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Review

Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire

Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. 296pp.

Wendy Lynne Lee *

In *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire*, Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson takes on the ambitious project of providing a broadly Foucauldian genealogical account of the concept and practice of “terrorism.” While I am not quite sure she summits every mountain she attempts to climb, Erlenbusch-Anderson makes a valuable contribution to an under-developed literature and she offers some tantalizing points of departure for future explorations of an important and timely subject. *Genealogies* is an eminently worthwhile read; while some grounding in Foucault (among others) is sure to enhance the experience, Erlenbusch-Anderson’s introduction provides an able road map, making the ascent up through the complex and truly fascinating history of “terrorism” an adventure that doesn’t leave the reader out of breath, yet offers some genuinely startling moments of insight that stop us, urging us to review much of what we think we know about a term that sees a good deal of use—one man’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter—if much less comprehension. Articulating a creative use of Foucault’s notion of a *dispositif*, that is, larger

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historical formations “on which discursive and nondiscursive practices, laws, institutions, political decisions, military measures, architectural forms, and mentalities are joined together” Erlenbusch-Anderson is able to provide comprehension to use, and like a page-turner detective novel, she provides use to the comprehension of the history of “terrorism” and thus to terrorism.

Taking as her point of departure Ludwig Wittgenstein’s focus on the “historicity and contextuality of concepts,” Erlenbusch-Anderson argues that “if we want to understand what terrorism is, we must first determine what the term means, how it functions in a given context, and how it is operationalized as an element in different discursive and nondiscursive practices” (4). The meaning of a word, in other words, is not merely its use, but its *usefulness* given its context. If we want to understand what is the difference, for example, between being “a robber or a terrorist” we must begin by examining how such a distinction “is determined according to a set of contextually specific norms that give regularity to and thus determine the meanings of the words” (5). Contrary, then, to our tendency to privilege current culturally specific use as if the meanings of concepts constitute “natural kinds” that “exist in the world independently of human thought and practice,” Erlenbusch-Anderson naturalizes the meaning(s) of words like “terrorism” through a careful excavation of their conceptual history, dividing it into seven categories of historical formation, or *dispositifs*: systemic, doxastic, charismatic, identitarian, strategic, polemic, and synthetic (14). These provide Erlenbusch-Anderson the tools for exploring her central thesis, namely, that “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” (8) utilized in some cases by the state and in others against the incursions of the state. As a “mechanism of social defense,” in other words, “terrorism” signifies an organically emergent range of strategies, policies, postures, and charismatic figures “deployed when biopolitical concerns about the life of the population and the survival of the nation come into tension with traditional sovereign interests” (11), or when the state itself is perceived as a threat to the life of the population (70).

As a correlate to new ever-more technologically advanced economies of power (30–31), Erlenbusch-Anderson shows that the meaning of “terrorism” cannot be neatly reduced to an act of political violence regardless its origin, but instead involves an indefinite and evolving range of other terms and practices. The meaning and role of

“police,” “sovereign,” “colonial rule,” “enemy of the people,” “freedom,” and “terror,” among others, situates what constitutes “terrorism” along an axis of history defined by the relationship of the state to its own people, but also to a number of other agents and interlopers. While the single constant in this flux is constituted by this primary relationship, we’re not to take that to mean that it’s determined by any particular configuration of power—although Erlenbusch-Anderson does date the emergence of terrorism to the French Revolution’s Reign of Terror. She argues that the concept “terrorism” “didn’t exist before 1794” (19), but that during the volatile period after the French Revolution “the use of the term terrorism as a form of government, analogous to concepts like tyranny, monarchy, or despotism, came to be supplemented by its use as a name for political commitments, like republicanism, populism, or royalism” (47). In other words, while governments may have long and varied histories of *terrorizing* their own peoples as well as those of other sovereign states, “*terrorism*,” comes into its own as a salient category of government at a particular historical juncture, deployed to specific objectives, within a context of other concepts whose meanings are equally a function of their usefulness to particular agents such as Robespierre.

Erlenbusch-Anderson’s identification of the Reign of Terror as the conceptual birthplace of “terrorism,” is thus not merely a conceptual, but also a historical and, as she argues, charismatic claim in the sense that it attaches to specific historical junctures incarnated in the actions of particular and empowered agents. Could we push this birthdate back further? Say, to the terror institutionalized as “sport” in the Roman Colosseum or by the Viking’s conquer of East Anglia? Erlenbusch-Anderson makes a persuasive case that the answer is no: however transformative these episodes in human history, they don’t capture the *deliberate orchestration* of terror as a managerial strategy of the state, Foucault’s “biopolitical technology” (30). Indeed, it’s at this volatile juncture in European history that Erlenbusch-Anderson’s appeal to Foucault, as both a conceptual *and* historical point of departure, becomes key to understanding terrorism as a set of *dispositifs* in the relation of the state to its subjects—as a managerial instrument tailored to a specific configuration of “population.” Following Foucault’s lead, she argues that the eighteenth century’s *raison d’Etat* gave rise to “a new rationality,” namely “*raison économique*,” that is, Western liberalism’s *laissez faire* approach to realizing a prosperous state through the subordination of the *preservation* of the state to the sovereign, but leaving its economic fortunes up to “the natural processes inherent in society and the economy” (30). In this

configuration of “state,” “[i]ndividuals must no longer be subject to minute disciplinary regulation, but insofar as they formed a population with its own natural processes, such as mortality and fertility, they must be managed through biopolitical technologies.” Terror thus functions an effective tool of state self-preservation, or more specifically: the preservation of the ontological conditions of the *raison économique* upon which the state is itself dependent. “The function of the police,” Erlenbusch-Anderson continues, “was henceforth limited to the repression of all forms of disorder, delinquency, and illegality that threatened the freedom required for the maximization of state forces” themselves acting in the interest of the economic “enrichment and well-being of the state” (31). It is at this juncture, in other words, that the police becomes *the police*—an incarnation, as Walter Benjamin might have put it, of the threat of violence codified as law-giving and law-preserving in the interest of defining the relationship between the state and a population.

Given the star role played by *raison économique* in the transformation of *raison d’Etat*, it might be tempting to wonder why Erlenbusch-Anderson doesn’t appeal more explicitly to Karl Marx whose analysis of the rise of the eighteenth century’s Industrial Revolution instantiates *raison économique* as capitalism. Although Marx describes these forces somewhat differently in his analysis of historical materialism, the forces of production are nonetheless taken to mirror “the natural processes inherent in society and the economy” as well as fundamentally transform the relationship of the population to the state. Just as Foucault’s “genealogical method serves the purpose of demonstrating that new practices rely for support on older practices out of which they develop,” that, fueled in part by technological innovation, *raison économique* emerges out of and transforms earlier forms of *raison d’Etat*, so too Marx argues that the emergence of capitalism from Medieval Feudalism is fueled by developments in agricultural production that give rise to new forms of commodity exchange that, in turn, give rise to industrial-scale forms of production. Marx is also keenly aware of the critical role played by technological invention such as the cotton gin and the innovation that makes possible the division of labor. Similarly, one of the key drivers in Erlenbusch-Anderson’s appeal to Foucault is *economic* revolution within the province of state power facilitated by technological advance. Indeed, it’s the self-preservation of the state, argues Erlenbusch-Anderson, that necessitates the implementation of terror as policy to insure that the relationship between the state and its burgeoning capitalist economy advantages a very specific configuration of power—one

balanced between an older European world grounded in hereditary rule and a new world whose new practices and institutions both defy and consolidate *raison d'Etat*.

So why doesn't Erlenbusch-Anderson bring the relationship between economy and the state into greater relief? Perhaps appealing to Marx to this end? Because while "terrorism" is certainly imbricated in the relationship between the economy and the apparatus of the state, this is only one instantiation of the relationship between the state and its population. *Raison economique* is neither the only instantiation nor is it any more stable a signifier of how the state deploys or *responds to* terrorism than are other factors bearing on the *dispositifs* that define particular configurations of terror. *Raison economique* means something different during the Reign of Terror than it does, for example, in the case of the emergence of a self-conscious proletariat in revolutionary Russia; we thus cannot take "capitalism" to be its synonym; we aren't entitled to understand the terrorism deployed by the state exclusively (or even primarily) in economic terms; and we'd do a disservice to the history, for example, of the struggle between the emergent bourgeoisie and the proletariat if we sought to reduce it to terms that ignored critical factors of national and/or cultural identity, technological invention, or the identity-affective effects of previous revolution. Still, I dwell on this question because to the extent that an "economic" interpretation of Erlenbusch-Anderson's objectives is misguided, it is so in a way that substantially helps to clarify just what is so valuable and original about this book. *Genealogies of Terrorism* is neither a Marxist nor a Foucauldian account of economy, the formation of identity, or the state; it's an excavation of a conceptual terrain whose soil may be composed of the complex relationship of the state to the profound cultural transformation evolving between the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution's advent of mass production. But it's *about* how terrorism—deployed through a range of *dispositifs* to ends at once preservative and transformative of the state—becomes a critical governing strategy for maintaining not merely sovereignty, but *relevance*—not merely power, but *advantage* for the state (36–37). If, in other words, *Genealogies of Terrorism* is a genealogy of *terrorism*, it's because it shows us how specific configurations of power, inflected by *raison economique*, are institutionalized through violence, or through the ever-present threat of violence represented as law-preserving *even* under conditions of extreme contest—indeed, paradigmatically under such conditions.

Erlenbusch-Anderson persuasively argues that terrorism is not merely an activity but, at some junctures, an *identity* (50), at others a "magic word" deployed to "the

persecution of political opponents” (51), and at still others (appealing to Hannah Arendt) a means for distinguishing between “totalitarian regimes and their authoritarian cousins” (53). She argues that “while the *dispositif* of terrorism served bourgeois interests and the establishment of liberal rule in the French Revolution, its Russian counterpart was a tactic of class war” (55). She calls this *strategic terrorism* “waged by the proletariat in its effort to secure a communist state.” Although this *dispositif* forms crucial sinew in the ligature of capitalism, it also enables Erlenbusch-Anderson to offer a more acute historical account of the relationship between the emergent self-recognition of the proletariat and a Russia whose own fraught relationship to its nobility, and to “[t]he notion of race as heritage” made the proletariat as a *class* possible in agrarian Russia and “justified” the use of terrorism as a form of collective self-defense against waning tsarist, but rising bureaucratic, rule (71, 82–83). As a means for overcoming a state conceived as “an organized use of force of one class [the bourgeoisie] against another [the proletariat],” Vladimir Lenin, argues Erlenbusch-Anderson, personifies a renewed meaning to strategic (and charismatic) terrorism deployed as a legitimate weapon, underscoring “the necessity of actual violence against the class enemy” (85).

As valuable as are Erlenbusch-Anderson’s insights concerning the many meanings of terrorism during the Reign of Terror and the Russian Revolution, it’s her contribution to our understanding of the *raison économique* of colonialism that really makes this book shine (chapter four). This story is complex, too complex to do justice to it here. But suffice a few observations to reorient our roadmap as Erlenbusch-Anderson approaches the present day. First, while she doesn’t necessarily use this language, the account Erlenbusch-Anderson provides of France’s fraught history of colonization, particularly in Algeria, is distinctively *dialectical*: it weaves together elements of both the terrorism enacted by the state during the Reign of Terror and the evolution of terrorist tactics recruited to acts of resistance. The “who” and “how” of power have, of course, shifted, but the focus remains the relationship between the state and its populations even though the state now seeks to strengthen its international status through external economic and military conquest (94–106) and the appropriation of terrorism as a weapon in the resistance of the proletariat to the bourgeoisie is about to be dramatically expanded to the self-defense of colonized populations (121–22). Although we immediately recognize these varieties of terrorism in virtue of their previous incarnations, the contexts in which they’re deployed—the colonization, subjugation, and institutionalized submission of a racialized,

geographically displaced “other”—transforms the meaning of “terrorism” in fundamental ways, indeed, in ways we recognize as distinctly modern. This “new” kind of terrorism, argues Erlenbusch-Anderson, is identified by French military officers during, for example, the Battle of Algiers as a variety of war. She refers to its *dispositif* as polemic:

An entire system of relations was thus established around terrorism that imposed mechanisms of repression but also produced new bodies of knowledge, new clusters of power relations, and new modes of being a subject. A new concept of polemic terrorism as the systematic use of indiscriminate violence against innocents as a tactic of warfare used by revolutionary forces to create disorder stipulated specific rules according to which attributions of terrorism to particular acts of violence became possible and meaningful...Most important, it allowed for a clear distinction among terrorists, innocent civilians, and agents of counter-terrorism. (121)

We can see the foreshadowing of Al Qaida or Islamic State tactics, for example, in Erlenbusch-Anderson’s reference to “the systematic use of indiscriminate violence against innocents.” But what’s critical to understanding why the confrontation of French colonialism to a “new mode of being a subject,” namely, being a *revolutionary* subject, gives rise to a hard-fought resistance is key to the history of “terrorism” is that:

- Terrorism describes the deliberate managerial strategy of French colonialism (121–22). Constructed as a form of “counterterrorism,” the colonization of Algeria was originally undertaken as a means by which France could rid itself of its “indigent population” (121).
- The targeting of innocents “to create disorder” describes a very particular relationship of the state to *colonized* but also *revolutionary* subjects, a relationship “justified” through a racialized geographically displaced form of “othering” (121–22).
- These same subjects (the FLN) organize and turn to “terrorism” to describe the adaptive subversion of the use of indiscriminate violence as a weapon against the French.

Appealing to Franz Fanon, Erlenbusch-Anderson notes that what the French called “terrorism was, in fact, the last resort of the colonized people in the face of terror inflicted by the colonizer” (124), and that what allowed revolutionary insurgents to “move freely

between native and European spaces” was the effective exploitation “of the very actions, traditions, and forms of subjectivity that the colonial state regarded as a sign of native submission to colonial power” (126). Indeed, it’s tempting to wonder whether these same expectations of submission don’t remain with us in the way, for example, some in the recent incarnation of the Republican Party attempt to discipline a female Muslim Democratic representative by weaponizing her ostensibly “anti-Semitic” comments, thus shoring up their own legitimacy as the friend of another colonial power and broadcasting a clear and terrorizing message to the “other” within and without their own direct spheres of power. The point, of course, is that however dialectical this complex history, we can see the outline of our own fraught relationship with “terrorism,” both as state-preserving and as a weapon appropriated and altered by those whose alternatives are perceived (often rightly) to be exhausted.

In her chapter five, “Reimagining Terrorism at the End of History,” Erlenbusch-Anderson explores what she calls synthetic terrorism (135). Her aim is to “complicate this account of the continuities between past and present” with a specific focus on post-9/11 U.S. counterterrorism (135). Since so much of *Genealogies of Terrorism* reads like a good murder mystery, however, I am disinclined to give away the finale. Still, I can suggest something of the dark “end of history” direction Erlenbusch-Anderson is headed. As its name suggests, “synthetic” terrorism incorporates in differing ways to differing objectives each of “terrorism’s” previous incarnations (135–36). It can apply to “tyrants and dictators, failed or rogue states, belief systems, racial identities, criminal actions, tactics of warfare, and types of war” (135). The end of history, in other words, is something of a free for all but, Erlenbusch-Anderson insists, this does not mean that synthetic terrorism is the tidy “result of a continuous historical development” (135). Clearly not; this end is far messier and far from ending. “By uniting a variety of threats in a single frame,” synthetic terrorism, makes possible a multiplicity of mechanisms of social defense against threats including, but not limited to, violent aggression, immigration, limitations on free trade, oil depletion, violation of human rights, drug trafficking, and new disease. However, 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. (136)

It seems ironic in the extreme that the object which must be defended against terrorist threats is humanity particularly, as Erlenbusch-Anderson lays out in original and ominous detail, given that this object is now thoroughly commodified via the “universality of capitalism and liberal democracy” as well as subsumed through the occasion provided by the post-9/11 world “to implement a legal paradigm of executive prerogative and reshape the future according to the United States’ vision” (137–38). I’d venture to say that this vision—a nightmare in fact for many—has become a fully flowered fascism under the regime of Donald Trump.

Such observations, however, seem consistent with Erlenbusch-Anderson’s argument that “[s]ynthetic terrorism is thus properly understood as an effect rather than a cause of particular political interests whose realization depends on new techniques of power” (151). She goes on to list the many and disheartening ways in which these “techniques of power” come to be “justified,” for example, by designating some members of humanity as the enemy of civilization. Indeed, it’s hard not to read Alabama’s 2019 virtual blanket ban on abortion, even in cases of rape and incest, as just such a “justification,” especially given the explicit appeal to heart-beat detecting technology deployed to this act of terror against women. Just as women are cast in the “pro-life” narrative as callous killers of their unborn, so to other “others” are routinely cast according to “a racially and sexually inflected notion of Islam and the Muslim-looking person, [and] other elements of the concept [of the terrorist] can be brought to the fore to identify perpetrators as terrorists even when they fail to conform to the Muslim-looking construct” (153). One thinks here of the FOX pundit Jeanine Pirro’s insistence that Representative Ilhan Omar cannot be a real American because she wears the hijab. That creeping U.S. brand of fascism reflects “the interests and strategies of a white supremacist political structure that treats white American or “domestic” terrorists as dangerous individuals who, nevertheless, are afforded basic legal rights,” but treats non-whites “as a collective threat to the social body” is, argues Erlenbusch-Anderson, precisely how the history of terrorism has come to be interpolated into the body (and bodies) of “humanity” (157), a theme she explores in her last chapter, “Toward a Critical Theory of Terrorism.”

Acknowledging that Erlenbusch-Anderson intends for these last arguments and observations to be aimed at setting the rudder for future work, and that she is wholly on solid ground wondering whether genealogical accounts like hers’ can tell us how things ought to be (163), I found this last chapter a fine, but somewhat unnecessary, summary and

a somewhat less than fully fleshed out philosophical speculation. But I'll leave it to the reader to make that call. Her primary endeavor to show that "terrorism is indeed a functional requirement of relations of power that aim to produce a particular normative vision of the social body" is well-evidenced and well-argued, so I'm not entirely sure why canvassing potential rivals towards a better understanding of terrorism are all that important here. But this is a very minor quibble about a very worthwhile, genuinely gripping book—no small achievement for non-fiction that deploys postmodern thinkers like Foucault to hold a mirror up to a humanity that's tilting towards a future yet more violent than its past. In closing, let me add one factor to the toxic cornucopia that bears on the *dispositifs* Erlenbusch-Anderson lays out: climate change. How it will inform the relationship between governments and populations remains to be seen, but if past is prologue, we already have a good idea of the role terror as well as terrorism is likely to play.