

State Violence Is Redundant

Today we are struck by what appears to be the rise of egregious and excessive states, perpetrators of violence—wars, torture, extrajudicial punishments, disappearances, deportations, immigration and asylum bans. Authoritarian, strongman, illiberal regimes are viewed as the consequences and expressive instruments of the far Right, buoyed by the waves of populism that have followed in the wake of the devastating globalisms of neoliberals and their ilk. Yet as we discuss (see “How We Recount,” this issue), there is a stunning amnesia that accompanies such an account, a forgetting of the forms of violence inflicted by liberal democratic and neoliberal states, both eager and at pains to shed their historical and ongoing formation as settler-colonial and imperial states in a time of global convulsions that could bring about their final demise.

The exceptionalisms of today hide the long arcs of political violence and state terror, in the ways that liberalism of the recent past hid *their* refuse. How are we to reckon with these long arcs, traceable by the repercussions and afterlives of Western European and Anglo-US colonialism and slavery, known and felt in the spectacular and quotidian forms of violence that saturate life now as much as, if not more than, they did in the past?

In Latin America and in Southeast Asia, struggles continue over memories of the tortures and disappearances undertaken by Cold War dictatorships sponsored and supported by the United States at the height of its liberalism. Brutal US-led counterinsurgency military and paramilitary campaigns conducted in the name of regional security during the Cold War were clearly extensions of the genocidal, tortuous, and mutilating wars that served as the means of founding US imperial power after its own Civil War—settler wars of Indian removal, slaveholding terrorist campaigns within its expanding domestic borders, and wars of conquest in Latin America and in the Pacific that continue to dispossess and thieve in large land grabs and body counts.

“Out of the inhuman black ghettos of American cities, out of the

cotton plantations of the South, comes this record of mass slayings on the basis of race, of lives deliberately warped and distorted by the willful creation of conditions making for premature death, poverty and disease.” That is the opening sentence of the 1951 document “We Charge Genocide: The Historic Petition to the United Nations for Relief from a Crime of the United States Government against the Negro People.” How can this charge and record of state violence not be the charge of our own times, resounding with complaints of the Black Lives Matter movement? How could it not resound with the complaints of groups targeted by other states under the direct protection and patronage of the United States, such as Israel and the Philippines? “History has shown that the racist theory of government of the USA is not the private affair of Americans, but the concern of mankind everywhere,” the petition argues. It is so because “a policy of discrimination at home must inevitably create racist commodities for export abroad—must inevitably tend toward war.”¹ Among those racist commodities that have been exported through the military alliances and networks developed during the twentieth-century are techniques of governance and statecraft that have become both the exceptions and the rule within the universal political protocols of nation-states. Philippine president Duterte’s campaign of extrajudicial capital punishment for drug users and pushers—criminalized “offenders” of Philippine society—clearly draws from the playbook of the US–Latin American war on drugs of the last few decades for its ideological campaign, even as its operations are also its own invention. It also draws directly for its drives, tactics, and techniques on the long, continuous history of low-intensity counterinsurgency campaigns conducted by the United States and its proxy states before and after the “democratization” shift in US foreign policy in the late 1980s, a shift taken to recover hegemony in the face of the undeniable gains of decolonizing peoples’ struggles from two decades before.

“We Charge Genocide” offers as evidence of the crime for which it holds the US government accountable the beatings, murders, and rapes of black men and women by local police, sheriffs, and other law enforcement agents. It also offers as evidence of genocide the infliction on black lives of “conditions of life calculated to bring about [their] destruction,”² through employment policies, residence and housing regulations, and rules and practices of transportation, medical care, and education. Such conditions of life, the petition argues, effectively reduce the vitality of black people an average of eight years. The measures are there to prove the systemic reduction of life chances as much as the outright elimination of persons of a group, to prove that economic terrorism, as well as police terrorism, claims its victims. But the measures will, in our own present time, also become the instruments of a more calibrated life taking (on which more later).

Antiblackness lives in the heart of these policing, work, and welfare (housing, health, education) policies, what now some might call equal measures of sovereign and necropolitical power and biopolitics. And though the recent charge of mass murder and crimes against humanity brought up against Duterte in the International Criminal Court might not name it as such, antiblackness is arguably at work in the postcolonial state when it carries out the learned and shared tools and techniques of genocidal violence on subgroups of its own people. We know these sovereigns and strong rulers from another era. What is certain is that such violence constitutes the international fraternal language of state sovereignty through which individual states authorize, communicate, and negotiate their power on the global stage.

Duterte could not exist without this language system in place, and without the network of power alliances in the global security complex in which the nation-state he oversees serves as logistical provider and support. One way to pursue this historical trace is through the rhetoric of the war on drugs that haunts the current political imaginary and the rhetorics of securitization in the Trump/Duterte era. Another way is through the rhetoric of democracy that accompanied the US imperial project at the turn of the twentieth century, as it tried to distinguish itself from the blighted model of Spanish colonialism with its guarantee to extend “that full measure of individual rights and liberties which is the heritage of free peoples” to its colonial wards.³

Sovereign violence is the state’s bid for international recognition. It doesn’t matter whether such recognition is positive or negative. Or whether such violence is legitimate or not. It is the fiat political currency of the day.

The present-future condition of possibility is framed by a past that calls forward the ongoing experience of coloniality. This is what Paul Amar refers to as “the security archipelago” or the geographies that reach across the complex that is the human-security regime.⁴ Though many theorists mark the origin point of such securitization in the modern architectures of fascism, we might think about a longer historical arc of imprisonment, war, and othering. With the recent ironic appointment of Jeff Sessions to the Department of Justice, the return to the war on drugs seems imminent as a strategy of containment against demographic shifts and the activation of social movements that name and revise the racial state. However, Sessions’s security rhetoric, alongside strengthening the state and the legal infrastructure for repealing voting rights, also opposes consent decrees aimed at reducing police violence against communities of color, law-and-order discourses that have been condemned by Amnesty International. Such rhetoric, which displaces the disproportionate impact of security across social groups, threatens to return us to a colonial/

modern Cold War past where the “enemy from within” continues to be the vessel for state containment.

Beyond state-centered politics, there is the environmental, atmospheric violence that could be properly called state sanctioned insofar as this is a form of violence that is licensed, authorized, and endorsed by governmental agencies. This is a slow as well as an instantaneous violence, as when the pipelines for oil continue to be built, and the long-term effects of fossil fuel extraction are joined by the instant contaminating effects of spills and other anticipated accidents, risked on the lands and lives of indigenous communities. The struggle of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe against the building of the Dakota Access Pipeline continues their own centuries-long struggle within this particular long arc of political violence. David Archambault II, chairman of the Standing Rock Sioux, talked about this struggle as the latest battle of his people against the theft of their belongings and their conversion into resources: gold, land, water.⁵ It foregrounds this particular environmental racism as indigenous dispossession and counter(indigenous) sovereignty, the elimination of peoples as the means and consequence of the capture of space and the future.⁶

What is this kind of state violence if not the continuation of a colonial violence against nonhuman nature, which feminists have long understood as also and always concomitant with the rise of sexual violence as imperial policy and capital relation. What is human sovereignty if not the conjoining of man and state—each made in the godly image of the other—in the colonization of the planet? Masters of the universe. An early globalism, the most recent version of which struts under the name of neoliberalism.

And so what? What good does it do to trace these long arcs, to find nothing egregious about such modern state violence except the fact that, despite centuries of brutal evidence to the contrary, it continues to be viewed as exceptional or merely instrumental? When we continue to observe the rituals of electoral politics and choose between one form of state or another, all our hates and fears coursed through the men and women who vie for the freedom and impunity of state power? Even when we profess faithlessness in this system of political representation that is itself the standing, infrastructural violence we have yet to dismantle or even undermine. When the notion of state violence is redundant, and might speak only to old liberal conceits.

Everyone else flees or circumvents the state because they know what’s up. (They’ve long known that “everything is fucked up,” though this is not how they would have thought it—since surely they had none of the illusions that things were ever fair or even working.) Liberalism has always been an exception. Most of the world has lived in other times, under other orders. There and then, people knew that the state is the harsh feature of an inescapable landscape in which people must till their

dreams or find a crevice in which to sleep, if not some dignified way to die. Even as death as well as life is full of unfathomable devastation and disappointment.

Already platforms are the new geopolitical territories, with CEOs as the new sovereigns (or sovereigns such as #45 are CEOs). Or perhaps CEOs are simply the figures of the new sovereigns, which are in reality increasingly (but also always were) the systems-machines they purportedly direct. And states are now thrashing about trying to regain their lost sovereignty. Or at least those with bids to take them over think they should. And wouldn't that be a good way, a tried and true method, of beating the new sovereigns (even when you are in bed with them)? Sexual violence permeates the conjugal bilateralisms and multilateralisms of the international state system and the global economy. Rape culture is surely only centuries later a campus issue. It was first and foremost the province of would-be states, of states in the making (conquistadores of all shapes and sizes), of states falling apart (postcolonial states), of states reasserting power or claiming it (NATO states and ISIS vying for dominion)—carried out by the men and women they conscript to do their work, men and women who cannot otherwise find a way to be among the protected, whose only way to find enfranchisement and empowerment under this state is to render themselves its frontline agents.

You will say this is the revanchist state. For what has been operating since the protracted decline of the liberal metropolitan state is what Allen Feldman calls the deconstructive state. This is a state that perpetrates multiple, covert wars that are largely “unwitnessable,” falling out of the developmental time of the progressive nation-state and into the counter-time of the accident. It “accidentalizes” the accident in a manner analogous to the way it “rationalizes” reason, Feldman, by way of Derrida, tells us. The deconstructive state is the aphasic perpetrator of the “ordering of mishaps,” an ordering that breaks with the “justificatory ground” of war in favor of its “containerization”: the “stratagem of re-siting, dispersal, and disconnection that permits new mobilities and motilities of power, which expand corporatist predation and legal impunity.”⁷

The revanchist state is thus unevenly entering into “formations of formless sovereignty as a limit experience of political perception that refuses definitive outline.”⁸ Imperial states are undoubtedly scrambling, and the deconstruction of the state is on the agenda of at least one of them. Feldman gives us a deeper insight into the throwaway bomb-throwing remarks of conspiracy theorist Steve Bannon with regards to his “Leninist” ambitions for “deconstructing the administrative state.” The models of what to do with the state may be proliferating, not least of all in the periphery, where laws have never hampered sovereign will. Aleatory violence may now be the rule, as algorithmic risk taking becomes the princi-

pal modality not only of finance capital but also of military operations to establish not discipline, not control, but rather supremacy.

“State sovereignty” operates within these modes of violence on a variety of scales. Whether staged up close, with bullets to the head, or at a distance, at drone’s length, the “small wars” and “savage wars” that have been and are being waged today to quell rebellions and insurgency are not simply proxy wars. They are wars that are widely available as generalized, deregulated bids for a stake in worldly power. Every day such wars conscript new members, drawn from pools of disposable populations, forgotten and left-out underclasses, and so on, offering small rewards or promised returns in derivative economies of cash and flesh, in exchange for their distributed, punctuated performances of deathly sovereignty, which bigger guns will aggregate. It is a “diffusion of cruelty,” as Talal Asad puts it, but a diffusion that is capitalizable.⁹

Everywhere, the dirty, small, and savage wars that were the secret laboratory experiments of developing Third-World states, funded and assisted by liberal democratic, imperial states, have become local and transnational enterprises in their own right, their tactics and techniques of administering death proliferating as states, parastates, and protostates and their agents borrow from, collaborate with, and emulate one another. What end in sight? When security has become a business opportunity at all levels, when securitization signals remunerative and incentivized military and policing operations as much as financial processes, when morbid inventions for extracting a thousand financial cuts from the dead and dying, or tagged to die, bubble forth from below, in the internecine conflicts over profit and power margins, which occur continuously as the very ground of everyday life, the very environment in which those without ammunition are dared to survive, and their survival made into resource matter for more operations, more logistics, more punishment, more wealth, more valued life.

Notes

This essay was written collaboratively as part of a book sprint. See “How This Text Was Written” (in this issue) for more information on the process.

1. Civil Rights Congress, “We Charge Genocide,” xv.
2. The “We Charge Genocide” petition to the UN quote the UN’s own definition of genocide. United Nations, “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide,” 9 December 1948, A/RES/260(III), A, II (c), [www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/260\(III\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/260(III)).
3. William McKinley, “Benevolent Assimilation Proclamation,” Instructions to General Otis, 21 December 1898.
4. Amar, *The Security Archipelago*.
5. Transcribed by the author from Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race,

“2016 Indigenous Forum: A Conversation with David Archambault,” www.cser.columbia.edu/idg-forum.

6. Vimalassery, “Prose of Counter-Sovereignty,” 88.

7. Feldman, “Accidentalization of War.”

8. Cornell, “Feldman’s Critique of Violence.”

9. Asad, “Remarks on Allen Feldman’s *Archives of the Insensible*.”

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