Beyond Boomerang

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Abstract

This review article examines the historical relationship between American imperial power and its impact on racist domestic policing through an exploration of Stuart Schrader's *Badges Without Borders*. I argue that conventional approaches to the “boomerang” effect of imperial violence on the metropole fail to adequately capture the complex, fugal relationship between racist state power within the United States and its expressions abroad. Schrader's in depth, historical and archival interrogation of these relationships sheds new light on U.S. imperialism and its capacity to deflect attention away from its own violence. In holding the “foreign” and “domestic” together “in a single analytic frame,” Schrader gives us a new language for combatting racist police violence precisely when we need it most.

Keywords Stuart Schrader · Counterinsurgency · American exceptionalism · Imperialism · Boomerang · Policing · Anti-colonial

One of the most consistently striking characteristics of American culture is the tone of shocked surprise that always seems to accompany confrontations with politics that are not congruent with our image of ourselves. These expressions of unease—which straddle the “right liberal” and “liberal liberal” extremes of our impoverished public culture—frequently take the shape of dismayed confusion. After the bombings of September 11, 2001, for instance, the predominant question on every American's lips (according to mouthpieces from *Newsweek* to George W. Bush) was not, “why did this happen?” but forlorn expressions of, “why do they hate us?”¹

¹ President George W. Bush, Addresses the Nation, Sept. 20, 2001 (https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html); Fareed Zakaria, “The Politics of Rage: Why Do They Hate Us?” *Newsweek*, October 14, 2001 (<https://www.newsweek.com/politics-rage-why-do-they-hate-us-154345>).

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More recently, Donald Trump has elicited comparable expressions of shocked unease. For example, in a conversation with Rachel Maddow about Trump's willingness to detain children at the U.S./Mexico border, a teary-eyed Hillary Clinton shot out; "I mean, you just ... who *thinks* like that? Who *does* these things? How can they actually live with themselves? If you heard about it in some third-world banana republic, you'd say: 'That's horrible! Stop it! Who would do that?' Now it's happening in our country, and it's just so distressing."²

Even an inherently global event like a viral pandemic can bring forth these same stunned utterances which are often, as with Clinton's comparison, framed in contrast to a generalized "Third World." The doctor in New York, unable to believe what was unfolding before his eyes, tells a reporter; "It's like a third-world country type of scenario. It's mind-blowing."³ Earlier that month, a woman trying to get tested for Covid-19 similarly described the situation as "like a third-world country."⁴

All these expressions of existential rupture—of endless, handwringing surprise that *this* "Third World scenario" is happening *to us*—cluster together in the shadow of a looming unseeing. What we can't see, what can never be seen, is the ongoing historical relationship between American power and the rest of the world, and the impact of that relationship on "domestic" politics. Like an accelerating universe, this unseeing-of-US-power exerts its own repulsive force, making it nearly impossible for political analysts to bring these overlapping worlds into the same frame of reference. Thus when they do appear to collide—when terrorists or a virus find their way onto the island of Manhattan—the only public response available to describe this collision is shocked surprise. Why do they hate us? Why does our healthcare system look like the system of the people who hate us?

The very structure of Political Science as an academic field reinforces this unseeing on a disciplinary level. Following World War Two, when Political Science in North America began to organize itself around its current four subdisciplines, professional hiving off led to the confinement of scholarship concerned with politics on a global scale within the emerging field of International Relations (IR). The discipline of IR began narrowing its own conceptual vision and influence around a handful of approaches aimed at legitimizing its status as an autonomous field. These approaches focused almost exclusively on the relationships between sovereign states. Today, whether their primary concern is security, power, cooperation, norms regimes, and/or international order, most mainstream IR scholars remain committed to the idea that state or regime behavior is the proper focus of scholarly inquiry into world politics.

² Decca Aitkenhead, Interview, Hillary Clinton: "What is more uncivil than taking children away?", *The Guardian*, June 29, 2018 (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jun/29/hillary-clinton-on-trump-s-child-detention-policy-it-keeps-me-up-at-night>).

³ Michael Nedelman, "'That's when all hell broke loose': Coronavirus patients start to overwhelm US hospitals," CNN, March 25, 2020 (<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/25/health/coronavirus-covid-hospitals/index.html>).

⁴ Hallie Golden, "Washington state residents frustrated over obstacles to get coronavirus tests," *The Guardian*, March 4, 2020. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/03/coronavirus-washington-state-deaths-testing>).

This focus on states and state behavior in IR mirrors other ways that critique is silenced within Political Science. Significantly, analyses of race in international politics disappeared almost entirely from mainstream IR scholarship and became the purview of adjacent disciplines (e.g., Africana Studies) or subdisciplines focused internally on elections, institutions, and law (e.g., American Politics, Political Theory).⁵ Within these other Political Science fields, this indwelling stance itself prohibited inquiry into transnational forms of racialized power and anti-imperial modes of resistance that transcended borders. Political Theory for instance, as Jennifer Pitts notes, remained “remarkably untouched” throughout the 1980s and 1990s by the explosion of critical work happening within those other academic fields inspired by postcolonial theory such as comparative literature, world history, cultural studies, race and ethnic studies, art history, and anthropology.⁶

At the end of the day, this means Political Science has been deeply complicit in unseeing the *longue durée* of America’s racist, imperial, disciplining power exercised over once colonized peoples across the globe. Since the demise of formal imperialism in the years following World War Two, Political Scientists themselves have participated in normalizing both a language of totalizing surety (e.g., “grand strategy,” “balance of power”) as well as oxymoronic platitudes (e.g., “liberal hegemony”) that consistently re-concretize states as the primary units worthy of analysis in global politics while occluding the imperial exercise of American power.⁷

Mainstream IR scholars thus contribute every day to a public culture in America singularly incapable of understanding itself as anything other than *sui generis* and, thus, incapable of reacting to politics that contradict that understanding with anything other than shocked bafflement. Indeed, the reactions of IR scholars and foreign policy analysts to events like 9/11 or the election of Donald Trump often mirror the more popular forms of baffled self-absorption. Has Washington squandered the unipolar moment, bemoans Fareed Zakaria?⁸ Is this the end of the “American led liberal world order,” worries John Ikenberry?⁹

What gets lost in this American-centered narcissism is the way the power of the USA *actually* exerts itself on the world: working through, across, within, around, beneath, with and without, states and state institutions. This power is fugal rather than univocal, it not only punishes, it disciplines, refines itself, fails in one context, learns from its mistakes, and thrives in another. Throughout the twentieth century but particularly since World War Two, this fluid congeries of American policy and

⁵ Robert Vitalis, *White World Order: Black Power Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 14–15.

⁶ Jennifer Pitts, “Political Theory of Empire and Imperialism,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, 13 (2010), 213.

⁷ “Liberal Hegemony” is a term most often associated with champions of the “U.S. led liberal world order” like John Ikenberry. See in particular Ikenberry’s *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁸ Fareed Zakaria, “The Self-Destruction of American Power: Washington Squandered the Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs*, 98.4 (2019), 10–17.

⁹ John Ikenberry, “The Plot Against American Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, 96.3 (2017).

military practice has shaped both the politics of the world and the world of politics within the USA in a manner seemingly invisible to much mainstream media culture and academic Political Science. And it is upon precisely this power that Stuart Schrader turns his formidable interrogative skills in *Badges Without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing*.

Schrader's book joins an efflorescing group of critical scholars (e.g., Robert Vitalis, Nikhil Singh, Adom Gettachew, Daniel Bessner, Jessica Whyte, Robbie Shilliam) who are re-engaging twentieth-century global history through the state-transcending lenses focused on imperialism and anti-colonial struggle. His emphasis on policing, however, stands out for the way it conjoins ideology analysis, policy inquiry, and archival research in an approach particularly suited for understanding the contrapuntal rhythm of imperial cause and effect. Focusing on policing in the way that he does allows Schrader to explore the evolution of imperial practices within and without of the United States or—as he puts in his description of how tear gas was normalized as a “non-lethal weapon” in the USA and Vietnam—through “a frenzied, to-and-fro itinerary across the foreign-domestic divide.” (Schrader, 195)

The book thus provides a rigorously critical genealogy of the long-term connection between foreign and domestic policing in the USA, focusing on the era following World War Two when America stepped into ensure that “formerly colonized, newly independent nations” did not fall under the Soviet sphere of influence or embrace economic policies that might trouble the imperial legacy of capital accumulation. (Schrader, 53) Schrader focuses in particular on the way powerful security experts such as Byron Engle and Robert Komer—men who make startling re-appearances throughout the book—working through government agencies like the Office of Public Safety (OPS), channeled their experience of policing in American cities into shaping counterinsurgency strategies in these nations. These same experts—through these same agencies and funding bodies—then folded what they learned from these counterinsurgency strategies back into policing in American cities. This fluid, to-and-fro between theaters of domestic policing and theaters of foreign counterinsurgency management, gave shape to both a distinct form of militarized and racialized policing in America (with a particular federal-but-local-but-federal twist) and a distinct form of American “imperialism without imperialists.” (Schrader, 30)

Schrader's book is thus simultaneously about the impact of imperialism on the metropole and a rejection of that very idea. In other words, historians and political observers have long warned that the extractive economic practices and racist violence of imperialism can fatally corrupt societies that consider themselves civilized and enlightened. Separated by over 150 years, for instance, the very different Edmund Burke and Aimé Césaire^{10,11} each identified imperial violence with decline, using the same words, “gangrene” and “poison,” to describe the putrefying transformation of the colonizing body politic. In the twentieth century, as Schrader notes, commentators from Hannah Arendt to Césaire, Jean-Paul Sartre to Michel Foucault,

¹⁰ Edmund Burke, “Speech on the Nabob of Arcot's Debts,” *The Portable Edmund Burke*, eds. Isaac Kramnick, (New York; Penguin, 1999) 378–387.

¹¹ Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York; Monthly Review Press, 2000).

have similarly described the way “techniques of power deployed in far-off lands by imperial rulers tend to be repatriated for domestic use” as the “boomerang effect” of imperialism.(Schrader, 43). Schrader’s book, however, complicates that boomerang metaphor in three crucial ways.

First, he points out that applying a concept developed in reference to European empires to a US context fails to grasp the way American policy makers learned from the mistakes of European imperialists. In particular, these policy makers and experts approached imperialism as mode of security-focused governance, transforming US technical assistance into a unique form of “imperialism without imperialists” which did not “require staffing distant jurisdictions with white supremacist colonial officers.”(Schrader, 30) While I think it is clear that British liberal imperialists in the early twentieth century—many of whom would go on to influence IR both in Britain and the USA—were extraordinarily interested in de-imperializing their own empire, there is obviously something unique about the governance and directionality of an empire built entirely upon denying its own power even as it exerts it. Schrader’s granular reading of how that power works on the ground (or grounds) not only complicates our understanding of American influence in the world and at home, it challenges the very language by which we describe what an “empire” is and, in so doing, opens up new doors for political critique and contestation.

Second, Schrader’s analysis challenges not just the detailed trajectory of the boomerang effect but the assumption—explicit in Burke, Arendt, and even Césaire’s critique—that the problem with imperial violence begins in the colony. Schrader, by contrast, muddles the directionality of this logic, arguing that in the case of the United States, policing was already racialized, already violent, already corrupted, and that these preexisting practices worked their way into counterinsurgency abroad and then back again. And he makes this case with particular clarity in Chapter Eight, “Order Maintenance and the Genealogy of SWAT.” As Schrader demonstrates, the origins story often told about the emergence of the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team in Los Angeles is that, when Daryl Gates was looking for a better way to suppress Black radicals in the 1960s, he consulted US Marines at Camp Pendleton in San Diego and the result was the creation of SWAT. The inspiration for SWAT, in this telling, came from the Vietnamese theater of war, transplanted (via Gates) to the streets of LA. But for Schrader this story fails to adequately grasp the ways inspiration for the “aggressive, militaristic form of policing” Gates brought to LA originated in *both* counterinsurgency practices abroad *and* those already “native to Los Angeles” (Schrader, 232). Schrader’s work in this chapter de-exceptionalizes police violence in the USA even as it links its transformation to imperial practices of counterinsurgency abroad. Here, the right metaphor is not so much the boomerang as the perpetual motion machine.

Third, in challenging the basic directionality of the boomerang thesis—the assumption that “techniques of rule of violence” run in transit from a “debased imperial periphery to an otherwise untarnished domestic arena”—Schrader upsets its normative core. (Schrader, 233) Once you expose the ways the “routes of transit” for police violence were always multidirectional, then it becomes less possible to see America as a city on a hill whose pristine democratic culture was corrupted, tragically, by its own actions overseas. The “flattest version” of this argument, Schrader

maintains, naturalized and normalized violent, US sponsored, counterinsurgency overseas so long as it never touched the home front. Even more dangerous, the boomerang's supposed trajectory from a pristine democratic core to the chaotic periphery and back again, occludes America's long history of racial and imperial violence, its origins as, in Aziz Rana's words, a "settler empire"—slave holding, expansionist, and violent.¹²

Schrader's book thus stands in solidarity with the boomerang thesis and pushes beyond it in ways that illuminate both the strange creature that is police-focused American imperialism abroad and its multifaceted effects on policing at home. It reveals that while racism, "movements to counter it, and their repression" have existed in the USA for hundreds of years, the war on crime, stop and frisk, and mass incarceration developed "specifically in the context of an effort to use police to manage global decolonization." (Schrader, 5) *Badges Without Borders* resolutely refuses to be bound by the prescribed limits of a single discipline and is thus able to see more, reveal more, critique more than is possible within the rigid parameters of mainstream Political Science. Schrader's method is "unhoused" in the tradition of Edward Said, holding the "foreign" and "domestic" together "in a single analytic frame." (Schrader, 14)

The book does this by blending archival investigations of policing and counterinsurgency at every level of analysis. Chapters themselves move between theaters of US sponsored counterinsurgency training abroad, the reinterpretation and reconceptualization of that training in the USA, the re-exportation of that training, and the re-incorporation of those ideas (e.g., tear gas, riot control, "disappearance" as a weapon of counterinsurgency) back into American policing. Throughout the book, key figures like August Vollmer, Engle, and Komer emerge and re-emerge as conduits of ideas coming in (from the American experience in the Philippines and post-war Japan) and going out (to Brazil, Vietnam, Guatemala) and coming in (to Harlem and Los Angeles). But the book does more than highlight how the USA fully integrated its external and internal facing approach to counterinsurgency; it demonstrates over and over again why political figures and security experts felt that approach was necessary.

Because the global politics of the Cold War took place in a formally color blind, decolonial era which meant that US foreign policy was now faced with a complicated, double-layered policy objective; a) to discipline former colonial states in ways that replicated the racist modes of colonial-capitalist resource extraction required by the world's markets, while b) avoiding practices that explicitly emulated those racist modes of disciplining and resource extraction. This internally fraught policy objective was complicated by another, equally thorny problem of perception which, as Schrader's archival research demonstrates, preoccupied diplomats and policy experts in the post-war era: how to avoid Soviet propaganda that characterized the United States as the hierarchical, racist society it actually was. On both the global and domestic level, US policing experts helped to do this by vocally rejecting racism

¹² Aziz Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 3.

and embracing national equality and then recasting resistance to inequality and racism as crime and subversion in need of ordering and control. On both the global and domestic level, professionalization of those police forces engaging in “discretionary, counterrevolutionary police actions” becomes the obvious solution to the problem of maintaining racist order through an explicitly non-racist set of policy practices. (Schrader, 41)

Throughout, Schrader’s book also demonstrates how these violent processes constructed the very “stable referents” that preoccupied them—“the Third World, communist insurgency, guerillas”—even as they claimed to be the only conceivable solutions to the problems brought about by “the Third World, communist insurgency, guerillas.” In the cyclical logic of global counterinsurgency, “discretionary, counterrevolutionary police actions” were always the only solutions to the problems caused by “discretionary, counterrevolutionary police actions.” This endless, dog-chasing-its-tail, approach to global and domestic order-making mirrors, in key ways, how liberal imperialists—from Jan Smuts to Niall Ferguson—consistently imagine that more and better empire is always the solution to the problems created by liberal empire because to think otherwise would be illiberal. Schrader’s detailed engagement with the perambulation of those experts and institutional figures involved in this counterinsurgency, however, highlights the difficulty of putting a finger on the particular rhythm of this uniquely American imperial feedback loop. These men, Schrader argues, were “bricoleurs who picked up bits of useful knowledge along the way and modified them in relation to what they already knew,” dashing “from emergency to crisis, which they or their allied agents had often helped to create.” (Schrader, 53)

Hence, Schrader’s analysis goes a long way toward explaining the seemingly acephalic quality of American imperialism, a quality which contributes to its ongoing obfuscation. Behind the logic of “liberal hegemony” lies counterinsurgency and professionalized policing, modes of racialized power that structure the everyday lives of people in America and throughout the world while deflecting attention away from that power at every level. *Badges Without Borders* provides us with a particularly cogent set of historical tools with which to puncture the immense bubble of unseeing that stands between most Americans and any awareness of the massive security structure their state enables. It also suggests that we can find historical precedents for combating that unseeing within the very movements which counterinsurgency strategies were established to combat: radical Black and anti-racist movements that connected police abuse domestically with counterinsurgency abroad. As Schrader notes, it was the convergence of “Black radicalism, white New Left militancy, anti-war action, and anti-imperialist solidarity” in the late 1960s that gave rise to a critique of overseas police assistance that ultimately resulted in the termination of the OPS. (Schrader, 269)

At the end of the day, *Badges Without Borders* provides us with one, particularly powerful antidote to the commonsense of American unseeing, a commonsense whose logic reaches its most fevered pitch in the relentless expressions of shock at our “Third World dictator” of a president and the “third world” conditions of our healthcare system. Schrader’s book does this through the very urgency of its methodology: its insistence on defying the accelerating universe of American

exceptionalism and, instead, on holding the “foreign” and “domestic” together “in a single analytic frame.” It is a remarkable work of “unhoused” scholarship with implications for resistance and solidarity more necessary now than ever.

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