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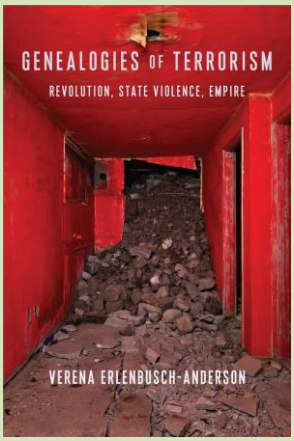

Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson

Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire

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In *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire,* Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson takes a detective-based narrative style that guides the reader through a precise and conscious exposition of how the term terrorism came to be strongly embedded in our human shared imagery; by following a poststructuralist approach, with a careful, vigorous, and delicate prose, Erlenbusch-Anderson manages to critically sketch a notoriously visual and graphic narrative regarding the inherently complex historicity and Foucauldian genealogical development of terrorism as a statal and non-statal revolutionary practice.

Despite the fact that *Genealogies of Terrorism* is built upon a dense web of rather specific and complex terminological concepts, indicating how being familiarised with poststructuralism's theoretical framework is encouraged, from an all-encompassing

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approach, Erlenbusch-Anderson manages to make a relevant and analytical contribution to an under-researched area of enquiry concerning terroristic violence by sensitively applying Foucault's conceptual tool of dispositif, a French word that designates the historical processes "on which discursive and nondiscursive practices, laws, institutions, political decisions, military measures, architectural forms, and mentalities are joined together"[2].

With this in mind, Erlenbusch-Anderson intelligently navigates through the historical and discursive axioms that have moulded the use and depiction of terrorism by departing from the foundational notion of the "historicity" of a concept [3]; following Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophical enquiry, linguistic descriptors need to be understood not as neutrally formed and pre-existent to human development and experience, but historically and culturally produced inside the margins of discursive technologies of conformation that both naturalise contingent modes of representation and interpretation and silence the underlying contextual axioms in the bosom of their formation.

Building on this account, Erlenbusch-Anderson sophisticatedly underlines how analysing a conceptual term outside the context in which it emerged and treating it as an objective and neutrally formed descriptor would only contribute to outlooking the historical, social, and cultural process underpinning its employment. This abstract understanding of language as a discursive technology at the service of contingent forms of conformation, is categorically applied to the production of the term terrorism and its subsequent naturalisation by invocating Michael Bhatia's illustration of how "the terrorism label […] serves as a means to deny the legitimacy of some forms of violence while affirming the necessity of others" since "names, words and discourse are viewed as objective representations of fact, when in fact they are victories in contestations over interpretation[4].

In short, *Genealogies of Terrorism* does not focus on the procedural dimension of terrorism regarding how those attacks happen, but rather on the process of *naming* certain violent acts as terroristic. By actively interrogating the following foundational thesis of

[2] V. Erlenbusch-Anderson, "The trouble with terrorism", in *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 11.
[3] V. Erlenbusch-Anderson, "The trouble with terrorism", 4.
[4] V. Erlenbusch-Anderson, "The trouble with terrorism", 5.

the book, Erlenbusch-Anderson states how "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"[5], showing how the term *terrorism* historically emanated in conjunction with other political practices during the Reign of Terror[6] to discursively name the direct management of biological lives by the systematic employment of terror as a Foucauldian biopolitical weapon. Erlenbusch-Anderson's historical assessment of *terrorism* is analytically exposed jointly with the materialisation of a new state-centric rationality named "*raison économique"*[7], according to which the internal configuration of the state is based on the premises of economic liberalism and the prioritisation of the integrity and security of the state's population, placing terrorism as a biopolitical apparatus to ensure the state's self-preservation under economic guidelines of political functioning, and configurating a new power-based relation between the figure of the state and the population[8].

Nevertheless, *Genealogies of Terrorism* makes a persuasive case by stating how terrorism not only becomes a governing strategy during Robespierre's mandate, institutionalising it as a legitimate, and therefore legal practice, but also argues how terror as a violent tool has been likewise employed by non-statal actors. As a result, Erlenbusch-Anderson interrogates resistance movements by taking as an example how Lenin, previously and during the Russian Revolution, motivated the use of terror in the name of self-defence against the declining tsarist and bureaucratic structure, analogous to the statal biopolitical terrorism[9].

Accordingly, based on this critical overview concerning the existence of a dual understanding of terrorism, from a historical viewpoint rooted in statal practices and non-statal acts of resistance, Erlenbusch-Anderson exposes in a complex but fruitful analytical enquiry how France's history of colonisation[10] depicts both accounts of violent practices

[5] V. Erlenbusch-Anderson, "The trouble with terrorism", 8.
[6] V. Erlenbusch-Anderson, "The trouble with terrorism", 16.
[7] V. Erlenbusch-Anderson, "The Emergence of terrorism", in *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 30.
[8] V. Erlenbusch-Anderson, "The Emergence of terrorism", 23.
[9] V. Erlenbusch-Anderson, "State terrorism revisited", in *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 54.
[10] V. Erlenbusch-Anderson, "Terrorism and Colonialism", in *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 91-132.

and the historical nuances that participate in the emergence and fabrication of the term *terrorism* inside the margins of a racialised discourse that perpetuates unbalanced and asymmetrical power relations by contingently classifying subjects according to their race. Moreover, this case study also shows how terrorism, as an apparatus of knowledge production and designation, delimits which practices, depending on the discursive identity an actor upholds, are granted structural legitimacy[11].

This account is exemplified by the French colonisation of Algeria, a historical period during which a new form of subjectivity was produced to capture the employment of indiscriminate terroristic violence by colonised populations: the *revolutionary* and subversive subject, personified by the National Liberation Front (FLN). According to Erlenbusch-Anderson:

> The notion of subversion, […], must be understood as an ideological move that allowed colonial authorities to raise "the specter of an insidious revolutionary movement bent upon the destruction of French qua 'Western' values, and implicitly shored up colonial rule as a bulwark against an immoral and shadowy adversary". In this way, the true motivations of resistance fighters could be effaced, and their actions could be presented as a threat, both real and ideological, to France and French values.[12]

Consequently, *terrorism* is configurated as a foundationally non-statal practice performed by revolutionary bodies of knowledge that inextricably aim at destabilizing the state, an actor that, to ensure its self-preservation, produces security discourses rooted in an asymmetrical hierarchical structure between the benign French state in contraposition with a racialised and inferior other ontologically configured as a dangerous subject. Accordingly, state's terroristic practices are depicted as inherently legitimate to protect its population from non-statal subjects naturalised as threatening, a discursive account imbricated in its constitution with a racialised understanding of human production and classification[13]. Based on this graphic example, Erlenbusch-Anderson illustrates the critical importance of analysing historical axioms to understand the emergence and employment of the term *terrorism*, commonly treated as a neutral descriptor beyond

[11] V. Erlenbusch-Anderson, "Terrorism and Colonialism", 123.
[12] V. Erlenbusch-Anderson, "Terrorism and Colonialism", 108.
[13] F. Fanon, "Introduction", in *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto, 1967), 1-7.

contextual considerations, by exemplifying its dual dimension of state-preserving and non-statal practices of contestation.

Erlenbusch-Anderson culminates this genealogical enquiry by exploring, based on the US counterterrorism practices deployed after the 9/11 attacks, a new account of terroristic violence named "synthetic terrorism"[14], understood as all those "mechanisms of social defense against threats" to defend "not just a particular national or social body but also a specific notion of humanity"[15]. This biopolitical approach of taking humanity as the target of political management is linked to contemporary justification technologies, regarding terroristic violence, by targeting certain subjects as ontological enemies of the human civilisation as a whole.

This last apprehension made by Erlenbusch-Anderson leads to one of the main criticisms that can be made concerning the analytical dimension of the book. As it has been exposed, *Genealogies of Terrorism* actively focuses on the historicity of the concept of *terrorism*; nevertheless, it could be argued that the book would have notoriously benefitted from not only applying a poststructuralist but also a postfoundationalist theoretical framework by interrogating how, following Agamben's critique, this shift Erlenbusch-Anderson precisely dissects towards a biological dimension of political power in the direct governance and management of human life is not only the result of a historical period, but rather an ontological matter in its conception[16]; said differently, political action has always been conceptually biopolitical through the classification of subjectivities according to them being normative or naturally abnormal. Consequently, from a critical viewpoint, *Genealogies of Terrorism* uniquely focuses on the historical nuances that have promoted the emergent of terrorism, disregarding how the systematic employment of terror could be framed as a biopolitical tool ontologically necessary for the conformation of any form of political regime that, through self-preserving discourses, has to actively classify subjects according to contingent premises to protect the normal forms of life from abnormal ones, an analytical approach only subtly invocated in Erlenbusch-Anderson's

[14] V. Erlenbusch-Anderson, "Reimagining terrorism at the end of History", in *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 135.
[15] V. Erlenbusch-Anderson, "Reimagining terrorism at the end of History", 136.
[16] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 3-21.

understanding of synthetic terrorism and that could have been actively interrogated throughout the whole book for it to have a more clearly developed critical dimension.

Overall, *Genealogies of Terrorism* is a political excavation in search of the historical and conceptual axioms that have led to the conformation and subsequent naturalisation of our understanding of *terrorism*, a pervasive and context-sensitive descriptor linked in its constitution with processes of statal self-preservation strategies and non-statal resistance movements, vigorously elucidating with an accessible narrative the complex historicity of the term imbricated with the reproduction of hierarchical and asymmetrical power relations between states and their populations through the development of new rationalities. Consequently, Erlenbusch-Anderson, due to the conceptual richness and analytical dimension of this exploration, opens the door to new genealogical enquiries and potential studies reflecting on how our current socio-historical context may or may not mould our understanding and practices of terroristic violence.

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