



The Cunning of Neo-Colonialism

Henry Aoki

Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy - Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française, Vol XXX, No 1 (2022) pp 98-102.

Vol XXX, No 1 (2022)
ISSN 1936-6280 (print)
ISSN 2155-1162 (online)
DOI 10.5195/jffp.2022.1014
www.jffp.org



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.



This journal is operated by the University Library System of the University of Pittsburgh as part of its D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program, and is co-sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh Press

The Cunning of Neo-Colonialism

Henry Aoki

University of Southern California

As a born-and-raised son of Minneapolis (albeit one who moved away a year before the uprising), and as an aspiring socialist revolutionary, the “anticolonial eruptions” of 2020 and beyond are of an immediate, visceral importance. I can still recall the tremendous joy and hope that surged through my soul as I watched the 3rd Precinct burst into flames. Through Signal and Telegram, my friends and I whispered something we were far too beaten down to boldly proclaim: “This is it. It’s happening. It’s real.” For one brief moment, it was like five hundred years of suffering had stormed the streets and at last we would all be free.

It is all the more important—and far more painful—to recall what happened next. The City Council promised to “defund the police.” When the smoke cleared, the MPD received a smaller budget cut than other agencies.¹ A ballot measure to replace the MPD with a Department of Public Safety was defeated by a 56% “no” vote.² Dolal Idd was gunned down by the MPD on December 30th, 2020.³ Winston Boogie Smith was assassinated by U.S. Marshals on June 3rd, 2021.⁴ On February 2nd of this year, Amir Locke was murdered by the MPD SWAT team.⁵ No more precincts burned. The social media algorithms that had amplified a local protest into a global movement fell silent. Jerry-rigged crime statistics were splashed across the front of every paper. The revolution hadn’t even come before it went into retreat.

I appreciate Geo Maher’s *Anticolonial Eruptions* for its unrelenting defense of the right of all colonized people to rebel. Certainly, as we stand in the midst of a terrible reaction, upholding this right is critical to any revolutionary, counter-hegemonic struggle. Yet I am at the same time troubled by this text, reading it in the wake of a revolution that did not even progress far enough to fail. Maher argues that colonialism cannot help but produce its own blindspot—by dehumanizing the colonized, it becomes unable to comprehend their revolutionary consciousness and thus cannot recognize their uprising until after it has arrived. The colonized can intentionally hide in this blindspot, following the Jamaican proverb to “play fool to catch wise,” until at the last minute striking out in a “decolonial

ambush.” Maher’s provides an extensive argument for the significance of the colonial blindspot and the “decolonial cunning” that exploits it—but the majority of this argument is focused solely on the Haitian Revolution and slave resistance in the United States. More recent struggles only move into the center of analysis when it’s time to describe the ultimate “decolonial ambush”—thus the continuing significance of the “colonial blindspot” is only *inferred*, rather than proven. This troubles me not because I think the Haitian revolution or the Underground Railroad are unimportant to more recent struggles, but because regardless of whatever the “ontology” of the world is, the tactics of the imperialists have clearly changed.

Whatever the rhetorical power of the metaphor, revolutionaries cannot deceive ourselves into thinking that we are actually fighting slave masters. The enemy leadership is not a semi-feudal, semi-capitalist gentry — the enemy leadership is the contemporary U.S. capitalist class armed with a sophisticated intelligence apparatus. Maher writes that “the colonized and racialized emerge as an unseen enemy so disqualified, so scorned, and so invisibilized that, like a beast leaping from the dark, they only appear in outline and only when it’s too late.”⁶ Perhaps this still applies to the average American settler, but it certainly did not apply to J. Edgar Hoover. Intelligence agencies have no vested interest in pretending that the colonized are happy. But they do have a vested interest in seeking out any discontent among the colonized. William J. Maxwell’s 2015 *F.B. Eyes*, for instance, reveals that the FBI extensively surveilled Black American literature for at least five decades — long before the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power.⁷ Moreover, the bitter historical experiences of Black Power and the broader U.S. Third Worldist left are proof that it takes very little time for the enemy to know us well enough to destroy us. And this is only half of the issue. The other half is that the imperialists are not simply “colonial” but *neo-colonial*. Our enemy is cunning. To use a phrase that circulates in certain corners of the movement, “the counter-insurgency is real.”

Five years before the murder of George Floyd, Jamar Clark was murdered by the MPD. In response to the murder, protestors, led by established left-ish organizations, occupied the Fourth Precinct and camped outside of it for several weeks.⁸ One year after that, Philando Castile was murdered just outside St. Paul. Protestors, led by established left-ish organizations, assembled an encampment at the nearby Governor’s Mansion.⁹ These were “peaceful protests” (notwithstanding, in the case of the fourth precinct occupation, the non-fatal shooting of several protestors by a group of white supremacists). Violence was exiled into smaller protests, away from the established vanguard. Rather than destroy these symbols (and material forces) of oppression, the leaders of the protests eventually heeded the police’s demands to leave. The “volcano” was cooled before it could erupt.

It is not difficult to conclude that the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic were a significant factor in the emergence and growth of the

uprising. Psychologically, the unambiguous necropolitics and necrocapitalism of the United States formed a fountain of rage that George Floyd's murder would unleash. From a practical perspective, mass unemployment and mass remote work meant that countless people who would otherwise be at their job could protest in the streets. Yet the pandemic also offered a third critical condition for the tremendous growth of the uprising – a condition that is all too easily forgotten. Right after George Floyd was murdered, the established left-ish organizations of the Twin Cities *did not know if there should be any protests*.¹⁰ At this moment, many assumed that in-person protests would be a super-spreader event for Covid-19. Established organizations, usually at the vanguard of any action against police brutality, hesitated and limited themselves to shorter events. Consequently, the vanguard was yielded to those Black youth who refused to leave the streets. It was they who led the successful attack to destroy the Third Precinct. And it was established organizations that then undertook the task of reigning back in the movement.

Maher argues that the colonized can “embrace, perform, and weaponize” their dehumanization in the fight against their oppressors, playing “the docile slave until the last possible moment.”¹¹ Yet this cunning is complicated in an era where the imperialists fund colonized puppets to play at being rebels right up until the moment that the colonized need to be made docile. It is all the more complicated when high-profile opportunists in the movement ironically hide from accountability on the basis of “movement security.” Neo-colonialism creates an environment where we can never be totally sure whether we are playing the fool or being played for a fool. The snakes in the movement are benefited when we overstate the racial hubris of the colonizer – the snakes can then disguise their own subordination to the colonizer as them being no more than a “Spook Who Sat By the Door.” It is thus essential for us to recognize that *The Spook Who Sat By the Door* is a fantasy. E. Tani and Kaé Sera's classic subterranean movement text, *False Nationalism, False Internationalism*, explains that the fantasy of an “experienced veteran who now wants to serve the movement” is a deliberate tactic employed by the state to infiltrate revolutionary movements.¹² Individuals like Geronimo Ji-Jaga Pratt are exceptions, not the rule. We may be inherently more cunning than the Klan, but we are not inherently more cunning than the CIA, or the Ford Foundation, or any of our Universities.

The destruction of the Third Precinct was less the culmination of decolonial cunning, and more the brief failure of neo-colonial cunning. The revolutionaries who set it on fire did not “play fool” but refused to be made into fools. This distinction is critical if we are to think about what follows the “eruption” – a subject that Maher's book does not broach. The eruption did not end because the revolutionaries made a tactical retreat back into the “decolonial underground.” It ended because the cunning of neo-colonialism *domesticated* it. The revolutionaries were *forced* underground, not into a tactical

position but into isolation and obscurity. The underground is a tactical position only so far as the masses extend into it like roots. Otherwise the underground is just a suspended defeat – as Sera and Tani observe in the history of the Black Liberation Army and the Weather Underground.¹³

The underground is a critical aspect of every revolution, but the underground today cannot be the underground that achieved the Haitian revolution and the General Strike of the slaves. Neo-colonialism has ended the straightforward invisibility of the colonized. To be colonized is not the same thing as being underground, which means that those who really are underground can be easily cut off from the masses of colonized people. The underground must therefore be *deliberately* constructed to connect with the masses without succumbing to the cunning of neo-colonialism. This means that the revolution will be simultaneously built below ground and above ground.

Neo-colonialism must be faced head on. We cannot strike at it from the shadows. As George Jackson wrote,

Of course, the revolution has failed. Fascism has temporarily succeeded under the guise of reform. The only way we can destroy it is to refuse to compromise with the enemy state and its ruling class.¹⁴

Neo-colonial cunning – that is, compromise – must be *exposed*, which requires some aspect of the revolutionary movement to expose itself as well. It cannot be outmaneuvered, only overwhelmed through an open and unrelenting attack on all that keeps us from being free.

-
- ¹ Gross, Jenny, and John Eligon, "Minneapolis City Council Votes to Remove \$8 Million From Police Budget," *New York Times*, December 10, 2020.
- ² Hargarten, Jeff, Liz Navratil, and Michael Corey, "How Minneapolis Voted on the Police Charter Amendment," *Star Tribune*, November 3, 2021. <https://www.startribune.com/how-minneapolis-voted-on-the-police-charter-amendment/600104740/>
- ³ Xiong, Chao, "Mpls. Police Justified in Fatal Shooting of Dolal Idd, Dakota County Attorney Says," *Star Tribune*, August 6, 2021. <https://www.startribune.com/mpls-police-justified-in-fatal-shooting-of-dolal-idd-dakota-county-attorney-says/600085549/>
- ⁴ HoangLong, Samantha, "What We Know (and Don't Know) about the Killing of Winston Boogie Smith Jr. in Minneapolis," *Star Tribune*, October 20, 2021. <https://www.startribune.com/what-we-know-and-dont-know-about-the-killing-of-winston-boogie-smith-jr-uptown-minneapolis-police/600084825/>
- ⁵ Saint Louis, Christina, "Black Men Gather in Minneapolis to Demand Justice for Amir Locke, Other Victims of Police Violence," *Star Tribune*. Accessed March 21, 2022. <https://www.startribune.com/black-men-gather-to-demand-justice-for-amir-locke-other-victims-of-police-violence/600150236/>
- ⁶ Maher, Geo, *Anticolonial Eruptions: Racial Hubris and the Cunning of Resistance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022), 85.
- ⁷ Maxwell, William J., *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).
- ⁸ Editorial Board, "Jamar Clark Protest Ended Well despite Miscues by City, Police," *Star Tribune*, March 22, 2017. <https://www.startribune.com/jamar-clark-protest-ended-well-despite-miscues-by-city-police/416875794/>
- ⁹ Phifer, Ivan, "Peaceful Castile Protest Continues at Governor's Mansion." *Minnesota Spokesman Recorder*, August 3, 2016. <https://spokesman-recorder.com/2016/08/03/peaceful-castile-protest-continues-governors-mansion/>
- ¹⁰ Anonymous. Interview by author. Jitsi transcription. July 15th, 2021. The interviewee was a member of an established, Twin Cities left-ish organization at the time George Floyd was murdered, and has chosen to remain anonymous.
- ¹¹ Maher, 49.
- ¹² Tani, E., and Kaé Sera, *False Nationalism, False Internationalism: Class Contradictions in the Armed Struggle* (Kersplebedeb, 2021), 249.
- ¹³ *Ibid*, 238-239.
- ¹⁴ Jackson, George. *Blood in My Eye* (Baltimore: Black Classics Press, 1990), 120.