

## BOOK REVIEW

### Bernard Harcourt, *The Counterrevolution: How Our Government Went to War Against Its Own Citizens* (Basic Books, 2018)

Stuart Schrader\*

**T**HE COUNTERREVOLUTION IS EXCELLENT. A LAW PROFESSOR, BERNARD Harcourt is analytically incisive, and his prose is pellucid. Assign this book to your students. Suggest it to reading groups. In brief, Harcourt argues that the US government, with corporate assistance, is engaged in an effectively limitless counterinsurgency campaign against its own citizens, acting as if there were an active, ruthless, and disciplined insurgency now threatening to overthrow the state. But there isn't one—yet.

Harcourt outlines a model of counterinsurgency as the de facto paradigm of contemporary governance. Counterinsurgency theory assumes that the governed can be divided into three groups, and counterinsurgency practice acts upon them in tailored ways. Counterinsurgency, argues Harcourt, attempts to eliminate (a) the minority of enemies, while turning (b) the apathetic masses into (c) reliable supporters of the state. Beyond eliminating the revolutionary minority, whether by prison cell or police bullet, counterinsurgency relies on two other modes. The state gathers copious intelligence data on everybody, and it convinces people not to dissent using propaganda, psychological warfare, and distraction. These two tripartite divisions, forms of population and modes of governance, combine into repression that is extensive and intensive, foreign and domestic.

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### Getting Counterinsurgency Right

Because I endorse this book, it may seem churlish to point out a micro error. But pressing on this mistake leads to the discovery of a greater analytic problem, like a TV detective who notes a tiny bit of mismatched plaster covering what turns out to be a huge hole in the wall, at the end of which lies the secret to unraveling the mystery. My intention is simply to make Harcourt's case stronger.

The mistake is only partially Harcourt's fault. It concerns the date of the founding of John F. Kennedy's Special Group (Counter-Insurgency), which occurred in January 1962, not January 1961, before his presidency actually began (p. 240). Harcourt cites a brief biographical account of the French counterinsurgency theorist David Galula. That book's author, Ann Marlowe, misread a confusing paragraph in a classic account of counterinsurgency during the 1960s by Andrew Krepinevich. His argument was that the US Army was ill-suited to adopt the Kennedy team's fervor for counterinsurgency. The result was a colossal mismatch: a conscript army attempting to learn new tricks on the fly against disciplined and experienced Vietnamese guerrillas.

The date doesn't matter much, but the Special Group (Counter-Insurgency) does. Harcourt makes a cogent argument about counterinsurgency theory as developed in the 1950s and 1960s and another about the security apparatus in the post-9/11 moment. But he never quite illustrates the connection beyond highlighting resemblances between the tripartite theory of population and the practical effects of post-9/11 security practices. He references the Federal Bureau of Investigation repression of the Black Panthers and others in the 1960s, but one still wonders how the theories of counterinsurgency developed among relatively obscure thinkers like France's David Galula and Roger Trinquier, replicated more recently by David Petraeus, could have provided a new basis for the relations of state and civil society decades later. The explanation, I think, will be found in the police. And to get to cops, we need to understand what the Special Group (Counter-Insurgency), or SGCI, actually did.

### Security, Territory, Population

Harcourt's explanation of counterinsurgency theory is the best part of the book. It is brilliant intellectual and political history, written with precision. He shows how French military tacticians, facing independence movements in Algeria, Vietnam, and elsewhere, developed robust guidelines for neutralizing these movements. Harcourt explains the importance of Maoism,

which seemed to theorize a path to revolution that did not pass through factory gates. Even if insurgents around the globe had not read Mao Ze-dong—though many did—they perforce applied his distillations of how to wage the war of the weak against the strong. They would capture territory without ever planting a flag in it (except occasionally to taunt government forces). If Mao knew that guerrillas needed to rely on the population at large for success, the French theorists similarly believed that the key to their success in preventing revolution was also the security of the population.

Counterinsurgency aimed to convince the population to remain on the side of the government, though Harcourt also argues that “securing the neutrality of the majority” would suffice (p. 95). It also tried to eliminate active rebels. Torture, it turned out, was one key method of gathering intelligence on the whereabouts of the actively rebellious. Punishing those who aided the rebellion with food, shelter, or intelligence was much easier than discovering the actual guerrillas.

Harcourt is sensitive to oscillations in counterinsurgency thought and practice over the decades, avoiding the trap of believing that one strand or the other ever really disappears. Ultimately, counterinsurgency is crisis management. Whatever seems like it might work is tried, which is why counterinsurgency is marked by what one scholar has called “repetition compulsion.” Often it takes the form of the brutal mass killing of civilian women, children, and elders in territories perceived insecure.

### **How Security Was Made**

Angry US troops committing abuses represented a small fraction of the overall counterinsurgency picture, however. In fact, the United States adopted a counterinsurgency policy that covered its relations to nearly every “developing” country during the 1960s. Vietnam was one among many. It was called the Overseas Internal Defense Policy, produced by the SGCI. This declaration of principles reasoned that because insurgencies were incredibly difficult to stamp out once they had erupted, the best approach was to administer preventive medicine. It took the form of aid to at-risk countries for “internal defense,” or later “internal security.” In practice, this meant strengthening the police, teaching them how to run investigations, administer traffic stops, regulate borders and operate customs offices to prevent smuggling, and stop and frisk suspects.

The SGCI was an interagency body for the identification of problems, coordination of mission, and allocation of resources in the global fight against communist subversion. Before the creation of the SGCI, the United

States had been offering ad hoc training, technical assistance, and equipment support to police in many countries across the globe. This program lacked strong centralized leadership, falling to figures with little sway in the White House. The SGCI changed that. As I explain in my recent book, one reason for the creation of the SGCI was to give a stable foundation for such police assistance. Once the SGCI was up and running and it had promulgated its policy guidance, which notably never mentioned putting “boots on the ground” as later occurred in South Vietnam, its most important achievement was the creation of the Office of Public Safety, or OPS. This was the police assistance arm of the Agency for International Development.

In Harcourt’s account, policing is a “particularly conducive vector through which the counterinsurgency paradigm has moved from military and foreign policy to the domestic context” (p. 131). Yet by looking at the SGCI, and even at Harcourt’s own descriptions of interrogation and torture in Algeria, we find that counterinsurgency did not need to move from the military to the police because it was primarily a police activity. If anything, it required the military to adopt a police posture. Counterinsurgency was mostly the work of proxy police forces assisted by OPS.

The credo behind OPS police assistance was that routine policing practices from the streets of Los Angeles to New York were the most effective means of preventing communist revolution from Montevideo to Jakarta. As such, OPS sent advisors to about 50 countries. They were mainly former federal law-enforcement officers, municipal police executives, criminology professors, and forensics technicians, plus some CIA spooks. Additionally, police from over 75 countries came to the United States for specialized training in US-style police techniques, ranging from riot control and fingerprint analysis to mundane personnel and staffing strategies.

Consonant with the counterinsurgency theory Harcourt outlines, the assumption was that the active minority of revolutionaries would consort with the larger population. Police kept tabs on the latter to reveal the whereabouts of the former, if not stymie them entirely. Police operated close to the ground, able to gather information on and control broad swathes of the population. Moreover, the population served a specific function in situations of concentrated insurgency. It provided resources for revolutionaries. From information to arms to foodstuffs that were given willingly or stolen, revolutionaries gained support from the population. Internal defense, then, meant controlling resources that might fall into the hands of insurgents. The SGCI’s Overseas Internal Defense Policy declared, “*the ultimate and decisive target is the people.*”

Once it becomes clear that counterinsurgency—that is, preventing an insurgency from breaking out—was a police project in actual practice thanks to the Overseas Internal Defense Policy and OPS, the link between Harcourt’s French theorists and the governance of everyday life on American streets today becomes apparent. In the absence of actual insurgency, as in the contemporary United States, the classic functional role of the population to insurgency is nullified. Harcourt argues that the population is nonetheless subject to the social control that would be expected to occur during insurgency. He is right. The practices of state repression designed for situations of insurgency became security forces’ second nature because they were already routine and typical.

To meet the communist challenge in the 1960s, US national security mandarins resolved to use cops to police the globe. The “vector” of “domestication of counterinsurgency” (p. 123) was policing, and OPS is particularly salient to tracing it. Among police at home, the experience of coordinating counterinsurgency overseas bolstered their organizational coherence, their reliance on capital-intensive technical wizardry, and their ideological commitment to conflating racial difference with political opposition. Global counterinsurgency was a state-building project, creating new bureaucracies and enlarging security agencies. At home, a habit of state-building, now with security as the overweening justification, was the legacy. The state that was built is both a carceral state of jails and prisons and a surveillance state of endless monitoring of everyone still outside them.

### **Netflix and Chill**

Harcourt is right to emphasize the immense surveillance apparatus that the United States has built, which many discussions of the carceral state ignore. Through digital telecommunications technologies, the US government (and corporations) can access nearly everything we do. Foreign-domestic legal distinctions become meaningless. But amid the avalanche of data, bluff everyday policing like the traffic stop remains integral to security, even as police repertoires are subject to algorithmic reconfiguration.

*The Counterrevolution* could stop there. But Harcourt also makes a moral argument about how and why digital technologies are used by the state not only to suppress active rebellion but also to keep the majority indifferent. Harcourt goes astray, however, when he criticizes digital entertainment or the way our smartphones have become prostheses. He is concerned with understanding counterinsurgency’s necessity of keeping the broad population

politically disengaged. Yet although psychological warfare uses distraction, distraction is not necessarily psychological warfare.

One problem is the term “pacification,” which is not what it seems. Netflix may pacify me, by providing escapism. But Netflix is not an instrument of pacification as counterinsurgency theory used the term. Rather, pacification meant activity. The pacified built security’s physical structures, along with security’s structures of feeling. Pacification fostered active loyalty to the state by giving people a stake in their own social uplift. Such activity may not be present in the everyday life of the United States today, but the reason is not Netflix.

Rather, this absence is the effect of the absent insurgent challenge. Without a communist alternative attempting to recruit the masses, the liberal state’s proffer of incremental social improvement through developmentalism has less purchase. Social uplift was once harnessed to brutal coercion and surveillance for the purpose of counterinsurgency. Under the current economic regime of austerity, advancing inequality, and resource depletion, all that remain are coercion and surveillance. Harcourt of course understands this point and perhaps can be faulted only for tying the ends too neatly.

### **Countering Counterrevolution**

*The Counterrevolution* is a call to action. The situation Harcourt outlines should enrage and horrify us. It is not just that obscure mid-century French military theorists figured out how to transform a set of emergency tactics into a strategy of long-term governance. Rather, it is, as W. E. B. Du Bois once remarked of the Philadelphia neighborhood where he conducted his pioneering sociological research on African American urban life, that “police were our government.” Today, it remains true for African American people. What Harcourt helps us to understand is that it is now also true, if at differing intensities, for everyone else. Yet the breadth of social repression may also catalyze a correspondingly broad rejoinder.