



CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF LAW AND SOCIETY
BERKELEY LAW

CSLS SPEAKER SERIES

Monday, January 28, 2019

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**“Going Ballistic: The Forgotten Origins of
Forensic Firearm Identification”**

On November 19, 1924, the British Governor-General of the Sudan and commander-in-chief of the Egyptian Army was assassinated in broad daylight in central Cairo. Though many had witnessed the act, authorities encountered great difficulty in investigating the murder and discovering the offenders. Unable to rely on eyewitnesses, authorities turned to a novel science to try the culprits: forensic ballistics. The murder trial became the first in which the unique markings of a mass-produced weapon were used to determine guilt, sending eight defendants to their death. Following this trial, the novel science of forensic ballistics served to convict other defendants in cases that had until then remained unsolved.

By exploring the Egyptian origins of forensic ballistics, this paper illustrates the colonial roots of forensic culture more broadly. It demonstrates forensic science’s necessity in an environment of mutual distrust between colonizers and colonized, and the eagerness of British authorities to apply such novel sciences to “others”—especially during times of emergency when exigency justified their use. New forensic sciences such as ballistics, tool-mark identification, fingerprinting, foot-printing and dog tracking enabled the colonial state to police and punish even in the absence of community cooperation, and without the aid or presence of eyewitnesses. Less restricted by time and space, the colonial state became—and appeared—omnipresent and omniscient.

In reexamining the origins of forensic ballistics, the paper also challenges conventional wisdom concerning how forensic sciences enter the judicial process: rather than judicial recognition relying on “general acceptance” within the relevant scientific community, the origin story of forensic ballistics suggests that expediency, rather than scientific soundness, proved to be the crucial factor.

A draft of “Going Ballistic: The Forgotten Origins of Forensic Firearm Identification” is available in hard copy at the Center.

PLACE Selznick Seminar Room, 2240 Piedmont Avenue
TIME **12:45 – 2:00pm.** Coffee and water provided. Bag lunches welcome.
INFO <https://www.law.berkeley.edu/centers/center-for-the-study-of-law-society/>
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