BEYOND THE CULTURE OF TERRORISM

Giovanna Borradori

Very minimally, a culture entails a system of values in terms of which the participants in it find identity, meaning, and purpose. In this sense, there is a reciprocal productive exchange by which we are always engaged in the creation of the culture that constitutes us in turn. Much more precisely than age, the concept of culture describes the way in which we express our agency, and thus conditions what we remember and forget, what we believe in and how we judge, organizing our actions and projections. A culture, in other words, both opens up and limits one’s sense of possibility.

It is hard, by contrast, to know what we really mean by terrorism. Clearly, it does not pick out a fact in the physical sense in which water names the chemical combination of two molecules of hydrogen with one of oxygen. But it is unclear whether it picks out a fact in the more comprehensive sense either, namely, as the worldly correlate of a true proposition. If I look at the proposition “Mars is a planet,” the fact I am indicating is that the celestial body we have referred to as Mars since ancient times has the features of a planet. Does the proposition “September 11, 2001 and March 11, 2004 are terrorist acts” truly describe a worldly correlate? My suspicion is that most people would not dispute that this is the case. I find this suspicion deeply disturbing given the crucial role that terrorism has played on the global political scene in the new millennium. In this essay, I shall call into question the legitimacy of taking terrorism as a self-evident expression and examine the vast array of political implications that derive from it.

The difficulty with defining terrorism starts with naming the individual occurrences of it. “September 11, 2001 and March 11, 2004 are terrorist acts” features only elliptical denominations. Indeed, many violent events that are classified as terrorist go by date, even though that is a problem too, often due to different linguistic conventions and sometimes to other more emotive reasons. For example the Madrid train bombings of March 11, 2004 are also known as 11/3, 3/11, M-11, and 11-M, while the attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, which occurred on September 11, 2001, often go by the abbreviated denomination “9/11,” perhaps reflecting the wish to mark the absolute uniqueness and monumentality of this event. Some other violent occurrences labeled as terrorist go by the name of their targets: this is the case of the attack against the USS Cole, which occurred on October 17, 2000, while it was refueling in the harbor of Aden, Yemen. Some others yet don’t have a proper name at all, which is the case with the suicide bombings of Israeli buses, carried out by Palestinian militants.

It is puzzling that such naming instability has not issued some doubt, or at least more critical caution, with respect to the meaning or concept that all those multiple names are supposed to pick out. For the expressions in use to designate “acts of terrorism” are not a finite set containing different names for the same thing. Keeping with celestial bodies, the problem with naming terrorist acts is not reducible to Frege’s celebrated distinction between sense (Sinne) and reference (Bedeutung), whose paradigmatic example is that there are two senses, or names, Morning Star and Evening Star, both referring to one reference, the planet Venus. The instability pertaining to the naming of instances of terrorism stretches in all directions, a fact which reflects an even deeper difficulty of establishing whether it refers to anything at all.

Let’s look again at the two propositions “Mars is a planet” and “September 11, 2001 and March, 11 2004 are terrorist acts.” I mentioned the former as an example of a true proposition in the sense that it describes a worldly correlate: Mars carrying the features of a planet. One could certainly suggest that the system of classification of celestial bodies based on the distinction between stars and planets is just one astronomical scheme of description. Mars could very well be conceived, as it has been or might still be, as a divine entity in another descriptive scheme. However, it seems safe to assume that most people would...
take for granted the validity of the astronomical classification and therefore accept that “Mars is a planet” describes a fact, in the sense of the worldly correlate of a true proposition. If it is true, as I suspect, that most people would accept the proposition “September 11, 2001 and March 11, 2004 are terrorist acts” as a factual description as well, it means that the system of classification and signification for so-called terrorist acts is taken for granted, and thus remains invisible, unquestioned, and anonymous. In what follows, I will examine the conditions under which the related expressions of “terrorism,” “terror” and “terrorist act” have come to be seen by the public, the major media networks, and the majority of the political establishment as self-evident.

Leaving astronomy behind, contrast the proposition “September 11, 2001 and March 11, 2004 are terrorist acts” with this other proposition: “September 11, 2001 and March 11, 2004 are criminal acts.” It seems to me much easier to look at the latter as a kind of factual description than the former. In one sense, there is a legal framework that defines the mass murder of innocent civilians in a time of peace a crime. But the proposition is a kind of factual description in the moral sense too, as random murder is universally taken to be deplorable, cruel, inhuman, and thus criminal.

In the same way that we tend to leave unexamined the legal and moral framework for the definition of mass murder as a criminal type of act, we seem to leave unexamined the system of classification and signification that defines September 11, 2001 and March 11, 2004 as terrorist acts. This is, I believe, a grave mistake. The problem is how to examine it.

One deflationary way to address this problem of the “background” is to claim that “September 11, 2001 and March 11, 2004 are terrorist acts” is a proposition indirectly descriptive of a state of affairs, because terrorism is a subspecies of crime. However, I would object, if terrorism is a subspecies of crime, it loses a distinctly political content, something that our culture has taken so seriously to accept that war be waged against it.

Since 9/11 terrorism has entered public discourse as a political category or concept, acquiring the dignity of a military enemy; in fact, the smartest, most intractable, and most dangerous military enemy of the world’s greatest superpower: the United States of America. This assumption implies that when we speak about terrorism, we should be discussing something different than large-scale organized crime, such as drug trafficking. But do we?

In August 2002, The New York Times reported a study conducted by the World Markets Research, a centre of economic “intelligence” based in London, which worked out a world ranking of countries at risk of terrorist attacks. It gave Colombia the first place and the United States the fifth. In this case just like innumerable other ones, the label “terrorism” covered over abysmal differences in context. Colombia’s tumultuous political front, copiously fraught with assassinations, is complex and fragmented: drug-lord mercenary armies fight alongside paramilitary private groups, hired by land-owners, against the historical terrorists (members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC), the police force, and the official army. How can this splintered play of forces, deeply entrenched in contradictions specific to Latin American modern history, be so easily assimilated to the attacks of 9/11, or the suicide bombers on the Jerusalem buses? Similarly, where is the common ground between Al Qaeda and the domestic terrorism in the United States? Interestingly, this parallel is seldom drawn, even though it should follow from the way in which the category of terrorism is used indiscriminately.

Even the most superficial examination, reveals little in common between the perpetrators of the two most devastating terrorist attacks in the American history: the one against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City. The ringleader of the nineteen hijackers responsible for the former was Mohammed Atta, Egyptian by birth, highly educated, multi-lingual, widely traveled. The mastermind and executor of the latter was Timothy McVeigh, a poorly educated white suprematist brought up in rural America, strictly mono-lingual, who never set foot outside of the country. If associating Mohammed Atta with Abu Mustab Al Zarqawi, the Jordanian born hooded executioner of so
many foreign hostages in Iraq, is also a slippery slope.

Jürgen Habermas identified this issue as a crucial one in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, when I had the pleasure and the honor of gathering his reflections. Habermas reconstructs the political content of terrorism as a function of the realism of its goals, so that terrorism acquires political content only retrospectively. In national liberation movements it is quite common for those who are considered terrorists, and possibly even convicted as terrorists, to become, in a sudden turn of events, the new political leaders. The recently deceased key-figure in Middle Eastern politics, Yasser Arafat, is a case in point.

For the conservative ideologues of the Israeli government, including the current prime minister, Ariel Sharon, Arafat was a terrorist. For the rest of the world he was the President of the Palestinian Authority, on the way to becoming, as peace agreements hopefully proceeded, the President of a sovereign Palestinian state. The same can be said for one of the founding fathers of the state of Israel, Menachem Begin. At the head of the military Zionist faction known as Irgun, Begin was the mastermind of the Jewish uprising against the British authorities controlling Palestine, which began in 1944, increased in pace and scope immediately after World War II, and continued until late 1947. Begin ordered many of the Irgun’s operations, including the famous Acre prison breakout, in which members of the underground organization were freed, and the destruction of the central British administrative offices in the King David Hotel, which caused the death of ninety-one people, among which were fifteen Jews. Following the establishment of the State of Israel, in 1948, Begin disbanded the Irgun and became the leader of the parliamentary opposition until 1977.

Habermas’s argument seems to me to bring into light an essential point: namely, that terrorism cannot be treated solely as a military issue. Discussing and clarifying its status and theoretical complexity is not an academic exercise, but an urgent, perhaps the most urgent, political question on the present agenda.

Take one of the official legal definitions of “terrorist activity,” widely adopted by the FBI and the CIA as well as the Departments of State and Defense. Terrorist activity, the document reads,

> Are violent acts intended to intimidate or coerce a “civilian” population or intended to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion.

This definition does not address or engage any of the conceptual hurdles that emerge as soon as the notion of terrorism enters political discourse. It is not clear, for example, what separates civilian and military targets in the presence of terrorism, which is, for example, one of the historical obstacles to the peace process between Israeli and Palestinians.

Also, I pause at how cavalierly the official definition of terrorism presents the notion of “intimidation,” both of civilians and legitimate governments. If it is true that intimidation is the chief characteristic of acts of terrorism, it is also a major component of military strategy in war. What separates, then, terrorism from war? Has there ever been a war completely free of terrorism, namely, the killing or abuse of civilians for the sake of the intimidation or swaying of a government? Were the carpet bombings of London, at the hand of the Nazis, or of Dresden, Germany, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, at the hands of the allies, acts of war or acts of terrorism?

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These questions bring me to yet another conceptual difficulty that the official definition of terrorism does not even touch upon: the possibility that a legitimate government commits acts of terrorism. Can we draw a line between different kinds of terrorism in terms of the distinction between state and non-state terrorism? Are their respective legitimacies different in kind or just in degree? What does one make of the other important distinction between national and international terrorism, upheld after 9/11 as a truism? Once terrorism erupts on the geo-political scene, can we still separate clearly between institutions such as the army and the police, or the political states of war and peace? Finally, and perhaps most ominously, are we ever at peace in the face of the potential occurrence of a terrorist attack?

The blurring of all these distinctions and conceptual boundaries exposes the global system of communication to a new set of responsibilities. Some publications seem to have recognized them and some have not. In the weeks after 9/11 the issue arose briefly to the surface of the major media organizations only, unfortunately, to be silenced shortly thereafter. For example, in October 2001 CNN’s website displayed a self-defensive announcement on the use of the term “terrorism” that speaks to the ideological constraints on free speech that have emerged in the wake of 9/11 as well as of CNN’s own complete lack of critical caution on this matter.

There have been false reports that CNN has not used the word “terrorist” to refer to those who attacked the World Trade Center and Pentagon. In fact, CNN has consistently and repeatedly referred to the attackers and hijackers as terrorists, and it will continue to do so.

As acute media critic Norman Solomon noticed, the American media simply took for granted, in the aftermath of the attacks of 9/11, the legal and very generic definition quoted above. “It’s notable,” he wrote, “that American news outlets routinely define terrorism the same way that U.S. government officials do. Usually, editors assume that reporters don’t need any formal directive because the appropriate usage is simply understood.”

To be fair some editors did feel the burden of responsibility but refrained from taking sides, hiding their recommendations behind the many loose ends of the official definition. The Wall Street Journal is a good example. Here is the memo used by its reporters regarding the use of the term “terrorism:”

The term terrorism should be used carefully, specifically to describe those people and non-governmental organizations that plan and execute acts of violence against civilians and non combatant targets.

By contrast, the British news agency Reuters has been taking a much more thoughtful and responsible position since before the tragic events of 9/11. The following directives confirm its effort to present terrorism as a critical question rather than a neutral descriptive term.

As part of a policy to avoid the use of emotive words, we do not use terms like terrorist and freedom fighter unless they are in a direct quote or are otherwise attributable to a third party. We do not characterize the subjects of news stories but instead report the actions, identify the background so that readers can make their own decisions based on the facts.

Reuters’ long-standing policy was reiterated by an internal document of September 2001, which pushed even further its critical stance. In the turmoil of that moment, it courageously stated: “One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.” Faced with conspicuous pressure by a number of foreign governments to describe their enemies as “terrorists,” Reuter’s executives very candidly answered: “Our policy is to avoid the use of emotional terms and not make value judgments concerning the facts we attempt to report accurately and fairly.”

Reuters’ invitation to its reporters to simply refrain from using the term “terrorism” is founded on a substantive position loaded with moral and political implication: terrorism is not a description but a judgment. This is the position that I wish to explicitly articulate and defend here.

Both “description” and “judgment” as well as the distinction between them have been the subject of debates in the philosophy of language for centuries on end. My hope is to have distilled a rather innocuous use of them aimed at clarifying what is at stake when we
speak and read of terrorism. In saying that terrorism is not a description I simply mean that it isn’t a referring expression: an expression that picks out a definite meaning or concept, emerging from a well articulated system of rationally grounded beliefs. By contrast, a judgment is a complex discursive structure, which is useful to very briefly elucidate.

In general, a judgment such as “Ted believes that snow is white” includes Ted’s mental state (the belief that snow is white) as well as the propositional content of the state (that snow is white), which is independent of the believer. This act-object ambiguity, characteristic of all judgments, reveals that judgments are two-pronged: they denote the “act” of judging and the “object” that the act of judging addresses. This ambiguity is crucial to my discussion of terrorism. If it is true that “September 11, 2001 and March 11, 2004 are terrorist acts” is a judgment, we ought to evaluate it from the act and the object perspectives. From the object end, we have to examine the judgment “September 11, 2001 and March 11, 2004 are terrorist acts” as a proposition: as such, it will be either true or false, stand in logical relationships with others, and be composed of concepts or other judgments. We have already established how difficult it is to know what one means when using the expression “terrorism,” for it is not a description picking out a definite meaning. In the same way that I may not be able to believe that the building in front of me is the library unless I understand the concept of library, I may not be able to identify this or the other bombings or beheadings as terrorist acts unless I understand the concept of terrorism. Sure enough I can have beliefs about libraries as well as about specific acts of violence. For instance, I may very well believe, upon entering it, that this specific building holds many books. If this building happens to be the library, I can certainly hold the belief that the library has many books. Yet, without some sort of pre-understanding, I still do not have a fully articulated idea as to what a library is. By the same token, I may hold all kind of demonstrated beliefs about specific violent acts commonly tagged as terrorist: for example, that they entail a disregard for human life. However, as it is the case with the library, the sum of all these demonstrated beliefs will not bring me to the fully developed concept of terrorism that I need in order to hold the belief that “September 11 and March 11 are terrorist acts.”

I will now shift the focus on the second component of judgments, which is the “act” of judging or the mental state that such an act corresponds to. Obviously, such act of judging carries the mark of the beholder, which is not only the individual but the institutions, government agencies, media apparatus as well as the political elite in charge of major policy decisions. This responsibility is not just cognitive but moral as well. To offer a judgment is to take implicit responsibility for the argumentative grounds on which one believes in it. This is particularly important in the case of terrorism. To make “September 11 and March 11 are terrorist acts” into a meaningful judgment, one has to regard it as argumentatively viable and then take responsibility for the arguments supporting it. This discursive dimension in the strong Habermasian sense, where discourse tags a process of integrated and rationally structured exchange of beliefs, is unfortunately minimal in current political discussions of terrorism.

Since 9/11, terrorism has been pointed at as an independent substance of sorts, a strategy that is revealed by the interchangeable use of the expressions, terrorism and “terror.” This is not just a rhetorical twist but evidence of what I call the essentialization, or reification, of a heterogeneous array of phenomena, motivations, beliefs, into one self-contained and self-evident entity, called terror.

The reification of terrorism into terror gives the illusion that the terrifying effect of terrorism works as a tidal wave, whose destructive power remains the same whether there are people who drown as a result of it or not. By contrast, I believe that the terror that terrorism generates is a feature of the symbolic order: the dimension in which a culture communicates and, in doing so, works out a sense of itself. Jacques Derrida noticed it during our first conversation in his downtown apartment three weeks after the collapse of the World Trade Center. I simply conveyed to him that September 11 seemed to me a major event, one of the most important historical events I would have witness to in my lifetime. But not even such a simple statement was cautious enough for him, for reasons that became more and more evi-
dent as the months and the years passed. He replied:

When you say “September 11” you are already citing, are you not? You are inviting me to speak here by recalling, as if in quotation marks, a date or a dating that has taken over our public space and our private lives for five weeks now. Something fait date, I would say in a French idiom, something marks a date, a date in history; that is always what’s most striking, the very impact of what is at least felt, in an apparently immediate way, to be an event that truly marks, that truly makes its mark, a singular and, as they say here, “unprecedented” event. I say “apparently immediate” because this “feeling” is actually less spontaneous than it appears: it is to a large extent conditioned, constituted, if not actually constructed, circulated at any rate through the media by means of a prodigious techno-socio-political machine.

What Derrida calls the techno-socio-political machine elicits critical reflection. By repeating the traumatic memory, victims typically try to reassure themselves that they can withstand the impact of what may still be to come. This self-destructive tendency, which impedes the victims of severe trauma to put it behind themselves and get on with their lives becomes a destructive weapon in the hands of the information and political systems. Since 9/11, we have all been forced to reassure ourselves, with the result that terror appears less a past event than a future possibility.

If this is so, terrorism does not simply crash over our lives like a tidal wave; to the contrary, our media, indeed all of us, the citizens of the largest liberal democracy in the Western hemisphere, have made space for it, and keep making space for it. This “us” spans as large as the political culture in which we exist as participants, speakers and listeners: the culture whose system of values provides us with a sense of agency and purpose. It is this very culture that has constructed terrorism as we know it today. It is what I call the “culture of terrorism” that has given it the symbolic validation it could have only hoped to get and without which its political effectiveness would be severely curtailed, if not annihilated.

The culture of terrorism points thus at what I see as the unsettling collusion between the culture expressed by current political discourse and the culture of the terrorists. Since 9/11 and the US declaration of “war on terror,” the culture of terrorism has granted it the political standing that the terrorists themselves could only have bet on achieving. Since then, the same culture of terrorism has affirmed terror as an essence, an independent substance that stands against us, in some cave on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan or perhaps at the outskirts of a major urban center. In any case, out there, in the world. This culture has essentialized terrorism, objectified it, reified it, and in so doing erased its own productive function in relation to it.

I don’t wish to suggest that terrorism is a mental event located exclusively in our minds. My point is not to deny the unacceptable harm of the attacks, from 9/11 and before 9/11 until March 11 and beyond. These are tragedies, which caused irretrievable human loss and forever wrecked lives and families, entire communities, promises and hopes. Acts of massive violence, in effect crimes against humanity, such as 9/11 or March 11 do exist, and need to be prosecuted without mercy, within the legal framework of which our tradition of constitutional democratic trust goes legitimately proud. This means that the perpetrators and masterminds of these attacks have to be brought before and International Criminal Court, representing the plethora of nationalities of the victims, where they must be prosecuted as criminals and not glamorized and validated as military adversaries.

My claim is that the culture of terrorism has let the discourse pushed by the terrorists take a prominent and unexamined role. And by essentializing terrorism, the culture of terrorism engages in a double defeat: not only does it represent terrorism according to its own expectations of success, granting it political dignity and aggrandizing its range. But also, and even more disturbingly, in doing so it fulfills its own need for self-reassurance, cohesion, and strength.

One could elect different explanatory models for the rise of such a need for self-reassurance. Adopting a genealogical perspective, I see it as the result of the peculiar political situation created by the end the Cold War. In the early 1990s, American foreign policy seemed to be lacking a cause strong enough for a na-
tional mobilization, which, I suggest, left the field open for the success of two dominant conservative theories: the end of history and the clash of civilizations.

In the *End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama claims that liberal democracy may constitute the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the final form of human government. “What we are witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or a passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such.”¹⁴ In Fukuyama’s over-simplification of the Hegelian intuition, the world has become ready to harmonize political regimes and styles, and to fall under the affectionate embrace of Western liberal democracy.

The declared loss of relevance of historical progression and perspective seems to be the direct premise for Samuel Huntington’s thesis on the clash of civilizations. Huntington did not need Fukuyama to reach the same conclusions. However, the fact that they might share a common theoretical horizon helps reveal the Weltanschauung of those years, the set of basic assumptions that contributed to producing the political discourse in which seemed natural to declare war against terror. In his widely read and discussed essay, entitled “The Clash of Civilizations,” appeared in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993 (an expression Huntington owes to Bernard Lewis’s conservative reading of the history of Islamic civilization in terms of progressive decadence), Huntington describes world politics as having undergone a radical shift: conflicts, he wrote, will be increasingly anchored in cultural and religious motives rather than in secular ideological differences or economic inequality. Published in the same year as the first terrorist attack against the World Trade Center by a fundamentalist Islamic group, Huntington’s essay identified Islamic civilization as the most likely challenger of the West in the twenty-first century.

If the attacks of 9/11 gave American foreign policy a sharp focus, they also revived Huntington’s picture in bright colors. Despite President Bush’s explicit denial that Islam as a culture and a religion carried direct responsibility, his Manichean rhetoric—from the injunction to take sides, “with us or against us!” to the infamous taxonomy of nations aligned along a transcendental moral axis of good and evil—did not much in the way of dispelling the public’s perception that, in the end, a clash of civilizations might be involved. It also convinced traditionally secular European allies that 9/11 revealed the conflict between two political theologies. Jacques Derrida explains it well:

> We have been speaking of a strange war without war. It often takes the form, at least on the surface, of a confrontation between two groups with a strong religious identification. On the one side the only great European-style democratic power in the world that still has at once the death penalty in its judicial system and, despite the separation in principle between church and state, a fundamental biblical (and primarily Christian) reference in its official political discourse and the discourse of its political leaders “God bless America,” the reference to “evildoers” or to the “axis of evil” and the first rallying cry (which was later retracted) of “infinite justice,” would be but a few signs among so many others. And facing them, on the other side, an “enemy” that identifies itself as Islamic, Islamic extremist or fundamentalist, even if this does not necessarily represent authentic Islam and all Muslims are far from identifying with it.¹⁵

Derrida’s words reflect a mainstream European perception and negative evaluation of the tone assumed by the American political discourse after 9/11. This is the background against which the crisis between the Old Europe, as Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has defined it, and the US, is to be read; a crisis whose open wounds are still plaguing the destiny of millions of people, certainly in the European Community and in Iraq too.

What seems unacceptable from a European point of view is the American allegiance to a religious rhetoric that engages and validates the language of Islamic fundamentalism. A Marxist philosopher, Agnes Heller, has described the workings of fundamentalism as an ideological machine of manipulation and indoctrination. From her angle, in the context of so called Islamic fundamentalist terrorist groups, Islam performs the function of ideology.

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The two totalitarian terror regimes of the twentieth century, Nazism and Bolshevism, were the misfits of European culture. Yet just as one cannot understand the Soviet Union from the texts of Marx or Nazism from the texts of Gobineau or Nietzsche, so it is absurd to attempt to understand bin Laden from the text of the Koran. Indeed, the Koran endorses jihad, Karl Marx urged the dictatorship of the proletariat, and Nietzsche praised the blond beast. So what? Terror regimes need traditional texts for ideological reasons; they use and misuse them as ideologies. No text should be read from the position of its ideological implementation.

There is a whole tradition of thinking, spanning Adorno to Hannah Arendt, which analyzed, studied, and ultimately explained the process of ideological manipulation in the two most powerful expressions of totalitarianism of the twentieth century: Nazism and Stalinism. Now, obviously, the question is whether these terror groups are tokens of a totalitarian structure.

Arendt’s model of interpretation of totalitarianism seems to fit eerily the terrorist picture. One of her key-ideas is that while tyranny promotes lawlessness, totalitarianism promotes the inexorability of laws which are presented as either laws of nature (the biological laws of racial superiority embraced by the Nazi regime) or laws of a strictly deterministic interpretation of history (the economic laws of class struggle). The “total terror” practiced in the extermination camps and the gulags is, for Arendt, not the means but the essence of totalitarian government. In her reading, total terror is not the physical elimination of whomever is recognized to be different but the eradication of difference in people, namely of their individuality and capacity for autonomous action. The monopoly of power sought by totalitarian regimes “can be achieved and safeguarded only in a world of conditioned reflexes, of marionettes.”17 Contrary to Nazism and Stalinism, which both employed a secular frame of reference, contemporary global terrorists, broadly associated with the heading of Al-Qaeda, take religion to be the unshakeable nomological order. Religious law is presented as the absolute divine injunction, in light of which the world becomes a world of conditioned reflexes, of marionettes. Marionettes are the perpetrators, in their total indifference to the world that they have to negotiate as they acquire the skills to carry out their criminal actions. We have all been haunted by the tales of the neighbors of those nineteen hijackers, who appeared well educated middle to upper class men, able to function in American society, to take out pizza, make an online reservation, and attend a flying school. But the victims, too, are marionettes in the totalitarian frame of terrorism. They have no face, no gender, no promise as human beings.

Totalitarianism is thus a radical silencing of pluralism obtained by the political implementation of fundamentalism—whether it is secular or religious. This silencing is achieved by the deployment of two convergent strategies: the imposition of a state of constant alert and the demonization of the enemy, so that anyone, any “other,” is viewed as a potential enemy disguised as a friend, a neighbor, or simply a bypasser. My hypothesis is that the kind of terrorists groups associated with the name Al-Qaeda are a twenty-first century mutation of totalitarianism, which use religion in the classical way in which totalitarian structures have used other discourses such as race or class struggle: as an ideology. If this is indeed the case, to engage terrorism on the terrain of religion is a token of what I see as the silent collusion of the culture of terrorism with the terrorist groups that it seeks to combat. The commitment to a starkly polarized picture of the geo-political situation, loaded with religious overtones, validates the terrorist ideological manipulation, so that terrorist groups are free to achieve what is probably one of their main objectives: to infiltrate the Muslim population at large and become the catalysts of the Muslim world’s frustration toward the collapse of the dream of a pan-Arab state, the defeat of pan-Arab nationalism, and the general authoritarianism of Arab regimes.

Yet, there is another effect of such silent collusion. Speaking in terms of “with us or against us,” dividing people and the world into good and evil, and finally implementing policies that substantively reduce civic freedoms, makes liberal democracies into progressively totalitarian structures.

There is no doubt that the explicit declarations of the terrorists responsible for the attacks of 9/11 and March 11 reject modernity
and secularization in the name of religion. However, the liberal democratic front seems to be weakening in its allegiance to modernity and secularization in the name of a Manichean, radically polarized conceptual scheme. The collusion at the heart of the “culture of terrorism” seems a new millenary form of fundamentalism, which I see as a reaction to the deterritorialization and decentering that both the Arab world and the largest liberal democracy in the West express in the face of globalization.

Here is where I see, with Habermas and others, the centrality of Kant’s political writings to the present moment. For Kant offered the most comprehensive description of the republican ideals of the Enlightenment, first and foremost the secularization of politics. It is to Kant and his cosmopolitanism that we have to turn, I believe, if we hope to change the militarism, Manichaeism, and unilateralism of current political discourse. It is only by expressing unbending respect for the juridical and political system structuring international law that we’ll be able to reduce the violence of the culture of terrorism.

Kant famously wrote that the “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another.” Rather than a coherent set of beliefs, the Enlightenment marks a break with the past, which becomes available only on the basis of the individual’s independence in the face of authority. Precisely this independence is the mark of modernity. “If it is asked whether we at present live in an enlightened age, the answer is: No, but we do live in an age of enlightenment.”

Kant’s statement seems to tackle the enemy number one of all totalitarian structures, including what we call terrorism: freedom understood as affirmation of one’s own critical perspective, of one’s own difference. So modernity is all contained in this very specific understanding of freedom: thinking for oneself, relying on one’s own ability to judge, considering one’s identity as an open project. How to understand this openness has caused a great deal of debate, although it is clear that it is incompatible with any version of fundamentalism.

The Enlightenment, for Kant marks the liberation of humanity as a whole from blind obedience. Enlightenment, he wrote “is the freedom to make public use of one’s reason in all matters.” And as any individual “naturally” embraces her autonomy of judgment if external conditions allow it, the use of public freedom considerably stimulates private reason, or the exercise of freedom in the privacy of one’s own mind.

Kant moves to cosmopolitanism by simply extending this line of argument. If public freedom stimulates, or is even the condition for, private freedom, why not extend this logic on a planetary scale? Nation-states, as enlarged versions of individuals, ought to benefit from public, that is international, freedom, which will grant them the possibility of productive dialogue and argumentation. Obviously planetary public freedom needs to be legislated, which explains Kant’s seminal effort in the direction of the foundation of international right.

Kant’s premise, that we’re all side by side, so that, in the ideal situation, we should all acquire world citizenship speaks to me, at this moment, with great power. No unconditional support should ever be asked, no war waged on private motives.

The request for unconditional support advanced by the U.S. administration not only to its political allies but to the “civilized world,” is for Habermas only one feature of the post-9/11 era and, I would add, of the culture of terrorism that inhabits it.

For at least three decades, financial and political globalization has put pressure on the organizational form of the nation-state conceived as territorial state. This aging poses the question of how long the form of the nation-state will last, and eventually, what will replace it. It would be a mistake, a grave mistake for the nations of the twenty-first century to anchor their identity in anything else than what Habermas has called “constitutional patriotism,” where loyalty to the constitution simply attests for the consensual participation of all citizens. Such loyalty also expresses loyalty to the idea of universal rights that he takes as the condition for the coexistence of human beings, particularly in a complex and multicultural society. A few months after the fall of the Berlin Wall, which led to the unification of the

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two German republics, Habermas wrote the following:

If we do not free ourselves from the diffuse notions about the nation-state, if we do not rid ourselves of the pre-political crutches of nationality and community of fate, we will be unable to continue unburdened on the very path that we have long since chosen: the path to a multicultural society, the path to a federal state with wide regional differences and strong federal power, and above all the path to a unified European state of many nationalities. A national identity which is not based predominantly on republican self-understanding and constitutional patriotism necessarily collides with the universalist rules of mutual coexistence for human beings.\(^{18}\)

The notion of constitutional patriotism opens onto the possibility of a new cosmopolitan order, the search for which is, I believe, a first step in the resistance against the culture of terrorism. In my view, any defensible and respectable understanding of terrorism must be consistent with the founding principles and aspirations of a cosmopolitan nation, committed to respecting international law and the impartial administration of justice. Aspirations painlessly articulated after World War II and imperfectly embedded in the regional and global legal framework as well as in the institutions of international governance. For only under this lens, globalization can redeem itself and turn from the nihilistic pursuit of economic injustice to the progressive effort towards universal political justice.

ENDNOTES

1. For the purpose of this essay, I am seeking only a minimal definition of “culture” without engaging any of the major multi-disciplinary debates surrounding it, from anthropology to ethnography, from semiotics to cultural studies. In his classical The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973), Clifford Geertz declares his debt to Max Weber and his view of the human agent as suspended in “webs of significance” he or she is responsible for spinning (5). In this sense, culture is the production as well as the self-conscious evaluation of human possibilities in light of a system of values—ethical, moral, political, or aesthetic—that reflect ideals about what human life is or ought to be.


6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. I refer here to the much debated fact-value distinction, which runs through the history of Western moral philosophy for centuries. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, the distinction reached a point of formal clarification in the work of A. J. Ayer and R.M. Hare (see A.J. Ayer, Language Truth and Logic [New York: Dover, 1949] and R. M. Hare, The Language of Morals [PLACE: Publisher, 1952]). For those who acknowledge this distinction, evaluative terms have, in language, a different function than so called “descriptions” of the world. While the latter state facts the former don’t.

11. The question of the role of mediatic technology in what I have called the symbolic dimension is an important one, both in general and with regard to current debates on the nature of terrorism. See, Jean Baudrillard, The Spirit of Terrorism (New York: Verso, 2002) and Slavoj i ek, Welcome to the Desert of the Real (New York: Verso, 2002).

13. I take a loosely Foucaultian path here that would need to be methodologically articulated further. It is inspired by Michel Foucault only to the extent that I am interested in his notion of “historical a priori,” which governs the discourses of a period (see, his *The Birth of the Clinic*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith [New York: Pantheon, 1973], and *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith [New York: Pantheon, 1972]). Also, in my emphasis of the concept of culture, like Foucault I do not aim at describing how any already constituted subject comes to evaluate terrorism, but rather concentrate on the conceptual structures that allow subjects to emerge against the backdrop of that implicit evaluation. In particular, it is Foucault’s later work that interests me at this junction. In texts such as *The History of Sexuality*, trans. R. Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), he articulates the possibility of studying how discursive and non-discursive practices produce specific forms of subjectivity, or self-understandings, in specific historical circumstances.


