

8 Terrorism and Perception

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1. War and Perception

War is considerably more complex than its physical realization through violent action, an idea that, due to its visibility, is often presented as its centerpoint. The phenomenon of war spills over from the physical dimension in which it develops, permeating the emotional and the political spheres. As pointed out by Glucksmann (2020), war is an activity of the spirit. For this reason, von Clausewitz (1982) defined it as a clash of wills that is only resolved on the battlefield; and General Beaufre describes it as a dialectic of hostile wills.

There is also the problem of the relevance of the facts because war does not exist completely apart from them. It is even necessary to define what is 'to win' and what 'to lose'. These concepts are situated in relation to achieving one's own objectives, more than in the defeat of the opponent; and this is when, sometimes, there is no real difference between a battle either won or lost on the physical plane. In fact, during the Middle Ages, kings were often present on the battlefield to claim their victory; such a gesture assured the legitimacy of their actions and truth of the claim. If we take truth not as an autonomous reality, that is, that subsists by itself, but rather, as the result of a social consensus, winning or losing comes to be a kind of shared feeling, or not, as shown in the smiling photos of those who shortly go on to act as suicide bombers. What is important is what is believed and what is felt by those involved; that is the decisive element, and as such the truth.

Reality, in this context, becomes a variable, and conflicts, in addition to being a clash of forces and wills, also become a collision of perceptions and realities. Ultimately, war is about temporarily altering the perception of the reality in which the conflict takes place: misleading, breaking the soul of the opponent, causing him to lose initiative, depriving him of his freedom of action, and persuading him to make wrong decisions. The key is thus located in this last human feature – the will – but this is, in turn, affected by the perception of the environment in which it is integrated.

In the most advanced Armed Forces, globally speaking, a newly developed ‘cognitive domain’ is being integrated together with the traditional forces: Land, Sea and Air, alongside which others such as Cyberspace or Outer Space have in recent history also been added. Such an addition transforms truth and reality into another dimension of the battlefield; an area in which to attack and defend. Such a view removes a level of autonomy and causes the entire conflict to be disaggregated from its context, placing it in a space apart from the reality of its context.

As a social phenomenon, war infiltrates all aspects of society. Crucially, it encompasses the internet and social networks as much as the battlefield. To Glucksmann (2020), it exists as a clash of discourses, which is not won by the best, but by the one that embraces the whole battlefield. If one doesn’t play this game, they run the risk of being outflanked and, so, defeated.

Thus, the population, as a creator of consensus and truth, is the object and objective of a struggle that, to a large extent, is settled in their imagination and, for this reason, it is not easy to win. In the end, it is only perception that counts in both memory and power. It is there, in the emotions and in the memory, and not in reality, where defeat is burrowed. Without winning such a battle, military victory is not possible and, furthermore, such a victory loses part of its meaning since it cannot be projected along the time, in the future. It becomes a fight for truth, as well as the need to fix the correct reference of things; and, consequently, for the results of the action and even for its justice. That is why it was not necessary to win the Vietnam War if characters like Rambo could be created a posteriori, with such dramatic force that they can capture or transform reality itself and restore the dignity of the defeat until transforming its action into victory.

Another related issue is situated in the contradiction that war embodies. The objective of all war is peace, this is its political resolution, not victory, which is its military resolution (although clearly, whoever obtains victory tries to build peace on it). However, the terms ‘peace’ and ‘victory’, are not necessarily or directly equivalent, as the case of France in Algeria or the United States in Vietnam shows us. War, by developing its actions on one plane – the military – and measuring the effectiveness of its actions on another – the political – embodies a specific logic that, far from being linear and direct, often incorporates elements of contradiction and paradox. These are the result of the translation of acts of war to the different spheres and contexts in which they take place. Such shots are endowed with a kind of refraction that significantly alters the direction and effects of military action. The same will happen with terrorism.

War is a clash of powers – the Machiavellianism of strategy often confuses force with power (Glucksmann, 2020), but it is much more than that – and, as such, it is an inherently political activity in which the military

AU: To maintain consistency, single quotes have been used for key terms and double for true quotes. Please check if the changes made throughout the chapter are ok.

plane is very relevant (though by no means is it the only one in which the conflict is settled). Hard power – whether military or economic – is often the most visible form of power, but it is accompanied by other variants that can enable the intended purpose, sometimes in a more effective and less apparent way. Power is not action; its secret is that it is rarely used because the use of its hard forms wears it out; In addition, action incorporates tolls in terms of legitimacy. The mere image of power is also, in itself, a form of power, since it does not need to be exercised, being like all its soft forms, a halo, a way of influencing and, therefore, a sign that does not incorporate the burdens of its hard nature. As Hobbes (2010) emphasized, “the reputation of power is Power”.

In asymmetric warfare, the military level continues to be important, but the weaker party, seeing its poor prospects for success, transfers its operations to other areas (economy, media, for instance), whereby the chances of achieving victory are higher, by temporarily diluting the differences in power between the parties. But above all, it can also be defined as a confrontation between two significantly different strategic models.

War and terrorism are related. War is a clash of powers. Terrorism, for its part, is a fiction of war to the extent that it is also a fiction of power and incorporates the politics paradoxical logic. Thus, what is visible in a terrorist action suggests that there is much more behind when, not infrequently, what is exhibited on the scene of an attack is all, there is not anything left. In this way, the whole is presented as a part and thus, in addition, amplified by the multiplying capacity of social media, and an extraordinary return is obtained from each action in terms of Power.

From this perspective, we can consider terrorism as an extreme case of asymmetric warfare in which the weakest party definitively abandons the military plan, replacing it with the multiplier effect of social media.

2. Terrorism as a Phenomenon of Violence

Terrorism, as a practice, has existed since the dawn of humanity. The Latin for ‘terror’ comes from the name Deimos, a minor god and the son of Aphrodite (Venus) and Ares (Mars). Terror, not by chance, thus appears to us as a child of Beauty and Violence; and he is also the twin brother of Phobos, or Fear. The three are accompanied in each battle by the sister of Ares, the goddess Enio, known as the ‘destroyer of cities’. The combination of mythological characters is neither strange nor casual, but on the contrary, very real and human and, therefore, explanatory of reality, as all myths are. The word ‘terrorism’ is derived from the political regime led by Maximilian Robespierre and which in turn takes its name from the famous speech he delivered before the National Assembly: “Virtue without terror is fatal; terror without virtue is powerless” (Robespierre, 2007, p. 115).

In it, an ideology, virtue, is linked to a practice, terror, in an equation that relates both terms. Such a combination requires delicate management to prevent the ideology from being contaminated by violence, which, in addition to being dangerous, is difficult to achieve.

From this, it follows that terrorism, or rather, terror, is fundamentally a communication strategy that has its roots in morbidity. It uses what Shelley called the “tempestuous loveliness of terror”.¹ The showiness of the use of violence in a world and a time in which it has become strange constitutes a powerful media attraction factor; and it even has powerful effects of legitimation for security in the very convictions that are exhibited with its use. In terrorism the media takes precedence over any other consideration, including the military element or reality itself, since with its acts, it aspires to conceptualize and to transform it. Thus, if war is basically an act of communication that incorporates a supplement of violence, terrorism is a political activity that is staged in the media through a certain amount of bloodshed. Violence is part of terrorism, but terrorism is not only violence; in fact, violence, its methodology, is not the most crucial aspect of terrorism, but, as happens in war, the discourse, is an eminently political proposal.

Terrorism is an illegitimate methodology, a strategy, put at the service of a specific political option. It is based on the provocation with which the emotional manipulation of political decision-makers is intended, either directly or implicitly; that is, through social pressure resulting from the atmosphere of alarm and fear that actions generate. It is achieved through the association of violence and media pressure, obtained through sporadic waves of terror that are prolonged over time (Münkler, 2009).

In this way, through the intentional overpoliticization of its actions, terrorism tries to alter the perception that decision-makers have of reality; and with provocation, it forces an inappropriate response to the emotional challenge posed. Not having sufficient means to defeat the State, the danger of terrorism is usually situated in the response given to the challenges it poses. In other words, it manipulates the existing cleavages of societies, its fracture lines, placing their contradictions in the firing line. It is also the case that terrorism tries to impose on the State the need for a short-term reaction that is alien to its long-term strategy so that it makes the mistake of emotionally altering the parameters and references for analyzing the situation; and thus any option adopted is inadequate. It is the old action-reaction dynamic that continues to be useful and valid for the simple reason that it works.

Terrorism can also be described as a form of theater (Hoffman, 2017), a programmed show with which it tries to exercise emotional control over the population, rather than over a territory, as is characteristic of war. These uses of homeopathic doses of violence that, applied in a custom-built

scenario and amplified by the mass media, help the terrorist group to colonize the minds of the target population, both posing a problem and offering the solution simultaneously through the imaginary. In addition, and with the repetition of their actions, pedagogically, terrorists rule out any option other than the one they propose while teaching their cause; it is what Carlo Pisacane called 'propaganda by deed'.

The attacks serve to raise the debate and spread the terrorist agenda, subsequently undermining the convictions of the counterpart. The media, in their search for neutrality and equidistance, help familiarize the ideas of terrorist groups; by trivializing words and terminology, the linguistic exposure allows a group's language to be adopted, thus contributing to the risk of both indoctrination and radicalization.

As one PLO leader George Habash noted of the Munich Games massacre in 1972: "The choice of the Olympics ...it was like painting the name of Palestine on a mountain that can be seen from the four corners of the Earth" (cited in Taylor, 1993, p. 6). The simplicity of his speech associated with the use of publicity techniques ensures repercussions. Postmodern man does not think, he just informs himself; however, he looks for emotion in the news more than for truth, that is why terrorism and false news, are more viral than the trustworthy news: they adapt better to what is demanded.

In any case, the effectiveness of terrorism is not measured by the material and human damage it causes, but by the psychological impact derived from them and which is not directly related to their physical reality; from there it bleeds into the political plane. We are facing an act of communication, in which the physical dimension, violence, is not necessarily essential but simply the medium.

3. Terrorism as a Media Phenomenon

One of the fundamental elements that terrorism incorporates is an effective media strategy. Modern terrorism in fact begins at the end of the 19th century with the appearance of the mass media, whose development has been parallel. Thus, when mass media became globally reaching, so did terrorism, guaranteeing the dissemination of a group's actions and with this their impact. For this reason, both terrorism and the media maintain a quasi-symbiotic relationship: terrorism wants to be news, and the media needs news. The message is not violence itself, but rather it is conceived under the code of violence.

Terrorism thus struggles for control of the news agenda and, with it, control of the truth. In addition, the media is able to generate an anxiety by demanding a response to something that does not require it and thus preventing the implementation of one phase of the response from taking hold

before moving on to the next. In this way, the emotionality of public opinion is put before rationality or, even, the resolution of the problem posed.

E.T.A.s attacks took place at 08.00, which meant that footage already dominated the news at 09.00, and later occupied the 15.00 news and ran into the evening news, winning the group the whole day's worth of media coverage for their cause. When Spain joined the EU in 1985, E.T.A. similarly murdered five people in three different attacks trying to change the news agenda of the day and in this way, to misinform.

The media give terrorism a visibility that does not correspond to its real power. Visibility and power are terms felt as equivalent. The main attribute of power is to construct a truth, so that it is exercised through its production. Only the one who has the truth has the power. And this is best understood by simplest means. The truth must be made explicit and the cheapest and most indisputable way to do it is through an image. It helps not to think beyond what is in front of you or in the proposed sense.

It is not about creating large-scale or serious damage, but about summoning a large audience. The practice of terrorism thus embodies that of a publicist; a message, the symbolism and the quality of the unexpected, as well as the surprise (inherent in the proper use of tactical intelligence), to attract the attention of the target audience. The action is converted into a perfect image and ready to be reproduced, creating and feeding its own narrative. As has been said, it is a theater in permanent search of an audience: an 'expressive violence' (Le Borgne, 1988, p. 249) which sheds light on some debates in which the victims are reified in favor of the objects and symbols that are attacked.

As a work of art and despite its appearances, the image is emotional. Images allow great results to be achieved by influencing the emotional consciousness of millions of people. An audience does not have time to make its judgments and the information with which it does so is, not infrequently, deficient. An image in this context is everything, a complete explanation of extraordinary simplicity, which, being a portion of reality, is difficult to refute. This has made the real-time media 'factories of history' and creators. Reality – what is or is not real and true – thus becomes one of the dimensions of the battlefield, of the aforementioned 'cognitive domain'. The photographer, like the painter, is an artist, a selector of reality who uses the particular to express the general. However, the image that it provides to the viewer is not complete, it is packaged; with the camera selecting the portion of truth that is intended to be transmitted and discarding the rest. This is of course artificial, since the image is a fragment of the whole; the context is missing, without which it cannot be understood. The composition focuses on some element and thus that element is stolen; moreover, the simplification allows concentration on the sustained argument, centrally situated, subsequently eliminating in the process the

inconsistencies that are inherently present in human nature. With this, the camera becomes, due to its ability to create both reality and impact, an instrument of politics. Photography is primarily directed at the emotions that are directly accessible to it. It is not for scholarly and rigorous analysts whose writings and explanations are rarely of interest to public opinion. The image hides the truth, it becomes a discourse and, wars like the one in Vietnam, are transformed into a succession of images of exuberant plasticity with which sensational (and irrefutable) events are projected, even if they are not the most important ones. As such, war is seen as a succession of photographs that, due to a lack of a media strategy on one side, allows the other to choose by imposing its agenda, and with it its law.

In any case, this unwanted and diabolical concurrence of interests between terrorism and the media requires debate and management, since freedom of the press belongs to the heritage of the West. Paradoxically, any restriction on freedoms would be a victory for the terrorists, since their fight involves a struggle for legitimacy and, incidentally, their capabilities are being recognized.

4. Terrorism as a Bloody Narrative

The key element of terrorism is not, as we have said, violence, which but serves as a visible manifestation of it; rather, its central element is the political discourse that it both creates and depends on. The discourse, or narrative, surrounding terrorism is its legitimizing element in which action, message and cause are interwoven; it is a medium that is part of the message and that serves to intertwine the collective object and real objective of the struggle. Narratives are not rational but emotional; they are built on the basis of perceptions, commonplaces or stereotypes and plot leaps, aiming to express a perceived reality built on the promise of a better world.

A narrative is always a selection of facts, carried out with greater or lesser accuracy and freedom, and which leads to a pre-established imagination. It supposes a balance between reality and fiction, to the extent that it embodies a conscious act of creation, and in which rational and irrational elements predetermined by the intuited purpose are incorporated. It exists as a bridge between the implicit and the explicit. A narrative then, as a stringed set of ideas, not false but incomplete, has the potential to evolve into an ideology (a doctrine or a religion, say). Its function is to make reality intelligible through an intentionally simplified lens; it is a vision of the world no matter how biased it may be and the point of reference from which it is made extravagant, and which, most of the time, is not presented. In this sense, terrorism is nothing but a bloody narrative.

Despite the appearance of presenting itself as a formulation, narratives are characterized by the debates that they put in motion, not simply the

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ideas that they present. They have the power to steer the population toward a certain direction and to publicly silence certain facts or opinions that contradict them or do not support them. Thus, if a narrative, as a set of linked ideas, takes into account something unforeseen or for which it does not have an implicit internal response, it is dismantled. Hence its illustrious coherence, from which most human acts remain absent.

As Freund pointed out: "ideology does not try to know if, for example, there is a contradiction between the ideal of freedom and that of equality: it excludes as enemies those who pose a similar question... the desire for exclusion" (Freund, 1995, p. 174). Hitler, predictably, goes further claiming that political parties are prone to enter compromises; but a *Weltanschauung* never does this. Whilst a political party is inclined to adjust its teachings with a view to meeting those of its opponents, a *Weltanschauung*, instead, proclaims its own.

The truth within such a discourse is viewed not as an unattractive prose or a set of data that is not at all suggestive, but rather as the emotion of an exciting proposal or agenda, however unrealistic and biased it may be. It thus becomes a mechanism of group identity construction and socialization. That is why a narrative is not immutable in form; its premise of change to keep the background unchanged means it has the potential to evolve and adapt, incorporating elements of the present that link with its proposal for the future. Through taking control of their own narrative, terrorist groups have the ability to reinterpret the facts and even themselves in order to maintain an emotional coherence with the ends. They are romantic but not universalistic or rationally symmetrical; they always start from a happy arcade that allows explaining the future using the past; or, to be more exact, they rewrite the past in the name of the future. If a reference does not work, without hesitation, another is sought; the important thing is to preserve the mobilizing spirit, the dynamics.

Narratives do not describe reality but rather they help to create it, generating the necessary ethical space for violence. Terrorists depend on an ideology or a set of ideals, in order to be able to live with the violence they commit or threaten to commit. Without the necessary narrative, they would go from being agents of justified and necessary violence to the condition of criminals, or worse still, to that of psychopaths (Laqueur, 1981, p. 272). Through the weapon of discourse, verifiable data and stories, however interpretable, are replaced by fragmented narratives based on a diffuse plot that uses a black-and-white logic to polarize the political space while reaffirming that they are not the actual pivots of real politics and may even have nothing to do with it. These narratives, or stories, choose the photographs in relation to the imaginaries they propose. This selection of facts and perspectives comes to justify what has already been decided before; feeling precedes thought just like music precedes words.


5. Conclusions

Terrorism, as a fiction of war, embodies its characteristics and its logic. Both terrorism and war are violent activities but above all, both are politically driven acts of communication, in which physical – and apparently decisive – violence, is driven by a prevailing and inherently political discourse, operating within its own specific parameters, and its own version of reality. With discourse as its strategy, terrorism tries to alter the perception of decision-makers and educate a population that is both the object and objective of the struggle. Using online methods of communication such as social media, terrorism uses the visibility of its own actions to – simulating a power it does not have – control the media agenda and impose on the State the need for a response that, due to its emotional nature, will never be satisfactory. Rather, it will inevitably generate an action-reaction spiral, a kind of drift that will place him in front of his own internal contradictions, will show his most coercive nature and will serve to break the feeling of community. The real danger of terrorism is thus not situated in its acts but rather in the measures adopted to respond to it.

Who has the power has the truth, because, remembering Foucault, power is obtained from the production of truth. The transformation of an untrue concept into something true embodies the essence of what concerns us as a real exercise of power. The struggle for the meaning of a term and for truth is, in the end, a struggle for power. The key to terrorism lies, despite appearances, in the solidity of its narratives, and not in the violence with which it stages its aims; this is the visible element of a dramatization process that serves to summon an audience and send a message. The narratives make movements such as Salafist-jihadist terrorism exceptionally dangerous as they have appropriated an ancient philosophical tradition with which they strengthen their discourse and provide coherence to their actions.

In short, no one can hide an illuminated city on top of a mountain, unless its own inhabitants are the ones who turn off their lights; As the biblical dictum says, “Take note of the one who has integrity! Observe the godly! For the one who promotes peace has a future”² (psalm 37:37).

Notes

- 1 Shelley, P. B. (2014). On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery. In *1819–1820* (pp. 218–223). Routledge.
- 2 Retrieved from <https://biblehub.com/psalms/37-37.htm> 

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