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Securing Injustice: The Psychocriminalization of Resistance as ‘Political Violent Extremism’

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Introduction

Viewing those convicted of crime as ‘sick,’ or specifically ‘socio- or psychopathic,’ are prevalent notions in North American culture, regularly expressed in everyday discourse, academic writings, government propaganda, the entertainment industry, and mass media alike. As an effect of the culture of therapy, those persons classified as criminals are commonly represented as inherently defective individuals suffering from some form of pathology, or abnormal condition, rooted in the mind and/or body of the individual (Rimke 2011b, 2010a). While this view dates back to at least the nineteenth century (Foucault 1978) its current popularity can now be seen as a taken-for-granted ‘natural’ human-type in modern culture. As such, it hardly comes as a surprise that in the post-9/11 climate of government-sponsored anthropophobia, expert security discourses have shaped and promote a new category of pathological criminality rooted in the growing popularization and scientization of the ‘terrorist’ identity: “the violent extremist.”

The parameters of this essay thus seek to discuss the emergence of the new category today referred to as “violent extremism” and to challenge the growing breadth and penetration of security thinking in relation to both the criminalization and pathologization of resistance as a form of terrorism. Specifically, it discusses the sociopolitical construction of anti-capitalist activism as a criminal pathology or psychocriminalization in the context of the post-9/11

so-called ‘war on terror’ seen in the case of violent extremism recently constructed by traditional security experts which is taken here as the primary data to be examined in the form of a preliminary discourse analysis.

To provide a bit of context, the on-going and in-progress research presented here is the culmination of my other studies such as the pathological approach to crime (Rimke 2010c, 2011b), the criminalization of resistance or radical activism (Rimke 2011a), the dominance of psy discourses in everyday life or what I call psychocentrism (Rimke 2000, 2003, 2010a; Rimke and Brock 2012), and earlier research that contributed to sociological and criminological knowledge on the doctrine of moral insanity that was used by legal and medical experts in efforts to identify, diagnose and prosecute socially ungovernable or otherwise difficult subjects throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the West (Rimke 2003, 2010a, 2011b; Rimke and Hunt 2002).

While popular conceptions of the criminal as ‘ill’ or in some other way psychologically and/or biologically constituted have become taken-for-granted in everyday discourses, radical and critical criminological and sociological approaches have long rejected this hypothesis on theoretical, empirical and ethical grounds (Taylor, Walton and Young 1973). As I have argued elsewhere (Rimke 2010b, 2011a), security discourses can be understood as dominant governing modes of thought and what I’d like to discuss in this essay is the role of the human sciences in replicating the fetishization of security in capitalist society. However, the task of critical criminology is to provide an alternative understanding of the dominant discourses and practices that serve to reproduce the current social organization and configuration of power relations. The essay thus provides an analysis that seeks to disrupt the relations of ruling intrinsic to the conceptual practices of power that exalt and reify political resistance as deviant, criminal and pathological, rather than view it as perhaps the result of social organization, social injustice, and/or social relations.

From Radicalism to Violent Extremism: C21st Expert In(ter)ventions

The objective of the current research is to provide a critical account of the now taken-for-granted popular and expert discourses on terrorism and security with the aim of overthrowing the ‘naturalness’ of dominant ways of thinking by studying the historical relationship between forms of expert knowledge, the exercise of power, the creation of subjects and the shaping of subjectivities. Through the academic fields and court-sanctioned diagnostic process, assessing psy - increasingly referred to as ‘forensic’ - experts are able to have an effect, potentially wide ranging, on juridical decisions in addition to the long-term consequences for the accused and convicted. As a “regime of truth” (Foucault 2002:131) the dominant security doxa can be conceived as a heterogeneous network of agents, sites, practices, discourses and techniques for the production, dissemination, legitimation, and utilization of truths. Thus the ways of speaking about subjects, events and experiences and the particular language deployed is central to the inextricable relationship between the exercise of power and the constitution of truth. The construction of the concept of ‘violent extremism’ as seen in the contemporary psy discourse of the violent extremism risk assessment provides an example of how expert discourses go about constituting a particular world-view based upon both terminology and positivist epistemological conventions employed to create, bolster and legitimate a particular version of reality as truth.

The violent extremism risk assessment (VERA) was designed to act as a social scientific measurement and tool to assess the risk of what traditional security experts increasingly refer to as “violent political extremism.” Focus is placed on the purported factors perceived to be relevant to the process of “radicalization” (i.e. the means by which and the reasons why a person becomes ‘radical’) which the dominant view naturally represents as a process of leading to violent extremism as seen the security rhetoric that refers to radical or militant

activists as “political terrorists”. Some of the main agents involved in the design of measures and tools used to assess the risk of so-called terrorism include: 1) the main architect of VERA who was funded by Public Safety Canada (<http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/res/cor/rep/2009-02-rdv-eng.aspx>) is D. Elaine Pressman, Ph.D., Senior Research Fellow at the Canadian Centre for Security and Intelligence Studies at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University in Ottawa; 2) so-called expert in “radicalization” John Flockton, Clinical Director at the Corrective Services New South Wales High Risk Management Correctional Centre in Goulburn; 3) Sean Norton at Defence Research and Development Canada (DRDC); and 4) Wayne L. Hanniman of the National Security and Criminal Investigations Division of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP).

Pressman (2009:30) argues that violent extremism differs from ordinary crime whereby the latter is motivated by financial gain, aggressive narcissism or other personal motivation. Terrorism/violent extremism/radicalism are theorized to be driven by loftier ideological goals and issues. And while violent extremist acts are violations of criminal law, the underlying motivation renders these acts significantly different from other types of ordinary crime. While over 100 definitions of terrorism have been identified in the literature, there is a general consensus in the dominant security literature that terrorism is more than a criminal act and must include the intention of instilling fear in a social group or population (Pressman 2009, Record 2003).

According to the FBI, one category, specifically “domestic terrorism” refers to: “left-wing groups, [who] generally profess a revolutionary socialist doctrine and view themselves as protectors of the people against the ‘dehumanizing effects’ of capitalism and imperialism. They aim to bring about change...through revolution rather than through the established political process (United States Federal Bureau of Investigation 2001)” And by “established political process” we know exactly what they mean: conformity to the highly con-

trolled and restrictive processes of parliamentary democracy as the preferred form of political engagement and expression. Thus alternative forms of politics and political action such as radical and militant activism – historical movements one could argue are at the base of, and key to, social change and progress - that seek to challenge the pacifying politics of parliamentarianism are thus treated and represented through the dominant security doxa as irrelevant, absurd, pathological or even criminal. Militant and effective activism should thus be understood as posing a threat to the reproduction of the dominant social, political and economic order which relies upon the neoliberal parliamentary democratic electoral process that operates to maintain the capitalist structures, systems, discourses and practices.

Deconstructing the Politics of In/Security: An Anti-Security Approach

The concept of anti-security can be understood as a means of addressing, challenging and moving beyond the hegemony of security. Given that the concept of security depends upon the concept of insecurity as relational constructs, the notion of anti-security moves beyond the dominant dualism central to the pacification efforts underpinning Official narratives of crime and danger. Understood as the most powerfully productive and repressive political trope of contemporary social and political life (cf. Neocleous and Rigakos 2011), the emphasis on security means that at some fundamental level the order of capital is an order of insecurity (Rimke 2011a). It is through this politics of in/security that the current wave of state repression against anti-capitalist activists is organized, structured, rationalized, legitimated and celebrated. The critical concepts of pacification and anti-security helps to make sense of the processes and practices through which civility as obedience is constituted, maintained, reproduced, and resisted.

The deployment of security resources against subversive groups can be described as the effect of the on-going class

war against any or all disobedient and defiant citizen-subjects. Only the state, through its rhetoric of asserting its ability to act for the common good, is capable of sustaining, maintaining, and increasing class conflict and class domination in attempts to not only absorb but to profit from the inevitabilities of resistance capitalism has produced. Thus, to demand security - and therefore increased policing - is inevitably a demand for greater state repression. By reproducing the very divisions and categories of the criminal sciences, the problematic of crime appears to be objectively resolved when in fact such constructions can be said to be the most powerful exercise of state power of all - the power to define, delineate and control resistance and to re-present it as crime and criminality (Rimke 2011a).

**Psychocriminalization:
The Criminal and Psychocentric Hybrid**

Psychocentrism, or the reduction of human life to 'psy' discourses (Rimke 2000, 2010a, 2010b, 2011b), can be understood as the cultural corollary of neoliberalism that attempts to govern what becomes viewed as dangerous and disorderly populations. Psychocentrism recuperates and/or nullifies all forms of human resistance as disorderly and as such provides a means for discussing and analyzing the ways in which different forms of human resistance have been, and continue to be, pathologized in Western legal (increasingly referred to as 'forensic') and medical texts. Psychocentricity thrives on the human deficit model while obscuring societal deficits and social relations of power that frame, underlie, and create human struggles, difficulties, and resistance. Rather than challenging social deficiencies and economic corruption, the human deficit model incites modern subjects to focus on personal or inner deficiencies of the self and others. This Western mode of understanding ourselves has not only normalized and naturalized the discourses of normalcy/abnormality; it has also had the effect of rendering its own power invisible. Psychocentric attitudes, perceptions and interpretations thus dominate the social world. Thinking of

all human life in terms of ‘the normal’ and ‘the pathological’ is a major modern development based on the potency of socially derived rules or what Foucault refers to as “normation” (2007:57) – the emergence of scientifically established norms. Social scientific discourses reproduce norms that work as regulatory mechanisms for the official classification and naturalization of subversive groups as high-risk or dangerous thus highlighting the political and cultural functions of psy discourses. The pathological regime of truth is witnessed in the dominant Western tendency to reduce everything about human life to psy discourses and is neatly summed up by what Marsh refers to as “the compulsory ontology of pathology” (Marsh 2010:12).

The construction of ‘violent political extremism’ provides a scientific category and rationalized explanations to account for those persons who resist dominant sociopolitical prescriptions by intentionally rejecting commonly accepted social and political codes of conduct and subjectivities of desire. The VERA experts have provided a theoretical corpus of knowledge, which advances its relevance in categorizing resistance as individual pathologies without ever seriously examining the social conditions that produce resistance. Yet, those engaging in disorderly conduct situated in positions of authority – especially police and security agents, not to mention bosses and state executives – and never does official corruption act as examples of anti-social conduct or violent extremism in the guides and handbooks. This peculiar misrepresentation operates primarily through psychocentrism. It produces selves, individuals, and citizen-subjects committed to a personal identity, where the individual is over-responsibilized and authorities are increasingly deresponsibilized whereby Official violence in its myriad forms is legitimated, justified and rationalized in sundry ways. This provides a stark example of the contemporary trend to incite modern subjects to evade social and political structural critique in favour of individualistic or self-critique (Rimke 2000, 2010b). Resistance and critique thus become “symptoms” or “signs” of abnormality whereas conformism and submission are

taken as indications of normalcy.

The VERA experts, however, have reconfigured resistance in a novel positivistic way. The politically motivated extremist or radical is not (or no longer) viewed as suffering from an anti-social personality disorder, or sociopathy/psychopathy. Instead, the new human scientific discourses marshaled by criminal and terrorist experts such as Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt of The New York Police Department's so-called Intelligence Division, claim that terrorists have been rather "unremarkable individuals, who have led unremarkable lives, have held unremarkable jobs" and have had little or no previous criminal record (Silber and Bhatt 2007).

According to Sageman's (2004) study, political extremists were not found to be poor or angry. Pressman cites Sageman's research results that indicated that

many of the social explanations previously assumed with regard to terrorists were incorrect. Terrorists were not found to be poor, angry or fanatically religious. Instead, the terrorists analyzed were found to be largely middle-class, educated men from caring, stable and religious families. They grew up with strong positive values of religion and community concern. Sageman found that the terrorists did not display any psychiatric pathology nor patterns of emotional trauma in their past. No evidence of pathological hatred or paranoia was observed in the sample studied. In terms of past experience or historical factors, terrorists did not suffer long-term relative deprivation nor did they suffer from pathological prejudice (Pressman 2009: 7).

One security expert went so far as to claim that a non-violent past increases the probability of radicalism, now nebulously referred to as terrorism in post-9/11 society. Characteristic signs or symptoms include the following:

- Uncompromising and rigid ideology
- Deep convictions/not superficial

- High worth of ideology
- Accept responsibility for action
- Moral justification: by higher authority
- Selective empathy (not for “enemy” target)
- Study, training and focus on goals
- No prior criminality
- Belief in ideological (unrealistic) long-term goals
- Responsible/employed
- Stable family history not early problems

Pressman concludes that the violent extremist or, following the security logic presented by mainstream academics, what may be referred to as the political criminal, is significantly set apart from the common or ordinary criminal in all regards. For example, she closes by stating that amongst contemporary experts there

is consensus that terrorists do not act out of mental imbalance, psychopathology or psychopathy. They are not typically unemployed, under-employed, undereducated or poor. They are not generally irresponsible, or impulsive. They may have a well developed moral code but this code may not include empathy for those whom they consider the enemy. Their acts are planned, coordinated, morally justifiable within their value system and high in social conscience. Their background and historical factors, situational factors and attitude factors differ from ordinary criminals (Pressman 2009:30).

The claim that the so-called terrorist, radical or politically motivated extremist is unremarkable or “normal” is especially significant socially because in essence the claim being made is that the terrorist could be anybody – the unsuspecting and average subject, and not the spectacular psychopath as previously thought and promulgated. In other words, the

new human scientific discourse implies that today's terrorist is not your typical psychopath but rather your average citizen. The list of signs and symptoms still constructs a psychopathological subject but one that is simultaneously – and paradoxically – normal and abnormal at one and the same time.

Conclusion

If the psy sciences and forensic experts are vested with the role of determining the appropriate way of being human or “normal” it can be said that they wield significant social power, especially in our crises-riddled era, providing a proliferation of medico-moral discourses centering on the ethical flaws of individuals rather than the epic failures of social and political structures and institutions. Cultural domination enables psy authorities to contribute to pacification means by nullifying subversive or transgressive subjects by rendering them pathological and dangerous to the public. The psy complex's moralizing engagement with diverse populations both generates and ministers to anxieties about the disorder consequent upon both individual and collective excess, deficiency and resistance. The dominant (and dominating) human sciences thus provide a form of social policing that constructs and treats social and political resistance as pathological. Concern for economic and political resistance translates into “social disorder” to address the risks that jeopardize the economic and cultural privileges of those who benefit from current social and economic arrangements. Threatening subjects thus become the legitimate objects of social control via scientific inquiry and taxonomies.

Whether viewed historically or in the light of growing (and global) opposition to the crisis that is capitalism, it is becoming more and more clear that pacification through psychocriminalization is class war exercised by other means. By containing opposition, penalizing, criminalizing and pathologizing dissent, and repressing or erasing meaningful political debate, the psychocriminalization of anti-capitalist

resistance operates under the guise of ‘national security.’ Critical and/or radical criminological scholarship from an anti-security perspective questions the current assumptions and rhetoric about terrorism. Such an approach understands that activists who engage in symbolic and direct action to fight in solidarity with communities under attack and to ensure the survival of the planet face ongoing state repression not only in the form of individualized and collective criminalization but equally significantly, as pathologized subjects, subject to the power and knowledge of human scientific experts.

It has been proposed that the notion of striking a balance between security and liberty is a powerful neoliberal myth that masks the fact that liberalism’s key category is not in fact liberty, but rather security (Neocleous 2007; Neocleous and Rigakos 2011), and the efforts to psychocriminalize resistance to the injustices of capitalism demonstrates this precisely. But perhaps we might go further and argue that the ultimate goal of the post-9/11 security hegemony is to maintain and reproduce capitalism and thus to secure injustice itself.

Notes

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