Foucault Studies

SYMPOSIUM

Genealogy, Terrorism, and the "Relays" of Thought

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Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson's *Genealogies of Terrorism* is an attempt to "loosen the grip of habitual frameworks of thought" vis-a-vis terrorism and genealogy.[1] In the aftermath of so many violent events in our world, debates about the meaning of terrorism follow predictable arcs and strategies. Generally, we think that we know terrorism when we see it, or, if there is confusion, we think that we can define terrorism via descriptive, classificatory, or normative analyses. However, "unquestioned and implicit assumptions about what we already recognize as terrorism" shape our perceptions and definitions.[2] To navigate this impasse, Erlenbusch-Anderson uses Foucault's method of genealogy to excavate the material and discursive conditions of terrorism and to contextualize different modes of understanding it today. In the process, she also disrupts some habitual patterns of genealogical thought, especially the tendency to mobilize genealogies toward normative ends. Very often, normative theorists treat genealogies as the material on which they work, abstracting the theorist from their discursive and material conditions and implying a distinction between theory and practice. Erlenbusch-Anderson concludes *Genealogies of Terrorism* by considering how theory can serve "as a relay among a plurality of concrete practices of resistance and transformation."[3] What it means to be a "relay" is a fascinating question in *Genealogies of Terrorism*. How should genealogists avoid foisting prescriptive or speculative theories on others? How should genealogists "derive norms from the practices of those who are fighting"?[4] In loosening the rigidity of our thought, Erlenbusch-Anderson spurs the multiplication of alternative archives and genealogies. Through what relays do these genealogies promise "alternative futures […] for those of us who […] look for new ways of thinking and knowing"?[5]

Erlenbusch-Anderson's genealogy focuses on a French lineage of the concept of terrorism, beginning with its emergence during the French Revolution. Challenging the

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[1] Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson, *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire* (2018), 20.

[2] Ibid., 3.

[3] Ibid., 182.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., 184.

metaphysical tendency to treat the Revolution as the origin or birthplace of terrorism, she maps the term's contestation amidst a broader shift towards biopolitical rationalities. In a short period of time (1794-1797), the meaning of terrorism exhibits a striking variability, referring to charismatic individuals, systems of government, philosophical doctrines, and social identities. In 1794, the term is coined by Jean-Lambert Tallien to describe Robespierre's charismatic violent reign, functioning like the phrases "Hitler's Germany" or "Stalin's Russia."[6] Within weeks of this formulation, journalist Francois-Noel Babeuf redeploys terrorism as a description of a system of government that is not specific to Robespierre but is, in fact, operative in the Tallien's own Thermidorian government. "That is, Babuef took Tallien's description of terrorism as a particular form of government at face value and suggested that the new political leadership conformed to its own understanding of terrorism."[7] By separating terrorism from the person, Babeuf's discourse allows for its philosophical and identitarian meanings as well. If Thermidorian rule was the true terrorism then perhaps being labelled a terrorist by the government was not a bad thing. Perhaps terrorism is the "demand for freedom, the rights of man, democracy, justice and equality."[8]

This explosion of contestation over the meaning of terrorism takes place against the backdrop of a transition from sovereign to biopolitical rationality, more specifically from *raison d'état* to *raison économique*. Robespierre's reign of terror reflects the *raison d'état*, a mode of governing that is centrally concerned with the preservation of the state. For Robespierre, the idea that the state must be preserved by any means necessary helped establish the legitimacy of his revolutionary government and justified his use of violence against external enemies. However, as the radical tumult of Robespierre's reign makes clear, *raison état* operated in tension with other political rationalities. Tallien's critique of Robespierre's reign as terrorism reflects *raison économique*, a rationality which made the sovereign subservient to the laws that governed society. As a biopolitical rationality, *raison économique* is concerned with the natural and stable functioning of society. It uses law as a tactic of regulation and shifts its attention from external to internal enemies. According to Erlenbusch-Anderson, it is this shift of rationality that helps us make sense of terrorism as a "mechanism of social defense […] a way of discriminating between good citizens and bad citizens, between those who could live and those who must die to ensure the health and salvation of the nation."[9] The French revolution was not the origin or birthplace of terrorism in any way that isolates its proper meaning as charismatic, systematic, philosophical or identitarian. Rather, terrorism is as contested as the upheavals around the Thermidorian reaction and as shifting as the biopolitical rationalities that lead to our historical present.

In a later discussion, Erlenbusch-Anderson illustrates how terrorism as a *dispositif* of social defense is "taken up, transformed and overlaid with new meanings" during the

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[6] Ibid., 22.

[7] Ibid., 46.

[8] Ibid., 50.

[9] Ibid., 52.

French colonization of Algeria. According to 19th century biopolitical rationalities, "the colonization of Algeria was necessary for France's internal well-being and external reputation"; the colony was to serve as a place to dispose of French criminal elements as well as a way to restore national glory after the fall of the French Empire.[10] With the invasion of Algiers in 1830, French colonial forces transformed this biopolitical rationality into a policy of "peace enforcement" via vast surveillance mechanisms and biological logics of racist subjugation. While the armed resistance movement understood "peace enforcement" to be another episode of the colonial war begun in 1830, French colonial forces understood problems in Algeria to be of an internal order. In their view, "military action was no longer justified as a method of subjugating a foreign population but as a way of maintaining internal order in the face of a terrorist threat."[11] Framed by a shared biopolitical discourse and its "tactical reversibility," colonial and resistance forces deploy opposing understandings of terrorism. Today, the Algerian revolution is remembered in similarly divergent ways, as an "exemplar of anti-colonial struggle" for resistance movements on the one hand and an exemplar of counter-terrorism strategies for aspiring imperial states on the other.

Despite these patterns of historical memory, Erlenbusch-Anderson's genealogy shows that there are no simple continuities to be drawn between the Algerian Revolution and post-9/11 United States. While the U.S. military uses Gillo Pontocorvo's 1965 movie *The Battle of Algiers* to teach troops about terrorism and counterinsurgency, Erlenbusch-Anderson maintains that terrorism today is differently synthetic in that many senses of terrorism (charismatic, systemic, doxastic, identitarian, strategic, etc.) coalesce in the flexible mechanism of social defense while not being captured by a single definition. Quoting Nietzsche on synthetic definitions, she maintains that "one can still perceive how in each individual case [of terrorism] the elements of the synthesis change their value and reorganize themselves accordingly, so that now one, now another element comes to the fore and dominates at the expense of the rest."[12] In this heterogeneous field of rearranging elements, the biopolitical rationality of social defense still enframes its contestation. Reading the changing National Security Strategy documents from 1987 to 2002 as an illustration of the flexibility of this heterogenous field, Erlenbusch-Anderson shows how the specter of an always present terrorist threat works to justify vast invasive state powers in the U.S.. And despite the widespread tendency to treat the events of 9/11 as a historical caesura, Erlenbusch-Anderson demonstrates that the contemporary dispositif of social defense had, by the mid-90s, already generated the techniques of the "war on terror." 9/11 provided the occasion to expand those techniques and make them permanent.[13]

Genealogy tends to subvert historical knowledge like this. By excavating how things have been and could be otherwise, it unsettles well-worn assumptions and maps how things that appear unproblematic are actually problematic. Like Foucault, Erlenbusch-

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[10] Ibid., 92.
[11] Ibid., 95
[12] Ibid., 136.
[13] Ibid., 151.

Anderson does not pretend that genealogy solves problems or delivers normative judgments. Instead, genealogy offers spurs to questioning as well as a "sort of tool box through which others can rummage to find a tool with which they can do what seems good to them, in their domain."[14] Erlenbusch-Anderson emphasizes the use of genealogical method as a tool and not just the application of concepts such as biopolitics, governmentality, or subjectivation. Divorced from his strategy of careful historical excavation, the appropriation of Foucault's concepts for critical analysis is often in tension with his work. However, even contemporary genealogists can drift from the spirit of Foucault's text. Erlenbusch-Anderson cautions those genealogists that protect some concepts while excavating others as well as those genealogists that attempt to confidently pivot to prescriptive normative theorizing. The place of genealogy is itself subject to genealogical concerns, and reserving some concepts or theoretical gestures from the movement of genealogical critique threatens to "perpetuate currently dominant conceptualizations of and solutions to terrorism."[15] Moreover, Foucault objected to the image of the intellectual abstracted from their discursive and material context, acting as a "prophet or lawgiver who imposes normative prescriptions about what is to be done on the practices of those who fight on the ground."[16] As Foucault put it, theory "does not express, translate, or apply a practice, it is a practice"; "what I say should be considered as proposals, 'games on offer.'"[17] Erlenbusch-Anderson interprets this as the promotion of a normative political theory that "excavates or helps excavate" from concrete practices and relays among resistant concrete practices.[18]

Erlenbusch-Anderson's critical survey of Foucauldian genealogical research is a fair accounting of the field, capturing dominant contemporary trends in the literature. For instance, in the Anglophone feminist reception of his work, Foucault's concepts (power/knowledge, discipline, or subjectivation) are more widely applied than his methods of genealogy or problematization. Judith Butler's early writings are particularly influential in this respect, as Butler's social theory links a Foucauldian understanding of power with psychoanalytic and phenomenological approaches to embodied subjectivity. In "Herculine Barbin and the omission of biopolitics from Judith Butler's gender genealogy," Jemima Repo explores the striking ways that Butler's theoretical model evades the genealogy of biopolitics that enframes so many of her favorite Foucauldian concepts. On Repo's reading, Butler's evasion of the genealogy of biopolitics contributes to the abstraction of her gender theory from "gender itself." In her own genealogical investigation, *The Biopolitics of Gender*, Repo traces the term's construction in 20th century psychiatry to show that gender is a biopolitical project complicit with deadly white cis-normative discourses of "abnormality, sexual difference, and biological foundations."[19] Interestingly, when Repo considers the possibility of feminist theory without or beyond

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[14] Ibid., 166.
[15] Ibid., 177.
[16] Ibid., 178.
[17] Quoted in ibid., 179.
[18] Ibid., 182.
[19] Jemima Repo, *The Biopolitics of Gender* (2016), 104.

gender, she engages in the kind of normative argumentation that Erlenbusch-Anderson interrogates in *Genealogies of Terrorism*. According to Erlenbusch-Anderson, the elimination of ambiguous, flexible terms like gender or terrorism "will not eliminate the political rationalities, interests, and structures that make it possible and necessary, but will instead generate different concepts that allow for the preservation of the mechanisms of social control."[20] In her view, the normative call to eliminate or abolish a term is another way that genealogists abstract their work from concrete practices. Instead of issuing normative proposals, Erlenbusch-Anderson suggests that genealogies act as "relays among a plurality of concrete practices of resistance and transformation."[21]

Although the notion of "relay" is not extensively developed in *Genealogies of Terrorism*, there are some models in Foucault's oeuvre beyond his genealogies themselves. For instance, his *Parallel Lives* series comes to mind. The series includes *Herculine Barbin (Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth Century Hermaphrodite)* and *I, Pierre Rivière: Having Slaughtered my Mother, Sister, and Brother: A Case of Parricide in the Nineteenth Century* as well as the introductory essay "The Lives of Infamous Men," a meditation on the experience of textual encounter in the archive. Importantly, the *Barbin* and *Rivière* volumes are dossiers that gather or relay collections of texts together as provocations to investigation and reflection—memoirs, novellas, medical and legal documents, newspaper articles, and notes. In "Lives of Infamous Men," Foucault describes the invitation to genealogy as staging an encounter with texts that form part of the "dramaturgy of the real […] One won't see a collection of verbal portraits here, but traps, weapons, cries, gestures, attitudes, ruses, intrigues for which words were instruments."[22] Or, as Lynne Huffer describes it, "Foucault's infamous human lives appear as ashes or dried plants and flowers organized in an herbarium […] Just as fossils appear as pictorial poems in the sedimented archive of nature, so too archival 'poem-lives' appear in asylum reports and police reports."[23] In her discussion of relays, Erlenbusch-Anderson points to the poem-lives that appear in Kevin Olson's careful genealogy of the tricolor cockade, appreciating the ways that "imaginaries of popular political power can be both explicitly articulated in speech *and* implicit in political practices."[24] The archive is not total and there is a need for engaged empirical critique that explores how lives entangle with power, how power "in striking down a life and turning it to ashes, makes it emerge, like a flash, out of the anonymous murmur of beings who pass without a trace."[25] The *Parallel Lives* series is an invitation to excavate these entanglements, and it is a model of the activity of relaying.

Erlenbusch-Anderson concludes *Genealogies of Terrorism* by looking to Gary Wilder's politics of radical literalism as a model for normative reconstruction in relation to

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[20] Erlenbusch-Anderson, *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire,* 171.

[21] Ibid., 182.

[22] Michel Foucault, "The Life of Infamous Men," in *Michel Foucault: Power, Truth, Strategy* ed. Meagan Morris and Paul Patton, (1979), 78-79.

[23] Lynne Huffer, "Foucault's Fossils: Life Itself and the Return to Nature in Feminist Philosophy," *Foucault Studies* 20 (2015), 139.

[24] *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire*, 168.

[25] Huffer, "Foucault's Fossils: Life Itself and the Return to Nature in Feminist Philosophy," 139.

genealogy. By "radical literalism," Wilder means to describe "normative strategies that are fully immanent in a given problem."[26] Aime Cesaire, Leopold Senghor and Frantz Fanon are all credited with performing radically literal normative interventions in that they engaged with "transformative possibilities sedimented in existing arrangements."[27] What does it mean for these possibilities to be sedimented or "fully immanent in a given problem"? If the archive is not total, immanence is ambiguous, incomplete and complicated, sedimented like a fossil or herbarium, to borrow Huffer's imagery. Moreover, any given problem (e.g., gender or terrorism) is entangled with other problems in ways that multiply the field and shape of immanence. Perhaps this is the point or the exciting part of radical literalism for the genealogist; tracing the disseminated and subtle field and shape of existing arrangements. As *Genealogies of Terrorism* shows us so deftly, one need not foray into speculative philosophy or prescriptive law-giving in order to experiment in creative ways in the archives and relay beyond them.

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[26] *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire*, 182.

[27] Ibid, 182.

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