

In-Stating Fear: A Critical Phenomenology of quotidian Terror

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Introduction

The starting point for this paper is provided by the former head of the CIA's Bin Laden Issue Station, Michael Scheuer's argument that Osama bin Laden should be understood as an 'inciter-in-chief' of violence, rather than its actual perpetrator (Scheuer 2005). This argument is usually understood as an explanation of the particular nature of the operations of contemporary decentralised and networked terrorist organisations, in which no single cell or agent exercises command and control over these operations (cf Killcullen 2009: 28-9). Within the context of this paper, however, it is interpreted as the starting point for an investigation into particular state practices through which the 'reality' of the terror attributed to al Qaeda's (AQ) actions is made real as a matter of sense-experiences in everyday life. In other words, in this interpretation, the incitement is directed towards states to rouse fear, not towards other local terrorist organisations to take action.

This paper argues that the ephemeral sensation of fear in response to a terrorist 'event' has to be rendered as a constant experience of everyday life in order for exceptional counter-terrorism measures to be legitimated, and that consequently the fear that terrorism is alleged to induce is produced instead through the very practices of states that are presented as necessary responses to this threat. There is, I shall argue contra Derrida, nothing inherent or essential in terrorism that guarantees its continued effectiveness in terms of installing fear in a population. In other words, the actual experience of this terror does not refer to an encounter with terrorist practices as such, but rather to practices of 'counter-terrorism' that produce the simulacrum of terror as a quotidian experience. The experience of 'terror' is therefore tied to the emulation of fear-inducing strategies by the state that wrests the governmentality of fear from the terrorists and re-instates it under the auspices of the extant sovereign.

The paper will focus on one such 'simulating' practices, the Homeland Security Advisory System, i.e., the colour-coded terrorism warning system deployed by the US government in response to the attacks of 9/11. The guiding question for this investigation is: What reality of terror is produced through these state practices, and in what way do they allow for, or even induce, counter-practices and resistance to the in-stated terrorisation of society?

1. From Essence to Sense

Most definitions of terrorism include a reference to the fear that terrorist violence is supposed to create in order to influence political decisions and actions (cf. Hoffman 2009). Arguably, however, this crucial aspect is never fully explored. Empirical studies of terrorism focus instead on underlying ideological or religious motivations of terrorist organisations, as well as on the strategies and tactics employed in pursuit of their goals. The fear that terrorist actions are supposed to incite is therefore assumed to be the necessary and unambiguous product of terrorist actions. Moreover, the modalities of fear are never explicitly addresses in such studies. The socio-political, epistemic, and practical aspects of 'the politics of fear' remain outside the purview of much of traditional terrorism studies, with its research focus directed at the 'essence', i.e., the inherent properties and characteristics of terrorism. Yet if terrorism is about the incitement of fear for political purposes, we need to replace essence with sense (Deleuze 2004: 16); in other words, we need to focus more closely on the manifest appearances of 'fear-ful' events, acts, and practices as they direct themselves towards sensual

experiences of the terrorised audience. Fear does not refer to an essence, but to particular sensual or phenomenal experiences.

Secondly, we need to expand the scope of our investigation to include state practices that are implemented in response to terrorist threats or actions. The incitement of fear, in other words, is not the exclusive purview of terrorism; rather, terrorist acts can be understood as part of a ‘politics of fear’, of a contest over the sovereign monopoly over fear. If the sovereign monopoly over violence entails the decision over life and death, terrorism and counter-terrorism need to be understood as a contestation over political sovereignty and community (Behnke forthcoming 2010). Within this contest, states adapt terrorist strategies – *‘il faut opérer en partisan partout où il y a des partisans’* (Schmitt 1995: 20) – or rather, states revert to the terror that is constitutive of the order they create. If we recognise the contest over political legitimacy, agency, and order involved in terrorism and counter-terrorism, operating *en partisan* is the necessary response of the challenged state to the terrorists’ contestation of its monopoly over the incitement of fear.

What is called for to study these instantiations of terror and the incitement of fear is a ‘critical phenomenology’ that focuses on the practices and phenomena that operate within this contest. A phenomenology is required to understand and investigate the appearances and manifestations of fear and its incitement. As argued above, fear is a sensual response and thus reacts to the phenomenal, and not the essential, reality of terrorism. Definitions of terrorism (and counter-terrorism) don’t incite fear, the lived experience of it does.

Moreover, such a phenomenological method needs to be critical. The mere description of the phenomena as such will of course not do, given the political nature of the subject. The problematisation of the structures of power and interest underlying the phenomenology of terror and the incitement of fear needs to be part and parcel of the analysis. This does move the analysis away from a strictly descriptive one, but it gains the ability to critically reflect on the political context of terrorism and the ‘politics of fear’.

Overall, what is offered in this paper is an analytical and methodological supplement to traditional studies of terrorism, moving the focus from the definition of terrorism to a empirical description of its everyday life experience.

2. Terror, Time, and Trauma

How do we conceptualise the relationship between terror, fear, and time? The question emerges because fear, unless it manifests itself as a clinical phobia, is usually an ephemeral, temporary phenomenon, something to overcome, rather than to perpetuate. Yet within the context of terrorism in general, and the War on Terror since 9/11 in particular, fear needs to be maintained, indeed made permanent for terror and counter-terror to have any effect.

In a remarkable interpretation of 9/11, Jacques Derrida invests the ability to make fear permanent within this Event itself.

The ordeal of the event has as its tragic correlate not what is presently happening or what has happened in the past but the precursory signs of what threatens to happen. It is the future that determines the unappropriability of the event, not the present or the past. ...

We are talking about a trauma, and thus an event, whose temporality proceeds neither from the now that is present nor from the present that is past but from an im-presentable to come ... [T]his weapon is terrifying because it comes from the to-

come, from the future, a future so radically to come that it resists even the grammar of the future anterior. ...

There is traumatism with no possible work of mourning when the evil comes from the possibility to come of the worst, from the repetition to come – though worse (Derrida 2003: 96-7).

For Derrida, then, the traumatic nature of 9/11 suspends any temporality of terror and fear. Or rather, it occupies and contaminates our future, folding it into the experience of the event as a time of ever-looming re-iteration and repetition of terror. The fear incited by 9/11 deprives the future of any *telos*, purpose, or direction. The Future Perfect (or Anterior) is no longer a relevant tense, as all notion of what shall be, what we shall accomplish is erased by the fear of a renewed *éclat*, of another, even worse attack.

9/11 maintains the grip of fear through a traumatisation that cannot be erased through ‘work of mourning’. We remain spell-bound and immobilised by expectation of worse to come, by the knowledge that such terror will happen again. Trauma without end works to keep the fear of terrorism alive.

Except that the worse never happened, and that other attacks on the US mainland prove Marx’s adage that history repeats itself, ‘first time as tragedy, second time as farce’ (Marx 1852). None of the post-9/11 attacks could reproduce the drama of that event. Perhaps the response to the attack on 25/12/09, when Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a 23-year old Nigerian, attempted to bring down flight NW 253 on its approach to Detroit International Airport demonstrates this point best. The excited chatter about a renewed AQ threat soon gave way to a more measured discussion of appropriate security measures at airports, the failure of the CIA to intercept the perpetrator, and a derisive and satirical discussion of the particular (and unsuccessful) tactics of the latter of hiding the bomb in his underwear: ‘So even if the bomb works, there’s gonna be 72 very disappointed virgins’ (Stewart 2010).¹

The trauma of 9/11 faded over time. What from the perspective of the weeks immediately after the event, when the interview with Derrida was conducted, seemed plausible, looks decisively problematic from the perspective of today. By now, the temporality of timeless terror can be appreciated, as can its performative nature. Within the War on Terror, fear needs to be re-incited systematically; the trauma of the Event needs to be repeatedly induced. And this process is primarily conducted by the state and its counter-terrorism strategies

3. In-stating Fear

Terrorism, or rather the enactment of terror should be considered the most radical expression of political violence and war. Following Carl Schmitt, because political order is based on the production and performance of an intense antagonism that divides and thereby constitutes communities, terror is but the ultimate expression of such an ontogenetic Event. As William Connolly observes, the ‘territory’ of a nation-state is often understood to refer to ‘terra’, i.e., the earth or land on which it rests. Yet as he points out, the OED suggests that the form of the word ‘territory’ derives from ‘terrere’: to frighten, with territory being ‘a place from which people are warned off (OED, 1989; cf. Connolly, 1995: xxii).

¹ One should also notice that the Threat Level was not raised in response to this attempt.

Terror and fear are therefore always a constitutive part of any political order.² Terror and counter-terror are therefore best understood as a contest over the legitimacy of extent vs. imagined orders (Kochi 2009: 213). As such, this contest mobilises and incites the state's ability to re-assert the monopoly over terror and fear by re-asserting the constitutive decision between friend and enemy (or, in the context of the War on Terror, between friend and foe). While terrorism is most of the time incidental and occasional, the state has the possibility to institutionalise the incitement of fear through its structures of governance. In this respect, the War on Terror has seen the creation of a vast and diverse set of fear inducing mechanism. From dramatised narrations about terrorists, to the creation of detention centres such as Bagram and Gitmo in which the detainees becomes the object of the 'embodiment' of terrorism, to more mundane mechanisms such as highway signs requesting information about 'anything suspicious', and random roadblocks and road closures in US cities, the reality of 'terror' becomes a state-controlled simulacrum of the original terrorist threat. The focus of this paper is on one of these mundane mechanisms: the colour-coded Homeland Security Advisory System (HSAS).

4. Colour-Coding Terror

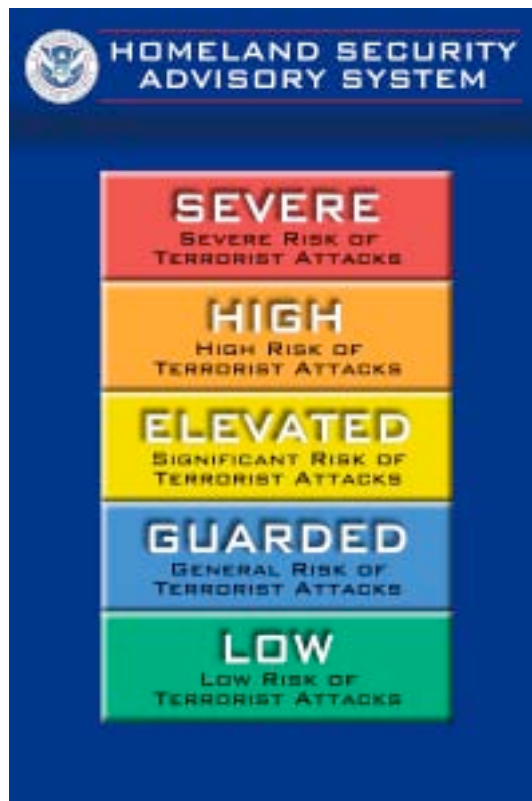
The HSAS was established by Homeland Security Presidential Directive-3 on 11 March, 2002 (DHS 2002). Its official goal was 'to provide a comprehensive and effective means to disseminate information regarding the risk of terrorist acts to Federal, State, and local authorities and to the American people. Such a system would provide warnings in the form of a set of graduated "Threat Conditions" that would increase as the risk of the threat increases' (DHS 2002). There are overall five Threat Conditions, identified by a description and respective colour.

From lowest to highest, the levels and colours are:

- Low = Green
- Guarded = Blue
- Elevated = Yellow
- High = Orange
- Severe = Red

The graphic depiction of the Threat Conditions is rendered this way:

² Nobody understood this better than the author of the modern state, Thomas Hobbes. Convinced that the laws of nature are contrary to our natural passions, any Covenant and any order requires 'some coercive Power to compel men equally to the performance of their Covenants, by the terrour of some punishment, greater than the benefit they expect by the breach of their Covenant' (Hobbes 1904: 97; cf. 119).



This 'Colour-coded Threat Level System is used to communicate with public safety officials and the public at-large through a threat-based, colour-coded system so that protective measures can be implemented to reduce the likelihood or impact of an attack' (DHS 2009a).

The colour scheme is structured as follows: against a dark blue, slightly veined background, five rectangular colour blocks are compiled on top of each other, from 'Low/Green' at the bottom to 'Severe/Red' on top. The scheme is given official status by the 2-line heading 'Homeland Security Advisory System' on top of the image, set off from the rest of it by two thin red lines above and below these title lines. Two to the left of the title lines, the official seal of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is placed.

The information contained in the image is provided on two levels and through two media. Firstly, the Threat Level within each colour block is further elucidated through a (somewhat redundant) description. 'Low' entails a 'low risk of terrorist attacks', 'Guarded' a 'general risk', 'Elevated' a 'significant risk', 'High' a 'high risk', and 'Severe' a 'severe risk' of such attacks.

Secondly, the linguistic information provided is supplemented by a colour code that employs the traditional chromatic scheme based on colour temperature. The cold green supplements the Low message, with an increasing severity of threat indicated by blue, yellow, orange and red colours, respectively. Text and colour are employed in a mutually reinforcing fashion. Information contained in the image therefore appeals both to the cognitive as well as emotional faculty of the viewer.

It remains, however, unclear what the precise status of the declaration of a particular threat level is. There are no binding measures to be taken; the Presidential Directive that establishes HSAS only stipulates that federal agencies and departments 'should consider ... general measures' (DHS 2002). As Philip Bobbitt points out, only one alert, in which the level was

raised from Yellow to Orange, was every accompanied by any specific measures (Bobbitt, 2008: 259). At this time, 'sixteen international flights were cancelled and scores of passengers interviewed' (Bobbitt 2008: 259).

As for the general public, however, no further information about the sources, reliability, or content of the respective information behind the raising and lowering of the threat level is provided. In September 2009, an Advisory Council therefore came to the conclusion that the 'system's ability to communicate useful information in a credible manner to the public is poor. Significant rethinking of how to communicate to this audience is warranted' (DHS 2009b: 1). At them time of writing, no such change has been implemented.

In the absence of any reference to such information, the colour chart and the threat level announcements became mobile signifiers, detached from any fixed signified. Moreover, the system becomes completely self-referential: raising the threat level to Orange simply means that it is no longer at Yellow, and vice versa. The fear remains anonymous and without object, and hence subject to the potential manipulation by the state. Terror and fear are re-calibrated as a sensitivity to such self-referential changes. They do not refer to past and/or future events or possible threat; rather, they are incited precisely through the erasure of manifest threats. Providing symbolic warnings rather than 'act-able' information, the colour charted threat levels turn an ontological threat, in which society faces its enemies, into an epistemological threat: the public audience does not know what threatens it, and in what way; and this unknown itself incites, or is supposed to incite, epistemic fear (Blits 1989). As such, the audience does not even know what it does not know. Fear of terrorism becomes the diffuse fear of the unknown. To paraphrase former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, the HSAS produces the knowledge that there are unknown unknowns.

'But an objectless fear is an unresolvable fear. No one can fight or flee what he cannot identify or know' (Blits 1989: 425). As critical readings of sovereignty and statehood have elucidated, the onto-genesis of the state is tied to its ability to provide an object of fear: the enemy, the other, the outside. Order is fashioned out of the foundational *coup de force* of sovereignty by instituting this ontological distinction and by making it the basis of an ontic order. Yet the self-referential nature of the colour scheme 'conceals' rather than reveals the enemy; ontological security is denied, and the audience is cast back into the (pre-state) state of 'Hobbesian fear' where threats can emanate from everywhere and everybody.

It is significant to note that the two lowest levels, 'Green/Low' and Blue/Guarded' were never mobilised since the implementation of HSAS in 2002. This adds to the sense of a suspended order and the normalisation of exceptional circumstances. The normal state of affairs is still rendered visible in the green and blue rectangles, yet at the same time constantly denied. Times are exceptional, the colour scheme constantly tells us, and will remain so for the foreseeable future. Thus, rather than to incorporate the possibility of terrorist attacks into a changed political reality, the colour scheme re-iterates and institutionalises the exceptionality of circumstances on the symbolic level, while withholding any evidence on the empirical level.

The particular governmentality of fear that this scheme entails re-asserts the state's monopoly over the incitement of fear. Power and Knowledge are intertwined in a Janus-faced fashion: while the designation of threat levels indicates, or perhaps purports, the state's knowledge of the threat it faces, this knowledge is withheld from society and its citizens. Terror therefore becomes a simulacrum produced by the state, in the very sense that Jean Baudrillard (1988) use the term, i.e. as the displacement of an 'underlying reality'. The simulacrum, in other words, *is* the reality of terror. The implementation of the HSAS therefore has a similar effect

as the event of 9/11 has in Derrida's interpretation: it abolishes the future perfect by the constant anticipation of 'worse things to come', of another raising of the threat level without explanation, and by representing, yet at the same time excluding, the normality of 'Green/Low' and 'Blue/Guarded'. What Derrida saw vested within the event itself, is now produced through the constant state-controlled deployment of a self-referential mechanism.

5. Counter-Readings

Yet such a purely text-immanent reading cannot do justice to the actual, empirical effects of HSAS. There is unfortunately no systematic research into these effects in terms of perceptions of terror and of behavioural adjustments within society (cf. Eisenman et al., 2009). Exactly what effect the colour scheme had remains unclear or at best anecdotal.

On the other hand, a number of observers have noted that HSAS has become the object of criticism and derision (cf. DHS 2009b). The colour scheme itself has been imitated and corrupted in a number of rather ways, and its use criticised as politically motivated. The latter accusations gained further credence with the publication of Tom Ridge's account of his tenure as the first Secretary of Homeland Security, *The Test of Our Times*, in which he describes how Rumsfeld and then Attorney General G Ashcroft pressured him to raise the threat level shortly before the 2004 Presidential Elections (Hall 2009). Rumours and accusations about such partisan political uses of HSAS had been frequently voiced in the media, and satirised in the Daily Show:

<http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/mon-august-2-2004/headlines--terror-warning>

It seems fair to say that from the beginning, the 'colourfulness' of the HSAS inspired parody, grafting, and ridicule. In what follows, I shall present some of the best examples of this counter-discourse.

Counter-Reading 1: HSAS – Iraqi Version



This version plays on two elements: the colour scheme of the original with its five colours, which this parody version extends to 10, and the banality of the American original, which is replaced with more detailed and ‘realistic’ descriptions of the meanings of the respective threat levels. This parody also brings to mind the discrepancy in terms of everyday terror and violence between the Americans and the Iraqis. And finally, it alludes to the fact that this condition in Iraq has been brought about by the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, in response to the attacks of 9/11.

Counter-Reading 2: The Banality of Evil

The next example plays on the banal, redundant, and completely self-referential information provided by the HSAS. The respective categories are only meaningful in relation to each other, but obviously provide no meaning in terms of defining or describing the ‘reality’ of terror. The added number of colours and threat level definitions therefore effectively subtracts from the information provided by the chart. And finally, the ‘Ultra Platinum Severe’ category on top further emphasises the meaninglessness of the scheme by alluding to the prevalent ‘metal scheme’ of credit cards and frequent flyer cards.



Counter-Reading 3: Terrorism as a 'Gut' Feeling

The final example provides a culinary rendition of the HSAS colour chart, which appeared in response to a comment by Michael Chertoff, then the Secretary of Homeland Security, in a *Chicago Tribune* interview in July 2007 that he had a 'gut feeling' that al Qaeda might strike against the USA in the summer months of that year (O'Brian 2007).

The parody version here links terrorist threat levels to the gastro-intestinal effects of certain fast food items. While the bland non-meat 'Tofu Puppy' is easily digestible and will leave no 'gut feelings', the red rectangular's 'Danger Dog', a Hot Dog 'wrapped in a piece of bacon, fried in oil and served on a bun with grilled onions and sauce' (Wikipedia 2010), first sold in Tijuana, Mexico by often illegal street vendors, and notorious for the low quality of its ingredients, is almost certain to cause fairly unpleasant 'gut feelings'.

The aim of this parody is obviously the personal and arbitrary context and content of the 'threat warning'. The notion that the personal 'gut feelings' of the Secretary of Homeland Security would constitute an authoritative assessment of an imminent terror attack serve as a guide to necessary adjustment in the daily conduct of citizens is countered by a more 'literal' depiction of the usual causes of uncomfortable 'gut feelings'.

And as in the other two examples, this parody emphasises the vacuity and meaninglessness of the HSAS. Contrary to the two other examples, the respective categories refer to something else than other categories; the self-referentiality of the previous parodies is replaced with a reference to the 'terror' of gastro-intestinal' discomfort of Secretary Chertoff. However, this move does not diminish the critical impetus behind this satirical rendition of the HSAS. If anything, it further emphasises the banality of Chertoff's statement. Or rather, it points out the inadequacy of a personal 'gut feeling', usually associated with comparatively banal everyday life issues, as a source of information about the potential challenge by terrorists.



HOMELAND SECURITY ADVISORY SYSTEM

DANGER DOG

SEVERE RISK OF
TERRORIST ATTACKS



CHICAGO DOG

HIGH RISK OF
TERRORIST ATTACKS



KOSHER DOG

SIGNIFICANT RISK OF
TERRORIST ATTACKS



WIENER

GENERAL RISK OF
TERRORIST ATTACKS



TOFU PUP

LOW RISK OF
TERRORIST ATTACKS



The satirical renditions of the colour chart thus point to an interesting, inadvertent outcome of its institutionalisation: it diminishes, rather than incites, fear. In fact, from the very beginning, it was subject of comedy:³

<http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/tue-march-12-2002/red-scare>

<http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/tue-march-12-2002/the-color-of-panic>

The very lack of any reference, of any signified in terms of information about attacks, opens a space for critique and opposition. In the absence of any such reference, comedians and critics are free to fill the void with their own imagination. Two things are striking here: the implication of the administration in the incitement of fear, and the banalisation of fear itself. Far from re-producing and institutionalising the production of fear, HSAS becomes a tool to do the work of mourning that Derrida considered to be impossible. The critically and satirically refracted versions of HSAS create a space of resistance to the official state-controlled discourse on terror and fear.

6. Conclusion: Exceptional Resistance?

The above argument and analysis needs to be put into the larger context of the politics of fear and terror in post-9/11 US society. To put this bluntly, the USA was, is, and shall remain a country in ‘fear’, terrorised by delusions of weakness and vulnerability. Within this successful ‘securitisation’, or rather ‘terrorisation’⁴, the government has been able to implement and institutionalise exceptional political measures and spaces that will most likely endure past the so-called War on Terror.

Resistance to this governmentality machine, it appears, can only articulate itself locally, from within, and against its different elements in different locations. The memoirs of former Gitmo detainees, written despite the explicit injunction not to do so, the work of lawyers resisting the abolition of basic legal principles, and the destruction of customers’ records in public libraries are but a few examples of such localised strategies. Taken together, they do not amount to a grand strategy against the governmentality of terror and fear, but their cumulative effect nonetheless has made it more difficult for the US administration to maintain the un-questioned legitimacy of its extra-ordinary measures.

Within this context, HSAS and its ‘deconstruction’ through comedy, satire, and public ridicule arguably contributed to a political discourse, in which the complicity of the state in the incitement of fear was at least made into a subject of debate, and in which the event of 9/11 and the ensuing mourning of the tragedy could take place. In this sense, a central element in the governmental machine failed, and was turned against it. The incitement to fear turned into an incitement to resist.

³ On the relevance of the Daily Show and Jon Stewart on American public opinion, see for instance Doyle (2008),

⁴ Terrorisation here refers to an enhanced level or intensity of securitisation.

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