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**To cite this article:** Enrique Galvan-Alvarez, Ole Birk Laursen & Maria Ridda (2020) Decolonising the state: subversion, mimicry and criminality, *Postcolonial Studies*, 23:2, 161-169, DOI: [10.1080/13688790.2020.1752356](https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2020.1752356)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2020.1752356>



Published online: 04 May 2020.



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INTRODUCTION



## Decolonising the state: subversion, mimicry and criminality

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This special issue brings together an interdisciplinary group of scholars to reflect on the decolonisation 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 globalisation and the height of European colonialism in the mid-nineteenth century, avant-gardists have problematised 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 organising principle.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, in the former Spanish and Portuguese colonies of South America, railway and maritime workers confronted formations of state bureaucratisation with autonomous union democracies, contributing to working-class solidarities across ethnic and national divides at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> In Europe's southern gateways to overseas colonies, other challenges to the state emerged in the shape of criminal underground organisations such as the Italian Camorra. Structured much like the Japanese Yakuza and Chinese Triads and organised around ethnic and national identities, such organisations simultaneously subvert and mimic the state, presenting problems for our understanding of legal regimes and their vested interests.<sup>4</sup> 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 decolonisation in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>5</sup>

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 organisations refuses to be incorporated into the nation-state.<sup>6</sup> 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 emergence of multiple

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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sovereignties in Iraq and Syria.<sup>7</sup> In former imperial metropolises such as Paris and London, black and ethnic minorities have not only responded to institutional racism by organising around labour unions and cultural communities but also resorted to violent uprisings and riots.<sup>8</sup> Away from the headlines, transnational criminal organisations (for example, the Neapolitan Camorra and the Mumbai D-Company) or diffuse online subversive networks (for example, 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 and Homi Bhabha to Dipesh Chakrabarty and Neil Lazarus, overwhelming attention has been paid to the nation-state as the primary legitimate structure of postcolonial governance.<sup>9</sup> 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 postcolonial, structures of power. Although such studies have contributed greatly to our understanding of the legacies and processes of decolonisation, 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.<sup>10</sup> 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 decolonisation from a state-aspiring narrative. It also problematises the entwinement of nation and state, a colonial discursive legacy that remains largely unchallenged in much postcolonial studies scholarship. The fact that decolonisation needs not to 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 decolonisation does not only resist colonial regimes but also their legal and geopolitical sequels: the postcolonial states. Furthermore, the porosity and contingency of many postcolonial states highlight 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, decolonised or reinvented as its centre. Following in the footsteps of recent scholarship on anarchism, state sovereignty and lawbreaking,<sup>11</sup> it brings together a collection of articles organised historically and thematically around the issues of subversion, mimicry and criminality across the postcolonial world.<sup>12</sup>

In this introduction, we outline the historical and theoretical context for understanding the critical impetus behind the special issue. Summarising 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 decolonise the nation-state.

### Theorising the state, imagining subversion

Early academic theorisations tend to construct the state as a coherent, monopolistic and violent force, regardless of whether this force is legitimate or not.<sup>13</sup> However, the idea of the state as the single agent entitled to the use of force can be traced back as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>14</sup> 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 as an immoral entity to be thoroughly dismantled.<sup>15</sup> Such historical conceptualisations 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> This highlights the rich complexity of overlapping systems of governance that predated, coexisted with or was in some form derived from colonial systems of power.<sup>20</sup> 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 decolonise the state.

Instead of privileging the centrality of the state, this special issue brings attention to the margins, interstices and liminalities of the state and explores how those spaces are claimed, organised 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 that favour the revolutionary seizure or the total dismantling of the state, this special issue turns towards the oblique and ambiguous resistance instantiated by transnational networks of jihadis, hackers and criminal organisations. It also analyses practices of war, sexuality, governance and rioting that show the limits of the postcolonial state. From this angle, the colonised nation does not exclusively achieve decolonisation through statehood, but also by resisting a postcolonial state burdened and haunted by its colonial legacy. The texture of such resistance is discussed in this 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> The concept of mimicry plays a key role in any project of decolonisation, since engaging the colonisers always involves, to some degree, mirroring their movements and speaking their language.<sup>23</sup> The ambiguous act of mimicry contains both a subversive promise and a conservative temptation, which is perfectly instantiated in the practices of postcolonial states.<sup>24</sup> Subverting or decolonising the state displays the same ambiguity, as subversion and decolonisation require some form of engagement with the colonial regime. This is clearly demonstrated in practices of war, propaganda and necropolitics across the postcolonial world (for example, in Syria, Iraq, South Sudan, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, CAR), which contain multiple elements of mimicry among belligerent states or factions.<sup>25</sup> Successfully fighting an enemy involves engaging and mirroring, to some extent, its military, disciplinary, rhetorical and political practices. Further, organising the postcolony involves the unavoidable conundrum of having to relate to the legal, political and military structures of the colonial regime.<sup>26</sup> Insofar as the pre-colonial state of affairs is irretrievable, mimicry is always present in any process of decolonisation, 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 decolonisation 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 decolonisation 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'.<sup>27</sup> As criminalisation 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.<sup>28</sup> As Comaroff and Comaroff point 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'.<sup>29</sup> Criminal narratives are used by the state to claim that the pathologies of colonial and postcolonial societies are the natural consequences of a 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.<sup>30</sup> 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 corporatisation of the state.

Such ambiguous positionings and the criminalisation of resistance to the colonial state have been associated with anarchism since its inception as an organised 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.<sup>31</sup> 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'.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup> However, through this expansion, anarchism risks becoming another European paradigm exported to the colonies, complicit in the very processes it seeks to undermine.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> 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, decolonising the state through anarchist eyes does not necessarily require us to abandon nationalism but to critically engage with the historical, theoretical and practical processes that make up the colonial state.

This special issue opens with Laura Galian-Hernandez's essay 'Decolonising Sexuality in Egypt: *al-Tatawwur*'s Struggle for Liberation', which examines the ways in which issues of sexuality, the body and gender were instrumentalised 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 decolonising the state through subversion.

Following 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 decolonise the Middle East, Kurdish 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 United States 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 decolonisation, 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.<sup>36</sup> 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’.<sup>37</sup> Developing further this dichotomy, the essay foregrounds the connection between the dynamics of subalternity and the development of criminal organisations as forces operating in concurrence with the dynamics of turbo-capitalism and ‘outside the state’.<sup>38</sup>

Focusing also on the cultural resonance of subversion in Aung San Suu Kyi’s *Freedom from Fear*<sup>39</sup> and Pascal Khoo Thwe’s *From the Land of Green Ghosts*,<sup>40</sup> 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 article observes 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 article introduces the notion of subalternation 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 ‘Epistemicide, postcolonial resistance and the state’ 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 south-west Colombia and north-west Ecuador, they demonstrate how this tradition has permitted the formation of supra-national spaces that challenge the idea of the nation-state.

In the final article, “‘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, this 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, the article 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 totalised oppression of the state. In doing so, it redirects our attention towards theoretical conceptions of non-statist nationalism within a postcolonial framework.

As a long and varied history suggests, from its inception in the nineteenth century, the state has been challenged from a variety 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 other 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 eye over 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.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).