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Trends. Terrorist Brains

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Abstract: This Trends article discusses the construct of biological reductionism in the context of the case of Red Army Faction member Ulrike Meinhof. For the author, overly emphasizing the biological aspects of Ms. Meinhof's case might obscure legitimate grievances, and ultimately, lead to more cases of violence associated with terrorism.

Among other social roles, that of a terrorist who was a member of the Red Army Faction has been ascribed to Ulrike Meinhof. During the early 1970s, Ms. Meinhof is believed to have been instrumental in kidnapping and assassination against members of the West German social and political establishment. She is believed to have hung herself in a jail cell in 1976.

At this point, the construct of biological reductionism becomes salient. According to The New York Times, a prosecutor ordered that her brain be studied at the University of Tubingen. Apparently, "evidence of neurological abnormalities" was found, perhaps the residua of a neurosurgical procedure undertaken in 1962. Later on, in 1997, Meinhof's brain was moved to Magdeburg University for comparison with the brain of a "multiple killer."

The notion that brain dysfunction can lead to terrorism can be conceived of as a subjugating discourse. With dysfunction as a cause, the consequence also is more likely to be conceived of as dysfunctional. With brain as the cause, legitimate social and political precursors as grievances are ignored, discounted, or become illegitimate. Medicalization of cause takes the phenomenon out of the political playing field and places it safely within the walls of the asylum. In fact, the construct of terrorist brain may bar the goal of an asylum from oppression and repression by substituting in its place an environment that precludes an external or internal escape to freedom. None of this serves as an apologia for Ms. Meinhof but as a guarantee that there will be more like her. (See Hitchcock, J. (1996). *Dread of the strength of the instincts: A psychoanalytic contribution to the understanding of violence. Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 51, 102-116; Landler, M. German radical's daughter seeks brain kept after suicide. *The New York Times*, p. A9; Meloy, J. R., & McEllistrem, J. E. (1998). *Bombing and psychopathy: An integrative review. Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 43, 556-562; Shaw, E.D. (1986). *Political terrorists: Dangers of diagnosis and an alternative to the psychopathology model. International Journal of Law & Psychiatry*, 8, 359-368.) (Keywords: Biological Reductionism, Biology, Meinhof, Neurology, Terrorism.)