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US Imperialism and the Larger Context of the Kyle Rittenhouse Case

By Vince Montes
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Many had anticipated the acquittal of **Kyle Rittenhouse**. *The arbitrariness in the adjudication of self-defense and the question of jury's and court's objectivity within the context of the backlash of the anti-police brutality protest and efforts to address racism. However, rather than focus on the role that race and racism play in policing and the legal system, this article attempts to situate the Rittenhouse case within the larger context of the US imperialist-capitalist state.*

A Social Structure of Violence

Kyle Rittenhouse was raised on a consistent diet of war, violence, and the allure of patriotic duty, 'support the troops,' 'blue lives matter,' which in most cases has been translated into an aspiration for honorific status. The aspirations for honorific status can be generalized to

US society that has come to worship all things military[i] or armed authority (i.e., the military and police organizations). Examples of an American diet are an abundance of the military, first-person kill video games, e.g., Call of Duty, Medal of Honor, and Battlefield, and Hollywood's endless homage to war, killing, and their representations of heroism and retribution with an AR-15 or M4. These images are but part of a society whose social structure is structured in violence.

The US was founded on violence. From the pre-revolutionary days of 1776 to the founding of a new nation on the grounds of the indigenous people of North American, and a subsequent conquest, genocide, a system of slavery, and a long history of racial oppression and exploitation, which followed brutal repression of rebellions. This violence was not limited to contiguous lands because this imperialism spread to Cuba, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and the Philippines in the late 20th century. Imperialism is a permanent feature; the US engages in military coups, support of dictatorships, invasions, occupations, the assassination of democratically elected officials, and the political and economic domination of other nations has come to represent the US States. And more recently, the so-called 'war on terror' (read: the war against Arabs and Muslims). All these imperialist actions require a great deal of state-sanctioned violence.

A man holds a "Free Kyle" sign near Bradford High School during President Donald Trump's visit on September 1, 2020. (Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

Since World War II, the US has coordinated and solidified the interests of the political, corporate, and military elite into a permanent war economy in which its foreign and domestic policing are seen through the lens of military metaphysics (Mills 1954). Today, according to **David M. Kennedy**, the US military "wield unprecedented firepower and hold in their hands an almost incalculable capacity for focused violence. Not since the time of the Roman Empire have a single country's arms weighed so heavily in the global scales" (2013:2).

As a result, the former US Army Colonel and historian, **Andrew J. Bacevich** wrote that

> "Americans… have fallen prey to militarism, manifesting itself in a romanticized view of soldiers, a tendency to see military power as the truest measure of national greatness, and outsized expectations regarding the efficacy of force" (2013:2).

Militarism includes the entire colossus apparatus of coercive organizations, including policing and all aspects of the national security state. In addition, militarism comes with a high human and economic cost.

The US Social Character

David Riesman stated that "every society seems to get, more or less, the social character it needs" (1961:5). It is "simply the sum total of character traits to be found in the majority of the people in a given culture" (Fromm 1955:78). The point is that every society develops

a particular social character that ensures the conformity of its members. The US has been no exception; its institutions of the state have socialized its social character. The dominant US social character has the beliefs and values that uphold the system of capitalism, such as excessive individualism and instrumental rationalism. And because of increased militarism, the social character also has a great tendency to accept violence and coercion as necessary to preserve their way of life. As a result, armed authority, the enforcers of capitalism, are regarded with the highest deference and fetishized. Just like imperialism is an integrative element of US capitalism at a macro-level, this is the fundamental essence of the US social character at the micro-level.

Fairly recent events have only further shaped the US social character. As David Harvey (2005) points out, the implementation of neoliberal policies that accelerated in the 1980s reduced the social welfare state, deregulated the economy, removed many tariffs and barriers, and weakened organized labor. Some of the consequences have been the displacement of manufacturing workers.

These changes also had their intended implications of increasing the profit margins of the capitalist class and reducing impediments that had prevented them from reaping enormous amounts of wealth. While some of the population was able to adapt, many were not. What followed was a series of social phenomena.

There was the deterioration of social conditions: a rise in unemployment, the underground economy, homelessness, and overall social malaise. The reduction of the welfare state and labor protections also occurred amid the backlash of the rise of social and revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 1970s, resulting in a buildup in coercive organizations – e.g., policing and prison nexus (Parenti 1999).

In short, the implementation of neoliberal policies created the further need for more institutional violence and coercion (see Montes 2016) by policing the economic and racially dispossessed nationally and imposing neoliberal policies abroad.

A neoliberal ideology that negated the political-economic causes that explained crime, homelessness, and even alarming mental health crises became essential in sustaining these changes. This ideological change recast policing as honorific crime-fighting and not as enforcers of capitalism and racial order. Increased racial and gender diversity, with Hollywood adding intrigue and heroism increased its occupational prestige. The lack of secured employment opened the floodgates for applicants. In the end, quality of life and militarized policing works to readjust capitalism with its latest version – i.e., neoliberalism and further accelerate the imperialistic side of the US social character.

In addition, since the US is not in an ascending global position but is in a state of decline, with the loss of its manufacturing industry, which includes technological and science production, a nation in debt, the US relies more on its military might (Harvey 2003). It does not make or engage in the level of innovation of a rising nation. The only hand it can play is its military hand. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the global 'War on Terror,' its involvement in so-called regime changes are all testament to how US capitalism relies on imperialism.

The problem is that the above conditions have created too many young men and not-so-young men who want to be 'in the shit' of combat. They have itchy fingers and want a

baptism of blood, with all the glory it is supposed to provide, but the US-imperialist state cannot accommodate them all in its military and the national security state. So, they join the ranks of local policing and become prison guards and jail deputies. Those who cannot join or develop their own paramilitary groups in which they attempt to recreate their military 'tribe' experience (Junger 2016) or to develop the bond of solidarity they imagined exist in a real combat unit.

The desire to create a 'tribe' or group solidarity is not unique to members and ex-members of armed authorities or those who aspire to be in one. This tendency is an attempt to struggle against egoistic (excessive individualism) and anomic (lack of normative regulation) tendencies in US capitalist society.[ii] Max Weber described how capitalism was increasingly becoming an inescapable iron cage of rationalization (1958:182-183). As tradition and religious forces that once provided spiritual and moral guidance lose their hold, in their place is ends-means calculated, bureaucratic formal rationalism, resulting in the disenchantment of social life (Gerth and Mills 1946:50-51).

US Imperialism as Colorblind

The more excessive use of the white supremacy label works to distort and politicize within the parameters of the duopoly political party. For the Democratic Party and its supporters, white supremacy is a word used to describe the supporters of Trump, the participants of the capital protest, and the various right-wing groups that support Trump.

A message like 'Make America Great Again' and referring to people as either 'rapists' or 'terrorists' certainly invites this interpretation. This results in trickery, political manipulation, in which the mainstream media spins, distorts, misinforms to generate ratings, and propagates hatred and division.

However, the problem with using this label on individuals, a political party, and groups is not that it might not be true, but that it diverts our attention away from how white supremacy is central to the US imperialist state. When one political party accuses the other party of the state of acting racist, this displays the hypocrisy that pervades the US imperialist capitalist state.

The historical record bears out that US state operates within a racial hierarchy. One needs to only consider the following examples presented above: **the conquest and genocide of the Indigenous people of the North American continent; the system of slavery and the subsequent de jure and de facto segregation and discrimination; war against national liberation movements, and the 'war on terror' (read: war on Arabs and Muslims).**

Although imperialism is an integral part of US capitalism, capitalism is an equal opportunity system of exploitation and oppression.

Because wealth is based on the exploitation of other people's labor and the extraction and privatization of lands and resources. Contrary to the system of capitalism being founded on the free market and free trade, many countries have experienced the violence and coercion of imperialism when it refuses to open their countries up to foreign markets, unfavorable trade, and direct foreign investments.

As a result, it is difficult to untangle imperialism from US capitalism. Therefore, capital

(wealth) accumulation is directly correlated with the dispossession of people from the land, other means of production, and the fruits of their labor. In a capitalist society, there is a direct relationship between wealth and poverty.

Capitalism produces many victims, vectors, and points of resistance. One can see slave revolts, peasant revolts, anti-colonial, and worker's rebellions all responding to the central problem of capitalism and its various manifestations of oppression, usurpation, and exploitation.

For example, the capitalist system has been destructive to many US whites living in urban, suburban, and rural parts of the United States. (One can also see this among European countries such as British colonialism of Ireland and the imperialist actions against Yugoslavia). The notion of white privilege, especially if many of them also find themselves a part of the permanent underclass, is offensive and obtuse. One can undoubtedly refer to the psychological wage of whiteness as a means to drive a wedge between white and black workers (Du Bois 1992), or **Karl Marx**'s "The Irish Question," whose work reverberates how oppressed people are divided and conquered. The use of racial ideologies in the development of false political and class consciousness can also be seen in the development of the southern strategy, the 'get tough on crime' platforms of both the Republican and Democratic parties. These examples illustrate how animosity and scapegoats divide and disunite while providing political currency to the duopoly political party system.

A common denominator is found among imperialist powers and regimes, including the US, which uses some form of racial or cultural hierarchy, as was also operating in Nazi Germany. These powers were also highly skilled in integrating and inducing their citizens (including those with second-class status, resulting from their racial, economic, or gender oppression) to participate in the very machinations of the imperialist state. The political institutions, political parties, and legal systems, in most cases, did not operate in opposition to their political order. Perhaps, another way of looking at this is to understand that the US imperialist state retains its racial character, even as the perception of US nationalism as a racially diverse amalgamation of people. Yet, its racial character of a racial hierarchy continues to be dominant.

This is problematic because white supremacy is not just a 'white racist thing,' or exclusive to the Republic Party, Trump, and his supporters, or right-wing groups, but is organized in the social structure. In this context, one does not need to be a racist to support, pledge allegiance, or kill abroad or nationally. Neither does one need be a racist to protect the

privilege of a few, suppress resistance from 'insurgents,'[iii] and carry out the biddings of an imperialist capitalist state, which is grounded in subtle and not so subtle racial ideologies, masked in diversity and nationalism. As pointed out above, US imperialist capitalism is not solely dependent on racial hierarchy. It has many vectors that are made hidden and are part of its false consciousness, which makes it easier to use the label of white supremacy within a narrow perimeter for political expediency.

War Against All and the Victimology of Self-Defense

The very birth of the United States, as a colonial settler's state and the threats from the Indigenous people on the 'frontier,' slave revolts, workers' strikes, a civil rights mobilization, and urban rebellion has historically created a narrative of how the good wholesome, law-abiding people were under attack by unprovoked people. For Michael Parenti, the role of the usurper and the usurped have been reversed by the representation of the paradigm of the

wagon train versus the swarthy hordes (1989). The image is that it could be happening in the US wild west, Vietnam [Iraq, or a city or town in the United States], but the general scene is the same.

> "There is a fort, or encampment, or a wagon train, and inside the encampment are the human beings. They are white, they are human, they are warm, they are attractive, they talk, and they are nice. Outside come the swarthy hordes, the savages. They can be Indians, they can be Bushman, they can be Arabs on camels…. They are subhuman and they are attacking the human beings. And the wagon forms a circle, and the human beings know what to do. They leveled their guns and began to knock off, shoot these screaming savages" (Parenti 1989).

We are never told why the 'swarthy horde' attack the human beings. We are never told that they are protecting their land, their people and way of life or that they are fighting against social injustices. If any of this is acknowledged, then we are told that protest is acceptable if it is nonviolent. Yet, the regular structured violence, which is necessary to maintain a particular 'peace and stability' is normalized and is never discussed.

This is the quintessential representation of victimhood because it denies the real victim the right to resist and fight back against the injustice of colonialism, exploitation, police brutality, racism, etc. What then is left is the narrative of those in power. Their innocence, and how they are just defending themselves against the 'savages' – also, read protester and the 'rioter.' The reason people protest and rebel, taking part in extra-parliamentary actions is never fully explained. However, the reason is apparent: it would illustrate the guilt of the US state, its duopoly political party system, and all its supporters and their role in creating the conditions in which people feel the need to resist usurpation and inequality. In this context, we should also understand how exploited and racially oppressed people attempt to seek shelter, reward, and honorific status as protectors of the encircled encampment, making them also culpable.

Enter **Kyle Rittenhouse, Travis McMichael and Greg McMichael, and George Zimmerman** (to name some of the most recent cases) who decided to enter the encircled encampment as so-called 'defenders' against the 'swarthy horde,' or dangerous classes and races of insurgents.

For them and the US imperialist state is in a war against all.

It is not just the supposed external threat (e.g., 'the war on terror,' China, and Russia) but the supposed internal threat of insurgents that are said to be bent on destroying 'America' and its status quote. A status quote that Howard Zinn argued is protected by guards (i.e., the armed authorities and the middle class), who will not develop a political class consciousness until they too realize that their lives are as expendable as the prisoners [the exploited working class and dispossessed] of the system (1995).

In addition, **Barnard Harcourt** (2018) reminds us that in any potential revolutionary situation, the population comprises roughly of 15% insurgents or revolutionaries, 70% of the passive majority, and 15% of the counterrevolutionaries (i.e., the government, its political parties, the courts, its armed authority, and their supporters). The objective of the insurgent and the counterrevolutionary is to win (gain the trust) of the passive majority. Historically, as well as currently, this has been no easy task. The complex and sophisticated US imperialist state's ability to co-opt, confuse, and distract and misdirect our attention,

resulting in more people lining up to join the counterrevolutionaries. The allure and worship of all things military or armed authority have become a dominant component in the US social character, especially in this period of the overall US global decline.

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Vince Montes is a lecturer in sociology at California State University – East Bay. He earned a Ph.D. in sociology and historical studies at the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research, New York, NY. His research includes US imperialism, capitalism, and political control.

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Notes

[i] See Greenwald 2012 for the use of this concept.

[ii] See Emile Durkheim 1953 *Suicide* for the concepts of egoism and anomie.

[iii] The US state perceives any group or individual who challenges the status quote as a threat is considered an insurgent (see Harcount 2018).

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