
METAPHYSICS OF VIOLENCE AND TERROR

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INTRODUCTION

Just very recently, amidst the fateful crisis in Libya, the embattled Libyan dictator Qaddafi warned the NATO forces that soon he will mobilize an army of invisible “Jinns”⁽¹⁾ to confront the infidel intruders to a Moslem land. It is not known what the reaction of NATO commanders in the field was, but eventually Qaddafi was quite serious about his metaphysical assertion when he ordered his forces to slaughter opposition groups.

Throughout the history of mankind, political rulers joint with spiritual leaders have used and abused the supernatural beliefs and

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metaphysical forces in order to establish their power and solidify their grip over the minds and bodies of people. Religious wars of the past, inquisition trials, torture, prison and other cruel punishments are considered as clear manifestations of the influence of the outer-world in the daily life of people.

Terror and violence are terms that have existed all along with the development human society from primitive times to the present. In prehistoric era to the advent of men's primeval civilization, violence was part of daily life in the "state of nature" which was a product of pure human instinct for survival. Gradually, before reason became as the ground foundation for "civil society", religion and metaphysics dominated the realm of knowledge of the world and its various sophisticated phenomenon. Thenceforth, violence became inseparable parts of religious rituals that still today are being observed as a sacred duty in some religions.⁽²⁾

What are the principal causes of these acts of terror and violence that seem to be inseparable part of human societies? The main argument in this paper is that violence, terror and atrocities such as September 11 events, suicide attacks and other mass killings, executions and the likes, should be explained and understood only within the purview of "metaphysical paradigm" and not necessarily through conventional rational approaches.

THE METAPHYSICAL PARADIGM

Theorizing about violence and terror from a metaphysical⁽³⁾ standpoint is a rather heavy task that requires a profound knowledge of both philosophy and religion. There are some resources in the literature on these topics which by nature are not always easy to understand for

students of politics and international relations.⁽⁴⁾ My endeavor here is to elucidate some of the most critical aspects of violence and terror from a new methodological perspective, the “metaphysics.”

The terms *metaphysics* and *metaphysical* in a popular sense have been used in connection with “New Thought” in religion and theology.⁽⁵⁾ Cutting across the division of the academic and the popular, there is another way of dividing metaphysics: theoretical and applied. This distinction is like the division between science and technology; one describes; the other applies the description to practical problems, putting knowledge to work. Traditionally, gathering knowledge in metaphysics is by rational thought; in a more popular understanding, knowledge gathering may be either mystical or “occult”⁽⁶⁾; in either case the pure knowledge is to be distinguished from the practical application of it.⁽⁷⁾

Prior to the modern history of science, scientific questions were addressed as a part of metaphysics known as natural philosophy. The term *science* itself meant “knowledge” of originating from epistemology. The scientific method, however, transformed natural philosophy into an empirical activity deriving from experiment unlike the rest of philosophy. By the end of the 18th century, it had begun to be called “science” to distinguish it from philosophy. Thereafter, metaphysics denoted philosophical enquiry of a non-empirical character into the nature of existence.⁽⁸⁾

THE ESSENCE OF VIOLENCE

Many philosophers and thinkers have dealt with the question of violence from their own world view and perspective. Jacques Derrida’s *Violence and Metaphysics* is one such work that concluded,

there is a necessary relationship between the metaphysical quest for “totality” and political “totalitarianism.” His views however relate merely to criticizing the philosophical foundation of Western political institutions by his theory of “deconstruction.”⁽⁹⁾ As he wrote in an early essay, “incapable of respecting the Being and meaning of the other, phenomenology and ontology would be philosophies of violence.”⁽¹⁰⁾

On the common ground, violence is defined as the “use of physical force to cause injury, damage or death.”⁽¹¹⁾ Furthermore, “violence is used as a tool of manipulation and also is an area of concern for law and culture which take attempts to suppress and stop it.” The term *violence* encompasses a broad spectrum covering a wide variety of illegal or unusual actions against human beings, even animals and living species or their natural environment. This can be as a result of interpersonal conflicts, international wars, aggression, genocide or deliberate alteration and demolition of the environment.

Violence can be viewed and defined from various angles: law, politics, sociology, psychology etc. According to Max Weber, states and governments have the “monopoly on violence” because they possess all the means and instruments of inflicting injuries to people and depriving them from their freedom and ordinary lives. Use of violence through legal system by police forces and military is solely within the competence of legal authority of governments for the purpose of law enforcement and establishing peace and order. But, in some instances, this could go beyond the legitimate purposes for which it has been established; such as maintaining a ruler in power who has lost its legitimacy.

Contrary to Weber, German political theorist Hannah Arendt⁽¹²⁾, making clear distinction between violence and power, believes that

"Violence can be justifiable, but it never will be legitimate. ... Its justification loses in plausibility the farther its intended end recedes into the future."⁽¹³⁾ Whereas most political theorists regard violence as an extreme manifestation of power, Arendt thinks that the two concepts as opposites. Of course, no one logically questions the use of violence in self-defense, because the danger is not only clear but also present, and the end justifying the means is immediate. But, obviously, to be lawful, certain conditions should be observed, without which it could create legal obligation and liability.

There have been widespread attempts to extend the traditional definition of violence to various fields of social studies. Some authors have made a distinction between "hard" and "soft" violence. Thus, in delving into the etymological development of the word violence, we come across various attributes of the term including situations where physical violence is not necessarily present but the impact could be more detrimental to the subjects.

Here are some derivatives of the regular definition of violence that could go even further in other areas that no explicit physical harm is inflicted to the victims:

1. Structural violence: a term that was first coined in the 1960s commonly attributed to Johan Galtung. It refers to a form of violence based on the systemic ways in which a given social structure or social institution harms people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. Structural violence inevitably produces conflict and often direct violence, including family violence, racial violence...⁽¹⁴⁾

2. Symbolic violence: was first introduced by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to account for the tacit almost unconscious modes of cultural/social domination occurring within the every-day social habits maintained over conscious subjects. The concept of symbolic violence

also referred to as "soft" violence, which includes actions that have discriminatory or injurious meaning or implications, such as gender dominance and racism. Symbolic violence maintains its effect through the mis-recognition of power relations situated in the social matrix of a given field.⁽¹⁵⁾

3. Religious violence: Religions and ideologies have been the cause of interpersonal violence throughout history. Ideologues often falsely accuse others of violence, such as the ancient blood libel against Jews, the medieval accusations of casting witchcraft spells against women, caricatures of black men as “violent brutes” that helped excuse the late 19th century Jim Crow laws in the United States and modern accusations of satanic ritual abuse against day care center owners and others. Both supporters and opponents of the 21st century War on Terrorism regard it largely as an ideological and religious war.⁽¹⁶⁾

4. Media Violence: Some social scientists see an undisputable link between media and violence. This argument can be easily supported in authoritarian regimes where media and writers are under the strict control of the government. In this case, media can influence and instigate public opinion against or in favor of some faction of the society leading to controversy, conflict and violence. In some instance they can destroy the personality of a dissenting public figure by defamations and false allegations.

TERROR AND TERRORISM

While violence and terror are somehow similar in form and substance, the latter comes from Latin verb *terrere* meaning “to frighten” which adds a singular attribute to the former. In other words, the ultimate

objective of terror is “to inspire fear with a view “to paralyze the will to resist the objectives of the perpetrator.”⁽¹⁷⁾

David Forte states that the “primary difference between terror and terrorism is that while illegitimate terror can be neutrally evil, i.e. random violence committed by robbers, rapists and even soldiers, terrorism has the additional political or moral dimension, being the systemized use of randomly focused violence by organized groups against civilian targets to effect a political objective.”⁽¹⁸⁾

Terror and terrorism have existed throughout the history of human civilization. Despite its long history, terrorism and low-level violence associated with religious movements are more recent phenomena. In the past, despotic rulers used terror as a means to subjugate their own people. The post-revolutionary France has passed through the trauma of Robespierre terror. The memory of systematic state terror in Stalin’s Russia, Hitler’s Germany and other dictators is still alive.

But today this dimension of terrorism has changed drastically. We are now witnessing the tremendous spread of a new face of terror, associated with violent behavior of religious extremists, whose cruel actions and drive to cause extensive bloodshed, go beyond sane imagination. This phenomenon is described as one of the sad paradox of our time; the myth of “romantic revolution” whose promoters are the ideologues, whose dupes are the young and idealistic and whose victims are the weak and the little men, the children, the old and defenseless.⁽¹⁹⁾

With the advent of sophisticated communications and relations among nations, terrorism, whether directed toward states or individuals, has gained new dimensions and consequently attracted the attention of world public opinion. It has also provided appetizing food for mass media around the world and hence incentive for terrorists to

gain reputation through wide publicity. Unlike the past when conventional media, such as radio and television broadcast and newspapers could limit the propaganda impact of terrorism, today the internet has become a rather uncontrollable, easy and handy tool for murderer to expose their horrifying acts to the public around the world. We have seen with revulsion the shocking video clips showing the act of beheading of innocent people in Iraq.

PROBLEM OF DEFINITION AND REGULATION

While wars and armed conflicts have been defined and regulated in the past, violence and terror never had such capacity; since they are considered as inhuman acts of barbarism and savagery. They have been forbidden as crime against humanity.

Despite several attempts to define and regulate the periphery of terror and terrorism, thus far, the international community and the United Nations have not been able to reach a comprehensive agreement. Perhaps, one reason for this deficiency is that one cannot legalize and inhibit something that belongs to the realm of faith and metaphysics.⁽²⁰⁾

Indeed, atrocities such as the one we have been witnessing in recent years cannot be explained and digested by a sane and rational mind. Those who resort to these savageries are presumed to be “men of faith” whose source of inspiration comes from the outer-world or the “metaphysical.” Obviously, regulating such actions through national and international laws and conventions can hardly deter the wrongdoers and criminals.

Social scientists however have attempted to circumvent the problem by shedding some light on the matter. In the context of

terrorism, Charles Tilly identifies "terror" as a political strategy defined as "asymmetrical deployment of threats and violence against enemies using means that fall outside the forms of political struggle routinely operating within some current regime", and therefore ranges from:

- intermittent actions by members of groups that are engaged in wider political struggles to one segment in the *modus operandi* of durably organized specialists in coercion,

- including government-employed and government-backed specialists in coercion to the dominant rationale for distinct, committed groups and networks of activists.⁽²¹⁾

According to Tilly, the term "terror" spans across a wide range of human cruelties, from Stalin's use of executions to clandestine attacks by groups like the Basque separatists and the IRA and even ethnic cleansing and genocide.⁽²²⁾

In this sense, professor Bassiouni⁽²³⁾ notes: "to define "terrorism" in a way that is both all-inclusive and unambiguous is very difficult, if not impossible. One of the principal difficulties lies in the fundamental values at stake in the acceptance or rejection of terror-inspiring violence as means of accomplishing a given goal. The obvious and well known range of views on these issues are what makes an internationally accepted specific definition of what is loosely called "terrorism," a largely impossible undertaking. That is why the search for and internationally agreed upon definition may well be a futile and unnecessary effort."⁽²⁴⁾

In the meantime, the international community adopted a series of "sectoral conventions" that define and criminalize various types of terrorist activities. In addition, since 1994, the United Nations General Assembly has condemned terrorist acts using the following political

description of terrorism: "Criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes are in any circumstance unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or any other nature that may be invoked to justify them."⁽²⁵⁾

In 2004, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1566 condemned terrorist acts as:

"criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act, which constitute offences within the scope of and as defined in the international conventions and protocols relating to terrorism, are under no circumstances justifiable by considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other similar nature."

Despite all these attempts, we are still far from containing the spread of terror and violence in the world. Perhaps the problem should be approached not through the earthly and mundane discourse but somewhere above the outer-world from where the faithful and zealous terrorists get inspired.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

In recent years, especially after the American military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, terrorists have gone to the extreme by conducting suicidal attacks against their targets. Of course, we shall

not forget the suicide attacks against embassies and troop's headquarters of Western powers around the world before that period; among which militia actions in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Argentina... are the most notorious. Despite extreme precautionary security measures, these operations and the likes are still being carried out by terrorists, for the purpose of gaining attention of the media, intimidating an opponent or toppling a shaky and weak government. The present Iraq and Afghanistan are ill-fated example of such daily occurrence.

We are living in a dangerous world no prophet ever predicted. The spread and magnitude of violence and terror activities have made all nations very vulnerable. What happened in New York, London and Madrid can occur at anytime and anywhere without discrimination. Terrorists have already demonstrated that they can achieve disproportionately large effects in world order with a relatively small number and limited capacity for violence. They have caused widespread alarm, compelling governments with a clear preponderance of conventional military power to negotiate with them, to grant them concessions or simply to back down with humiliation.

Thus far all endeavors to effectively deal with this kind of terrorism seem to have failed. It is not quite clear how the world should approach this evil of the 21st century. Use of force and naked power has proved to be inefficacious. It would be rather hard to believe that terrorism may be uprooted for good in the years to come. Perhaps we should think of some unconventional means to contain this unusual phenomenon called terrorism.

Living in peace and quiet for individuals and states has become an art⁽²⁶⁾ for which we are not so much prepared. However, perhaps in the long-run, we end up to cohabitate with this awful situation and

gradually get used to terror and violence in our daily life.

Inevitably, the result of such dreadful situation is further religious and racial intolerance, clashes and consequently more closure of societies and limitation of people's interactions around the world. In such circumstances, we should surrender to the will of "metaphysics" and just hope for a miracle to change our vulnerable condition and await the great savior to come from above to protect us from unforeseen hazards. ❖

NOTES:

1. In the Islamic tradition, Jinn is a spirit that can take on various human and animal forms and makes mischievous use of its supernatural powers. Jinns are mentioned in the Quran like a zillion times. They even have a surah to themselves. (Suratul Jinn). They use to reveal to the Prophet Muhammad in times he needed help against his enemies. Sometimes, they even carry him to their world to teach whole clan of them.

2. Scarifying various animals (instead of human beings in the past) during religious rituals and manifestations can be indeed considered a form of systematic violence still practiced in certain societies.

3. The term *metaphysics* originally referred to the writings of Aristotle that came after his writings on physics, in the arrangement made by Andronicus of Rhodes about three centuries after Aristotle's death. Traditionally, *metaphysics* refers to the branch of philosophy that attempts to understand the fundamental nature of all reality, whether visible or invisible. It seeks a description so basic, so essentially simple, so all-inclusive that it applies to everything, whether divine or human or anything else. It attempts to tell what anything must be like in order to be at all. To call one a metaphysician in this traditional, philosophical sense indicates nothing more than his or her interest in attempting to discover what underlies everything. Old materialists, who said that there is nothing but matter in motion, and current naturalists, who say that everything is made of lifeless, non-experiencing energy, are just as much to be classified as metaphysicians as are idealists, who maintain that there is nothing but ideas, or mind, or spirit. See generally: *Metaphysics: Multiple Meanings*: Presented by AWPNT This site was selected as one of the "Best 1,001 Web Sites" by *Computing* (December 1996).

4. See e.g. Halpern, Cynthia. "*Theorizing Terror: The Violence of the Sacred and the Violence of the Secular*" Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American

Political Science Association, Marriott Wardman Park, Omni Shoreham, Washington Hilton, Washington, DC, Sep 01, 2005 http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p39962_index.html

5. The New Thought movement--not to be confused with New Age--is a more than century-old, practically oriented spirituality that promotes fullness of all aspects of living, through constructive thinking, meditating, and other ways of realizing the presence of God. See above *Metaphysics: Multiple Meaning*, AWPNT

6. That is: relating to, involving, or characteristic of magic, witchcraft, or supernatural phenomena.

7. *Ibid*

8. *Metaphysics* is a branch of philosophy of concerned with explaining the fundamental nature of being and the world, although the term is not easily defined. Traditionally, metaphysics attempts to answer two basic questions in the broadest possible terms: a)"What is there?" and b) "What is it like?" A person who studies metaphysics would be called either a *metaphysicist* or a *metaphysician*. The metaphysician attempts to clarify the fundamental notions by which people understand the world, including existence, the definition of object, property, space, time, causality, and possibility. A central branch of metaphysics is ontology, the investigation into the basic category of beings and how they relate to each other. See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaphysics>

9. Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) was the founder of "deconstruction," a way of criticizing not only both literary and philosophical texts but also political institutions. Although Derrida at times expressed regret concerning the fate of the word "deconstruction," its popularity indicates the wide-ranging influence of his thought, in philosophy, in literary criticism and theory, in art and, in particular, architectural theory, and in political theory. Beside critique, Derridean deconstruction consists in an attempt to re-conceive the difference that divides self-reflection (or self-consciousness). But even more than the re-conception of difference, and perhaps more importantly, deconstruction works towards preventing the worst violence. It attempts to render justice. Indeed, deconstruction is relentless in this pursuit since justice is impossible to achieve. See: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/derrida/>

10. Jacques Derrida, *Violence and Metaphysics* (1967):

11. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violence>

12. See e.g.: Hanna Arendt, *On Violence*, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1970 - 106 pages . This book is “An analysis of the nature, causes, and significance of violence in the second half of the twentieth century. Arendt also reexamines the relationship between war, politics, violence, and power. “Incisive, deeply probing, written with clarity and grace, it provides an ideal framework for understanding the turbulence of our times”(Nation). Index.

13. From *Wikipedia*, the free encyclopedia

14. See for example: James Gilligan, *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic*. Gilligan defines structural violence as "the increased rates of death and disability suffered by those who occupy the bottom rungs of society, as contrasted with the relatively lower death rates experienced by those who are above them." Gilligan largely describes these "excess deaths" as "non-natural" and attributes them to the stress, shame, discrimination and denigration that results from lower status. From *Wikipedia*, the free encyclopedia

15. From *Wikipedia*, the free encyclopedia

16. *Ibid*

17. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terror>

18. Forte, David F. "Terror and Terrorism: There Is a Difference". *Ohio Northern University Law Review* (Ohio Northern University Pettit College of Law) (1986).13: 39-52.

19. See Ali Asghar Kazemi, “ The Art of Living in Terror” in *Strategic Discourse*. [http:// stradis.blogspot.com/2006/08/art-of-living-in-terror.html](http://stradis.blogspot.com/2006/08/art-of-living-in-terror.html)

20. The definition of terrorism has proved controversial. Various legal systems and government agencies use different definitions of "terrorism". Moreover, the international community has been slow to formulate a universally agreed upon, legally binding definition of this crime. These difficulties arise from the fact that the term "terrorism" is politically and emotionally charged. Angus Martyn in a briefing paper for the Australian Parliament has stated that "The international community has never succeeded in developing an accepted comprehensive definition of terrorism. During the 1970s and 1980s, the United Nations attempts to define the term foundered mainly due to differences of opinion between various members about the use of violence in the context of conflicts over national liberation and self-

determination." These divergences have made it impossible to conclude a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism that incorporates a single, all-encompassing, legally binding, criminal law on definition of terrorism. From *Wikipedia*, the free encyclopedia.

21. Charles Tilly. "Terror, Terrorism, Terrorists," *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 22, No. 1, Theories of Terrorism: A Symposium (Mar., 2004), pp. 5-13

22. *Idem*

23. Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni is a United Nations war crimes expert and university professor, born in 1937. In 1999, Professor Bassiouni was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in the field of international criminal justice and for his contribution to the creation of the International Criminal Court. He did not win as Médecins Sans Frontières received the award in 1999.

24. From *Wikipedia*, the free encyclopedia

25. Taken from definition of terrorism in *Wikipedia*, the free encyclopedia

26. The latter part of this paper is taken from my earlier writings on the subject: See Ali Asghar Kazemi, "The Art of Living in Terror" in *Strategic Discourse*. <http://stradis.blogspot.com/2006/08/art-of-living-in-terror.html>