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Decolonizing the State: Subversion, Mimicry and Criminality

This special issue brings together an interdisciplinary group of scholars to reflect on the decolonization of nation-states through acts of subversion, mimicry and criminality in the colonial and postcolonial world. Since the birth of nation-states, emerging in conjunction with the first wave of globalization and the height of European colonialism in the mid-nineteenth century, avant-gardists have problematized the role of the nation-state. With the split between Karl Marx and Mikhail Bakunin in the First International in 1872, anarchism's challenge to parliamentary politics and the nation-state rapidly spread across the colonial world.ⁱ For instance, during the 1870s, Jewish, Italian and Spanish labour migrants to Egypt brought with them discourses of radical social emancipation, merging with local labour movements and promoting internationalist activism that resisted the nation-state as an organizing principle.ⁱⁱ

Meanwhile, in the former Spanish and Portuguese colonies of South America, railway and maritime workers confronted formations of state bureaucratization with autonomous union democracies, contributing to working class solidarities across ethnic and national divides at the end of the nineteenth century.ⁱⁱⁱ In Europe's southern gateways to overseas colonies, other challenges to the state emerged in the shape of criminal underground organizations such as the Italian Camorra. Structured much like the Japanese Yakuza and Chinese Triads and organized around ethnic and national identities, such organizations simultaneously subvert and mimic the state, presenting problems for our understanding of legal regimes and their vested interests.^{iv} Across South Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, anti-colonial rebellions, labour strikes and boycotts during the interwar years contributed directly to the decades of formal decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s.^v

More recently, at a time when the legacies of European colonialism, the flows of migration and the uneven development of capitalism still govern national borders, a combustible mixture of ideas, groups and organizations refuses to be incorporated into the nation-state.^{vi} By so doing, they create a subversive vacuum, an ambiguous territory that offers opportunities for marginal discourses and opposing forces to be expressed. This ambivalent space becomes a stage in which the nation-state can be subverted but also re-enacted or reinstated in many shapes and forms. Instances of these dynamics can be found across the postcolonial world: from the post-Soviet frozen conflicts, of which the Ukrainian war is but the latest episode, to the recent formation of ISIS, with the subsequent disappearance of the Sykes-Picot border and the emerging of multiple sovereignties in Iraq and Syria.^{vii} In former imperial metropolises such as Paris and London, black and ethnic minorities have not only responded to institutional racism by organizing around labour unions and cultural communities, but also resorted to violent uprisings and riots.^{viii} Away from the headlines, transnational criminal organizations (e.g. the Neapolitan Camorra and the Mumbai D-Company) or diffuse online subversive networks (e.g. Anonymous) represent very different, but equally significant, challenges to the state, which blur the Manichean dichotomies between oppressor and resister.

Despite this long and varied history, surprisingly little scholarly attention has been devoted to issues of subversion, mimicry and criminality in the field of postcolonial studies. By contrast, studies have principally focused on the emotional and historical forces of nationalism and the nation-state. From influential critics such as Benedict Anderson, Partha Chatterjee, Homi Bhabha to Dipesh Chakrabarty and Neil Lazarus, there has been an overwhelming attention to the nation-state as the primary legitimate structure of post-colonial governance.^{ix} Such emphasis on the state

does not thoroughly interrogate the colonial roots of the nation-state concept and its re-enactment in the post-independence period. Focusing on the state has often ignored non-parliamentary formations of alternative democracies, insurgency groups and para-states as well as practices of resistance to dominant, colonial and post-colonial, structures of power. Although such studies have contributed greatly to our understanding of the legacies and processes of decolonization, they have also largely neglected important questions about forces that have sought to subvert the postcolonial nation-state through mimicry, criminality or anarchist cooperation. This may give rise to the idea that subversive movements that challenge the nation-state do not contribute to the emotional and political creation of the postcolony.

However, taking a transnational turn, there has been recent critical interest in exploring the history of anarchism in the colonial and postcolonial world.^x This new wave of critical re-engagement with the postcolonial question offers new insights into anticolonial movements that operate outside and against the state, thus disentangling decolonization from a state-aspiring narrative. It also problematizes the entwinement of nation and state, a colonial discursive legacy that remains largely unchallenged in much postcolonial studies scholarship. The fact that decolonization needs not be synonymous with statehood becomes evident in the anticolonial and anti-statist struggles of third world anarchists alongside alternative forms of transnational affiliation. The impulse for decolonization does not only resist the colonial regimes but also their legal and geopolitical sequels: the postcolonial states. Furthermore, the porosity and contingency of many postcolonial states highlights the relevance of criminal and resistant networks that by subverting the state accomplish an often powerful, albeit limited, governance of the postcolonial nation. In order to bring those marginal forces into the focus of postcolonial scholarship, this special issue takes the

state, subverted, decolonized or reinvented, as its centre. Following in the footsteps of recent scholarship on anarchism, state sovereignty and lawbreaking^{xi} it brings together a collection of articles organized historically and thematically around the issues of subversion, mimicry and criminality across the postcolonial world.^{xii}

In this introduction, we outline the historical and theoretical context for understanding the critical impetus behind the special issue. Summarizing the main arguments of each essay, we highlight important issues that will require further scholarly attention as historians, sociologists, political theorists, literary critics and anthropologists continue to investigate questions of subversion, mimicry and criminality. In doing so, this special issue aims to foster closer dialogue between these scholarly disciplines to provide a better understanding of the forces that seek to decolonize the nation-state.

Theorizing the State, Imagining Subversion

Early academic theorizations tend to construct the state as a coherent, monopolistic and violent force, regardless of whether this force is legitimate or not.^{xiii} However the idea of the state as the single agent entitled to the use of force could be traced back as early as the 16th and 17th centuries.^{xiv} This monopolistic and (il)legitimate agent was similarly constructed by socialist, Marxist and anarchist thinkers either as a structure to be appropriated through a revolutionary process or an immoral entity to be thoroughly dismantled.^{xv} Such historical conceptualizations share a totemic, abstract, and monolithic quality that often ignores the complex and ambiguous actors that wield power outside the state. However, more recent approaches have followed Foucault's reassessment of the state, not as an abstraction, but as a collection of discrete practices of power, echoing also Landauer's poetic imagining of the state as a

set of relations.^{xvi} This focus on the practice of power has paved the way for many different theoretical reflections on the state and the praxes that make it up in the areas of political geography, environmental science or security.^{xvii} A more porous and relational view of the state has also brought about more attention to the disruptive agency of non-state actors and their potential for subversion.

When approaching the postcolonial state we find a similar pattern of moving from monolithic conceptions of the state to a more practice based analysis. Hence, the early focus on the state as the primary means of expression of national and anti-colonial sentiments has been replaced by a more complicated reappraisal of the multi-layered relations of power that govern postcolonial societies.^{xviii} Mbembe and Pavel also bring into question the consistency of the state by exploring the contingency and porosity of its practices, both at the national and international level.^{xix} This highlights the rich complexity of overlapping systems of governance that predated, coexisted or were in some form derived from colonial systems of power.^{xx} It is in that network of relations that we find the postcolonial state being subverted, discontinued or mirrored. By focusing on the limits of the postcolonial state's sovereignty, more recent scholarship brings to the fore forces that refuse to be governed and that aim, in their disparate ways, to decolonize the state.

Instead of privileging the centrality of the state, this special issues brings attention to the margins, interstices and liminalities of the state and explores how those spaces are claimed, organized and narrativised. It is in those spaces that we find subversion, mimicry and criminality engaging in an often violent and fraught conversation with state power. Moving away from theories of subversion which favour the revolutionary seize or the total dismantling of the state, this special issue turns towards the oblique and ambiguous resistance instantiated by transnational

networks of jihadis, hackers or criminal organizations. It also analyses practises of war, sexuality, governance and rioting that show the limits of the postcolonial state. From this angle, the colonized nation does not exclusively achieve decolonization through statehood, but also by resisting a postcolonial state burdened and haunted by its colonial legacy. The texture of such resistance is discussed in the special issue in the theoretical language of subversion through mimicry, criminality and anarchism.

The issue of subverting the colonial regime has been present since the birth of anti-colonial resistance, which arguably begins with the inception of colonialism itself.^{xxi} Any attempt at subverting the colonial structures of power, whether by means of insurrection, peaceful resistance or infiltration, is faced with the conundrum that the pre-colonial state of affairs can never be fully restored.^{xxii} The concept of mimicry plays a key role in any project of decolonization, since engaging the colonizers always involves, to some degree, mirroring their movements and speaking their language.^{xxiii} The ambiguous act of mimicry contains both a subversive promise and a conservative temptation, which is perfectly instantiated in the practices of postcolonial states.^{xxiv} Subverting or decolonizing the state displays the same ambiguity, as subversion and decolonization require some form of engagement with the colonial regime. This is clearly demonstrated in practices of war, propaganda and necropolitics across the postcolonial world (e.g. Syria, Iraq, South Sudan, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, CAR) that contain multiple elements of mimicry among belligerent states or factions^{xxv} Successfully fighting an enemy involves engaging and mirroring, to some extent, its military, disciplinary, rhetorical and political practices. Further, organizing the postcolony involves the unavoidable conundrum of having to relate to the legal, political and military structures of the colonial regime.^{xxvi} In so far as the pre-colonial state of affairs is irretrievable, mimicry is always present in any process

of decolonization, consistently posing the question of whether colonialism is being subverted or reinstated. The subverted states analysed in this special issue find themselves often replicated in their resistant rivals. Whether such an ambiguity represents the ultimate victory of the colonial state or its ironic demise remains an open question, which in turn keeps the processes of decolonization ever relevant, changing and alive.

Turning to another form of subversive mimicry, the connection between criminality and postcolonial discourse leads to a productive interrogation of the blurred dynamics of power operating both within and outside the state. It allows for an exploration of the process of decolonization that goes beyond the canonical dichotomies of oppressor and oppressed. Exploring the cultural resonance of criminal discourses, Chris Cunneen argues that criminality reshapes ‘the meaning of evidence and provides alternative narratives’.^{xxvii} As criminalization is dependent on historical, political amnesia and on processes of ‘othering’ and racialisation, there is a strong connection between the discourse on crime and nation-building typical of colonial societies.^{xxviii} As Comaroff points out, criminality acts today as an imaginative vehicle for thinking about the threats to the nation and for posing ‘more law and order as the appropriate means of dealing with them.’^{xxix} Criminal narratives are used by the state to claim that the pathologies of colonial and postcolonial societies are the natural consequences of lack of progress. In response to these ossified narratives, this special issue takes into consideration how the discourse on criminality ‘unhinges colonial law as an abstract expression of power and grounds it firmly in the lived experiences’ of the oppressed.^{xxx} It will also investigate the extent to which the ambiguous positioning of the underworld's activities, both within and outside the official spaces of power, at once ‘mimics’ and challenges the gradual corporatization of the state.

Such ambiguous positionings and the criminalization of resistance to the colonial state have been associated with anarchism since its inception as an organized movement with its own distinct theoretical and practical expression in the late 1860s. Emerging from the debates in the First International, anarchism posed a challenge to European colonial projects from a myriad of perspectives. Indeed, if European colonialism required a strong, centralised state apparatus to control and administer territories across the world, anti-imperial resistances were inherent to anarchism's anti-statist tenets.^{xxxii} More than anti-statism, however, the broad anarchist tradition's challenge to imperialism stemmed from its opposition to social and economic inequality. As Errico Malatesta remarked in *L'Anarchia*: '[t]he inhabitant of Naples is as concerned in the improvement to the living conditions of the people inhabiting the banks of the Ganges ... as he is in the drainage of the *fondaci* of his own city'.^{xxxiii} Connecting transnational networks of resistance, Malatesta gestures towards the strategic solidarities between European workers and colonial subjects required to realise visions of anarchy. Extending such strategic solidarities transnationally, anarchists were also among the first to 'capitalize on the transoceanic migrations of the era', allowing for anarchism to flourish across the colonial world.^{xxxiii} However, through this expansion, anarchism risks becoming another European paradigm exported to the colonies, complicit in the very processes it seeks to undermine.^{xxxiv} Anarchism's real challenge to the colonial project lies less in the 'contact zones' of imperial labour structures, and more in the praxis of resistance through direct action.^{xxxv} This is not to suggest that anarchists across the colonial world did not join anti-colonial movements but rather that, in doing so, anarchism's revolutionary potential often mutated to accommodate the historic appeal of nationalism. Despite their anti-statist principles, anarchists often collaborated with anti-colonial

nationalists, signalling that dismantling overarching structures of power was the central and most important struggle/goal. To understand its postcolonial significance, anarchism must be approached as an anti-colonial movement, through which libertarian theories and practices were appropriated as articulations of resistance to the colonial state. In other words, decolonizing the state through anarchist eyes does not necessarily require to abandon nationalism, but to critically engage with the historical, theoretical and practical processes that make up the colonial state.

Chapter Structure with brief description of each paper

Our special issue opens with Laura Galian-Hernandez's essay 'Decolonizing Sexuality in Egypt: *al-Tatawwur*'s Struggle for Liberation', which examines the ways in which issues of sexuality, body and gender were instrumentalized in the struggle for liberation in the early 1940s. Focusing on the literary magazine *Al-Tatawwur*, Galian Hernandez explores the Egyptian intellectual left's challenges to the newly formed nation state and argues that prostitution, sexual desire and contraceptives played a key role in the process of decolonizing the state through subversion.

Following on from this, Enrique Galvan-Alvarez's article 'Rojava: a State Subverted or Reinvented?' explores the Kurdish governance that emerged from the fragmented sovereignties of the Syrian civil war (2011-2015). Aiming to decolonize the Middle East, the YPG-J militias have implemented an allegedly stateless and anti-statist system in the territories they control in Northern Syria (Rojava Kurdistan). Their political project and military success against ISIS, Al-Nusra and other Islamist factions, have attracted support from the international left and from global powers like the US and Russia. Not surprisingly, the Rojava project is made up of multiple and

ambiguous practices of rhetorical, political and military mimicry. This essay focuses on the challenges faced by an anti-statist project of decolonization, which needs to engage a number of states in order to survive and, therefore, has to function and perform itself as a state.

Maria Ridda's essay 'Capitalism, Criminality and the State: The Origins of Illegal Urban Modernity' investigates how transnational criminal organisations, as forces acting outside formally constituted authorities, challenge traditional reconfigurations of the postcolonial and world city. Mimicking the contours of the neoliberal economy, criminal syndicates develop as a result of the economic, social and historical entanglements between North and South, state and anti-state, legal and illegal economies. The effects of transnational criminal organisations on the city generate a number of spaces that refuse to be categorised within conventional hierarchies of power, and unveil a number of grey areas that reveal and challenge alternative reconfigurations of Western modernity. As the privileged site of inhabitations of 'colonial histories and postcolonial proximities', the city deploys what Chambers calls an 'unauthorised modernity' where Otherness is characterised by marginal discourses (2017). As one of such discourses, criminality provides a magnifying lens that refuses to be incorporated into heteronormative understandings of oppressor and oppressed. This is particularly relevant in those contexts where the lack of state intervention justifies criminal narratives 'as both enabling and disabling tools of authority' (Mukherjee 2003). Developing further this dichotomy, the essay foregrounds the connection between dynamics of subalternity and the development of criminal organisations as forces operating in concurrence with the dynamics of turbo-capitalism and 'outside the state' (Camus 1984).

Focusing also on the cultural resonance of subversion in Aung San Suu Kyi's *Freedom from Fear* (1991) and Pascal Khoo Thwe's *From the Land of Green Ghosts* (2002), Pavan Malreddy's article 'Subalter-Nation: Narrating Burma' examines how the discourses of nation-building in Burma are inextricably linked to sovereign ambitions of state-building through militaristic and insurgent means. In particular, it focuses on the contested nature of both nation- and state-building ideologies in Burma that are characterised by a rift within their respective modes of narration: national autobiography and subaltern autobiography. The genre of national autobiography, which is commonly associated with the life histories of national leaders, has gained considerable attention in recent literary criticism. This essay suggests that while Suu Kyi's autobiography remains complicit with elite nationalism, Pascal Khoo Thwe's life narrative charts Burmese national history through individual and communal trajectories. Within this, the essay introduces the notion of subalter-nation as a narrative mode of subaltern autobiography that forges the means of another national consciousness through insurgent and secessionist sovereign ambitions.

Shifting the focus to Latin America, María do mar Castro Varela and Carolina Tamayo Rojas' essay 'Thinking Outside the State, or, Is It Possible Not to Be Governed That Much?' examines the example of the Inga community, a cross-border indigenous community in the northern Andes, as an example of an autonomous grassroots democracy. Throwing light on the 'exchange tradition' between north-Quechua communities in the border zone between southwest Colombia and northwest Ecuador, they demonstrate how this tradition permitted the formation of supra-national spaces that challenge the idea of the nation-state.

In the final essay, "'Anarchism, pure and simple": M. P. T. Acharya, Anti-Colonialism and the International Anarchist Movement', Ole Birk Laursen traces the

life and activities of the Indian anarchist M. P. T. Acharya from 1907 to 1954. Drawing on archival material from across Britain, France, Germany, Sweden, and Russia, the article explores, firstly, how Acharya charted a different path towards independence than those of his contemporaries such as Gandhi, M. N. Roy, and Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, and, secondly, how Acharya attempted to bring anarchism into India's independence struggles. Through an analysis of Acharya's essays on anarchism, it argues that his activities within the international anarchist movement broadens our conception of the reach of anarchism and enables a more nuanced understanding of anti-colonial struggles against the totalized oppression of the state. In doing so, it re-directs our attention towards theoretical conceptions of non-statist nationalism within a postcolonial framework.

As this long and varied history suggests, from its inception in the nineteenth century, the state has been challenged from a plethora of angles. Across the non-Western world, age-old structures of governance were dismantled to give way to colonial regimes, in the process maximising profit and capital for the European powers. But challenges emerged from the beginning, charting other ways of conceiving the post-independent nation rather than through the vision of the state. However, while such subversive narratives contribute greatly to our understanding of the postcolonial nation and its colonial legacies, these stories have rarely been awarded the critical attention they demand. In bringing together an interdisciplinary group of scholars to reflect on the ways in which the colonial and postcolonial state has been challenged, this special issue seeks to cast a decolonial look on the state by focusing on acts of subversion, mimicry and criminality. In doing so, it opens new routes to understanding the emotional and historical forces of state-formation and its decline.

Notes

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- ⁱⁱ Anthony Gorman, “‘Diverse in Race, Religion and Nationality ... But United in Aspirations of Civil Progress’: The Anarchist Movement in Egypt, 1860-1940”, in Steven Hirsch and Lucien van der Walt, eds., *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1870-1940: The Praxis of National Liberation, Internationalism, and Social Revolution*, Leiden: Brill, 2010, pp. 3-31; Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860-1914*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Geoffroy de Laforcade, ‘Straddling the Nation and the Working World: Anarchism and Syndicalism on the Docks and Rivers of Argentina’, in Steven Hirsch and Lucien van der Walt, eds., *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1870-1940: The Praxis of National Liberation, Internationalism, and Social Revolution*, Leiden: Brill, 2010, pp. 321-362; Edilene Toldeo and Luigi Biondi, ‘Constructing Syndicalism and Anarchism Globally: The Transnational Making of the Syndicalist Movement in Sao Paulo, Brazil, 1895-1935’, pp. 363-394.
- ^{iv} Comaroff, John L, and Jean Comaroff (eds), *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006, p. 41.
- ^v Bridget Brereton and Kevin A. Yelvington, eds., *The Colonial Caribbean in Transition: Essays on Postemancipation Social and Cultural History*. Barbados:

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^{viii} David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, London: Verso, 2012; Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*, London: Zed Books, 2013; Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot*, London: Verso, 2016.

^{ix} For instance, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983; Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?*, London: Zed Books, 1986; Homi Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration*, London: Routledge, 1990; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000; Neil Lazarus, *Nationalism*

and *Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

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^{xi} Francesco Benigno, *La mala setta*, Torino: Einaudi, 2015.

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^{xvii} Merje Kuus and John Agnew, “Theorizing the State Geographically: Sovereignty, Subjectivity and Territoriality”, Kevin Cox, Murray Low and Jennifer Robinson (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Political Geography*, Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008, pp. 117-132; Robert Pallitto and Josiah Heyman, “Theorizing Cross Border Mobility: Surveillance, Security and Identity”, *Surveillance and Society* 5.3 (2008): pp. 315-333; Adrian Leftwich, “Theorizing the State”, Peter Burnell (ed.), *Politics in the Developing World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 223-240; Tariq Amin-Khan, *The Post-Colonial State in the Era of Capitalist Globalization*, New York: Routledge, 2012; Antonio Ioris, “Theorizing State-Environment Relationships: Antinomies of Flexibility and Legitimacy”, *Progress in Human Geography*, January 2014: 1-18.

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- ^{xxv} James Fergusson, “Of Mimicry and Membership: Africans and the ‘New World Society’”, *Cultural Anthropology* 17.4 (2012): pp. 551-561; Achille Mbembe, *Dreaming the Postcolony: Achille Mbembe On the Postcolony*, Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2015; Kenyan Tomaselli and Michael Wessels, *San Representation: Politics, Practice and Possibilities*, London: Routledge, 2015; Francisco Ferrandiz and Antonius Robben, *Necropolitics: Mass Graves and Exhumations in the Age of Human Rights*, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania press, 2015.

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