



Destaque Semanal

Pan-Africanism

Pan-Africanism refers to the conviction that all Africans and descendants of Africans in the diaspora share a common history, common interests and, ultimately, a common fate which thus(...)

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Terrorism

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Terrorism, often identified as violence done for political reasons by sub-state actors against civilian and non-civilian targets to create widespread fear (Hoffman, 2006), is a complex concept as there are no universal criteria that enable its distinction through time and place from other forms and uses of political violence. While a common ground on what terrorism means would comb us through ideas such as planning, usage of direct violence towards civilians and/or symbolic figures/spaces in order to create a panic effect, the fact is that only a few of those who behave in that specific way are labelled and widely perceived as terrorists. This is because what is conceived as terrorism depends on historical contexts and mostly on positionalities, symbolic systems that frame the concept (namely epistemic communities), the geo-political space where terrorism occurs as well as the power relations that structure that space.

The centrality of the 'Westphalian narrative' in the disciplines of International Relations, Terrorism studies and International Law, that is the foundational idea of the primacy and legitimacy of sovereign states and of the state's legitimate monopoly of violence, means that anything that challenges said primacy, such as non-state violence, must be discounted, which results in an epistemic bias against non-state actors (Jackson, 2008). Likewise, violence carried out by the state, either against its own citizens, such as the juntas in South America in the 1970s and 1980s and currently in Myanmar/Burma, or against others, is arguably perceived as outside the scope of terrorism. Additionally, the labelling of a phenomenon as terrorist is also dependent on the very specific lieux occupied by the alleged terrorist and their potential victims in the global economy of space and powers. As such, the so-called victim of a terrorist act can be conceived as innocent or as a complicit according to the political stance of whom is giving this same definition (i.e. the victim of terrorism can be seen as a complicit of

State terrorism by terrorist militants). What was conceived as terrorism in times of slavery and colonialism, for example, is no longer considered as valid since the historical conditions that grounded that definition ceased to exist. In the slavist plantation terrorism was seen to identify slaves' rebellions. In post-slavery society, terrorism was seen to spring from where unchained former-slaves were assembling against white supremacy. In the colonial past, all insurgent armed formations that used to fight against and ultimately defeat imperial settings with a use of violence that included civilians among its targets were identified as terrorist. In colonial metropolises and postcolonial nations armed formations that challenge the State, its form of government and the ruling elites through an extended use of violence, were considered as terrorist.

Feminist scholarship on terrorism has underlined the disparate levels of attention paid to similar political violences globally, some by demonstrating that everyday violences in the West, namely violence against women, should be known as everyday terrorism, and, as such, not subjugated knowledge within Terrorism Studies, contradicting Western exceptionalism (Gentry, 2015); while others, in spite of recognizing the similarities between "domestic/everyday violence" and "war/terrorism", argue that the securitization of the intimate/everyday comes at a high price, bringing counterterrorism to the sphere of the intimate (Sjoberg, 2015), which is likely to result in the heightening of the "terror" of intimate violence.

The definition of terrorism is thus the result of a hegemonic distinction between subjects or entities (i.e. States) pertaining to the status quo and subsequently acknowledged by its legal frameworks and those subjects who want to violently and politically challenge it. As the Epistemologies of the South claim "Modern Law" is a cornerstone of today's modern "regimes of truth", such as the state. This is particularly elucidative concerning contemporary international law, whose dispositions claim that state armies and inter-state warfare are considered lawful, whereas other subjects or political entities who also hold political reasons to fight see their army and warfare considered unlawful and easily labelled as terrorists. NATO, a prominent regional organization which sets international standards concerning security and defence - defines terrorism as "The unlawful use or threatened use of force or violence against individuals or property in an attempt to coerce or intimidate governments or societies to achieve political, religious or ideological objectives" (2014). By using this definition, anything that is perceived and labelled as a threat to status quo societal values and interests is understood as terrorist and held responsible for the insecurity felt, gaining in Cohen words "a moral dimension". To do that the nature of the episode, person, condition or group "is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions" (1). Recent examples of these have gravitated around the representation of Muslim communities in the western media. In the post 9/11 world terrorism has frequently meant radical Islamist political violence (often times conflating with Islam altogether), rather than white supremacist violence.

After 9-11 terror has been defined by Judith Butler as a frame, that is the epistemological system that provides the intelligibility of life in a state of war. Here, the relation between terror and terrorism is one that transcends terrorism in terror, being terror a system of interpretation and practices that also belong to the ones said to fight against terrorism. In her thought, life is an ontology that cannot be apprehended outside that frame, being the "body to which this ontology refers [...] one that is always given over to others, to norms, to social and political organizations that have developed historically in order to maximize precariousness for some and minimize precariousness for others" (p. 2). As a consequence, in the global economy of signs where terror works as a frame, specific ontologies establish differential degrees of precariousness and killability of the subjects involved: victims of terrorism in some places in the so-called global North are interpreted and produce political and military effects which are different from the ones produced by other victims in other places in the so-called global South. These ontologies are deeply structured in imaginaries, knowledges, and practices informed by colonial archives (see the work of Louise Amoore, and Marieke De Goede).

The idea that a certain group of people can turn as a terrorist, that it is inherent to them to organize, at a certain point, a terrorist attack, means to de-historicize and de-politicize the reasons why certain subjects (usually not the one that are in a position of power whose terrorist actions are not labelled as such) do use terrorism as a political and military dispositive.

Besides the historical reasons of terrorism, there are also reasons related to a specific idea of society and war. For those who terrorism has a transcendent meaning – that of a just war against the oppressor – bombing civilians, if not suicide bombing, has a political, cultural and individual meaning (see Asad on suicide bombing) that is not

read as such (but as one of the most hideous crime) by human rights defenders (see the debate between Asad, Brown, Butler, and Mahmood).

Terrorism is said to be an instrument of both the radical left and the radical right. While condemned as such by the established powers, it has been sometimes used as a tool for liberation or democratization. As Stuart Hall skilful highlights - regardless of objective actions, whereas a specific group is labelled as terrorist or as freedom fighter is constitutive of reality as a particular group will be seen and perceived differently according to the label. Also, the wider public will validate distinct public policies to handle a specific group, mostly due to how they perceive it.

References and further readings:

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