Foucault Studies

SYMPOSIUM

Genealogy as Multiplicity, Contestation, and Relay: Response to Samir Haddad, Sarah Hansen, and Cressida Heyes

VERENA ERLENBUSCH-ANDERSON
Syracuse University, USA

DIAGNOSING THE PRESENT

Genealogies of Terrorism pursues two interrelated goals: (1) to problematize ostensibly obvious assumptions about terrorism by (2) mobilizing Foucault's genealogical mode of inquiry in a site beyond his own scholarly horizon. As such, the book seeks to speak to a diverse set of audiences interested in terrorism and political violence, Foucault studies, critical theory, and political theory and philosophy. My primary aim in writing the book, however, was to come to terms with my own confusion about what seemed to me to be an enormous and entirely unprecedented political transformation in the wake of the event we have come to know as 9/11.

I had started my undergraduate degrees in Political Science and Philosophy at the University of Salzburg, Austria, in October 2001, shortly after two hijacked planes had taken down the iconic towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. The curriculum in both disciplines reflected the difference that 9/11 had introduced into our lives. Political scientists and philosophers alike offered new courses that were nominally about terrorism but really dealt with topics such as religious extremism, Islamic fundamentalism, the political theory of Sayyid Qutb, U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, and so forth. And there was an overarching sense that whatever it was that the world was facing, it was an absolutely new problem that required a whole set of new political interventions—interventions that were swiftly implemented in the name of national and international security. Something about this consensus bothered me, but I could not figure out what it was, until I read Foucault's *La volonté de savoir*.

What struck me about Foucault's book was the way in which it showed that modern sexuality is born many times, each time under highly specific conditions, and that it bears the marks of these multiple births. I started to wonder whether terrorism, too, was a thing with many beginnings, and I suspected that getting a better sense of these beginnings

might allow me to understand a bit more clearly why I found the collective response to 9/11 so irritating. Lacking any sense that I was in way over my head, I thus decided to do what Foucault did and track down the many births of terrorism. *Genealogies of Terrorism* is the first result of this effort.

The main difficulty in tracing a genealogy of terrorism as it presented itself—or perhaps better, as it was presented to us—in the wake of 9/11 was to articulate a coherent method. This difficulty emerged from what some scholars have described as Foucault's "anti-method"[1] or "non-methodology,"[2] that is, a lack of consistency in Foucault's use of methodological terms and his elusiveness about what might be called a "research design." To be sure, Foucault had much to say about his methods. He tells us, for instance, that archaeology is "the method specific to the analysis of local discursivities," while "genealogy is the tactic which, once it has described these local discursivities, brings into play the desubjugated knowledges that have been released from them."[3] Archaeology explores discourse in order to "discover its guiding principles, the rules of formation of its concepts, its theoretical elements, and so on," while genealogy reconstructs "the function of the text, not according to the rules of formation of its concepts, but according to its objectives, the strategies that govern it, and the program of political action it proposes."[4] Genealogy, he writes, "means that I begin my analysis from a question posed in the present;" it "defines the target and the finality of the work," whereas archaeology "indicates the field which I deal with in order to make a genealogy."[5] Despite Foucault's extensive discussions of archaeology and genealogy, he does not offer a formalized—or formalizable—methodology that would tell those of us seeking to do what he did how, exactly, to go about it: how to determine the relevant periodizations, what archives to examine, which materials to read, how to read them, which analytical categories we should use, and so forth. Indeed, when asked about such methodological choices in a 1966 interview, Foucault answered that "the choices that one could make are inadmissible and shouldn't exist. One ought to read everything, study everything. In other words, one must have at one's disposal the general archive of a period at a given moment."[6]

But what was the archive—both understood as a collection of records and as "a set [of discourses] that continues to function, to be transformed through history, and to provide

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[1] Larry Shiner, "Reading Foucault: Anti-Method and the Genealogy of Power-Knowledge," *History and Theory* 21:3 (1982), 382–398.

[2] Ganahl in Colin Koopman, ed., "Ways of Doing Genealogy: Inquiry after Foucault." A Group Interview with Verena Erlenbusch, Simon Ganahl, Robert W. Gehl, Thomas Nail, and Perry Zurn," *Le Foucaldien* 3:1 (2017), 6.

[3] Michel Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey (2004), 10–11.

[4] Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*, ed. Michel Senellart et al., trans. Graham Burchell (2007), 35–36.

[5] Michel Foucault, "Le Souci de La Vérité," in *Dits et Écrits IV, 1980-1988*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (1994), 674.

[6] Michel Foucault, "The Order of Things," in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 2*, ed. James D. Faubion (1998), 263.

the possibility of appearing in other discourses"[7]—whose analysis would allow me to describe how an ostensibly self-evident discourse of terrorism emerged after 9/11 that appeared to be the only one available? Which developments had made it possible, in the first decade of the 21st century, to talk about terrorism as if it were utterly obvious what was meant by this term? Through what operations, in what periods and which geographical locations, and through which processes of conflict, struggle, and contestation had it come about that among a series of seemingly identical actions, some were said to be *obviously* terrorism while others were *obviously* not? Which of all the relevant archives were actually accessible to me? And how could I possibly "read everything, … know all the institutions and practices" pertaining to the particular moment I sought to understand without making a series of arbitrary and inadmissible choices about the empirical material under investigation?[8]

It seemed to me that the best way to proceed was to begin with what was actually said, with what was, as Foucault put it, "on the very surface of discourse" in order to "make visible what is invisible only because it's too much on the surface of things."[9] Once I began to examine post-9/11 U.S. counterterrorism and foreign policy, I found explicit references to French counterterrorism during the Algerian Revolution, references which were right there on the surface of the U.S. Pentagon's discourse during its invasion of Iraq in 2003. From there, a network of relations quickly emerged that further connected the Algerian Revolution to French counterinsurgency in Vietnam, developments in 20th-century international law, Bolshevik state terror, anarchist and social revolutionary resistance to the tsarist regime in Russia, and contestations between Jacobin proponents and Thermidorian detractors of the Reign of Terror in the French Revolution. While other connections also appeared, considerations of feasibility and narrative coherence led me to limit myself to following only one thread of the phenomenon I sought to better understand. The book, then, presents in rather chronological fashion the result of a genealogical investigation that started with a specific interest in the present and worked backward from there.

CONTESTING TERRORISM IN THE PRESENT

I offer this rather detailed description of the generation of *Genealogies of Terrorism* because it provides a first answer to Samir Haddad's excellent challenge to evaluate the argument developed in the book by the standards of the kind of engaged critique the book defends. Haddad observes that the "discourse of the end of history," which the genealogy I offer is intended to "diagnose, has somehow come to infect [my] approach, since only one paradigm—the neo-conservative one—is considered as a source of understanding

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[7] Michel Foucault, "The Archaeology of Knowledge," in *Foucault Live. Collected Interviews, 1969–1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Lysa Hochroth and John Johnston (1996), 57.
[8] Foucault, "The Order of Things," 262.
[9] Foucault, "The Archaeology of Knowledge," 58.

terrorism [in the present], and it is a paradigm presented as the culmination of all that has gone before" (Haddad, 7).

One important way of understanding this "contamination" of the project is as a feature of its explanatory aim, since the book describes the conditions that made possible the emergence of a discourse that presents itself as the only and, indeed, the obvious understanding of terrorism. Put differently, if the book appears to be infected by the neoconservative understanding of terrorism, this is because this understanding is the disease, so to speak, that the genealogy serves to diagnose. The methodological presupposition of this approach is that the ostensibly unitary discourse of terrorism in the present was constituted through historically contingent events that generated a multiplicity of meanings which continue to circulate on the very surface of this discourse and are, for this very reason, difficult to see. By making them visible, I sought to reveal the heterogeneity, fragility, and contingency behind the ostensible self-evidence of the neoliberal-cum-neoconservative paradigm of terrorism that dominates our present. The restricted focus of analysis, and the lack of attention to contestations in the present, is an upshot of my effort to provide a precise description of the transformations that made possible this particular paradigm. On this account, the book's failure to explore current and ongoing challenges put to the dominant discourse of terrorism is the effect of practical considerations of explanatory focus and material constraints of intellectual production.

But Haddad is certainly right to insist that the currently dominant understanding of terrorism is not the only one, and that its discursive and practical contestations ought to be subject to critical analysis. That is, an engaged critique of terrorism intended to reveal transformative possibilities in the present, particularly in this post-9/11 present of American expansionism and liberal universalism, should examine the current dispositif of terrorism, as it does past instances, as a site of both control and contention. In particular, Haddad asks how those who are labeled terrorists understand their actions, what alternative notions of terrorism might emerge from state discourses beyond that of the United States and its allies, and what practices of resignification may be observed in contestations about terrorism as a global phenomenon.

These are questions I take on in more recent work, where I focus on current developments in the United States around the classification of white supremacy as terrorism.[10] Between supporters and critics of such classification, I suggest that a historical approach to conceptualizing white supremacy as terrorism, especially in U.S. activism around racial justice, sexual violence, and immigration, (1) reveals the severely truncated understanding of white supremacy that is operative in counterterrorism policy; (2) sheds light on the limitations of the conventional conceptual apparatus of terrorism as an emancipatory tool; and (3) yields alternative ways of understanding terrorism that harbor transformative resources, even as these resources remain contested, fragile, and

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[10] See most notably "Department of Homeland Security Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence," September 2019,
https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/19_0920_plcy_strategic-framework-countering-terrorism-targeted-violence.pdf

ambiguous. In other words, instead of either uncritically endorsing or outrightly rejecting the categorization of white supremacy as terrorism, I argue that it contains real transformative possibilities, even as these possibilities are not yet realized or blocked by the contingencies of the current historico-political context.[11]

Among the scholars who pursue the question of how those who are typically labeled terrorists understand their actions, let me highlight Darryl Li's tremendous book, *The Universal Enemy: Jihad, Empire, and the Challenge of Solidarity* (2019), whose aim is to render legible as serious political visions those forms of political action and agency which, within a U.S.-dominated discourse, are presented as evil or pathological. Based on extensive ethnographic and legal work on the jihad in Bosnia, Li proposes an understanding of jihad as a universalist political project—one that shares the structures but not the aspirations of the Western liberal universalism underpinning the Global War on Terror, and one that produces its own classifications and justifications of political violence. Li's reading of jihad in political rather than moralist or pathologizing terms by no means amounts to its idealization or romanticization but rather makes it available for political evaluation and critique. On Li's account, jihad becomes intelligible as an alternative (not liberal but Islamic) universalist vision and a form of armed solidarity under conditions of U.S.-led imperialism in the War on Terror that produces its own ambivalences and tensions. As an effort to recover transformative possibilities from the practices of those who are engaged in political struggles, Li's book is, in my view, an object lesson in the kind of engaged critique I defend in *Genealogies of Terrorism*.

INTERSECTING GENEALOGIES OF THE WAR ON TERROR

Let me now turn to Cressida Heyes' question about the relationship between *Genealogies of Terrorism* and other critical-theoretical works on terrorism. In particular, Heyes situates the book in relation to Jasbir Puar's seminal work, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007) and C. Heike Schotten's excellent book, *Queer Terror: Life, Death, and Desire in the Settler Colony* (2018), both critical interdisciplinary interventions that seek to challenge the received wisdom of social science research about terrorism.[12]

I read Puar's work as a "genealogy of homonationalism"[13] whose primary ambition is to elucidate the "process of the management of queer life at the expense of sexually and racially perverse death in relation to the contemporary politics of securitization, Orientalism, terrorism, torture, and the articulation of Muslim, Arab, Sikh, and South

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[11] My analysis here closely follows Iain Macdonald's exceptional study of possibility in Adorno in *What Would Be Different: Figures of Possibility in Adorno* (2019).

[12] I would add Eqbal Ahmad's 1998 lecture, "Terrorism: Theirs and Ours," Edward Said's work—such as the 2001 interview "Origins of Terrorism" and the 2006 essay "The Essential Terrorist"—, and Judith Butler's 2004 book *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* as pioneering works of interdisciplinary humanities scholarship that anticipate and critically engage formations of terrorism in the War on Terror and that were influential for me in developing my view.

[13] Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Tenth Anniversary Expanded Edition, with a new foreword by Tavia Nyong'o and a postscript by the author (2018), 40; 61; 62.

Asian sexualities."[14] Puar's central claim is that queerness has become productive and desirable within a context of biopolitical global governance, with the so-called War on Terror as a privileged site of this articulation. On her account, queerness is at once a sign of civilizational status and abjection, a site of division where "properly" queer people are distinguished from perversely sexualized and racialized "terrorist look-alikes."[15] The inclusion of some queer people and political progress for some sexual minorities, in other words, is subject to a disciplinary and biopolitical calculus in which apparent advances turn out to be a mode of managing some lives while exposing others to death. *Terrorist Assemblages* exposes how multiple and ambivalent discourses, practices, and subjectivities are played off against one another in the service of U.S. nation and empire-building. Yet whereas Puar dissects the ways in which terrorism today functions in the service of homonationalism as a key site through which (some) queer people are brought into the fold of the nation state, *Genealogies of Terrorism* supplements this analysis with a historical account of the contingent developments through which terrorism became the kind of thing that could assume this role.

Like Puar, Schotten draws on queer theory, as well as settler colonial studies and the history of political thought, to account for the currently dominant paradigm of terrorism in the War on Terror, an ambition Schotten and I clearly have in common. But while *Genealogies of Terrorism* examines the emergence of the present neoliberal dispositif of terrorism in the French, Russian, and Algerian revolutions as key sites of its historical formation, Schotten focuses on the place of terrorism within the settler-imperialist logic of a U.S.-Israeli alliance—a geopolitical context that remains unexplored in my work. Based on a wide-ranging theoretical argument that explicates the futurist temporality of settler colonial expansion, Schotten argues that "terrorism" today is the chief ideological tool to delegitimize opposition to such expansion. Because settler sovereignty is justified for the preservation of life, its continued existence requires the production of ever new mortal threats to settler life, be they "savages," "queers," or "terrorists" who refuse to be brought into the fold of settler colonial empire. On her view, then, "terrorism" does not name some empirical fact about the world but marks a structural position within the theoretical and ideological architecture of settler sovereignty; a position that is necessitated by the imperative to defend colonial expansion and secure the future of settler life.

While Schotten's work sheds important light on the neoconservative paradigm of terrorism and elucidates an additional node in the genealogy of contemporary terrorism, her structural analysis has implications for thinking about possibilities of resistance in the present that diverge from those of a genealogical approach. Schotten argues that in the neoliberal and neoconservative context of the War on Terror, "terrorism" just is the name given to whatever values, ideas, and practices are incompatible with or unintelligible by the organizing norms of imperialism. To put this more strongly, given the overwhelming dominance of this discourse in the current moment, the meaning of terrorism is exhausted

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[14] Puar, xxi.
[15] Puar, 52.

by its function as a moralizing epithet for those who stand in the way of "Western" values. It follows that any attempt to resist empire's discourse of terrorism can itself only be understood as terrorist sympathizing or outright terrorism. This has two key implications for questions of resistance. First, as Schotten makes explicit in her book, when faced with the choice between a settler-imperial "us" and a "terrorist" other, we must resist empire and, consequently, "stand with the 'terrorists.'"[16] The second implication, which is left more implicit in *Queer Terror* but follows from Schotten's analysis, is that any attempt to contest empire's discourse of terrorism—for instance through linguistic contestation or by reclaiming the language of terrorism for emancipatory ends—will be resorbed into the dominant framework and facilitate the expansion of terrorism discourse and, with it, empire. On this view, efforts to classify white supremacist violence as terrorism, for example, will not only be ineffective at countering white supremacy but, on the contrary, will expand and reinforce the white supremacist logic that underlies the settler colonial and imperial discourse of terrorism.

I take this focus on the formal possibilities of the current discourse to be the main difference between Schotten's and my books. Where her analysis lays bare the structural logic of U.S. War on Terror discourse and locates possibilities for resistance within the terms of that very discourse, *Genealogies of Terrorism* seeks to reveal the multiplicity of discourses and practices of terrorism that have made this paradigm possible. Rather than describing its formal structures, a genealogical approach records the contingent historical processes and events through which it took shape. But more than that, it also treats terrorism today not only as a propagandistic tool of delegitimation but also as a space of contestation with multiple meanings and uses. Not all of these have the same political purchase, to be sure, but they should not, for that reason, be rejected as ineffective and counterproductive. Instead, it is upon us theorists to elucidate and amplify their transformative potential.

THEORY, PRACTICE, RELAY

The idea that political theorists should treat experiences of conflict and contestation as sources of normative content is by no means new. It has a long history, for instance in various traditions of critical theory from the Frankfurt School to certain strands of 20th-century French philosophy, feminist theory, critical philosophy of race, and post- and decolonial theory. These traditions diverge from a common view of political philosophy as a normative endeavor that prescribes practices, institutions, or policies in accordance with a set of *a priori* principles. Instead, it understands the task of the theorist as identifying and intensifying transformative resources in concrete political struggles. Yet, as Sarah Hansen compellingly shows with regard to Foucauldian feminist analyses of gender, even scholars committed to attending to such struggles may slide into forms of normative argumentation that actually abstract from, rather than relay, concrete practices of resistance and transformation.

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[16] C. Heike Schotten, *Queer Terror: Life, Death, and Desire in the Settler Colony* (2018), 130.

The account of theory as relay that I developed in *Genealogies of Terrorism* follows Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, and I examined Gary Wilder's politics of radical literalism as one, though not the only, promising avenue for a relaying mode of theory in the context of terrorism.[17] I found the notion of relay (*relais*) helpful because, as Perry Zurn and Andrew Dilts insist, it clarifies the "collaborative and intersubjective nature of the practice of theory" in which the theorist becomes an "accomplice" to political struggle.[18] Deleuze highlights this collaborative dimension of theory in the mode of a relay in a 1972 interview with Foucault. Reflecting on the task of the intellectual in relation to political struggles, Deleuze describes theory and practice as different yet mutually dependent types of discourse that enable, transmit, and amplify one another. In contrast to traditional modes of thinking about practice as an application of theory or theory as derived from practice, Deleuze insists that their relationship always takes shape in local contexts in response to the specific conditions of their deployment.

The relations between theory and practice are much more partial and fragmentary. On the one hand, a theory is always local, relative to a small domain, and it can have its application in a different domain that is more or less distant. The relation of application is never one of resemblance. On the other hand, from the moment theory pushes into its own domain, it encounters obstacles, walls, and blockages which necessitate it being relayed (*relayée*) by another type of discourse (it is this other type that eventually enables its passage to a different domain). Practice is an ensemble of relays (*relais*) from a theoretical point to another, and theory is a relay from a practice to another. No theory can develop without encountering a type of wall, and it takes practice to break through the wall.

For Deleuze, in other words, theory and practice need each other to overcome moments of blockage and depletion. When theory cannot move us further because it finds itself in new conditions that differ from the context of its articulation, it is practice that can help break this impasse. And when practice has exhausted itself in a concrete situation, it is theory that can preserve its power and make it fertile for other domains. Deleuze gives as an example of the relaying function of theory and practice Foucault's work with the Groupe d'information sur les prisons (GIP):

> You [Foucault] started by analyzing theoretically a milieu of confinement like the psychiatric asylum in 19th-century capitalist society. Then you come to the conclusion that it is necessary for people who are precisely locked up to speak for themselves, to act as a relay (*qu'ils opèrent un relais*) (or, on the contrary, it is you who were already a relay in relation to them), and these people find themselves in the prisons, they are in the prisons. When you organized the Groupe d'information sur les prisons, it was on this basis: establish the conditions where prisoners could speak themselves. It would be completely wrong to say … that you moved to practice by applying your theories. There

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[17] For an alternative account of theory as relay, see Emmanuel Renault, *The Experience of Injustice: A Theory of Recognition*, trans. Richard R. Lynch (2019).

[18] Perry Zurn and Andrew Dilts, "Active Intolerance: An Introduction," in *Active Intolerance: Michel Foucault, the Prisons Information Group, and the Future of Abolition*, ed. Perry Zurn and Andrew Dilts (2016), 8.

was neither application nor project of reform nor investigation in the traditional sense. There was something else entirely: a system of relays in an ensemble, in a multiplicity of bits and pieces simultaneously theoretical and practical.[19]

Deleuze here insists that Foucault's work with the GIP is not a straightforward application of his theoretical work on prisons; but neither did Foucault observe the prison in order to then derive theoretical insights from its operation. Rather, as Zurn and Dilts show, the GIP served as a switch point, so to speak, that opened up new circuits through which the prisoners' words could circulate beyond the prison and reach people outside the prison, other GIP chapters, and other activist organizations. But the prisoners, too, functioned as a relay in the struggle against the prison through political acts of insubordination that refused the prison's efforts to control the flow of information. The prisoners' participation in collecting and disseminating information thus took up and intensified the activist ambitions of Foucault's theoretical critique of the prison as an effort to "disrupt the epistemology and therefore the operation of the prison."[20] By examining the GIP through the conceptual lens of the relay, Deleuze is able to highlight its collective and collaborative mode of action that consists of both theoretical and practical activities—activities that stir and intensify one another in a multi-pronged assault on the prison. The more general point, I take it, is that struggles for emancipation are most effective as collaborative endeavors and are not well served by a hermetic distinction between theory and practice.

The GIP is perhaps one of the more striking examples of the work of relaying in which Foucault was involved. But this does not mean that his other writings, even and especially those that are not immediately or obviously connected to activist struggles, do not have a similar function.

As Hansen shows us so well, Foucault's oeuvre offers other models, most notably in the Parallel Lives series—I, Pierre Rivière, Having Slaughtered My Mother, My Sister, and My Brother: A Case of Parricide in the 19th Century (1975) and Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite (1908)—and its introductory essay "The Lives of Infamous Men." We could add Disorderly Families: Infamous Letters from the Bastille Archives (1982), a collection of lettres de cachet which brought the sovereign power of the king into even the most remote corners of everyday life. The system of lettres de cachet, just as Farge's and Foucault's effort to compile them and the lives they struck, are also relays—relays that facilitated the circulation of power in society and relays that "restore [the] intensity" and "resonance" of those ordinary and infamous lives and invite us to once again feel their force.[21] Like all of Foucault's works, these herbaria, which reproduce singular lives "in unchanged form" and "without a clear purpose,"[22] are "experience books": agents of transformation that, through excavation, transmission, and amplification, prevent readers "from always being

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[19] Michel Foucault, "Les Intellectuels et Le Pouvoir," in Dits et Écrits II, 1970-1975 (1994), 307; my translation.
[20] Zurn and Dilts, "Active Intolerance: An Introduction," 8.
[21] Michel Foucault, "Lives of Infamous Men," in Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, ed. James D. Faubion (1994), 158.
[22] Ibid., 159.

the same or from having the same relation with things, with others, that they had before reading."[23] This, then, is the principal aim of theory as a relay in a project of engaged critique: to hold space for transformative possibilities that are as yet unrealized by eliciting an experience in the reader that provokes questions, complicates common sense, invites reflection, and stirs the imagination.

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[23] Michel Foucault, "Interview with Michel Foucault," in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 3 (2001), 246.

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Author info
Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson
verlenbu@syr.edu
Syracuse University
USA

Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Syracuse University. She is the author of *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Terror, Empire* (Columbia University Press, 2018) as well as of articles on Foucault, political violence, and method in political theory.