

REVIEW

Verena Erlenbusch, *Genealogies of terrorism, revolution, state violence, empire*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. pp. 296. ISBN: 9780231187268.

Terrorism belongs to the political categories that shape our political present. It forms a normative background that we tend to take for granted. However, there is something odd about this so-called obviousness once we realize that phenomenal similarity never provides firm criteria to circumscribe what is meant by “terrorism”. On the contrary, political acts come to be addressed as terrorism only in specific contexts and perspectives. Terrorism then becomes part of a polemic scene that multiplies its uses, meanings and implications. *Genealogies of Terrorism* is a conceptual investigation that undertakes to reactivate such polemic scenes by bringing about the critical potential they hold in themselves. It challenges the presumption that terrorism is a primarily contemporary phenomenon. Political philosophy usually doesn’t look further than the neoconservative turn in the late 1980s, in an American context, or its colonial conditions of emergence, in a European context. But even though we undoubtedly face new forms of terrorism that require conceptualization, we cannot address this key issue without undertaking a historical genealogy. It is striking, for instance, that even in the French political context the terminological link with the French Terror is scarcely recalled – and this sort of oversight is surely a symptom of the problem Verena Erlenbusch addresses in her work.

Genealogies of Terrorism’s approach is definitely foucauldian. Its historical focus begins with the term “terrorism” itself: when, where and for what purpose did we start to describe political phenomena as “terrorism”? Such a focus doesn’t require restriction to the semantic level – it provides a dynamic thread through complex political scenes while highlighting how designations of terrorism perform and configure those frames. Picking up on Foucault, Erlenbusch argues that there is nothing like “terrorism” as such, but only *dispositifs* of terrorism. Their investigation requires two crossed approaches: *archaeology*, which digs up terrorism’s discursive conditions of appearance, and *genealogy*, which redraws the relations of power within which terrorism operates as a configuring element. From this perspective, there is no such thing as a historical “evolution” or “continuity” of terrorism, but only contextual operations of recurrence, rearrangement, superimposition, reversal or reappropriation. Taking over Foucault’s account of biopower, Erlenbusch’s central thesis is that terrorism works as a historically variable *dispositif* of social defense. More precisely, she writes that “terrorism emerged at the end of the eighteenth century as the correlate of a new economy of power whose concern with the investment and

improvement of life brought into being an entire series of technologies that served the purpose of social defense.” (pp. 8). Each chapter focuses on a key historic power apparatus within which terrorism operates as an element in the production of a specific social body, delimiting its boundaries through mechanisms of subjugation, repression and eradication.

The term “terrorism” first appears in the context of French Terror, in the junction between a state apparatus and revolutionary claims. Erlenbusch analyzes Robespierre’s defense of terror as a way to adapt the old sovereign right to kill to the new political concerns regarding the life and health of the population. She shows how Robespierre’s plea to defend the Republic against enemies foreign to the social body deviates from Tallien in an understanding of enmity from within. This relation to social defense provides a grid of intelligibility according to which polysemous concepts of terrorism are brought together in a polemical scene. The author hence maps the conceptual space of terrorism appearing between 1794 and 1797: *charismatic terrorism*, related to the rule of a particular person, first used by Tallien to denounce Robespierre; *systemic terrorism*, related to a specific system that abrogates constitutional right, introduced by Baboeuf (Grachus) against Tallien; *doxastic terrorism* as a political philosophy, which allows Baboeuf to turn Tallien’s term against him (denouncing “*le terrorisme des anti-terroristes*”, pp. 46); and finally *identarian terrorism*, which corresponds to its appropriation as a political identity, affirmed by Baboeuf who claims that “terrorist” is used as a denunciation to justify the persecution of real patriots.

We then follow the track of terrorism from the French Revolution to revolutionary Russia, where it first reappears in radically anti-state form. The author analyzes how Russian revolutionary discourses oscillate between an alleged continuity with France, endorsing the use of terrorism to achieve the Revolution, and the insistence on historical differences. These differences emerge from an understanding of terrorism as the effect of a gap between the political claims of a class and its material conditions. In this sense, there is a complete reversal between Jacobin and Bolshevik terrorism: while the former implemented capitalism, the latter seeks a socialist revolution. According to Erlenbusch, the Russian transposition of the French revolutionary heritage into a discourse of class war constitutes a new variation of terrorism that works as a mechanism of social defense. She shows (directly echoing Foucault’s *Society Must Be Defended*) that class war has been explicitly understood as the continuation of a race war. In this context, terrorism appears as a strategy (*strategic terrorism*) of popular self-defense. The author analyzes how the motif of social defense works, once more, as a shared grid of intelligibility framing the opposition between social revolutionaries and the Tsarist Regime. Instead of combining old sovereignty with emerging biopower, Tsarist classical sovereignty holds the new forms of power supported by revolutionary terrorism as an existential threat, thus requiring antiterrorist emergency legislation. Nevertheless, Erlenbusch shows that the Bolshevik rise to power replays those articulations of the power apparatus, as revolutionary terrorist violence is turned into a terror apparatus of the state.

Returning to the French context with the colonization of Algeria, Erlenbusch highlights a crucial shift in the roles played by terrorism. The French imperial perspective now constitutes itself through mechanisms of national defense unilaterally understood as counter-terrorism, where terrorism designates in return the colonized radical other. Erlenbusch further analyzes the transition from the nineteenth century colonial war in Algeria to the stabilization of a colonial state in the twentieth century as a shift in French understanding of social defense. The conquest of a new land appears first as a matter of national salvation that must eliminate Algerian resistance as an outside obstacle. On the contrary, Algerian resistance in the twentieth century comes from formally French citizens and thus becomes a matter of internal order. We witness the emergence of discourses and practices of peace enforcement that abolish any clear distinction between war and peace. It allows for the understanding of terrorism as a new kind of warfare (*polemic terrorism*), distinct from terrorism as a matter of law (*criminal terrorism*), that legitimizes extra-legal state military practices. The author shows how Algerian resistance short-circuits the colonial narrative in understanding terrorism not as a riposte to French internal order enforcement operations, but to the war started by the French in 1830 (cf. Frantz Fanon, *L'an V de la révolution algérienne*). Such a counter-version subverts the French account of terrorism as a new phenomenon requiring an adequate counterinsurgency response and opposes it “with a modified set of rules of veridiction, norms of behavior, and modes of being a subject” (pp. 122).

French tactics of counterterrorism during the Battle of Algiers have been taken in the early twenty-first century as a model for American counterinsurgency operations in the Middle East. However, the author challenges the idea of a continuity between those two contexts: she shows instead how contemporary terrorism is “a revision, rearrangement, and reworking of a much longer history of terrorism” (pp. 135), which leads to a new concept that she calls *synthetic* terrorism. She shows how 9/11 becomes the occasion for a neoconservative imaginary of eschatological progress at work since the 1970s, based on liberal democracy and the free market. Most importantly, she points out how the American rewriting of French peace enforcement extends it on a global scale. Terrorism must be fought not only to protect American citizens but also humanity as such, thus legitimating killing for humanitarian ends – where those designated as terrorists see their humanity denied (cf. Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*). Through such mechanisms of dehumanization, synthetic terrorism thus takes part in the production of “the very norm of humanity that is said to require protection” (pp. 157).

From its first appearances to today, “terrorist” seems to function as a magic word that justifies violence against those it designates. Hence how are we to go on with the term “terrorism” today? Shall we try to use it in a more consistent way to defy state rhetoric, shall we redefine it through a fairer political frame, or shall we get rid of it altogether? Instead of proffering a specific course of action, Erlenbusch invites the reader to stay with this question as an insisting matter of concern. This archaeological approach reveals that

as soon as terrorism is called up in political discourses, its uses and meanings multiply. This observation prevents us from asserting once and for all what terrorism actually *is*. The strength of this work is to trace the elements of a historical investigation for an archaeology of the present. It unravels the web of significations condensed in dispositifs of terrorism to excavate their precise interactions. Terrorism always has to do with mechanisms of repression, but it also produces “new modes of being a subject.” (pp. 121) Erlenbusch’s genealogical inquiry highlights the fact that dispositifs of terrorism disclose potentialities of resistance, precisely because terrorism works as a polemical perspectives multiplier – so it remains open to strategies of transformation. The present work remains under the purview of this claim.

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