
Review

Genealogies of terrorism: Revolution, state violence, empire

Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson

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Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson's *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire* is an invaluable text for scholars, educators, and activists interested in maintaining a nuanced understanding of the social–political frames that overdetermine our world while obscuring possibility. I used this text in my course on decolonial theory and it stimulated a lot of exciting (and excited) conversations. In hopes of expanding one of our more fruitful dialogues, once I have introduced the main arguments, I will focus on the relationship between race/racism and terrorism/counterterrorism. My primary concern is with the concept that the author introduces to supplement Foucault's functional notion of race, which she describes as 'mechanisms of social defense' (p. 10). I tend to think that Foucault was on the right track in his tactical understanding of racial conflict – though his history was off – and I wanted more to be said about why race is not also a useful way of understanding terrorism throughout the colonized world.

Erlenbusch-Anderson begins by describing the historical emergence of the concept of terrorism from the late 1700s into the present. 'The concept of terrorism', she says, 'did not exist before 1794' (p. 21). For genealogical newcomers, claims to contingency can be jarring. Other performatively similar genealogical claims extend from Foucault's critique of the prison—it did not exist as we know it before the 19th century—or the general claim that race/racism/racialization did not exist before the 15th century. This sort of historical destabilization is powerful because it does more than simply demand that one defend a definition of terrorism over and against another. Rather, genealogical critique of the variety being deployed elucidates the affordant conditions of the concepts we are compelled to use, as well as reject or defend. The rules of the game, or the bottle that traps the fly, are revealed as one possible reality that came about because of various forces.

The material shifts that afford terror/terrorism make their first significant appearance in the French Revolution. Initially, terrorism describes the actions of Robespierre, but the language was rapidly 'decoupled' from the individual and



used as a general description of ‘any system of government that relied on terror as a means of exercising power’ (p. 22). Erlenbusch-Anderson then makes a series of helpful distinctions to elucidate other forms and functions that the language of terrorism has taken since the French Revolution.

There is (1) charismatic terrorism, or the kind attributed directly to a single actor (Robespierre’s reign, Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s Russia), and (2) doxastic terrorism, or terrorism as a political philosophy. She adds to these variations: (3) identarian terrorism, or terrorism as a social identity that ‘could be assumed and cultivated by way of an active commitment to certain beliefs, values, and principles’ (p. 22). (4) Strategic terrorism, or ‘the use of violence as a political strategy’. (5) Criminal terrorism or ‘terrorism as an illegal act’. And (6), polemical terrorism or terrorism as a new kind of war (p. 22).

Drawing on Nietzsche, Erlenbusch-Anderson captures these various functions under the umbrella category of ‘synthetic terrorism’, which operates as a conceptual form that comes about through the amalgamation or synthesis of meanings that came prior to its function and which make it ‘difficult to unravel, difficult to analyze, and ... completely beyond definition’ (p. 193). In other words, through various key historical case studies, the meanings of terrorism are reified and exhausted in the contemporary, such that their ongoing operation is also in constant reference to the past. Perhaps the clearest example of this continuity between past and present is captured in the relationship between the Algerian revolution and the U.S.’s ongoing war on Middle Eastern peoples. Here Erlenbusch-Anderson says:

... the techniques, methods, and devices used by the U.S. military in the Middle East were modeled on tactics of counterterrorism deployed by the French army in Algeria. In this way, French imperialism constituted a ‘primer for American imperial politics’ (p. 135).

Through this synthetic understanding, Erlenbusch-Anderson ultimately argues that terrorism ought to be understood ‘as a dispositif that serves the strategic function of establishing a pervasive network of power by responding to an imminent, ubiquitous, and amorphous terrorist threat’ (p. 136).

Erlenbusch-Anderson’s primary argument for an understanding of terrorism as a dispositif, described above, is a refreshing and much needed contribution to a conversation that is too often ideologically lopsided. The text helps further clarify the relationship between the rise of liberal politics and the present conflicts with which liberal states find themselves endlessly engaged, and in a way that invites conversation, as well as extension. In the spirit of extension, then, I want to now discuss her shift away from the language of race/racism/racialization as a useful element in the dispositif being described. Here, I am left wondering how the amorphous terrorist threat toward which power directs itself is understood, or ought to be understood, especially in the present. That is, despite being amorphous, not



just anyone can be objectified as a terrorist, and being deemed a terrorist is also being reduced to an object upon which violence is allowed to be exercised.

There are some clear traces within the text that I think problematize Erlenbusch-Anderson's shift away from a racialized conceptualization of terror towards a notion of social self-defense. For example, in her discussion of the pre-Soviet conflicts, Erlenbusch-Anderson cites Gerasim Tarnovski, who describes the ruling classes as 'crowned vampires, kings, and czars' (p. 71), a clear use of naturalized objectification to cast the enemy other as threat or monstrosity to be resisted and destroyed. At the same time, she notes, the pre-Soviet autocrats explicitly framed the conflict 'in terms of a war between races' (p. 75). There are obvious connections in the French-Algerian conflict and its US uptake as a war on terror. And, even the assault against Robespierre is partly driven by a pseudo-racialized objectification, because, despite being bourgeois in his heart, he paid lip service to solidarity and abolitionism. This caused problems for the bourgeoisie, especially in Haiti, which was having its own revolution at the time. As C.L.R. James notes, when Robespierre was dead and his successors had taken power, 'the old slave-owners, crawling out of their prisons and hiding-places, held up their heads again and clamoured for "order" to be restored in San Domingo and the colonies' (James, 1989, p. 178). Even though Robespierre was brutal to proletariat and bourgeoisie alike, his 'reign of terror' is described as such by the bourgeoisie partly because of his nominal shift away from naturalized hierarchies.

Thus, at the very least, the form and function of race/racism co-emerged through the cases that Verena critiques alongside the rise of terror/terrorism. And, it might be the case that terrorism and racialization were initially distinct, but it seems that these conceptual forms have since coalesced, such that we cannot understand the contemporary usage of terrorism without taking into consideration its explicitly racist modes. Hence, an additional sub-category ought to be added to the synthetic notion of terrorism, what might be called 'racialized-terrorism', which ought to be made explicit and distinct because it is not just a unique iteration of the other sub-forms. Terrorism means something distinct in the present, such that when the word is deployed a certain representation is simultaneously evoked—as do 'criminal', 'illegal', or 'gangster'.

Erlenbusch-Anderson appeals to two cases that capture this point. The first is the 2015 San Bernardino shooting, the other is the public response to the Tsarnaev brothers. The San Bernardino shooting was interesting because in the moments before it was clear what had happened, media agencies hovered over the scene (in helicopters) waiting to 'see' if it was a terrorist attack. Once it was revealed that the actors were 'Middle Eastern', the events were properly categorized. In Verena's critique of the Tsarnaev brothers, she demonstrates the incompatible relationship between citizenship and terrorism, arguing that 'the synthetic nature of



contemporary terrorism is harnessed to articulate and implement a certain normative view of citizenship' (p. 153). She goes on to say:

although terrorism is predominantly associated with a racially and sexually inflected notion of Islam and the Muslim-looking person, other elements of the concept can be brought to the fore to identify perpetrators as terrorists even when they fail to conform to the Muslim-looking construct. In this way, it becomes possible to simultaneously be 'one of us', that is, a citizen in both legal and the inclusive sense, and a terrorist (p. 153).

The counter examples of the white 'lone-wolf' are obvious, and Erlenbusch-Anderson responds to this by pointing out that the Tsarnaevs racial status was questioned, given their central Eurasian background. But this central Eurasian racial tension is not new for MENA peoples. Indeed, as I argue throughout my work, the ambiguous status of MENA peoples is a fundamental affordant characteristic of our ongoing domination, a status that was enshrined in the U.S. in the early 20th century through the cases of Costa George Najour, Takao Ozawa, and Bhagat Thind (Furlas, 2015 forthcoming) The responses of Lindsey Graham and Peter Wehner to the Boston bombers affirms this lingering white supremacist relation to MENA peoples. Wehner explicitly says 'the perpetrators of the Boston Marathon bombing are not "white Americans"' (p. 155). Nevertheless, institutionally speaking, MENA people are classified as white, and for the state to change its mind on this status would also presumably mean that MENA people would be formally recognized as a protected class, such that the FBI and other institutional agencies might have to pivot in how they surveille, arrest, torture, and kill MENA perceived people. Of course, the terrorist label would still be applied in an effort to excuse state violence, but the success of that excusing would likely change.

Nevertheless, it is the case that the conditions Erlenbusch-Anderson describes as aspects of synthetic terrorism also operated in the background of the above-mentioned cases, and for the critical theorist who is interested in normative possibilities these nuances matter. I am suggesting that there is a greater tactical advantage and broader range of possibility to be revealed when a critical analysis of terrorism holds on to the concepts of race/racism/racialization. Erlenbusch-Anderson's text invites conversations and extension in the way I am suggesting, and in a way that other approaches to terror/terrorism do not. Indeed, she realizes that much more is at stake than the rightness or wrongness of a concept, and she does an outstanding job of shifting the conversation away from definitional battles to focus on the problem as one of power in a meaningful, as well as useful, way. If the discourse around terrorism followed Erlenbusch-Anderson's example and seriously examined the many oppositional power relations that operate in the background when terror is being discussed, then it might be



possible to transform the material conditions that afford these ongoing conflicts in the first place.

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George Fourlas
Hampshire College, Amherst, MA 01002, USA
gfourlas@hampshire.edu