

# Foucault Studies

© Samir Haddad

ISSN: 1832-5203

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22439/fs.v1i28.6069>

*Foucault Studies*, No. 28, 4-9, September 2020

---

SYMPOSIUM

## Examining Genealogy as Engaged Critique

SAMIR HADDAD

Fordham University, USA

Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson's *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire* is a rich text. Its analyses range across two centuries in the histories of terrorism at the same time as it makes an important contribution to methodological debates taking place among those working in Foucault's wake. While I very much appreciated and learned from the careful genealogical work that Erlenbusch-Anderson does in tracing the various meanings and functions that terrorism has had in France, Russia, Algeria, and the United States, I will restrict my remarks in this brief intervention to questions of method that the book raises, specifically regarding genealogy as a method and its use as a tool of critical intervention.

Towards the beginning of *Genealogies of Terrorism's* concluding chapter, Erlenbusch-Anderson very helpfully classifies recent scholarship on Foucault into three different kinds. First, there are the interpreters of Foucault, i.e., those scholars for whom Foucault's work is the object of their analysis. Such scholars have, in Erlenbusch-Anderson's words, "done much to advance our understanding of Foucault's place in contemporary philosophy, the development of his thought, the viability of his methodological innovations, and perceived tensions between different periods of his intellectual production and activist engagement."<sup>1</sup> Second, there are other scholars who take a Foucauldian concept, "like biopolitics, governmentality, or subjectivation,"<sup>2</sup> and use it to analyze a contemporary issue that Foucault himself may not have examined. Third, there are scholars who, rather than take up concepts from Foucault, use his methods or practices of inquiry, also to analyze issues or topics outside of Foucault's own purview. These scholars show us a different way of "staying truthful to what Foucault did by being users of his work rather than mere readers"<sup>3</sup>.

In terms of its relation to Foucault, *Genealogies of Terrorism* does in fact mobilize certain Foucauldian concepts to advance its claims ("biopolitics" and the "dispositif" are two

---

<sup>1</sup> Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson, *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire* (2018), 165.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 166.

concepts that play an important role in the book's arguments), but it is predominantly a version of the third kind of scholarship, for it takes its lead and inspiration from Foucault's method of genealogy in order to analyze a topic that Foucault never himself engaged at length. This to my mind is one of the book's great strengths – free of the limitations of having to remain too close to Foucault's oeuvre, Erlenbusch-Anderson is able to do better justice to the specific histories of terrorism that she examines. In particular, the classification of different kinds of terrorism – systematic, doxastic, charismatic, identarian, strategic, criminal, polemic, and synthetic – and the complexity of the analyses that read these different types in different moments of history, is something that would never arise in a scholarly work on Foucault, nor even a scholarly work simply mobilizing Foucauldian concepts. This freedom vis-à-vis the Foucauldian text can itself serve as an inspiration for other scholars, reminding us of what is possible if we resist the temptation of excessive fidelity to the thinkers we work on and with.

Also in the discussion of method at the end of the text, Erlenbusch-Anderson raises the ever-vexing question of normativity's relation to the genealogical approach. She summarizes two recent and powerful attempts to address this question, namely, Amy Allen's synthesis of insights from both Foucault and Habermas to propose a "principled form of contextualism"<sup>4</sup> that has a place for transcending ideals without ever letting them hold full sway, and Colin Koopman's division of sources (genealogical and pragmatic) into two distinct methodological tasks – one which problematizes in order to diagnose, and the other which reconstructs in order to posit an alternative. In contrast to both of these approaches, about which she has certain worries even as she admires them, Erlenbusch-Anderson proposes an alternative understanding of *genealogy as engaged critique* (one of the subheadings in the final chapter),<sup>5</sup> in which norms can be excavated "from the practices of those who are fighting"<sup>6</sup> and genealogical theory itself is understood as a practice. It is here that genealogical theory can be a tool for resistance, precisely as a practice that reveals and problematizes the causal multiplicity at work in all complex phenomena, uncovering multiple sites of resistance in any dispositif analyzed. In this way, for Erlenbusch-Anderson, genealogy has a diagnostic function which is at the same time "tied to a reconstructive project in which theory serves as a relay among a plurality of concrete practices of resistance and transformation."<sup>7</sup> I take Erlenbusch-Anderson thus to be proposing that, to some extent against Koopman as she has presented him (while clearly sympathetic to Koopman's approach), the reconstructive project giving rise to norms of action is not separate from genealogical inquiry, but is part and parcel of it, and that this can take place without having to go the Habermasian route through the transcendental she sees Allen endorsing.

I have no desire to take sides here on this debate between Allen, Koopman, and Erlenbusch-Anderson. But I am very interested in this understanding of genealogy as

---

<sup>4</sup> Amy Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves* (2008), 148, cited on Erlenbusch-Anderson, *Genealogies of Terrorism*, 176.

<sup>5</sup> Erlenbusch-Anderson, *Genealogies of Terrorism*, 179.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

engaged critique and the possibilities it holds for the excavation of norms and what we might call counter-norms. Crucial, it seems to me, is this idea of it being a relay between practices (“relay” being a term Erlenbusch-Anderson takes from Deleuze’s description of theory in his famous “Les intellectuels et le pouvoir” interview with Foucault).<sup>8</sup> It would be in bringing different practices into contact as a relay point, and in sending practices into each other as relay points do, that genealogy can be more than a diagnosis and embrace its potential as a transformative practice engaged in resistance. And, to follow Deleuze’s description, when genealogy runs into “a wall”<sup>9</sup> as theories inevitably do, it is practices that can help us to break through.

Now, even as this vision of genealogy appears at the very end of *Genealogies of Terrorism*, and so in many ways belongs to future work, it is also available to us as readers to fold back and apply as a standard by which to judge the genealogical analysis that the book carries out. So, how, according to this standard of being a relay between practices, do the genealogies in *Genealogies of Terrorism* measure up? To some extent I think the book does an excellent job of acting as such a relay, and to some extent I think it, and we as readers acting in its wake, could do better. I say this not to advance a major criticism of this work but in the spirit of taking up Erlenbusch-Anderson’s call to pursue genealogical inquiry, both regarding the specific topic of terrorism as well as in other domains that the book does not address and for which we could use it as a methodological guide.

Let me begin with the positive. The practices between which *Genealogies of Terrorism* does an excellent job of acting as a relay are certain discursive practices of naming and describing terrorism. As I have already mentioned, in her investigations, Erlenbusch-Anderson generates a multiplicity of different kinds of terrorism as they appear at different historical moments and in different political and social contexts, and the genealogical dimension of her work arises in part in the very action of relaying that her analysis performs. We thus see how, for example, in the context of the French Revolution, “terrorism was understood in at least four ways: (1) as the rule of a particular person, Robespierre, or *charismatic terrorism*; (2) as a system of government, or *systematic terrorism*; (3) as a political philosophy, or *doxastic terrorism*; and (4) as a political identity to be cultivated, or *identarian terrorism*.”<sup>10</sup> Further, Erlenbusch-Anderson demonstrates how elements of these different understandings get carried forward in history into the Russian Revolution and the Algerian War of Independence, at the same time as new understandings arise in these new contexts (*strategic terrorism*, *polemic terrorism*, and *criminal terrorism*), and into the story she tells that finally culminates in the notion of *synthetic terrorism*, which she argues best characterizes the context of the American imperial politics from the 1980s to today. In this way, *Genealogies of Terrorism* serves precisely as a relay point between all of the discursive practices of writing out of which these understandings of terrorism arise, and it is in reading this scholarly work that we get to see all of these understandings together, conjoined and related. This relaying occurs

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 233, fn. 61.

<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, “Les intellectuels et le pouvoir” (2001), 1175.

<sup>10</sup> Erlenbusch-Anderson, *Genealogies of Terrorism*, 15.

*within* some of the contexts discussed, particularly in France, Russia, and Algeria, where multiple conceptions of terrorism are brought into relation with one another, and *across* these contexts, up to and including the present.

However, I would suggest that this genealogical inquiry falls short of generating possibilities of resistance to the extent that it might, for when it comes to analyze the present, the multiplicity at work earlier in the book starts to drop away. The problem is that even while the notion of *synthetic terrorism* contains in itself a multiplicity – it draws upon and reconfigures several of the other notions of terrorism previously articulated – it emerges only out of one discursive voice, namely, that of an “official” discourse of the United States. This is in contrast to the other historical periods analyzed in the book, in which several different and often opposing sources are used to generate multiple conceptions of what terrorism might mean at any one time. For example, Erlenbusch-Anderson reads the words of both Jacques Massu and Zohra Drif in the course of presenting the account of terrorism that arises in Algeria. But, in the present, a present described as being “at the end of history,” terrorism is understood almost exclusively from the position of like-minded souls, i.e., the neo-conservatives and their allies in various US Administrations. It is as if the discourse of the end of history, which Erlenbusch-Anderson seeks to diagnose, has somehow come to infect her approach, since only one paradigm – the neo-conservative one – is considered as a source of understandings of terrorism, and it is a paradigm presented as the culmination of all that has gone before. What is missing here are other discourses on what terrorism is – how, for example, do those labeled “terrorist” today understand their actions? How is the label used by other State actors – those with significant military and economic power, and those without – as they speak of the “global” phenomenon of terrorism today? In what ways do these different voices contest the meaning of the term emanating from US Administrations, thereby resignifying it in the process? It seems to me that if resistance is to emerge out of the genealogical inquiry, if norms or counter-norms are to be excavated, as I quoted before, “from the practices of those who are fighting,”<sup>11</sup> then the discursive practices of these same fighters – whatever side they are on – need to be examined.

It may well be that we are too close to the present to undertake this task. Certainly, the neo-conservatives and various U.S. Administrations have made it easier to examine their discourses on terrorism, for they have consistently provided us with publicly available documents like the ones Erlenbusch-Anderson analyzes. And perhaps it is the case that there are no other voices, or at least no other voices of non-state actors, who so clearly articulate a vision of what terrorism is today, and so there is seemingly nowhere else we could turn. But here we may do well to follow Kevin Olson’s lead, which Erlenbusch-Anderson endorses as exemplary of the third kind of engagement with Foucault she herself follows,<sup>12</sup> and examine not *discursive* practices, but other political practices, such as physical actions, behaviors, rituals, and objects, that are found among those with a stake in what terrorism might be. This is not at all to say that the discursive should be put aside

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 167-168.

– I share Erlenbusch-Anderson’s belief that naming can be a significant practice through which power is exercised – only that the discursive should not be our sole preoccupation.

In suggesting that we need to look harder in the present for discursive and non-discursive practices that could provide alternatives to the dominant view of terrorism currently holding sway, I am assuming that such an expanded inquiry is possible. This would be to say that the fact that Erlenbusch-Anderson or indeed anyone else has not yet done it is the sign of an empirical limitation that could be overcome. At the same time, however, I cannot help but wonder whether there is something deeper in play here about genealogy as a method. Is it by chance that genealogy, in Foucault and in others, always seems to comment on the present only through a rigorous interrogation of elements of the past? I am hard-pressed to think of genealogical inquiries focused fully on the present that are successful in serving as relay points between multiple practices and thus contribute to movements of resistance in their own right. Perhaps the direct objects of genealogical inquiries are in principle restricted to the past, insofar as the present is a time in which multiple practices are not yet available to be analyzed. This would in no way be a reason to abandon genealogical inquiry, for it would remain a powerful tool for intervening in the present. But it would be the case that if it is to be a practice of engaged critique as described by Erlenbusch-Anderson, this genealogical intervention is always to be carried out through a detour through the past.

In any case, these final remarks of mine are speculative at best, and testing their validity should be pursued by doing further genealogical work. With *Genealogies of Terrorism*, Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson has provided us with an excellent guide for doing such work.

## References

- Allen, Amy, *The Politics of Our Selves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.
- Erlenbusch-Anderson, Verena, *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.
- Foucault, Michel, “Les intellectuels et le pouvoir,” in *Dits et écrits I: 1954-1975*, edited by Daniel Defert and François Ewald, 1174-1183. Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 2001.

## Author info

Samir Haddad  
sahaddad@fordham.edu  
Associate Professor  
Department of Philosophy  
Fordham University  
USA

Samir Haddad is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Fordham University. He is the author of *Derrida and the Inheritance of Democracy* (Indiana UP, 2013), and co-editor, with Olivia Custer and Penelope Deutscher, of *Foucault/Derrida Fifty Years Later: The Futures of Genealogy, Deconstruction, and Politics* (Columbia UP, 2016).