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The Onus of Thought in the War on Terror

Başak Ertür

A commentary on "Explanation and Exoneration, or What We Can Hear" by Judith Butler, *Theory & Event*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (2001)

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A version of the opening essay of Judith Butler's book *Precarious Life* (2004), "Explanation and Exoneration, or What We Can Hear," was first published in *Theory & Event* in late 2001.¹ It was part of a special issue edited by members of the journal's editorial board in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. In their introductory note to the special issue, the four editors, Wendy Brown, Bill Chaloupka, Tom Dumm and Paul Patton, reveal a number of the hesitations and concerns that they had to work through in curating a volume that would speak to the event. Was it too soon to speak, amidst cries of war and grief? Was it their turn to speak, rather than, say, Middle Eastern colleagues whose voices were much needed at this juncture? Was it possible to speak, as politically invested theorists, without instrumentalizing the violence in the service of their own investments, even if inadvertently? The airing of these hesitations do not exactly serve, in this instance, as self-shielding disclaimers. There is instead a sense of exposure – we cannot afford not to speak, and so we cannot but risk error and misfire. Given the overall quality of the contributions to the special issue, the worry may not have been entirely necessary, if nevertheless understandable: Having to grapple with an unexpectedly sudden escalation of violence, in this case, the event of 9/11 and its immediately bloodthirsty aftermath, endangers thought in particularly insidious ways. How to make sense of the events without being numbed to the senselessness of the suffering endured and the suffering to come? How to conceive of what is likely to follow, without at the same time lending one's thought to a form of inadvertent complicity with it? How to formulate critique in a modality of non-violence, when thought finds itself triggered by and steeped in so much violence?

One can read Judith Butler's contribution to the special issue in part as a response to these questions, even if it doesn't directly engage them. Her inquiry begins from the conditions of public discourse in the United States in the wake of 9/11. She addresses forms of censorship and anti-intellectualism that were operating at the time, such as the dismissal of any attempt to understand the grounds and causes of the

conflict as providing excuses for the attackers and thus exonerating them; the exclusion of critical and historical perspectives, inquiries and debates from the realm of the audible; the stricture on questioning the US foreign policy's contribution to creating a world where such acts of violence are possible; and the attendant marginalization and mockery of anti-war positions. Butler notes that this exclusion of critical and anti-war perspectives creates an impoverished public discourse that sustains itself on a hegemonic grammar of the sayable, on narrative devices that prioritize the first person register while pathologizing the nation's "enemies," and on a customized vocabulary that differentially allocates moral blame and justification for acts of violence, often solely depending on whether the perpetrators are "us" or "them". So the limits imposed on public discourse serve as a frame that not only leaves out certain types of analyses but also legitimizes retaliatory violence.

Thus far we are on familiar territory. The problem that Butler identifies here was in part an intensification of an already existing trend in US mainstream public discourse on terrorism. In a section entitled "The Semantic of Terror and Violence" in their 1979 book,² Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman suggest that the differential allocation of the epithet "terror" to acts of violence on the basis of "reasons of state" was already in operation during the US imperialist adventures in Southeast Asia in the late 1950s. In their account, this nomenclature became institutionalized in the 1970s. They demonstrate this partially through a critique of *Terrorism*, a 1977 book by Walter Laqueur,³ now considered a founding text of "terrorism studies" – an interesting clue that terrorism expertise may have always produced "terrorology" within ideological bounds. As Chomsky notes elsewhere, during Ronald Reagan's presidency in the 1980s, a first episode of the "war on terror" was launched, two decades before the attacks of 9/11, "with much the same rhetoric and many of the same people in high level positions."⁴ Coinciding with Benjamin Netanyahu's term as the Israeli ambassador to the United Nations (1984–88), this period further entrenched historically and critically impoverished ways of talking and thinking about political violence in the US. An incensed 1986 book review by Edward Said, of Benjamin Netanyahu's edited volume *Terrorism: How the West Can Win* ("Win what?" Said rightly questions) captures well this earlier episode of,

... a full-scale ideological and cultural battle against terrorism—a battle whose main thrust has been, first, its selectivity ("we" are never terrorists no matter what we may have done; "they" always are and always will be), and, second, its wholesale attempt to obliterate history, and indeed temporality itself. For the main thing is to isolate your enemy from time, from causality, from prior action, and thereby to portray him or her as ontologically and

gratuitously interested in wreaking havoc for its own sake. Thus if you can show that Libyans, Moslems, Palestinians and Arabs, generally speaking, have no reality except that which tautologically confirms their terrorist essence as Libyans, Moslems, Palestinians and Arabs, you can go on to attack them and their "terrorist" states generally, and avoid all questions about your own behavior or about your share in their present fate.⁵

Said believed that this "machinery for pushing the terrorist scare" would eventually "stand exposed for the political and intellectual scandal that it is."⁶ One of the effects of reading Butler's text alongside Said's is, therefore, having to lament recent history's betrayal of Said's belief in public wisdom. But there is another way in which the two texts sit together. Toward the end of his piece, Said warns that "Past and future bombing raids aside, the terrorism craze is dangerous because it consolidates the immense, unrestrained pseudopatriotic narcissism we are nourishing."⁷ He does not say more about the workings and manifestations of this narcissism. And as if taking over from where Said had left off fifteen years earlier, Butler writes about the attacks of 9/11 in terms of "the enormous narcissistic wound opened up by the public display of our physical vulnerability." This psychosocial perspective becomes an important component of her analysis of the frame of censorship and war that operates to both exclude critique and legitimize retaliatory violence: The exclusion of critical and historical perspectives sustains the disavowal of any responsibility on the part of the US itself, and thus prevents complicating the question of agency and victimhood. The framing out of these more difficult questions of responsibility thus serves to legitimize and render righteous retaliatory violence. In turn, retaliatory violence is meant to compensate for the narcissistic wound, and to magically reinstitute the US's fantasized invincibility and invulnerability, when these have been so suddenly and spectacularly compromised by the attacks. The first person, first-worldist, unilateralist register of the hegemonic grammar that Butler identifies undergirds every stage of this operation.

Butler's main contribution in her article is to intervene, on the basis of this analysis, to carve out another frame, one that can allow the thinking of the grounds and horizons of non-violence. Effectively inverting the operative frame of war that she has unpacked for her reader, Butler's proposal is that allowing critical and historical perspectives into public discourse will assist in sharing the onus of collective responsibility in contemporary structures of violence. Such an avowal of responsibility can in turn serve as a resource not for more war but for the recognition of global interdependency and a shared condition of vulnerability. In other words, the de-centering effected and the vulnerability exposed by the attacks can be seized as an opportunity for

re-imagining US foreign policy and the nation's place within an international community, with a consideration for "the ways in which our lives are profoundly implicated in the lives of others," and an ear for being addressed in the second or third person.

"Perhaps the question cannot be heard at all, but I would still like to ask" was Butler's preface to inquiring in this piece about "another meaning, and another possibility, for the decentering of the first person narrative within the global framework", and as she suspected, her proposal was indeed inaudible on the level of mainstream politics. Her prompt response to 9/11 is nonetheless striking in its immediate political astuteness, as it combines clarity of analysis with an ability to imagine otherwise amidst the ruckus and the ruin. Striking, too, in its eventual intellectual fecundity: It is here that we find early formulations of her thought on frames of war and violence, on vulnerability as a resource for politics and ethics, on the bases of global cohabitation, and on the question of grievability and its differential distribution – influential thinking that she has further developed in subsequent publications.

Thinking alongside this essay today, three general observations can be made. First, it may be necessary to begin from the recognition that the task of "explanation" itself, in the word's root sense of "making plain" and "flattening," has become more difficult. When Said was writing in 1986, he did not need to take recourse to figurative language to explain the historicity of, for example, Palestinian "terrorism." When Butler was writing in 2001, she cited Arundhati Roy's suggestion that Osama bin Laden had been "sculpted from the spare rib of a world laid waste by America's foreign policy," as a figurative explanation that needed to be heard at the time. Now, another fifteen war-filled years on, what language can efficiently "make plain" without explaining away the historicity of, for example, Daesh? Embodied in this strange creature of sustained war and violence, terrorism discourse comes closest to its ideal enemy, a seemingly anachronistic monstrosity that makes it that much easier "to isolate [the] enemy from time, from causality, from prior action, and thereby to portray him or her as ontologically and gratuitously interested in wreaking havoc for its own sake," as Said had written. It may be helpful here to remember Allen Feldman's suggestion that in contexts of prolonged conflict, it will no longer suffice to read violence as the surface expression of "deeper" issues, such as socioeconomic conditions or political grievances.⁸ Violence comes to acquire its own performative and symbolic autonomy "as a self-legitimizing sphere of social discourse and transaction."⁹ It has its own internal semantics, forces of causation and economy of exchange. It is in this sense (and not in the racist sense of culturalist explanations such as "Islam is a culture of death") that Feldman writes of violence as a "culture" and an "institution" unto itself.

Perhaps it is not entirely coincidental, then, that Daesh, this perfectly distorted spawn of imperialist wars, calls itself a “state” and engages in the most banal tedium of statehood and bureaucracy at the first opportunity,¹⁰ indicating something of the ways in which state violence recycles and reinstitutes itself in contemporary formations of war.

Second, the mainstream institutional approach to “explaining” terrorism has also shifted in the fifteen years since the publication of Butler’s essay. As Arun Kundnani suggests, by 2004, the taboo on discussing the causes of terrorism was no longer sustainable for the purposes of the war on terror itself.¹¹ This is when the concept of “radicalization” began to have currency in policy-making and policing, first in the UK, and soon after in the US, as an explanation of sorts. Refining the earlier crude culturalist and psychological approaches, the notion of radicalization is based on the assumption that terrorists come from a wider milieu of non-violent extremism, and that a combination of individual psychological circumstances, and theological and ideological indoctrination turns some extremists into terrorists. Thus the idea for policy makers is to target non-violent extremism as a breeding ground. Importantly, identity and community are seen as essential factors in radicalization, and there are assumed to be perceivable indicators of this process, so that the risk is imagined as manageable through surveillance, intelligence and policing of certain populations. Radicalization discourse thus contributes to the legitimation of the intensive surveillance of Muslim minorities as a new suspect community.¹² As with other governmental strategies based on risk-management, a concept of “vulnerability” finds its place in this discourse, in the form of “vulnerability to radicalization,” so that those who are suspected of such vulnerability (i.e., deemed potential terrorists in the making) must be “safeguarded,” and are treated both as “at risk” and “as risk.”¹³ Notably, this language of vulnerability operates on an entirely different register than Butler’s proposal to conceive of vulnerability as a resource for feminist politics and resistance.¹⁴ The latter requires understanding vulnerability as both an ineliminable and a differentially distributed product of social relations, and the concept’s radical political potential stems from this double movement of struggling against the conditions of its differential distribution, while striving to accommodate its ineliminability in our critical imaginaries of co-habitation. On the other hand, in its increasingly institutionalized versions, such as the “vulnerability to radicalization” formulation found in the war on terror, vulnerability is treated as a problem to be addressed through risk management and “resilience-building”, thus serving to shore up the paternalistic and interventionist power of the state.

Radicalization accounts and theories have become extremely widespread and popular in the endlessly burgeoning field of terrorism

studies and in counter-terrorism policies, but as Kundnani points out in his study of this literature:

Answers to the question of what drives this process [of radicalization] are to exclude ascribing any causative role to the actions of Western governments or their allies in other parts of the world; instead, individual psychological or theological journeys, largely removed from social and political circumstances, are claimed to be the root cause of the radicalization process. While some accounts acknowledge politics as a component –using euphemistic phrases such as “grievances against real or perceived injustices”– this is only done in the face of overwhelming empirical evidence, before they quickly move on to the more comfortable ground of psychology or theology.¹⁵

Thus the explanations that are currently in vogue and around which much scholarly gesturing and policy revolves, in fact further entrench the “institutionalization of the denial and avoidance of history.”¹⁶ The kettle logic of such denial can be traced, for example, in the UK’s “Prevent” strategy, a key component of the government’s counter-terrorism policy entirely underpinned by theories of radicalization.¹⁷ In the official Prevent strategy document, the government cites qualitative research concerning the factors that contribute to radicalization and support for terrorism in the following words:

Support for violence is associated with a lack of trust in democratic government and with an aspiration to defend Muslims when they appear to be under attack or unjustly treated. Issues which can contribute to a sense that Muslim communities are being unfairly treated include so-called “stop and search” powers used by the police under counter-terrorism legislation; the UK’s counter-terrorism strategy; a perception of biased and Islamophobic media coverage; and UK foreign policy, notably with regard to Muslim countries, the Israel-Palestine conflict and the war in Iraq.¹⁸

The strategy document does not then go on to dispute these findings, in fact, they are admitted to be “important” and “largely supported by other classified work.”¹⁹ In other words, the official government strategy avows that discriminatory counter-terrorism policing practices, the UK’s official counter-terrorism strategy and foreign policies (including the Iraq War, the UK’s role in which was a significant milestone for a generation’s “lack of trust in democratic government”) have contributed to increasing support for terrorism among British Muslims. Yet this momentary avowal does not translate into policy proposals that may mitigate this effect. It does not yield attempts to address the crisis of parliamentary democracy, a decision to desist from the counter-productive counter-terrorism strategy, or the pursuance of an offi-

cial anti-war position in foreign policy. To the contrary, the rest of the document goes on to discuss how the government will expand and intensify its existing counter-terrorism strategy, including extending surveillance duties to schools, universities and colleges, faith institutions and healthcare providers so that there may be “no ‘ungoverned spaces’ in which extremism is allowed to flourish.”²⁰

Third, and relatedly, the limits imposed on public discourse in the war on terror have become not only further institutionalized through the criminal law, but also governmentalized through radicalization discourse. As an example of the former, the ongoing case of the Academics for Peace in Turkey is at first glance an anomaly for a “democracy”: more than one thousand academics are currently under criminal investigation on charges of “propagandizing for a terrorist organization,” with another thousand expecting their turn, all for having signed a peace petition.²¹ And yet, when we consider the wording of the relevant legislation, as well as the line of interrogation that the academics are subjected to, the case actually sits comfortably within the current global legal regime of the war on terror. For example, a similar formulation criminalizing the “encouragement of terrorism,” can be found in the UK’s Terrorism Act of 2006, defined as any “statement that is likely to be understood by some or all of the members of the public to whom it is published as a direct or indirect encouragement or other inducement to them to the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism,” regardless of “whether any person is in fact encouraged or induced by the statement to commit, prepare or instigate any such act or offence”. One of the questions that Turkey’s academics face in the police interrogation implies that the peace petition was “coordinated” with or by the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), the organization the academics are accused of propagandizing for. Note that in the US, the Patriot Act’s prohibition against “material support for terrorism” has been interpreted in the 2010 Supreme Court judgment of *Holder v Humanitarian Law Project*²² to include engaging in “coordinated” forms of public speech such as teaching and advocacy, that is understood to further a terrorist organization’s political objectives, even when these are lawful objectives. The existence of such legal provisions in jurisdictions where the rule of law appears less compromised because the provisions are more selectively (read: discriminatorily)²³ utilized, directly legitimate these legal practices around counter-terrorism elsewhere, even when these are so indiscriminate as to draw people with cultural and intellectual capital into their wide net. Therefore, calling on a government to bring its legal practices into line with democratic standards often involves the failure to recognize how far this line has shifted in the war on terror globally. This may be something to bear in mind for thinking about “the ways in which our lives are profoundly

implicated in the lives of others," and what forms solidarity may need to take today.

But if the developments in the UK can be deemed indicative of future global trends in the war on terror, something other than outright criminalization of speech seems to be underway, and this may effect a different kind of shift in the status of and the space for critical thought. Let's call this, if rather inelegantly, the governmentalization of the limits on public discourse: The latest piece of anti-terror legislation in the UK, the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act of 2015, has taken a sure step towards leaving "no ungoverned spaces," by imposing a "Prevent duty" on numerous authorities, including local governments, criminal justice institutions, schools, childcare providers, higher and further education bodies, and healthcare services. Formulated as a duty to "have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism," the primary effect of this is the compulsory recruitment of local council workers, probation officers, teachers, healthcare providers, university lecturers and other professionals as informants who must monitor the potential radicalization of the members of the public they come into contact with as part of their day-to-day work. Thus the most alarming problem with the duty is its capacity to institutionalize Islamophobia on a massive scale. But it poses an additional and subtler problem within the educational context, as it directly targets both the limits of acceptable speech, and the very conditions of critique. The former is a matter of definitions, since the duty to prevent radicalization comes with an implied obligation not to radicalize students or to expose them to extremism, including "non-violent extremism," when extremism is officially defined in rather ambiguous terms as "vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs."²⁴ The latter, the targeting of the conditions of critique, has to do not with the limits imposed on what can be up for debate, but with the Prevent duty's very mode of implementation, which is one of extending risk assessment into every corner of educational settings.²⁵ The chains of speculative reasoning inherent to risk thinking combined with the will to leave no space ungoverned pose a direct threat to the conditions of possibility of critique in spaces of learning, especially if we understand critique as "the art of not being governed 'quite so much'."²⁶

Fifteen years on, the hegemonic grammar of terrorism discourse has tightened its grip on the spaces and conditions of thought - partially because it thrives in war: the more prolonged the military war, the more its autonomously generative formations play havoc with the viability and audibility of critical registers in which historicities and temporalities of violence may be understood. Meanwhile official-

ly sanctioned doctrines of radicalization proliferate as high-yielding pseudo-explanations that mass-produce laws, procedures and magical policies that do not necessitate desisting from war. In turn, radicalization discourse colonizes spaces of thinking in ever more intrusive ways, so much so that critique in the war on terror may no longer be solely dismissed as *exonerating* terrorism, but also potentially be *burdened* with the charge of contributing to it. The onus is shifting. All the more reason to insist on the ungovernability of the risk of critique, so that we can continue imagining otherwise.

Notes

1. Judith Butler, "Explanation and Exoneration, or What We Can Hear," *Theory & Event* 5:4 (2001).
2. Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1979), 85–95.
3. The currently available edition of Lacqueur's book is *A History of Terrorism*, rev. ed. (New Brunswick and London: Transaction, 2001).
4. Noam Chomsky, Wars of Terror, *New Political Science* 25:1 (2003), 115.
5. Edward Said, "The Essential Terrorist," *The Nation* 242:23, June 14, 1984, 830.
6. *Ibid.*, 828.
7. *Ibid.*, 832.
8. Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 19.
9. *Ibid.*, 5.
10. Richard Seymour, "Living With Daesh", *Salvage*, November 23, 2015, <http://salvage.zone/online-exclusive/living-with-daesh/>.
11. Arun Kundnani, *The Muslims are Coming: Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror* (New York and London: Verso, 2014), 115–16.
12. For U.K.-focused literature on the new suspect community, see Christina Pantazis and Simon Pemberton, "From the 'Old' to the 'New' Suspect Community", *British Journal of Criminology* 49:5 (2009), 646–666; Arun Kundnani, *Spooked! How not to Prevent Violent Extremism* (London: Institute of Race Relations, 2009); Tufyal Choudhury and Helen Fenwick, *The Impact of Counter-terrorism Measures on Muslim Communities* (Manchester: Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2011).
13. I am borrowing this formulation from Nathan Hughes, "Young People 'As Risk' or Young People 'At Risk': Comparing discourses of anti-social behaviour in England and Victoria," *Critical Social Policy* 31:3 (2011), 388–409.
14. For a very helpful map of the ways in which vulnerability discourse is mobilized in mainstream political vocabularies, and a lucid reformulation of the concept as a fertile resource for feminist and Left politics, see Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay, "Introduction," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, eds. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 1–11.
15. *Ibid.*, 117.
16. Said, 'Essential Terrorist', 828.

17. U.K.'s counter-terrorism strategy has been branded "CONTEST", and it has four strands, known as the "four P's": Prevent (i.e. prevent people from becoming terrorists), Pursue (i.e. gather intelligence to foil terrorist plots), Protect (i.e. securitize borders, transport systems, public infrastructure, public spaces and the like) and Prepare (i.e. have systems in place to mitigate the effects of an attack). Currently Prevent is understood to have three overarching objectives: "respond to the ideological challenge of terrorism and the threat we face from those who promote it; prevent people from being drawn into terrorism and ensure that they are given appropriate advice and support; and work with sectors and institutions where there are risks of radicalisation which we need to address." HM Government, *Prevent Strategy* (London: Stationary Office, 2011), 7.

18. HM Government, *Prevent Strategy*, 18.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 9

21. See Article 7, Section 2 of Turkey's Anti-Terror Law states "Those who make propaganda of a terrorist organization by legitimizing, praising or encouraging its coercive, violent or threatening methods shall be punished by confinement in jail not less than one year and not more than five years. If committed through the media, the punishment for this crime shall be increased by half." For more on the Academics for Peace, see the platform's website <https://barisicinakademisyenler.net/English>.

22. Holder v. Humanitarian Law Project, 561 US 1 (2010), 130 S. Ct. 2705

23. Julia M. Eckert, "Laws for Enemies", in *The Social Life of Anti-Terrorism Laws: The War on Terror and the Classifications of the "Dangerous Other"*, ed. Julia M. Eckert (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2008), 7-31.

24. Ibid., 107.

25. See, for example, the framework document produced by The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the principal regulator of universities, tasked with overseeing the implementation of Prevent duty in higher education: HEFCE, *The Prevent duty: Monitoring framework for the higher education sector* (November 2015), http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/2015/201532/HEFCE_2015_32.pdf. The word "risk" appears 28 times in the 22-page document, and the entire framework is about continual risk assessment and risk management.

26. Judith Butler, "What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue", *Transversal* (May 2015) <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0806/butler/en>.