

The White West
Fascism, Unreason, and the
Paradox of Modernity

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7	Preface Kader Attia, Anselm Franke, and Ana Teixeira Pinto
9	Introduction Unreason and Modernity Anselm Franke and Ana Teixeira Pinto
	Whose Universal?
27	Inheritance and Finitude Toward a Literary Phenomenology of Time Donna V. Jones
45	Fractal Thinking Denise Ferreira da Silva
55	Imperial Reason, Permanent Security, and the Dawn of Everything A. Dirk Moses
	War Ecologies
77	Fetishized Repression Institutional Racism as a European Civil System Norman Ayari
89	America and the Cold War Origins of the (White) West Nikhil Pal Singh
113	Anything You Can Imagine Is Here Rijn Sahakian
125	Blue Land Olivier Marboeuf

Aesthetic Currencies

- 161 **The Promise of the Nonhuman**
An Existentialist Trope in the Anthropocene
Sladja Blazan
- 181 **The Art Right**
Larne Abse Gogarty
- 191 **Formless Labor**
Kerstin Stakemeier
- Automating Apartheid**
- 209 **An Analytics of Obligation**
On Algorithmically Mediated Labor and
the Transference of Racial Value
Ramon Amaro
- 225 **Biometrics as White Biopolitics**
Nitzan Lebovic
- 237 **Digital Colonialism**
Felix Stalder
- 248 **Contributors**

Preface

The “White West” project began with a conference organized in May 2018 by Kader Attia, Ana Teixeira Pinto, and Giovanna Zapperi at a forum in Paris for decolonial debate run by Kader Attia, with contributions by Larne Abse Gogarty, Florian Cramer, Angela Dimitrakaki, Quinsy Gario, Ferenc Gróf, Léopold Lambert, Sven Lütticken, Olivier Marboeuf, Pascale Obolo, Natascha Sadr Haghighian, and Marina Vishmidt. We titled the conference “The Resurgence of Fascism as a Cultural Force,” since widespread opinion found the current usage of the term fascism “alarmist” and “imprecise.” These responses made us aware of how poorly understood the term had become and spurred the urge to reengage it.

In collaboration with La Colomie, Kader Attia and Ana Teixeira Pinto organized a second conference in June 2019. Named after a 2017 essay by Nikhil Pal Singh, “The Afterlife of Fascism,” it examined the recurring elements of fascism in contemporary society. For this event, the speakers included Norman Ajari, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Sven Lütticken, Revital Madar, Karine Parroí, Rijn Sahaktian, Nikhil Pal Singh, Françoise Vergès, and Louisa Yousfi. A third conference, “Automating Apartheid,” took place in January 2020 at the Kunsthalle Wien in Vienna by invitation of the directors What, How & for Whom/WHW (Ivet Curlin, Nataša Ilić, and Sabina Sabolović), with contributions by Florian Cramer, Radhika Desai, David Columbia, Marina Gržinić, Rose-Anne Cush, Zakkiyah Iman Jackson, Nitzan Lebovic, Olivier Marboeuf, Ciraj Rassool, Dorcy Rugamba, Kalpana Seshadri, and Felix Stalder.

Together with Anselm Franke and the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin, a fourth event was programmed. Titled “Whose Universal?,” the conference was meant to examine the paradox at the heart of modernity regarding who is included and excluded in systems of justice, but it was unfortunately derailed by the COVID-19 crisis. Instead, we organized a podcast with a range of conversation partners: Norman Ajari, Ramon Amaro, Paola Bacchetta, Florian Cramer, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Priyamvada Gopal, Barnor Hesse, Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz, Donna V. Jones, Rajkamal Kahlon, David Lloyd, Olivier Marboeuf,

**Imperial Reason, Permanent Security,
and the Dawn of Everything**
A. Dirk Moses

War and Realism

The Russian invasion of Ukraine that began in 2014 and intensified in 2022 has sparked a geopolitical debate about national sovereignty and the inviolability of state borders. The term “imperial reason,” recently used to denote Western invasions of Muslim-majority states,¹ has found a new context as Western leaders have begun acknowledging the stark social-Darwinist logic of state competition and the necessary militarization of foreign policy. With this trend comes the masculinization of politics, the growth of the arms industry, and the degradation of the environment at a time when global politics needs to confront the impending climate catastrophe. As during the Cold War, those who advocate this seemingly realist posture decry what they call the illusion of values-led foreign policies and United Nations diplomatic leadership. Their position is reminiscent of Otto von Bismarck’s dictum from 1862: “Not through speeches and majority decisions will the great questions of the day be decided—that was the great mistake of 1848 and 1849—but by iron and blood.”² In referring to the short-lived national parliament that failed to unite German territories under liberal auspices, he was contrasting the hardheaded realism of state interests with the utopianism of politics as dialogue and consensus.

Do we face this dichotomy today? One of the most famous proponents of the international-relations theory of “realism,” the political scientist John Mearsheimer, believes his position to be rational because it reflects the unwritten laws of geopolitics, namely that states pursue their own interests without much regard for universal values. He has thus warned for a decade that Ukrainian efforts to seek NATO membership would provoke an invasion from Russia because Russian leaders have consistently

1. David Slater, “The Imperial Present and the Geopolitics of Power,” *Geopolitics* 1, no. 2 (2010): 191–205.

2. “Excerpt from Bismarck’s ‘Blood and Iron’ Speech (1862),” trans. Jeremiah Riener, German History in Documents and Images, accessed July 10, 2023, https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document?cfm?document_id=250.

declared that such efforts threaten their statehood, which demands spheres of influence and buffer states. To ignore these threats is, by implication, irrational, even if the Russian demand is not necessarily reasonable.³

Recent scholarship also draws attention to realism. Matthew Specter's book *The Atlantic Realists* (2022) demonstrates that realism was not imported to the United States by German émigrés in the mid-twentieth century, as is commonly thought, but developed in a transatlantic exchange in the late nineteenth century, as both countries started to assemble overseas empires.⁴ Realism, in this reading, originated in the new discipline of geopolitics, which saw established and rising empires in competition, all demanding spheres of influence for their development and permanent security. The original claim to a sphere of influence was the Monroe Doctrine, expressed by US President James Monroe in 1823. It determined that Old World intervention in the New World of the Americas threatened US security interests and would be treated as a hostile act. Such leaders—and the realists who study them—talk about “permanent security interests.”⁵ According to this logic, Ukrainian neutrality—or client status—is a permanent security imperative for Russia because it cannot afford to have an “anti-Russia” on its doorstep, or in its historical heartland, as Russian nationalists view Ukraine.⁶

Is this the realism we see today? Only in part. Mearsheimer does not question if Russian claims about its sphere of influence are legitimate or not; they are, for realists, an objective fact that we ignore at our peril. He invokes the Monroe Doctrine to state that

3. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001); Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin,” *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (September/October 2014). See also Benjamin Schwarz and Christopher Layne, “Why Are We in Ukraine? On the Dangers of American Hubris,” *Foreign Magazine*, July 9, 2023, <https://harpers.org/archive/2023/06/why-are-we-in-ukraine/>.

4. Matthew C. Specter, *The Atlantic Realists: Empire and International Political Thought between Germany and the United States* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).

5. Flemming Splidsboel-Hansen, “Past and Future Meet: Aleksandr Gorchakov and Russian Foreign Policy,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 54, no. 3 (2002): 384.

6. Andrew Osborn and Alexander Marrow, “Putin Says Ukraine Is Becoming an ‘Anti-Russia’; Pledges Response,” *Reuters*, May 14, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-says-russia-will-respond-ukraines-cleansing-political-space-2021-05-14/>.

the United States would never tolerate a hostile state at its borders. So far, no one has contradicted him on this point. Like Henry Kissinger in Davos in 2022, he enjoins Ukraine to be neutral and cede territory to end the hostilities.⁷ They are not advocating for escalatory warfare. Seeking to defeat and thus permanently weaken Russia, they argue, is unrealistic in view of its nuclear capacity and stated belief that a Western orientation for Ukraine poses an existential threat to Russia’s survival. In Germany, the realist position, paradoxically, is the cynical combination of economic pragmatism and historical justice: buying cheap Russian energy under the cover of historical indebtedness because Nazi Germany inflicted such terrible damage on the Soviet Union. In this way, a values-led policy aligns neatly with the imperatives of German industry and the national economy. Calls to militarize German and Western politics come from liberal internationalists speaking in the name of “the West,” not from classical US realists who opposed the invasion of Iraq twenty years ago and a generation earlier criticized the US campaign in Vietnam. Cold War rhetoric is being wielded anew by liberal internationalists, not by classical realists: “The future of the democratic world will be determined by whether the Ukrainian military can break a stalemate with Russia and drive the country backwards—perhaps even out of Crimea for good,” write prominent US pro-war commentators.⁸

Relatedly, for the “small nations” between Germany and Russia who can invoke histories of occupation over the centuries as warranting their hard-won and jealously guarded sovereignty, the state is not the enemy but the protective shield against outside intervention. It is no accident that the concept of genocide was formed in this region by a Belorussian-born Polish-educated Jewish lawyer—Raphael Lemkin—during the Second World War. The experience of nationality as fragile and threatened by predatory occupiers is intensely recalled and felt. Freedom is not just individual but collective, indeed anti-colonial or anti-imperial: expelling invaders and establishing democratic institutions of

7. Timothy Bella, “Kissinger Says Ukraine Should Cede Territory to Russia to End War,” *Washington Post*, May 24, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/24/henry-kissinger-ukraine-russia-territory-davos/>.

8. Anne Applebaum and Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Counteroffensive,” *The Atlantic*, May 1, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/06/counteroffensive-ukraine-zelensky-crimea/673781/>.

self-government. Many people understand and sympathize with this impulse, identifying with Ukrainians' struggle to liberate their homeland from Russian occupation.

One of the vexing dilemmas we confront is that the impulse to support smaller states from their paranoid and aggressive neighbors can be instrumentalized by the liberal-internationalist permanent-security project that is further militarizing the West. It is often forgotten that one of the key planks of British rationale and propaganda in the First World War was ensuring the sovereignty of small states like Belgium. In doing so, the British continued nineteenth-century reasoning by imperial apologists who argued that Pax Britannica, the century of relative peace before the start of the First World War, benefited humanity by civilizing savage and barbarous peoples and ending the slave trade. Now liberal internationalists cast the current war as a rerun of the Second World War, with Putin as Hitler. In this framing, those counseling caution like Kissinger are appeasers, as Chamberlain was of Hitler. Accordingly, realists warn against sleepwalking into a new world war, as the Great Powers did in 1914. Seen this way, all parties are speaking the same language—of state interests, spheres of influence, civilizational struggle, and national survival—which ends up with what political scientists call “security dilemmas,” meaning that one state’s security requirements are regarded by neighboring states as a peril. Confronting this dilemma is David Graeber and David Wengrow’s comprehensive book *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (2021). In it, they pose the question: How did we get stuck with security fears governing our lives?

How We Got Stuck

Graeber and Wengrow ask how the development of the modern state and concomitant infringements on our elementary freedom came to be seen as an inevitable and necessary trajectory of human history. It was not always so. As they demonstrate, archaeological and anthropological research indicates that humans experimented with various social arrangements for millennia that did not always violate the three human freedoms: the freedom to move and relocate, the freedom to disobey and ignore authority, and the freedom to collectively shape what they call “entirely new social realities, or shift back and forth between different ones.”⁹ One of their points is to remind readers of these freedoms that “have

gradually receded, to the point where a majority of people living today can barely comprehend what it might be like to live in a social order based on them.”⁹

Graeber and Wengrow observe that the state is a combination of three governing principles: the control of violence, the control of information, and the control of individual charisma, which translate, respectively, to sovereignty, bureaucracy, and a competitive political field or democracy. Scholars have erred, they say, in projecting this combination back onto history, when in fact societies were usually governed by only one of them. Today we experience a unique constellation of all three: “All these accounts seem to assume that there is only one possible end point to this process: that these various types of domination were somehow bound to come together, sooner or later, in something like the particular form taken by modern states in America and France at the end of the eighteenth century, a form which was gradually imposed on the rest of the world after both world wars.”¹⁰

They are skeptical about modern states, including putatively democratic ones, which, they observe, are dominated by elites while the population largely plays the role of spectator. If anything, they suggest, modern democracy’s roots lie in aristocratic rather than Athenian traditions. How and why it came to this, they conclude, “must remain a matter for speculation.”¹¹ Their challenge is to think non-teleologically about world history, to consider the force of contingency, so that the radical questions they pose about human freedom beyond modern states can be pondered and answered.

A point of their book is to think about these questions in different ways. For example, contrary to many accounts, they argue that warfare was not a constant of human life until relatively recently. When it does become central to certain polities, they observe the loss of freedoms and the modeling of governance on the patriarchal household.¹² Drawing on the respective work of Orlando Patterson and Franz Baermann Steiner, they trace this modular pattern to ancient Rome, in which natural freedom was

9. David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 503.

10. Graeber and Wengrow, 367, 369.

11. Graeber and Wengrow, 504.

12. Graeber and Wengrow, 508.

defined as the male individual's ownership of property, including of enslaved peoples. The latter were often obtained in wars of conquest and became the personal property of the male head of the household, a soldier. His freedom consisted in disposing of his property as he pleased. In this way, slavery and property law intersected. The enslaved person became an object (*res*) and part of the household, joining women and children, over whom the patriarch had near absolute authority. This model of military and familial subordination linking domestic care and domination was more tightly wound in Rome than in other societies, which handled them with greater flexibility, thereby allowing more freedom, especially for women.

Did, then, the "relationship between external warfare and the internal loss of freedoms," they ask, lead to "systems of ranking and then to large systems of domination" like "dynastic kingdoms and empires"?¹³ It is a difficult question to answer; they concede, but the evidence they assemble points to Roman law and its military entailments; themselves the product of an expansionary empire. The Roman historian Sallust (86–35 BCE) is apparently the first to refer to the Roman state as *imperium*. Over time, empire came to mean the domination of one society by another, usually backed by military force; imperial expansion entailed dominion whether by annexation or through less formal means, but it did not necessitate colonization.¹⁴ Indeed, empire can exist without colonization; Ottoman rule in Egypt was not colonial because of the large measure of local self-administration and the absence of permanent settlers. Alternatively, empires often engaged in settlement and resettlement, colonizing frontier regions with loyal subjects; the Romans referred to its settlements of soldiers on conquered territory as *colonia*.

These two modalities of conquest could be combined.

Alexis de Tocqueville wrote: "The Romans, in general, did both.

13. Graeber and Wengrow, 507.

14. The following exposition draws on chapter 6 of A. Dirk Moses, *The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Securing and the Language of Transgression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). See the lucid analysis of Ronald Grigor Suny,

"The Empire Strikes Out: Imperial Russia, 'National' Identity, and Theories of Empire," in *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, ed. Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 23–66.

They seized the country's government, and in several parts of it they founded colonies that were nothing other than far-flung little Roman societies." Tocqueville accordingly advised French authorities in subduing Algeria after 1830 to dominate the interior so the coastal regions could be settled.¹⁵ He and other apologists denied that such wars of conquest were exterminatory in intention—they sought to use only as much force as necessary to achieve their aims. Even so, imperial conquest and warfare were governed by the logic of permanent security in various ways. In the first place, the aim of the colonizer was not just to defeat military forces but also to annex territory and rule over a foreign people. War aims were not limited, as they customarily were in intra-European wars; they were absolute. "Colonial conquerors came to stay," entailing massive disruptions to subjugated communities. Second, the colonizer often ended up waging war against the entire population because it was difficult to distinguish between combatants and noncombatants, especially when guerrilla-style resistance ensued.¹⁶ In general, imperial troops prevailed over opponents even when outnumbered because they were regularly paid, well supplied, and trained. The ability to concentrate forces at one point was more decisive than technological superiority alone, especially if Indigenous agents could be conscripted.¹⁷

The most fatal logic of permanent security is the violent escalation provoked by local resistance, which leads to reprisal and revenge killing to ensure that opposition is stamped out once and for all. Rome's armies occasionally exterminated entire cities

15. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, ed. Jennifer Pitts (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 61, 65.

16. Horst L. Wesseling, "Colonial Wars: An Introduction," in *Imperialism and War: Essays on Colonial Wars in Asia and Africa*, ed. Jaap A. de Moor and Horst L. Wesseling (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 3; Peter Paret, "Colonial Experience and European Military Reform at the End of the Eighteenth Century," in *Warfare and Empires*, ed. Douglas M. Peters (Aldershot, 1997), 357–70.

17. Michael Howard, "Colonial Wars and European Wars" in De Moor and Wesseling, *Imperialism and War*, 218–23; George Raundzens, "Why Did the Amerindian Defences Fail? Parallels in the European Invasions of Hispaniola, Virginia and Beyond," *War in History* 3, no. 3 (1996): 331–52; Luke Codwin, "The Fluid Frontier: Central Queensland, 1845–63," in *Colonial Frontiers: Indigenous-European Encounters in Settler Societies*, ed. Lynette Russell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 112.

that resisted or rebelled against its rule.¹⁸ Punishing and avenging treachery and betrayal, experienced as an insult and expression of contempt, was another motivation for destroying a people or city. Rome's attack on Carthage, which it accused of basic breaches of trust, is a classic example. Rome withdrew the right of pity and limited warfare; vengeance and indignation drove it to impose collective capital punishment.¹⁹ In 133 BCE, the Romans destroyed Numantia on the Iberian Peninsula for defying Roman rule, as they had Carthage thirteen years earlier. The sieges and subsequent destruction of Jerusalem between 70 BCE and 136 CE also can be seen in this light.

Terror played an important role in imperial conquest and governance. Massacring entire towns hastened the surrender of others when they heard the news. The relentless pursuit of enemy peoples is also a recurring feature of permanent security through the ages. Enemies were pursued to the extent that they no longer represented a threat or sufficient vengeance had been exacted. Sometimes the destruction was total. What these scenarios show is that real or imagined resistance to imperial or national rule can radicalize a policy of "pacification." Resistance leads to reprisals and counterinsurgency that aim at the continued destruction of a presumed enemy to achieve permanent security, so that never again would such resistance recur.²⁰

Imperial thinkers devoted considerable thought to the problem of "small wars," with their pattern of conquest followed by resistance. Although they advised against exasperating the conquered population, the destruction of villages and crops was countenanced if necessary. Tocqueville's liberal scruples were not shared by many French in Algeria, as he reported in 1833:

[In one view,] to subjugate the Arabs, we should fight them with the utmost violence and in the Turkish manner, that is to say, by killing everything we meet. I have heard

18. Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 216.

19. David Konstan, "Anger, Hatred, and Genocide in Ancient Greece," *Common Knowledge* 13, no. 1 (2007): 170–87.

20. Benjamin A. Valentino, Paul Huth, and Dylan Balch-Lindsay, "Draining the Sea: Mass Killing and Guerrilla Warfare," *International Organization* 58, no. 2 (2004): 375–407.

this view supported by officers who took it to the point of bitterly regretting that we have started to take prisoners in some places, and many assured me that they encouraged their soldiers to spare no one. For my part, I returned from Africa with the distressing notion that we are now fighting far more barbarously than the Arabs themselves. For the present, it is on their side that one meets with civilization.

At the same time, he regarded burning harvests, emptying silos, and interning civilians as "unfortunate necessities [...] to which any people that wants to wage war on the Arabs is obliged to submit." The reason for such extreme measures was that war was being waged on populations, not governments. Perceived "necessity" could compel liberals like Tocqueville to defend wars against entire populations.²¹

Early Modern Europe and Permanent Security

In view of Tocqueville's invocation of Roman precedent, Graeber and Wengrow rightly declare eighteenth-century France to be an inheritor of Roman traditions. As we know, early modern France normalized, even globalized, the modern state. This analysis allows us to propose an answer to the question of how security dilemmas came to define and limit our imagination of human freedom. Compressed and simplified, the story goes like this: In the sixteenth century, writers like Machiavelli advocated armed militancy and *raison d'état* to ensure political stability, continuity, and civic virtue. This type of thinking was enabled by the collapse of the Roman Empire long before and the splintering of Christendom into a multiplicity of realms, including small city-states, each preoccupied with its own survival. Out of this highly competitive environment, which did not characterize far richer parts of the world like China, came a military revolution and eventually the rudiments of the modern state necessary to

21. Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, 70, 87. See also Jennifer Pitts, "Empire and Democracy: Tocqueville and the Algeria Question," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 8, no. 3 (2000): 295–318; Cheryl B. Welch, "Colonial Violence and the Rhetoric of Eviction: Tocqueville on Algeria," *Political Theory* 31, no. 2 (2003): 235–64; and more recently, William Callois, *A History of Violence in the Early Algerian Colony* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

wage war: a tax-collecting bureaucracy and standing army so inimical to the three fundamental freedoms.

Theorists of sovereignty like Jean Bodin and Thomas Hobbes justified these developments. Self-preservation became the basic right, or even the obligation, of early modern polities. John Locke called self-preservation a “fundamental law of Nature” that trumped obligations to others. Emer de Vattel declared *un droit de sûreté* (a right to security) and the right of self-defense.²² The link to permanent security was the doctrine of necessity: feeling forced to react when collective security was threatened. Early modern thinkers tried to limit the doctrine of necessity by linking it to immediate self-defense rather than vaguely defined self-preservation, because the latter could escalate immediate security to “permanent” security, meaning the anticipation of future threats, which would lead to endless warfare. In Article 51 of the UN Charter, ratified in 1945, the enshrinement of self-defense as the only legal justification for force stands in this tradition, as it is narrower than self-preservation, but states still reason in terms of both. The fact that it took over seventy years after the Nuremberg trials for states to agree on a definition of the crime of aggression (in 2010) indicates the subjective nature of such assessments. For example, in 1981, Israel justified its bombing of an Iraqi nuclear reactor by saying it had “performed an elementary act of self-preservation, both morally and legally,” conveniently but misleadingly invoking Article 51.²³ As does Russia today.

Lest we fall into the trap of narrating the conjunctural development of the modern state as the “rise of the West,” it is important to recall that in the fifteenth century even the bigger states in Europe, like Spain, Portugal, France, and England, were relatively weak in global terms. Recent research underlines how the Spanish conquistadors were effectively privateers who inserted themselves as minor players into intra-American rivalries. For all the human devastation they eventually caused, including the introduction of disease and slavery, the Spanish were comparatively few in number and dependent on local alliances. Similarly, the small number of Portuguese in the Indian Ocean were limited to coastal trading

posts. The English and Dutch states were so poor and weak that they chartered private trading companies that had to compromise with local powers in India and the Malay Archipelago.²⁴ These European companies established the transatlantic slave trade that, together with the tea, sugar, and cotton extracted from India and the Americas, contributed to the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth century.

This precarity led to increasingly militarized engagement with locals and the prioritization of security. The legal justification of their aggression as self-defense then laid the foundation for later imperial expansion. In the sixteenth century, for example, the Salamanca School of theologians justified Spanish depredations in the Americas by interpreting Indian resistance as aggression, thereby coding Spanish reprisals as self-defense and thus just.²⁵ Accordingly, the violence of imperial reason and settler accumulation was not included in the laws of nations: apart from occasional scandals, contemporaries did not see their security measures as excessive or transgressive. For this reason, the social scientist Mark Neocleous observes that the laws of war, as they developed in the early modern period, justified the crushing of Indigenous resistance as legal: “In the bourgeois mind, *the global war of primitive accumulation was the archetypal just war*.” In other words, “The class war was historically a just war. International law was a key weapon used in the global class war.”²⁶

The German jurist Carl Schmitt made this point in 1950, though from the opposite political perspective. A proponent of European empire and apologist for the Nazi state, Schmitt understood the violence of what he called *Landnahme* (land appropriation). It is the process of territorial conquest and annexation that he saw as the basis not only of European expansion but of statehood itself. The establishment of European states could be traced to what he termed *Völkerverdrängung*, mass migrations of

24. Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

25. A. Dirk Moses, “Empire Resistance and Security: International Law and the Transformative Occupation of Palestine,” *Humanity: the International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 8, no. 2 (2017): 379–409.

26. Mark Neocleous, “International Law as Primitive Accumulation: Or, the Secret of Systematic Colonization,” *European Journal of International Law* 23, no. 4 (2012): 957; italics in original.

22. Richard Tuck, *Rights of War and Peace: Political Thought and the International Order from Grotius to Kant* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1999).

23. Murry Colin Alder, *The Inherent Right of Self-Defence in International Law* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), 141.

peoples tantamount to “a series of great land appropriations.”²⁶ The same process obtained in empire: “The history of colonialism in its entirety is as well a history of spatially determined processes of settlement in which order and orientation are combined.”²⁷ The legal order of European empires was predicated on control of territory that was wrested from “wild peoples” in colonial wars of annihilation. These wars disregarded the constraints of competition and warfare among European states, which were displaced to far-off non-European lands, thereby stabilizing Europe.²⁷ Combined with his influential theory of statehood as the sovereign’s ability to proclaim states of emergency and violently impose order, Schmitt’s notion of land appropriation made imperial conquest and settler colonialism the secret driver of Western state development.

The intensification of colonial rule over the course of the nineteenth century points to a significant transition in the history of empire and permanent security: from the land and continental empires that organized humanity for millennia with economies of tribute and taxation to the blue-water European empires that inaugurated global capitalism and centralizing bureaucratic-military states. As Tocqueville noted, both forms of foreign rule marked European expansion, beginning with the Spanish conquest of the Americas in the late fifteenth century. This was also part of what Karl Marx called *wirtschaftliche Akkumulation* (often translated as “primitive accumulation,” though “originary” is more accurate), the process by which English commons and church lands were privatized and agricultural producers were separated from their means of production to become wage laborers, whose surplus the landowner kept in accumulating further capital. Marx focused on the expropriation and proletarianization of the English peasantry—what he called the “classic form” of originary accumulation—because he wanted to account for the birth of industrial capitalism in England. He also observed that this English transformation was dependent on earlier imperial developments. “In actual history,”²⁸ declared Marx, “it is notorious that conquest, enslavement, robbery,

murder, briefly force, play the great part” in originary accumulation. The violent expropriations of European empire began with the Spanish in the Americas. “The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalised the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.”²⁸

This list suggests that originary accumulation outside Europe mainly consisted of violent plunder: “The treasures captured outside Europe by undisguised looting, enslavement, and murder,” wrote Marx, “floated back to the mother-country and were there turned into capital.” He followed his contemporaries in distinguishing between colonies of exploitation and settler colonialism. The latter were “real Colonies, virgin soils, colonised by free immigrants,” and “colonies properly called.”²⁹

But Marx was less interested in the fate of the Indigenous peoples than in the capitalist exploitation of settlers.³⁰ For that reason, he regarded colonies of exploitation as more brutal. “The treatment of the aborigines,” he continued, “was, naturally, most frightful in plantation-colonies destined for export trade only, such as the West Indies, and in rich and well-populated countries, such as Mexico and India, that were given over to plunder.”³¹ Missing in his analysis was a sustained attention to the principal form of originary accumulation in settler colonies, namely the expropriation of land after the removal or destruction of its Indigenous owners.³² In shifting the focus, we can see dispossession rather than proletarianization as the salient mode

28. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Friedrich Engels, trans. Samuel More and Edward Aveling (New York: Modern Library, 1966), 78⁷, 78⁵, 8²³.

29. Marx, 8²⁶, 83⁸n1.

30. Philip Michael, “Settlers and Primitive Accumulation: Foundations of Capitalism in Australia,” *Review* 4 no. 2 (1980): 307–34. See also Gabriel Piterberg and Lorenzo Veracini, “Wakefield, Marx, and the World Turned Inside Out,”

Journal of Global History 10, no. 3 (2015): 457–78.

31. Marx, *Capital*, 83⁵.

32. Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minnneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 19–20.

27. Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos, 2003), 80–82, 132, 142. The historian Lauren Benton observes that Schmitt’s distinction between European and non-European space in the application of nascent laws of war is too sharply drawn; see Benton, *Search for Sovereignty*, ch. 6.

of accumulation, at least in these parts of the world, amounting to a distinctive mode of “settler accumulation.”³³

Marx noted settler-colonial violence only briefly in *Capital*, reporting how settlers in New England set premiums on “every Indian scalp and every captured red skin.”³⁴ His remark that this practice occurred when “a certain tribe” was proclaimed “rebels” points to the logic of permanent security in colonialism and Western state building: namely, defending ordinary accumulation from Indigenous resistance. It is no accident that in German colonies in Africa, the authorities perpetrated mass violence in suppressing Indigenous uprisings.³⁵

Resistance as Nation-State Formation

How did Indigenous people respond to this hyper-exploitation? One mode was “millenarian rebellion” directed against foreign elements perceived as threats to their survival.³⁶ These were not pretty affairs. Writing of the so-called Indian Mutiny, Marx thought the “infamous” conduct of the “sepoys” was “only the reflex, in a concentrated form, of England’s own conduct in India, not only during the epoch of the foundation of her Eastern Empire, but even during the last ten years of a long-settled rule. [...] There is something in human history like retribution; and it is a rule of historical retribution that its instruments be forged not by the offended, but by the offender himself.”³⁷ Writing in the same vein, Jean-Paul Sartre noted that “in Algeria and Angola, Europeans are massacred at sight; it is the moment of the boomcrang; it is the

third stage of violence; it comes back on us, it strikes us, and we do not realize any more than we did the other times that it’s we who have launched it.”³⁸ Frantz Fanon agreed: “The violence of the colonial regime and the counter-violence of the native balance each other and respond to each other in an extraordinary reciprocal homogeneity.”³⁹ The Tunisian Jew Albert Memmi was also attracted to the Marxist proposition that colonialism produced its own negation by bringing forth an utterly alienated colonized population whose only prospect of dignified life was the “complete liquidation of colonization.”⁴⁰

How was the alienation of the “native” issued from colonialism generated? Does it offer a way out of “stuckness”? These Francophone anti-colonial thinkers pointed out that the foundational binary between settler and native was a colonial product. In such a “Manichean world” (Fanon) of colonialism, in which the settler cast the native as the incarnation of absolute evil, natives had to invert this value hierarchy for their own self-respect. “Colonialism creates the patriotism of the colonized,” wrote Sartre.⁴¹ Memmi explained the source of this nativism in his famous book from 1957, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. His basic message was that “being considered and treated apart by colonialist racism, the colonized ends up accepting this Manichaean division of the colony and, by extension, of the whole world.” Consequently, “in the eyes of the colonized, all Europeans in the colonies are *de facto* colonizers.”⁴² What’s more, the practical impossibility of assimilation—because of the colonizer’s refusal and because of the self-denial entailed—meant that the native inevitably resorted to traditional values as a compensatory orientation. But these values, usually familial and religious, had become petrified by colonial pressure, and did not promote social progress. Nativism was reactionary. By ontologizing collectives in the same way as

33. Nicholas A. Brown, “The Logic of Settler Accumulation in a Landscape of Perpetual Vanishing,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 4, no. 1 (2014): 7.

34. Marx, *Capital*, 825–26.

35. Dominik Schaller, “From Conquest to Genocide: Colonial Rule in German Southwest Africa and German East Africa,” in *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation and Subaltern Resistance in World History*, ed. A. Dirk Moses (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 296–324; Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller, eds., *Genocide in German South-West Africa: The Colonial War of 1904–1908 and Its Aftermath* (Mannheim: Metin Press, 2008).

36. Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2001), 177–210; Nicholas A. Robins, *Native Inaugurations and the Genocidal Impulse in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Nicholas A. Robins and Adam Jones, eds., *Genocides by the Oppressed: Subaltern Genocide in Theory and Practice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

37. Karl Marx, *Karl Marx on Colonialism and Modernization*, ed. Shlomo Avineri (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 224.

38. Jean-Paul Sartre, preface to Franz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1963), 20.

39. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 88.

40. Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 151.

41. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 93; Jean-Paul Sartre, introduction to Memmi, *Colonizer and the Colonized*, xxviii; Abdul R. JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983), 4.

42. Memmi, *Colonizer and the Colonized*, 130–31.

the settler, and “condemning each individual of that group,” the colonized became “a xenophobe and racist.”⁴³

Sartre and Memmi did not applaud the chauvinism and racism of anti-colonialist struggles, and Fanon’s aversion to nativism is well known; racism and “a legitimate desire for revenge” could not “sustain a war of liberation,” he thought. Memmi eventually left Tunis for Paris because, as a Jew, he found life impossible in postcolonial Muslim Tunisia.⁴⁴ As Marxists, they were cosmopolitan internationalists who preferred a popular front of anti-colonialists that included sympathetic settlers, some closer to the liberation ideal than the Africans or Arabs. National liberation entailed transcending the terms of settler/native to create a new socialist nation of equal citizens. The colonial system needed to be transformed by expropriating the collaborating Indigenous bourgeoisie rather than simply expelling settlers.⁴⁵ They wished decolonization to be the assertion of freedom when the newly constituted people could gain political agency, enter history, and create their own authentic civilization, not just a variation of the colonizer’s.

At the same time, these writers told their European reading publics that their expectation of a nonviolent, non-racist, anti-colonialist struggle was unrealistic.⁴⁶ Violent and racist anti-colonialism was a predictable phase through which colonized peoples had to pass, even if it entailed “tragic mishaps,” in Fanon’s words. Fanon himself was ambivalent, famously praising this violence as a “cleansing force” through which “the native frees himself from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect.” This redemptive nationalism was necessary to assert a new postcolonial culture:
 “The most elementary, most savage, and the most undifferentiated

nationalism is the most fervent and efficient means of defending national culture.”⁴⁷ Sartre supported Fanon’s rendition of the conflict with some stirring lines: the struggle’s “irrepressible violence is neither sound and fury, nor the resurrection of savage instincts, nor even the effect of resentment: it is man recreating himself.”⁴⁸ For all the romanticization evident here, these thinkers both expressed and explained the revolutionary violence of the colonized as the moment of salvation.

Fanon was aware that racism, far from being a transitional political emotion, was being used by the “national bourgeoisie” to secure its own position in the postcolonial order. Rather than constructing a new nation beyond race, these elites were allowing precolonial tribal rivalries to recur.⁴⁹ Moreover, the new state appeared to the liberated populations less as their own democratic creation than as a distant apparatus that was milked by a dominant rival ethnic grouping for its own benefit. Their security and identity were therefore more likely to inhere in pre-independence traditional ethnic attachments than in a chimerical supra-tribal national identity.⁵⁰ The catastrophe of postcolonial African political stability, civil war, and genocide has been blamed on this failure to transcend race during and after decolonization. Writing in the tradition of the Francophone intellectuals, the historian Mahmood Mamdani blames this failure on colonialism: “That greater crime was to politicize indigeneity, first as a settler libel against the native, and then as a native self-assertion.”⁵¹

Anti-colonial affects like humiliation pertain to local and national uprisings against land and sea empires throughout the nineteenth century, from Haiti to Christian Ottoman provinces to the early decolonization of the Iberian territories in South America.

43. Memmi, 130, 139. Memmi’s insight closely resembles the theory of social regression advanced by Yanki Volkan in both *Bloodlines: From Ethnic Pride to*

Ethnic Terrorism (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997) and *Blind Trust: Large Groups and Their Leaders in Times of Crisis and Terror* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004).

44. Albert Memmi, *Jews and Arabs* (Chicago: J. Philip O’Hara, 1975).

45. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 146, 158; Benta Parry, “Resistance Theory/Theorizing Resistance or ‘Two Cheers for Nativism,’” in *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory*, ed. Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iversen (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1994), 172–91.

46. Memmi, *Colonizer and the Colonized*, 134–37; Sartre, preface to *Wretched of the Earth*, 18, 21.

47. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 148, 94–24.

48. “The native curses himself of colonial neurosis by thrusting out the settler through force of arms. When his rage boils over, he rediscovers his lost innocence and he comes to know himself in that he himself creates himself.” Sartre, preface to *Wretched of the Earth*, 22.

49. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 156–59.

50. Clifford Geertz, “The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States,” in *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa*, ed. Clifford Geertz (New York: Free Press, 1963), 109–19.

51. Mahmood Mamdani, “Beyond Settler and Native as Political Identities: Overcoming the Political Legacy of Colonialism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43, no. 4 (2001): 651–54.

Whether seeking greater autonomy from imperial rule or emphatic independence, many of these uprisings began as resistance to taxation imposed to fund the imperial war machines engaged in global struggle.⁵² Thus, empires operating in this competitive and expansive environment produced their own negation, or at least made them constitutively unstable unless they accommodated local autonomy, as the Habsburg Empire managed in part until the First World War.

In western Europe, early modern traditions of resistance recalled the Dutch revolt against the Spanish Habsburg dynasty from the mid-sixteenth to mid-seventeenth century, immortalized by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's play *Egmont* (1788) and Ludwig van Beethoven's accompanying composition. In pursuing national liberation in the nineteenth century, then, local freedom was often imagined and articulated not by moving away but by staying put. Certainly, in nomadic, sparsely settled regions, locals could try to avoid central authority, as Kazakh herders did with the Soviets into the 1930s.⁵³ But such regions became increasingly rare as the global population and state control grew and intensified.

Staying put and self-rule now meant buying into the Western rhetoric about civilization, which claimants, whether Egyptian or Korean nationalists, brought to Versailles in 1919, seeking national independence.⁵⁴ It also entailed adopting developmental teleologies. If the Soviet State in the 1920s and 1930s spoke about “overcoming backwardness,” new African states from the 1960s onward engaged in development projects and adapted the colonial state institutions they inherited.⁵⁵ Challenging the West, for the postrevolutionary and postcolonial nations, meant a developmental state as the vehicle for national freedom and future security.

52. James C. Scott, “Resistance without Protest and without Organization: Peasant Opposition to the Islamic Zakat and the Christian Tithe,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29, no. 3 (1987): 412–36; Sean Redding, *Sovereignty and Sovereignty: Taxation, Power, and Rebellion in Rural South Africa, 1880–1965* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006).

53. Sarah Cameron, *The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

54. Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

55. Fred Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

Since the 1970s, we have been confronted with the capitalist reality of the attrition of state capacities in neoliberal revolutions. Another reality is the geopolitical dilemma with which I commenced: so-called smaller states seeking freedom by relying on “great powers” and other smaller states, making themselves clients for their own ends. Yet another is the concomitant ramping up of security apparatuses to assert state power against resistance to capitalist extraction and/or to assertions of freedom against those states, large and small.

The Fatal Temptation of National Permanent Security

It is no accident that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky idealizes the State of Israel as a model for his state's armed independence—a popular notion in Ukraine and the West, irrespective of Israel's political lurch further to the right. In an article in *Foreign Affairs* in October 2022, the former Ukrainian defense minister Andriy Zagorodnyuk quoted Zelensky as saying that the country needed to become a “big Israel” until it could join NATO.⁵⁶ Who would pay for this ultra-militarization he did not say. Nor did he mention Israel's annexation of Syrian and Palestinian territories, still less its decades-long occupation of Palestine that Israeli and international human-rights NGOs call apartheid. Zagorodnyuk focused on “Ukraine's path to victory” and “how the country can take back all its territory.” His euphemistic statements about how to integrate the possibly hostile populations of the Crimea and Donbas regions are reminiscent of interwar assimilation policies by new states confronting recalcitrant national minorities. His determination to liberate occupied territory also countenances the destruction of Ukrainian cities by Russian missiles so long as the war continues. So paramount is national liberation and sovereignty, Zagorodnyuk concluded, that it was worth risking Russia's use of nuclear devices, in which case, he assured readers, “severe retaliatory measures” would be necessary. Herewith the apotheosis of the nation-state is revealed as the embodiment of imperial security logics understood as collective freedom. Quickly forgotten in the West are the reservations many harbored about the illiberal and nationalist policies of governing

56. Andriy Zagorodnyuk, “Ukraine's Path to Victory,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 12, 2022.

A. Dirk Moses

parties in frontline NATO states like Poland. The case of Western liberalism (“freedom”) was blind to the illiberalism of some members of the Western family, whose politics regarding migration and sexual freedom resemble Russia more than proclaimed Western values. With this articulation of freedom as armed permanent security by decolonizing entities, we confront a non-dialectical end point of history: of being really, badly stuck.

There are people trying to unstick this conjuncture, indeed those who have contested the settler-colonial state project along the way—the Indigenous critiques so central to *The Dawn of Everything* indicate where to look. For example, security can be rethought: “Security takes many forms. There is the security of knowing one has a statistically smaller chance of getting shot with an arrow. And then there’s the security of knowing that there are people in the world who will care deeply if one is.”⁵⁷ Whether these critiques represent a negation that pries us out of the position in which we are stuck may be utopian. What is certain, however, is that the justification of stuckness by both realists and liberal internationalists cannot unstick humanity. There are good grounds, then, for thinking of other options.



War Ecologies

57. Graeber and Wengrow, *Dawn of Everything*, 20.