Book Review | Violencias de Estado, la guerra antiterrorista y la Guerra contra el crimen como medios de control global (Violences of state, the war on terror and the fight against local crime as disciplinary means of global control)

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Violencias de Estado, la guerra antiterrorista y la Guerra contra el crimen como medios de control global (Violences of state, the war on terror and the fight against local crime as disciplinary means of global control); Pilar Calveiro. Buenos Aires, Editores Siglo XXI, 2009. 326 pp. $27.50 pbk. ISBN 978-987-629-209-2

Pilar Calveiro introduces readers to the fascinating world of politics, explaining that a radical change has surfaced with the collapse of Soviet bloc. If previously the world was based on a top-down hierarchical organization of labor and conflict, today things seem to be changed a lot. Particularly, the Soviet decline paved the way for the advent of a new global form of politics that has even undermined the trust in the U.S. The cold war was constructed by the hegemony of two superpowers, the USSR and U.S. Both consolidated their power, combining by means of an outstanding concentration of capital and technology, but this bipolarized world faced a radical disruption at the time one of the enemies collapsed. The privatization of public space was accompanied with the intervention of banks and business corporations in the state. Not only this, but politics understood as an equilibrium of rivaled forces ended. The market and private interests arrived to politics, co-opting officials and monopolizing the power of state. Under the guise of formal democracies, business corporations enhanced their legitimacy by the introduction of fear factors, namely, enemies invented to propose policies that otherwise would be rejected by the citizenry. This suggests that economic elites now concentrate not only the wealth, derived by their monopoly of means of production, but also exerts their power from the state apparatuses. To discipline other states, corruption indexes the political will of dissidents; but if this is not enough direct intervention is requested. We witness how a global Empire (in terms of Hardt and Negri) has
concentrated the monopoly of violence and economy over other independent states. In doing so, this mega-structure needs two tactics. In the homeland the Empire criminalizes protests and dissidence. Abroad, it centralizes the legitimacy by the invention of terrorism. If local crime dissuades citizens to be attached to the right of property, terrorism facilitates state to control potential situations of rivalry. Of course, Calveiro adds, although terrorism is not new, the global Empire (from the 1990s onwards) engendered a new meaning of terrorism, a more fearful one that paralyzes the acts of dissidence and discrepancy. At the same time, the U.S. and global Empire behind legalized torture, arguing that only serious injuries would be typified as acts which violate human rights. Terrorism is coded as a serious threat to the West. However, the definition of the problem acquires an abstract sense; states start to define terrorism as “any act that jeopardizes the well-being of society, or threaten to collapse the social peace.” A broad definition like this, Calveiro argues, is conducive to strengthening tactics of violence on individuals, a totalitarian act to destroy subjective difference. As the previous argument given, 9/11 not only accelerated the times but also gave the pretexts to expand a new more terrible form of neo-capitalism that exploits individuals as never before. This striking book reminds us that terrorism is now labeled by states to justify their hegemonic practices, to create a discourse of terror so that capital can be replicated elsewhere. Totalitarian regimes prosper because democracy is in decline.

What would be interesting to discuss here is the connection of terrorism and states. Paradoxically, the most democratic nation of the world, the U.S., conducts practices that violate international rights. The forced disappearance of prisoners who lack any rights to legitimate defense in a trial is accompanied with acts of torture that are silenced. To understand why the U.S. is equated with totalitarianism, Calveiro said that Arendt was right when she confirmed that one of the aspects of these regimes was the production of non-persons. Totalitarianism introduces a hegemonic discourse, which nobody rejects, where the sense of humankind is annulled. Citizens embrace totalitarianism to fuse their loyalties to a great leader, while some other (dissidents) are situated under the line of humanity. Not being human entails that violence should not be circumscribed to right and law. These totalized forms of domination are orchestrated by corporate businesses that control states to direct the army and workforces, depending on their hegemonic interests. The Afghanistan-led invasion showed not only the millionaire investments of American corporations, but also how business and warfare are inextricably intertwined. In doing so, the state should base its control on a legal state of exemption. This means that the law only applies to visible persons. The secret plays a pivotal role here to destruct the identities of dissidents in camps of extermination.
Up to here we have examined the book as objectively as possible, highlighting its most provocative theses. Although we consider this this book gives a clear insight to understand the modern terrorism as well as the disposition of media at time of covering some news and silencing others, it is important to debate the text as being based on a clear contradiction, namely, a flaw in the way Calveiro sees the terrorism. On her account, terrorism always should be equated with terrorism of state because of two main reasons. First of all, the state monopolizes all legal resources to exert violence as well as the ideological disciplinary resources to explain its acts. Before states, citizens have no opportunity to promote their claims. Secondly and equally important, states appeal to the discourse of terror to suffocate any anti-systemic demand. The construction of terrorism as a discourse reveals cruel statistics. The rise of terrorist attacks is perpetrated in the zones occupied by the U.S. in lieu of the greater metropolitan areas, as the media portrays. Afghanistan and Iraq are places where we find the most casualties. The war on terror, indeed, is not aimed at solving the problem of terrorism, but at moving it from the periphery to create hypothetical settings that may justify and explain any interventionary action. Therefore, terrorism, in Calveiro’s thought, is derived from the state exclusively. In sum, terrorism equates to terrorism of state.

We are in a condition to argue not only that Calveiro is wrong with respect to her thesis of terrorism, but also that it ignores the history of terrorism as more than a contemporary issue. Although her diagnosis of totalitarianism is excellent, we strongly believe that terrorism is a dialectic relationship between two actors. A group of dissidents or insurgents who appeal to violence as a dissuasive mechanism of negotiation and the state that is unable to keep its control over the situation. A finely grained view of the problem suggests that terrorism surfaces whenever a party, ethnicity or minority is pushed to being clandestine in a democracy. Calveiro not only has a romantic view of democracy, as the ideal of all egalitarian sentiments, but also confuses the roots of terrorism. The contradiction lies in the following point. States are the products of capitalism, not the shelter in which citizens can be protected. States have worked historically as the bulldozers of trade and capital. It is impossible to see the invasion of markets as anti-politics while the actions of state are the expression of politics. Both market and state are sides of the same coin. What Calveiro does not acknowledge is that democracy was evolving in the U.S. on basis of two principles, the rights of property and the liberty of expression. One might think that the global Empire of today emerged by the conceptual framework of democracy. In ancient Greece, neither the authority of the king nor slavery was questioned. Democracy was strictly a political resource in order for citizens to call the senate to abolish a law if it was unjust. With the advent of modernity in England, the concept of liberty was added as a prerequisite of democracy. In fact, what would be at stake was the possibility to liberate the feudal bonds and to channel them into the liberal work and consumption. Thousands of workers migrated
from one point to another in Europe. This mobile workforce not only changed the ways people perceived authority, but also it adopted a new view on democracy (which we can tell Anglo-democracy). From that moment onwards, there was no radical change but the evolution of capitalism. What today Calveiro sees under the lens of conspiracy (this means the invasion of mystery forces that operate in the shadows against the lay people) is explained only on what Weber denominated “bureaucratization process.” In view of this, capitalist societies are based on two factors, risk and interest. Both allow the protection and expansion of capital. Whenever the status quo is on danger, dictatorship regulates temporarily the ways and modes of productions. Democracy is given when the system reaches stability. This means that dictatorship is a tactic to give stability into what democracy disorders. It is important not to lose sight that democracy liberalizes the boundaries of nationhood, stimulating free trade and connection among people; but this runs the risk that people confront their states at a later day. When this happens, warfare redirects the loyalties to the respective nation-states. While this book is a good project, this is the point Calveiro misunderstands.