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“The Past is the Past”: Linear Temporality, Memory, and Empire

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Biographical note: Tom is a Research Fellow at the University of Warwick working at the intersection of critical security studies, modern British history, and sociology. His research explores terrorism and the turn towards preemptive politics, with a particular focus on de-radicalisation programmes. He is currently working on the Research Council of Norway's RIPPLES project, where he is examining the social and legal implications of how states respond to terror. Tom convenes BISA's Critical Studies on Terrorism working group.

This is a short reflection about my experience of interviewing former combatants from ‘the Troubles’ in Northern Ireland and several Prevent ‘counter-radicalisation’ practitioners, interviews which I undertook for my doctoral research. My perspectives about temporality (and many other things) were profoundly unsettled by this experience. Here I raise the role of privilege in how time might be perceived, and the importance of considering the co-constitutive nature of time and space.

I grew up in the north of England as a white male, and where (in comparison to friends at school) my family was relatively affluent. My parents owned their own semi-detached house, we had swimming lessons, and went to France on holiday every year. This position did not encourage me to consider critically the conditions in which I was brought up. Because of my skin colour, gender, and financial stability, I have not been confronted by many forms of structural discrimination that so many people face. I rarely had to think about the privileged conditions I was raised in that enabled me to do things most other people cannot – primarily conditions of white and male dominance which obviously have a significant (and *ongoing*) history. The intricate connections between the past, the present, and the future were for me largely invisible. Yet this began to change when I conducted interviews with former combatants in Northern Ireland (Pettinger 2020b), an experience which profoundly unsettled my perception of time as linear. It revealed for me how ‘the past’ – rather than being something separate and as simply ‘coming before’ – is written into the conditions of the present and future, and how we remake the past by the stories we tell.

Interviewing 30 former militants from the so-called Troubles as a part of my PhD studies, I reflected that these actors are immersed today in an environment that excludes them precisely because of their past, or what is imagined about their past. They are constantly reminded through their everyday experiences that the(ir) past is intricately connected to and productive of the(ir) present and future. There are very visible and tangible effects for these people of the rhizomatic relationships of temporality: the status of these individuals as ‘historical Troubles militants’ often prevents them from getting jobs, and they are still regularly excoriated by politicians, the media, and society more broadly. Their involvement in violence decades ago is not (just) chronologically yesterday, but is (also) an embedded part of their today and tomorrow. In this context of thinking how temporalities could be entangled, we might consider an issue with much more extensive implications: the history of colonial empire. Looking at the emotions around slaver statues in the UK, we see that empire and coloniality is not just a historical fact that mostly came to an end 70 years ago through the dismantling of many formal colonial institutions, but is a present and ongoing lived reality that profoundly shapes and constructs the world that we live in today. Seeing time as linear – *yesterday happened before, today is happening now, tomorrow has not yet happened* – reproduces a discourse which subjugates the everyday lived experience of those for whom ‘the past’ has visibly material and ongoing affects: empire, formalised female subordination, US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, all of which might be perceived as being technically historical are not (just) ‘yesterday’ but produce profound ongoing affects. Although this is a starting point for post-colonial scholarship, I have had to

train myself to recognise and see how connected the (idea we have of the) past is to the present and future, as it does not come particularly easy for me – somebody with a lot of privilege!

My interviews with Prevent practitioners were similarly disruptive for how I considered time. As well as (what we consider to be) the past dynamically moulding the present and future – as I found talking to ex-militants – the past itself is also constituted through the present and future. The UK's Prevent counter-radicalisation programme is concerned with stopping supposedly risky people from materialising into 'terrorists'. Prevent's interventive arm, Channel, provides interventions for the most troubling Prevent cases. In my interviews with Prevent and Channel practitioners, with a couple of notable exceptions they decontextualised any external, environmental reasons why somebody in the UK might turn to violence. In the testimony of these officials, any structural or historical reasons for 'terrorism' are stripped of explanatory power: de-radicalisation practitioners consistently made the case to me that people turn to violence not because of systemic oppression or material injustices, but because they have a mental health problem, aren't effective enough at critical thinking, or are just in need of a job or better housing (Pettinger 2020a). Years of experience of structural violence through racial discrimination, hyper-aggressive foreign policy, or political disenfranchisement are rolled up and reconstituted as momentary personal grievances. In attempting to persuade 'the most risky' Channel cases away from engaging in violence (Pettinger 2020a), it is necessary for this programme that the past is forgotten. The conditions of the present – in this programme – are made up of nothing more than the conditions of the present as well as an imagination of a better future (Boukalas 2017). Memory is reconstructed through Prevent by situating the past as irrelevant to the conditions of the present. When the past is not taken seriously, meaningful political reform becomes unnecessary: after all, goes the logic, if conditions of the past do not produce the present, the conditions of the present can be merely recalibrated in order to find a resolution to the risk of protest and disruption. Going back to the point about empire, we could see the implications of forgetting the past when so many (privileged, white) people came out to defend slaver statues in the UK. This position is only possible where the abhorrence and depravity of slavery has been eviscerated from memory. The past is the past: it is irrelevant and meaningless. The moment is now! so let's think of a brighter future where we come together and forget what's gone before. I was told by one Channel practitioner – in a comment echoed by other officials – that despite criticisms of the contested Prevent strategy "people should just get on with it, get on board." Whilst substantive critique of Prevent exists because of its proclivity to mobilise racialised prejudice (see for example: Younis and Jadhav 2020; Heath-Kelly et al. 2021), this practitioner's framing delegitimises criticism that remembers histories of unequal power relations, inciting us to look only forward. (How we remember and remake) the past is foundationally important in the making of the present and the future.

Temporality is not chronology: time does not flow linearly from a past that was before, to a present which is now, to a future which has not yet arrived. It is complicated, and entangled, and co-constitutive: space and time flow dynamically, with the past shaped by the future through (reconstructing) memory – at the same time as the past is embedded in the present and the future. Contestations over time, memory, and history are central to how we understand our world, how we know each other, and how we interact with others. Thinking chronologically or in linear historical steps can discourage us from seeing how 'the past' is actually inscribed into the ongoing everyday, and from seeing how far memory remakes what we know of the past. Claims about the erasure of history are far from original, and indeed they situate much feminist and post-colonial scholarship: I often feel I have been profoundly ignorant for the majority of my life about how people with less privilege might experience the world. Recognising my privilege and understanding the conditions that enable it allows me to be more genuinely empathetic, to be more humble, and to work for a world based around inclusive justice. This feels like a huge challenge for somebody not well-practised at recognising how (what we make of) the past is imbricated in the present.

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