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Terror and its representations

- Archives - Archives Générales 2006 - 2022 - 2008 - N°16 Decembre/december/2008 - Revues, livres, etc. -

Date de mise en ligne : Friday 28 November 2008

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*WHAT are the origins and nature of terror and terrorism in the United States and beyond ? This book of essays about the history and contemporary reality of terror reveals little-known aspects of a compelling subject. Since the American and French Revolutions, governments and their opponents have used terror and terrorism for different political reasons. We learn how terror and terrorism have marked the evolution of social values and have entered into cultural expression of all types — literature, music, television, cinema — and have influenced the formation of ideologies and political institutions. The authors of the introduction and eighteen chapters comprising *Terror and Its Representations* show how a sensitive subject can be treated with conviction while maintaining the critical distance necessary for serious debate.*

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From the Introduction: “Languages of Terror”

Any discussion of “terror” and “terrorism” must be careful to consider the terms and language used. These words evoke such strong feelings that the definition of terms required of any study of social and political life must be done with special care. Because of the emotional contexts out of which any discussion or study of terror arises, the “languages” or “discourses” of terror and on terror are necessarily part of the general phenomenon of terror as a psychic, emotional and physical reality.

Most generally, *terror is a willed, intentional effort to influence behavior through the use of intimidation and physical force*. As such, terror is essentially political. Although the use of terror for political purposes is often said to be the expression of ideological “fanaticism,” it is more accurate to admit that terror and terrorism are exercised rationally in the pursuit of political objectives. This is true of both anti-establishment terror and terror used as an arm of state policy. Ascribing “irrational” motives to terror is most often simply a way of discrediting the motives of its perpetrators. However, it is also clear that uses of terror and terrorism can and must be understood in relation to specific social and political situations and according to the ideological predispositions of those who use it. Such are the ambiguities of social analysis.

The essays included in the present volume discuss specific historical instances of terror. The overall objective of the book is to provide an implicitly comparative perspective on the reality of the uses of terror and on how these uses have been variously represented. The idea is not to reveal the “relativity” of terror and terrorism, but rather to allow a greater and deeper understanding of political practices that appear to be universal throughout recorded human history.

Because political actors of all political persuasions have used terror – whether progressive or reactionaries, egalitarians or elitists, libertarians or authoritarians – it must be concluded that terror and its uses are universal phenomena. It is for this reason that a certain intellectual honesty should force us to be circumspect when discussing it. To simply denounce terror and terrorism cannot produce greater understanding of the phenomenon.

And yet, it should be obvious that such examinations of the idea and reality of terror in the history of the United States and elsewhere are related to the present political (or geopolitical) conjuncture. This is not simply because George W. Bush launched his “war against terror” in September 2001, but because the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the weakening of the so-called socialist state political systems, created a need for a new ideological focus.

More than twenty years ago, Edward Said published an excellent article, “The Essential Terrorist,” in which he explained how the rhetoric denouncing terrorism is part of the maintenance of social control and political indoctrination in the industrialized countries. He implies that it is not so much a question of *defense* against outstanding enemies as it is of the effective *designation of enemies*. [1]

The principle of the scapegoat is well known: in order to transcend divisions within one’s group, enmities are projected onto others. However, beyond the notion and the reality of scapegoating, there is a systemic imperative: all systems of exploitation, and thus of authoritarian domination, require the cultivation of the systems’ own deadly enemies. Once designated, the enemies become an object of terror and must be combated not only because of the physical threat they may or may not represent, but also because of the psychic consequences of the malevolence that has been projected onto them. It is here that a cultural dimension of terror and its uses develops. In their imaginations, the perpetrators become the victims. Hannah Arendt makes this point, referring to the Nazi terror and how those who administratively acquiesced to it were led to say: “What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders!” instead of saying “What horrible things I did to people!” [2]

Unfortunately, the general discussion of these realities can easily remain at an excessively high level of abstraction. And excessive generalization is exactly what must be avoided when dealing with such questions. It is for this reason that empirical historical analysis, literary criticism and cultural studies are so important.

[...]

There are examples of scientifically based research and reflection elucidating terror and terrorism, but that are, regrettably, largely excluded from public discussion. For example, the work of Joel Kovel, historian and psychoanalyst, is important to mention in this regard. Kovel’s book, *Red Hunting in the Promised Land*, shows the ideological and psychic continuity between the genocidal attitudes and policies concerning Native Americans and “anti-communism” of all types. For him, the United-Statesian mind is afflicted by an “enemy psychosis” of which anti-communism is only one example. This is an identifiable mentality produced by a complex of external events “interacting with a penchant for demonization which has been deeply inscribed in our national experience. [3]

The work of Richard Slotkin is also worthy of special attention. His use of literature in demonstrating the emotional and cultural evolution of the population of the United States is fundamental. Slotkin reveals how thoroughly cultural expression in the United States came to be infused with a profound existential anxiety rooted in fear of others. Already in the early 1970s, he observed that those attempting to understand the violence that appears to be endemic to life in the United States were only beginning “to say to us what artists like Melville and Faulkner had earlier prophesied: that myths reach out of the past to cripple, incapacitate, or strike down the living.” Slater has documented how “The first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation; but the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience.” [4]

These are scholars that have done inspiring work in explaining what I call “the culture of violent retribution” – a culture endowed with liberal ideas, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the impulse to apply these ideas in a purifying confrontation with an arbitrarily identified and abstractly defined evil.

In effect, perhaps the most profound responses to the question of the “normality” of terror and terrorism can be made by cultural studies. Whether in terms of the general psychological dispositions of the population, structured by existential conditions of all types, or in terms of how such dispositions and conditions are depicted or suggested in the arts and literature, *cultural representations*, or rather *expressions*, of terror go to the heart of the question.

[...]

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Seen from a more anthropological standpoint, the practices of terror are part of a cultural matrix that invites and, indeed, demands study. The examples are too numerous to list, although some come easily to mind, such as the practice of lynching, the folkloric “tar and feathering”, and vigilante justice on the frontier. Other examples are less known, but just as emblematic of how the victims of terror have often had the onus of terrorism projected onto them (as in the case of the “Molly Maguires” in the 1870s). [5]

There are ambiguities and even contradictions in the political and juridical evolution of United States institutions that must be carefully analyzed when attempting to understand the functioning of political democracy in this country. How to explain, for example, the “sacralization” of the United States Constitution and the recurrent tendency to contravene its most cherished principles? And what is the role of religion, as an influence or justification, in the use of terror?

From the Alien and Sedition Acts (1798) to the USA PATRIOT Act (2001), infringements on the Bill of Rights and limitations on civil liberties have been periodically legislated or decreed by the Congress and the president and have been upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court. The use of assassination and torture has been accepted, the right of *habeas corpus* removed, and free speech and association denied. Do these tendencies constitute exceptions or coherence and continuity in the historical evolution of the United States?

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In light of these historical experiences, it is essential to begin any debate about terror and terrorism with a look at the French Revolution. For most scholars, it seems clear that transition from feudal society to modern political institutions involved a complex of social and economic interests and ideological orientations that still exist today.

[...]

At the very least, it can be said that terror and terrorism are nothing new. Since the French Revolution, the contours of the debate concerning them have remained essentially the same, but we are constrained to continually define and reconsider the terms of the debate. Most importantly, we must understand both the changes and the continuities in the uses of terror and the responses made to it.

In this regard, the remarks made by an observer writing in the recent past can be helpful. Speaking of the 1930s in somewhat nostalgic terms, he said of that time of economic and political crisis: “Those were happy days. People still knew how to read. One could still think aloud. All that seems to be over now. The War has so drained everyone, demanded so much patience, so much courage, has so multiplied glorious as well as inglorious horrors that [people] no longer have the energy even to look violence in the face, to see it at its source.” More pointedly, this observer said, taking the United States as an example: “Respect for law and liberty has served to justify police suppression of

strikes in America; today it serves even to justify [...] military suppression in Palestine and the development of an American empire in the Middle East.”

These observations date from 1947, expressed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in the first paragraph of his book *Humanism and Terror*. [6] He said many other relevant things, as did George Orwell, Victor Serge and others at the time. These were critical voices that stood above the sectarian tensions and ideological rigidities in the “east-west” conflict during the post-war world (notably producing the, perhaps self-contradictory, notion of a “balance of terror”). We are now in another phase of geopolitical change, but the rhetoric and the modalities of terror as a political instrument do not seem to have significantly changed.

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The importance of the essays included in this book is that we can go beyond the idea that things “do not seem to have significantly changed” towards a more informed understanding of historical and cultural continuities in the midst of unique situations and structural mutations. In the wake of September 11, 2001, we can more fully appreciate the remark made by Malcolm X concerning the “chickens coming home to roost.” Unexpected, dramatically tragic events often result from the accumulation of ill-considered, insensitive or malicious practices.

The point is that this is a continuing, perennial discussion because our world remains that in which Merleau-Ponty and others struggled six decades and more ago. And yet, at the present time, the planet Earth is confronted by social and political changes in relation to which our reflections about the United States may become useful. Historical scholarship and cultural analysis are needed more than ever in the attempt to understand the Terror accompanying forced consensus and a generalized “dumbing down” caused by intellectual debilitation in the media and certain changes in educational processes. The “states of terror,” whether national, geopolitical or psychic, have united to produce situations that every thinking person must consider seriously.

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(Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée) [publications at univ-montp3.fr](http://publications.at.univ-montp3.fr)

[1] See Edward Saïd, "The Essential Terrorist," in Edward Saïd and Christopher Hitchens (eds.), *Blaming the Victims: Spurious Scholarship and the Palestinian Question*, London, Verso, 1987, pp. 149-158.

[2] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York, Penguin Books, 1994 [1963], p. 106.

[3] Joel Kovel, *Red Hunting in the Promised Land: Anticommunism and the Making of America*, New York, Basic Books, 1994, p. 236.

[4] Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier*, New York, Middleton, Wesleyan University Press, 1973, p. 5.

[5] The "Molly McGuires" was a fictitious, secret terrorist organization imagined and propagated in the press by a powerful industrialist in order to justify the brutal repression of a labor-union movement. Nineteen workers were executed as a result. The industrialist himself controlled the judicial process. I discuss this example in my *Histoire du fascisme aux États-Unis*, Paris, Éditions CNT-RP, 2008.

[6] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist Problem*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1969 [1947], translated by John O'Neill, p. xiii.