

Terrorism and Cosmopolitanism

Daniele Archibugi, Technological Director, Italian National Research Council

The fall of the Berlin Wall was a symbolic event that raised hopes for a more united world, founded on the values of international legality and democracy. The idea was put forward that, at last, human rights would be respected planet-wide and that violent conflict would gradually disappear. In just over a decade, many such hopes have been swept away by Realpolitik. In the same decade, we have witnessed the birth of a new generation of civil wars, the resumption of traditional-type wars between states and the birth of humanitarian interventionism under the banner of self-interested charity.

Yet we must not forget that the 1990s also happened to be the years in which the fear of nuclear war was set aside and millions of people - in eastern Europe, Africa, Latin America and Asia - gained or regained the right to choose their governments through elections. They were the years in which Nelson Mandela and Václav Havel left prison to take the helm of their respective countries. They were also the years in which international organisations - the United Nations first and foremost - tried to stop being mere paper pushers vis-à-vis the resolutions of the summits of the superpowers. History does not allow for algebraic sums, and no one today can say whether the advantages outweighed the disadvantages or vice versa.

As a symbol of a historical turnaround, the destruction of the Twin Towers is comparable to the collapse of the Berlin Wall. In the last three months, newspapers have effectively been the spirit of the world, using every word in the dictionary to describe the event. The attack was a historic event not only in terms of the magnitude of the damage inflicted; after all, recent history has, alas, accustomed us to even worse tragedies. In 1994, for example, half a million people were killed in just a few weeks in Rwanda, yet nothing changed in international politics. In 1995, 8,000 people were killed in a single day in Srebrenica alone, but the effects of the tragedy were only felt at regional level. No, the terrorist attacks in America have changed the course of the world because, for the first time ever, the hegemonic power has been hit - and because the attack was an absolutely gratuitous one. No conflict was in progress between the United States and the forces which the attackers claimed to defend. Though the long-term effects are still uncertain, the principal political task of our present era is to prevent the destruction of the Towers from dulling that splendid dawn - the hope that democracy and legality can assert themselves in states and among states.

What is Terrorism?

Terrorism is the use of terror by organised groups to achieve given objectives. Often such objectives are non-political. Terrorism stands out from other forms of political violence because it strikes indiscriminately. A given act may achieve its aim even more effectively if the victims are not actually associated with the terrorists' objectives.

One of the basic characteristics of terrorism is that it achieves its aims not only and often not so much through direct action as through the sense of panic provoked by that action, which causes an entire community to change its behaviour. The execution is only one part of the effect; no less important is the threat thereof. When the community in question begins to live with terrorism that is when the terrorists achieve their main aim. They have, at last, become active political players.

If we apply this definition to the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001, we can see how the criminals have indeed achieved their aims. The use of elements of everyday life (airliners and now even correspondence) and the destruction of buildings which, however symbolic, were used for commercial purposes served the purpose to make all western people feel unsafe. To achieve this aim the attackers had no qualms about killing individuals of many different nationalities and religions - and even kill themselves. The indirect consequences their act has generated for the United States and the rest of the world are much greater than the direct ones. A new war is now in progress, together with an economic crisis and uncertainty as to our everyday safety that will accompany us for years to come. According to the evil criminal logic of the terrorist, these were precisely the aims they wanted to achieve and the spectacular way in which the event unfolded was functional to that end.

Yet terrorism isn't only the action of isolated groups. States also act in a terrorist manner when they resort to the indiscriminate use of violence. A war waged against civilians is thus an act of terrorism. In the Nineties, the terrorism of states - democratic states included - increased along with great hopes for democratisation. We expect tyrannical regimes to use dictatorial means and resort to extermination, and in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Indonesia, Nigeria and many other places, the liberal West culpably looked on as tyrannical regimes perpetrated genocide. But liberal democracies were not the perpetrators of these acts.

But in other situations throughout the 1990s, democratic states - the United States in particular - were active in international terrorism: Panama, the Persian Gulf, the Balkans are some of the examples. In all these cases, military force was used, mowing down civilian victims, people who had nothing whatsoever to do with the acts America was attempting to combat. The 'indirect' component - the establishing of the predominance of the West, meaning the United States - played a more important role than the direct one. The entire Third World has metabolised the tough lesson: namely, that anyone who enters into conflict with the United States risks being bombed.

These new interventions - all rigorously subsequent to the fall of the Berlin Wall - are often tinted by humanitarian motivations. But they will be remembered in the black book of military history rather than in the pink book of humanitarian altruism. They are characterised by a new quantitative fact: that is, the victims of conflict are all on one side only, that of the 'humanity' that was supposed to be receiving help. Western losses in these wars have either been zero or comparable in number to the casualties in a car crash.

In so far as they are based on internal constitutional systems in which the use of violence is allowed only if it is legitimate and apt, democratic states ought to be prepared not to use terror as an instrument of political struggle. Only those states that have extirpated the recourse to armed force internally deserve to be called democratic. So why do they ignore the values and principles that inspire their domestic constitutions beyond their frontiers?

Today heads of state and public opinion are joining together in a just condemnation of terrorism. But how many have pretended not to see the terrorism of western democracies? The terrorism we suffer from others is perceived as being entirely different from the terrorism we cause others to suffer. For westerners, the Twin Towers were a familiar, much-loved landmark. They were part of our daily lives, whereas the valleys of Iraq, Serbia and Afghanistan - to cite three places that have experienced the effect of western bombing - are not part of our everyday experience. We have never seen them reproduced in postcards, and to find out where they are we have to look them up in the atlas. The victims of bombing are unknown to us, just as unknown to us are the millions of refugees who occasionally set out on their travels in sole pursuit of survival and suffering the worst hardships imaginable as a result.

By no means do I wish to argue that the motivations of the criminals who have destroyed the Twin Towers and those of the politicians who have decided to intervene in the Persian Gulf, the former Yugoslavia or Afghanistan can be grouped together. We know too well that in the Persian Gulf, a sovereign state was annexed by another sovereign state; in Kosovo, a genocide was being perpetrated; and, in Afghanistan, an instigator of massacres and his accomplices were being harboured. The Twin Towers, on the other hand, were populated simply by people peaceably going about their work.

But aren't the reactions of western democracies inappropriate? Are they effectively designed to achieve a purpose? I believe that anybody with a bit of common sense knows that the use of violence is not only exaggerated but, above all, aimed at the wrong target, hence terroristic.

We are now seeing carpet-bombing in which the victims are mostly civilian. In this case too, the so-called 'collateral' effects would appear to be as important as the direct ones. Millions of Afghan civilians are now flocking to the border with Pakistan in search of survival, and there is a serious risk of yet another humanitarian catastrophe. The political and civilian arrangement of Afghanistan is more uncertain than ever; grinding poverty is likely to continue in a situation in which the only thing of which there has been no shortage since the Soviet invasion are rifles, bombs and land mines. In short, the risk is that Afghanistan is going to inherit the sad destiny of countries such as Iraq, Somalia and Iran, which, after being targets of the West, were abandoned to their enduring problems: namely, bloodthirsty dictators, wars between armed bands, religious fanaticism and above all, poverty, poverty and yet more poverty.

Is War Effective Against Terrorism?

The most surprising thing about the attacks on Afghanistan that began on October 7 2001 is the lack of any link with the events of September 11. We take for granted that, supported by his criminal organization, Osama bin Laden instigated the attacks. But it is just as evident that it will not be possible to strike the terrorists by air attacks, and probably not by land actions either. The US military even admits that the chances of capturing bin Laden ('dead' or alive', true to the tradition of westerns) are slim.

But what have the Afghani people got to do with all this? How far are the victims of the bombing responsible for the terrorist attacks? No direct logistic involvement emerges. The people guilty of the suicide attacks were trained in flying schools in Florida. Luckily, nobody thinks it is necessary to bomb Florida! So why bomb Afghanistan? Only to demonstrate that the United States are capable of a military response?

As a punitive instrument, the military action in progress is thus ineffective. So will it be effective in preventing future attacks? The answer is sure to be negative. True, the United States have achieved a brilliant diplomatic success by involving previously hostile governments. People in the United States' black books, such as Fidel Castro, Qadafi and Arafat, have condemned the terrorist attacks in no uncertain terms and even declared themselves favourable to reprisals against Afghanistan. To receive the support of governments is not, however, to convince peoples. It is disturbing to see masses of semi-literate outcasts singing the praises of bin Laden. Not even Adolf Hitler managed to win so much mass sympathy outside of Germany and Austria. The beginning of the war has added credit to bin Laden's project whereby the war in progress is a war between the Islamic world and the United States. What should have been made clear is that the conflict was between a small band of criminal terrorists and the civilised world. How many of the people who, out of ignorance, are today extolling a terrorist are going to turn into terrorists themselves tomorrow?

Risk and terror have become global. Today there are thousands of people who are observing chemical substances, germs, aqueducts, airports and nuclear power plants with the sole aim of seeing how to manipulate and hit them to cause harm to the West. If we think that it is possible to keep millions of people under the sword of Damocles of air bombing, we have got things wrong. The terrorists of September 11 have demonstrated that they hold in contempt not only the life of others but also their own. These terrorists elude rational logic; they are a problem for our security because they have psychiatric problems.

It is certainly surprising that the American press itself, so patriotic at this moment in time, on October 7th published front page photographs of President Bush and bin Laden opposite one another. The image the press wants to accredit is the one already proclaimed by Bush: a new chapter in the eternal battle between good and evil, a sort of Hollywood-style clash between the good guy and the bad guy. The US press still fails to realise just how deeply offensive it is for America to equalise the image of a constitutionally elected president and that of a criminal. Bin Laden has thus achieved the communicational effect that he wanted, accrediting himself as Adversary Number One of the President of the United States.

Like others in the past, the broad coalition created today to crush the terrorists is not without a cost. Saddam Hussein was armed to contain Iran, bin Laden and the Taleban to stave off the Soviet invasion, the theocracy of Saudi Arabia to fight Saddam Hussein. Today it is the new nuclear power of Pakistan which is enjoying the indiscriminate support of the West. History ought to have taught that, in the long term, the values of liberalism and democracy cannot be defended with the equation 'the enemies of my enemies are my friends'. Sooner or later Golems rebel, return to their imprinting and become more frightening than the enemies they were supposed to annihilate.

### The Cosmopolitan Perspective

In moments of crisis, it is not sufficient to oppose. It is also necessary to make concrete proposals to weaken terrorism. Which is what the cosmopolitan perspective puts forward.

Recognition of the value of individual life. The cosmopolitan perspective sets out from the assumption that it is necessary to give equal value to human life, irrespective of whether an individual belongs to 'our' or to 'another' political and social community. Though this is an abstract assertion, it has been affirmed in many aspects of human life. We find it aberrant, for example, for an individual to be killed in a poor country because his organs are necessary to prolong the life of a westerner. Yet this simple ethical principle is ignored when wars begin: in this case, the main objective is to minimise the losses on one side, without bothering to consider whether to achieve that objective it is necessary to multiply losses on the other. Hence the first cosmopolitan precept seeks to equalise the value of our lives with the value of the lives of others.

Methods of conflict. Terrorism cannot be fought with terrorism. Western democracies and the United States ought to demonstrate as of today that they are made of better stuff than bin Laden and his accomplices. Which is why they should refuse to sow innocent victims, if they are not directly connected with the aim of preventing the resurgence of further losses.

Democratic participation. Today, partly on account of the war, democratic countries are more vulnerable and more exposed to risk. But democracies possess a fundamental weapon of defence against terrorist attacks; that weapon is participation. If the examples of Basque and Irish terrorism have taught us anything at all, it is that it is impossible to overcome armed factions as long as they can count on the support of a sizeable portion of the population. Yet at the moment in which that

support wanes, it becomes impossible for the terrorists to act. To contain terrorism, Spain and the United Kingdom have, respectively, avoided presenting the conflicts as being between the 'Spanish' and the 'Basques', or between the 'English' and the 'Irish'. They have showed public opinion that a limited group of people was sowing terror and wreaking havoc to the detriment of the great majority of the population. What would have happened if, instead of working through the police and the magistrature, Spain or Great Britain, had - maybe with the use of intelligent devices - bombed the neighbourhoods in which the terrorists 'presumably' live? Whenever indiscriminate means have been used - in so-called 'dirty' wars - the consensus for terrorists has always risen. Today there are no sizeable groups in western countries prepared to support bin Laden and his organisation. But to identify and neutralise the groups that do exist, it is necessary to aim at participation.

The intelligence revolution. Since the drums began to roll, any reflection on the total failure of the world's most efficient intelligence agencies - the CIA and the FBI - has begun to lull. The two agencies have proved totally incapable of defending their citizens, arguably because they wrongly see their job as being to defend the 'national interest' as opposed to the interest of citizens. Following the terrorist attacks, these agencies will have more funding and more power, which means that the freedom of American citizens (and of many other countries in the world) will not only be limited by the threat of terrorism, but also by the control that these powers will exercise over their (and our) lives. Are we really sure that this control is designed to protect us? The CIA and the FBI ought to be dismantled and reconstructed on foundations radically different from those of the past. In a democratic perspective, intelligence works if it is seen as control by citizens, not as control over citizens.

Financial controls. The most effective way of striking terrorism is to strike the financing that fuels it. There is only one link between the terrorists of September 11 and bin Laden, and that is the financial link. It is certainly amazing that a criminal known for years as the instigator of different terrorist attacks has, until September 11th, enjoyed the greatest liberty to transfer the capital needed to plan new massacres. How come we have been unable to strike not bin Laden as a person but at least his money? The reason is to be sought in the very essence of capitalism, which is refractory to control over finance. Yet finance has always been technically controllable, in so far as every transaction has to be recorded and codified. Is it vain to hope that, in the aftermath of September 11, flows of capital will be subjected to controls designed to demonstrate the origin and destination of funding? Controls of this kind would serve not only against terrorism, but also against all criminality, arms and drugs traffic included.

From the law of arms to the arms of law. All those such as bin Laden and his accomplices who have sullied themselves with crimes against humanity ought to be judged by international tribunals before the relatives of the victims. Trials of this kind would strip them of their aura as inspired martyrs with which they hope to gain the support of people in the prey of desperation. Today the United Nations ought to set up a special Tribunal with judges from both the countries that are victims of terrorism and from Islamic countries and try them, if necessary in their absence. They ought to swiftly set up the International Criminal Court, the Treaty for which was approved in Rome more than three years ago (despite the opposition of the United States), and which is struggling to receive the necessary ratifications from states. This is the opposite direction from Bush's strategy, which aims to generate ad hoc, and military, tribunals. The US Vice President Dick Cheney declared that "Terrorists don't deserve the same guarantees and safeguards that would be used for an American citizen going through the normal judicial process" (International Herald Tribune, 16 November 2001, p, 5). This declaration shows that his legal knowledge dates back to before the American Revolution of more than two centuries ago: Tribunals will serve, first and foremost, to assess who is and who is not a criminal or a terrorist.

Peace in Palestine. The Palestinian question is by no means the only source of international tension (the Kurd question is another that comes to mind). Yet the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the one which more than any other is perceived as a clash between different cultures and civilisations. In the hypothetical clash of civilisations (which is what bin Laden proclaims and western ideologists irresponsibly theorise), the frontier is situated in the Middle East. This is why today it is right for Palestinians to aspire to a land of their own and hope for a decent future, but it is also necessary to find an agreement that will allow the two peoples to live and prosper together. It is certainly paradoxical that such a small area of the world, home to fewer than nine million people with one of the highest levels of culture in Asia, is such a major source of international tension. How many economic resources are Arab and western countries prepared to give today to ensure the Palestinians a decent future? That today, after more than half a century, the Palestinian question is still without a solution demonstrates the incapacity of the so-called international community.

The United Nations. If the UN is to be nothing more than a lackey to the United States, then the whole institution is pointless and deserves to be dissolved. Its function ought to be as a mediator between cultures precisely to prevent the present crisis from turning into a clash between civilisations. The actions of international politics designed to combat terrorism ought to be carried out under the aegis of the UN precisely to reinforce the idea that terrorism, more than a crime against states, is a crime against individuals.

#### Europe and the United States

The idea of outside threat has always existed in the American imagination, and a great many American films and novels imagine the country being invaded, attacked or destroyed by external enemies. Yet this is the first time since Independence that our American brothers have experienced the effects of violence against civilians on their own territory. Pearl Harbour was a military base, the war of secession was a civil war, and World War I and World War II were fought outside their continent. Recurring massacres caused by the folly of single individuals have been of an incomparably lesser magnitude and, in any case, are a problem of internal public order.

At first there was uncertainty on how to react and eventually the spirit of reprisal prevailed. But at another tragic moment in world history - the end of World War II - after liberating Europe from fascism, the United States understood that they had to give of their all if the values of liberalism and democracy were to assert themselves in the old continent. To punish war criminals, they set up Tribunals. To take away the social base of fascism, which had asserted itself partly due to mass unemployment, they launched the Marshall Plan. Today Europe wouldn't be what it is without the decisive contribution of the United States.

Europe has to pay back the favour both to defend its own interests, but also to defend the interests of the United States. Instead of acritically giving in to the threat of 'either with us or against us', Europe has to rediscover the pride of guiding the world through a period as difficult as the present one; not only by hunting down the terrorists but also by promoting economic development plans in the Third World to remove terrorism's social base. If Europe committed itself to developing the Third World with programs analogous to the Marshall Plan, in half a century's time the whole world - our American brothers first and foremost - would surely be grateful to us.

The cosmopolitan perspective is deliberately ingenuous. Compared to Realpolitik, with its military, financial and political means, cosmopolitanism has no other power but the ideas it puts forward. But where has the daily application of the precepts of Realpolitik led us? Today the planet is on the point of exploding no longer on account of a conflict among large, powerful, organised counterpoised blocs, as happened during the Cold War, but only on account of a small band of

fanatics. Maybe people should realise that the moment has come to follow different precepts, deliberately more ingenuous but not necessarily less effective in the long term.

21 November 2001

---

Social Science Research Council | 810 Seventh Avenue | New York, NY 10019 USA | 212-377-2700/2727 fax