

Queering the Problem

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Jasbir K. Puar. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Duke University Press, 2007. 368 pp.

The intention of this book is obvious and quite simple. *Terrorist Assemblages* confronts the American tendency post-9/11 to see terrorists under every bed and often in every bed. Jasbir Puar attacks the racist underpinnings of counter-terrorism, the heteronormativity of American “ethnic” groups who try to assert that they are not terrorists, and the homonormativity of gay and lesbian groups who try to assert that they are just as proudly American as anyone else who hates terrorists.

The intention is simple and yet the book itself is extremely complex. One reason for this is suggested by the title. The idea of the assemblage comes from Deleuze. Arguably, the politics of the book are more informed by Foucault’s theories of power and knowledge, but the mode of the book is Deleuzian. A good example is the following section of the preface:

The strategy of encouraging subjects of study to appear in all their queernesses, rather than primarily to queer the subjects of study, provides a subject-driven temporality in tandem with a method-driven temporality. Playing on this difference, between the subject being queered and queerness already existing within the subject (and thus dissipating the subject as such), allows for both the temporality of being (ontological essence of the subject) and the temporality of always-becoming (continual ontological emergence, a Deleuzian *becoming without being*) (xxiv).

Many queer theorists are enamored of Deleuze. They enjoy the constant indeterminacy, the determinate inconstancy. As in my last sentence, it leads to an incessant wordplay, a devotion to rhetorical flourish. Note that in the quotation above there are queernesses and things are being queered but there are no queers, much less homosexuals. Deleuzian analyses disintegrate oppression because they destabilize the identities that justify oppression but they also disintegrate identities that provide psychic support. Could anyone use Deleuze to justify a statement such as “I am gay”?

Of course in Puar there is no acceptance of such a simple identity. She instead dismisses those who find comfort in it. She disdainfully notes at the beginning of the book that gay pride is now accepted as a part of life by even the most conservative of American writers. She says “the resounding silence of national and mainstream LGBTIQ organizations” on Abu Ghraib resulted because they are “currently obsessed by the gay marriage agenda” (96). Many such organizations just said that Abu Ghraib was not a gay issue, but Puar assumes that gay=queer=opposed to the hegemony of the American state. If sexual diversities are not inherently progressivist then there is something wrong with them.

The dismissals in this book are legion, often in a tone such as that with which she confronts “the self-proclaimed political left.” In opposition she asks:

What is at stake in defusing queer liberal binaries of assimilation and transgression, secularity and religiosity? If we are to resist resistance, reading against these binaries to foreground a broader array of power affiliations and disaffiliations that are often rife with contradiction should not provide ammunition to chastise, but rather generate greater room for self-reflection, autocritique, and making mistakes (24).

The desire to resist resistance is a typical Deleuzian tangle. The call for autocritique implies the kind of navel-gazing that has always plagued the unaligned left. But of course, it is all too seldom one’s own navel that is being critiqued but rather that alarmingly unthinking belly-button on the leftist next to you. I don’t want to be unfair, but in this book Puar seems more self-satisfied than self-reflective.

There are certainly ways in which she has a right to be satisfied. This is an extraordinarily intelligent and well-researched book. She makes splendid use of other thinkers in the field, particularly Sara Ahmed. One of the latter’s observations that Puar explores is the way in which the assurance of the openness of liberal democracy and the closedness of theocracies deny that many experience exactly the opposite. Thus, the theocrat wishes to live openly in a society that does not require him or her to hide from state-sanctioned sin, while the liberal democrat believes that openness requires, if not secularity, at least the acceptance of behaviour that offends religions.

Puar offers an extensive consideration of the Texas sodomy ruling. She sees the self-congratulatory gay response as part of homonormativity and notes that few have commented on the fact that Lawrence was white and Garner African-American. She turns to Marion Riggs and others for African-American responses to claims about black homophobia. In the end Puar concludes, “sodomy is and always has been perceived as a ‘racialized act,’ and in the United States it has been adjudicated as such.

By racialized act, I mean that the act itself is already read through the raciality of the actors even as it accords raciality to those actors” (132). She justifies this claim by referring to studies that show “differentials of class, age and race as well as migrant sociability in public and private space...shape the policing that leads to sodomy and public morals arrests” (132). Well, yes. But this is true of criminal prosecution in general. One might add that any victimless crime that can take place in privacy is unlikely to be prosecuted. Criminal surveillance tends to note only those “criminals” who are compelled to perform much of their life in public. This does not make sodomy a particularly racialized act any more than any other act that the state perceives to be a crime. Crime is racialized as poverty is racialized.

Puar’s easy opposition to all aspects of the hegemonic order is unlikely to increase readers’ agreement with Puar’s book and often will offend those who otherwise might be convinced. Thus she dismisses “public and governmental rage” at the sexual torture at Abu Ghraib because there was no rage “at the slow starvation of millions due to UN sanctions...” (79). Am I just too much of a liberal if I say that this distinction seems to me inevitable? Puar is certainly correct in assuming that the homophobia of the American administration is visible in both the homophobic torture at Abu Ghraib and the apologies that claimed that Muslims are particularly offended by homosexuality. But what does it say about culture that makes homophobia an inevitable tool of the military? Is this just American power or rather homophobic vandalism asserted by the powerless working class, here operating as the military? Puar doesn’t like the adulation of Mathew Shepard as “the quintessential poster boy” (46), but she doesn’t mention the role that class played in the murder of this college kid. The values Puar displays as a queer anti-racist might seem inevitably leftist, but they seldom offer more than a feint towards class.

I doubt that there is anyone reading this who disagrees with Puar. She is attacking the things that need to be attacked and supporting those who are wrongly being attacked. If I might introduce a personal note, she is pursuing the same argument I have been presenting for the last few years, in a series of lectures on the uncomfortable connection between “Western” gay cultures and Islamophobia. As both of us note, it seems to be all too easy for gay groups to claim anti-racist philosophies and yet flirt with racism in assertions of pro-Americanism or attacks on Islamic homophobia.

But why Islam? Why not fundamentalist Christians, why not those Orthodox rabbis who have spit venom at gay rights? One answer is simple: there are few, if any, states that are considered to be Jewish or Christian that have punitive legislation against homosexuals. Various Islamic states have exactly this. But the more complex explanation is in a sense homonormative. In other words, every time gay culture can find a way in which its purpose is the same as the hegemonic culture, it gains power.

Thus if the United States has become an Islamophobic state—and I would argue that under George W. Bush it was exactly that—then it is in the interests of “the gay community” to target those aspects of homophobia that might be associated with Islam.

But what if one takes a progressivist approach and suggests that religious homophobia is a pre-modern view that changes as more liberal attitudes triumph? Thus those gay Muslims who can accommodate their sexuality within a certain view of their religion will become the norm, in the same way that gay Christians can now see homophobic Christian states as part of the past. That presumably would be the end of the gay justification of Islamophobia.

Perhaps. There is another aspect of this, however, that has to do with individual psychology and the particular psychology of the United States. The first part is that any person tends to accept the local more than the foreign, even when the local is antagonistic. The particular American version is a part of American exceptionalism. More than other nations, the United States looks at itself as unique and accommodates anything that can be labeled American in a way that refuses to accommodate anything that seems inherently outside. Thus the strangeness of the southern American Christians who test their faith by handling poisonous snakes is yet American. Buying toothpaste in Tehran is not American. That last observation is just one inkling, however, that in the end there is no answer. If all must wait until Islam is as American as apple pie or until every imam performs gay marriages, then there will be a long wait.

So it is tempting to come back to Puar’s explanations: Islamophobia is just another version of American white racism. Puar argues that the “gay community” is just a part of that white racism. Every aspect of the various angers reflects heteronormativity, whether it is white gays waving flags of patriotism or racialized minorities exhibiting the family values of all good Americans.

These explanations, however, avoid many of the more troubling questions. First, what if Islamophobia in 2010 includes many who are not white? Puar’s book mentions anti-Muslim acts performed by an African-American soldier and a Hispanic man, but offers no suggestion of why they fit white racism. When the latter killed a Sikh man he said “I’m an American.” Does this mean he was trying to be a white Anglo-American, that he was making up for some perceived Hispanic deficiency? Or might it mean that Islamophobia has become a marker of Americanism that is beyond race? One need not watch much television to perceive a rainbow of Americans who find comfort in hating Muslims.

And what about religion? Somehow, Puar can devote 250 pages to attacking Islamophobia with almost no consideration of Islam as a religion. She mentions the asser-

tions that Islam is homophobic, but rather than exploring this possibility she just attacks the racism of those who assert it. When she introduces a gay Arab voice it is not to discuss the more liberal versions of Islam, but rather to attack the way Abu Ghraib was both homophobic and anti-Arab. She seems to accept Joseph Massad's definition of the "Gay International" (57), an American-led gay liberation movement void of sensitivity to other cultures. Massad, and presumably Puar, believes homosexuals in Arab countries have found ways to function under the radar, but when the "Gay International" makes great noise about Arab homophobia, it just causes trouble for Arab homosexuals. This might be the case, but does this mean that the need for gay liberation is not international? If a person of Arab ancestry who lives in the United States can write about Arab issues elsewhere, why can a gay person not write about gay issues? Do race, geography and religion inevitably trump sexual orientation?

But of course in Puar, there is little concern for sexual orientation as everyone and everything is being queered, as in this comment on the way Sikhs have been drawn into Islamophobia:

As a figure that deeply troubles the nation's security, the turbaned body can be most fruitfully rearticulated, not solely as a body encased in tradition and backwardness, attempting to endow itself with modernity, nor as a dissident queer body, but as an assemblage, a move I make to both expand the expectations and assumptions of queer reading practices (descriptive and prescriptive) and to unsettle the longstanding theorizations of heteronormative frames of reference for the nation and the female body as the primary or sole bearer of cultural honor and respect (174).

I can see why this assemblage contributes to her own theorizations, but I find little here that will help anyone who experiences the effects of both homophobia and Islamophobia.

I mentioned above that Puar's research is amazing. Her secondary sources marshal a myriad of relevant resources, from the obvious, such as Rey Chow and Michael Warner, to grad student art projects. For her primary targets, such as *Lawrence v. Texas* or the way the 9/11 furor has affected Sikhs, her research extends through government records and a variety of popular media. Much of this doesn't appear in the body of her text, but the notes are extensive and fascinating.

I just wish more of that fascination appeared in the book. I think the argument of the book is too strong, but that might just be me the old white guy reacting. Still, any such blanket dismissal of American racism and Islamophobia seems especially simplistic in the Obama era. If his attempts to reach out to Islamic countries and the

simple fact of his black body in the “highest office” change things, then Puar is out of date. If, as I must admit my cynical self fears, the result of the Obama earthquake turns out to be the same old United States, then Puar’s analysis needs more awareness of the slippages in race, class and sexual orientation.

In this book I find less awareness of slippages and more Deleuzian slipperiness. Puar is very aware that people have died and that people are being oppressed. The notes provide detail after detail of how that works. But I fear all of her Deleuzian ideas will do nothing to change that.

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