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Charmaine Misalucha-Willoughby

De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines, charmaine.willoughby@dsu.edu.ph

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The Tragedy of the Search for Security

Review Essay by Charmaine Misalucha-Willoughby, Associate Professor, International Studies Department, De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines, charmaine.willoughby@dsu.edu.ph

Francois Debrix and Alexander D. Barder. *Beyond Biopolitics: Theory, Violence, and Horror in World Politics*. London and New York: Routledge, 2012.

Vivienne Jabri. *The Postcolonial Subject: Claiming Politics/Governing Others in Late Modernity*. London and New York: Routledge, 2013.

Daniel Rothbart, Karina V. Korostelina, and Mohammed D. Cherkaoui, eds. *Civilians and Modern War: Armed Conflict and the Ideology of Violence*. London and New York: Routledge, 2012.

Security is a primary concern for actors in the international system. States in particular guarantee their survival by finding various ways to minimize their vulnerabilities and enhance their security. Security policies identify the existential threat (*i.e.*, security from whom or from what) as well as the referent object (*i.e.*, security for whom). These clarifications notwithstanding, security is inevitably a zero-sum game. The classic security dilemma captures this perfectly: one's security is always another's *insecurity*. Given this rather inescapable situation, we must pause and re-evaluate the means with which we conduct our elusive search for security. Just as importantly, we must be cognizant of the consequences of what our security means to others. As we launch our "liberal peace projects," "war machines," and other "technologies of power" in the name of security, we must ask ourselves what is rendered insecure and at whose expense our security is maintained. The three works under review here examine these difficult spaces between the security-insecurity nexus. They showcase, in other words, the tragic consequences of our search for security.

The edited volume of Daniel Rothbart, Karina V. Korostelina, and Mohammed D. Cherkaoui on *Civilians and Modern War* focuses on collateral damage as an unintentional consequence of the search for security. They begin their analysis with the premise that civilian devastation in modern warfare continues to be treated as an individual rather than a systemic problem. While the protection of civilians is enshrined in the rules of engagement for combatants and state-run militaries, as well as in many legal instruments and moralistic pronouncements, collateral damage in the form of civilian suffering and casualty remains high in prolonged and intractable conflicts around the world. International humanitarian law offers little help in the face of the objectification of civilians, such as when they are "cast alternatively as objects of war, frictions to the war machine, hindrances to the movement of forces, potential combatants, [or] possible collaborators with the enemy..." (p. 8). The volume revolves around three sectors of civilian/combatant relationships: targeting civilians, preserving civilian immunity, and redressing anti-civilian practices.

In terms of the preconceptions, assumptions, and attitudes of states about civilian non-combatants, Richard Rubenstein examines why American military campaigns in the last two centuries have been heavily influenced by normative beliefs in the "sacred right" to self-defense,¹ the need to defeat an "evil" enemy,² and preserve "national honor."³ In five episodes in American military history (including the US wars against Native Americans, the revolutionary

origins of the American state, the wars of continental and colonial expansion, domestic and global military campaigns, and the wars to maintain hegemonic status), Rubenstein highlights the necessary role of civilians, particularly their responsibilities and sacrifices, both at home and abroad. On the subject of World War II, Karina V. Korostelina looks at the “enemy at home,” or those civilians or ethnic groups that were accused of collaborating with the enemy. She concentrates specifically on the plight of Crimean Tatars and Californians of Asian descent and finds that during that war, intense government propaganda against these minorities exacerbated fears and prejudices that existed within the population. Meanwhile, Alexander B. Downes traces how military culture affects the tendency of state militaries to target civilians during times of war. Korostelina’s co-authored chapter with Juliia Kononenko analyzes how martial forces relied on child soldiers in Chechnya.

Part two of Rothbart, Korostelina, and Cherkaoui’s volume examines the balance between military license and humanitarian protections. Against the backdrop of international legal instruments that enable states to engage in “just wars” while at the same time obliging them to uphold humanitarian norms, Daniel Rothbart’s chapter investigates the different institutional influences that shape the category assigned to civilians during times of war: international law, military strategy, and soldiers’ lived experiences. Neta Oren extends this argument by studying soldiers’ wartime narratives of the 2009 Gaza War. Michael L. Gross offers two cases on military asymmetry where the Israeli Defense Force fought guerrilla fighters in the Second Lebanon and Gaza Wars. In these cases, guerrilla fighters were inextricably linked to different aspects of civil society through safe havens and support for basic needs, provided by civilians. Once civilians participate directly in activities supporting guerrilla forces, say the authors, they lose, according to international humanitarian law, their right of immunity. Mohammed D. Cherkaoui adds another layer of complexity when he probes the reporting of civilian and soldier deaths in war zones. He contends that most media organizations “romanticize” wars and exploit the uncertainties that surround wars, thereby mobilizing the public to accept the so-called “sacrifice” made by both soldiers and civilians. Furthermore, in his other chapter, Cherkaoui analyzes the impact of cognitive frames and language. He demonstrates the constraints of language, including military exceptionalism and spin journalism and how these constraints affect the prospects of creating a civil framework of the media narrative.

Part three of the volume concedes that while some level of civilian devastation is inevitable, new measures can be taken to promote legal, military, and advocacy reforms. Donald C.F. Daniel and Tromila Wheat observe the difficulty of internationally sanctioned peace operations, as the troops needed to protect civilian non-combatants can often either not be deployed in many conflict regions, cannot be relied on to participate in such operations, or cannot physically protect civilians in danger zones. Susan F. Hirsch studies international humanitarian law and international criminal law and argues that while these bodies of law distinguish between combatants and non-combatants, they also make distinctions regarding different types of civilians through substantive law and through legal processes. Due to the complexity of international humanitarian laws and international criminal law and their respective legal processes, however, Hirsch asserts, individuals involved with any legal proceedings in these arenas may experience contestations of their civilian status. Michael Miklaucic outlines the experience of the International Tribunals for Yugoslavia and Rwanda, as well as the Special Court for Sierra Leone, and emphasizes how these tribunals and court cases have set precedents regarding accountability and norms of acceptable wartime behavior. Andrea Bartoli and Tetsushi Ogata call for the creation of an alliance of states specifically committed to drafting and

upholding non-genocidal and anti-genocidal policies, while Sarah Holewinski advocates more active post-war reconstruction efforts.

Vivienne Jabri's *The Postcolonial Subject* focuses on the global security apparatus and how it extends its machinery and technologies in both military and civilian terrains, as well as in "discourses of legitimation that draw upon a racialization of populations, a hierarchical rendering of societies despite the universalizing claims of the human as a category and target of action" (p. 4). Colonialism's legacy, Jabri claims, is what enables this projection of power in the late modern period: "...Where the colony in modernity was subjected to conquest, the postcolony is subjected to the post-panoptic governmentalizing manifestation of power, where populations, and not simply individuals, are shaped and regulated into governable, manageable entities" (p. 4). Following Foucault's analytics, power is projected via the disciplining of bodies and the governing of populations in order to produce "disciplined and governable individuals and populations." Projections of power may take the form of the use of force, the provision of welfare, or other material or discursive exercises that aim to create hierarchies in societies, thereby transforming societies into governable entities. In the context of this review, this governmentality may refer to the practice of seeking security. If security paradoxically produces insecurity, governmentality inevitably breeds resistance.

To resist, according to Jabri, is to claim the right to politics. Hence, tracing the contours of resistance allows the emergence of political agency. This is no easy task, considering that constitutive inequality is inscribed in the postcolonial subject to the point that past and present coalesce. Hybridity is the term used to describe the nuances surrounding the postcolonial subject's position vis-à-vis other actors in the realm of the international. Jabri points out, "...The postcolonial subject's relationship to the international is one that is not determined by the colonial legacy, but generates a new political relationship that is not confined to the relationship between the West and the postcolonial world"; rather, it is one that "includes relationships within, through the constitution of forms of political community suggestive of a space of hybridity, negotiation, and articulation" (p. 12). Given these complex threads, Jabri offers a conceptualization of resistance as the claim to the political, and she launches this by looking at particular moments in the postcolonial subject's temporal and spatial histories.

The temporal constitution of the postcolonial can be traced to colonial modernity, the postcolonial international, and the late modern cosmopolitan eras. Taking this route does not necessarily mean a denial of the historical imagination. Rather, it aims to uncover the technologies of power that dispossess the postcolonial subject of meaning and a sense of being in the world. Here is where the "paradoxes of modernity" come to light, where emancipatory odds are coupled with violent, dispossessive, and destructive potentials. As a result of these paradoxes, Jabri then reasons that "policing access to the modern has its postcolonial articulations (p. 33)." In other words, governmentality remains despite the end of colonialism, and so long as there is governmentality, there is resistance.

The spatial constitution of the postcolonial, meanwhile, is found in the declaration of independence and in the moment of founding. The first is significant in that it represents the inclusion of the decolonized to the Westphalian state system,⁴ a construct enshrined in modernity and embraced by the international, in which a web of territorially defined states is the basis of the so-called modern states system. The moment of founding is equally historic because it epitomizes the sovereign right of claiming (or in the case of the decolonized: re-claiming) territory. This process of repossession and reinscription is necessary for the establishment of

sovereignty, which is the prerequisite for a recognizable political community. Both therefore constitute the emergence of political agency.

The edited volume of Rothbart, Korostelina, and Cherkaoui, as well as the work of Jabri, provide examples of who suffers as a result of our search for security. On one hand, we see a snapshot of how non-combatant civilians are rendered insecure despite the numerous instruments that uphold international humanitarian law and minimize collateral damage during wars. On the other hand, we witness how colonial legacies also have postcolonial incarnations. Likewise, therefore, the uncertainties and insecurities that stem from colonialism take on new forms today. There is another layer in the security-insecurity nexus, and Francois Debrix and Alexander D. Barder offer a glimpse of what the search for security does not only to the securitizing agent, but also what an omniscient biopolitics of fear makes of society. Similar to the works above, Debrix and Barder's piece speaks of tragedy when it comes to the zero-sum game of the search for security.

Beyond Biopolitics begins with the premise that in protecting life, we destroy it simultaneously: "...In seeking to make the biohuman live and prosper, [we] constantly decide which lives are worth living and which are not (or which bodies can be killed)" (p. 8). Furthermore, we insist on preserving life at all costs, but such a drive is "inevitably coupled with the need to determine what must die" (p. 11). In order to secure lives, a sovereign authority is necessary in order to manage the well-being of the population. This authority is therefore called for to address a host of social issues, such as health, hygiene, life expectancy, social productivity. Consequently, a range of techniques is deployed to tackle these, thereby correcting, improving, reforming, or recalibrating the population. These social issues and their corresponding disciplinary practices therefore extend the power and authority of the sovereign. In short, crises and problems – insecurities – are needed to anchor or legitimize the authority of the state and its institutions, often by invoking fears, dangers, and existential threats.

Fears are produced and reproduced by the agents of security in view of establishing control and ultimately, preserving life. This biopolitics of fear then creates what Debrix and Barder refer to as "agonal sovereignty,"⁵ which is a modality of power that is no longer able to distinguish between "life and death, preserving human bodies and sacrificing them, or law-creating and law-maintaining order, on the one hand, and unbounded violence, on the other..." (p. 21). From this regime of terror, it is an easy slide to a horrific humanity. We become a society that not only has no respect for life but also has centralized fear, thereby requiring us to continue searching for (and longing for) an enemy, regardless of whether said enemy is spectral.

While depressing in its bleak view of humanity and its trajectory, Debrix and Barder's text does offer a glimmer of hope. Responding to the violence of agonal sovereignty calls for a different method: an ethic of inventorying the scattered. This practice does not intend to recover or remake the bodies that have been unmade by the excessive violence of the sovereign. Instead, [it] offers openness as a counterpoint to horror's gaping hole or wound. It offers multiplicity of thought, of reasons, of explanations for what may not have happened to the body targeted way beyond the fact of life and death. It enables an opening, a space to rethink relations between what is alive and what is not and, perhaps just as crucially, between what may be alive or always subject to death and what does not account for either life or death (p. 130).

In sum, the works of Rothbart, Korostelina, and Cherkaoui; Jabri; and Debrix and Barder reflect on the consequences of our search for security. If security guarantees our survival, then at whose expense are we able to achieve this? The above authors highlight that those rendered

insecure may be civilian non-combatants, the postcolonial subject, or humanity in general. Is the path to security really paved with tragedy? Or is it possible to shift the security debate from collective to cooperative to comprehensive security? What will it take for us to realize that real security can only be sustainable if we stop the vicious cycle of the security-insecurity nexus? The authors may not necessarily offer us a way out of the cycle, but they do point us in the right direction.

¹ The foundation of the American nation rests on the idea that the right to protect their lives, liberties, and properties is not only a matter of self-interest, but also a moral right. Self-defense implies protecting the American people and their institutions and values.

² American images of the enemy are embedded in a classical Christian conception of evil as “malicious wrongdoing or pure hatred of the Good, as well as imbibing the “satanic characteristics of tyranny, cruelty, deviousness, and megalomania” (p. 22). These images are often invoked in order to strengthen arguments for self-defense.

³ The preservation of national honor as a rationale for war is anchored on the idea that “if we do not fight, the nation will be weakened, humiliated, and dishonored” (p. 22). In this sense, it is meant to disguise deep-seated anxieties about America’s national identity and international reputation and credibility.

⁴ The Westphalian state system is the foundation of contemporary International Relations. The signing of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 is often referred to in the literature as the birth of the modern state system.

⁵ The concept of agonal sovereignty is derived from Hannah Arendt’s language of political action and agonistic engagement. Agonal sovereignty is a formation of power that renders questions of life and death unimportant by negating the difference between them. This, according to Debrix and Barder, is total violence.