

C. Heike Schotten

Queer Terror: Life, Death, and Desire in the Settler Colony

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Quote: “Ultimately, *Queer Terror* is an invigorating analysis of the biopolitical project of colonial settler sovereignty and its contemporary manifestation in the War on Terror.”

For those who may situate Jasbir Puar’s groundbreaking work, *Terrorist Assemblages* (Puar 2007/2017), as the go-to queer feminist reflection on the politics of terrorism, state power, and queer politics, you may need to read C. Heike Schotten’s *Queer Terror: Life, Death, and Desire in the Settler Colony*. This is not to say that Puar’s work is not significant (it is) or that it is old news (indeed, the recent tenth-anniversary edition reminds us of its relevance and pertinence). But Schotten offers a novel account of the politics of terrorism in relation to desire, state power, and queer politics. Situating a consideration of terrorism at the intersections of political theory, queer theory, settler colonial studies, and native studies, and through intriguing readings of Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben, Thomas Hobbes, Michel Foucault, and Lee Edelman, Schotten argues that, in a War on Terror world, terrorism “has little do with the material realities of either political violence or the actual events of September 11, 2001” (xii). Instead, she insists that “terror” is queerness, “terrorism” is improper desire that threatens the life of the settler state, and the War on Terror, in spite of the concretized origin story of 9/11, is actually the ongoing, persistent, and anxious desire for life in the “settler colonial operation of European sovereignty” (xv). That is, the contemporary panic over terrorism is actually colonial anxiety over “the savage.” In this rich, sophisticated, and compelling work, Schotten exposes how the War on Terror is the new materialization of the legacy of settler colonialism and US empire, which aims to expel that which threatens the life of the settler polity: queerness. Her response is a political theory of queer resistance: affirmation of “the ‘terrorist’” as “a figure of radical resistance whose commitment to decolonization” means that “terrorism” demands our solidarity (xxi).

Schotten’s argument about “terrorism” as the imperial project of settler colonialism begins with a critical reading of Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*. In chapter 1, “The Biopolitics of Empire: Slavery and ‘the Muslim,’” Schotten challenges the widely positive reception of Agamben as a heuristic device for making sense of the contemporary War on Terror. She argues that *Homo Sacer* is complicit with the War on Terror vis-à-vis its exaltation of an exceptional Jewish victim as “the irretrievable loss of properly political and human life in the grotesque crimes of Auschwitz” (4). Schotten argues that Hannah Arendt’s “civilizationist, misogynist, racist, and classist investments” are formative to Agamben’s claims in *Homo Sacer*, which results in an uncritical production of “the Muslim” as a figure through which Agamben examines the biopolitics of the Holocaust (16). To be more specific, the effect of this Arendtian underpinning,

Schotten argues, is that Agamben elevates the exceptional status of “the Jew” as the victim par excellence of modern biopolitics, producing a biopolitical European exceptionalism. Rather than paying attention to the specific, contemporary plight of and death sentence Muslims face--say, in the conditions of indefinite detention in Guantanamo--Agamben displaces “the Muslim” onto the Jew such that the only conceivable victim is the Jew and the only imaginable political event is the Nazi genocide. Through this “Holocaust Exceptionalism,” Agamben “establishes the humanity of Jewish people through a victimology that elevates them to the status of modernity’s exemplary biopolitical targets, and reinscribes the racialized, civilizational inhumanity of Muslims” (28). Schotten argues that Agamben’s Holocaust Exceptionalism is a feature of European civilizing discourse more generally, which centers “Jewish oppression in order to obfuscate the colonial violence that founded the settler and imperial states today perpetrating the War on Terror” (29-30). Moreover, such exceptionalism serves as ideological justification for waging war on Muslims and Arabs since they cannot register as victims of political violence.

In chapter 2, “The Biopolitics of Settlement,” Schotten shifts Foucault’s notion of biopolitics from the domain of state racism to the domain of the settler state itself. To advance this reframing of biopolitics, Schotten offers an unexpected reading of Hobbes through queer theorist Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. The outcome is an exhilarating reading of Hobbes’s *Leviathan* as an account of settler sovereignty bound to an anxious futurity, which is tethered to a civilizing moralism about life and death. For Schotten, the attention given to Edelman’s analysis of reproductive futurism has obscured a key feature of the text: its political theory of the temporality of settler colonialism. *No Future* accounts for a generic logic of futurism that is, Schotten argues, “the ideology of survival that underpins settler colonial civilizationism” (36). In short, *No Future* is a text that posits queers as those who reject a future and thus who pose a threat to the survival of life itself. On this reading of Edelman, queerness is a death drive, a threat to civilization. This death drive of queerness exposes, Schotten claims, the temporality of futurity that drives modernity. In relation to Hobbes, this futurity is realized and propelled by the sovereign. Schotten’s reading of the Hobbesian transformation from the state of nature to civilization underscores that the sovereign does not bring peace so much as he brings life. The institution of the commonwealth is thus what “demarcates life *as* life” such that sovereignty is “the biopolitical regime” (45). When read back through Edelman, the futurity of the sovereign is, however, never guaranteed; it is a *drive*, a desire, for life itself. As such, sovereignty is “anxious, reiterative activity,” or what Schotten names “anxious desire,” which seeks “to assure satisfaction forever, indefinitely into the future” (55, 57). As a result, settler sovereignty requires the death-native in order to create “life itself”, that is, the civilized. Schotten’s reframing of biopolitics as about the desire of settler sovereignty, and its desire for life in particular, means that “terrorism” actually names the “savage” death drive of queerness.

Schotten’s subsequent task is to argue for queer theory as a political theory of revolutionary dissident politics that “is both necessary and useful for theorizing projects of political resistance” to the biopolitical sovereignty of the settler state (67). In chapter 3, “Foucault and Queer Theory,” Schotten highlights the deeply left political pulse of Foucault’s texts like *Discipline and Punish* and *History of Sexuality*, volume 1. Her concern is that queer theory has moved away from this political Foucault to the later ethical Foucault or toward a phenomenology of affect and assemblage, and in doing so, queer theory obscures or forgets altogether its own radical, political impulse. Ultimately, Schotten wants to hold onto Foucault’s project of emancipatory critique--of

unearthing subjugated knowledges--as the queer project itself. As she writes, "one can be both a Foucauldian and an avatar of radical, emancipatory politics; the former need not invalidate or vitiate the latter. Indeed this may very well be the meaning of 'queer'" (68). Schotten expands on this reinvigoration of queer theory as radical political theory in chapter 4, "Society Must Be Destroyed." Here, Schotten returns to Edelman's *No Future* for its "unabashed conflation of queerness with both revolution and death" (94). Refusing to rescue *No Future* from critiques of its antisocial thesis and as yet another manifestation of cis, white, gay male discourse, Schotten nevertheless makes a bold claim that the text is remarkably much more politically driven than scholars have been willing to recognize. On Schotten's read, *No Future* is and thus ought to be read as a revolutionary manifesto that aims for "neither reform nor accommodation, but rather abolition or overthrow of a system that is essentially hierarchical and exploitative at its core and therefore beyond repair" (98-99). As a revolutionary manifesto, Edelman's rejection of futurity can be understood as a critique and call to destroy the modern biopolitical sovereign state. For--and this is how Schotten connects the previous chapters--if the settler state is bound to a moralism of life demarcated by the death-savage, then what Edelman exposes is that life in the settler state is futurity, a stifling temporality that produces the colonial settler as life itself. *No Future* is thus a call to "embrace the 'death drive' . . . a championing of resistant futures and political systems that *show up as death from a futurist perspective*" (110). Thus, on Schotten's reading, Edelman fashions "queer" as less about identity and more about a critique of and resistance to the temporality of European modernity, a "specific futurist oppression" (116).

In the final chapter, "Queer Terror," Schotten offers a new explanation for what the War on Terror really is. It is not political violence committed by nationalist movements; it is not a nebulous evil that targets people and places that ought to be protected; rather, "terrorism" is best "understood as the contemporary settler state's moralized imperial name for the unthinkable indigenous remainder that, in the insistence *on* remaining, challenges the settler state's claim to sovereignty, security, and civilizational value" (129). Schotten's response to such settler ideology is a dissident queer politics. Contra Puar, who is skeptical about queerness as resistance to the biopolitical, Schotten reads queerness as "*the abjected necropolitical by-product of biopolitics*," which makes queerness about existing in excess of the established social order (144). From this antisocial perspective, queerness is about being marked as the uncivilized, the dissident, "the terrorist" in the settler state. Accordingly, it is necessary to take on the praxis of dissident critique, that is, to embrace the death drive in the face of life itself. In order to resist biopolitical settler sovereignty, one must not wage war on "terrorism," we must "choose *not* to choose empire or the endless futurism of colonial domination. We choose to stand on the side of 'terrorism'" (168).

Ultimately, *Queer Terror* is an invigorating analysis of the biopolitical project of colonial settler sovereignty and its contemporary manifestation in the War on Terror. I am deeply moved by the rigor and ingenuity of this analysis. I am, though, curious about the minimal attention paid to the historical specificity of the contemporary manifestation of the settler state's War on Terror. Certainly, Schotten's general account of the legacy of settler sovereignty's War on Terror is invaluable. Yet even though it is evident that a political theory of the event and aftermath of 9/11 is not the aim of *Queer Terror*, it also seems that a gesture to historicize the specific projects of the anxious settler state would concretize the linchpin claim of the text: that there is a connection between colonization and genocide of indigenous peoples in the name of civilization and

contemporary violence against Muslims and Arabs. If “the Muslim” was important to Agamben only insofar as they became “the Jew,” then it seems that one ought to attend, in some way, to the specificity of the contemporary dehumanized status of Muslims and Arabs, even as one connects their current status to the legacy of the US empire’s origins in settler colonialism. Moreover, given that settler colonial legacies manifest in distinct ways, it seems important not to turn “queer” into a homogeneous catch-all for how domination and violence manifest vis-à-vis the settler polity. Yet, given all that Schotten is able to achieve in this text, perhaps this is asking for too much. But this performative aspect of (or absence in) the text is curious.

Nevertheless, what Schotten intends to do, and does very well, is to offer a political theory of settler colonialism, drawing careful attention to its temporal structure that propels its anxious, biopolitical civilizing mission. Her shift in the conceptual framing of biopolitics from Foucault’s state racism to settler colonial sovereignty is compelling, and so too is the use of Edelman’s text to frame sovereignty’s temporality and moralizing desire. Moreover, I commend Schotten for re-centering queer theory’s radical political impulse and fashioning it as a resource for resisting US empire-building. Given the depth of this work, there is no doubt that *Queer Terror* will open up new inquiry and debate in a variety of fields.

Reference

Puar, Jasbir. 2007/2017. *Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times*. 10th anniversary edition. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.