and 'countering terrorism'⁸⁴ helped serve this role. They facilitated the construction of international security apparatuses to consolidate state power, principally in the North as well as the creation of transnational policing arrangements to monitor and manage their respective populations.

In Britain, as elsewhere in Europe, this process took the form of a war on the rights of asylum seekers and migrants that would lead eventually into a domestic war against 'Islamist terrorism' under the 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT) in the wake of September 11, 2001. The figure of the 'Third World' asylum seeker blurred almost seamlessly into that of the 'terrorist', and the police powers for monitoring and controlling both largely overlapped.

For al-Jedda, this new political climate would see him twice deprived of his British citizenship by ministerial fiat. This was enabled by a series of laws passed by the British government in the name of protecting national security and countering terrorism – laws that have led to both spectacular violence, from dawn raids to citizenship revocation, and many quiet violations of dignity upon the population.

Recent organising to defund and/or abolish the militarised police has been a very welcome development, but with few exceptions, it has yet to tackle the question of 'counter-terror' policing. This is despite the growth of modern 'counter-terror' policing and surveillance being a key means through which coercive state powers have been transformed – indeed, the way through which what remains of the welfare state has been remade into the security state.

For this reason, organisers countering security policies experienced silent unease at the widely welcomed news from Minneapolis City Council following the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) uprisings. The City Council passed a resolution committed to replacing the city's police force, but its proposed 'community-led public safety system'⁸⁵ had disquieting echoes of the 'counter-extremism' surveillance programmes that have proliferated the world over – and which, far from representing a retreat from the logic of policing, signal its qualitative expansion.

Part of the difficulty in tackling counter-terrorism policies is that resistance has often remained in the legal realm – presenting them as discrete violations of rights or protocols to be combated through the courts – or that opposition extends merely insofar as policies are racist and/or Islamophobic.

Neither approaches are without merit, but neither is sufficient. Connecting counter-terrorism to the question of policing at large is a vital step in advancing struggles against police and state violence. It compels us to broaden our understanding of policing, into a space where the boundaries between society and security grow hazy. It also forces us to confront the limits of anti-state violence strategies rooted in frameworks of legalism or moralism that fail to address either the politics or the underlying political economy of counter-terrorism.

'Counter-terrorism' is a set of policies, an ideology, a political project and, increasingly, an industry. It has been generated by the dynamics among states within the global system; through the machinations of different political parties in governments and their respective agendas; and through an expanding network of operators and power blocs seeking to find a niche within the security industry.

This essay traces the development of the modern security state in Britain, maps the political economy of counter-terrorism and offers possibilities for organising strategies against counter-terror and security policies.

The counter-terror complex

Hilal al-Jedda was naturalised as a British citizen in 2000, but only seven years later was deprived of his citizenship – something made possible by an amendment to the Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Act (2006), which was introduced as part of the government's anti-terror crackdown following the July 2005 London bombings. Home Secretary Jacqui Smith made the deprivation order while al-Jedda was interned by British and US occupation forces during a return visit to Iraq. He was detained in Iraq for over three years, but never charged and reported physical abuse during his internment.

The removal of his citizenship was temporarily overturned by the Supreme Court – but that didn't stop the British government depriving him of his citizenship a second time in 2013. This was subsequently legitimised by an amendment to the Immigration Act (2014), which enshrined the government's ability to render British citizens stateless through a deprivation where they are theoretically eligible to claim citizenship elsewhere.

In order to recover his citizenship between the two deprivation orders, al-Jedda from his new home in Turkey had to wrestle with the Special Immigration Appeals Commission (SIAC) – extraordinary courts which permit secret evidence and opaque legal mechanisms, introduced in 1997 for the purposes of handling 'national security' cases.



“Khadra” a nom du plume, in a portrait session in France, Seine-Saint-Denis, France in January 2020. She works as a public servant, which she says prohibits her from speaking in public or she risks her job. These pics (she designed the outfit for portrait) signify to the veiling of her rights , and the fear she cannot publicly speak out. They were part of an exhibition TNI supported I exist: European stories of Islamophobia. Credit: © Tanya Habjouqa / NOOR / IG: @habjouqa / Twitter: @thabjouqa

Al-Jedda’s case illustrates just a few of the policies introduced in the name of ‘counter-terrorism’, ‘counter-extremism’, and the overarching framework of ‘national security’ – of which there are now dozens on the books – that have served to strengthen the organs of state violence. These have expanded powers available for policing and immigration control, as well as disruption powers that allow for greater coercive control of groups and individuals.

Today, even viewing certain content online or possession of certain documents can be prosecuted as ‘terrorism’ – as illustrated by the case of the Welsh Muslim woman *Umm Ahmed*, jailed for possession of magazines on her phone, even though the judge stated that she posed no threat nor had any intent to commit violence.⁸⁶ Those unfortunate enough to be convicted of terrorism offences can be liable to lengthy prison sentences – over and above equivalent offences under non-terror law. Once inside, they may be sifted into extremist segregation wings for maximum control and upon release can be subjected to extensive monitoring and restrictions on their movement, as well as potentially limitless police sweeps of their homes.⁸⁷

The ambit of counter-terrorism extends beyond the criminal sphere. Passengers at ports can be subjected to suspicionless ‘Schedule 7’ examinations – superpowered stop and search examinations – often arbitrarily, sometimes spurred by surveillance from the UK’s sprawling intelligence-gathering architecture. Such an encounter can set in motion an escalating set of counter-terrorism interventions, leading up to recurrent police harassment, passport seizures and more.

The citizenship-deprivation powers used against al-Jedda, for example, do not require guilt of any offence to be proven in order to be exercised.

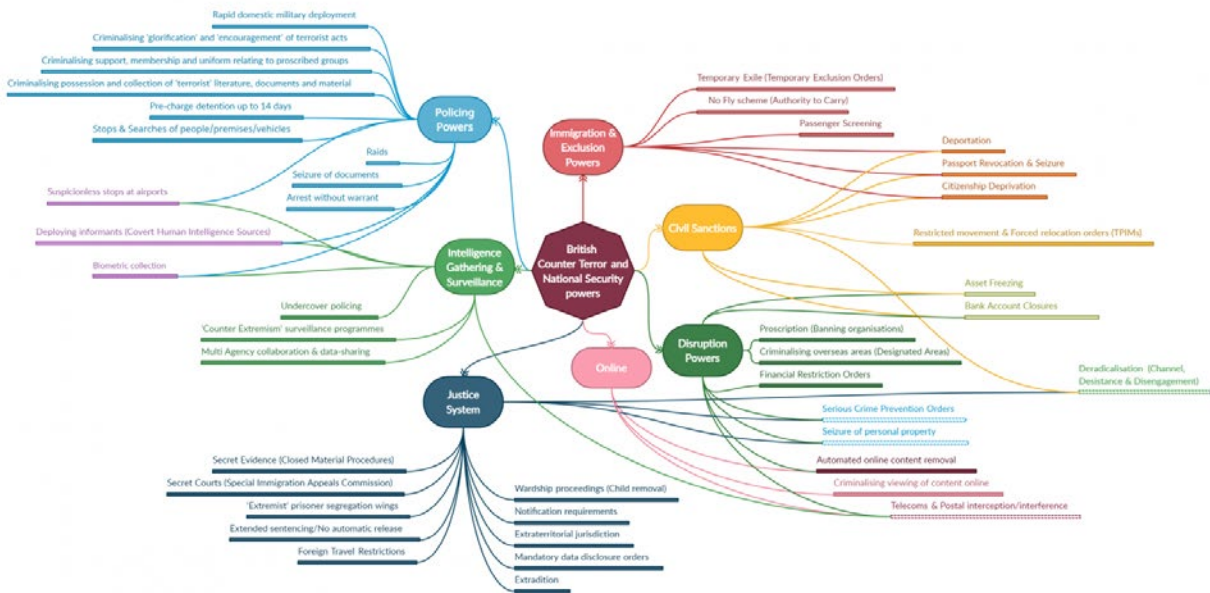
British counter-terrorism today

The legislative backbone of Britain’s vast counter-terror complex is the Terrorism Act (2000), which consolidated powers under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (1974) and its successors.

In 2020 the budget for counter-terror policing alone in Britain was £906 million⁸⁸ out of an overall national policing budget of £15.2 billion while the government’s 2021 Spending Review announced funding for a multimillion National Counter-Terrorism Operations Centre.⁸⁹ The 2018 Counter-Terrorism Strategy committed to invest £1.4 billion in the security and intelligence agencies, in addition to £2 billion investment in the anti-terror capabilities of the Special Forces as part of a 30% real terms spending increase on CT, alongside £500 million to ‘protect UK citizens from terrorist threats’.⁹⁰

Evidently unconstrained by any concerns of resource scarcity, the counter-terror complex has grown to historically unprecedented levels in its scope, reach and capabilities: indeed in 2021, British counter-terror laws can prosecute ‘terror offences’ carried out in space.⁹¹

FIGURE 1 maps the powers available to the British state and its agencies in the name of ‘countering terrorism’ and/or preserving ‘national security’.



[Figure 1: Powers available for the purposes of counter-terrorism and national security in Britain (excluding those granted through international treaties)⁹²]

The huge investment in counter-terrorism is at odds with its miserable performance in terms of the stated goals: catching terrorists. Based on government statistics up to December 2020, 87.4% of the 4,869 arrests under the broad category of ‘terrorist-related activity’ prosecuted under terrorism legislation were not ultimately convicted of any terror-related offences.⁹³ Since 2015, between 89% and 95%⁹⁴ of individuals tipped off by the public or police each year to the ‘Prevent’ surveillance programme have been deemed ‘false positives’.

Worse, several acts of actual violence have been carried out under the nose of policing and security agencies by individuals known to them : a policy failure by any measure. These include the Manchester Arena bomber Salman Abedi, the Westminster attacker Khalid Masood and the attempted Parsons Green bomber Ahmed Hassan.⁹⁵

Yet, arguing against counter-terror policy merely on the basis of efficacy, or lack thereof, is a politically fraught exercise. It can serve to naturalise what is an inherently political category – the ‘terror offence’ – as well as blurring how much of counter-terrorism operates outside the ‘criminal space’. Moreover, the security framework effectively operates on an unfalsifiable logic – that ‘security’ policies are the only real guarantee of safety, and where attacks or the failure to ensure public safety serve to highlight the need for further security policies, which can expand infinitely.

The refrain repeated by successive government ministers, with almost rhythmic frequency, of the need for more counter-terror laws to fill another unforeseen loophole, and extend the reach of state agencies ever further, illustrates the resilience of this logic.

Rather than engaging on the same discursive terrain as the state, or arguing on the basis of poor or bad application of policies, it is more worthwhile for opponents to analyse the politics and political economy that drives security policies.

The political project of counter-terrorism

Put simply, the project of modern British counter-terrorism has been to securitise and police the contradictions thrown up by successive governments’ domestic policy orientation and imperialist ambitions.

It does so by marshalling a complex of policing, surveillance and ideological apparatus that allow for a set of politics to be recast as ‘extreme’ or ‘terrorist’, for sections of the population to be rendered ‘threats’ – and for both to be subjected to an expanding array of disciplinary, coercive and punitive powers.

Through this process the many real fractures and contradictions generated by British politics are decoupled from the state and projected onto ideas, individuals and groups. In this way, the growth of counter-terrorism is inseparable from the contemporary regimes of capitalism and globalisation that it helps govern.

1990s: Post-Cold War security consensus emerges

During the 1990s, the leadership of the G7 and the newly-formed EU (from the earlier European Economic Community (EEC) established a political consensus on the key domestic ‘security threats’ they faced in a post-Soviet world. Chief among these were refugees and dissidents fleeing from states of the Global South which had been wracked by years of neoliberal ‘modernisation’, and the violent social and political dislocations these processes produced.⁹⁶

Britain – a key player in both groupings – used this security framework to reorganise its policing arrangements on two fronts. First, it provided the context against which it could fortify its borders against asylum seekers, principally flowing in from countries across Africa and Asia. An increasingly brazen assault on the rights of migrants and asylum seekers came to define British politics through the 1990s to the present. Hilal al-Jedda received his British citizenship in 2000, shortly before the

Labour government pulled up the ladder on new asylum seekers from Iraq entirely – predominantly Iraqi Kurds seeking asylum from the very government which Britain would join the US coalition against as part of the GWOT.

Second, the British state deployed counter-terror policing against foreign dissidents at home in order to demonstrate political loyalty to its allies abroad: police batons held aloft with one hand, olive branches in the other. Algerian, Egyptian, Kurdish and Tamil migrant communities in particular were subject to this repression, which was later enhanced by a rash of counter-terror laws.⁹⁷

Across Europe, these political realignments towards securitisation were expressed through an increasingly entangled relationship between migration control and countering ‘terrorism’ that would swallow the continent up in racial turmoil, and laid the groundwork for today’s mass securitisation.

9/11 and the Global War on Terror

From 2001, the GWOT ushered in global tolerance of permissiveness towards the exercise of state violence – directed most often, though by no means exclusively, at Muslim populations – as well as an international framework of securitisation in which countries worldwide were implicated. Britain and many other countries massively expanded their capacity for policing, surveillance and expulsion during this time.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) – al-Jedda’s initial destination after fleeing Iraq – became a key node in the US’ global complex of torture and detention in the run-up to and during the GWOT.⁹⁸ Today, it is also home to projects like the Global Counterterrorism Forum’s *Hedayah Center* for countering violent extremism, as well as spearheading attempts to brand and ban its rival, the Muslim Brotherhood, as ‘terrorists’ internationally.

Al-Jedda’s next stop, Pakistan, would serve as the launchpad for the GWOT’s first salvo: the assault on Afghanistan. It was also instrumental in facilitating the US’ broader imperialist strategies in Asia in subsequent years, readily sacrificing sovereignty in order to serve US interests.⁹⁹

Britain, Al-Jedda’s onetime home, played a leading role in the destruction of his homeland in 2003, before subjecting al-Jedda himself to sweeping new powers granted to insulate itself from the backlash. It was while he was being interned by British and US occupying forces in Iraq that al-Jedda was first stripped of his citizenship.

In this way, al-Jedda was subjected to both fronts of Britain’s part in the GWOT: international and domestic. Wherever he travelled he would remain under the security umbrella cast by the GWOT, and potentially at its mercy.

Late 2000s: Politics of austerity and authoritarianism

The decade following the 2007/08 global financial crisis was marked by an acceleration of ultra-nationalist tendencies across Europe and beyond, often held together by politics of virulent Islamophobia, xenophobia and hardline monoculturalism.

That lingering nexus between Muslims, asylum seekers, migrants and a supposed existential *threat to the nation* that animated counter-terrorism policy in the 1990s coalesced into a tighter political programme.

Britain itself embraced this new political realignment with its change of leadership in 2010, after which a series of Conservative-led governments took the opportunity to further ratchet up the counter-terrorism complex to new heights. These post-2010 governments married the work of 'counter-terrorism' to more tightly managed nationalist frameworks of 'British Values' and 'muscular liberalism' – in contrast to the supposed leniency of state 'multiculturalism'.

It was under the first of these governments that Home Secretary Theresa May (later Prime Minister) pushed through her flagship Immigration Act (2014), and the creation of a 'hostile environment' for migrants, asylum seekers and, by extension, foreigners living in the UK. It was an amendment hastily appended to this law that legitimised the enhanced citizenship-deprivation powers that were used against al-Jedda. Indeed, his case was repeatedly invoked during parliamentary debates on the amendment¹⁰⁰.

2016 to the present

The years since 2016 have seen a further unravelling of the political consensus, with hard-right tendencies surging to state power worldwide, ongoing instability wherever the GWOT was waged and broader geopolitical polarisation.

In this context, British counter-terrorism has reached its logical conclusion, by overextending, and ideologically collapsing in on itself. The British state is increasingly justifying its counter-terrorism policy to target a far-right that it has itself helped conjure into being, and all manner of politics are being ritually denounced as 'extremist', from the direct-action environmental organisation Extinction Rebellion and BLM demonstrations¹⁰¹ to the proliferation of right-wing COVID-19 conspiracies.¹⁰²

In a telling indication of political priorities, in November 2020 a Europe still reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic published a pan-EU joint approach to countering terrorism, at the behest of France and Austria. The approach included a commitment to strengthening deportation powers to tackle 'extremists', and restriction of public funding for groups deemed to have violated 'the democratic order and values of EU Member States' – a thinly veiled reference to Muslim organisations.¹⁰³

Counter-terrorism powers have proved no more successful in tackling acts of political violence¹⁰⁴ than they have in their secondary aim of stemming domestic discontent – not that that will stop such powers from being deployed as a blunt tool to contain and police the situation.

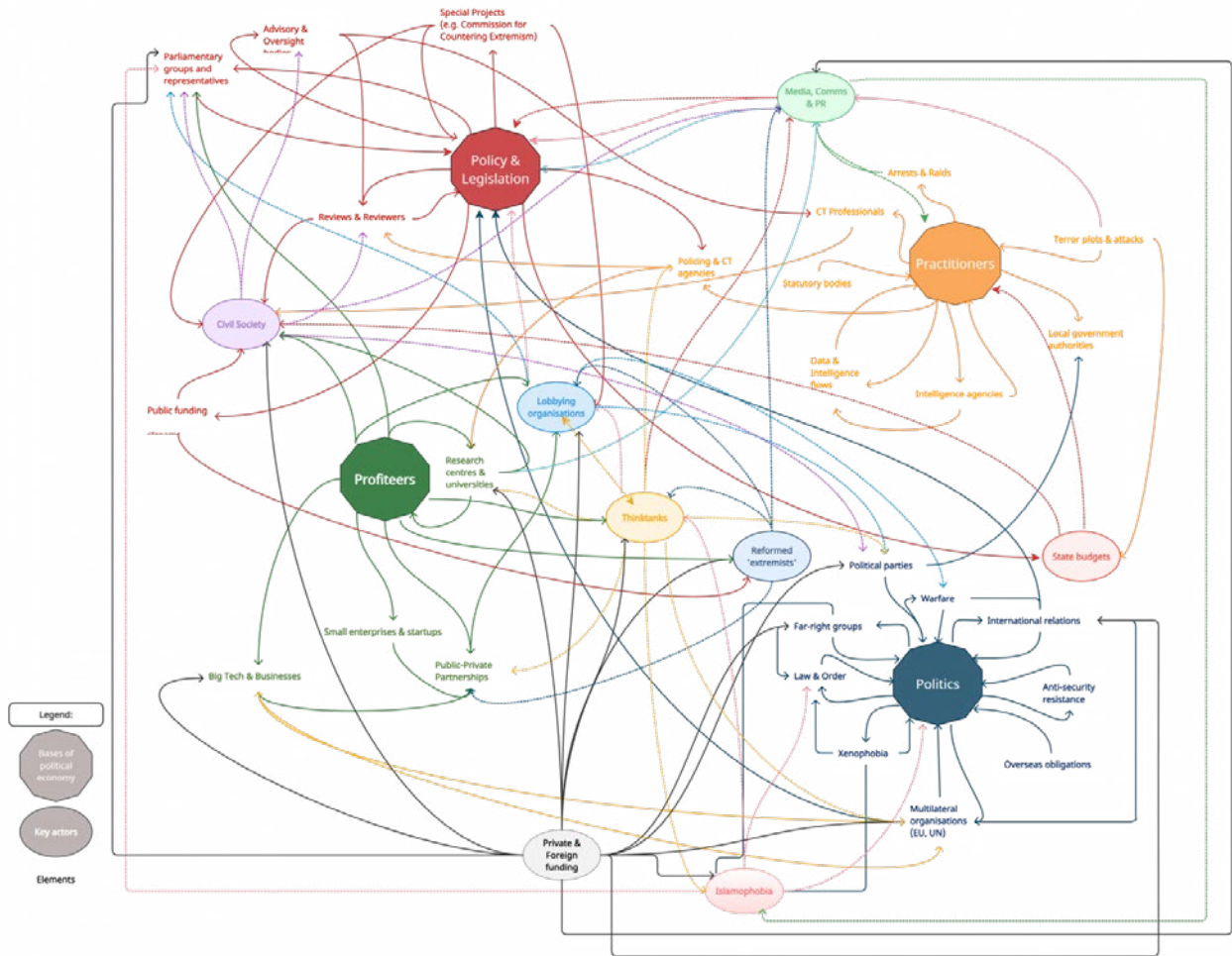
National security and counter-terrorism are not only a means of amassing state power, but increasingly the language spoken by the state: with counter-terrorism being incorporated into social provision and political programmes, from funding streams for civil society to anti-domestic violence strategies.¹⁰⁵ Programmes under the banner of 'Countering Violent Extremism', for example Britain's 'Prevent' strategy, have conscripted vast swathes of the public into 'counter-terror' work by demanding they identify 'extremists'. It is through this that national security policies have trickled down to domestic politics: what began as strategies ostensibly to police the 'fringes' of British society have poisoned the heart of political life.

In this way, national security has increasingly become the means through which politics are managed, filtered and controlled: acting as a buffer against democratic politics from below, and serving as justification for an expanding array of powers from above. Alongside this, it has allowed for the consolidation of shadowy 'securocrats' at the very centre of state power, with an array of thinktanks, lobbies and agencies clustered around the hallways of the powerful.

Political Economy of securitisation

Over the last decade, counter-terrorism policies have increasingly moved into the realm of private industry and public-private collaboration, with counter-terrorism work being outsourced to third-party actors alongside a ballooning array of state agencies. It is they who, through a mix of private lobbying and public advocacy, attempt to move their own agendas and secure their own material interests through the burgeoning counter-terrorism industry – in turn generating a self-reinforcing drive towards further securitisation, surveillance and profit.

FIGURE 2: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SECURITISATION



Counter-terrorism in Britain is driven by the mutually reinforcing relationship between organs and processes of securitisation policy and legislation, politics, profiteers, and practitioners.

Policy and legislation include the architecture and policy framework in which counter-terrorism is practised and produced. Practitioners are the various departments managing and overseeing the implementation of policy – including police and intelligence agencies. Politics involves the evolving set of forces shaping national and transnational politics, while profiteers include the various operators that provide – sell – goods and services and for the purposes of counter-terrorism.

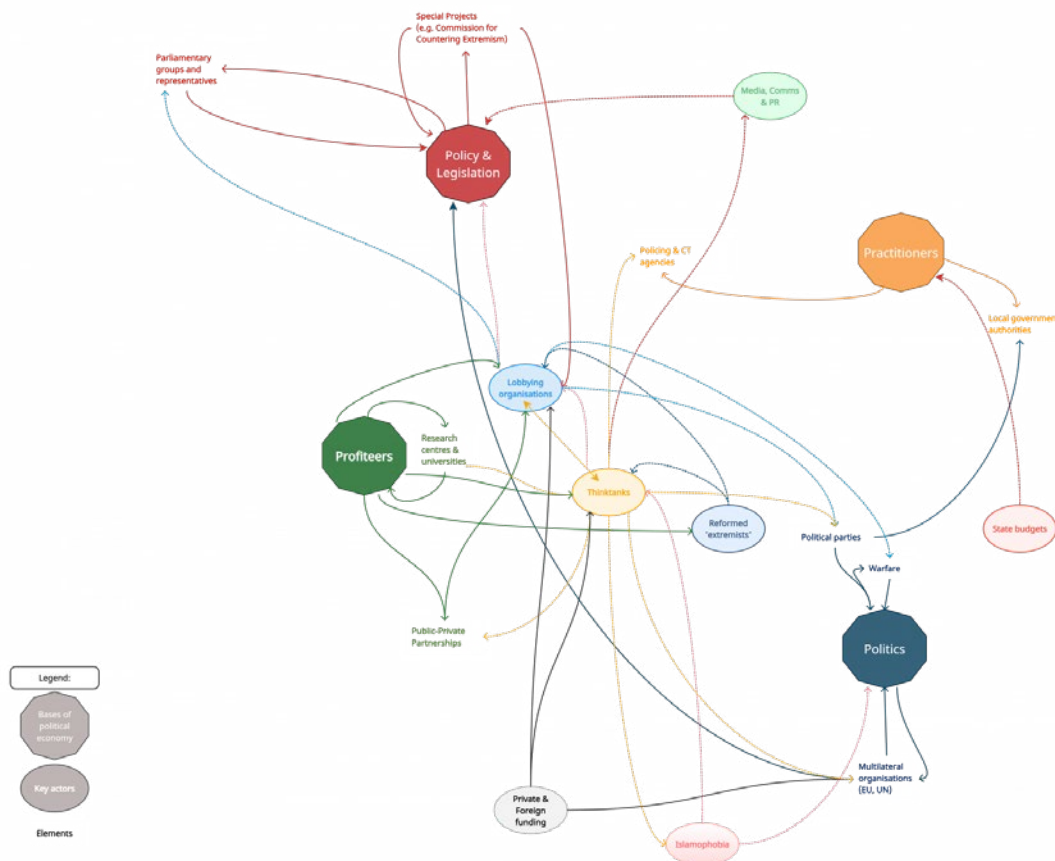
These are mediated by a range of ‘nodes’ such as the media, communications and public relations (PR), lobby organisations and thinktanks, and various sources of funding – all of which are central to amplifying and reproducing securitisation discursively, ideologically and institutionally.

A range of other actors – from academic research clusters, policy advisory bodies to far-right pressure groups – are embedded within this web of relationships, generating their own pressure on the organs of securitisation, or being pressured by them in turn.

Some of these relationships include more ‘traditional’ forms of lobbying and patronage politics, as practised by thinktanks and lobby organisations. Others, such as the expanding footprint of tech and social media companies, reflect more plainly profit-driven motives.

The turn towards public-private collaboration for counter-terrorism purposes since 2010 – particularly in the context of tackling ‘terrorism’ and ‘extremism’ online – has facilitated the penetration of tech companies and start-ups into the security field. Major players include the ‘counter-extremism’ enterprise Institute for Strategic Dialogue, which has partnerships with governments in no fewer than ten countries including Britain, and has collaborated closely with major social media companies like Facebook, Twitter and Google.¹⁰⁶

FIGURE 3 POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THINKTANKS AND LOBBIES



The Henry Jackson Society (HJS) is one example of the coterie of pro-securitisation thinktanks. Set up in 2005, its political council has featured luminaries such as past and present British Home Secretaries Amber Rudd and Priti Patel, alongside a number of former Labour Secretaries of State, including Margaret Beckett and Ben Bradshaw.¹⁰⁷ Undergoing an ideological lurch to the right towards the end of the 2000s, it was able to consolidate various tendencies of neoconservatism, militarism, virulent Islamophobia and aggressive Zionism and convert them into policies and proposals for the new Conservative governments of the decade.

Staff have regularly passed through the HJS as part of the revolving door between various pro-security organisations and political advocacy work, while senior members have been placed in high-ranking positions over the past decade. Former HJS director William Shawcross served as head of the Charity Commission between 2012 and 2018 – during which time it oversaw an unprecedented crackdown on Muslim and pro-Palestine advocacy,¹⁰⁸ and made interventions in favour of curtailing the powers of the charity sector. He has most recently been appointed to oversee an ‘independent’ government review of the Prevent programme.

Moreover, the head of the Extremism Analysis Unit, one of the state’s counter-terror departments, disclosed that analysis provided by the HJS and its side-project, Student Rights, shaped analyses that the Unit provided to counter-terror practitioners in order to inform their own work.¹⁰⁹ Groups like the HJS form part of the regular inside-track of media coverage and ‘expertise’ on issues of national security.

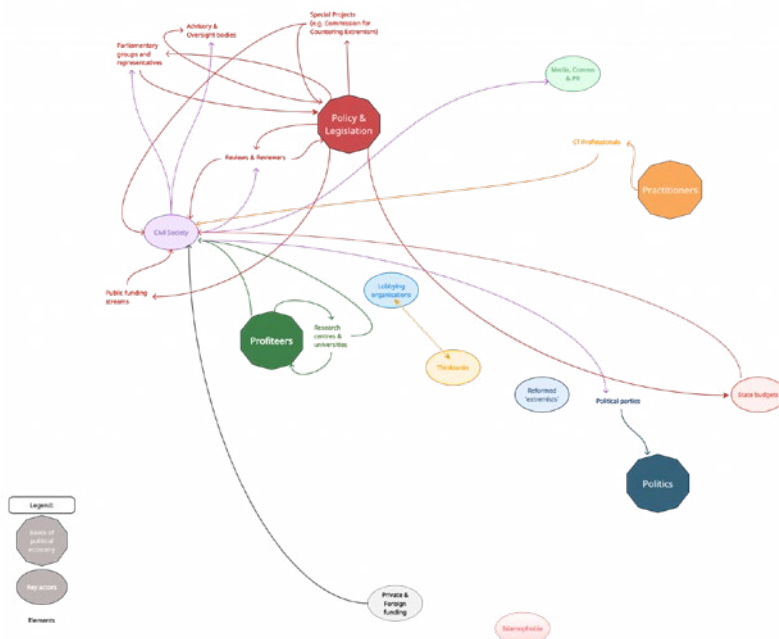
It is through these dynamics and relationships that the ideological underpinnings of the counter-terror complex – namely, Islamophobia and xenophobia – are made material. They are laundered through media and state apparatus and made to seem like ‘common sense’, consolidated through the legal frameworks governing them, and enforced by statutory institutions, presided over by the likes of HJS alumni.

Civil Society

‘Civil Society’ occupies an exaggerated role in the imaginary of ‘progressive’ politics. With the state’s transformation under neoliberalism, civil society has regularly been held up as the engine of social change in place of the state.

While some organisations and advocacy groups have certainly played an important role in limiting the excesses of the British counter-terrorism complex over the past 20 years, others have helped advance securitised and repressive state counter-terrorism policies.

FIGURE 4 POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CIVIL SOCIETY



This should be of no surprise, since far from being insulated from the vagaries of private or corporate power, or of 'formal' politics, civil society can just as easily be a conduit for them.

Even among those actively engaged with counter-terrorism, there are various degrees of complicity between civil society organisations (CSOs)– defined here as including charities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community associations and grassroots groups and networks – and the counter-terrorism regime. These range from dependency to patronage to active support for counter-terror policy.

These are shaped both by the political disposition of particular organisations, as well as by the shifting mode of engagement between government and civil society since 2000. This shift has been particularly noticeable in the case of Muslim-led organisations, but has gradually come to define most state–civil society relations.

The Labour governments of the 2000s pursued a twin strategy of courting so-called 'moderate' Muslim organisations while isolating 'extremist' ones. This allowed them to co-opt and contain Muslim communities' political engagement, and channel it into 'safe' forms of civic and spiritual engagement while tempering the thorny questions regarding British foreign policy. The Conservative-led Coalition government from 2010 took a harder line on the terms of engagement with Muslim organisations, vocally denouncing former collaborators – who were to be frozen out of future consultations, joining the fate of their 'extremist' counterparts.¹¹⁰ In doing so it subordinated them to a more tightly defined political project, and was even less tolerant of ideological difference than its predecessor.

The shifts in policy from 2010 onwards coincided with the onset of austerity and intensified neoliberal restructuring under the Coalition government. It also saw moves towards greater state management of the 'third sector' of civil society, with 'gagging laws' restricting charity campaigning near election periods, and the growing politicisation of the state's charity regulator – including by recruiting it explicitly into the work of 'countering extremism'.

These three processes worked in tandem, with the denial of funding under austerity generating a new dynamic of dependency between CSOs and government which was ripe for political abuse, alongside a drive to ideologically discipline organisations, and expanding powers of sanction to keep them in line.¹¹¹

In 2015, the new Conservative government produced its first Counter Extremism Strategy followed by an Integrated Communities strategy, which placed greater emphasis on the role of civil society in the work of 'countering extremism'. It is through these that the government has begun on the active construction of a 'civil society' that is in tune with its aims.

As a result, even CSOs that otherwise share little in common with the agenda of 'counter-terrorism' have found themselves compelled into taking counter-terrorism funding in order to continue their work. Those CSOs that maintain a critical line on 'counter-terrorism' are frequently the target of innuendo-filled smears and attacks of being 'extremist' themselves.

The cumulative impact is that civil society is being progressively absorbed into the machinations of the security state, and is less able to act as a defence against state abuse and overreach.

Counter-securitisation strategies

Counter-terror policies cannot be decoupled from the issue of policing because they are a weathervane for its eventual trajectory: in Britain, counter-terrorism forms part of the long historical arc of state violence that is entwined with migration control and policing.

Tackling the counter-terror complex necessarily means taking on consolidated power blocs, well-monied interest groups, and a state able and willing to exercise all manner of coercive instruments in its defence – not least, counter-terror policy itself.

Reframing the struggle against ‘counter-terrorism’ as part and parcel of the wider struggle against state violence requires a reconsideration of strategies, including the tactical repertoire and political programme of anti-securitisation campaigns.

Tactical repertoire

The tactical arsenal of counter-securitisation organising has often hinged on legislative demands, resting on a mix of media-intensive advocacy campaigns, the defence of legal rights and agitation for greater transparency/oversight through reviews and inquiries.

These have at times amounted to important interventions – certainly enough to provoke the ire of the Conservative Johnson government, now seeking to curtail legal rights – but the lesson of the last 20 years of counter-terrorism underscores the relative impotence of this as an overall strategy in the face of an expanding security state.

Rights-based organising seeks recourse from institutions of the state to adjudicate over violence that is, in the final instance, produced by the state. Despite crucial individual campaign wins, legal rights by design cannot ultimately be the main means to transcend the matrix of domination that characterises the relationship between the security state and its population.

Furthermore, such campaigns often require choosing politically uncomplicated cases of ‘good citizens’ as the subjects of advocacy in order to elicit public sympathy. In doing so, they often inadvertently mirror the state strategy of differentiating between ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ subjects, who under national security powers are made vulnerable to all manner of exclusion and coercion, like Hilal al-Jedda.

Recovering solidarity in an age of national security – particularly with those deemed supposedly beyond the pale of support – is a vital, and difficult, component of any campaign against securitisation that seeks to build a political base that can advance popular sovereignty.

Mapping out the political economy of counter-terrorism can help demystify the relations, institutions and circuits through which counter-terrorism policy is produced. It can also help draw us away from disempowering and over-determinist notions of counter-terrorism policy as being driven by unstoppable laws of nature, and throws light onto where effective organising efforts can be directed.

Taking lessons from the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israel is useful in illustrating how to build popular pressure through campaigns that disrupt the networks of power, private actors and influence that shape such issues.

Private companies seeking to profit from securitisation should be subjected to mass public pressure; CSOs buying-in to 'counter-extremism' work should robustly confronted: the aim should be to confront and repel the encroachment of counter-terrorism into all areas of social life.

Political programme

Perhaps the single biggest limitation of traditional civil society, NGO-based and legalistic organising is that, in being forced to guard against a barrage of attacks, it can only offer an endless defence of the present, and is unable to articulate a political vision for the future.

In developing struggles against the security state, our political programmes should not just reactively oppose individual laws but also advance a vision for a post-security society, similar to the approach taken by abolitionist campaigns.

It is a symptom of deep political decay that 'counter-terror' and 'national security' policies have gradually come to fill the space in British politics vacated by democratic and social welfare programmes, however partial and inadequate they were. Social problems are being addressed as security issues, and the projection of political force has prevailed over any semblance of popular sovereignty. The conscription of vast swathes of the public into 'counter-terror' work – for example through the Prevent surveillance programme¹¹² – has also 'socialised' national security.

The atmosphere of mutual suspicion that this generates serves as the cultural project of this instability, replacing the sense of collectivism of earlier generations, and going even further than the cult of individualism fostered under neoliberalism. This is the antithesis of the solidarity that is needed to build an emancipatory political project, and must be overcome through the course of struggle.

There have been recent attempts to develop a wide-ranging agenda that goes beyond simple opposition to counter-terrorism policies, including the reports *Leaving the War on Terror A Progressive Alternative to Counter-Terrorism Policy*¹¹³ by Ruth Blakeley, Ben Hayes, Nisha Kapoor and colleagues, and *Beyond PREVENT: A Real Alternative To Securitised Policies*¹¹⁴ by CAGE. Further efforts to build and expand on such programmes are very much needed and welcome.

It is only through doing so that we can resolve the congealed mass of political contradictions that the counter-terrorism complex seeks to silence and criminalise: the real issue of widespread disaffection, disenfranchisement; the ruinous nature of capitalism, and the devastation wreaked by imperialism.

Challenging the security state must be an exercise in world-making, and a curative to the distress that characterises the one in which we now live.

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Notes

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DISMANTLING THE IMPERIAL BOOMERANG

A Reckoning with Globalised Police Power

Joshua M. Makalintal



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.
© Lynzy Billing

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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THE MACHO STATE

Coercion, patriarchy and resistance

Diana Quiroz



When police officers themselves are responsible for so many cases of gender-based violence and when so many cases are never addressed by the judicial system, what does that say about both the institution of the police, the state and their coercive apparatus?

I am writing this essay in the week of the [horrifying femicide of Úrsula Bahillo in Argentina](#). At the very same time, on the other side of the Atlantic, in the Netherlands, I saw my attacker looking into my living room seven years after the night when he tried to rape me.

I will come back to my story in a moment, but first I want to describe what happened to Úrsula. Úrsula Bahillo, who was 18, was regularly attacked by her partner, Matías Ezequiel Martínez, a police officer seven years older. For those who see women as responsible for their own safety, Úrsula did everything in her power to avoid being stabbed to death by her partner: she went to the police, she reported the violence, she asked for help, and she kept on doing this – 18 times, to be exact. The response was utterly inadequate. Even though there was a restraining order against Matías Ezequiel, the justice system never made sure that it was enforced.

Although each and every one of the femicides that take place in Latin America is painful to me and hundreds of thousands of other women, now and again there is one that is even more harrowing. What makes it especially anguishing is when someone whose duty is to respect and protect the rights inherent in your humanity is precisely the person who violates those rights – and who does so with total impunity. This is why phrases like [“they don’t protect me, they rape me”](#), or [“the police don’t look after me, my friends do”](#) have become prominent slogans in the increasingly [multitudinous transfeminist demonstrations in the region](#).

But it is not necessary to mention one of the countless femicides perpetrated by the police to illustrate their role in reproducing the systemic violence suffered by female-identified people (and other non-normative sexual and gender identities) all over the world. Although this essay looks at gender-based violence (GBV) as one of the key functions of the police in Latin America, the focus is on the patriarchal justice system and its mechanisms of omission as acts of coercion. As an example, I describe my experience of trying to gain access to justice in a European country to offer a reading from my perspective, which is that of a cisgender, migrant, racialised woman from Latin America.

When crime’s prosecutor commits crimes

What happened to Úrsula Bahillo is not an isolated case. According to Argentina’s [Coordinator Against Police and Institutional Repression \(CORREPI\)](#), registered cases of women suffering violence at the hands of the repressive state apparatus involve patriarchal male violence and are on the rise. Of the 671 cases of violence perpetrated by the security forces in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires since 1992, 389 resulted in femicides.

Although there are no official figures to demonstrate the occurrence of GBV at the hands of the security forces at the regional level, the available figures in some Latin American countries and/or cities are alarming. In Mexico, [8 out of 10 women who are arrested are tortured by the authorities](#). As the Centro Prodh points out, there are indications that sexual torture is widespread and within the [state there are](#)

institutional structures that tolerate and even encourage it. In Chile, solely in the context of the social uprising that took place between October 2019 and March 2020, the National Human Rights Institute reports that of the 2,832 victims of state violence recorded by the Public Prosecution Service, 390 reported that they had been sexually assaulted.

These figures do not include cases of sexual and gender-based violence committed by the police that occur when the officers concerned are 'off duty' (I use the inverted commas because, as I understand it, violence is not one of the police's duties), as in the case of Úrsula Bahillo. In Colombia, for example, the Office of the Human Rights Defender reported that in 72 of the 3,225 cases of sexual violence they dealt with in 2018, the violence was perpetrated by relatives of the victim who were in the police or the army.

Figures on transfemicides or travesticides perpetrated by the police are likewise hard to find, although these and other cases of intimidation, disrespect for identity, arbitrary arrest, extortion and physical and sexual violence have been amply documented by trans activists. Transfemicide and travesticide, together with other types of violence such as the lack of access to health care, education and employment, explain why the average life expectancy of trans people in Latin America is between 35 and 41, according to REDLACTRANS.

Violence as a universal female experience

With that background it is easy to imagine what a relief it was to move to a European country where, in addition to having opportunities that would have been highly unlikely in my country of origin, there was also the prospect of a life free from violence. Yes, in the Eurocentric worldview I grew up with, it is assumed that Europe has solved problems as archaic as sexual and gender-based violence. So, I would boast about being able to cycle home alone from a bar at night, more concerned about getting to the bathroom in time than about being raped, beaten up, killed and thrown into a canal, as happens to dozens of women in Latin America every day.

That was until one day in 2014, when I arrived home late at night. When I opened the door to my flat, I noticed a man urinating in the garden. When I reprimanded him, he asked me in a drunken voice who I was. Without waiting for my reply, he jumped on top of me. He would have raped me were it not for his friend with whom he had visited my neighbour, who dragged him off before he could penetrate me. At the time, I had been going through an extremely stressful few weeks. My father was dying more than 9,000 km away, and I had to finish my studies and look for a job in the context of a migration system that had made it clear for some time that it would tolerate the temporary presence of people like me in the country, but it would not be at all easy for me to settle there. Being already emotionally drained and predicting that I would be re-victimised by the police (as I was not the textbook victim of rape and also did not want to come across as the 'immigrant causing problems' and jeopardise my chances of extending my residence permit), I decided not to report my attacker to the police.

It was very hard for me to come to terms with what had happened. I was distressed not only by the incident itself but also by having decided not to report it, as according to the man who rescued me, it was not the first time my attacker had lunged at a woman while he was drunk. Reporting him was not just a question of seeking justice for myself, but also an obligation not to allow that to happen to any other woman.

At the time, I did not wonder whether any of the women my aggressor had previously attacked had gone to the police. It did not even cross my mind that what had happened to me had also been experienced by at least half the female-identified population. It had never occurred to me that female identities are not safe in Fortress Europe either.

After a few months I returned to my 'normal' life. But after that incident, although I continued to boast about how safe my life was, I began to swerve to the side of the road whenever I heard a car approaching at speed behind me while I was cycling. I went back to living with the fear I had grown up with. The fear of being run down on purpose and left at the mercy of a potential rapist. The fear of being killed at any moment for embodying a female identity.

What is not named does exist

When I told close friends in the Netherlands about the sexual assault, I learned that a surprising number of them had survived sexual violence of some kind in their lives. Most of the accounts were from women, although there was also one man (who had been abused by a family member during his childhood). As it did with me, these experiences had left them with major scars, but none had gone to the police to seek justice. Only one of them told me why she had not done so: because she knew nobody would believe her.

These accounts coincided with the information I started to unearth when I sought help after seeing my attacker seven years after the night when he tried to rape me. It turns out that he is a friend of one of the households in the shared housing group I recently joined. The reason I saw him looking through my living room window is that he happened to be visiting his friends. I was left terribly shaken by this chance re-encounter and the prospect of coming across him again at any time in my home was what finally led me to go to the police, specifically to seek a restraining order.

I was looking for contacts who could give me advice about the statute of limitations for the crime (in fact, I wasn't even sure if sexual assault was classified as a crime in the Netherlands), and by chance I came across the figures that corroborated what I had learned from my friends. According to a [survey by the European Union's Fundamental Rights Agency](#), one in three women have at some time experienced physical or sexual violence. In the Netherlands, this figure rises to 45%. The survey also found that only 14% of victims in the 27 countries of the European Union (EU) as a whole and 15% in the Netherlands report the incident to the police. The survey is from 2014, and it is the first – and so far the only – representative EU-wide survey.

Soon after I contacted them, the Victim Support service in the Netherlands (*Slachtofferhulp*) assigned a volunteer to accompany me during the reporting process. In the first minute of the first phone call she advised me not to go to the police. Specifically, she told me that the police were very busy and it was unlikely that any report would lead to a restraining order, or even an investigation. After all, it was 'my word against his'. I reminded the volunteer that there were witnesses, but even if there hadn't been, didn't I have the right to be believed? Instead of going to the police, she advised me to opt for a mediation process, a service free of charge that would allow me to sit across the table from my attacker and explain to him how his wild night out with his mates seven years ago was causing me an unprecedented mental health crisis.

Invisibilising gender-based violence in the patriarchal justice system

Until recently, I had not been able to understand why, despite its prevalence, sexual and gender-based violence in Western Europe¹⁶³ is not part of the public debate as it is in Latin America or in countries across sub-Saharan Africa such as [Liberia and Sierra Leone](#), for example. In my experience, the issue is discussed in Western Europe, but mainly as a characteristic of underdevelopment, inherent in the absence of the rule of law and in male chauvinist cultures attributed to Latin America or even Southern Europe. A [2017 Eurobarometer survey on gender equality](#) illustrates the prevalence of gender stereotypes amongst women, which subsist along the belief that gender equality has been achieved in politics, and to a lesser extent at work and in leadership. Today, apart from civil society organisations engaged in advocacy, or academics researching GBV, or when a particular case of violence against women causes a media furore, it seems that most people don't challenge, either through discussion or protest, this type of violence as they do in Latin America.

One possible explanation is the extremely high number of these incidents in Latin America that end in brutal deaths. When people read or hear every day about hate crimes and about women and girls, trans and transvestite people who are found dead, wrapped in blankets or plastic bags, their bodies dismembered and dumped on a patch of wasteland or in streams, in suitcases or rubbish tips, with or without clothes, with signs of torture or traces of semen, at the very least it gives people a lot to talk about.

But it is also possible that the cause and effect of the lack of visibility given to such a prevalent problem is that gender-based violence – and violence against women in particular – is usually seen as a strictly personal matter. The : The Atria Institute for emancipation and women's history in the Netherlands [reported on an online national survey conducted in 2010](#) which documented the reasons why the victims of physical and sexual violence in the country do not go to the police. The most common reasons were that women considered these episodes of violence a private matter and wanted to resolve the situation themselves; that they did not feel that the incident was serious enough; that they wanted to keep it secret; that they did not believe anyone could help them; or that they felt ashamed and were afraid of the perpetrator. A [2016 Eurobarometer survey on domestic violence](#) had similar findings. Additionally, the survey found that European women don't speak about their experiences of GBV because they lack proof, or the situation is unclear, or because they don't want to cause trouble.

Although these taboos are slowly fading away, and in the Netherlands an increasing number of women now report such crimes, [convictions for sexual violence are still very rare](#). This has to do with how complicated and ineffective the reporting process is. In the Netherlands, reporting a crime is a two-step process. First you have to notify the police that the incident happened (this is not an official statement). After providing such information, the victim may decide to report the case officially. [Of the 37% such cases that are officially reported, 58% are abandoned, usually due](#) to lack of evidence. While the presumption of innocence is a fundamental principle of justice, in a context of pervasive GBV where rape often happens behind closed doors, mechanisms ought to be put in place that can lead to conviction in rape cases, even when there is little evidence. However, there is little indication of steps being taken in this direction, despite the Netherlands' recent recognition of [all forms of involuntary sex as rape](#). This situation both discourages victims from reporting and encourages rapists or stalkers to continue committing crimes with impunity.

Thus, preventing and resolving gender-based violence is seen as the responsibility of the individual, and this is compounded by the fact that the state itself often keeps this type of violence invisible. In the Netherlands, for example, not only do the police take years to deal with reports of rape, they also coerce the women reporting it not to discuss the incident, since they argue that this [could hinder the prosecution of the case](#). This not only makes it difficult for victims to receive appropriate support or even get help from their close friends, it also prevents the problem from becoming the subject of public debate. Similarly, many EU countries (including the Netherlands) [are still not providing gender-disaggregated data when they report annual homicide rates](#). Because of this, the number of femicides in the EU is probably much higher than reports suggest, given that in 2016, official figures classified only [788 women in the region as victims of femicide](#). In other words, when women do not talk about it and are unaware of the magnitude of the violence we suffer, we gradually fail to recognise our oppression. This lack of awareness deprives us of our agency and keeps us from organising ourselves to demand action by the state.

Omission as coercion, femicide as state policy

Returning to the issue of gender-based violence in Latin America, another factor leading to the growing unity among women and non-cisnormative identities is an ongoing discussion of the problems that plague us that must be addressed due to our subaltern status. Drawing parallels with other oppressed communities, the most intense debates about dismantling the police and military complex, particularly in the US, take place within African-descent communities. It is noticeable that such discussions are less likely to take place in a site of privilege: the number of men rethinking masculinity is still miniscule, as is the number of white people discussing racial violence as a [#whitepeoplesproblem](#). Indeed, it may be that women in Western Europe, in terms of the general population and not its more organised constituencies, are not engaged in debates about our subaltern status because we see ourselves as having more privileged lives compared with the standard of living in other countries. Yet women in Europe [earn less and work more than men](#),¹⁶⁴ and are victims of GBV [almost as often as our counterparts in the rest of the world](#).

In Latin America and in Western Europe (as demonstrated recently by the case of Sarah Everard killed in London – yes, from the victims of femicide that I keep adding to the essay, the reader will realise that it has taken me weeks to write it), there is always the fear that the disappearance of a woman or female-identified person will end in the worst possible way: rape and murder. We are used to seeing how the media report femicides: they talk of prior warnings, when there were any, and of reported incidents that were not properly dealt with, but there's rarely any discussion about the structural nature of the problem or about the justice system's failure to address it. Not to mention the fact that transfemicides do not receive as much media attention as the murders of cis women.

Indeed we must change the way in which the term (trans)femicide is used – not just to quantify victimised bodies (which is necessary, but by no means the ultimate aim of justice for GBV) but also to identify the state as the main guarantor – the duty bearer – responsible to end the violence that leads to women being killed.

NOA POTHOVEN, ANOTHER VICTIM OF STATE FEMICIDE

One case of gender-based sexual violence that caused an uproar in the Netherlands in recent years is that of Noa Pothoven, a teenager who died in 2019 from self-imposed starvation. Noa had been sexually assaulted at the age of 11 during a children's party and again a year later at another party. When she was 14 she was raped by two men. The post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) she suffered as a result of these attacks was never properly treated and Noa sank into a depression that ended her life at the age of 17. Her death led to outrage in the international press because it was [mistakenly reported that she had died by euthanasia](#). In the Netherlands, the focus of the reporting on her case was, in order of media importance, her wish to die, her mental health problems and anorexia, and the ineptitude of the youth support services that dealt with her case. While the underlying causes of her disorder were always mentioned (i.e., that she had survived multiple episodes of sexual violence in her childhood), little attention was paid to the fact that fear and shame prevented her for a long time from taking about it with anyone or that a court had ordered her to be committed to various psychiatric institutions (while none of the perpetrators seems to have been brought before any court).

In this context it is worth mentioning the case brought before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) in the 2000s. This concerned the murders of young women in Ciudad Juárez in northern Mexico on the US border, where young women have been disappearing regularly for more than 30 years and where the response of the justice system has invariably been to [blame the women for their own disappearance](#), resulting in inaction. Concluding its investigation, the IACHR spoke for the first time of femicide not just as the murder of women, but as the state's failure to act and a permanent message that says that where impunity reigns, the lack of consequences for the attackers becomes 'permission' to continue committing violence against women.

From this perspective, the justice system also has a role to play in preventing violence, because the prison system, by definition, deals with crimes that have already been committed – in the case of (trans) femicides, when the female-identified person has been deprived of their right to life. However, bringing a lawsuit can also be a prevention mechanism to the extent that it leads to accountability, whereby the justice system is sending a message of zero tolerance. But when the justice system offers nothing but impunity, inaction, cases closed without being investigated, or social workers who tell you straight away not to bother the police because they are very busy, it not only shuts victims or survivors out of the justice system, but also sends the message that the system endorses these types of violence.

The road already travelled...

With regard to this we do need to acknowledge what has been achieved at the global level in less than a decade: from #niunamás or #niunamenos and their transformation into the contemporary transfeminist movement as one of the most important political actors in Latin America, to #metoo worldwide and the changes brought about by the bravery of so many women and non-normative identities who came forward to speak about the violence they experienced in areas as diverse as medicine, the entertainment industry, the media, academia and politics. This has undeniably contributed to a change in the social ethos, which has had repercussions in the justice system: formerly untouchable men, like

Harvey Weinstein, ended up paying for their abuses, while countries such as France have introduced harsher penalties for adults who engage in sexual relations with minors.



Bolivia, La Paz, 14 January 2020. Families of victims of femicide demonstrate in front of the office of government buildings in La Paz. Credit: Andrea Bruce / NOOR

Although court rulings in favour of oppressive power (such as police officers all over the world who shoot people dead at point-blank range, or the politicians exonerated of money laundering or influence peddling, to mention just two of a long list of examples) could indicate the contrary – the rise of a global debate on the lack of legitimacy of the justice system is an advance. And how could there not be a crisis of legitimacy, when the judiciary is the only one of the three powers of state in a democracy that largely does not have to be subject to election by the people. The lack of gender awareness in much of the justice system all over the world forms part of this crisis of legitimacy.

Faced with this crisis of legitimacy and given their role as public servants, the justice system and the institutions that comprise it (the police, the courts, the public prosecution service, defence lawyers) have the obligation to respond to society's demands. Instead, their attitude is generally reactive and repressive, as we see over and over again in Latin America when transfeminist movements [come out on the streets to condemn femicides](#) (or recently in the UK as well, in the case of the [protests against the femicide of Sarah Everard](#)), or the [#blacklivesmatter protests](#), or the [protests against the military coup](#) in Myanmar. Of course, I cannot deny that in writing this, I am fearful of the consequences it could have for my immigration status, or at the very least the violence to which I could be exposed for expressing these opinions. I know that as a migrant I am expected not to voice opinions that could be considered transgressive. What migrants are expected to do is integrate into society in the most normative possible way, and this expectation is often imposed with violence, as shown in countries like France by the [criminalisation of Muslim women migrants](#) who wear the hijab.

Some people might say my fears are far-fetched, but the recent [child benefit scandal](#) in the Netherlands in which thousands of dual-nationality families were wrongly accused of fraud by Dutch tax authorities and plunged into penury demonstrates that the worst fears of marginalised groups ([especially those with an immigration background](#)) are well founded.

GBV serves this system of precarity and control. The criminalisation of poverty – evidenced in the child benefit scandal – not only compounds impoverishment, but also the precarity of women’s lives who bear the brunt of unpaid care work. Meanwhile GBV is not only tolerated and made invisible by the coercive state, it also serves a disciplinary measure to keep women in check and far away from equality. And gender inequality in turn serves the coercive state by making [women the corner stone of precarious labour](#), necessary for capital accumulation and control. In other words, GBV is functional to the coercive state where its pervasiveness is crucial for the dehumanisation of feminine identities as producers and reproducers of a subordinated working class.

...and the road ahead

Against this background and as a prerequisite for the eventual abolition of the police and the military, I argue for the renewal of the justice system rooted in feminism. There need to be structures in the public prosecution service whose exclusive role is to investigate the gender-based crimes that they call domestic or sexual violence, the most extreme form of which is femicide. Evidence shows that worldwide, [discriminatory laws disproportionately affect non-normative gender identities](#). Likewise, prosecutors in the Netherlands still lack knowledge of the diverse forms of GBV, as demonstrated by a [Shadow Report on the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combatting violence against women and domestic violence](#) in 2018. With this in mind, the prosecution service should also have the mandate to address other widespread problems (such as crimes perpetrated by or against society’s most excluded groups), taking a gender and intersectional approach.

An intersectional approach means addressing inequality as the root of violence. When we discuss violence in general, and the abolition of the prison-military complex in particular, we can for example neglect the labour dimension of the police and military. In Latin America and elsewhere, the police are a source of employment for impoverished sectors, just as the military has historically served as a means of [economic mobility for racialised men](#). In contrast, the [police is the Netherland’s largest employer](#) and the sector is characterised by a low turnover. Striving for accountability and reparations for the widespread abuse of power will also therefore have to pragmatically address how to construct an economy of peace that includes decent work for all.

Likewise, when we discuss GBV, it seems like the alarms only blare when violence reaches an extreme (such as femicides, transfemicides or hate crimes), but we fail to focus on the structures lead to this violence. Parity of gender and ethnic origin in state institutions could be part of the structural change that is necessary, although it does not guarantee a gender or class or ethnic perspective, as the gender and sexual violence we survive every day is not only systemic but also availed by the state.

To paraphrase Paulo Freire, it seems to varying degrees that we are coming to the realisation of our condition of oppression. The moment is ripe to also realise that “nobody liberates themselves all alone. People liberate themselves in fellowship with each other.” Invoking the appeals of abolitionists who see not only the need but also the potential for the world to transform itself, it is time to forge ties of

solidarity, communities of care, but above all communities of understanding, to come closer to the one another and find our own humanity in this otherness. This we owe to ourselves, to those who came before, but above all to those who will come after.

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Notes

- 163 I am using the United Nations definition of Western Europe, which includes Austria, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, and Switzerland.
- 164 Scoring in the gender equality index does not include violence in the calculations, which strongly suggests that gender inequality is worse than usually estimated.
- 165 Eduardo Gudynas defines ‘extractivism’ as ‘a particular type of high-volume or high-intensity extraction of natural resources of which 50% or more is destined for export as raw materials in processed or minimally processed forms. This includes both the exploitation phases, such as the upstream phases of prospecting, discovery, etc. and the downstream phases, such as closure and abandonment of appropriated sites’. <http://ambiental.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/GudynasApropiacionExtractivismoExtraheccionesOdeD2013.pdf>

NEOEXTRACTIVISM AND STATE VIOLENCE

Defending the defenders in Latin America

Aldo Orellana López



PERU, NOVEMBER 2014: Indian woman observing the arrival of a large cargo ship to Matarani's port. The growth of this town has been steady with the construction of the Interoceanic Highway. In 2012, its port mobilized three million tonnes and is expected to increase as the company Tisur, which holds the concession for this port since 1999, plans to invest US \$ 140 million to build a system for receiving, storage and shipment of minerals. These extensions will attend future mining projects in the central Andes (Apurímac) and the south. The Interoceanic Highway is an international, transcontinental highway in Peru and Brazil to connect the two countries. It has had a severe impact on the fragile rainforest environment, such as deforestation, illegal hunting and fishing, massive crops for monocultures and pasture lands, illegal mining, pollution, soil erosion and loss of biodiversity. It is also affecting the local populations, introducing the drug and arms trafficking into the region, slavery, underemployment and violence, and also damaging the life of ancestral indigenous communities. Credit: ©Sebastian Liste / NOOR / IG: @sebastianliste / Twitter: @SebastianListe

The commodities boom in the early 2000s extended the frontiers of extractivism and has relied on state violence, making Latin America one of the most dangerous and deadly places for indigenous peoples and frontline community defenders. Focused on Peru and Colombia, this essay explores dynamics of state violence and strategies for effective resistance.

‘In La Guajira, we are fighting to keep our land, so that we don’t lose another centimetre’, explains Samuel Arregocés, member of the Consejo Comunitario de Negros Ancestrales de Tabaco (Ancestral Black Community Council of Tabaco) in Colombia. ‘This coal is coal of blood, coal of tears, coal of misery ... this is why we’re resisting the extractive model¹⁶⁵ imposed by this nation’, he adds. His life experience reveals the reality behind extractivism in Latin America and the violence that comes with it. In August 2001, 400 families from the Tabaco community were forced off their land to make way for the biggest open-pit coal mine in Latin America, Cerrejón, which is currently owned by mining giants Anglo American, BHP and Glencore. Prior to the eviction, the community had been attacked several times: their utilities were cut off, homes were burned down, their cemetery desecrated and their freedom of movement restricted. Homes that hadn’t already been destroyed by fire were bulldozed, under the watch of the Colombian police.

Coal mining in La Guajira has displaced over 25 Afro-Colombian and Wayúu indigenous communities and dried up or diverted more than 20 important rivers. Their organisations are also under constant threat for defending their territory. ‘Those of us who have been leading these processes have been harassed. We have even been persecuted by people we don’t know’, Samuel says.

Latin America is considered the ‘deadliest [place] for land defenders’. Global Witness data show that 148 of the 212 environmental and land defenders killed worldwide in 2019 were in Latin America. These assassinations and other types of threats and intimidation occurred mainly in the context of mining conflicts, oil extraction and agribusiness.

What is happening with the Cerrejón mine and the communities in La Guajira is an example of what Eduardo Gudynas calls ‘extrahections’,¹⁶⁶ a term that refers to the violent ‘appropriation of natural resources’ which involves the violation of human rights and the rights of nature. ‘There are many examples where extraction has led to such violations, such as harm to human health caused by pollution, the forced displacement of communities and others, including the assassination of social leaders’, Gudynas says. At the turn of the century, high prices for raw materials on international markets stimulated growth in export-oriented extractive activities. This so-called ‘super cycle’ put even more pressure on the affected territories and communities. Resistance grew, led mainly by indigenous and peasant movements, as well as social organisations from the cities. The level of conflict intensified throughout Latin America, as did state-sponsored repression, the criminalisation of protest and the assassination of environmental and social leaders. Maristella Svampa calls this the era of ‘neextractivism’.¹⁶⁷

The era of neextractivism

‘Neextractivism’ is a mode of accumulation based on the overexploitation of natural resources and involving the expansion of the ‘frontiers of extractivism’ into new territories. This period is characterised by what Svampa calls the ‘Commodities consensus’,¹⁶⁸ a ‘new economic and political order’ sustained

by the 'boom' in the price of raw materials and the increased global demand for natural resources. Commodity prices rose constantly during the early 2000s. Oil reached US\$140 per barrel in 2008, when the global financial crisis caused it to fall below US\$40. In 2009, the price began to recover and even exceeded the US\$100-mark between 2011 and 2014. It has fluctuated since until its drastic fall as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. In the case of minerals, according to UNECLAC, between 2002 and 2008, the amount of mining exports quadrupled in value. Since then prices have fallen, but the consumption and export of minerals in terms of volume has continued to increase. In terms of volume, during the supercycle the region went from exporting 289 million tons of minerals in 2002 to 443 million tons in 2008 and 600 million tons in 2017.

All Latin American countries welcomed the price boom, as they saw the extraction and export of natural resources as a new development 'opportunity'. Some of the revenues were used to increase public spending to reduce poverty levels. Although there are national differences, in general, redistributive and social policies enabled Latin America to reduce poverty from 44% to 31.4% of the population between 2002 and 2011, and extreme poverty, from 19.4% to 12.3%.

In this new extractive phase, China played a pivotal role. Its ascension as a world power made it an important purchaser of various types of raw materials, such as minerals, fossil fuels and agribusiness products. China has trade relations with practically all Latin American countries, from conservative, neoliberal governments to progressive governments of the so-called 'pink tide'. Over 80% of Latin American exports to China are raw materials or products with little added value, while the region imports all sorts of manufactured products.

Chinese foreign direct investment has also increased in the region. Between 2010 and 2015, direct investment from China exceeded US\$64 billion, much of it destined to areas related to extractive activities, mega-dams, infrastructure, etc. Moreover, China has become an important source of loans in Latin American countries – finance that is mainly used for extractive projects. In 2015, the flow of loans from China to Latin America rose to 35 billion US dollars.

Changes in international prices and the growth of the Chinese economy reshaped many Latin American government budgets. Around 2010, governments began to promote more projects of mega-mining, extraction of conventional and unconventional fossil fuels, agribusiness expansion and the construction of mega-dams. They also began to build infrastructure related to extractive operations, such as highways for transporting exports. The fall in commodity prices in 2013 and 2014 exacerbated the intensification and expansion of resource extraction to order to compensate for loss of export earnings. Consequently, there were more socioenvironmental conflicts and violent repression of communities in extractive zones.

Conflicts increase year after year. According to the Observatorio de Conflictos Ambientales (OCMAL), in 2010, there were 120 mining conflicts affecting 150 communities in Latin America. In 2014, the number of conflicts had reached 198, affecting 297 communities and involving 207 projects. In 2017, 217 conflicts were reported, which involved 227 projects and 331 communities. In 2018 OCMAL registered 259 conflicts. Until 2018, the countries with the most recorded conflicts are: Mexico (45), Chile (43), Perú (39), Argentina (29), and Brasil (26).

Rodrigo Lauracio, from the Muqui Network of Peru¹⁶⁹, says that conflicts are inescapable, because extractive activities require territories to operate. The affected communities resist because they see a "risk of dispossession of its territory" and "a risk to their survival." Conflicts often lead to the paralysis of activities, which leads to repression and violence towards the communities.

The assassination of environmental leaders during this period were also cause for alarm. [Global Witness](#) reports that between 2002 and 2013, 908 such murders were reported worldwide, of which 760 – 83% – were in Latin America. In 2016, over half of the 200 activists killed were in this region.

“Extractivism is a structural feature of capitalism as a system of world accumulation. For this accumulation to take place, it is necessary that there be sacrificial, colonial zones”, explains Argentinean sociologist Horacio Machado. The ‘re-primarisation of the region’s economy’ exacerbated the ‘dynamics of dispossession and pillaging of land, resources and territories for progress. This process reproduces a pattern that dates back to colonial times in which the region was a source of the world’s raw materials. Today, each country extracts and exports what cumulatively represent a huge range of natural resources. And just as in colonial times, this extraction involves violence and destroys territories. The operators of this capitalist extractivism are mostly transnational corporations (TNCs) working in partnership with the state, whose role is to provide security and generate favourable economic conditions for foreign investment in this kind of activity.

Public security and the role of the state in globalisation

In the era of neoextractivism, one of the main roles of the state – which nominally has the monopoly over the use of force – is to guarantee the security of transnational capital invested in extractive operations.

For Oscar Campanini¹⁷⁰, from the the Bolivian Centre for Documentation and Information (CEDIB), “the state is essential to carry out extractivism.” First, because it needs to make operations viable through the normative and laws. It is also a protagonist through state-owned companies. But mainly, it is the state that resolves the contradiction in conflicts through violence exercised by state apparatuses, such as the police and the armed forces.

In recent decades, several Latin American governments have created tough police units designed to control protests and intervene in socio-environmental conflicts. One such unit is the Mobile Anti-Riot Squadron (ESMAD for its acronym in Spanish) in Colombia. Created in 1999, this [unit](#) is in charge of ‘riot and crowd control, blockades, accompanying evictions from public or private spaces that occur in urban or rural areas on national territory’.

ESMAD has become notorious for its brutality, [especially](#) when repressing indigenous and peasant communities who resist eviction from their land to clear the way for mining, oil exploitation and the construction of mega-dams. They are consistently deployed in the midst of socio-environmental conflicts. In Colombia, 25% of the conflicts reported between 2001 and 2011 were related to oil, gold and coal.

ESMAD [evicted](#) Samuel Arregocés’ community in Tabaco in 2001. Many other communities that resist extractive projects have suffered similar [attacks](#). It is a ‘police force marked by 20 years of serious human rights violations’, [says](#) the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers’ Collective (CAJAR). ‘34 people have lost their lives at the hands of the ESMAD during social protests. ... It has systematically engaged in torture and the cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of its victims’. ‘To this systematic violation of human rights, one must add the systematic impunity that conceals them. There [has not been] a single conviction for the murders and tortures committed.’

A report by the non-government organisation (NGO) Temblores [affirms](#) that there were 1,352 ESMAD officers in 2006, rising to 3,328 in 2018. Its budget is around 13 million Colombian pesos (roughly US\$ 3.5 million). CAJAR [states](#) that between 2001 and 2018, the Colombian government allocated 84.7 billion pesos to its operations (approximately US\$ 23 million).

This case illustrates the true function of the security forces in conflict situations, which is to serve the interests of extractivism, but their protection of extractive operations and of the TNCs goes way beyond this. In Peru, for example, [Earth Rights International](#) (ERI) has brought to light how the law ‘empowers the Peruvian National Police... to create agreements with extractive companies that allow the Police to provide private security services within the facilities and other areas ... of extractive projects in return for profit’. According to ERI, at least 138 agreements were signed between 1995 and 2018, of which 109 had been signed before 2017 and 29 were still in effect in 2019. In effect, the state is turning into a private police force for transnational capital.

Katherine Paucar¹⁷¹ of ERI, says that “The state has gradually been generating mechanisms that have allowed them to guarantee that resources continue to be exploited in the territories of indigenous peoples. This results in the violation of their rights.”

Gigantic TNCs, such as Anglo American, BHP, Glencore, Southern, Newmont, China Minmetals Corporation, have shares in operating companies that have signed agreements with the police in recent years. The companies provide the police logistical support, basic services, communications equipment, food, vehicles, internet, office supplies and more. According to ERI, between 2010 and 2018, the police were paid 45.5 million soles (more than US\$ 12.2 million) for their security services.

The majority of police interventions occur in conflict situations, a frequent occurrence in Peru. According to the [Office of the Ombudsman of Peru](#), between December 2019 and December 2020, 197 conflicts had been reported, of which 129, or 65%, were categorised as socio-environmental.

[ERI concludes](#) that in Peru, ‘policing has been privatized’ and the agreements are being used ‘as a strategy for the State to guarantee the ordinary course of action for extractive activities in the framework of its extractivist policy’.

This security doctrine is part of an economic ideology and an agenda aimed at opening up the region to investment and relaxing environmental norms, which goes back to the 1990s and was reinforced during the era of the commodities consensus. It is a regional trend, symbolised by countries such as Colombia and Peru.

Twenty years ago, Colombia implemented the so-called ‘democratic security’ and ‘investor confidence’ policy, comprising economic liberalisation and increasing security for foreign investment. Following the same logic, the government created the ‘mining, energy and road battalions’ formed by the Colombian armed forces, charged with protecting extractivist activities, infrastructure and important roads from attacks. To do so, entire areas have been militarised and patrolled. These battalions are special units of the armed forces under the command of the Colombian Department of Defense. In 2012, the then Minister of Defense, [Juan Carlos Pinzón](#), said that the protection of the country’s mining, energy and road infrastructure, “is not only a duty but a priority, because through that infrastructure, the wealth of Colombians moves, creating employment opportunities and development.”

These battalions function by order of the government, but companies can also hire their services. In 2014, the existence of several security [contracts](#) between extractive companies and the mining and energy battalions came to light. The Colombian government justified them by referring to the internal armed conflict. [Investigations](#) by the Colombian organisation Tierra Digna found that as of 2015, there were at least 21 special energy and road battalions in Colombia. It also revealed that between 2001 and 2013, 103 contracts were signed for which companies handed over the sum of 45 billion Colombian pesos to the state for the battalions' services (around US\$ 12 million). Companies, such as Glencore, Anglo American, BHP, AngloGold Ashanti, Drummond and others, have paid for these services.

Ultimately, the goal is 'to strengthen the armed forces throughout the national territory and expand the mining-energy sector to make it the largest one in the economy'. It is 'a security policy for extractivism', says Terra Digna.

One consequence of these security policies is growing impunity. In the case of Peru, according to Rodrigo Lauracio, there is a 'Police Protection Law' that "overprotects" the police when they use their weapons in conflict situations. 'Police officers cannot be tried on equal terms, as other citizens', he says. This law favours the disproportionate use of force, which leads to greater violence and greater impunity. This is a pattern that is repeated in other countries.

An economic order in favour of transnational capital

It is clear that the establishment of this entire legal and economic architecture has been made possible through the [corporate capture](#) of the state – a mechanism that TNCs use to exert influence to implement laws for their own benefit in various domains, which range from the relaxation of environmental standards to security laws. 'Legislation by dispossession', as [Miller Dussán of the Association of People Affected by the Quimbo Megadam \(ASOQUIMBO\) in Colombia](#) calls it. However, it is important to note that this legal framework that prioritises extractivism is not just limited to serving private corporate interest, it also serves state-owned companies.

This political, economic and judicial framework can be situated in what [William Robinson](#) calls the '[transnational stage of global capitalism](#)', which is characterised by the rise of 'truly transnational capital' and the integration of countries into the 'globalized production and financial system' and 'global circuits of accumulation'. In this stage, the new 'transnational state' generates the conditions for globalised accumulation, promoting regulatory frameworks that facilitate it, financing the infrastructure that transnational capital needs and becoming an instrument of coercion and control.

In the era of transnational capital, a supranational power exerts 'de facto' power over state sovereignty in the form of a global regulatory structure based on a vast network of free trade and investment protection agreements. In practice, this governs and regulates trade and the global economy via the '[Lex Mercatoria](#)', which shapes the global economic and legal order in favour of transnational capital. This economic order also "overprotects" companies when popular resistance or public policies for the benefit of the population affect their interests. It is not by chance that most of the Investor-state dispute settlement cases (ISDS) lawsuits of transnationals against states, are in extractive sectors, mainly mining.

The deepening of this new stage of global capitalism has been accompanied by a new round of extensive

and intensive expansion of transnational capital, which seeks to penetrate spaces and territories that were previously outside the zone of accumulation. This new 'wave of dispossession' has intensified extractive activities, triggering resistance from people living in the affected territories and an increase in conflict, repression and violence on the part of the transnational state. This is what Robinson [calls](#) 'militarized accumulation' or 'accumulation by repression'.

Peru and Colombia – emblematic cases of violence and impunity

The violence against the communities in the conflicts involving extractive operations comes mainly from the state, through the use of public security forces. However, it is neither the only source, nor the worst.

The presence of extractive operations often attracts groups with shady interests that are capable of mobilising criminal networks and paramilitary groups in the area. This creates a very tense and hostile environment for socio-environmental and land defenders. The prevailing impunity for the crimes committed makes the situation worse. When a crime takes place, it is difficult to find the perpetrators and the masterminds behind them.

Global Witness reported that in 2019, 64 of the 148 assassinations of environmental leaders in Latin America [took place](#) in Colombia, 'the highest number ever recorded in the country'. They also pointed out that these occur in an 'climate of persecution and threats' 'that seeks to spread fear'.

'Defending human rights is hard... especially in La Guajira because of the coal mining', [says](#) Jakeline Romero, an indigenous member of Force of Wayúu Women, an organisation that also resists the expansion of coal mining. 'In our organisation, we have had to endure many situations of violence including [threats](#), stigmatisation and false accusations'.

Front Line Defenders [say](#) that '44% of the attacks between 2015 and 2019 [in Colombia] were against defenders who expressed concern with the operations of five companies... Cerrejón is one of them'. Moreover, this company has a [security agreement](#) with a 'mining and energy battalion'.



Military waiting to be picked up at the Interoceanic highway between Matarani and Arequipa. This desert dune area is used for target practice and explosives by soldiers of the garrison of Arequipa. The Interoceanic Highway is an international, transcontinental highway in Peru and Brazil that seeks to facilitate Brazil's access to the Pacific coast (and the markets of Asia) and in the same way the transfer of Asian products to the Atlantic coast (markets in the United States, Europe and Brazil). The construction of the highway has a severe impact on the fragile rainforest environment as it increases deforestation, illegal hunting and fishing, illegal mining, pollution, soil erosion and loss of biodiversity. It also affects the local populations, introducing drug and arms trafficking into the region, violence, and land dispossession. Credit: Sebastian Liste / NOOR

In the case of Peru, repression has also increased in areas of resistance to mining activities. The situation is particularly critical in the southern Andes, which includes the most mining concessions in the country and the so-called 'mining corridor'. Minerals pass through the corridor to the point of export. Most of the extractive companies that have security agreements with the police have projects in this 'mining corridor'. This area, Espinar province, is home to the Antapaccay copper, gold and silver mine, owned by the Swiss-based transnational mining corporation, Glencore, and is now constantly militarised as a result of successive '[states of emergency](#)', a legal provision that suspends the communities' rights and protests despite the mines environmental impact on water, air and land. High amounts of heavy metals have been [found](#) in the blood samples of dozens of adults and children in the communities.

In 2012, a [general strike](#) and roadblock ended in a police operation that left three dead, dozens injured and several arbitrarily arrested. After this conflict, the National Coordinator for Human Rights of Peru (CNDDHH for its acronym in Spanish) [denounced](#) the existence of a security contract between the police and the mining corporation, noting that during the operation, the police used the corporation's facilities as an 'operating base' and detention centre where human rights activists were tortured.

The latest serious conflicts in Espinar took place between July and August 2020. The population once again demanded that their demands related to health and the environment be met, as well as a one-

time payment of 1,000 soles (approximately US\$265) to cope with the economic crisis caused by the pandemic. The funds were to come from the so-called 'framework agreement' between the company and the municipality, which stipulates that 3% of the mine's proceeds are to be used for development projects in the province. When the company – responsible for managing the resources from the agreement – refused to heed their demand, the population protested and was repressed by the police. The CNDDHH [reported](#) that three people suffered gunshot wounds, six were wounded by pellet guns and several were injured and bruised from the beatings. 'They tortured people, threatened to kill them, threw gasoline on them and threatened to burn them. There are also testimonies saying that women were touched inappropriately', [declared](#) Mar Pérez, a lawyer for the CNDDHH.

'States of emergency and exception' are a pattern of legal abuse found repeatedly throughout Latin America. The state uses this situation to militarise territories and suspend constitutional rights to spread fear among the population and make it easier to develop extractive activities. 'These mechanisms are an efficient way of demobilising protestors', the Bolivian Centre for Documentation and Information (CEDIB) [affirms](#).

These situations of conflict and repression also lead to processes that 'criminalise social protest' by detaining and prosecuting social leaders for forced and ambiguous accusations of criminal offences, such as terrorism, sabotage, conspiracy and extortion.

After the 2012 protests in Espinar, the [state prosecuted](#) three social leaders charged with instigation and other crimes. The trial lasted more than eight years and during that time, the affected people were forced to bear the costs in terms of economic resources and their time, not to mention the psychological and social impacts on them and their families. Rodrigo Lauracio from Red Muqui says that in some cases these processes are driven by companies and in others directly by the state. "It seeks to prevent future social protests and intimidate organizations that question extractive projects," he says.

'Concepts such as "national security, public order, protection of critical state assets", among others, have been used to justify the subordination of state security forces – both the police and the military – to the interests of the extractive companies', explains CEDIB.

There are other, more subtle forms of repression in areas of extractive activities, such as discrediting social organisations and leaders. The people and organisations leading resistance have often been called 'enemies of the state, enemies of development and terrorists'. This type of labelling not only generates stigma, but also helps create a tense atmosphere of violence that could have fatal consequences for affected people, especially in countries that have experienced significant internal armed conflicts, like Peru and Colombia.

Such attacks and discourses generally originate in state authorities, but are also instilled in organs of repression, such as the military and police, whose training is based on the logic of the 'internal enemy' that must be destroyed. This logic does not respect social protest as a right or a legitimate and democratic act of citizenship.

Rodrigo Lauracio says that this discourse is also repeated by dominant social groups and the media, who say that people who reject extractive activities do not want the development of the country. This lead "many people to assume an extractivist position and stop questioning the impacts and human rights violations". "Violence, states of emergency, extractivism are naturalised," he says.

As if that were not enough, the state's use of violence and these kinds of abuse are deeply intertwined with racism. During the conflicts in Espinar in 2020, CNDDHH's lawyer Mar Pérez highlighted that 'it has been internationally recognised that the use of force by the police is highly racist', since '70% of the victims of the use of force by police during protests are indigenous'. This has generated much criticism, including from the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

Extractivism and violence from the left

These examples from Colombia and Peru of the use of state-sponsored coercive forces, the criminalisation of protest and human rights violations fit a more general pattern in Latin America of what Svampa calls 'the developmentalist illusion'.

Bolivia and Ecuador, for example, under self-declared left leaders and administrations, made very important advances in incorporating human rights and the rights of Mother Earth into their constitutional norms. However, both countries also developed numerous extractive projects and the results are not all that different from those in other countries, even if the redistribution of resources from extractivism may be more fairly shared.

'We are seeing neoliberal traditional extractivism and a new kind of progressive neoextractivism, where the state plays a more active role in the capture of the surplus and the distribution, which is legitimised, but that produces the same impacts on the environment and rights', Gudynas explains.

One of the cases in Bolivia that drew the most attention was the TIPNIS conflict. In August 2011, 1,000 indigenous people began a 400-kilometre march from the eastern department of Beni to the seat of government in La Paz. The goal was to demand a halt to the 'unconsulted' construction of the highway that was to go through the Isiboro Sécuré Indigenous Territory and National Park (TIPNIS), which is home to many Amazonian indigenous peoples. The communities were seeking to prevent the incursion of extractive activities into the nature reserve.

The government discredited the march in several ways by linking it to particular NGOs and other political groups. In the end, the government violently repressed the march when it was 80 kilometres from La Paz, initially ignoring national and international criticism but eventually forced to abandon the project temporarily.

In Ecuador, a conflict in the Amazon between a Chinese mining corporation and the Shuar community attracted international attention. In Morona Santiago province, communities of the Cordillera del Cóndor mountain range rejected the San Carlos-Panantza open-pit copper mine project operated by the Chinese corporation Ecuacorriente. In August 2016, hundreds of police officers violently evicted the Shuar Nankints community from the land that the Chinese corporation was claiming as its own. In response, several indigenous organisations accused the government of promoting a mega-mining project without holding a consultation to obtain free, prior and informed consent (FPIC). This was the first of a series of violent events that led to the militarisation of the area.

In both the TIPNIS and the Cordillera del Cóndor cases, the respective governments publicly discredited the communities and tried to dissolve NGOs accused of supporting mobilisations to further their own obscure interests.

As in Colombia and Peru, most of the so-called 'sacrifice zones' are found in the territories of indigenous peoples, who often are not consulted and later subjected to violence.

Reforms, support for struggles and alternatives

The violent extraction of raw materials for export is a pattern that has been reproduced in Latin America since the colonial period, and continues today. While China has played a fundamental role in the recent neoextractivist era in Latin America, a large proportion of these resources is still exported to Europe and the US.

This global race for the remaining resources has generated strong resistance movements, which are repressed with increasing violence but also continue to survive and even grow.

One crucial first step to confront extractivism is demanding that governments provide the necessary information on both the extractive operations and the security systems designed to protect them. These complaints and information can be brought before the international human rights systems to which our countries belong.

There are international instruments and important tools and precedents in the defence of human, territorial and environmental rights that can be exploited. In 2011 for example, the UN General Assembly spoke out against the misuse of security and counter-terrorism laws to attack human rights defenders. In 2013, the United Nations Human Rights Council said that national laws should facilitate the work of defenders rather than criminalise or discredit them. In 2019, the Council recognised the contribution of environmental defenders and highlighted the importance of their contribution to tackling the effects of climate change and the conservation of ecosystems. Moreover, it urged states to guarantee the 'participation of communities in the decisions affecting their rights and territories, combat impunity in cases of the violations of environmental defenders' rights, issue norms and implement protection policies', such as FPIC obligations.

Another important tool that has just been born is the [Escazú Agreement](#) "on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean". The agreement is signed by 24 countries and ratified by 12, and it could improve communities' access to information on extractive activities that affect them. However, it will be a challenge to achieve an effective application of this agreement, given that there are already other agreements, such as ILO Convention 169, that are frequently ignored.

Another strategy is seeking the reform or abolition of the repressive apparatuses of the state. In Colombia, many organisations are calling for ESMAD to be disbanded. Even the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has denounced the ESMAD's abuses and called for its reform. The existence and role of the 'mining and energy battalions' have also been strongly questioned. In Peru, organisations have been working to prove that the contracts between the police and the extractive companies are 'illegitimate'. There are also proposals to reform the criminal code and even the political constitution so that certain types of criminal offence are not used to prosecute social leaders.

The role of these security services has been put under an even bigger spotlight with the recent conflicts in Peru (November 2020) and Colombia (April/May 2021). In Colombia, Temblores had reported [1,708 cases](#) of police abuse on 5 May 2021 as anti-Duque protests continued in the face of massive state violence. In these cases, human rights organizations have called once again for reforms, from the elimination of the laws that protect the police in Peru, to the dissolution of ESMAD in Colombia.

On a structural level, there are proposals that seek to attack the system that generates the vicious cycle of extractivism and the violence that comes with it. In recent decades, the 'extractivist' development model has been widely criticised and various organisations are working to create alternatives. The growing violence associated with extractivism exposes the systemic crisis engulfing the transnational capitalist model as well as the planet's ecological limits. Thus, it is a good opportunity to think about building a new civilisational system.

These proposals range from advocating for just energy transitions, changing the productive matrix, to rescuing and articulating the experiences of communities that live based on their ancestral knowledge about the land. Other proposals to curb extractive activities promoted by the communities have emerged from the popular consultations and assemblies that have been developed successfully in Colombia, Ecuador, Argentina and other countries.

In the meantime, it is important as internationalists to support people fighting on the front line, create genuine solidarity networks to constantly denounce what is happening in the affected territories and the role played by TNCs. It is vital as well to dismantle the international shield that protects corporations, such as the Investor-State Dispute Settlement System (ISDS) included in trade and investment agreements.

Transnational corporations always play a 'winner takes all' game. They take no responsibility for the conflicts they generate because they can easily evade national justice systems or blackmail governments, or they are simply so powerful that many governments cannot lay a finger on them. This is why it is so important to demand greater international scrutiny of their activities to hold them accountable for the consequences. We must continue to support the establishment of a legally binding international human rights instrument for TNCs that obliges them to respect human rights and compensate the communities affected by their operations. The [binding treaty](#) currently being negotiated at the United Nations will be fundamental for ensuring that the communities who resist and denounce the impacts of TNCs have some form of protection and an effective international channel for obtaining justice for the repercussions on their territories and environment.

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Notes

- 166 According to Eduardo Gudynas, 'To identify these particular situations, I propose a new term: "extraher" and its derivative "extrahección" in Spanish. The origin of this word is the Latin word "extrahere", where "ex" means outside and "trahere" means to remove or drag to oneself. Therefore, extraher is used here to refer to the act of taking or removing with violence or where natural resources are "torn away" from either the communities or Nature'.
- 167 In her work, Maristella Svampa says, 'we can consider as developmentalist neoextractivism activities traditionally associated with it (like mining and oil exploration) and the ones linked to the new agriculture and food system, such as agribusiness or biofuel production. It also includes the infrastructure projects'. <http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2015/4/22/the-commodities-consensus-and-valuation-languages-in-latin-america-1>
- 168 Maristella Svampa describes commodities as "'undifferentiated products whose prices are fixed internationally" or as "products of global production, availability and demand that have an international price range and do not require advanced technology for their production and processing". Both definitions range from raw materials to semi-processed or industrial products. In the case of Latin America, the demand for commodities is concentrated in food products such as corn, soybeans and wheat, as well as fossil fuels (oil and gas) and minerals and metals (copper, gold, silver, tin, bauxite and zinc, among others)'.
- 169 Interview with the author. March 2021.
- 170 Interview with the author. March 2021.
- 171 Interview with the author. March 2021.

SETTLED HABITS, NEW TRICKS

Casteist policing meets big tech in India

*Ameya Bokil, Avaneendra Khare, Nikita Sonavane, Srujana Bej
and Vaishali Janarthanan*



Big Tech is reinforcing and accelerating a system of caste-based discrimination in India and reinforcing the power and impunity of its police.

It is the evening of 15 June 2019. The Station House Officer of the Kolar Road Police Station in Bhopal, the capital city of the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh (MP), convenes his officers to announce a rise in car thefts in their jurisdiction. He states that the thieves are the local *Pardhis* and instructs officers to make night-time visits to the *Pardhi basti* (a slum colony), pick up and detain *anyone* outside after dark. This goes unchallenged because the police widely believe that the *Pardhis* are habitual criminals, responsible for every case of house-breaking and theft. We might have found it hard to believe that the police blatantly target an entire community had we not been at the station for an entirely different reason. Every detained *Pardhi* would have their 'suspicious activity' recorded in the extensive files the police maintain on their community.

Recently, technology companies and governments are helping to digitise these police records and the surveillance of 'suspect' individuals who are more 'likely' to commit crimes. Through this rigged digital database, the Indian police force is being empowered to sustain its caste-based criminalisation of marginalised communities and continue to act arbitrarily with impunity. The digitisation of already biased police records, extensive surveillance systems, predictive policing through interlinked databases and the complete absence of a regulatory framework have led to the creation of a parallel digital caste system which denies the fundamental freedoms of specific marginalised communities.¹⁷²

When caste is criminality

The Constitution of India formally protects citizens' right to equality, including the right to equal treatment before the law and freedom from discrimination on grounds of race, caste and religion. The adoption of the Constitution was a transformative moment as India became a sovereign, democratic postcolonial republic and aspired to move beyond the pervasive feudal legacy of the caste system.¹⁷³ The entrenched nature of the caste system, applying to nearly all aspects of life, has made it hard to extirpate, making the right to equality unattainable for certain communities, as we had witnessed at the police station. The *Pardhi* community is one of India's *Adivasi* or indigenous communities.¹⁷⁴ Although formally outside strictures of the caste system, these communities are nonetheless vilified.

Several hundred communities, including the *Pardhis*, were branded as 'hereditary criminals addicted to systematic commission of non-bailable offences' under the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) enacted by the British colonial government in 1871. Its aim was to make these communities liable to state surveillance and control in myriad ways. Since the repeal of the CTA in 1952 and the official decriminalisation of the tribes criminalised thereunder, these communities are referred to as De-notified Tribes (DNT).¹⁷⁵

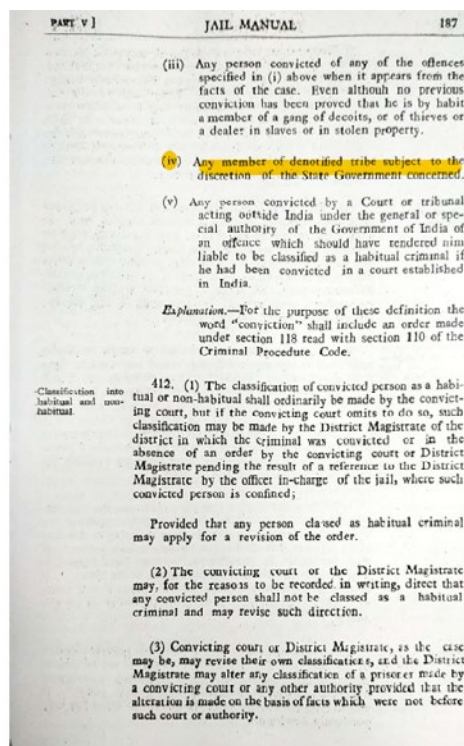
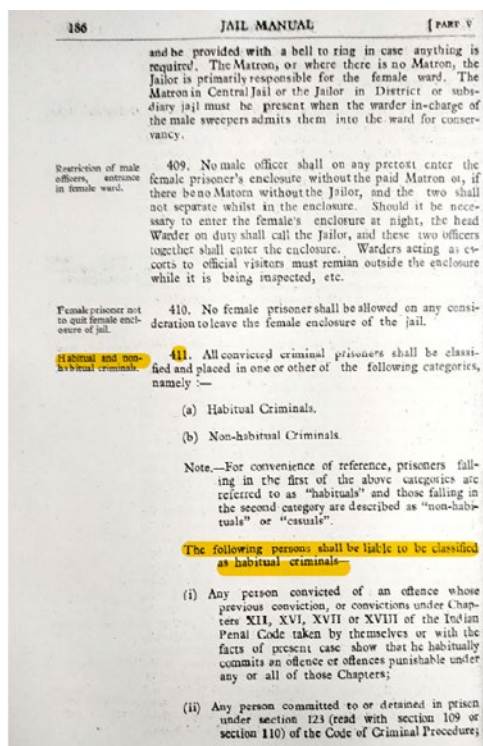
The CTA was inspired by the combination of racist European criminal anthropology and the Indian caste system, which portrayed criminality as a hereditary characteristic.¹⁷⁶ British colonial authorities established the police in the 1840s with the explicit objective of controlling the Indian population through force.¹⁷⁷ The police failed in its objective, so to give an appearance of order, it adopted the strategy of selective policing of certain groups.¹⁷⁸ This selection hinged on a social consensus on who was a criminal, informed by the caste system.

Thus, the colonial strategy created categories of persons who were considered the 'proper objects of policing', principally forest-dwelling and nomadic communities (including *Pardhis*) whose way of life conflicted with British interests. The *Pardhis* are traditionally semi-nomadic hunters,¹⁷⁹ whose way of life conflicted with colonial regulations on hunting, control over forests for commercial purposes and revenue collection from a sedentary population.¹⁸⁰

Consequently, surveillance and intrusive policing became a part of these communities' daily existence: from having their names registered in permanent records, being placed in 'reformatory settlements' in order to undermine their nomadic cultures and facing severe restrictions on their movement to constantly having to report to the authorities.¹⁸¹ This system is best described by historian Radhika Singha's explanation of the colonial policing system – 'it was far easier to prosecute a prisoner on a charge of belonging to some ill-defined criminal collectivity than to establish individual responsibility for a specific criminal offence'.¹⁸²

The contemporary Indian police have continued with this legacy. First, Indian society continues to be ordered by the caste system; second, the idea of hereditary criminals still occupies the mind and structure of the Indian police, largely comprising members of oppressive castes; and third on the grounds of expediency that hold as true now as they did during British colonial times.

Thus, limited policing resources are still targeting the same communities. Even after the CTA was repealed, its legacy has endured in policing structures, practices and attitudes. Individual Indian states have adopted legal provisions concerning 'habitual offenders' (HOs)¹⁸³ and maintained the surveillance systems designed under the CTA. The hereditary criminal of the past is now placed in the more palatable administrative category of the HO, which remains ill-defined and therefore gives the police vast discretionary powers. These provisions, while apparently neutral, are still selectively used against the same communities that were targeted in colonial times.



References to 'Habitual criminals' in the Madhya Pradesh Jail Manual, 1987, Vol 1, Part 2

A centuries-long project of predictive policing

'Angrez chale gaye, police chodh gaye hamare liye' (The British are gone, but they have left their police behind'), says a *Pardhi* woman in Bhopal, referring to the continued police discrimination her community faces. Whether in the form of indiscriminate detention, torture in custody, or economic exploitation, the everyday life of *Pardhis* is characterised by police violence; but because they lie at the very bottom of Indian caste society and continue to experience socioeconomic hardship, their systemic exploitation (much like their very existence) is rendered invisible. Scholars have failed to document the systemic police targeting of *Pardhis* and other DNT communities, while civil society's attempts to highlight the issue have been restricted to anecdotal evidence of police brutality.

Once held at a police station, every *Pardhi* – children, women and men – is subjected to physical and verbal assault. 'They know it is easy to beat a confession out of a *Pardhi*', says one woman. Parents are beaten in front of their children to 'send a message.' Recently, two *Pardhi* minors were picked up from a tea-stall and temple, stripped naked and beaten.¹⁸⁴ The police misled their mother about where they were, and when she tried to get them released, she too was beaten by the police and framed under false charges.¹⁸⁵

Besides the violence, police surveillance has long dispossessed *Pardhis* of their traditional livelihoods. Today, they depend on waste picking, begging and odd jobs like unloading rubble and clearing bushes. 'In the entire city, there is not one person who will offer us employment in a shop or give us any salaried job', claims one *Pardhi*, citing the stigma of criminality associated with DNTs. The constant police surveillance, harassment and frequent arrests hinder their ability to pursue education and steady employment.

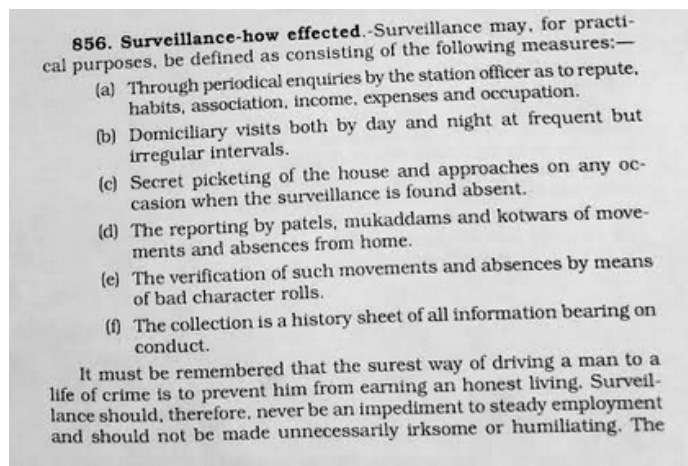
Threatening to create a new police record or add to an existing one, the police demand large bribes (the equivalent of US\$ 250–1,500) from the *Pardhis*. The bribe increases each time they are held in police detention or jailed. Between the bribes, bail and the lack of steady employment, a *Pardhi* family typically remains trapped in a cycle of perpetual indebtedness.

Police stations across India maintain registers of HOs – also called 'history-sheeters' – in their jurisdictions, with extensive details of their lives and daily movements. While their identification may not explicitly be based on caste, collective police action overwhelmingly identifies members of the DNT communities as HOs. These registers record their demographic details such as place of residence and caste, personal information such as age and identifying marks on the body, and 'evidence' of criminality: details of their habits, their method of committing crimes, their property, particulars of their associates, places they frequent, etc.

For communities such as the *Pardhis*, even being visibly mobile carries with it a threat of police surveillance and violence. Rana, a middle-aged *Pardhi* man, was stopped by traffic police for not wearing a crash helmet. When the police demanded to know his surname and caste identity, he was detained and questioned about how he had obtained a motorcycle. When his answers were deemed 'unsatisfactory', he was arrested. So pervasive is the fear of having one's daily life recorded in police registers that Rana, much like other *Pardhis* identified as a HO, rethinks every activity of his life, including something as mundane as going to the local tea stall with friends.¹⁸⁶ These records shackle the *Pardhi* community's lives, freedoms and dignities.

Arguably, the most important section of the habitual offenders' registers is an informal record that police officers must sign to attest that they have personally trailed or surveilled the HO at least once every fortnight to investigate whether s/he had (despite extensive surveillance) managed to outwit the police to commit a theft or burglary. The police in Bhopal's Govindpura police station showed us this, which was surprising given that these registers are fiercely guarded to avoid public scrutiny.

State police regulations allow them to maintain a record of HOs in their jurisdictions, but there are no restrictions on the information they can keep in their registers and therefore no form of accountability. As a result, the police have developed their own practices, including using local informants (known as *mukhbirs*) to keep abreast of HOs' daily activities and movements.



Madhya Pradesh Police Regulations detail some of the ways they surveil suspect individuals and communities

Police knowledge is ossified into algorithms

For over a century, the police have kept physical records of all cases and HOs, but these are now being digitised through the Crime and Criminal Tracking Network & Systems (CCTNS), the main and centralised system for maintaining digital records. The central government provides the core infrastructure to standardise digital data: First Information Reports (FIRs), various documents related to investigation and evidence, and the final police reports to be submitted to the courts. The CCTNS also allows geo-tagging of offences. However, for various state governments which are trying to build their own infrastructure over and above this standard, CCTNS extends far beyond digitisation into setting up a crime-mapping, analytics, and predictive system.

A super platform and an opaque black box, the CCTNS has been designed to be *the* digital repository of every local police record. It is hoped that it will make policing more efficient by allowing local police stations to know about a person's entire criminal history at the click of the mouse: cases in which the person has been accused, facial photographs, the crimes committed, the number of days held in detention, and whether the courts acquitted or convicted them.

The central government and the tech industry maintain that systems such as the CCTNS will allow for 'objective', 'smart', error-free algorithm-based detection of criminal hotspots and predictive policing. In reality since these databases are fed by the police's centuries-long caste-based system of preventive surveillance and predictive policing (which has already determined who is a criminal and what crimes

habitual criminals commit repeatedly), there is no possibility of objectivity or lack of caste bias. The CCTNS only adds a technological veneer to a caste-based policing model. While the ideological purpose matters little to local police stations, its material benefits include hours of saved time and seamless digital transmission of produced criminalities across jurisdictions.

The reliance on and aspirations for predictive policing are a part of the aim for the Indian police to be among the world's most advanced and professionalised force. The police claim that their limitations are inadequate staffing, poor technological skills and an overworked force. The goal is to have the same technological tools in every police station in India as in London and New York, to increase efficiency and technological expertise and obviate the need to recruit more police officers while also cutting workloads. Despite concerns raised about predictive policing in the UK and US with respect to racial profiling and discrimination, mass surveillance, arbitrary search and seizure, as well as the erosion of the fundamental right to privacy, the Indian police have sought to enhance predictive policing technologies such as hotspot detection and data mining.

The CCTNS is the future of India's police registers. By 2030, it is hoped that the platform will be adequately developed to free police officers of maintaining any paper registers. Since state governments are free to tweak CCTNS as they please, several states have been collecting biometric details (iris scans, facial prints, etc.) of HOs and even first-time offenders.¹⁸⁷ A senior police officer in Bhopal claimed that the CCTNS is being used in Madhya Pradesh as a repository of all criminals. CCTNS integrates various dossiers: history sheets and *goonda* files, fingerprints, footprints, details about family members of accused persons, etc. The details of family members are obtained for a 'deterrent effect', so that purported criminals do not commit further crimes. (A *goonda* is what the police call individuals who are more likely to commit assault or disturb public peace by indulging in general public violence and rioting. Derived from a pejorative term in Hindi that roughly translates as 'rowdy' or 'hooligan', the police surveilled such identified individuals through various *Goonda* Acts from as early as 1926.)¹⁸⁸

Permanent databases do not spare children either. One 16-year-old *Pardhi* had his details forcibly recorded (including fingerprints and photos) on a charge for which he was eventually given a suspended sentence. Creating permanent records of children, whether or not they are convicted, may be in direct contravention of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, which espouses the principle of a 'fresh start' for a child. This, however, is of no concern to the local cop.

The problem here, much like in the case of traditional surveillance, is that the police operate without a clear legal framework and use ambiguity to their advantage. The Madhya Pradesh Police Regulations allow for the creation of physical databases of HOs and briefly state the manner of their surveillance. This legal framework, which has remained unchanged over decades, did not foresee today's digital advances. Consequently, using technology for surveillance, with its associated set of new problems (permanence, security, and privacy, to name but a few), has virtually no legal basis and therefore very few constraints. In a landmark judgment in 2017, the Indian judiciary confirmed that Indian citizens have a fundamental right to privacy; however, the judiciary has yet to extend this to the question of maintenance of HO registers and databases.

The only limits to the breadth of police surveillance appear to be infrastructural constraints. To address these problems, the state of Telangana, for instance, is investing in a multi-storey centre to house its ambitious Integrated People Information Hub (IPIH), a database containing 360° profiles of every resident. Other states plan to follow suit.¹⁸⁹

The state's inability to self-regulate its use of technology is amply demonstrated by the ham-fisted introduction of the Aadhaar, a 'unique identification' number linking biometric information and various databases necessary for accessing welfare programmes, setting up bank accounts, purchasing SIM cards, and paying income tax, among others until the Supreme Court directed the government to regulate and limit its mandatory use for specific public services.¹⁹⁰

No hiding from the police

A second technological advance with regard to policing is the use of closed-circuit cameras (CCTV), purportedly for national security and women's security. A chilling incident of rape and murder that made the headlines in 2012 led to greater calls for harsh criminal laws and mass surveillance technologies to deter crimes against women. The paternalistic preoccupation with maintaining control over women's bodies for the stated purpose of ensuring their safety has resulted in surveillance in public spaces. The Lucknow city police recently announced that they will initiate a response for women in distress based on their facial expressions observed through AI-equipped facial-recognition technology.¹⁹¹

Most of the larger Indian cities are dotted with police CCTV (without attendant regulations) on busy streets, at intersections, and in market areas to replace in-person police surveillance. Private establishments and educational institutions in larger cities have also invested in CCTV on their premises in accordance with state regulations seeking to establish 'public safety.' The sinister implications of creating and maintaining such networks are obvious. Recently, during the lockdown imposed to control the COVID-19 pandemic, the Union Government allowed a hate-filled media campaign to vilify Muslims as maliciously spreading outbreaks across India.¹⁹² Unsurprisingly, this culminated in the police in MP and Telangana using drones to surveil mainly Muslim neighbourhoods.¹⁹³

While CCTV-based surveillance policing has thus far largely maintained the distinction between footage from police cameras and from private cameras mandatorily installed, but accessible only after a crime has been committed, a strange third hybrid is being developed in some parts of the country. Take, for instance, Bhopal Eye, the crown jewel of the Bhopal police surveillance system. This mobile application is marketed as a citizen-policing initiative which allows the police to actively maintain a database of the number, location and range of all private CCTVs installed in the city. As part of the Bhopal Eye initiative, the local police have been 'encouraging' the installation of CCTV in homes and commercial establishments, even in the absence of mandatory public safety regulations.

The economic model of Bhopal Eye, in some ways, parallels mobile applications such as Uber: the financial investment of acquiring and maintaining the input units (CCTVs) for the intended output (surveillance) is made not by the organisation that built the network, but is shifted to citizens by selling to them dual myths of ever-lurking danger and the deterrent value of constant surveillance. When citizens are thus recruited, they can download the free application and log in the location coordinates of their CCTVs. The police, as the database creators, develop this network and use the data to keep track of how many of the city's 'private eyes' can be harnessed for policing purposes. Apart from the lack of *any* regulation, little is known about the procedure used to manage Bhopal Eye, its use and its efficiency. The senior police officer credited with single-handedly constructing and initiating Bhopal Eye declined to answer our questions.

In the future, systems such as Bhopal Eye could, through both overt encouragement and tacit prejudice, facilitate the police's surveillance reach within mixed neighbourhoods, where both affluent and working-class families reside, as well as enable heightened monitoring of 'suspect' individuals, such as street-vendors, in wealthy localities.



Police promotional material shared on social media sites such as Facebook to encourage Bhopal Eye registration with the tagline “No criminal will be safe if houses install cameras properly”.

Some members of the DNT communities seem amenable to constant CCTV surveillance. Rana, the man who admitted to being afraid of even going to the local tea stall due to police harassment, exclaims, ‘I wish they would actually install CCTVs everywhere so that they would know [that it is not us] who is actually committing these crimes’. The history of CCTV has taught us, however, that the purported safety-net they offer is not for all citizens. For instance, police stations are required to have cameras installed at their entrances and inside cells where the accused are detained. This was supposed to be a check on custodial violence, for which the Indian police are notorious. However, they are now careful to take the accused to a room without CCTV before assaulting them. The police influence medical examinations of the accused to obfuscate the evidence of their brutality.¹⁹⁴ The police hesitate to supply CCTV video feed to those who request it, and the judiciary is not known to strictly demand it either. The reliance on cameras is thus entirely at the discretion of the local police. The police may simply not submit video evidence when it does not favour their case, while the defence might never learn that such evidence exists.

Thus, Rana’s trust in the potentially vindicating benefits of CCTVs seems misplaced. A 2018 incident related to the criminalisation of cattle slaughter in the city of Khandwa illustrates the point. The police had installed CCTVs at a busy town square to check on the illegal slaughter of cattle. A Muslim man, who lived within the range of the surveillance camera, was arrested for the offence. His family repeatedly claimed that the case against him had been fabricated and that the camera’s recording would provide the proof needed to exonerate him. However, since the prosecution enjoys wide discretion in introducing evidence at trial, the family had no means of ensuring that the footage made its way to court.

What's in it for Big Tech?

We found almost unreserved enthusiasm for technology in our interviews with the police, with officers at all levels regarding the force's steady progress into increasingly sophisticated methods of data collection and collation as a badge of honour. The only problem, according to the officer in charge of the CCTNS at one of the local police stations, is that the tools currently at their disposal do not work *well enough*. Nor did we have to poke around to find the reasons for this candid embrace since we received the same reply repeatedly: technology makes policing more efficient, convenient, accessible, and accurate – basically, *easier*. Experience suggests that justifications of efficiency need not be set in stone. Be it the precipitous demonetisation implemented in 2016¹⁹⁵ or the gargantuan *Aadhaar* project introduced in 2009,¹⁹⁶ regimes across the political spectrum have displayed a Hydra-like ability to invent and reinvent justificatory strategies, leading one to wonder what exactly lies underneath the screeds and slogans. It is thus meaningful to ask what interests are served by the technological advances but remain obscured from public view.

One need not look far. As Usha Ramanathan, a veteran privacy activist and trenchant critic of the *Aadhaar* project puts unequivocally, 'the driving force behind the [*Aadhaar*] project is corporate interest'.¹⁹⁷ India is a staggeringly lucrative market for private corporations that produce surveillance technologies.¹⁹⁸ In Bhopal, for example, security cameras alone, which are only one component of the city's surveillance infrastructure, cost upwards of Rs. 2.5 Crores (about US \$135,000), an enormous figure for a non-metropolitan city.

Indeed, a visit to the futuristic central CCTV control room at the police headquarters in Bhopal is like being at a trade fair, as a support staff member from Honeywell, the corporation behind the city-wide Integrated Video Management System project, rattles off the panoply of brands that have coalesced to create this panopticon. Honeywell landed the lucrative contract after its impressive performance at surveilling the *Kumbh Mela*, a Hindu pilgrimage held every 12 years, attended by millions. An eight-member team from Honeywell is constantly circulating around Bhopal's police headquarters to provide 'indispensable' technical support.

The nature of Honeywell's partnership with Bhopal police illustrates two significant ways in which private corporate interests cast an ominous shadow over the 'public good': not only do corporations pull the strings;¹⁹⁹ they also invariably set the stage. Consider the case of Huawei, which has been selling 'safe cities' across the world, of which facial-recognition technology is an integral component, altering its pitch to appeal to diverse potential patrons.²⁰⁰

Similarly, Honeywell's offering sees public safety as a function of constant, blanket surveillance, whereby everybody is suspect unless observed otherwise – a vision that it then volunteers to execute and helps the law-enforcement agency navigate. Honeywell's role is currently limited to providing the police with CCTV footage when a crime is committed and they request assistance to discover who the criminal is or track where they might have fled. However, for the police and Honeywell, this is only its secondary, instrumental purpose. The inherent purpose of Honeywell's CCTV footage is that it compels public self-discipline and self-surveillance, and therefore reduces crime.

Another case in point is the proliferation of facial-recognition-based AI technologies that are being marketed to police departments across the country as the 'must have' crime-fighting tools. According to reports, the Surat City Police has a picture intelligence unit that relies on Nippon Electrical Company's

proprietary NeoFace technology and vehicle number-plate recognition to track persons of interest.²⁰¹ During one of our interviews with a police officer, he alluded to the city's population as 'clients.' This language reveals what is not being openly stated, which is that the state is motivated more by being the customers of shiny curios than acting as the custodian of the citizens' civil rights.

The construction of a digital caste system

The dream of Digital India was sold to the Indian population by the Narendra Modi government soon after being elected in 2014. A key component of this dream is to build an e-governance model. The need to use technology has been furthered through the myth that tech is neutral in the prevention of crime and curbs the problem of human bias, when all that these systems do is essentially digitise the casteist targeting of communities through the nebulous category of HOs. There is scant reflection on what such a digitised caste system implies, who is responsible for designing it and how it reproduces and reifies hierarchies that are inimical to the criminal justice system.

The goal of efficiency makes no attempt to dislodge the traditional principles of policing: who is kept under surveillance and why remain constant across time and space. Technological advances merely sharpen the blade of police discretion and further entrench its operational biases. This is already a departure from the supposed relationship between technology and law enforcement in countries where police body cams are at least expected to correct implicit bias.²⁰²

Indeed, in the US, there have long been arguments about the attempt to shroud racist systems under the cloak of objectivity. The historian Khalil Muhammad demonstrated how a 'racial data revolution' in the nineteenth century marshaled science and statistics to make a 'disinterested' case for white superiority.²⁰³ The results of the 1890 census showed that African Americans were disproportionately imprisoned, but rather than interpreting this as a symptom of systemic inequities, the data was understood to be 'objective, colour blind, and incontrovertible'. In this way, crime statistics became the foundation upon which the myth of Black inferiority was constructed.²⁰⁴

Likewise, the datasets and models used in newer, tech-based systems are not objective representations of reality. The employment of new technologies that reflect and reproduce existing inequities – but that are promoted and perceived as more objective or progressive than the discriminatory systems of a previous era – often hides, speeds up, and even deepens discrimination, while appearing to be neutral or benevolent.²⁰⁵

A spate of new applications allows the police to access and update information from their mobile phones. The more one asks them about the number of databases the police 'maintain' and their regulatory frameworks, the more obvious it is that even the police have been unable to keep up with the mushrooming of private technologies in their operations. It is unknown how many online databases there are, how information is uploaded onto them, the nature and breadth of this information – and what is the ultimate aim of assembling this large archipelago of digital database infrastructures for police surveillance. These multiple applications, software and databases may (for now) exist in silos, even if they regularly cross-pollinate information. However, they are all so close to each other that they can all be easily interlinked to build dossiers of personal information on all citizens and allow more pervasive institutional profiling, which can then be used to justify differential treatment in schooling, employment, housing, etc., particularly for those belonging to marginalised communities who are identified as HOs.

Thus, when the *Pardhi* community says that the police have the entire history of every member of their community, this is no exaggeration. It is clear that the real aim of surveillance and the unchecked powers it gives to the police is to maintain political hegemony and a very strict, hierarchical social order. Thus, surveillance policing allows for the marriage of profit-making corporations and authoritarian regimes. The social control they seek to maintain is, in turn, in accordance with the casteist social control already enforced by police surveillance.

A Case for Police Accountability

We need to go beyond resisting the introduction and use of surveillance technologies to question, if not overhaul, the very ethos of policing in India, because it has already perpetuated dangerous predictive policing on the bodies of the marginalised even without these technologies. Unfortunately, the Indian state is increasing its excessive reliance on the institutions of policing to respond to various crises. Recently published data, for instance, documents the state's heavy reliance on policing and colonial-era sedition law to quell dissent on issues ranging from Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant to the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019.²⁰⁶ Each new cause opens up new avenues for criminalising and policing marginalised communities.

New justifications for increased police surveillance will keep multiplying as the state seeks to gain a tighter hold over the social order. Each instance of a perceived threat to the 'internal security'²⁰⁷ of this social order is fertile ground for intensifying surveillance mechanisms, as has been observed most recently in governments' response to citizens' protests.²⁰⁸ The habitual offender is to the city what the 'anti-national' dissenter is to the country – an inveterate, antisocial element from whom society needs protection. Activists, lawyers, students, and a cultivated category of urban Naxals are now all beginning to be at the receiving end of this uninhibited state surveillance and records. In February 2021, *The Washington Post* reported that civil rights activist Rona Wilson's laptop had been hacked into for surveilling and planting false documents implicating him as an enemy of the state.²⁰⁹ While the hacker's identity is unknown, it is reported that the hacker (an individual or organisation) had extensive resources at their disposal. In 2019, it was reported that the Israeli firm NSO Group's spyware tool Pegasus was used to surveil journalists and human-rights defenders.²¹⁰ The NSO Group admitted that it sells Pegasus exclusively to governments and law-enforcement agencies.

Surveillance-based policing to address violence against women is the latest addition to the police's range of responsibilities. Although feminist and women's movements, among others, have questioned the failure of criminal law to address violence against women, the questions of caste-based criminality, policing and intersectionality have largely remained absent from this conversation. The caste-based construction of criminality makes women from marginalised communities the most vulnerable. They suffer the greatest violence but receive no support from the criminal justice system, because its very structures allow the police to perpetrate such violence in the first place.



A parade of women walking from their dorms to various factories sidestepping sewage and construction.
Credit: Andrea Bruce / NOOR

Feminist and civil rights movements in India have essentially failed to question the very ethos of casteist policing in the country. *Pardhi* women recount instances of police harassment when they are at work segregating waste. If the police find anything valuable in their waste-collection bag, they are accused of having stolen it and are dragged to the police station. Some women said that their own jewellery and other items are confiscated and recorded as evidence of theft. In two instances where *Pardhi* women²¹¹ had committed suicide because of police harassment, the state relied on such 'criminal antecedents' to portray these women as criminals and grant the police impunity – as if being a criminal justified being a victim of police violence. The instances of violence against *Pardhi* women are rendered invisible through these constructed narratives of criminality, granting the police complete discretion and impunity.

We therefore need to focus our resistance on the very cause of the problem of disproportionate police targeting of marginalised *Adivasi* communities either through technological surveillance or other means: police discretion and impunity. As gatekeepers of the criminal justice system, the police determine who become the subjects of this system. Investing in building police accountability is the first step in tackling the culture of discretion and impunity that has become synonymous with law and order in India.

By underscoring and drawing attention to forms of coded inequality, not only must we challenge the social dimensions of technology, but also work against the construction of a parallel digital caste system that essentially intensifies the traditional caste system.²¹² At present, those whose bodies are subjected to violence by the carceral system are forced to seek justice from the same system. In the US, the Black Lives Matter (BLM)²¹³ movement has highlighted the dangers of carceral imagination, the racist systems of policing and the need to invest in non-retributive forms of justice.

A major BLM demand is to defund the police who are designed to criminalise Black communities. Lessons from the movement can be adopted to challenge caste-based oppression in India through policing. This would begin by building a discourse of the casteist nature of policing through advocacy, research and community organising, alongside an active investment in cultivating an imagination of a transformative justice, one that is not designed to prosper on the bodies of marginalised communities, whatever their caste – the eradication of which is another, much larger, struggle.

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ABOLISH NATIONAL SECURITY

Arun Kundnani



Like its criminal-legal system, the US's global national security infrastructure spreads rather than reduces violence, in ways that are often organised through racism. Extending a politics of abolitionism to national security allows us to understand the structural drivers of endless war and border militarisation and to articulate new visions of security based on the presence of collective well-being rather than the elimination of 'threats'.

While the COVID-19 pandemic raged in 2020, at least 15 million people participated in Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations across the US.²¹⁴ These multi-racial protests represented a coming to terms with the country's history of racial violence. Among the predominantly young people protesting, there is a widespread awareness that war, prisons, and borders do not advance the well-being of the majority of people in the US, that turning the country into an 'armed lifeboat' is no solution to climate crisis and zoonotic pandemics, and that wealth never 'trickles down' to the majority under racial capitalism. Those who have come of age in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008/9 are not being taken in by the false image of an exceptionally virtuous US.

As with any movement, within it there is a diverse range of motivations and orientations. Of particular note is the abolitionist approach that has shaped much recent Black-led mass struggle, influenced by Black feminist politics and queer organising – and the radical notions of care these traditions embody.²¹⁵ Abolitionism is a mode of political thinking and practice that has emerged from 20 years of organising against the prison-industrial complex by groups such as Critical Resistance.²¹⁶ Abolishing prisons and defunding the police are its most prominent aims but opposition to border violence and militarism has also been important. Abolitionism locates policing and incarceration within a broader set of structures that includes borders and military violence deployed abroad.

Fifteen years ago, one of the leading thinkers on abolitionism, Angela Davis, called for anti-prisons organising work to expand to take on the global imprisonment networks of the 'Global War on Terror'.²¹⁷ Today, groups such as Dissenters are organising against the entirety of the US's national security infrastructure from a Black abolitionist perspective.²¹⁸

At the core of abolitionist politics is an attempt to reconceptualise the notion of security. The logic that dominates the criminal-legal system, argue abolitionists, involves thinking of harm as a problem that can be solved through officially sanctioned punitive violence. This has two consequences.

First, it means that the criminal-legal system intensifies rather than reduces the circulation of violence, giving rise, in turn, to demands for more police and more prisons – a perpetual motion of criminalisation.

Second, it means that attention is diverted from examining the underlying social and economic causes of what we call 'crime'. Prisons instead serve to screen off the social problems that result from the 'unmanageable political economy' of global capitalism.²¹⁹ But in doing so, those problems are worsened.

The massive expansion in the number of prisons and the militarisation of law enforcement are not responses to increased crime but an integral part of neoliberalism, which involves declaring large numbers of people as 'surplus'. Prisons are ways of hiding such people from view and forgetting about the social questions they raise; racism is essential to this process.

In such circumstances, abolitionists argue, calls to reform prisons and police forces to make them more humane are insufficient. So, too, are calls to differentiate more effectively between those who deserve to be incarcerated and those who do not. Such calls avoid a reflection on the root causes of the problems that prisons and police pretend to solve. Instead, abolitionism proposes the creation of an 'array of social institutions that would begin to solve the social problems that set people on the track to prison, thereby helping to render the prison obsolete'.²²⁰

This broader sense of security would involve meeting educational, childcare, housing, and healthcare needs as well as decriminalising drug use, sex work, and migration. By also creating a justice system based on reparation and reconciliation rather than retribution and vengeance, there would ultimately be no need for prisons.²²¹

Of course, achieving that goal is not an immediate possibility. For now, the question is how to push for reforms to the criminal-legal system that move in the direction of defunding and disbanding. The answer will depend upon local context and the balance of political forces. As well as building power through grassroots organising, electoral initiatives will also play a role. The Movement for Black Lives coalition's Electoral Justice Project, for example, has proposed the Breathe Act, legislation that would defund federal incarceration and law enforcement, abolish the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), fund community-led, non-punitive approaches to public safety, retroactively decriminalise drug use, invest in education, health care, housing, and environmental justice, and extend workers' rights.²²²

Abolitionism throws up as many questions as it answers. The work of imagining alternatives to the criminal-legal system is ongoing. What is striking, however, is the generative possibilities of applying an abolitionist approach not only domestically within the US but also to its agencies of global security. In this, abolitionism draws upon the legacies of a Black internationalist politics in the US that found expression, for example, in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee's organising in the late 1960s against the Vietnam war and its work supporting national liberation in Puerto Rico and Palestine.²²³

Like its criminal-legal system, the US's global national security infrastructure spreads rather than reduces violence, in ways that are often organised through racism. And its military actions distract us from addressing the social and ecological problems the planet faces. Abolitionism implies that framing discussion of US military actions in terms of which kinds of 'intervention' are legitimate and which are not is a limiting horizon that hides from view the structural drivers of endless war. Likewise, discussing who should be constrained by borders and who should not means avoiding reflection on the role that borders play in our social and economic systems and what the alternatives might be.

An abolitionist framework entails understanding that genuine security does not result from the elimination of 'threats' but from the presence of collective well-being. It advocates building institutions that foster the social and ecological relationships needed to live dignified lives, rather than reactively identifying groups of people who are seen as threatening. It holds that true security rests not on dominance but on solidarity, at both the personal and the international level. It is possible to address security problems like climate change and pandemic diseases only from an internationalist perspective. In the long term, it is illusory to achieve security for one group of people at another's expense.²²⁴ In policy terms, an abolitionist approach would imply a progressive defunding and shrinking of the US's bloated military, intelligence, and border infrastructure, and the construction of alternative institutions that can provide collective security in the face of environmental and social dangers.

The US racial security logic

The US currently spends over \$1 trillion a year on a fantasy of national security. This amount, spread across military, intelligence, and border agencies, is over twice what it would cost to provide both COVID-19 vaccines to everyone in the world and a global safety net to prevent anyone from falling into poverty because of the virus.²²⁵ The Department of Defense budget alone comprises more than half of all federal discretionary spending each year. The US military deploys 2 million men and women across at least 800 military bases in 90 countries and territories around the world. It conducted covert military operations in 154 countries in 2020.²²⁶ It maintains an estimated arsenal of 3,800 nuclear warheads and, in the coming years, plans to spend roughly \$100 billion to purchase 600 more nuclear missiles from defence corporation Northrop Grumman.²²⁷

Beyond the military, the present-day US national security system includes agencies that were forged in the early Cold War, such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the National Security Council (NSC), as well as more recent creations of the Wars on Drugs and Terror, such as the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). With global frameworks like the Global War on Terror and War on Drugs, involving relationships of intelligence-sharing, training, arms exports, and financial assistance, the US is able to draw many other states into its security machinery, driving spirals of conflict across Latin America, the Middle East, South and South East Asia, and Africa. Hundreds of thousands have died in Mexico as a result of the militarised War on Drugs the US has encouraged there.²²⁸ The US remains the world's largest arms exporter, with its share of arms exports rising to over a third of the global total over the last five years.²²⁹

In the neoliberal era, the national security system has incorporated a web of think-tanks and private security corporations involved in weapons manufacturing, military logistics, the provision of mercenaries and other armed personnel, cyberwarfare, border fortification, and surveillance technology. At one remove from these corporations is the array of Wall Street investors who profit from the taxpayer-funded national security system.

The scale of this infrastructure is almost completely accepted as the taken-for-granted background to US foreign policy-making. To question it is to place oneself outside of what is considered legitimate opinion in elite US politics. Threaded through this consensus is an ideological process which involves repeatedly identifying 'bad actors' – whether they are embodied in nation states or insurgent movements – and selecting methods of dominating them to produce a fantasy of security. The frameworks through which these 'bad actors' are conceived have foundations in the racial and colonial history of the US. Today, they have a global reach.

From the frontier wars of the colonial period to the Global War on Terror, the construction of threats to security has involved what Michael Rogin calls the 'fantasy of savage violence', the fear that racially subordinated groups might inflict their barbarism on the civilised.²³⁰ Rebellions against racial and colonial domination are the indispensable emergencies around which US security policy and practice has usually been organised. Some of these emergencies are real, some exaggerated, and some entirely imagined. Their racial elements might be explicit or submerged. In any case, they provide opportunities for the mythic heroes of US expansion to exact racial revenge or rescue.²³¹ This involves what Franco Fornari describes as 'the incredible paradox that the most important security function is not to defend ourselves from an external enemy, but to *find a real enemy*'.²³²

In a sense, the US has never stopped fighting ‘savages’ at its frontiers, even as the frontier expanded to the global battlefields of the Cold War, Global War on Terror, and War on Drugs.²³³ The enemy in each case is characterised by an ascribed inherent failure to follow ‘civilised’ rules of conflict. To conservatives, the enemy is of necessity alien to the values of Western civilisation; to liberals, the enemy fails to uphold democracy and human rights. But these political differences conceal an implicit solidarity: with few exceptions, conservatives and liberals agree that national security means absolute domination over less civilised enemies.

In this way, the US national security system proclaims its own innocence and virtue while it is, as Martin Luther King, Jr., pointed out in 1967, ‘the greatest purveyor of violence in the world’.²³⁴ But the weight of history does not fully explain the modalities of US national security policy and practice in the neoliberal era. Neoliberalism depends upon racially coded global divisions of labour that render vast swathes of the human population superfluous to capitalist production. Projects of racist policing, mass incarceration, border militarisation, and counter-terrorism are directed at managing this ‘surplus’ humanity under neoliberalism. This, in turn, provides a material basis for recurring upsurges of nationalism and racism that flourish in the ruins of neoliberalism’s dismantling of collective democratic action.²³⁵

This emphasis on security under neoliberalism has offered a new basis for the legitimacy of government itself. As former Chair of the Federal Reserve, Alan Greenspan, told the Zürich daily *Tages-Anzeiger* in 2007, ‘thanks to globalization, policy decisions in the US have been largely replaced by global market forces. National security aside, it hardly makes any difference who will be the next president’.²³⁶

In other words, because economic policy is usually subsumed in global markets, neoliberal governments find it hard to derive consent from claiming to increase citizens’ material well-being; instead, it is easier to legitimise themselves through claims of protecting citizens from myriad terrible dangers – namely, ‘national security’. Racially marked populations, who have been dispossessed by neoliberalism, are then cast as new sources of danger, in the form of terrorists, migrants, or criminals.²³⁷ Neoliberal political contest becomes a matter of parties competing over the identification of threats and the implementation of spectacles of violence in response.

The result is a political culture bent out of shape: national security has an overbearing presence in policy-making circles but one that mainly sustains a fantasy of domination and avoids any coming to terms with its own structural failures. As its decision to increase military spending indicates, the Biden administration has not broken with this pattern.

Mourning for America

Such a situation is not unique to the US but is a tendency wherever neoliberalism dominates. However, the US context is distinguished by an ideological attachment to the fantasy of a never-ending 1990s, when, in the aftermath of the Cold War, US exceptionalism seemed to have made possible a stable, US-dominated world order, before China’s twenty-first century ascent to superpower status. The delusion of returning to the US ‘primacy’ of the 1990s has long since become obsolete as a viable means of providing national security. Yet in the Washington policy-making process, alternatives to such a strategy are simply not credible.²³⁸ By not facing up to the irreversibility of its geopolitical decline and the environmental and social challenges it now confronts, the US is putting off a collective mourning for the loss of an imagined America that was loved but no longer exists. This failure to grapple with the early end of the

American century finds expression in liberal calls for a return to a 'rules-based international system' – code for 1990s-style globalisation – as much as in Trump's call to 'make America great again'. Refusing to come to terms with the collapse of a fantasy of US omnipotence produces a melancholic paralysis in the face of real dangers, even as the US national security infrastructure lashes out against the current list of targets: China, Russia, Venezuela, and Iran.²³⁹

As such, the gap between the official US narratives of national security and the actual security needs of ordinary people has become palpable. The US national security infrastructure has itself been a major contributor to the greatest danger facing the US population over the coming decades, the heating of the planet.²⁴⁰ Indeed, rather than reduce its carbon emissions, the Pentagon has presented climate crisis as providing a new rationale for its existence, declaring the US military as a necessary source of order in a world of climate-driven mass migration and extremism.²⁴¹

The US national security system did not prevent over half a million people in the US losing their lives to COVID-19, one of the world's highest per capita death tolls in the richest country in the world. Instead, it mobilised anti-Chinese sentiment in response to the pandemic to justify an escalation in spending to counter the rise of China.²⁴² Thus, even the catastrophes of climate crisis and zoonotic pandemics have been folded into the racialised logic of national security. The cycles of violence spun by the War on Drugs and the Global War on Terror have continued, despite those Wars causing far greater loss of civilian life than drug traffickers or terrorists could ever have imagined.²⁴³ The general pattern is that US policies exacerbate the insecurities they are ostensibly designed to minimise. They have utterly failed to deal with the actual dangers facing the US population. It is a record of failure that can only be described as pathological.

Cracks in the system

But there are cracks in the dominant security logic that could be prised open. US public opinion is sceptical of the endless wars. Around two-thirds of Americans think the 2003 Iraq war was a mistake and over half think the US should not have deployed military force in Afghanistan or Syria. Veterans are just as likely to oppose these wars as anyone else, irrespective of period of service, rank, and combat experience.²⁴⁴ In both the 2008 and 2016 presidential elections, the winning candidate stood on a platform of military withdrawal (even though Presidents Obama and Trump both subsequently increased military deployment).

Not only is there opposition to US involvement in specific wars but there is also support for defunding the national security infrastructure as a whole: a majority in the US favours cutting the defence budget by 10% and reallocating those resources to disease control and other public services. Twice as many people support such a cut to the defence budget as oppose it.²⁴⁵ Despite its popularity, legislation introduced to achieve this defunding was easily defeated in Congress.²⁴⁶

The body of opinion in favour of military defunding lacks the momentum and energy that comes from grassroots organisational power – the only force capable of overcoming the vested interests and ideological barriers that have stood in the way of coming to terms with US violence.

Fifty years ago, when progressive movements in the US were last at a peak of organisational power, in the shadow of the Vietnam war, Congress did take steps to reduce the power of the national security

infrastructure. The ninety-third Congress, from 1973 to 1975, was, according to Greg Grandin, perhaps the 'most anti-imperial legislature in United States history'. In this period, Congress gave itself the power to review and reverse White House decisions to engage in wars; made intelligence agencies more accountable; abolished two national security entities, the Un-American Activities Committee and the Office of Public Safety; and banned US military support to authoritarian groups and governments in Angola, Chile, Indonesia, South Korea, and Turkey.²⁴⁷

Seize the time

Today, once again, young people are on the streets. Abolitionist demands, such as the call to abolish ICE, are central to these movements. At the same time, a Left flank has opened up in the Democratic Party, with a measure of representation in Congress, providing space to articulate implicitly abolitionist demands. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, for example, has called for the Department of Homeland Security to be disbanded.²⁴⁸

Three broad areas of engagement will be necessary for any alternative approach to begin to emerge. First, there will need to be intensified efforts of grassroots organising on national security policy-making, informed by an abolitionist perspective applied to the US's global infrastructure of violence. Deciding how best to organise and what specific issues to confront will be a matter for individual initiatives and campaign groups. For one group, the focus might be US sanctions policies, for another, it might be the War on Drugs in Latin America, for another, nuclear disarmament. Despite fighting on different fronts, these various campaigns will all be oriented towards a horizon of national security abolitionism.

Second, there will need to be a push to achieve whatever is possible through electoral and policy advocacy means. First steps might include demands to reduce the number of US military bases around the world, cancelling new weapons systems, and disbanding the United States Africa Command. A fuller agenda would include dismantling the infrastructure of the Global War on Terror and the War on Drugs by completely legalising drug use, halting US financial and logistical support for militarised violence carried out by other governments in the name of countering terrorists or narcotics traffickers, repealing authoritarian counter-terrorist legislation, and closing down the prison at Guantánamo Bay. Add to this a halting of US arms exports and other forms of security assistance and funding to governments that carry out severe human rights abuses, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Diverting resources from the US military would not only reduce one of the drivers of conflict – and cut carbon emissions – but would also free public resources and political space to address the structural causes of the problems the US military claims only it can solve. Within that space, an approach to foreign policy could emerge that was more oriented towards sustaining peace and development through conflict-resolution, debt relief, and reparations programmes that empower local communities rather than make financial aid conditional on acceptance of US counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics, or migration-control initiatives.



USA, Washington DC, 06 January 2021. A man dressed as a bald eagle at President Trump's "Stop the Steal" rally at the Ellipse. Credit: Nina Berman / NOOR

At the international level, this would imply the US renewing its commitment to the international systems of collective security established after World War II with the creation of the United Nations. The US itself drafted the elements of international law that limit the use of force across borders except in self-defence. With US encouragement, this principle was incorporated into the United Nations Charter, drawn up at San Francisco in 1945. Whatever the institutional weaknesses of the United Nations, its founding principles remain a valid and necessary basis for a system of international collective security.²⁴⁹

At the local level, a reduction in US and US-funded military power could enable alternative institutions of public safety to be developed. These might draw upon experiences of community-based security cultivated in locations where the state has failed to protect its citizens. Raúl Zibechi has, for example, written about how in Colombia, in the shadow of the War on Drugs, the indigenous peoples of the Cauca have successfully protected themselves and their land from paramilitaries, guerrilla forces, and multinational corporations by forming unarmed guard units. Unlike police forces, these involve all community members taking turns as guards, are accountable to local assemblies, and aim at restorative justice.²⁵⁰

Third, there will need to be an ideological struggle to fully confront the passing of the unchallenged dominance of the US, which would also mean a deep reckoning with the various forms of racial injustice – white supremacy, settler colonialism, and imperial warfare – through which that dominance was established. One way of moving towards such a reckoning is to take down public symbols that celebrate past racist violence, as protestors have sought to do in recent years. Another is through forms of restorative justice. In 2016, for example, 4,000 veterans came to Standing Rock in North Dakota,

where indigenous peoples were fighting the proposed Dakota Access Pipeline. The veterans met with a group of Sioux leaders to apologise for the colonial violence of their military units and offered their political solidarity in the struggle against the pipeline.²⁵¹

At the national level, a progressive step would be the construction of a landmark monument to the lives lost to US military violence, from Wounded Knee to Waziristan.

Twice before in US history there has been a major opportunity to overcome racism, prioritise care over killing, and embrace the reciprocity that constitutes humanity – first, in the era of reconstruction after the abolition of slavery, and then in the heyday of the Black freedom and anti-war movements of the late 1960s. As a third such opportunity begins to become a possibility in the United States – with climate and pandemic crises looming – we must once again seize the time to fulfil the promise of those earlier moments.

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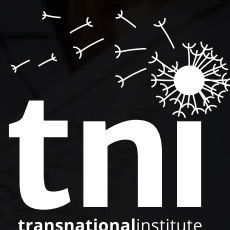
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