Contemporary Political Violence and its Legitimation

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The legitimation of contemporary political violence is central to its understanding. Whereas in earlier times, self or group interest narrowly defined, provided, in most cases, sufficient justification, in recent times demand has grown for loftier ones. This is not to suggest that crusades and other religious wars of the past could be explained by material interest or conflict over scarce resources, although the latter might have aggravated them in some instances.

It has been since the beginning of the past century that voluminous and elaborate ideological justifications and rationalizations became central to the initiation and infliction of political violence—preceding, accompanying, or following it. Several circumstances seem to account for this development. One is the actual presence of ideological motivation and fervor spurring on political conflicts; the second is the emergence of political propaganda and the mass media of communications that disseminates it. Further explanation may be found in the growing numbers who participate in these conflicts either as conscripts in huge military forces or members of large and highly specialized political police forces which carry out the repression that often culminates in violence. Arguably when large numbers of people replace the far smaller, more selectively recruited groups of the past charged with these activities, the need for motivating these multitudes increases. Members of mass conscript armies or large police forces, and the public at large, need to be persuaded that the political violence is legitimated by some higher purpose, rather than merely by individual or group interest. More generally speaking political–ideological legitimation of violence might have

also has increased as replacement of the divisive religious convictions which in pre-modern times often motivated combatants in various conflicts. But again this is not to argue that such religious motives became insignificant in our times as made clear by the rise of violence motivated by Islamic fundamentalism.

As to the substance of the political–ideological currents animating and justifying violent conflicts in more recent times, it is nationalism and the attempts to recast societies in some utopian mold that are the most important. Nationalistic and ethnic hostilities are, of course frequently related. The third major force, in recent years, has been the fundamentalist Islamic religious-political beliefs providing powerful motivation and legitimation for terroristic political violence that often entails self-destruction.

A common thread running through the legitimation of the major types of political violence—war, civil war, revolution, repression and decentralized terror—is an extended conception of collective self-defense. The Nazis felt mortally threatened by Jews and were convinced that only their complete eradication would make them secure. Communist regimes created and made much use of the mythical figure of the omnipresent and vicious Enemy of many social–political incarnations: members (sometimes even descendants) of the former ruling classes, priests and ministers; party politicians of parties no longer in existence; kulaks (i.e. more prosperous peasants, or any peasant who hired labor), as well as all those who expressed, or were thought of capable of expressing critical sentiments of the authorities and any of their policies.

Communist regimes endlessly claimed being encircled, besieged, and potentially subverted by increasingly desperate, and dangerous adversaries at home and abroad; it was imperative to engage in "self-defense" of an exceptionally extended and aggressive nature against all those actually

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or potentially hostile, including those in Cambodia who wore glasses (that suggested higher education and Western influences).

Islamic terrorists and those legitimating their actions believe that their religious beliefs and values are threatened, or under actual attack by the "infidels"—a category broad enough to include the office workers of the World Trade Center in New York, members of a wedding party in Jordan, teenagers in Israeli cafeterias and Australian tourists in a night club in Bali.

The compulsion in all these diverse quarters to redefine aggression as self-defense rests on the desire to make the infliction of violence more respectable. Self-defense both at the individual and collective level is a self-evidently acceptable justification. There are few humans, who believe in—and even fewer who would also act on—the principle of "turning the other cheek" notwithstanding the encouragement of Christian, and possibly other religious teachings. Pure, unconditional pacifism, secular or religious, is equally rare.

Even so self defense was less often invoked in the great conflicts of the past which involved unprovoked conquests, colonial expansion, the forcible settlement of territorial disputes, the desire to acquire land and other resources. In the old days the seemingly self-evident mutual hatred of neighboring groups and competition for scarce resources were sufficient for violence to erupt. Hitler might have been the last modern dictator to freely admit that he wished to conquer other nations simply to extend the "Lebensraum" (living space) of his nation, but even he claimed victimized status for his nation (on account of the Versailles Treaty). Victimhood, past, present or potential, is associated with, and justifies self-defense. And even Nazi Germany claimed, before invading Poland, that it was responding to a Polish border violation (fabricated by the German military).

Self-defense can also legitimate extraordinary measures of repression. Allegations of treacherous conspiracies are among the most potent justifications of ruthless and violent repression. From the Jewish World conspiracy to the large number of conspiracies communist states manufactured—conspiracies, broadly and dubiously defined, have been the most widely used grounds for unleashing state, or other, terror. Even the attack on the World Trade Center was claimed to be an American or Jewish-American conspiracy by numerous Arab and some European sources. It was of course in reality, a conspiracy of radical Islamists.

Modernity and Violence

Is the character and quality of political violence in recent times peculiar to modernity? Are there, and can there be new variations on the timeless conviction that ends justify means? But which ends and what means?

There is an ambiguous relationship between modernity and violence, both political and non-political. Modernity not only entailed the development of far more efficient methods of mass killing, it also created the technology of mass communications which made it possible to learn about such violence rapidly and to disseminate images of violent behavior and its consequences. Last but not least the mass media also lends itself to the campaigns to legitimate political violence.

Much of the news disseminated by printed and electronic media concern violence. Wars, rebellions, riots, criminal violence, as well as natural and unnatural disasters of every kind are the staple of news. There have been two schools of thought concerning the effects of such information. On the one hand it has been argued that exposure to vivid and authentic images of death and suffering especially on television may have a beneficial effect by making violence a concrete reality. In this view the television coverage hastened the end of the Vietnam war as the American public became aware of and indignant about the sufferings and atrocities entailed. Likewise it is widely believed that showing pictures of starving children in Africa will raise levels of compassion and lead to renewed efforts to provide relief. In such and similar instances awareness of violence is supposed to have a deterrent or morally uplifting impact. On the other hand it has also been proposed—more persuasively—that the routine, relentless exposure to images of violence and suffering creates "compassion fatigue," that it trivializes violence and thereby erodes the capacity for moral indignation and compassion. Susan Sontag wrote:

> …there is a mounting level of violence and sadism in mass culture: films, television, comics, computer games. Imagery that would have had an audience cringing and recoiling in disgust forty years ago is watched without so much as a blink by every teenager in the multiplex… mayhem is entertaining, rather than shocking to many people in most modern cultures… our capacity to respond to our experiences with emotional freshness and ethical pertinence is being sapped by the relentless diffusion of vulgar and appalling images…

It is questionable that audiences in the past would in fact have recoiled from such spectacles given the historical popularity of public executions, torture, lynching, bull, dog and cock fights and similar spectacles. What is beyond dispute that the mass media has been catering to a broad public interest in violence, and that many of its athletic manifestations (boxing, wrestling, ice hockey, etc) are considered normal public entertainment. On balance it seems that images of violence neither have a deterrent or morally uplifting effect, nor do they raise the actual levels

of violence by making people more accustomed to it. Approval, toleration or rejection of violence is determined mainly by identification with either the victim or victimizer and by acceptance or rejection of the ends being served by the violent means.

While the Holocaust is widely regarded (except in Arab countries) as the most distinctive and morally reprehensible expression of political violence in our times, possibly in all history, the mass murders and atrocities carried out in the Soviet Union under Stalin, China under Mao and Cambodia under Pol Pot were also remarkable in at least two respects. In the first place the number of their victims has been historically unprecedented (eclipsing those of the Holocaust) and secondly they represent clear cases of idealistic beliefs leading to and culminating in the mistreatment or murder of tens of millions.

Even is we discount original sin as an explanation of endemic political violence we cannot discount human nature, or at any rate its darker potentials, and especially the capacity to dehumanize other human beings—an apparent precondition of inflicting pain and death on a large scale. To be sure, these propensities are unevenly distributed. In any event it is obvious that without the availability of individuals willing to engage in political violence it would not occur; it is also likely that there are individuals who gravitate to organizations and situations which encourage and sanction such violence because they find satisfaction in carrying it out, or witnessing it. For them the ideological or theoretical justifications are of limited importance, welcome as they might be as they legitimate activities they enjoy even in the absence of such justification.

Two contemporary historical events, moral outrages of major proportions—the so-called Cultural Revolution in China and the massacres in Rwanda—are vivid examples of these human potentialities and propensities, and their manifestation in actual behavior. In both cases the violence involved large numbers of people who did not belong to specialized police forces or were embedded in hierarchies controlling and prescribing their behavior; they were under no compulsion to participate in these atrocities. Inflicting death or suffering was not a matter of obedience to powerful authorities and the participants often gave every indication of enjoying what they were doing, that is, humiliating, injuring or killing other human beings.

The first such atrocity was the Cultural Revolution in Mao's China (taking places between 1966 and 1976) the second, the mass murders in Rwanda in 1994. The victimization during the Cultural Revolution differed significantly from other major manifestations of political violence in the 20th century, such as the Holocaust and the Soviet mass murders. It was decentralized, grass roots violence, with a large element of spontaneity, encouraged but not closely supervised or organized by the highest authorities. It was public, unlike comparable actions in the other communist states. Inflicting *public humiliation* was the central feature of these events. The violence unleashed by the Cultural Revolution was comparable to a loosely coordinated, nationwide series of lynchings or pogroms, involving hundreds of thousands if not millions of participants and spectators and millions of victims. Most important for the present discussion that the victimizers, (as well as the spectators) were enthusiastic and highly motivated and took pleasure in humiliating, mistreating and often killing people deemed to deserve such treatment. Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals wrote:

> …regular humiliation in front of tens of thousands of screaming Red Guards was the fate of top level 'revisionists.' These spectacles, often incited by the Central Cultural Revolution Group and addressed by its leaders, were political theater designed to rouse the youngsters to even greater fury against Mao's supposed enemies. Documentaries… show tens of thousands of people packed into a sports stadium, shouting slogans, their clenched fists in the air, and humiliated revisionists with signs hanging around their necks… being forced down non their knees, roughed up, abused physically and verbally.

While official incitement and hate-mongering propaganda played a part in the formation of these attitudes there was an unmistakable responsiveness and readiness to project fierce hatred upon individuals largely unknown to the perpetrators, who symbolized ideologically defined evils as reported by the authors quoted above:

> …some hard-core Red Guards… positively reveled in the opportunity to take out 'class revenge on their hapless targets'… a 22 year old student in the East Asian Languages Department of Peking University wrote… 'The class enemies are extremely sinister and ruthless and I really hate the reactionaries to death! It was class hatred that made me denounce Li Jianping at the mass rally… that drove the masses to such popular fury. They beat her… to death with their clubs. It was an immensely satisfying event, to avenge the revolutionary people, to avenge the dead martyrs. Next I am going to settle scores with those bastards who shelter traitors, butchers and counter-revolutionaries.'

These were indeed "red guard circuses" in which elaborate public humiliation seemed to be a source of great satisfaction for those inflicting and witnessing it. Such public violence was largely a Chinese specialty; other communist states generally abstained from *public* humiliation and mistreatment of their designated enemies. On the other hand, public humiliation, torture (flogging, amputation) and

execution (beheading, stoning) remain institutionalized and practiced in several Islamic countries.

The genocide in Rwanda—the major atrocity of the last decade of the 20th century—is another instance of mass murder that prompts reflections on the darker sides of human nature. Mass participation and a pre-industrial methodology (machetes) were the distinctive features of these murders which led to the death of approximately 800,000 people. Equally noteworthy that it was not a series of impersonal killing of strangers, but of neighbors, and familiarity presented no emotional obstacles. As recalled by the incarcerated killers in Jean Hatzfeld: A time for Machetes:

> Our Tutsi neighbors, we knew they were guilty of no misdoing, but we thought all Tutsis at fault for our constant troubles. We no longer looked at them one by one; we no longer stopped to recognize them as they had been… They had become a threat greater than all we had experienced together… That's how we reasoned and how we killed…

Unlike in the Cultural Revolution, in Rwanda the major goal was complete physical elimination not humiliation.

These mass murders although enthusiastically performed were not entirely spontaneous, but preceded by planning and incitement by the authorities as again reported by the killers:

> Everybody had to participate in some way, to be involved in the killings, destruction and looting… [on the other hand]… no one was seriously threatened with physical harm for reluctance to use a machete on a Tutsi.

Whatever the exact balance between the voluntary or involuntary aspects, the most notable features of the massacres in Rwanda were the matter of fact participation of so many, the total absence of empathy and the ready acceptance of the purported necessity to eradicate the Tutsis, seen as enemies and competitors for scarce resources. In these as in other major massacres of our times, dehumanization played a major part and found expression in the frequent designation of the Tutsis as "cockroaches." One of the participants said: "We no longer saw a human being when we turned up a Tutsi in the swamps. I mean a person like us, sharing similar thoughts and feelings." They were also called snakes or dogs. Such sentiments were nurtured by propaganda campaigns:

> In Butare, home of the national university, professors vied with one another to publish… anti Tutsi diatribes. In the broadcast studios of popular radio stations… the Tutsis were referred to as 'cockroaches.' Announcers… used humorous sketches and songs to call openly for the destruction of Tutsis.

Babies too were killed. "Saving the babies, that was not practical"—one of the killers remarked. "They were whacked against walls and trees or they were cut right away… they were killed more quickly, because of their small size and because their suffering was of no use." Although killers did not want for motivation and initiative, obedience to authority played some part:

> Killing is very discouraging if you yourself must decide to do it… But if you must obey orders of the authorities, if you have been properly prepared…if you see that the killing will be total and without disastrous consequences for yourself, you feel soothed and reassured. You go off to it with no more worry… Man can get used to killing if he kills on and on.

There was a division of labor that also helped (as in other cases of mass murder, notably the Holocaust):

> The intimidators made the plans and whipped up enthusiasm; the shopkeepers paid and provided transportation; the farmers prowled and pillaged. For the killings, though, everybody had to show up blade in hand and pitch in for a decent stretch of work… We gathered into teams on the soccer field and went out hunting as kindred spirits.

As among the Nazi killers, group solidarity and pressures played a part:

> Colleagues were watching us. If they saw trembling, they sneered and called us cowards. If they saw hesitation, they… accused us of treachery… In that situation, the jeering of colleagues is awful to overcome if it gets around in the neighborhood… So you join the camp of the ones doing it. When the killings begin, you find it easier to play the machete than to be stabbed by ridicule and contempt.

For most of the participants the killings became routinized, referred to as "work" or "job" or "activities," part of the daily schedule, often followed by relaxed socialization by the perpetrators and their families and friends. One of the killers recalled:

> I gave him a machete blow at neck level, on the vulnerable vein. It came to me naturally, without thinking. Aiming was simple… he fell without shouting, without moaning. I felt nothing, just let him die… It was sweaty, hard and stimulating… I did not even count.

Apparently it was not difficult to integrate these activities with normal daily routines:

> In the evenings, after the killings, there was time for friendship, and meeting friends brought us light

hearts. We would chat about our days, we shared drinks, we ate.

The relative ease with which these killings were performed had another prosaic explanation:

Killing was less wearisome than farming… We could shelter from the sun and chat without feeling idle. The workaday did not last as long as in the fields… We fell asleep every evening safe from care, no longer worried about drought… We gorged on vitamin-rich foods. Another interlocutor said "Killing… was more productive than raising crops, especially for someone with a meager plot of land…

Matter of fact looting was an important motive:

People would steal anything—bowls, pieces of cloth, jugs, religious images, wedding pictures—from anywhere, from the houses, from the schools, from the dead… in the Tutsis' abandoned houses we knew we'd find quantities of new goods… That time [of the massacres—P.H.] greatly improved our lives… The daily Primus [beer], the cow meat, the bikes, the radios, the sheet metal, the windows, everything. People said it was a lucky season and that there would not be another.

Another participant recalled:

I saw colleagues linger over their catch [victims, that is—P.H.] to make the agony last. But they often left before polishing someone off because they were too eager to go looting. For example they gave the first machete blow and then spotted a bike, and—hop, they'd rather jump on the bike than finish the job. Same for a roof with good sheets and corrugated metal. It was greed more than wickedness. I trusted that there was time for each of those occupations… I struck just to get it done.

A smaller number enjoyed the murders:

Their killings were delicious to them. They needed intoxication… they felt frustrated when they simply struck down a Tutsi. They wanted seething excitement. They felt cheated when a Tutsi died without a word. Which is why they no longer struck at the mortal parts, wishing to savor the blows and relish the screams… There were fierce people who urged us to cause pain… We always finished our jobs properly. Except with runaways who made us sweat too much running in the swamps… Torture was supplementary activity… It was just a distraction, like a recreational break in a long work day. The orders were simply to kill… The bosses would say, 'Kill, and fast, that's all. There is no point in taking your time.'

Sometimes the murders became public entertainment:

The killers would call everyone to watch. All the women and children would gather to see the show. There were people still carrying drinks, or nurslings on their backs. The killers would cut off the victims' limbs, they would crush their bones without killing them. They wanted them to last… Shouts would rise up from all sides. These were raucous village jamborees, quite rare and quite popular.

The Rwandan mass murders help to evaluate familiar approaches to understanding the contemporary campaigns of extermination. Hannah Arendt famously argued—relying on the case of Adolf Eichmann—that engaging in mass murder (or designing mass murder) does not require special qualifications, beliefs, motivation or some personal pathology. Anybody under appropriate circumstances (such as organizational, situational or group pressure, or compulsion by superior authorities) could become a mass murderer—hence her concept of "the banality of evil."

The mass participation in Rwanda, and its organized nature, seems to support to Arendt's views: there was some pressure by local authorities to induce participation and the participants were ordinary people. At the same time these killers had strong beliefs about the alleged threat the Tutsis represented. This made it easier to kill them; many apparently relished their "work"; they accepted and internalized the officially promulgated view of the Tutsis as cockroaches; they were "willing executioners"—the term Daniel Goldhagen used to characterize the Nazis carrying out the Holocaust. Nor did the Hutu killers show any moral revulsion or experienced moral conflict if these accounts are to be believed. For some "killing was a demanding but gratifying activity" as one of them remarked. Ideological motives and strong beliefs giving rise to the dehumanization of the victims were no less important for understanding these massacres than "banal" obedience to authority.

Relativism and Moral Judgment

It is ironic that the mass murders such as the massacre in Rwanda and recent acts of Islamic terror have taken place at a time of growing moral relativism among Western intellectuals, and those under their influence, presenting a moral and psychological challenge and dilemma to those who disapprove of being "judgmental." Even before the rise of such relativism many social scientists and historians cautioned against moralizing and avoided reference to the concept of "evil." They considered their task to establish social and historical facts and explain them the best they could, not to pass judgment.

But there has also been a counter trend since the 1960s as a growing number of social scientists and intellectuals became advocates of political causes, social changes and improvements and have taken positions that entailed unqualified moral judgment. Consequently—despite the rise of postmodernism and the associated moral and aesthetic relativism—there has been no perceptible decline of judgmental attitudes and pronouncements with respect to with social–political injustices and the resulting human suffering even if the word "evil" is avoided. The relativism noted above has in fact been limited and selective; various evils continue to be denounced without hesitation and with relish, especially racism, sexism, homophobia and the inequalities they lead to.

The concept of evil has also been avoided because of its theological associations. Discussions and specifications of good and evil traditionally belonged to the religious realm although few in the modern world would insist that religion has a monopoly on moralizing; moral judgments do not require religious foundations although often enough it is not easy to disentangle the secular from the religious elements in such judgments.

In any case, contemporary Western intellectuals and social scientists consider dwelling on evil an expression of irrational religious impulses, or simplistic Manichean thinking. Intellectual sophistication requires to consider all attitudes or human qualities matters of degree, a continuum, or composites of opposing entities. Only members of the clergy or political extremists feel free and unembarrassed to use the word. In present day Western societies the public designation of anything as evil is often equated with a primitive self-righteousness. Lionel Trilling observed half a century ago that "educated people… 'more and more accounted for human action by the influence of environment and the necessities and habits imposed by society'—a circumstantial explanation never adequate to the reality of evil." Andrew Delbanco pointed out that "the once unassailable distinction between good and evil is suspect since it is now conventional to believe that 'the apparent assertion of moral principles functions as a mask for expressions of personal preference.'" David Frankfurter went so far as to conclude, after examining "demonic conspiracies and Satanic abuse in history" that "Every single example of evil… turns out to be evil imagined: there is, he says, no evidence for any of it. Evil, he agues, is not something real, it is a 'discourse' a 'way of representing things and shaping our experience, not some force itself.'" These remarks illustrate the "postmodern" mentality: everything is "socially constructed" from sexual identity to obesity and notions of good and evil.

It is a notable paradox that the reluctance to entertain the idea of evil coexists with a cultural climate redolent with what most of us would consider its striking manifestations and lurid depictions. Again, Andrew Delbanco wrote:

> …never before have so many novels and films portrayed acts of sadism, mutilation and terror. As we lost touch with the idea of evil, we seem to need more and more vivid representations of it…"

He further argued that "despite the monstrous uses to which Satan has been put… evil remains an inescapable experience for all of us, while we no longer have a symbolic language for describing it."

Ideas and Violence

It is the single major common denominator of most contemporary political violence that it is inspired, or nurtured by ideas, beliefs and their attempted realization. They may be political, religious, or secular-religious, each capable of providing legitimation for the acts of violence involved. Elaborate, self-conscious legitimation is a necessity when the violent actions to be performed may create moral conflicts or qualms in those performing them, or in those ordering, encouraging, or witnessing them. It is one thing to kill in war when combatants threaten one another's life, it is quite another to shove defenseless civilians into gas chambers, shoot them into mass graves, blow up children, women and the old in restaurants or marketplaces.

Present day Islamic terrorists are sustained by the idea of martyrdom, and the serene conviction that in after life generous rewards await them. These deeply religious and irrational beliefs are intertwined with more rational political objectives, sometimes with material rewards as well, benefiting the family of the "martyr."

Modern political violence also requires elaborate conceptions of the evil adversary, the varied incarnations of the 'Infidel' to be eradicated ruthlessly and without hesitation. The historically unique mechanized mass murder of Jews by the Nazis was based on such compelling conceptions of the Jewish enemy. A world cleansed of Jews was thought to usher in peace, harmony, prosperity and social justice, at any rate for the superior Aryan races.

The communist mass murders also rested on conceptions of a better world, inspired by the lofty goals derived from the Marxist ideals and theories, the creation of which required the removal of those obstructing its realization. Nathan Leites, an American social scientist aptly summarized the moral implications of this worldview:

> The Bolshevik must eschew free-floating empathy… Bolshevism shares the feeling expressed by a character in Dostoevsky's A Raw Youth: 'It doesn't matter if one has to pass through filth to get there as long as the

goal is magnificent. It will all be washed off… afterward… Bolshevik doctrine rejects the virtue of empathy with and pity for all human beings… The awareness of distress of others would reduce one's capacity to perform those acts which would ultimately abolish it… instead of feeling guilty about the suffering which one imposes on others…one attempts to feel self-righteous about directly and actively imposing suffering on others—for the sake of the future abolition of suffering.

Lenin put it more succinctly:

It is altogether unforgivable to permit oneself to be frightened or unnerved by 'field hospital' scenes [bloody, mangled bodies—P.H.]. If you are afraid of wolves, don't go into the forest.

Alexander Yakovlev, a high ranking Soviet Party functionary through much of his life came to reject both the practices and ideological foundation of the Soviet system as he came to a clear understanding of the connections between theory and practice:

Belief in the inevitability of the coming Communist world served to justify the numerous and senseless victims of the class struggle… The idea that one should not fear creating victims in the course of serving the cause of progress… is very characteristic of Marx… Moral criteria…are 'revoked' by the brutality and directness of the class warfare… This special 'class' morality leads to the indulgence of any actions… Its justification comes from the special vision of the historical path of development, its final goals for the full renaissance of humanity… All this grew into the conviction that everything that corresponded to the interests of the revolution and communism was moral. That is the morality with which hostages were executed… concentration camps were built and entire peoples forcibly relocated…

The exaggerated awareness or fantasy of some powerful and hateful enemy is the foundation of scapegoating. Human beings derive great satisfaction from righteous indignation and hatred which often inspire and justify violence. This universal and timeless impulse rests on the disposition to hold others—individuals, groups, social or political entities— responsible for a wide range of grievances, frustrations and resentments that individuals experience. Human beings have a marked preference for not taking responsibility for those of their actions and attitudes which have unpleasant consequences and incline to explain their hardships or misfortunes by the malevolence of other humans. It is not sufficient to blame, fate, bad luck, impersonal social forces, or circumstances for personal or group failure or depriva-

tion; it is far more agreeable to hold responsible specific human beings or groups, or some personalized abstraction (Jews, infidels, capitalists, communists, etc). Identifying evil, or evil-doers yields great satisfaction, indeed a quasi-spiritual gratification, the feeling that there is an ordered and meaningful moral universe in which good and evil can be readily and sharply distinguished. Still more gratifying may be the conviction that when evil is well defined and identified it can be crushed without regret or remorse. This attitude legitimated the great slaughters of our times: the Holocaust, the Soviet, Chinese and Cambodian mass murders, those in Rwanda and Islamic acts of terror.

Violence and Threats to Identity

There is another important source of contemporary political violence to be considered: the threat to one's sense of identity, real or imaginary. Such threats have multiplied and intensified in the wake of modernization that has splintered traditional communities, ushered in new national identities, homogenized societies, undermined traditional cultures, and almost simultaneously created a backlash against these processes: the reassertion of ethnic, national or religious identities and demanding that they be "respected."

The preoccupation with a weakened or threatened sense of identity helps to answer the question raised by Amin Maalouf: "why so many people commit crimes nowadays in the name of religious, ethnic or some other kind of identity? Has it always been like this, or is the present era influenced by hitherto unknown factors?"

The aggrieved concern with a sense of identity, moral corruption and the restoration of honor are thrust into sharp relief when these concerns confront the impurities (real or imaginary) of modernity. The Iranian Supreme Court overturned the murder conviction of six members of a state militia who stoned to death and drowned their victims they regarded as "morally corrupt," including "a young couple engaged to be married who, the killers claimed, were walking together in public." In another case in 2004 a 16 year old girl was sentenced to death and hung, for what was said to be "chastity crimes." All these killings, judicial and extrajudicial, were sanctioned by "Islamic teachings and Iran's Islamic penal code" as was recently reported in the New York Times.

Needless to say, the sense of individual identity is bound up with collective or group identity. Modernization notoriously undermines traditional communities and the associated sense of identity. Societies are in trouble when people begin to ask "who am I?" and in even greater trouble when they are unsure of the answer. In a traditional society the question does not arise. It is in societies which are the most ambivalent about modernity—such as present day

Islamic countries—that identity problems are the most pressing and in which militant, compensatory, counter-modernizing trends and responses arise, such as radical Islamic militancy. As Todd Gitlin wrote:

> Islamic fundamentalism… has become the main repository of a passion for pure belonging, a passion exacerbated by the unsettlements of globalization…

Maalouf observed that people "frightened by change seek refuge in values and symbols of a time honored tradition." The demand that women wear traditional Islamic garb is such a compensatory response as is the rage against Western popular culture. Most of the 9/11 suicide bombers spent substantial periods of time in Western countries and several of them acquired higher education in them thereby experiencing and nurturing a consuming ambivalence and hatred towards modernity.

The threat of Westernization or globalization often finds expression in violence. In the words of Maalouf:

> …it is easy to imagine how it [the threat to one' identity—P.H.] can drive people to the worst kind of extremities: if they feel that 'others' represent a threat to their own ethnic group or religion or nation, anything they might do to ward off that danger seems to them entirely legitimate. Even when they commit massacres they are convinced they are merely doing what is necessary to save the lives of their nearest and dearest… the butchers often have a clear conscience…"

Intellectuals and Violence

At last something has to be said about intellectuals and contemporary political violence in part because—as the preeminent moralizing elite of our times—they themselves often address the issue.

Insofar as a great deal of modern political violence was perpetrated in the pursuit of some utopian social–political project, intellectuals could not avoid being implicated. It is intellectuals, in their politicized incarnations, who propose and develop such utopian designs. Gao Xingjian, the Chinese Nobel prize winner wrote:

> During the century that has just passed, many of the intellectual elite went mad. Following the death of God, it was as if everyone had suddenly become a savior who wanted to annihilate the obsolete world order to establish a utopia.

The initial involvement of intellectuals in utopian designs and the attendant social engineering was most evident in communist systems. Less well known that academic intellectuals in Nazi Germany were among the enthusiastic supporters of the regime; spreading and elaborating the racist theories and propaganda required intellectual involvement and support.

Intellectuals in communist societies did not remain supportive of these systems. More typically their initial support gave way to withdrawal and disenchantment, except for those who became absorbed in the cultural–political apparatus of the ruling party. Arguably intellectuals outside communist systems, Western intellectuals in particular, retained their support and sympathy for these systems longer.

In Rwanda "university professors" were involved in the creation and dissemination of anti-Tutsi propaganda. In the former Yugoslavia too intellectuals played a part in the incitements to and justifications of ethic cleansing. The legitimation of Jihad has required substantial intellectual contributions and efforts and they have not been withheld.

It may be argued that these examples represent a debasement of the intellect and that those engaged in the creation and propagation of such ideas do not deserve to be considered "true intellectuals." But if we regard intellectuals all those who are regularly and often professionally engaged in the creation, propagation, or criticism of ideas and institutions associated with matters moral, cultural, social or political, then those assisting the creation of political utopias, social engineering and the legitimation of ruthless political systems and movements will also have to qualify as intellectuals.

Aside from creating or supporting the ideals or ends which require violent means for their realization, intellectuals may also be involved more directly in the legitimation of political violence as officials or functionaries in propaganda and mass communications, journalists or preachers of religion. It is after all, mainly intellectuals who explain why ends justify means in pursuit of the causes they support.

It was not my intention to insist that contemporary political violence is the exclusive outcome of utopia seeking, perverted idealism, nationalistic or religious fanaticism. As noted earlier, conflict over scarce resources is another potent and timeless source of such violence, as is the determination of power holders (of varied ideological persuasion) to cling to, or expand their powers and privileges. I did however argue that many of the most egregious and destructive instances of political violence in recent times had idealistic roots in the various conceptions of a world purified of evil, its incarnations variously defined, depending on the nature of the beliefs held.

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