Betrayal in an Age of Terror

Commentary on: Preventing Betrayal, Editorial by Jennifer J. Freyd

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Every act of public violence is political in the sense that it tests the nature and capacity of government authorized responses. In a democracy, such responses are predicated on the rough moral consensus of its citizens as to what reasonable demands they may make of one another and as to the proportionality and predictability of government sanctions when these are violated. Terrorism sets itself apart from ordinary politics by its declaration that anything goes in order to achieve its ends and by depriving its citizens of the power of a graduated, rational response (Ryan, 2012). *The terrorist, in effect, declares that in his moral universe, the categories of innocence and guilt have been abandoned;* children may be taken hostage, old women raped, people thrown off airplanes – everything is permissible so long as it terrifies ones opponents. The natural social response of shock is attributable to the atrocious behaviour itself and to our sense that the terrorist really will stick at nothing. The degree of shock also reflects baffled outrage at something that is a consequence of these two things, and that is the sense that the terrorist is inviting us and defying us to betray ourselves by breaking all our own rules; the disproportion between the stated goals and the sanctions threatened takes terrorist "bargaining" out of the realms of bargaining as usually understood, and turns it into the simple imposition of the will of one party whose demands are, as they commonly say, "non-negotiable".

Forms of terrorism prior to 9/11

   i) **Insurrectionary terrorism**

   This aims at the revolutionary overthrow of a state and first manifested in Czarist Russia in the late nineteenth century. Its example is instructive because Russia was a reforming autocracy, struggling to adapt a medieval political system to the demands of a modern economy and a multinational empire. Russian nihilists, as terrorists were then called, were the first to create the theory that animates insurrectionary terrorism to this day: using atrocities to provoke regimes into repression that will weaken their grip on citizens' allegiance and cause the discontented to embrace the terrorists as their spokesmen (Figes, 1997; Hosking, 2001). Other examples of the impact of terrorism on constitutional regimes are found in twentieth-century Latin America (Koonings and Kruijt, 1999); in Argentina, Peru and Colombia terrorism provoked the ruling elite, provided the pretext to exploit successful anti-terror campaigns and resulted in indiscriminate repression. This hastened the

imposition of military dictatorship in Argentina, authoritarian rule in Peru and a permanent state of emergency in Colombia.

ii) Self-determination terrorism

This is conducted in the name of a determinate people seeking emancipation from alien rule. Examples include post 1945 anti-colonial resistance in Indonesia, Algeria and Vietnam, the fight against British rule in Northern Ireland by the Irish Republican Army (particularly in the 1970s when violence escalated in the context of concerted attempts by the British to engage both Protestants and Catholics in power sharing (Donohue, 2001)), and Palestine which has been committed to violence from the very beginning of its struggle against "the Zionist entity" in the early 1950s (and where the upsurge of violence often coincides with peace negotiations (Rubner, 1998)). It also includes separatist terrorism aiming at secession for a subordinate ethnic or religious group within a state (Toff, 2003) such as the Tamils in Sri Lanka and the Basques in Spain.

iii) Loner terrorism

Loner or issue terrorism is perpetrated by single individuals or small groups who do not have a constituency of support and who, therefore, do not need to evaluate the consequences of violence for their own side. Examples include Timothy McVeigh and his right-wing co-conspirators who planted the bomb that destroyed the federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995, and the Aum Shinrikyo attack on the Tokyo subway system initiated by a small group enthralled by a cult leader (Lifton, 1999).

iv) Government terrorism

This is best exemplified by totalitarian governments which attempt to make men superfluous "through a way of life in which punishment is meted out without connection with crime, in which exploitation is practiced without profit, where work is performed without product and where senselessness is daily produced anew" (Arendt, 1951). Whilst the Soviet Union under Stalin (1929-1953) and Germany under Hitler (1933-1945) are prime exemplars, others such as China under Mao Tse-tung (1923-76), Cambodia under Pol Pot (1968-87) and North Korea today are also strong contenders (Rummel, 1994).

The terrorism of the global spectacular (Ignatieff, 2003)

Al Qaeda is a distinctive kind of terrorism. They have no aspirations to statehood, do not serve a determinate population and are indifferent to casualties inflicted on Muslim populations who live or work in proximity to their targets. The appropriation and exploitation of religious doctrine by Al Qaeda has been used to both amplify the political impact of terrorist actions by claiming that it acts on behalf of a billion Muslims, and to promise martyrdom to potential recruits. When violence becomes subservient to a personal and not to a political end, it creates the conditions for

nihilism whereby intended victims are to be brushed aside without compunction on the path to a higher goal. Like all death cults, Al Qaeda inculcates the inversion of psychological and moral scruples so that adherents who take their own and others' lives do so in the belief that they are delivered from sin, oppression, and shame (Miller, 1998).

The terrorists who attacked the United States on 9/11 directed their propaganda and their justifications at the US as the hated imperial capital of a materialistic, secular, and alien civilization. Their actions were defended in the language of Islamic eschatology not in the language of rights (Atta, 2001; Miller, 1998), and their intentions were apocalyptic not political; to humiliate the archenemy of Islam and secure martyrdom in the process. The 9/11 attackers may not have left demands, but this has not prevented their supporters throughout the Muslim world from claiming that they acted in the name of the Palestinians and in support of the just demands of believers to worship in the Holy Places free of foreign – that is American – occupation. It is this echo of justification that lends that attack its enduring impact. These are not rights claims exactly, since Muslim extremists disdain the language of rights. But they are a demand for justice nonetheless, to which Al Qaeda asserts they are entitled on behalf of the Muslim masses. But Al Qaeda terrorism does not seek to redress any such injustice. Nor is it intended to hasten reform in the Arab world but to prevent it, to drive embattled regimes into ever more authoritarian forms of reaction, unleashing a popular Islamic revolution that would take the whole region back to 700 C.E. and the time of the caliphate (Ignatieff, 2003).

Preventing betrayal

In her editorial, Freyd (2013) canvasses the nature of the actual and potential betrayals inherent in the Boston Marathon bombings of April 15, 2013, and cautions us regarding the need to mitigate further betrayal. Freyd offers two inferences by way of highlighting the pitfalls involved in how we make generalizations of blame.

a) Most perpetrators of terrorism are male.
   It would be unjust to suspect all males of violence.

Freyd says that most of us would agree with this inference, that it is a reasonable "gut response", and that it may be based on the fact that to do otherwise would be to make generalizations about "the powerful".

b) Most perpetrators of terrorism are ethnically x or nationally y or racially z.
   It is just to suspect that all who are ethnically x of nationally y of racially z are terrorists.

Freyd says that most of us would agree with this inference, that it is an unreasonable "gut response", and that it may be based on the fact that we are generalizing about "the already scorned".

The first generalization is reasonable but not because males constitute a powerful group. Its reasonableness has less to do with power than with utility; grouping the world, finding concepts, and creating categories in order to contextualize our changing needs and circumstances, is adaptive in that we maximize the information we need in order to reach useful conclusions regarding our best interests. Conversely, invoking a universal set as a frame of reference without evaluating the world at large leads to problematic conclusions. For example we would, I suspect, feel that the inference from "all terrorists are bipeds" to "all bipeds are terrorists" is absurd rather than unjust. However, when victims of abuse invoke a reductio ad absurdum such as "all rapists are male" therefore "all males are rapists", we understand why they do so.

The second generalization is unreasonable, a clear reductio ad absurdum yet, as Freyd notes, it is not *felt* to be so ("that same gut response is largely quiet"). I suggest that this has less to do with the fact that those that constitute x or y or z "are already scorned" than with the fact that they are *feared*. A hypothetical may be illustrative. Consider a nation of people with blonde hair, who are vegans and who have a triangle tattooed on their left cheek. A sub-group calling themselves "The Right Angle" are unabashedly vocal about their intention to disseminate veganism and about the fact that they will stop at nothing to achieve this. Over many years they have claimed responsibility for the majority of terrorist attacks that have been committed in various parts of the world. Based on their self-proclaimed programmatic terrorism, it would be a reasonable gut response to blame "The Right Angle" for a recent act of terror but it would not be reasonable to blame those of their countrymen who do not support them (although such a distinction may be difficult to make in practice). Similarly, when bombs were detonated in London in the 1970s, the reflex assumption that the IRA was responsible was reasonable in a way that widespread anti-Irish sentiment was not.

Al Qaeda and its prolific progeny deliberately seek to draw reprisals upon themselves in order to radicalize their own population. As repressive responses increase, the terrorists respond by tightening their screws on their base of support, replacing a political relation to their own side with one of unvarnished tyranny, killing or intimidating anyone who questions whether the costs of the campaign outweigh the gains. Populations that once supported armed struggle for reasons of conviction, become trapped either in complicit silence or beguiled by fanaticism. In the process, political regulation of terrorist groups by their community at large becomes impossible. Moderate voices who might persuade a community to withdraw their support from terror are silenced. In place of a political culture in which groups and interests compete for leadership, a people represented by suicide bombers ceases to be a political community at all and becomes a cult, with all the attendant hysteria, intimidation and fear (Ignatieff, 2003).

Liberal democracies are unique among forms of government in that they are "under endless trial", engaging in the burden of a constant institutionalized process of self-scrutiny to ensure that they are living according to those ethical values by which they are defined (Kolakowski, 1990). This becomes excruciatingly burdensome when confronted with those who use violence as a first resort, as does the difficulty in discerning who are the betrayers and who are the

betrayed. Terrorism is not only an offense against the lives and liberties of its specific victims, but against politics itself, against the practice of deliberation, compromise, and the search for nonviolent and reasonable solutions that is requisite to the safety of those who are under threat. Terrorism is a form of politics whose aim is the death of politics itself. For this reason, all societies that wish to remain political must not be blind to the betrayal that terrorism represents. Otherwise both we and the people that terrorists purport to represent are condemned to live in a pre-political state of combat, a state of war (Ignatieff, 2003).

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