

SYMPOSIUM

Situating Genealogies of Terrorism

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In an article in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, journalist Jason Burke—who has written extensively on terrorism—frames a commentary on the 2019 Christchurch shootings with the observation that terrorism is effective because “it always seems near. It always seems new. And it always seems personal.” Burke continues that “ever since the first wave of terrorist violence broke across the newly industrialized cities of the west in the late 19th century, this has been true.”¹ This narrow casting of terrorism as a western industrial phenomenon only 150 years old is perhaps enough to show why *Genealogies of Terrorism* is a necessary book. Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson has also more interestingly demonstrated, however, that while terrorism may feel near, new, and personal, this is itself a contingent response that deserves to be unseated with the more careful historical and conceptual analysis she offers. Indeed, to the extent that contemporary western states iteratively reinvent terrorism as whatever *feels* near, new, and personal, we are held captive by an unexamined picture of terrorism (and the terrorist) that easily serves propaganda purposes—perhaps especially purposes of state security.

This book has a complex argument, and I am not a scholar of terrorism. Rather, I have worked with a similar Wittgensteinian-Foucauldian method (most notably in my book *Self-Transformations*,² and here I have little to say about the historical work that forms the body of the book (and which clearly relies on a deep grasp of a diverse and difficult archive). Instead, I focus on the book’s intriguing method and on the later chapters, which constitute an important intervention in contemporary political philosophy and a corrective to much contemporary political rhetoric about terrorism. Suffice to say that Erlenbusch-Anderson is arguing that a Foucauldian genealogical approach to the conditions of the emergence of “terrorism” best addresses the methodological challenges in its articulation. Rather than make ahistorical, stipulative assumptions about what terrorism is, Erlenbusch-Anderson suggests that it is best understood as a plural and contextual phenomenon that, as Wittgenstein might have said, gains meaning from the

¹ Jason Burke, “Technology Streamed the Carnage to a Global Audience,” *The Guardian*, March 22, 2019, 12.

² Cressida J. Heyes, *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies* (2007).

contexts of its use. That is not to say, of course, that the term “terrorism” functions without referent, or that it can be reworked without challenge to serve any political purpose. Rather, it is to analyze terrorism in its multiple contexts, historical and contemporary, to show how its agents, targets, and goals evolve.

To be more specific, Erlenbusch-Anderson’s book argues that “terrorism functions—and has functioned since the eighteenth century—as a mechanism of social defense that is deployed when biopolitical concerns about the life of the population and the survival of the nation come into tension with traditional sovereign interests.”³ The historical work of making this case through discussion of the French Revolution, late nineteenth and early twentieth century Russia, and Algerian colonial war, enables her to identify a number of different strands in the weave of terrorism: charismatic, systemic, doxastic, identarian, strategic, criminal, and polemic terrorism, which come together in the contemporary world in *synthetic terrorism*. Synthetic terrorism, she argues, emerges from American neoconservatism in the 1970s,⁴ and much of the later part of the book examines this form and its post-9/11 functions. Especially today in the United States, she argues, terrorism is polysemous.⁵ It has been ascribed to diverse individual actions and to the actions of other states that are understood to oppose liberal ideals of freedom and equality, which are in turn tied to free markets, and to capitalist economic systems more broadly. This ideological construction of synthetic terrorism as not only a challenge to the state’s interests but also to something more universal that the US in particular represents, Erlenbusch-Anderson argues, means that “while previously the dispositive of terrorism served to defend society or the nation from internal and external threats, what is defended today is not just a particular national or social body but also a specific notion of humanity.”⁶

Terrorism studies: two implicit alternatives

This book is a key resource and corrective to (at least) two genres of writing and models of understanding: the first from government grey literature and mainstream Political Science, the second from a more humanistic and interdisciplinary genre of political theory.

First, think about the way terrorism is represented—as it must be, now—by western governments. The Canadian state response to terrorism, is, for example, in its public-facing presentation, a more even-handed and evidence-based approach than in the US, and ostensibly aims to promote community conditions that will inhibit recruitment to jihadism as well as to white nationalist movements:

In Canada, the definition of terrorist activity includes an act or omission undertaken, inside or outside Canada, for a political, religious or ideological purpose that is intended to intimidate the public with respect to its security, including its economic security, or to compel a person, government or organization (whether inside or outside Canada)

³ Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson, *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire* (2018), 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 136.

from doing or refraining from doing any act, and that intentionally causes one of a number of specified forms of serious harm.⁷

Here we clearly see the typical consequences of terrorism—intimidation, serious harm—all structured around damage to “the public;” along with a certain elision of Canada (the nation-state) with its people, and in turn with its government; and security as including economic security. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the implication of the Canadian state in practices of intimidation (Oka crisis, residential schools) that intentionally cause serious harm (First Nations genocide, environmental destruction of land) for political, religious, or ideological purpose (settler colonialism) is not countenanced. The scholarly literature is more subtle. Nonetheless, it seems to be rare in terrorism studies that the question of whether western states might commit terrorist acts is discussed, except as some kind of radical sidebar. One obvious lesson here is that policy-oriented political scientists should be reading books like *Genealogies of Terrorism*. A finer point is that genealogy as engaged critique offers a radical challenge to the implicit normativity of some genres of “terrorism studies.”

Reading Anthony Richards’ attempt to define terrorism, for example, immediately shows the contrast between his approach and Erlenbusch-Anderson’s. Like her, he rejects *eliminativism*—the view that we should stop using the word “terrorism” altogether as it is so inconsistently and strategically attributed. Richards begins his definitional gambit by stipulating “the essence of terrorism,” which is “purpose-based”⁸: “terrorism is the use of violence or the threat of violence with the primary purpose of generating a psychological impact beyond the immediate victims or object of attack for a political motive.”⁹ Richards rejects the suggestions that terrorism can be defined through the identity of its perpetrators or target victims, or the political orientation of its cause, and in this way his argument is not at odds with Erlenbusch-Anderson’s. The objection to his own argument that Richards anticipates (and the bullet that he bites) is the obvious one that intent to generate broad psychological impact for political motives is difficult to prove, likely leading to endless psychologizing about various political actors.¹⁰ He does not anticipate the further objection that “intentions” are the kinds of things most easily attributable to individuals or small groups of people who commit discrete acts, and are most difficult to connect to large political entities like states or to ongoing processes of terrorist attrition; there is, therefore, a bias toward certain kinds of actor and action built into his definition, and *Genealogies of Terrorism* helps us to see this elision. From a Foucauldian-Wittgensteinian perspective, however, what is perhaps more striking about Richards’ project is his conviction that terrorism must be *a priori* defined and cannot merely be “described”—an activity he seems to view as pre-theoretical, and that leads him to the tautological claim that “describing terrorism...is not an alternative to defining or

⁷ Government of Canada, *Building Resilience Against Terrorism: Canada’s Counter-Terrorism Strategy*. Ottawa, ON: Public Safety Canada, 2011, 7.

⁸ Anthony Richards, “Conceptualizing Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 37:3 (2014), 221.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 230

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 230-231.

conceptualizing the phenomenon because it does not help us to classify what terrorism is or is not, or to determine what its parameters are—this needs a definition.”¹¹ This quote surely illustrates that terrorism studies needs both Foucauldian genealogy and Wittgensteinian anti-essentialism!

Second, Erlenbusch-Anderson’s book is related to engagements with terrorism from within the interdisciplinary humanities. In 2017, a ten-year anniversary edition of Puar’s *Terrorist Assemblages* was published (with a new postscript--“homonationalism in trump times”), while in 2018, Heike Schotten published *Queer Terror: Life, Death, and Desire in the Settler Colony*. I am interested in how these books intersect, and I understand them as part of a renewed interest in theoretical work about terrorism that branches away from Political Science and was kick-started by Puar but cannot be reduced to her influence.

Puar, of course, argues that the recuperation of privileged homosexuals—the white, wealthy, and normatively coupled—into the narratives of US patriotism and nationalism establishes a self-declared progressive foil, against which the brown, foreign, and deviantly queer terrorist can be juxtaposed. This deployment of sexual politics to bolster racist nation-building projects she famously calls “homonationalism:” “to mark arrangements of U.S. sexual exceptionalism explicitly in relation to the nation... I argue that the Orientalist invocation of the terrorist is one discursive tactic that disaggregates U.S. national gays and queers from racial and sexual others, foregrounding a collusion between homosexuality and American nationalism that is generated both by national rhetorics of patriotic inclusion and by gay and queer subjects themselves.”¹²

Recall that Puar also claims to offer us genealogies of terrorism, although her reading of Foucault is more notional than the careful interpretive work offered by Erlenbusch-Anderson. She suggests that Orientalist readings of gender and sexuality in Islamic culture dovetail with secular liberal, conservative anti-terror *and* radical feminist interpretations to produce the perversely homosocial young brown Muslim man who hates western values and women as the terrorist archetype. By contrast, the white homonationalist subject demonstrates his patriotism through professed liberal values and cosmopolitan consumerism. How does this genealogy of the contemporary *terrorist*, which has defined a certain kind of humanistic approach to “the war on terror,” connect with Erlenbusch-Anderson’s genealogy of *terrorism*? It is not exactly clear to me how these two intersect: sometimes Erlenbusch-Anderson is talking about the structuring norms of race and religion that put some particular kinds of people—or even specific individuals like Boston marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev or Charleston church shooter Dylann Roof—outside citizenship or even humanity, but at other times about the evolution of a political phenomenon relatively disconnected from any particular political subjects.

Returning to Schotten, one of the topic terms in Erlenbusch-Anderson’s title is “empire.” Her understanding of *empire* and *imperialism*, however, functions largely tacitly in the book. She is primarily interested, I infer, in US imperialism of the sort epitomized

¹¹ Ibid., 230.

¹² Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* [2007] (2017), 39.

by “military aggression” in the Middle East that invokes a distinctive *raison d’État* that aims to “defend humanity against dangerous threats” and posits non-western cultures as barbaric, backward, and outside the narrative of progress that undergirds the understanding of liberal democratic capitalism as the apotheosis of humanity. The imperialism of the US, therefore, is globalizing and expansionist—ideologically and in terms of geopolitics—projecting itself beyond the boundaries of the state.¹³ Erlenbusch-Anderson and Schotten make fascinatingly similar-yet-different arguments, both focusing on genealogical analysis of the biopolitical rationalities that inform contemporary terrorist discourse while drawing on divergent archives. Schotten’s book pulls together political theory and queer theory (in ways indebted to Puar), but also adds Native Studies to the mix, to suggest that imperial rationality, with its civilizational impetus, begins at home. Not only the Islamic Other, but also the Indigenous Other is opposed to “life itself” and constructed as the original savage against which the same moralism can be deployed. In this case, though, it is settler sovereignty—not expansionist imperialism—that seeks to justify itself as the source and guarantor of the human:

Indigenous removal and dispossession are accomplished...not only via the exertion of violence, domination, war, famine, genocide, and disease, but also via a specifically ideological imposition of the meaning of ‘life’ and ‘death’ that requires an indigenous removal and dispossession that it cannot accomplish without killing itself. This intractable dilemma explains the transformation of settler societies into security states, which reformulates the indigenous threat of ‘savagery’ and death into external terroristic opponents of its ‘way of life.’¹⁴

Drawing on allusions to “Indian country” or victories at the domestic frontier that are both historical and metaphorical, Schotten suggests that “as the ‘terrorist’ obstacles to empire become projected versions of Indians, Indians become retroactively legible as the first or foundational examples of ‘terrorism’.”¹⁵ These projects are linked, Schotten argues, by biopolitical futurism. The “life” that sovereign biopolitics seeks to protect is civilized settler life; it is life that has a future defined through its essential historical progress (indeed, Schotten suggests, civilization is temporal while savagery has no time at all).¹⁶ “The ‘savage’ of the Americas thus becomes the symbolic negative—the embodiment of the state of nature itself”,¹⁷ and concomitantly is that which must die or was always already dead. In her genealogy of terrorism, therefore, Schotten argues that the civilizational moralism of the state is crucially that of the *settler* state. In forcing us to choose to be “with us or with the terrorists,” she provocatively concludes, George Bush got something right: “If the only options are, as Bush says, to side with a futurist, settler, and imperial ‘us’ (whether as avowed advocates of empire or its collaborationist liberal

¹³ Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson, *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire* (2018), 160-161.

¹⁴ Heike Schotten, *Queer Terror: Life, Death, and Desire in the Settler Colony* (2018), 59.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

compromisers) or with a queered, 'savage,' and 'terrorist' other, the choice, I think is clear: we must choose to stand with the 'terrorists'."¹⁸

The discourse of liberal freedom and equality that undergirds (however tenuously) US liberal democracy and free-market capitalism, Erlenbusch-Anderson argues, provides an ideological justification for the US use of force against foreign regimes in the name of both preserving US interests and promoting global human rights—goals that can be presented as synonymous only when convenient. This project, Erlenbusch-Anderson writes, should be “understood as an exercise of the old sovereign right to kill for the biopolitical purpose of ensuring the survival and well-being not only of the nation but also of humanity.”¹⁹ The understanding of the nation, and perhaps even of humanity, in play here is the settler nation and its settler citizens, to implicitly return to my earlier example of the Canadian state as potential terrorist. Indigenous leaders in Canada challenge the sovereignty of Canada, as they have always done and continue to do, on the basis of illegitimate treaties, broken treaty terms, and unceded land. They are challenging the hypocrisy of liberal norms (that allow, for example, many First Nations communities in Canada to live without drinkable tap water in one of the richest countries in the world) as well as the linking of those norms to an economic system that relies on extractive industries that destroy the land with no end or alternative in sight. To invoke these realities is to deploy Schotten’s ideas in one fairly straightforward way as adding a layer of analysis of empire-building to *Genealogies of Terrorism*. I also wonder, however, if the significantly different genealogy of terrorism that Schotten offers can be accommodated within the historical specificity of Erlenbusch-Anderson’s account. When the latter says: “a normative reconstruction of the concept of terrorism must be compatible with its genealogy—that is, with a genealogy of terrorism,”²⁰ I wonder if she thinks that the genealogy of settler colonialism, biopolitical futurism, and life and death that Schotten offers *is*, in fact, compatible with her own genealogy?

Foucault often reminds us that genealogy is “without constants:” “nothing in man [sic]—not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men.”²¹ Genealogy as a method opposes the idea of any single unity progressing through history and instead focuses on accumulating accounts of those historical threads that, taken together, create the conditions of possibility for certain kinds of subjects to exist (raising again the question of whether there is a gap between the terrorist and terrorism). Would Erlenbusch-Anderson be philosophically enabled or politically willing to “extract norms from the practices of those who are engaged in political struggles”²² to point in any particular direction? Given the similarity of their professed methods, would she draw the normative conclusion that Schotten does—that

¹⁸ Ibid., 130.

¹⁹ Erlenbusch-Anderson, *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire* (2018), 142.

²⁰ Ibid., 175.

²¹ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. and introduced by Donald F. Bouchard (1977), 153.

²² *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire* (2018), 181.

we must choose to stand with the terrorists?—a claim admittedly made for rhetorical effect, but not thereby without power?

Erlenbusch-Anderson ends her book with Fanon's interpretation of Algerian resistance to French colonialism as an "understanding of terrorism as the only form of struggle appropriate for conditions of domination and occupation. On Fanon's view," she writes, "terrorism is a form of counterattack determined by material conditions of a prior conflict."²³ This view was part of "a larger project of anticolonial critique that challenges us to critically examine entrenched assumptions about state violence as the only legitimate form of violence, public order as lawful and peaceable, and civilians as innocent bystanders of colonial oppression."²⁴ Fanon was hardly non-partisan; cutting a very different figure than Foucault, he argued (and fought) tirelessly against racism and colonial oppression. Thus, finally, how might Erlenbusch-Anderson extend her book to elaborate the suggestive point on which she concludes: that a reconstructive project that "derives norms from the normative practices of those who are fighting"²⁵ is compatible with her genealogical approach?

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²³ Ibid., 183.

²⁴ Ibid., 184.

²⁵ Ibid., 182.

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