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Title	Review of Terry Eagleton's *Holy Terror*
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Terry Eagleton. *Holy Terror*. Oxford UP, 2005.

In today's current political climate, Terry Eagleton's latest book *Holy Terror* appears as a timely reminder of the inherent difficulties and the complex origins of terrorism and its associated terms. Eagleton is consistently interested in a sustained evaluation of the term 'terror', its relation to the sacred, and its importance in philosophical and political thought from the Dionysian *jouissance* (3) to the advent of the suicide bomber. In beginning his book with a chapter entitled *Invitation to an Orgy* he is also well aware of the importance of a good opening gambit!

Throughout Eagleton's book the reader is conscious of a genealogy, a search for origins. Terrorism, as Eagleton advises is modern construction emerging during the French Revolution (1). However, it is also a historical concept as "human beings have been flaying and butchering each other since the dawn of time" (2). In order to confront modern concepts of terror, Eagleton returns to the pre-modern world of hedonistic god Dionysus, thereby situating 'terror' within a historical context and associating it with the myths of the past. In addition, Eagleton also presents terror as a political concept by opening with the suggestion that "terror is intended to help execute their political visions, not substitute for them" (1). The author is evidently searching for a concept of terror/terrorism that is both historically and politically accurate, a philosophical notion grounded in the material.

The title of the book *Holy Terror* relates the principle of terror to the transcendental and divine. For Eagleton there is seemingly a profound connection between terror and the religious. This idea is further augmented by Eagleton's immediate focus on the sacred. In introducing the term 'sacred' to his argument Eagleton directly establishes a key idea; language is ambivalent. Eagleton states that the word *sacer* can mean either "blessed or cursed, holy or reviled" (2). Therefore in his opening argument Eagleton reveals his desire to disrupt linguistic certainties in favour of ambivalence. In this first chapter, the author combines his critique of Dionysus with Žižek's Lacanian inspired idea of the "horrific *jouissance*" (3), inextricably connecting terror with the sacred through a theoretical term that directly reveals the breakdown of binaries.

This linguistic ambivalence continues throughout the narrative. It is not only the ideas of terror and the sacred that are dislocated in Eagleton's opening

discussions. This first chapter also disrupts binary oppositions by associating terror with the carnivalesque, enjoyment of life with Freud's death drive. The author employs the same technique with the terms civilisation and barbarianism, and justice and revenge. Law and love with particular reference to the law of God of the Old Testament and the fulfilment of that law in the person of God's son in the New Testament are also destabilised. Eagleton concludes that due to these inextricable links between concepts traditionally regarded as oppositional "the authoritarian preserves a secret compact with the anarchist" (9) and "the evolution of humanity brings with it the more sophisticated techniques of savagery" (11). Concepts, institutions and ideologies conventionally seen as antagonistic are actually mutually dependent. This demarcation lies at the centre of his narrative, and the themes and intentions of his theories are built upon this foundation.

His subsequent chapters continue these themes of the ambivalence of language, the origins of terrorism and the interconnections of terror with other concepts such as violence, justice and the sacred. His second chapter addresses the theme of the sublime, the favourite of poets. He examines it as follows: "As we enter the epoch of modernity, the sublime is one name for the annihilating, regenerating power we have been investigating" (44). The central idea of this chapter is that creation and destruction are inextricably connected. This dichotomy reappears throughout the text. Eagleton refers to this breakdown in the traditional binary as a "Jekyll-and-Hyde or Holmes-and-Moriarty doubleness" (56). Chapter three applies this profound breakdown in traditional binary oppositions to the dual notions of fear and freedom. Although freedom and fear initially seem to be diametrically opposed concepts, Eagleton adeptly traverses the gap. He introduces the idea of "absolute freedom" (74), which, in essence, is not freedom at all. Although this sentiment may be prized as a Twenty-First century Holy Grail for Western leaders, it is actually a vacuous sentiment, as "having abolished all particularity it leaves us with no reason why we should act in one way rather than another" (74). Therefore at the very core of freedom is the potential for fear and terror as the individual, constrained by nothing, is allowed to act in whichever manner he/she chooses without considering the needs of others (80).

After the discussion of freedom in chapter three, in chapter four Eagleton addresses the themes of saints and suicides; both concepts are profoundly intertwined with the main premise of terror. Eagleton confronts the phenomenon of the suicide

bomber with great dexterity rejecting the popular media hype in favour of a comprehensive critique. The common misapprehension may be that suicide bombers count life as cheap but Eagleton by contrast suggests that they must "hold that life is precious, otherwise they would not be doing what they do" (93). Eagleton's proposition that "however wretched or depleted, most men and women have one formidable power at their disposal, namely the capacity to die as devastatingly as possible" (98) allows the reader a more thorough understanding of those who sacrifice life in order to both destroy the stability of the hegemony and create a world that reflects their own ideology. He continues this attempt to rationally explain the current world crisis in chapter five in which he states that the term 'evil' is employed in order to bring a sense of closure; if an act or individual is 'evil' then there is no need for subsequent explanation or any attempt to solve the antagonism before it reaches a point where the only method to show dissension in through suicide: for many in the Western world "terrorist assault is just a surreal sort of madness, like someone turning up at a meeting of the finance committee dressed as a tortoise" (116). But Eagleton does not reject the term 'evil' out of hand; instead he reappropriates it and suggests that "an act can be both evil and historically explicable" (117). 'Evil' is no longer metaphysical or sensationalist but grounded in the material. A metaphysical evil is virtually impossible to defeat and the term becomes lurid and potentially meaningless. However this term can still be applied, says Eagleton, to a character such as Pol Pot in a way that it could not be applied to Mary Poppins (117). Eagleton does not formally reject 'evil' but points to a potential reappropriation of it for a political left that have rejected it as pure sensationalism.

The author finally returns once again to his central thematic concern of the sacred in a brief chapter on scapegoats in which he analyses the term 'sacrifice' as specifically referring to the act of making sacred (129). In a direct challenge to the West, Eagleton recognises that the West becomes capable of only fear rather than pity for the "injustices which brought this monster to birth" (133). There is a suggestion of the Marxist concept of praxis here as Eagleton, through his theoretical notions, cites the current situation in which the Other is regarded in Western thought as a figure to be feared. There is a distinct lack of mutual understanding between the two sides. A sense of Western imperialism permeates this portion of the text.

Eagleton maintains the left-wing values he is famous for with a critique of the inbuilt irony of bourgeois existence of an "unending revolution linked to a uniquely

pressing need for stability" (59) and a sharp swipe at those who dismiss Socialism as out-moded: "Despite the much-vaunted demise of the proletariat, the wretched of the earth have not vanished, merely changed address. They can now be found in the slums of Rabat rather than the cotton mills of Rochdale" (105). In addition Eagleton returns to his literary roots including literary examples in his text from D.H Lawrence's *Women in Love* (108), Joseph Conrad's *Secret Agent* (121) and Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (136) in order to negotiate the genealogy of terror and its associated terms through the artistic sphere. His discussion of Conrad's text is particularly informative referring as he does to this as the "first suicide-bomber novel of English literature" (121). Through his reading of this narrative Eagleton is able to negotiate the issues of freedom and vacuousness that he has mentioned in his theoretical analyses: "His [the Professor's] invulnerability lies not just in the fact that he cannot be arrested, but that by being prepared to blow himself into eternity at any moment, he has achieved a freedom which is at once empty and absolute" (123). Literature, reflecting and creating the world as it does, provides an excellent example of the dialectic of absolute meaning and meaninglessness in the act of the suicide bomber.

The primary difficulty with writing a review of such a book lies in its sheer scope. Eagleton is an exciting writer whose work is consistently overflowing with ideas and themes that deserve further explanation. Indeed in this short book there is seemingly a new critical concept on every page. It is a work of great importance in this day when many are searching for peace and security, when the population of the West seem to reject those they fear as evil fundamentalists. This book challenges the reader to reassess his/her own uses of terms such as 'terror', 'fear', 'freedom' and prompts him/her to consider the complexity of linguistic explication in this field.

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