

BOOK REVIEW

C. Heike Schotten, *Queer Terror: Life, Death, and Desire in the Settler Colony*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018). 272 pp. ISBN: 9780231187473.

In her book, C. Heike Schotten makes a personal Declaration of Queer Terror, written in order to respond to the oppressed situation of Palestinians, who are treated as death, lifeless and antimoral non-humans (in contrast to the privileged and valued of lives of settlers). In the manner of Lee Edelman with Michel Foucault, and by means of holding a critical conversation with Giorgio Agamben and Hannah Arendt, Schotten brings queer theory into discussion of biopolitics and biopolitical analysis. Her agenda of queer terror reveals how, for the purpose of moralising ideological notions of life and death and of justifying genocide and dispossession, moralism is first introduced and then incorporated into the futurism and settler colonial operation of European sovereignty. Therefore, as Schotten provocatively asserts, if we aim at challenging the construction of ‘terrorism,’ which has been appropriated to rationalise Islamophobia, we should *queer* ‘terrorism’ and consciously subvert moralism:

let’s declare that we, too, are queers, bent on the annihilation of the social order and its ceaseless reproduction of spectators of nihilism and death. We choose *not* to choose empire or the endless futurism of colonial domination. We choose to stand on the side of ‘terrorism.’ (p. 168)

By means of conversing with queer theories and biopolitical analysis, her project of queer terror shows us that the issue we have to deal with is the knot of Islamophobic and racist taboos that comes from the biased moralisation of the life of settlers.

In Chapter 1, Schotten argues that, if we attempt to examine and criticise American imperialism for its insistence on the War on Terror, Agamben and Arendt should be abandoned—particularly when Agamben, in an attempt to ‘complete’ Foucault’s theory of biopolitics, introduces Arendt’s notions of *zoê/bios* to biopolitics. Arendt holds assumptions that ‘the enslavement of some is necessary for the freedom of others’ (10) and that the unfreedom of some people is simply a human condition. She does not problematise the existence of slavery and other unjust systems, and she does not seek an alternative society. In the end, she normalises and defines non-European peoples as those who are unfree, who remain in an uncivilised, pre-political savage condition. In Arendt’s words, non-European peoples are not civilised enough to be political, which ‘means that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence, (14). Schotten calls Arendt’s viewpoint a ‘civilisationalist’ approach.

This kind of European-centric civilisation—introduced by Agamben to his revisionist perspective on biopolitics—does not die out. Agamben claims that biopolitics is something ancient rather than a characteristic of modernity (Foucault's claim). He therefore requires the notions of *zoê/bios* to fill the theoretical gap. Schotten criticises Agamben for presuming that the existence of *zoê* is ahistorical or essentialist to such an extent that it does not require any explanation as to why *zoê* is exceptionalised (7). In this light, when Agamben attempts to use *zoê* to analyse the Holocaust, the Jews become the 'Nazis' exemplary victims who were 'unique and most privileged' in human history (29). Auschwitz has been too exceptional to compare with 'the historical antecedents of the Nazi camp, namely, the Indian reservation in the settler societies' (25). Schotten calls Agamben's belief 'Holocaust Exceptionalism' (4).

In Chapter 2, Schotten reframes the notion of biopolitics in relation to settler sovereignty. While reading Thomas Hobbes with Lee Edelman, Schotten urges us to notice that 'sovereignty is biopolitical, not because of an exceptionalist understanding of life, as Agamben has it, but rather because sovereignty is what constitutes life *as* life to begin with' (32). This biopolitics is necropolitics because it establishes a difference between what must live and what must die. In this sense, we can understand why queer terror regards life not as a biological condition but as *desire*. Life is not a described situation of a person but a person's condition that is constituted to become. It is bound up with anxiety and power-seeking. 'Perpetually uncertain about the prospects of successfully getting what we want, we must continually seek to enlarge our power in order to secure the objects of our desire' (57). On the other hand, under the binary opposition between life and death, civilisation and savagery, progress and timelessness, peace and war, modernity and backwardness, the 'savage' of the Americas thus becomes the symbolic negative, with no respect for the value of life. Edelman describes this as the 'death drive' of the settler polity, and it explains why Muslims are not exceptionalised to be killed but are simply conflated with 'terrorists' as a 'nihilistic death cult in order to proceed with its necropolitical elimination' (65). At this point, terrorists and queers are moralistically represented as 'savage' figures of death and destruction, with Edelman reminding us that queerness means to 'dispossess the social order of the ground on which it rests' (41).

Schotten derives the queerness of queer theory from revisiting Foucault's writings, paying special attention to his method of genealogy as the basis for liberatory and dissident critique. In Chapter 3, Schotten contends that 'Foucault is unearthing knowledge from below in an attempt at disrupting hegemonic or "totalitarian" theories, discourses that therefore reign in some sense *from above*' (74). Foucault's strategy of from-below begins with 'the subjugated and with smaller and more local relations of power,' which have been appropriated by larger global apparatuses. This secures 'a space for political resistance, for what he so often describes as resistance to the mechanisms of power itself, rather than to a specific institution or a group of people' (76-77). Genealogy in this sense is a strategy of fighting against 'scientific' discourses, in which bodies, desire and thoughts are gradually and materially constituted as subjects.

In line with this, some Foucauldian scholars, including Jeffrey Nealon, suggest that resistance means to 'respond' to the tactics of power that subjectify us. But Schotten argues that this kind of 'respond' is not rebellious enough, 'since there is no inherently resistant or liberatory act' (90). She questions: Why 'must' the worker or citizen 'respond'? What makes 'bullshit' bullshit? The project of queer terror calls for consistently and critically *queering* the question of politics 'and/as' the question of revolution (92).

In Chapter 4, Schotten reads Edelman's *No Future* as the manifesto of queer revolution and anti-moralism. This signifies the transition from Foucault's statement that 'society must be defended' to a statement (Edelman's) which urges that 'society must be destroyed.' Schotten urges us to embrace the 'death drive' since the dead should "'come to life" (or insistently exist) and animate the destruction of the settler order that they are always already consigned by the social order to symbolise' (110). This radical queer politics shows why and how the existence of indigenous people itself is resistance to their settler sovereignty. Although Schotten's proposal seems to be paradoxical, it is queer in her meaning: 'this is a queer revolution that queers the aims of revolution itself' (111). On the other hand, queer terror should subvert moralism because, in the name of common good, social welfare and law, morality normalises power and is further institutionalised as moralism. Schotten believes that the nature of queerness is to embrace stigmatisation and to 'refute or fail to follow futurism's mandates' (124). Queers reject receiving any empty promise or fake wish that supports, sustains and normalises a power structure.

After mapping out queer terror, the final chapter sets out what more we can learn about 'terrorism,' the War on Terror and settler colonialism and how queerness can terrorise futurism and imperialism. Schotten argues that 'terrorists' are the enemies of civilisation because they are a sign of 'unthinkable destruction and annihilation' (128). They cause the threat not because of their biology but because of their existence, which has not yet been managed, controlled, stifled and quashed. They do not even have to commit any violent attack. While their existence challenges the life of settlers, they *are* terrorists (130). This reality points out the deepest issue of how are terrorists to respond 'properly' to the settlers and their supporters if justification of 'terrorists' is never achievable? This pushes Schotten to re-claim the queerness-as-praxis if 'the abject affirm that abjection rather than seeking to negotiate, reason with, or conform to the social order that produced it' (146). Here we see the paradox that when people who can actually threaten the social order are considered to be terrorists, it means that they are actual threats. 'Dissent from War on Terror culture is not effected by saying that Muslims aren't really evil,' (161) because terrorists will never be able to justify themselves. Conversely, 'dissidence is effected by embracing precisely what is determined to be unembraceable, unthinkable, unreasonable, or immoral—the refusal of settler colonialism and the War on Terror' (161). Terrorists have no choice but to queer that structure, which hates them and desires to kill them, which moralises and justifies

the settler's oppression. Schotten thus concludes that queers should choose to stand on the side of 'terrorism.'

Schotten's *Queer Terror* fruitfully draws biopolitical analysis, Foucauldian studies and radical queer theory into the conversation about Islamophobia and the War on Terror, and, in a broader sense, about genocide, racism and settler colonialism. She has observed that the genocidal eradication of Palestinians has been justified in the same way that the genocide of native Americans has been justified (163). She fairly criticises Arendt and Agamben for Holocaust Exceptionalism because of their Eurocentrism and the fact that they ignore other genocides and racism. However, does she also fall into another Western Zionism Exceptionalism? Schotten's project articulates well the genealogy of terrorism and Islamophobia in Western countries. It shows how Western biopolitical analysis has been on the wrong track when focusing on settler colonialism in North America and in Palestine.

When we consider many similarities exhibited by China's biopolitical power over Hong Kong, Tibet and the Uyghurs (the Turkic-speaking Muslims in Xinjiang), we are bound to ask the question: What makes settler imperialism historically unique? China's sovereignty considers the dissents and the innocents who do not commit violent acts 'the abject' and their life 'bare life.' These 'terrorists' are slaughtered as they are incapable of justifying their innocence. The only difference from settler imperialism might be that China moralises their nationalism. But they both share and create the psychic of anxiety when they see the threat from the existence of these 'terrorists.' Schotten sharply points out the weakness of Agamben's biopolitics, which is merely *descriptive* to the totality of biopolitics, and which is doomed to show the possibility of critical resistance.

Furthermore, I am curious about how Schotten avoids falling into another US exceptionalism and how she highlights the unique genealogy of Western Islamophobia. Although Schotten does not say that "'terrorism" and Islamophobia have nothing to do with race' (128), she does not take religious and racial conflicts seriously in her project. I agree with the significance of moral traction, but I also suggest that the racialisation of Muslims has already been incorporated into the broader moral discourse in the West.

Another question of mine, which might be raised by other scholars of Foucault studies, is whether the project of queer terror is too utopian to put into practice and what the next step should be after destroying the society, if it is possible. Schotten suggests not moving forwards to Foucault's ethics of desubjectivation (67) and insists that constantly responding to power is not queer enough (90). However, reading *The Use of Pleasure* and the last of Foucault's writings, we may notice that Foucault considers bodily practices to construct ethical subjectivity, which subverts the normalisation of bodily disciplines and other forms of power relationships. This kind of practice of the self leads to self-transformation that is the basis for constant resistance and radical queerness. In this sense, Foucault's notion of subjectification can be re-considered in the agenda of 'to exist is to resist' as queer terror.

Author Info

Yin-An Chen
MPhil (Kent), MA (Durham)
yahwists@gmail.com
Ordinand in the Church of England
Westcott House, Cambridge
United Kingdom