

The threshold of fire

Man the shooter and his subhuman incendiary Other

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The white gunman and the ‘rioters, anarchists, arsonists and flag-burners’

On 25 August 2020, seventeen-year-old (white) Kyle Rittenhouse shot three antiracist protesters in the US state of Wisconsin, killing two and seriously injuring the third. Equally shocking was the impunity with which the shooting was carried out.* Rittenhouse was protected by the police from the angry crowd eager to enact street justice against their assailant; he was then given a bottle of water and released. It was only the next day that Rittenhouse, convinced he was not guilty of murder, handed himself in to the authorities of a different state. His claim that he opened fire ‘to protect business and people’ (in this order) gained currency among many in the US. Whereas the right-wing hailed him as a hero, mainstream liberals accepted the moral relativism and two sidedness of the situation, especially as the image of the gun-wielding Rittenhouse (among other white supremacist armed militias, euphemised as vigilantes) was constructed against the image of a rioting, sabotaging and arsonist mob as a threat to ‘business and people’. *ABC News*, for example, presented the incident as a matter of debate. Providing the assailant with a justified motive (he ‘joined several other armed people in the streets of Kenosha, where businesses had been vandalized and buildings burned following a police shooting that left ... a Black man paralyzed’), it presented the two sides of the ‘debate’ as equally valid while disproportionately privileging the pro-shooting narrative, at least in terms of length:

To some, Rittenhouse is a domestic terrorist whose very presence with a rifle incited the protesters. But to others – who have become frustrated with demonstrations and unrest across the country – he’s seen as a hero who took up arms to protect people who were left unprotected.

‘Kyle is an innocent boy who justifiably exercised his fundamental right of self-defense. In doing so, he likely saved his own life and possibly the lives of others’, said Lin Wood, a prominent Atlanta attorney who is now part of a team representing Rittenhouse.¹

The incident is a microcosm of the larger confrontation. The recent uprising was incited by the targeted killing of African Americans by police forces, parastate militias and property-owning white citizens ‘standing their ground’. The Black Lives Matter movement, the black and/or multi-ethnic dissident crowd, the left, Antifa or the protesters more broadly appear on the other hand as bearing incendiary and licentious forms of fire that burn property, indiscriminately threaten people, act as a vehicle and/or cover-up for looting and may go as far as desecrating the white man’s most sacred symbol: the US flag. They are, in the words of former US President Donald Trump, ‘rioters, anarchists, arsonists and flag-burners’.² Even when no shooting is involved the dichotomy is still present, as right-wing groups organise armed rallies, whereas antiracism protests are depicted as engaging in various forms of riot, vandalism and incendiarism.

Two types of fire thus emerge and set the parameters for this confrontation. One is regimented in firearms, wielded by institutions and militias that are predominantly white and targeted against protesters and African

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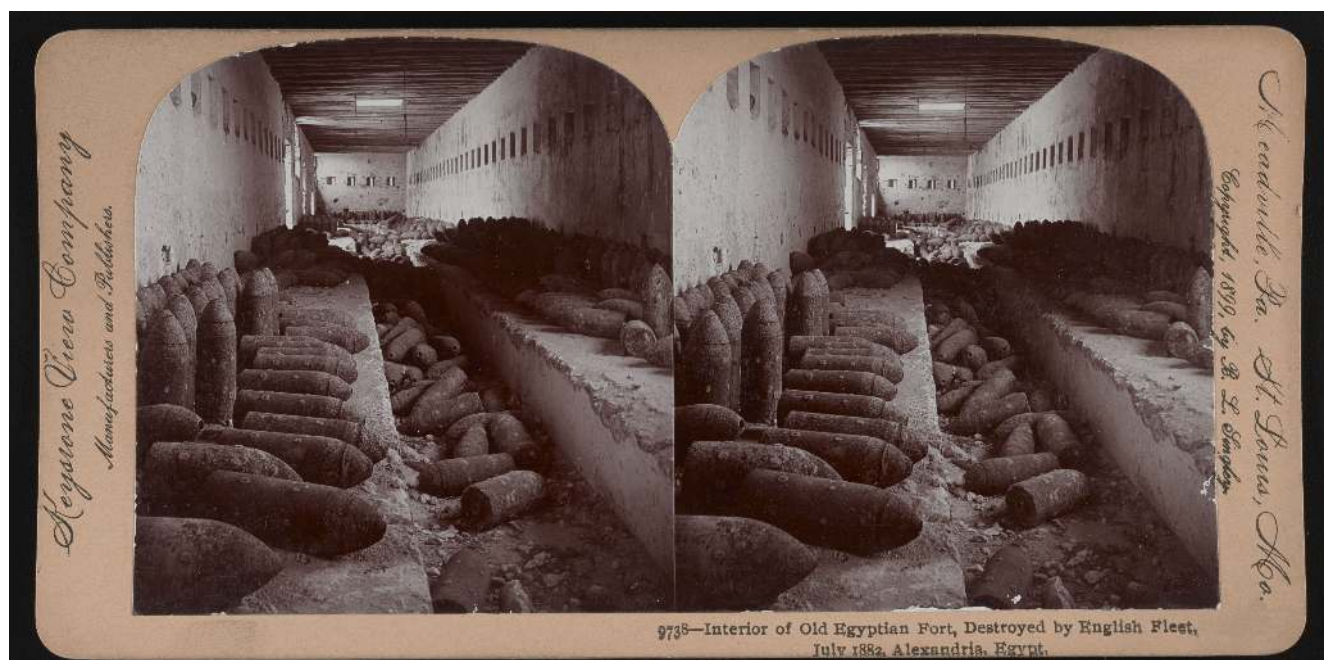
Americans, thus metonymising the white man, his right to bear arms, his state and its/their military and paramilitary organisations, his prerogative to ‘protect’ and ultimately exert his mastery, through fire, over other members of the population. The second is incendiary fire, the random fire of arsonists, looters and rioters, the metonym for the incendiary crowd and its chaotic and destructive rebellion. The hierarchised typology that privileges aimed and ostensibly precise gunfire over licentious arson, produces a hierarchisation of its bearers, placing the white man’s others at the threshold of fire and civilisation.

The following account situates this hierarchisation within the colonial history of typifying fire. Since the nineteenth century, fire has operated as a civilisational threshold in Western political thought. Imagined as man’s first invention and operating within an epistemic regime of evolutionism, the ability to ignite, wield, control and use fire separates humans from other creatures. The differential typology of fire nevertheless goes further. At the threshold of fire stand subhuman forms that are stuck between animality and humanity, namely primitive savages, children (or in some representations, adolescents) and women (the study of the relationship between fire and femininity, between incendiarism and hysteria, requires a different archive and a different set of tools, and will therefore not form part of this essay). Stuck at the threshold of fire, these subhuman forms were able to

ignite and wield fire, and in some cases wield lesser forms of fire power, but lacked mastery and restraint. This typology will translate later into the opposition between, on the one side, the self-detonating body of the misfiring terrorist, and on the other, the precise, targeted, laser-guided, smart and tactical weaponry of the white man and his superpower. For reasons of space, before we return to the contemporary US in conclusion, my analysis will home in on a set of archival and literary representations of emblematic colonial encounters around fire while drawing parallels with counterrevolution/counterinsurgency in Europe and the US.

Fire, revolution and the primitive

In 1882, during the British invasion of Egypt and after three days of British bombardment, fire spread through many neighbourhoods of the city of Alexandria. It was unthinkable, however, for the British press as well as many Arab news outlets, that the conflagration had been caused by British gunfire.³ On the contrary, the fire had to have been the work of indigenous *incendiaries*. Perhaps for the British media the double meaning of the term made it suitable for denoting incendiarism qua arson and incendiarism qua subversive political activities.⁴ This incendiarism and arson, furthermore, could not have served any strategic purpose according to the prevalent representations of the event, which either depicted the



indigenous rebels as an amorphous crowd emitting noise and spreading chaos and fire,⁵ or their leaders as pyromaniacs who ordered the arson⁶ and showed nothing but satisfaction when receiving news of the burning down of their city.⁷

When Ahmad 'Urabi, the rebel leader, was brought to trial, his claims that Alexandria caught fire as a result of the British bombardment were dismissed as nonsensical and *childish*.⁸ In opposition to the pyromaniac Egyptian rebels, pro-British discourse seems to have endowed British missiles with rational faculties that were denied to indigenous subjects. Salim al-Naqqash, the pro-British Syrian-Alexandrian chronicler of the events of the invasion, recorded a few incidents in which British missiles did in fact fall into residential quarters, but found their way to uninhabited chambers and sat there quietly without exploding.⁹ Salim Faris al-Shidyaq, another pro-British author running one of the most influential pan-Arab newspapers of the time, *al-Jawa'ib*, while conceding that part of the conflagration may have been caused by British bombardment (a concession he would later retract with the defeat of 'Urabi), expressed his wish that the British might have bombed the city 'in a manner that caused no harm'.¹⁰ Even when reprimanding the British for their bombardment, these authors endowed their fire with purpose: they had the right to bomb the city but not to cause harm; their bombs did show / could have shown restraint and spared civilian targets.

Two themes emerge in these representations. The first is of a purposeful bombardment that causes no fire, or at least nothing more than the strategic surgical fire it aims to ignite or, in the worst case, could potentially have not caused harm where it did (as per al-Shidyaq's fantasy). The second is of a set of politically subversive activities that spread uncontrolled and purposeless fire.¹¹ These themes are underlined by two intersecting though not identical biases. First, there is a clear statist bias. The fire of *order* is similarly orderly.¹² Even when belligerent, it hits its intended targets precisely, refrains from exploding in the midst of civilian targets and acts as the agent of order and discipline. The fire of the rebels, on the other hand, is an *incendiary* agent that causes a random and purposeless conflagration with no aim other than arson itself. This theme was consecrated a decade earlier during the Paris Commune, when the fire that consumed many of Paris's monumental governmental

buildings after over a month of bombardment by the government in Versailles, and during the exchange of fire between the invading forces of *order* and the retreating revolutionary forces, was attributed to a fit of hysterical incendiarism with which the rebels – especially the women amongst them – were afflicted. Indeed, accounts in the English, French and Arabic press explicitly and implicitly compared 'Urabi and his comrades to the communards,¹³ and al-Shidyaq went as far as attributing the fire of Alexandria to the work of former communards who had found their way into the ranks of 'Urabi.¹⁴

Second, there is the civilisational and racial bias. Fire and more specifically wild and incendiary fire, fire not regimented in firearms or combustion engines, represents a reversion to nature that is opposed, according to the dogmas of modernity, to civilisation. In representations of the Commune, this regression to incendiary barbarism was indeed expressed through the likening of the Parisian revolutionaries and their sympathisers to 'barbarians', 'heathens', 'negro kings' and a whole litany of Europe's others.¹⁵ In representations of the British invasion of Egypt, this civilisational bias dominates the narrative and appears in the form of a racialised dialectic of mastery and non-mastery. Whereas the white man controlled fire and used it as an orderly civilising force, the indigenous Egyptian was depicted as unable to use this technology. Opposed to the occupiers' tactical, precise and sometimes 'lively'¹⁶ fire, and side by side with the natives' incendiary, arsonist, always destructive but never tactical fire, the Egyptians were frequently depicted as bludgeoning, clubbing, stabbing, ripping apart and stoning the foreigners, but seldom as shooting at them. This is especially evident in the extended report compiled by the British Foreign Office laying out the putative details of the events in Alexandria during the invasion, in which images of violence perpetrated by the natives with sticks, cold weapons and bare hands are repeated ad nauseam, while incidents of natives using gunfire against their occupiers are surprisingly scarce – more surprising once we take into account that the people's movement against the occupiers was sparked and supported by the Egyptian army. Even when the natives appear armed, according to this report, and even when Egyptian army soldiers are part of the confrontation, they use the bayonets of their guns to stab the foreigners, instead of using the guns to shoot,¹⁷ as if this

wondrous technology was beyond their comprehension. Two decades later, an Egyptian nationalist newspaper, *al-Liwa'*, used these inconsistencies to question the whole narrative of indigenous hatred and violence against the foreigners, wondering why, if the Alexandrian natives had been as hateful and fanatical as the reports made them out to be, they only used sticks and bayonets and refrained from using firearms.¹⁸

Instead of attempting to resolve, verify or dismiss these inconsistencies, I read them as symptoms of a civilisational-racial bias, a civilisational teleology of wielding and mastering fire, which puts sophisticated, tactical and lively (gun)fire in the hands of the European, leaving the non-European at a stage of non-mastery, marvelling at, misusing and perverting the wondrous (Western) technologies of fire and guns.¹⁹ A few years later, as another wave of anticolonial protests (dubbed the 1919 revolt/revolution) swept the country, the appearance of armed resistance perplexed British Intelligence, which ventured that Egyptian partisans must have acquired their weapons through Greek and Armenian proxies.²⁰ It is as if firearms needed to pass down a racial-civilisational scale, from the hands of white Europeans to the hands of lesser Europeans (or Asians – literally Caucasian, even beyond the myth of a Caucasian race – who are Europeanised through their Christianity, their light complexion and their historical ties to Europe's forerunner, Christendom, in the case of Armenians) and finally to the hands of the African/Arab natives. This hierarchisation of fire and its users is also ontogenetic. Natives who are subjected to colonialism's civilising mission emerge as infantile and childish (the same term that was used by *al-Jawa'ib* to describe 'Urabi). They need to learn the proper handling of fire as part of their colonial education. This narrativisation of the typologies and threshold of fire within the ontogenetic and phylogenetic teleologies of colonialism's civilising mission is still more evident, as I am about to show, in the literary fiction of British but also US empire.

The adolescent and the savage

Present since the dawn of the literary fantasies of the British Empire,²¹ the threshold of fire marked the colonial experience beyond the context of Egypt and beyond the British Empire. Around the same time that the aforemen-

tioned confrontations were transpiring in Egypt, Rudyard Kipling – literary spokesperson of the British Empire and of Western Imperialism more broadly – was narrativising this threshold of fire to usher Mowgli, the man-cub raised in the forest, into civilisation and manhood in *The Jungle Book*. Mowgli's entry into manhood is narrativised as an ascent through the differential grid of fire, from blazing torch to hunter's gun and from unwitting arson to purposeful and aimed gunfire. The ability to wield fire, which Mowgli steals from the 'man village', marks his separation from the jungle, his mastery over other creatures, and his subsequent path to manhood. (The jungle itself signifies both the state of nature the civilised man needs to break with, and the infancy the adult man needs to leave behind: as Kipling urges his reader, 'Take up the White Man's burden / Have done with childish days'.) This narrativisation of fire, presented in the first episode of *The Jungle Book*, is more than preserved in the two popular Walt Disney cinematic adaptations of the book: it becomes the overarching theme and dominant plot line in the 1967 and especially the 2016 films.

The centrality of the threshold of fire across the three versions of *The Jungle Book* highlights its salience not only across times but also across empires. No author represents the cultural and literary apparatus of empire better than Rudyard Kipling. A British colonial born in India who went on to write about the country with Orientalist flair and to support British colonial designs in and beyond his birthplace, his literary support for empire went beyond his allegiance to Britain. Kipling is remembered as much for his famous poetic apology for US imperialism – 'The White Man's Burden' – which may also be read as a paean to Western imperialism as such. Similarly, no medium represents the ideological appeal of the US empire and its hold over the hearts and minds of children across the globe better than Walt Disney movies. The hierarchised typology of fire is not exclusive to British imperialist literature, *The Jungle Book*, or even the realm of literary and cinematic fiction. As I noted in the introduction, it is also evident in the opposition between the explosive, out of control fire of the racialised terrorist and the tactical, strategic, surgical, smart, (computer and/or laser) guided or otherwise friendly fire of Western superpowers – not to mention in racial confrontations in and beyond the contemporary US.

The Jungle Book nevertheless serves to highlight how this typology of fire positions both the primitive and the adolescent at a liminal stage between animal and man. This liminality is exemplified by Mowgli (in Kipling's text and in the 2016 film adaptation, which alludes unmistakably to puberty) whose handling of fire passes through a stage of delirium and lack of restraint. In the original text he threatens the inhabitants of the jungle including the pack of wolves to which he previously belonged; in the 2016 film he sets the whole jungle ablaze. Newly inaugurated into humanity, like savages and adolescents, but unlike the white colonial, Mowgli is yet to learn 'To veil the threat of terror / And check the show of pride'.²²

Mowgli is expected to transcend this unfortunate but necessary stage of misfire. Indeed Mowgli's words during his fire-frenzy, in Kipling's original text, carry within them the prophecy that after becoming a man and breaking with the jungle, he will return as a hunter. This once more recalls the recent conflagrations in the US, where the teenage Rittenhouse exercises his white male prerogative to handle fire, but like Mowgli, fires carelessly and prematurely. Part of the controversy surrounding Rittenhouse centred on the fact that he was a year younger than the legal age for openly carrying a gun.

The threshold of fire

In the US, both the young militiaman and the radical (ethnically diverse and/or predominantly black) crowd stand at the threshold of fire. The former is expected to train to go beyond this threshold, to learn not to fire prematurely or openly when the media is watching, to put fire to good use in colonial and disciplinary endeavours,²³ 'to veil the threat of terror / And check the show of pride'. The latter, so long as they refuse to enlist in the disciplinary and repressive institutions of US empire or the paramilitary organisations of white nationalism, are doomed to remain stuck at the threshold of the fire which they ultimately pervert: their action is always understood as vandalism and incendiarism and their organisation as open terror.

This confrontation continually produces gunfire as the white man's domain, allowing him the privilege of staging armed rallies and mass shootings. It is telling that Rittenhouse's legal defence team plans to plead the legality of the shooting and killing on the grounds that

Rittenhouse was acting as part of an organised militia, a right that the US Constitution grants its white and white supremacist subjects, at least in right-wing interpretations of it.²⁴ It is also worth noting how the gun lobby in the US, including the National Rifle Association, refuses to recognise that the enjoyment of this right might extend beyond its privileged white bearers, as when the Black Panther Party claimed the right to bear arms in its capacity as an organised militia. This defence gains special significance against the allegation that Rittenhouse's victims were also armed. The black mob is armed haphazardly, the white man is armed as part of an organised militia. The black mob shoots randomly,²⁵ the white man aims and shoots carefully, to kill if necessary. The black mob's random firing may cause terror, but the white man eventually dominates through his precise, if at times premature, firing.

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Notes

1. Stephen Groves and Bernard Condon, 'Teen accused of killing 2 thrust into debate over protests', *ABC News*, 29 August 2020.
2. Mario Koran, "'He's paying attention to people like us": Trump's message finds fans in Wisconsin', *The Guardian*, 18 September 2020.
3. UK Foreign Office, 'Correspondences Respecting the Riots at Alexandria on the 11th June 1882', the National Archives, UK, FO 881/4741. See also Salim al-Naqqash, *Misr lil-Misriyyin* [Egypt for the Egyptians], vol. 5 (Alexandria: Matba'at al-Mahrusah, 1884), which provides the first (and perhaps only) chronicling of the events of the invasion in Arabic and which relies almost exclusively on British and pro-British reports.
4. For example 'England and Egypt: Arrival of Reinforcements; The Intervention Question; Statement of French Policy', *The Standard*, 18 July 1882, 5 and 'The Campaign in Egypt: Sirg. Wolseley At Ramleh; A Proclamation to the Egyptians; Fire at Alexandria', *The Standard*, 17 August 1882, 5.
5. Al-Naqqash, *Misr lil Misriyyin*, 140–142; UK Foreign Office, 'Correspondences Respecting the Riots', 1; 'Outbreak in Egypt: Rioting in Alexandria; Attack on Europeans; the British Consul Wounded', *The Standard*, 12 June 1882, 5.
6. Salim Faris al-Shidyaq, 'khitam al-mas'alah al misriyyah' ['Conclusion to the Egyptian Question'], *Al-Jawa'ib*, 7 Dhu al-Qidah 1299 (19 September 1882).
7. Salim Faris al-Shidyaq, 'muhakamat 'urabi' ['Urabi's trial'], *Al-Jawa'ib*, 2 Safar 1300 (12 December 1882), 1.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Al-Naqqash, *Misr lil Misriyyin*, 90.
10. Salim Faris al-Shidyaq, 'al-ahwal al-hadirah wa al-mas'alah

al-misriyyah' ['Current affairs and the Egyptian question'], *Al-Jawa'ib*, 3 Ramadan 1299 (19 July 1882), 1.

11. This is evident in terms such as 'mutineers', which *The Standard* used to describe the indigenous crowd, and 'anarchy', which it used to denote their activities and effects. See 'Affairs in Egypt (from our correspondent)', *The Standard*, 7 January 1882, 5; 'The State of Egypt: Debate in the French Chamber; The Movements of Arabi [sic]; Conditions of Alexandria', 19 July 1882, 5; 27 July 1882, 4.

12. See how the British forces are depicted as attempting to extinguish the fire spread by the native crowd and how the local authorities are depicted as failing or refusing to extinguish the fire or curb the incendiaryism in 'England and Egypt', 5 and 'The Campaign in Egypt', 5.

13. Ahmed Dardir, *Licentious Topographies: Space and the Traumas of Colonial Subjectivity in Modern Egypt*, Doctoral Dissertation, Columbia University, New York, 2018, 302–308.

14. al-Shidyaq, 'khitam', 1.

15. 'The Fighting in Paris', *The Standard*, 29 May 1871, 4; see also Janet Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 217.

16. UK Foreign Office, 'Correspondences Respecting the Riots', 1.

17. *Ibid.*, 1, 62.

18. Mustafa Kamil, 'hadith al-Iskandariyyah' ['The Alexandria Incident'], *Al-Liwa'*, 11 August 1901, 1.

19. Notwithstanding, of course, that gunpowder is a Chinese invention which was known to the Arabs before it entered Europe. What we are interested here is the mythistory of progress rather than the actual history of scientific discovery.

20. 'Intelligence reports and notes on the political background to the nationalist riots of 1919 by Colonel F H Smith', the National Archives, UK, FO 141/753/6.

21. See for example how fire appears in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* as one of Crusoe's prerogatives, something he chooses to bestow on Friday as part of his colonial education.

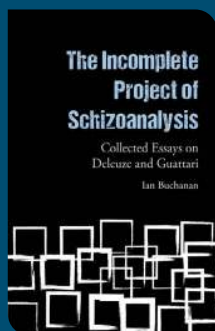
22. Rudyard Kipling, 'The White Man's Burden', 11–12.

23. Groves and Condon, 'Teen accused of killing'. ABC News reports that Rittenhouse himself was part of the Public Safety Cadets, an organisation through which police forces recruit and train children and young adults 'for careers and leadership in the public safety profession'. See [publicsafetycadets.org](https://www.publicsafetycadets.org) FAQ.

24. Noah Feldman, 'Kenosha Shooter's Defense Is a Gun-Rights Fantasy', *Bloomberg*, 3 September 2020; Victoria Bekiempis and Adam Gabbatt, 'Teen charged in killings of BLM protesters considered himself a militia member', *The Guardian*, 27 August 2020.

25. 'Breonna Taylor death: Gunshot at Louisville black militia protest', *BBC News*, 26 July 2020.

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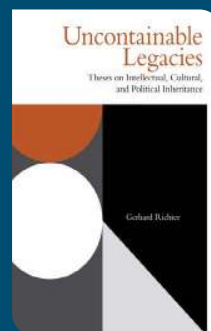
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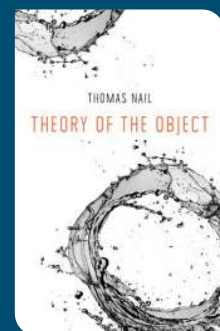
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