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EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES ON
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



TRACING THE
DISCOURSES
OF TERRORISM

Identity, Genealogy and State

ONDREJ DITRYCH



Tracing the Discourses of Terrorism

Central and Eastern European Perspectives on International Relations Series

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Tracing the Discourses of Terrorism

Identity, Genealogy and State

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To my parents

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Introduction

There is no terrorism beyond the discourse of terrorism. This discourse has its conditions and rules. It is the critique of these conditions and rules that this book is concerned about.

Thousands of scholarly articles and books have been published during the decade that separates us from the catastrophic events of 9/11 on the subject of terrorism. This book will tread a different path to most of them. It is a historical study of how states have articulated statements about terrorism since the 1930s, under what conditions these statements have been articulated, and what has been the effect of the discourses made up of these statements on global politics, including the constitutive role of the present discourse on what will be posited to be a *dispositif* of global terrorism (cf. Foucault 1980 [1977]).

The states' discourse of terrorism, like any discourse, carries tremendous power. It is the power to constitute the subject (terrorist) and its complementary Selves in difference from the Other, thus managing the political order (which is in continuous need of such management). As a constitutive element of the global terrorism *dispositif* it therefore strategically orients a broad set of practices – inflicting punishment, disciplining, surveilling – that bear on states, populations and individual human bodies. Being a critical project, this book does not create a new theory of the terrorist. Instead, it historicizes terrorism, bringing to fore the invisible practices of power and knowledge which constitute it, and challenging its dominant reifications. It parts with the dominant knowledges of terrorism (in terrorism studies, jurisprudence and so on), which tend

to be insensitized – and, what is worse, insensitizing – to the false realism of the object, and to the practices of power that make this realism possible and therefore (re)produce a societal narcosis toward governmental practice.

Indeed, it has become commonplace to start scientific treatises on terrorism with a lament that the object is notoriously difficult to define, not least because of its politically contested nature. This, however, has arguably been something of a *ritual*, having no practical consequences for the subsequent inquiry. In fact, attempts at objective definitions and positive statements about terrorism following such exasperations have not been in short supply. The field's reflexivity has been more or less simulated. It stands subservient to power because it reinforces the sense of unity of terrorism, making it possible to label as 'terrorist(s)' a wide array of actors with diverse political agendas in different places around the world which employ a variety of tactics of political violence to challenge the spatiotemporally specific *status quo*; and it does so by advertising and legitimizing concepts such as the 'new terrorism', with its unprecedented lethality and its capacity to undermine 'our way of life', and such concepts are marked by a fundamental irrationality (often sustained by Orientalist notions) and a potential omnipresence. Through these practices, the field of terrorism science is part and parcel of the global terrorism dispositif: it is dependent, in articulating statements about terrorism, on the claims issued by governments, which are unfalsifiable by standard methods of scientific inquiry to which it claims to adhere, while lending its scientific posture (with the corresponding entitlement to the production of trusted knowledge) to the purpose of authorizing them.

Much the same can be said about standard and textbook histories of terrorism. Gallons of ink have been spilled writing them. Yet, ironically, these histories of terrorism do little to historicize the presentist notions of terrorism since they tend to be characterized by a backward projection of the present concept of terrorism (often poorly stabilized) to the past, thus endowing it with a certain essential and eternal substance – effectively allowing for a mutability of only the accidental properties. If there is any confusion as to what terrorism is, it is only because of the politicization of the concept, or its abuse by the media, while a historical study *sine ira et studio* can elucidate its proper character. In their relentless search in the

historical fabric for anything matching such a 'terrorism', to which any historical sense of transience and contingency falls victim, and in drawing laws and lessons learned based on historical episodes featuring bedfellows as strange as Zealots, Hashasheen, Taborites, Anabaptists, Thugs, the Inquisition, French revolutionaries, Anarchists, various national liberation movements and Al-Qaeda, these histories naturalize, rather than historicize. Ironically, projecting terrorism backwards, possibly as far as antiquity or even the dawn of recorded history and all civilization, with the advent of modern terrorism commonly dated to the late eighteenth century and associated with the French Revolution, and finding eerie 'similarities' across this wide historical landscape (for illustrative examples, see Laqueur 2001 [1977]; Rapoport 1984; 2005; Martin 2003; Gray 2003; Hoffman 2006; Chaliand and Blin 2006; or Law 2009) does not prevent the authors of these histories from claiming that the present times are exceptional and legitimizing the politics of extraordinary responses. The contemporary terrorist wants 'total war... unfettered by laws, norms, regulations and conventions' (Laqueur 2004: 60), and terrorism today 'has nothing to negotiate' and therefore cannot be justified as a last resort (Chaliand and Blin 2006: 10). The consequence is clear: 'So massive and consequential a terrorist onslaught [as the attacks of 9/11] required nothing less than an equally comprehensive and far-reaching response' (Hoffman 2006: 19).

The history of terrorism in this book is different. It is a critical history: 'a history of the present', as this concept was understood by Friedrich Nietzsche and later Michel Foucault. It is a genealogical critique of the concept of terrorism.

Such a history does not look for the essential origin (*Ursprung*) or the linear evolution of terrorism up to its present state. In fact, it starts from the assumption that there is no such origin. Focusing on how states articulated statements about terrorism across time and tracing both continuities and discontinuities in their discourses in three discursive series, this study instead points out the contingency of the understanding of terrorism contained in them, while showing how each time terrorism was rendered as an exceptional threat that warranted extraordinary responses. Drawing on the theoretical reflection of the international order by Carl Schmitt – yet aware of its particular context and ideological limitations – it also proposes some basic conditions of the emergence

and evolution of the states' discourse of terrorism from the 1930s to the present day.

In the first chapter ('Concerning Method'), methodological assumptions are laid down and the method of analysis, combining Foucault's structural analytic and genealogical power analysis, is introduced. In the second chapter ('Overture: One World, Many Terrorisms'), to prepare the ground for the claim that when terrorism emerged in the states' discourse in the 1930s, the unity of the concept (comprising assassinations of protected persons and mass explosions) was purely accidental, the multiplicity of the meanings of the term as it had been used previously is outlined. Then follows the exposition of this discourse. In 'Emergence/y (1930s)', it is suggested that the discourse's initial emergence was conditioned on the crisis of the international order, and that it can be interpreted as a strategic response to the emergency intended to preserve the (fictional) community of states by means of a collective normalizing action. International terrorism in this period was constructed as a clandestine action, a conspiracy between the terrorist and a (revisionist) state united in their struggle to overturn the *status quo* – and therefore, the terrorism was effectively a means of the state's policy. Ironically, the discursive practices imposing discipline on the international community and the envisioned counter-terrorism regime that were meant to contain the crisis were based on the same universalizing principles that made the crisis possible in the first place. In the next chapter, 'Division (1970s)', it is argued that the (re)emergence of the discourse of terrorism in the early 1970s was yet another strategic attempt to prevent the continuing erosion of the *status quo* as political struggles failed to remain contained to their territorial spaces. However, this time, in contrast to the 1930s, because of the restitution of the political under the provisional *nomos*, a battle over the discourse followed between the first world and the autonomizing third world, resulting in a duality of discursive orders. (Not silent, the second world states enunciated statements according to rules borrowed from both discursive orders, but curiously more of these statements were from the first world's order, which suggests their essentially conservative position regarding the new provisional *nomos*.) In this battle, claims about the limits of (civilized) violence based on the *status quo* preference were countered by a discourse of underlying causes pointing to the systemic violence

embedded in the international political and economic order, which either amounted to terrorism as such, or at least was its most important cause. In the latter case, terrorism could even be considered legitimate by states – the former colonies which themselves had only recently come to existence, often following campaigns of organized political violence.

The terrorist subject has been constructed in the discourse in a multitude of statements constituting relational patterns of identity and difference. Three such patterns ('basic discourses') are identified in the states' discourse of terrorism in the 1930s: *civilization/barbarism*, *order/chaos*, and *political enemy/hostis humani generis*. In the discursive practices organized around those basic discourses, the terrorist was constructed as a depoliticized and dehumanized enemy of the order, who undermined the peace and reason guaranteed by states and their servants (bureaucrats, soldiers) and whose barbarism was the consequence of his unfettered use of violence. In the 1970s, in both discursive orders, the pattern of *civilization/barbarism* was preserved as much as the discourse of *order/chaos* among the first world states. In contrast, new basic discourses of *innocence/harm* (both discursive orders) and *regime/people* (the third world order) can be observed as emerging in this period.

Drawing on the findings of in the historical chapters, in the following chapter, 'Enclosure (2000s)', the 'history of the present' of the concepts and categories used in the contemporary discourse of terrorism is concluded. Despite an ongoing absence of a legal consensus on the definition of terrorism, a single hegemonic order can now be observed in the states' discourse of terrorism, conditioned on the demise of the spatial order determining the modalities in which violence is distributed in world politics. Characteristic of this enclosure has been an excess in the construction of the reality of global terrorism, projected into the extreme dehumanization and depoliticization of the terrorist in the familiar basic discourses of *order/chaos* and *civilization/barbarism*. The result has been a sanctioning of extraordinary responses in a new war without rules (or at the very least suspending those rules), which more than a continuation of politics by other means is turned into social pest control and imagined as a surgical intervention that removes the cancer cells of terrorism, and also a legitimization of measures representing different Foucauldian modes of government – discipline and surveillance, or security and

biopolitics. In a number of ways this discourse betrays its continuity with the discourse of the 1930s. Terrorism once again emerges as a phenomenon whose unity is accidentally constituted, and it is presented as a threat of unprecedented proportions which requires a universalist action by the international community. Moreover, as in the 1930s, a counter-construction of the civilized and ordered mankind is juxtaposed with this global threat, disciplining both the 'inside' of particular political orders and the 'outside' of the international order. Statements once articulated under the rules of third world's discursive order (for example, statements about state terrorism) are silenced or marginalized, and the discourse of root causes – once a discourse of resistance – is depoliticized and transformed into a moderate liberal discourse of development as a means of structural conflict prevention.

Having presented the analysis of the three discursive series, the focus is then shifted to the relations of power and knowledge. The chapter 'Power and Knowledge' thus inquires into the constitutive relationship between the discourse of power in the three series inquired into before and the knowledge as discursive formations in which truth claims relevant for this discourse have been formulated. At the most general level, the basic discourses of *order/chaos* (with the irrationality of the terrorist stressed particularly in the latter two series) and *civilization/barbarism* and the discourse of (mental) disease will be related to the practices of the modern constitution of sovereign reason, which recognizes itself by excluding madness and chaos from the realm of 'civilization' and domesticates men in particular territorial sovereignties, where autonomy of reason can be established (cf. Ashley 1984). As we descend further below, interdisciplinary links to law, crime science and terrorism studies (from the 1970s on) will merit particular attention. Regarding the first link, of particular interest will be the legal positivism paradigm defined by universality, progressivism, rationalism and liberalism and conditioning the 'progressive codification of international law', including criminal law and international humanitarian law – which is instrumental in the subjectification of the victim of the terrorist violence as a 'civilian' and thus sows the seeds for the later rendering of (counter)terrorism as war. Later legal theoretical claims that a state of nature obtains in the international order or that international law

is 'shattering' because of terrorism, which reinforces the notion of global chaos and legitimizes extreme and violent responses, will also be critically examined. Regarding the second link, the subjectification of a new criminal as a mobile professional in the conditions of increased transnational circulation stands out as constitutive for the subjectification of the terrorist in the discourse among states. Finally, the emergence in the 1970s of the field of terrorism studies and its inflation following 9/11 (with the extension of the production of truth claims to the burgeoning industry of think-tanks or consultancies) are significant events in their own right. More importantly, however, by and large the field continues to be dominated by a *Polizeiwissenschaft* ethos, making it ever ready to enter the services of power or lend legitimacy to government policies.

Instead of engaging in such *Polizeiwissenschaft*, this book aims to expand the horizons of 'thinking space' (cf. George 1989) concerning legitimate violence in global politics and to partake in (the continuous process of) liberation from the straitjacket that this machine imposes on our political possibilities. Its contribution to this critical project lies first in the genealogical perspective employed in regard to extensive archives of empirical material – a fruitful but so far underdeveloped venue of critical inquiry. Second, it devises a research design, making use of Foucault's toolbox to facilitate a transparent and intellectually disciplined poststructuralist discourse analysis that may serve as a source of future inspiration. The book does not aspire to contribute to 'identifiable scholarly literature by increasing collective ability to construct verified scientific explanations of some aspect of the world' (King, Keohane and Verba 1994: 15). Assuming that causal science is but a particular discourse of knowledge, the privilege of which can be asserted only under certain historical and political conditions (cf. Foucault 1970), I believe that the kind of analysis presented in the book may meet the relevance criteria of even mainstream international relations insofar as it 'illuminates important issues in world politics' (Keohane 1988: 382), even if it does so on its own terms.

This book is primarily interested in the discursive structures that ultimately make certain actions, including violent actions, possible and others prohibited. Therefore, not much of the human suffering

actually caused by such violent actions finds its way into its pages. It is never lost from sight, nonetheless. The physical violence, whoever commits it, and the human suffering which inevitably surrounds it are most real. It is with this violence always in mind that the conditions of discourses that form the horizons of our thought about it are interrogated here.

1

Concerning Method

This chapter introduces the methodological framework and the research design for the genealogical analysis that follows. Its ambition is to lay down a method that draws substantially on Foucault's 'toolbox'.¹ As Foucault had a rather notorious aversion to universals (cf. Foucault 1991), the design aims to be true, not to his methodical prescriptions, but rather to the ontological, epistemological and theoretical assumptions of his historical analyses and their normative underpinnings. The reader who is interested more in the empirical or theoretical arguments and less in the mechanics of how these arguments have been arrived at may safely skip this chapter. For those interested in the conduct of poststructuralist inquiry, it may perchance serve as a source of inspiration.

Needless to say, this book is not the first genealogy conceived in the field of international relations. A very selective list of previous genealogical studies includes James Der Derian's genealogies of diplomacy (Der Derian 1987) and terror and the national security culture (Der Derian 1992)²; David Campbell's genealogy of America's foreign policy (Campbell 1998); Jens Bartelson's genealogy of sovereignty (Bartelson 1995); Richard Price's genealogy of the chemical weapons taboo (Price 1997); Patrick T. Jackson's genealogy of the civilizational discourses of Germany after WWII (Jackson 2006); Richard Jackson's genealogy of the war on terrorism (Jackson 2006)³; Lene Hansen's genealogy of the Western discourses of the Balkans (Hansen 2006); and field genealogies such as Steve Smith's genealogy of International Relations (Smith 1995) and Oliver Richmond's genealogy

of peace and conflict theory (Richmond 2010).⁴ All these genealogies are products of the broader reflectivist movement, some strands of which have been inspired by poststructuralism. As a consequence, they refuse to conform to Keohane's condition for the recognition of reflectivists within the discipline, namely that they articulate and test causal hypotheses about a positively observable reality (Keohane 1988).⁵ The fundamental question asked by scholars inspired by poststructuralism is, how does order (*logos*) emerge from disorder (*chaos*) – in other words, how are geographical, conceptual and epistemological boundaries established, and identities constituted in the play of identity and difference. Their aim is to reverse a 'theoretical enclosure' imposed on the international political imagination (cf. Der Derian 1992: 7). The philosophical foundation for these inquiries is the importance of the word (discourse).

Following in the tradition of the linguistic turn in philosophy that attributed to language supreme importance in making sense of the world,⁶ poststructuralism was initially articulated in resistance to linguistic structuralism, which conceived of language (*langue*) as a system of signs whose meaning is established through differences and which enables speakers to issue mutually understandable utterances (*paroles*). Language, in this understanding, is the law of speech that organizes the world which we inhabit and in which things have no meaning based on their essence, but only in relation to signs existing at the level of *langue*. Such a language is not a product of the acting individual will; it is a structure (Saussure 1983). Poststructuralists like Foucault or Derrida (1978) draw on these assumptions, but they see language not as a closed but rather as an open and constantly moving structure of signs which continues to generate meaning through patterns of (privileged) identity and (devalued) difference, and focus on the power relationships underpinning these patterns. Gone is the inevitable and stable representational relationship between the significant and the signified. The word ceases to represent objects in the real world; instead, it constitutes them. Discourse is ontologically significant, (violently) endowing subjects, objects and material structures with meaning. It does not create things, but it does 'turn them to shapes and gives to airy nothing/a local habitation and a name'.⁷ There rests the constitutive power of discourse, and it is why it makes sense to study it.

Methodology, or the frame

The world according to Foucault: Discourse, power, genealogy

Discourse

Discourse, according to Foucault, is neither a conversation, nor a discussion of something (for example, the method). It is a formidable structure of meaning, a regular but unstable series of statements. A statement, the 'atom of discourse', must be distinguished from a (logical) proposition, a (grammatical) sentence or an (Austinian) speech act, as Foucault argues in the *Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault 1997: 90). This is not to say that a statement cannot include sentences, that it cannot make sense, and that speech acts are not in fact series of properly arranged statements.⁸ It is to say that propositions, sentences and speech acts are categories at different levels of analysis. A statement must also be distinguished from a sign. The sign only exists 'in the oblique form of [a] description that would take [it] as its object' (ibid., 95). If there were no statements ('descriptions'), there could be no language. Yet the sign is not simply contained in the statement. It is imposed on it and controls it, since a sign is a part of the system for the construction of possible statements which is called language (*langue*). So Foucault's statement, although it is always composed of an identifiable set of signs, exists at a very peculiar level: a level which is neither the level of the sign itself (that is, the abstract level of *langue*) nor the level of its material manifestation (such as a letter that is randomly typed on a typewriter and printed on a page).

Having made the distinction between statements and the other categories existing at separate levels of existence (propositions, sentences, speech acts and signs), Foucault finally arrives at the definition of a statement. A statement, according to Foucault, is 'a function of existence that properly belongs to signs and on the basis of which one may then decide, through analysis or intuition, whether or not they make sense, according to what rule they follow one another or are juxtaposed...' (Foucault 1997: 97). In other words, it is a modality of existence proper to signs and their series which allows them to be more than a mere sequence of marks, endows them with a 'repeatable materiality', and makes it possible for them to relate to the domains of objects (120). This is the statement's (*enouncement*) enunciative function, and it accounts for its character as an event.