CHICAGO JOURNALS

Symbolic Terror
Author(s): Geoffrey Galt Harpham
Source: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Winter, 2002), pp. 573–579
Published by: The University of Chicago Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344283
Accessed: 01/03/2011 11:28

http://www.jstor.org

Symbolic Terror

Geoffrey Galt Harpham

Is terror one or many? Does it constitute a global network whose center is nowhere and circumference nowhere, or is it concentrated in a few cave-dwelling fanatics? Does terror have policy objectives and specific grievances, a coherent worldview that contrasts, but also compares, with our own? Or does terrorism seek only terror, the specific concrete acts producing a general state of mind in a nihilistic frenzy of self-replication? Is terror political or eschatological, worldly or otherworldly? Are terrorists people possessed of a singular, horrid mania, or are they mere figureheads, tokens of a general and systemic derangement? Are we in the midst of terror or is terror in the midst of us? Who knows the answer to such questions—who knows, these days, what terror is?

Terror, I think we must begin by saying, is not trauma. A tidal wave might kill 5,000 people without producing terror. Terror is a feature of the symbolic order, the vast mesh of representations and narratives both official and unofficial, public and private, in which a culture works out its sense of itself. It affects that dynamic but relatively stable set of implicit parameters that establish a group's sense of the actual and the possible and create a loose but definite sense of collective identity. Terror may or may not be itself symbolic, but its effects are registered in the symbolic domain.

The two phases of our current terror affect the symbolic realm in different ways. The events of 11 September—the terrorism—have reconfigured the world political-military order in obvious but still-evolving ways. But even more resonant, in terms of the nature of terror, is the

anthrax crisis that, at this moment in early November as I write, is dilating each day, communicating itself invisibly, on surfaces and in the air, with the most deadly form described as "floaty." Its delivery system is the very symbol of the symbolic order, the postal service, which faltered. Through this system, terror can go anywhere at all and can affect or infect anyone along the way before it reaches its addressee, if it ever does. This new kind of letter does not, in fact, have to reach what Jacques Lacan called its "destination" in order to communicate itself; we are all the proper but horribly improper destinations of its ghastly message. The system itself, including the common air we breathe and form into words, has become anthraxed.

The terror has made it difficult to describe the most elemental of facts in a way that makes sense. The bombs we drop have a satisfying specificity on the television screen, but their impact seems, for the moment, to have been only tactical. There are fewer defections than we had hoped for, less resolve among the troops of the Northern Alliance than we thought, and, most counterintuitive of all, increasing support for the Taliban, for whom our bombs act as recruiting tools. The difficult fact is that some of our enemies do not mind dying as much as we would like them to and others are proving harder to kill than we had hoped; and many of those who are dying, unwillingly, are not our enemies. Our drops of food and medical supplies cannot compensate for the Red Cross center and the hospital that were destroyed through "human error." We have formed a "coalition" of nations who largely do nothing to help us. Nobody seems to have an endgame, an exit strategy; nobody claims with any plausibility that doing away with the terrorists and those who harbor them is altogether possible or that, if it were possible, the terror would stop.

And, yet, it seems that we must bomb. This is the most just of just wars, and if we were not bombing, we would be doing nothing at all except grieving and fearing.

Confusion in the military and political situations is, however, just the symbol or perhaps symptom of a more general derangement in the world "order." Not so long ago, the Third World provided the battlegrounds on which the First and Second conducted their wars, both cold and hot. Today, the First World is at war with the thirdmost part of the Third in a conflict that seems to be not so much between different countries as between different centuries. And we need other parts of the Third World as never before; Pakistan and Uzbekistan, of all places, are now precious allies, crucial to our success. The old Second World, Russia, is happy to

---

Geoffrey Galt Harpham teaches English at Tulane University. He is the author of *Shadows of Ethics: Criticism and the Just Society* (1998) and *One of Us: The Mastery of Joseph Conrad* (1996).

join us in combating the Taliban in Afghanistan, a battle they were waging all by themselves just a few years ago.

Nor is this all, or the worst. In the immediate aftermath of 11 September, both Israel and the Palestinians declared themselves deeply sympathetic to our suffering and so respectful of each other's solidarity with the United States that they seemed about to discover the elusive common ground necessary for a cease-fire and serious negotiations about Palestinian statehood and coexistence. Then, an assassination or two later, this compact abruptly collapsed, and we now stand on the brink of a new and altogether more dangerous escalation than any in recent years, with new waves of pessimism and intransigence crashing over a wavelet of optimistic willingness to cooperate that had barely reached the shore. And neither of the parties now seems to give a damn about our war on terrorism, which their conflict is in fact undermining by stressing our fragile coalition. Like Pakistan, like India, like Kuwait, like Saudi Arabia, like the uncertain Northern Alliance itself, Israel and the Palestinians have found a way to elude President Bush's declaration that "you're either with us or against us."

What is our position in all this? At one point in late October, we "demanded" that Israel end its hit-squad forays into the West Bank "immediately." Mr. Sharon refused this, secure in the knowledge that we did not mean it, since we were in the process of going after assassins in Afghanistan ourselves. The real addressee of our message, he knew, was the Arab world, especially Iran, to whom we wished to communicate the message that we were not uncritically pro-Israel or pro-Sharon—even though Sharon's political position was strengthened, as we knew it would be, by his appearing to refuse an (apparent) American ultimatum. Thus we are courting our enemies by rebuking, or appearing to rebuke, our allies; and our allies are confounding their enemies by defying, or appearing to defy, us.

One wonders whether anyone truly understands what they're doing and why they're doing it or whether it is at all possible now, in the climate of terror, to mean something, say something, and do something, and have all these aligned.

The question is, Has the terror sown disorder and confusion at every level of the geopolitical world order? Or has it produced a radical clarification of the order that already existed, an order hidden beneath layers of hypocrisy and duplicity? From another point of view, we might pose a slightly different but clearly related question, Is terror fundamentalist, a consequence of a warped ideology issuing from the wretched caves of Afghanistan? Or is it fundamental, a feature of the contemporary world order that we had always, in the past, been able to conceal, ignore, or deny but is now floating freely around the world? Has terror produced a new reality or disclosed an old one?

This radical uncertainty in the geopolitical domain affects as well the ideological discourse floating throughout the public realm, as the Bush administration tells citizens to go on living their decent, honorable, free American lives and also to be ever-vigilant for the slightest signs of incipient terror, which might be anywhere. But the most compelling discourse swirls around the urgent question of how to "make sense" of the terror. How can we explain the present situation without giving it a cause? How to give it a cause without making it reasonable? And how to make it reasonable without implicating ourselves, inserting ourselves in the causal chain that produced it?

Almost nobody seems capable of finding a way out of this dilemma. On the right, the message is bombs and more bombs—bombs in Afghanistan, in the Sudan and the Bekaa Valley, and—take a deep breath—in Iraq, even though that would cost us the "coalition" and almost guarantee more terrorist attacks. We should, some on the right argue, have taken out Saddam Hussein when we had the chance and should now seize the day to destroy him and others on the basis of what amounts to a gut feeling that they must be somehow involved. As Kenneth Adelman of the Defense Policy Board, a private group with the ear of Rumsfeld and Cheney, says, "I have no evidence that Iraq was involved in nine-eleven, but I *feel* it."[1] But, and not secondarily, this argument also typically involves restrictions on immigration and visas for foreigners, especially Arabs, and on the right to privacy for everyone in the country, and these reflect a long-held conservative view that our society was always too slack, too oblivious, too promiscuously tolerant and welcoming to secure the safety of its citizens. In short, the right recognizes, or perhaps feels, that our own policies and even our own character are in part responsible for the terror. As robust as it is, this is a moderate version of the views exchanged in the infamous televised conversation between Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, who agreed that secularism, liberalism, antihomophobia, and feminism were somehow to blame, that the chickens were coming home to (destroy the) roost. Terror confuses even Manicheans.

Strangely, right-wing arguments are now echoing on the left. Maureen Dowd writes that, "as some A.C.L.U. lawyers now secretly mutter that they want to seal our borders, and some liberals are easily dismissing their concerns about civil liberties abuses and capital punishment, so many old peaceniks are now hawky, less concerned about which group of beards runs post-Taliban Afghanistan than about aggressively going after the villains."[2] But a far more striking point of agreement concerns the question of the ultimate responsibility for the terror. The hard left and

1. Quoted in Nicholas Lemann, "What Terrorists Want," *The New Yorker,* 29 Oct. 2001, p. 37.

2. Maureen Dowd, "These Spooky Times," *New York Times,* 31 Oct. 2001.

the hard right agree that the responsibility lies squarely with the United States.

One of the most incendiary voices on the left is Noam Chomsky. In all his many utterances since 11 September, Chomsky has taken a single, consistent position: the 11 September attacks represent the logical outcome of American policies and actions. The United States, he says, has provided people all over the world with both incentive and instructions for terrorist acts against us. He cites the 1998 destruction of a pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum as one particularly murderous instance of deliberate terror that will have, in terms of likely eventual casualties, far greater destructive effect than 11 September. He points, as he has always done, to an appallingly long and detailed list of atrocities all over the world that were the direct or indirect effect of American policy and agency. These atrocities, both military and political, constitute the "root cause" of the current terror, which must be attributed directly to our actions. The Taliban itself is our creation, part of the "Afghan trap" we set for the Soviets in the late 1970s. At this very moment, he asserted in an 18 October talk at MIT, we are actively engaged in a course of action that will murder "three to four million" Afghan citizens—a "silent genocide" countenanced by the "elite culture" of the world, of which the United States is the leading player.[3]

Chomsky is particularly incensed about a charge made by Christopher Hitchens that Chomsky and others who were busily "rationalizing terror" were "soft on crime and soft on fascism."[4] Chomsky thought he was being tough on both, and was calling a spade a spade to boot by identifying the U.S. as the chief terrorist. "The list of states that have joined the coalition against terror," Chomsky says in his MIT talk, "is quite impressive. They have a characteristic in common. They are certainly among the leading terrorist states in the world. And they happen to be led by the world champion" ("MIT"). In reply—and ZNET is filled these days with replies as events are crowded out by the rage and grief of misunderstood disputants—Hitchens pointed out that the missiles that destroyed the Sudanese pharmaceutical plant were not civilian aircraft filled with passengers; Chomsky replied that to question the equivalence of the two terrorist acts is to express "extraordinary racist contempt for African victims of a shocking crime, which, to make it worse, is one for which we are responsible."[5]

But even Chomsky, so certain of so much about the past, has little to recommend even for the immediate future. There is an echoing void in

3. Noam Chomsky, "The MIT Transcript of 'The New War on Terror,'" www.zmag.org/ZNET.htm; hereafter abbreviated "MIT."

4. Christopher Hitchens, "Against Rationalization," www.zmag.org/ZNET.htm.

5. Chomsky, "Chomsky's Second Reply to Hitchens," www.zmag.org/ZNET.htm.

Chomsky's thought where specific recommendations ought to be, a nought where an ought might be. What should we do in the present crisis? According to Chomsky, we should—and this is the totality of his recommendation in the MIT talk—"rethink the kinds of policies, and Afghanistan is not the only one, in which we organize and train terrorist armies." And we should do so in order to bring our policies into line with the views of Saudi "bankers, professionals, international lawyers," who think we are "blocking democracy, preventing economic development" ("MIT").

It is bizarre to see the hard right promoting *feelings* and the hard left—if that is where Chomsky is; it has become difficult to place him anywhere—so coldly analytical, not to mention so respectful of the views of bankers and lawyers. And it is disturbing, too, to think that there are so many intelligent people for whom there is simply no event so ghastly, so outrageous, so monstrously murderous, so wanton and ignoble that the United States would not be held to be ultimately responsible for it simply on the grounds that *we* could have no share in *that*. It is Chomsky's refusal to be terrorized, his insistence that the terror really makes sense, that it has a germ of rational motivation, that this germ can and should to be incorporated into our national self-description, included among the narratives we tell about ourselves, that is the most terrifying, and terroristic, aspect of his thought.

Material interests, Joseph Conrad wrote in *Nostromo*, "impose the conditions on which they alone can continue to exist"; the creation of wealth from poverty, as in the San Tomé silver mine, can be justified because the order and stability this business demands "must," his protagonist Charles Gould argues, "be shared with an oppressed people."[6] But what about those who fly to their deaths confident that their destination is paradise? Are they pursuing material or immaterial interests? Are they producing the conditions under which they can flourish, or are they simply insuring their own destruction at the hands of an outraged civilized world? What, precisely, is the difference between flourishing and obliteration in this situation?

And here we confront one last possibility—that the true and most terrifying terror is not just the possibility that we are finally responsible for the murderous hatred others feel for us but rather our doubts about who or what is responsible for terrorism, our indecision about whether it has a purpose or a cause, our uncertainty whether it makes sense. Perhaps the surest symptom of terror is precisely the paralyzing inability to determine whether we have entered onto a new reality or are merely confronting for the first time the reality we had been living all along.

Against these doubts, multiplying like spores, we have but a few certainties—the grief of victims and the heroism of firefighters and rescue

---

6. Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo: A Tale of the Seaboard* (New York, 1964), p. 69.

workers. But beyond, or rather within these simple touchstones of moral-
ity, fungoid doubts about root causes, ultimate responsibility, and the
simple nature of obvious things hang, floating, in the poisoned air. Terror,
we are gradually discovering, is nothing other than the aggravated sense
of the possibility that new forms of maleficence and horror are even now
being harbored by our best intentions, lurking in the caves of our noblest
ideals, ramifying in the dark, soft interior tissues of our most honorable
attempts to secure peace and freedom in the world.