The Crisis of Martial Law

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In 1979, Ferdinand Marcos delivered a state of the nation address in which he explained that “the world oil crisis today has become the single, most important issue to face the peoples of the world’ and that “the crisis can only be met if the people consider the steps needed to meet the challenge as ‘the moral equivalent of war.’” Marcos justified his martial law regime as a necessary tactic for surviving not only the effects of the oil crisis but also for preparing to navigate a “a world [that] has grown more perilous” and where “problems have become more complex and critical.” While his earlier martial law declaration cited the danger of communist insurrection as the reason for executive rule, this speech articulated crisis as the external threat posed by problems “not directly of our own making.” With this declaration, Marcos not only legitimized martial law as a matter of “national sacrifice” but also rearticulated the position of the Philippines within the broader landscape of global political crisis. Analyzing the ways that national sacrifice concretized as new labor and migration policy, in the Philippines this talk considers the extent to which Filipino labor offers an important genealogy of martial law and an analytic for grappling with the role of migrant labor within cold war historiography.

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