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A Critical Geopolitical Analysis of Elite's Responses to Terrorist Attacks

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In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris that occurred Friday November 13, 2015 there were many reactions worldwide of solidarity with the victims and of condemnation of the criminal attacks against civilians. This paper contends that the geopolitical narratives and counter-narratives about the war on terror have arisen in the shape of dualities about the good, civilized, modernized French victims against the fundamentalist evil attackers. One of the recurrent features of elitist discourses is that they tend to create binary explanations of complex phenomena based on dichotomies such as us/them, our victims/their victims, freedom/security, and either the French Republic or the Islamic State. These categories of the world are abstract representations that neglect the role of history (colonialism and imperialism), the multiple scale dynamics among actors, and the continuities between the two opposing elements. Drawing from feminist, subaltern, and postcolonial geopolitical approaches, I aim to break up the initial binary discourses and put into question the historically charged categories used by the West to label the world. As case study the text takes some social media reactions that in the wake of the attacks called for a universal mourning of all the victims of terrorism. Thousands of people in Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram as well as in op-eds, asked for an impartial and general mobilization in favor of all the victims of terror, not only those killed in the French capital, but also in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria. The viral reproduction of these critiques constituted a geopolitical digital movement aimed at creating awareness of the need for unity against terrorism rather than a division between the West and the East, and between 'our' universal values and 'theirs'. The following analysis of the counter-narratives helps disentangling the power/knowledge dynamic and in turn rooting the different abstract labels.

A Critical Analytical Framework: Feminist, Postcolonial and Subaltern Geopolitics

Critical geopolitics rereads the grand narratives of the maps drawn by the power elites, questioning what is left out in the mainstream discourses and considering who scripts, why and for whom. As Hyndman puts it, it questions "assumptions in a taken-for-granted world and examin[es] the institutional modes of producing such a world" (Hyndman, 2003). Yet, feminist, subaltern, and postcolonial geographers advocate for a step forward of the critical exercise because they contend that most of the times critical geopolitics have remained a Western critique of the dominant geopolitics, overlooking scholars from the 'South' (West, 2006). Furthermore, it sometimes remains a mere exercise of deconstruction, insufficient to transform the status quo (Hyndman, 2003) These alternative (see Notes) approaches to critical studies propose to include a variety of methods of analysis among them: a) to pay attention to what is absent and what is present in the script; b) to frame the analysis in a theoretical and historical perspective; c) to challenge the official discourse considering the power-knowledge dynamic by interpreting what meaning is giving to the world by whom; d) to deconstruct the narrative in order to transform it or construct a new alternative; and e) to propose an embodied epistemology which includes multiple scales of analysis, particularly the views from the bottom (Slater, 2010). Therefore, these counter-hegemonic geopolitical approaches offer a more comprehensive critical thinking of the understanding of the world from the macro to the micro scale, leaving apart the Western reminiscences of traditional critical geopolitics.

An alternative geopolitical account of the terrorist attacks in Paris rises as a powerful tool to unpack the complexities behind the views of state-centered explanations. First of all, it is important to trace the genealogies of the attacks by ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) (see Notes) in Paris. This does not simply mean to highlight the military

involvement of France in the Syrian war but also to understand the origins of ISIL as a radicalized branch of al Qaeda in Iraq that was expelled to Syria by the US, and that in 2013 established itself in both Iraq and Syria. The genealogy, which is beyond the scope of this paper, could return to the colonial rule of Syria by the French. As Hyndman stresses, these genealogical maps "forge links and recognize extant networks among political actors that resist 'either/or' reasoning and have the potential to enhance their accountability" (Hyndman, 2003). This analysis allows perceiving that the conceptual construct of 'either Europe or the Islamic State', rather than opposites, represent a continuum that links France and ISIL. The fact that some of the terrorist involved in the attacks were homegrown show that there were just a few degrees of separation between here and there, us and them, either/or.

Second, a deconstruction of the elite discourses helps identifying the binary categories used to divide the world into two confronting maps, be called North/South, West/Non-West, First/Third World and civilized/uncivilized. A post-structuralist perspective sees continuity in the metanarratives used to map the war on terror. Both, before and after the Cold War, the Third World was seen as a source of instability and inflammability, as well as a threat to Western security (Slater, 2010). Those features of the Third World are taken for granted as innate or indigenous, ignoring the "history of colonial penetration" (Slater, 2010). Meanwhile the West is represented as the image of progress, civilization, and development, elements that are seen as special, intrinsic to the European and American evolutions, as well as "a universal step forward for the humanity as a whole" (Slater, 2010). The attacks of the cafés, the concert hall and the stadium in Paris were precisely targeting the so-called European lifestyle, as the presidents of the US, the UK and France have contributed to reinforce:

Obama: "This is an attack not just on Paris, it's an attack not just on the people of France, but this is an attack on all of humanity and the universal values that we share" (Reilly, 2015).

Hollande: "…committed by a terrorist army, the Islamic State group, a jihadist army, against France, against the values that we defend everywhere in the world, against what we are: a free country that means something to the whole planet" (Dearden, 2015).

Cameron: 'They were killed and injured by brutal and callous murderers who want to destroy everything our two countries stand for: peace, tolerance, liberty" (Crossley, 2015).

These references of the self and the other reflect the constructed metanarrative of the grandeur of the European civilization. That image leads to consider other cultures or civilizations as non-modern or uncivilized by implying that the European civilization and modernity is universal, intrinsic and unique.

An exercise of embodiment of the attacks also helps to understand the intersections of power and space (Hyndman, 2003). The counting and profiling of the victims in Paris, according to the feminist analytical approach, allows embodying, locating and grounding the events (Pain, 2010). That personification of the victims connects the political dimension with the ordinary life, but the attacks in Europe rather than daily life events are more dispersed or isolated than those happening in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Syrian, among other countries with higher rates of terrorist attacks. Therefore, the embodiments of all the victims across countries help to better geopolitically situate the war of terror.

In the same line the feminist standpoint also helps to map the emotions engendered by terrorism, beyond the top-down geopolitics of fear that portray threats as omnipresent (Pain, 2010). As Pain argues, the widespread notion of fear constructed by the media and the hegemonic powers may have disempowering effects by victimizing those fearful, and overlooking their agency and resistance (Pain, 2010). The fears need thus to be embodied and studied through the victims and the people closer to the attacks, instead of assuming or fueling the widespread notion of fear based on the declarations of the elites.

Alternative critical geopolitics also argues for a normative stance. Besides the deconstruction, the embodiment, and the genealogies of the geopolitical, a transformative or activist position is desirable to break the status quo and bring about a potential change. Religion itself could play that role in the case of the war on terror. Commonly seen as the root of the problem and the evil to fight, the incorporation of religious geopolitical accounts may contribute to reread the widespread notion of a violent Muslim culture and even to present Islam as a broker of a pacific dialogue among

countries. Jefferson West's analysis of Fethullah Gülen, an intellectual and spiritual leader of a Muslim social movement based in Turkey, highlights that Gülen´s vision of religion serves as a dissident geopolitical strategy because it purports religion as the trigger pulling together a "socio-geographical imagining of the world as a global village" (West, 2006). Gülen´s criticism of the use of the Islam for the justification of terrorism also helps to deconstruct the negative association created by the war on terror. Dissident, feminists, subaltern and postcolonial geopolitical critiques bring to light the 'power to' contest, deconstruct, and transform the interlinkages between power and the produced knowledge.

Binaries in Question: The Social Media Reacts

In the wake of the attacks in Paris multiple messages and symbols of solidarity swamped the social media and thousands of profile pictures of Facebook were tinted with the French flag. One of the most viral symbols was a sketch of the Paris' iconic Eiffel Tower in form of a peace sign and also the hashtags #PrayforParis. A counter geopolitical message, in form of a poem written by the Indian blogger Karuna Ezara Parikh, also circulated social media being shared more than 38,000 times the very next day of the killing (Borges, 2015). The text claims for a unified demonstration of sorrow for the victims of terrorism no matter if from Paris or Beirut:

It is not Paris we should pray for.

It is the world. It is a world in which Beirut,

reeling from bombings two days before Paris,

is not covered in the press.

A world in which a bomb goes off

At a funeral in Baghdad

and not one person´s status update says "Baghdad",

because not one white person died in the fire.

The viral poem plays a critical geopolitical role in two aspects. First, it criticizes the division between the attention given by the media and the social media in particular to an event happening at the heart of Europe in contrast with the peripheral bombings in Beirut and Baghdad that apparently went unnoticed. Second, the poem cries for a pray for the whole world, erasing frontiers to mourn the victims of terrorism, but also claiming that a world divided in categories is "falling apart in all corners." A critical look at the critical poem was posed by the journalist and blogger Max Fisher in his article "Did the media ignore the Beirut bombings? Or did readers?" pointed that it was easy to find a common enemy, the media, to be blamed for our ignorance of the events in the Middle East; however, he contends that the media did cover the events. According to him, this uncomfortable true "forces us to ask what our own role might be in the world's disproportionate care and concern for one country over another." Still in the same line with the poem, he brings a geopolitical critique of the different maps of emotions that are drawn when the terrorist attacks happen in the West in comparison with the East:

But I am still sympathetic to the anger. The underlying point behind this criticism is not really about the media, after all. Rather, it's about a sense that the world at large has ignored Beirut's trauma and that it ignores similar traumas throughout the world if they occur in the wrong places; that it does not offer the same sympathy to victims outside of wealthy or Western countries (Fisher, 2015).

Other critical responses to the attacks contested the Western elites' discourses that placed Paris' victims at the center of the world on terror and as the incarnation of the universal values of *egalité, fraternité et liberté*. One example is the article published in Aljazeera by the Iranian professor Hamid Dabashi, titled "Je suis Muslim" as a

wink to the hashtag #JesuisParis. He criticizes Obama's and Cameron's condemnations of the attacks for portraying them as an affront to the universal values that Paris represents, consequently excluding other cultures to join the mourning.

Am I – and millions of other Muslims like me – allowed to express our sympathies, solidarities, and sorrows on this horrific occasion, and do so from the innermost depth of our humanities as Muslims? […]

Of course, the attack on the French is an attack on humanity, but is an attack on a Lebanese, an Afghan, a Yazidi, a Kurd, an Iraqi, a Somali, or a Palestinian any less an attack "on all of humanity and the universal values that we share"? What is it exactly that a North American and a French share that the rest of humanity is denied sharing? […] (Dabashi, 2015).

Furthermore Dabashi takes a subaltern geopolitical perspective to denounce how the categories of cultures are charged:

These are loaded terms, civilisational terms, and culturally coded registers. Both Obama and Cameron opt to choose terms that decidedly and deliberately turn me and millions of Muslims like me to their civilisational other (Dabashi, 2015).

The article puts attention on the absences, silences, and abstractions behind the elite declarations in order to cast light over the ones left out, the non-European. This critical geopolitical text serves to disentangle the relation between the power elites and the production of a partial knowledge of the world, in particular, the war on terror.

The power to contest the hegemonic discourses may take different geopolitical strategies and in this case the social media serves as a platform to raise awareness of the binary discourses. Yet, as Slater stresses (28), critical thinking involves also considering the positionality of the author. The poem shared, for instance, served to hide readers' lack of attention to the Middle East bombings that have indeed being covered by the media. Likewise the fact that the Iranian professor was writing from Columbia University might have also had a different impact than if he was writing from the 'East' or the 'South'. Still, these critical geopolitical texts contribute to the deconstruction of the binary thinking.

Concluding Remarks

Feminist, subaltern, and postcolonial critical approaches constitute a valuable geopolitical framework to deconstruct, embody and historicize the apparent innate or intrinsic features of the polarized world emerging from the Paris attacks. In the aftermath of the events, the reaction of the elites brought to the forefront traditional categories such as West, civilization, progress, and modernity in contraposition to the uncivilized terror caused by the extremist attacks. The paper suggested an analysis of the genealogies of the attacks, the embodiment of the victims from Paris to Baghdad, the incorporation of moderate Islamic views, and the showing of continuities interlinking the two extremes as powerful tools to situate the binary thinking and the power/knowledge dynamic untied by the Paris attacks. The study of the grassroots virtual mobilization – in favor of a universal mourning for the victims and a universal rejection of the *brutality* – concludes that these texts constitute counter-hegemonic geopolitical scripts with power to resist the influence of the hegemonic views. The poem and the articles help revealing the neglected elements of the binary representations of the war on terror. This is only a primary critical geopolitical analysis of the events but the analytical framework presented here may contribute to conform a critical thinking about the war on ISIS that could be nourished in the following months with the evolution of the events.

Notes

1. The category 'alternative' is used as an umbrella term to include those geopolitical approaches that go beyond the sole critical perspective and bring new methods of study, particularly feminist, post-colonial, and subaltern geopolitics.
2. The terrorist group is also referred to as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) or in Arab, Daesh (Dawlat al-

Islamiyah f'al-Iraq w Belaad al-Sham).

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