

Representations of Political Violence and Terrorism

Raji Mohan, English (Leader)

Koffi Anyinefa, French

Cristina Beltran, Political Science

Kim Benston, English

Roberto Castillo-Sandoval, Spanish

Kaye Edwards, General Programs, Director of Center for Peace & Global Citizenship

Zolani Ngwane, Anthropology

Jill Stauffer, Philosophy (Mellon Fellow)

The seminar will explore the genealogy and logic of contemporary articulations of terrorism and political power. It was in the latter part of the 18th century that the word terror came to signify the state of affairs that results in the general community living in dread of death or outrage, but eruptions of violence described variously as revolutionary and terroristic since the beginning of the 20th century have focused attention on the connections between State, territoriality, and violence. While some commentators have seen these historical developments as exemplifying the antithesis of Western universalist ideals, others have suggested that terrorism is something like the bastard child of the liberal state, challenging the authority and legitimacy of that which produced it in the first place. Our point of departure into these questions will be the contexts in which political violence emerged as a visible concern of intellectual discourse in 17th and 18th century Europe, the terms in which the issue was understood, and the resolutions offered. We will examine the early modern ideas of social contract put forth by Locke, Hobbes, and Rousseau, as well as their refutation and appropriation by Robespierre. We will then move to the systematic and influential articulation of a philosophy of revolution by Marx and Engels and track the coterminous romanticization of violence in the works of Sade, Nietzsche, and Sorel, together with the more ambiguous treatment of the subject by Freud.

The political and psychological dimensions of state sponsored terrorism are illustrated in the wars and genocides of the twentieth century, most powerfully in the Holocaust, which has provoked in writers such as Arendt, Adorno, and Benjamin some of the most influential and distinctive critical reflections on cultures of terror. Aime Cesaire, who argues that the procedures of Nazi genocide were hatched and calibrated in the colonies, will serve as a conduit to our investigation of the shift in terrorism's meaning after World War II from governmental rule by terror to a non-governmental, even anti-governmental activity. In this segment, we will look at representations of anti-colonial and nationalist struggles in autobiographical narratives and political treatises from Ireland, Algeria, Kenya, Zambia, and India, paying particular attention to the work of Frantz Fanon who powerfully argued that the colonized man finds his freedom and humanity through violence. Fanon argues that violence functions like a language in the colonial system, such that the militant who seeks to overthrow the colonizer

through violence is only writing back in the colonizer's own language. The texts we will be reading in this section explore this dialectic of violation and violence, but contrary to Fanon, they present it as a mutating, complex phenomenon that draws its energies from multiple histories and traditions that are not always centered on the colonial experience.

Building upon the groundwork laid in the first part of the seminar, the second part will draw upon the disciplinary interests and expertise of seminar participants to work on specific elaborations of the problem. What follows are a few possible lines of inquiry: Spectacle, performance and image serve as important elements in contemporary experience and representation of terrorism and militancy. At issue here is the "looping back" effect of representation, which directs the performance of a resistant or terrorized identity by setting up structures of anticipation and a sense of *mise-en-scene*. The outrageousness of these stagings seems to derive from the way they particularly take aim at the discourses by which we understand the meaning, value, rights, and limits of the human body. Also of interest might be the implications of the technological sublime in the discourse and practice of violence in recent times, as elaborated by theorists such as Baudrillard, Foucault, Zizek, Derrida, and Habermas. We might also discuss accounts of specific militant groups to track the ways political violence gets eroticized in the second half of the twentieth century. The question of ethicality will inevitably be at the center of these explorations, and writers such as Levinas and Lyotard have usefully explored the difficulty of judgment in the face of competing ethical and political claims. Other issues of interest might be: the association of identity with embodiment, questions of bodily integrity, the explanatory or justificatory function of narrative, the gendering of violence, and the role of faith, belief, and cultural practice.