Aestheticising Terrorism: Alternative Approaches to 11 September

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This paper highlights the methodological difficulties of ascribing causation to events which are to some extent “irrational” and demanding of different forms of understanding — such as those provided in Romantic literature, or poetry, or art. It may be that the scientific urge to systematise diverts analytical attention from debates over values, and from existential complexities in the connections between (say) poverty and violent acts of (imagined) retribution. Official language also proffers distorting metaphors, sanitises facts and impedes the possibility of combating terrorism. “Non-analytical methods” may be essential to analysis.

Few events in global politics have been as influential as the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The shock was profound. The impact global. The subsequent US-led military campaign in Afghanistan received unusually broad-based support. Even former pacifists — from the Greens in the German government to a large group of influential American intellectuals — endorsed the call to arms.¹ The war against terrorism qualifies “as the first truly just war since World War II,” argued Richard Falk, who by his own admission had never before “supported a shooting war in which the United States was involved”.²

The horrifying nature of the terrorist attack is undisputed. And so is the need for action. More problematic, however, is the direction of this action and the relatively narrow public debate that emerged in its wake. Couched in a rhetoric of “good” versus “evil”, the US response to 11 September re-establishes the sense of order and certitude that had existed during the Cold War: an inside/outside world in which, according to the words of President George W. Bush, “you are either with us or against us”.³ Understandable as such an emotional response may be on some level, it creates more difficulties than it solves. The rhetoric of “evil madmen”, as Roxanne Euben convincingly stresses, “advances neither understanding of [terrorist] horror nor, for that matter, the capacity to combat or prevent it”.⁴ Indeed, the good-versus-evil rhetoric forecloses both critical discussion and practical policy options. It banished any attempt

¹ See, for instance, a “public letter” entitled “War against Terror”, published 12 February 2002 and signed by some sixty intellectuals, from Francis Fukuyama to Michael Walzer and Theda Skocpol. For a reproduction of the text see www.americanvalues.org [accessed June 2002].
³ “You are either with us or against us”, CNN, 6 November 2001.

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to critically investigate 11 September and the response to it into the realm of “insensitivity” and “irrelevance”.5

To draw attention to these factors is not necessarily to call into question the principle of *jus ad bellum* — the right to conduct a war in response to an unprovoked aggression. The point, rather, is to make room for a variety of inquiries that can increase both our understanding of terrorism and our options in responding to it. This essay seeks to make a modest contribution in this direction, focusing in particular on the usefulness of aesthetics, understood in the broad sense as an attempt to validate the whole register of human perceptions and sensations. Important and practically relevant insight can thus emerge from a range of more sensuous, more neglected, but equally relevant, practices of representation.6

**Foreign Policy between Rumsfeld’s World and Kant’s World**

A good entry into the difficult issue of 11 September is provided by one of the chief architects of the subsequent fight against global terrorism, the US Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld. Following a visit to American troops in Afghanistan, he described the key battle of Mazar-I-Sharif:

>A hail of precision-guided bombs began to land on Taliban and al-Qaeda positions. The explosions were deafening, and the timing so precise that, as the soldiers described it, hundreds of Afghan horsemen emerged, literally, out of the smoke, riding down on the enemy through clouds of dust and flying shrapnel.7

For Rumsfeld, this battle scene constitutes a “ride into the future”. It is a “remarkable achievement” because the successful collaboration between horsemen and high technology signifies a meeting between the nineteenth and the twenty-first centuries. The result is no less than a revolution in military affairs, one that not only makes efficient use of high-tech weapons, but also signifies “new ways of thinking and new ways of fighting”.8

Rumsfeld’s “ride into the future” is in fact a journey into the past — one that entrenches old ways of thinking and old ways of fighting. It represents a worldview and a policy approach that is inadequate to meet the diverse and increasingly complex security challenges of the twenty-first century. The new US foreign policy reflects a rather selective combination of Romantic idealism and Enlightenment rationality. Left over from the Romantic period is the deified masculine hero, later to be engaged in the battle-fields of Afghanistan and elsewhere. He is no less courageous than his Byronesque predecessors, for he and his comrades “rode boldly”, as their commander

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5 This is, for instance, how Agnes Heller portrays “renowned intellectuals” from America and Germany who advanced an alternative interpretation of 11 September. Agnes Heller, “9-11, or Modernity and Terror”, *Constellations*, Vol. 9, 1 (2002), p.53.


approvingly proclaims, “into tank, mortar, artillery, and sniper fire”. Reborn is the Romantic hero: the individual who rises to the occasion and challenges the repressive forces around him, the one who “stands resolutely and incorruptly against decadence, evil and deceit, until they are exposed for what they are”. However, unlike Napoleon’s Romantic conquest of Europe two centuries ago, Rumsfeld’s heroes are equipped with the latest satellite-guided missiles. They march with the scientific heritage of the Enlightenment, with the desire to systematise, to search for rational foundations and certainty in a world of turmoil and constant flux.

A brief revisit to the complex transition from the Enlightenment to the Romantic period reveals why and how Rumsfeld’s vision of modernity is highly problematic. If Kant were alive today, he would undoubtedly scold Rumsfeld for trying to solve political problems through a tightly controlled co-ordination of the faculties. Such an approach becomes possible if all faculties (such as perception, memory, reason, imagination and understanding) collaborate along the same model of recognition towards a particular object. But the ensuing model of thought (and action) is problematic, for it provides a few dominant forms of insight, usually those emerging from reason, with the power to synchronise a variety of otherwise disparate faculties. The result is a relatively narrow form of common sense that can neither explain its emergence nor become aware (and critical) of its own values. The so-established mode of thought makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to locate and explore a wide range of other and potentially valuable insights into a political problem like terrorism.

Rumsfeld likens his policy of deterrence to the challenge of dealing with burglars. To prevent break-ins you “need a good, solid, dead bolt on your front door”. You also need a good alarm. And to increase prevention, “you need a police force to patrol the neighbourhood and keep bad guys off the streets”. And, of course, “a big German shepherd doesn’t hurt either”.

That the same [burglar] logic should hold for national defence is highly problematic, for it places all resources — intellectual and material — into detecting, dissuading or punishing burglaries by means of policing. No attempt is made, for instance, at understanding why burglaries occur in the first place. The assumption, that there are always “bad guys” out there, moves the very phenomenon of burglaries into the domain of irrationality — thus preventing all possible policy approaches except the repressive policing method.

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10 David Morse, Perspectives on Romanticism (London, 1981), p.37. Both the Enlightenment and Romanticism were, of course, highly diverse époques, generating far more complex — and often contradictory — ideas than the ones that have survived in today’s interpretations, at least in those that make up prevalent realist foreign policy discourse. See, for instance, Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, trans. C. Porter, in Paul Rabinow, ed., The Foucault Reader (New York, 1984); Paul de Man, Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism (Baltimore, 1993); René Girard, Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque (Paris, 1961); Carl Schmitt, Politische Romantik (München, 1925).
13 Rumsfeld, “Transforming the Military”, p.25.
When faced with an issue as difficult and consequential as global terrorism, we need to use all of our faculties to deal with it. Even in the bleakest hour of history, or perhaps exactly then, there is hope for a brighter future. This hope lies in people’s ability to overcome prevailing thinking patterns — the Zeitgeist that has led to conflict and violence. Innovative solutions to entrenched political conflicts are unlikely to emerge from the thinking patterns that have come to frame existing political interactions. Needed at moments of incomprehension and despair is not a return to the familiarity of past habits, reassuring as this move may seem at first sight. If hope is to prevail over despair, if security and peace are to prevail over violence, then the prevailing logic and language of Realpolitik must give way to a broader and more critical engagement with the political.

Re-reading 11 September

Such a critical engagement must start with re-interpreting the very events of 11 September. To do so is not necessarily easy, for the prevalent public discourse, repeated in a variety of forums, holds that this is a “time for realism, not abstract philosophising”. But events themselves do not have any meaning. Meaning emerges only with the process of representation. And realism is, of course, only one of many forms of political interpretation. It is no less abstract than others, except that we have become so used to its metaphors — from the balance of power to collateral damage — that we are no longer aware of their arbitrary and highly political nature. To declare realism realistic, and to depoliticise its metaphors, is to foreclose the option of understanding a phenomenon like terrorism. Dealing with interpretation, and by definition with abstraction, is thus inevitable if one is to look for innovative solutions that can break the cycle of violence.

One of the crucial questions, often falsely dismissed as “insensitive and irrelevant”, is to ask why 11 September has come to be seen as a major event in global politics. But this question is not as absurd as it seems. Indeed, it is an important precondition for understanding the politics of representation that lies at the heart of terrorism and the fight against it.

The death toll alone could hardly constitute 11 September as a major event. About 3000 people lost their lives in the tragedy. Compare this to the 250,000 people who died in the Bosnian war, or those — estimated at up to one million — who were killed in 1994 during a few months of genocidal violence in Rwanda. In Bosnia it took almost half a decade for the international community to organise an intervention that would stop the killing. In Rwanda the indifference and inaction of the international community was even more stunning.

The 11 September outrage was different for at least three reasons. First, and most obviously, the terrorist attack took place on the territory of the USA, the sole superpower of the post-Cold-War era, directly affecting American lives and shattering a sense of domestic security and prosperity that had prevailed for at least a decade. Second, the attack was directed not randomly at any object, but at the key symbols of political, economic and military power. No building represents the neo-liberal economic world order better than the twin-towers of the World Trade Centre, and no

building represents the military might of the US hegemon better than the Pentagon. The White House, a possible target for a third attack, would, of course, have been the perfect symbol of political might. The assault was thus directed not only at physical targets, but also at representations of power. It sought to attack an entire way of life, one based on liberal democracy and free-market capitalism.

Third, 11 September took place at a time when processes of globalisation have fundamentally altered the relationship between time and space, imposing the latter over the former. Particularly relevant here is the fact that television networks broadcast the terrorist attacks live across the world, thereby providing the tragedy with an instantaneously global dimension. Paul Virilio’s apocalyptic vision of the “accident of all accidents”, of the global “circulation of the generalised accident”, all of a sudden achieved an all-too-realistic dimension.

The media representations that made 11 September into a truly global event follow their own logic — different from the logic of the events they seek to capture — blending information and entertainment in often highly problematic ways. This is one of the reasons why Virilio believes that the “paradoxical logic of the video-frame privileges the accident, the surprise, over the durable substance of the message”. It also privileges the spectacularly tragic over the chronically tragic — reflecting the Romantic element of the western cultural heritage. Consider the simple fact, widely publicised by the United Nations but little noted by policy-makers and the general public, that every day some 24,000 people die from malnutrition, or that every day 30,000 children under the age of five die from preventable causes. Of course, hunger, malnutrition and poverty are not the same problems as terrorism. They have different causes and require different solutions. But the fact remains that market-dependent and entertainment-oriented television networks favour heroic and spectacular images of wars and terrorist attacks over more mundane daily problems, even if the human, social and economic impact of the latter can be just as devastating and consequential in nature.

Contextualising 11 September reveals that the terrorist attack is not only a human tragedy, but also a political crisis. To investigate the political nature of a crisis, and the responses to it, is perhaps more important than ever today, for there is less and less time and opportunity to do so. The annihilation of space by time condenses the political decision-making process into an ever-shortened period. There is only little opportunity for contemplation before moving to action. William Connolly convincingly points out how our ability to hold democratic deliberations about military action has become jeopardised by the increasing speed in which conflict is carried out across the globe. Complex political and ethical issues need to be simplified so that appropriate political

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and military action can be taken in a short time-span. This is particularly the case in an event like 11 September, when massive popular pressure points not only to immediate military action, but also to a politics of retaliation. Even conventional security analysts, who do not usually contemplate the constructed dimensions of threats, warn of the dangers entailed in such a scenario. Ashton Carter and the former US Secretary of Defence, William Perry, stressed already before the events of 11 September that the period of fear and hysteria which inevitably follows an act of “catastrophic terrorism” is the wrong time to take action.\(^{22}\)

The Cultural Dimension of Terrorism

While the nature of a crisis is culturally and politically conditioned, the reactions to it are of course even more so. And such cultural and political factors can easily be identified in the response against terrorism. In the west, for instance, the image of the stereotypical terrorist contains strong Islamic and Arab features, and this long before 11 September. Islam has been constituted as the classical Other, encompassing people whose sense of identity and whose religious practices are so strange that they cannot be seen as anything else than a threat to the existing societal order.

The significance of stereotypical threat images becomes evident if one goes back in time and recalls, just for a moment, one of the biggest terrorist attacks that took place on US soil before September 2001, the now largely overshadowed bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, in 1995.\(^{23}\) Various influential commentators, such as the columnist A.M. Rosenthal, drew an immediate link to “Mideast terrorism”, even though there was no concrete evidence that could possibly be used to advance such an interpretation.\(^{24}\) The fact is, of course, that the Middle East had nothing whatsoever to do with the terrorist attack in Oklahoma. It was an entirely home-grown phenomenon.

The media coverage of the Oklahoma terrorist attack is equally revealing, particularly when one scrutinises the widely used metaphorical distinction between “extremism” and “fundamentalism”. The *New York Times*, for instance, often portrayed Arab terrorists as “Muslim fundamentalists”.\(^{25}\) A fundamentalist is by definition someone who derives his or her values from the core of a society, from its foundations. A fundamentalist represents, in a pure and crystallised way, all that this society is about — its essence, its core values, its vision of what is right and wrong. Fundamentalism is thus a metaphor that implicates not only the terrorist individual, but also the society whose fundamentals she or he represents. The fact is, of course, that most Arab terrorists, such as Osama bin Laden, are radicals whose actions do not reflect the opinions of the population at large. The political dimensions of this metaphorical practice become even more revealing when we contrast the fundamentalist description of Arab terrorists with those that are advanced when non-Arabs are implicated in a comparable incident. Timothy McVeigh, later executed, was never portrayed as a fundamentalist. The *New York Times* depicted him as a “white extremist”, as a criminal who has connections with other “right-wing extremists”.\(^{26}\) This metaphor has a very

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different connotation: it portrays an individual who operates at the margins of life, a radical who in no way reflects the core values of a particular society. The metaphor of extremism thus creates a situation in which the society at large is absolved of responsibility. The fact is, of course, that McVeigh was much more of a fundamentalist than most Arab terrorists. Although a loner and social outcast, he was nevertheless a typical product of mainstream America. Not a radical, but a young white man who reflected the fundamentals of the American way of life: a man who fulfilled his patriotic military duties and was even awarded an official US government medal for it — the Bronze Star, given for “valour and service during the Persian Gulf War”. 27

Discourses of Evil

The situation in the wake of 11 September is both different and similar. Different because Arabs did indeed turn out to be responsible for the attack. Different also because many journalists now tend to employ a more carefully crafted vocabulary to portray terrorists. And different above all because policy makers, from Washington to London, have gone to great lengths to emphasise that their war is a war against terrorism, and not against Islam or the Arab world. 28

On many levels, though, the present war on terror displays strong parallels not only with previous responses to terrorism, but also with the more general political worldview that prevailed during half a century of Cold War international politics. Consider, for instance, the Quadrennial Defense Review, the first major report to be published by the Department of Defence after 11 September. It points out that war was brought to “America’s shores by the evil forces of terror”. 29 President George W. Bush, likewise, speaks of the “evildoers”. 30 “Evil is real”, he stressed in his State of the Union address. “It must be opposed.” 31 What must be stressed as well, though, is that evil here means more than merely “doing harm or inflicting pain on innocents”. 32 Terrorists are evil because they attack, as did the Soviet Empire, the very foundations of western (and meanwhile quasi-globalised) civilisation: a form of life based on the principles of liberal-democracy and market-oriented capitalism. Radical evil thus emerges, as Paul Valadir puts it, if it is a challenge to what is perceived to be the most total and complete notion of good in history. 33

Most commentators — including the author of this essay — would readily agree that defending democratic principles against terrorist threats is a worthwhile endeavour. It is, indeed, essential. Whether or not a rhetoric of good versus evil is helpful to this task is an entirely different question. Various analysts strongly challenge this assumption. Douglas Klusmeyer, Astri Suhrke and Roxanne Euben, for instance, argue that a rhetoric of evil prevents both serious investigation into the phenomenon of terrorism

28 This is, of course, not to say that stereotypical images of Islam no longer exist. See also Euben, “Killing (for) Politics”, and, for the classical study of the subject, Edward W. Said, Orientalism (London, 1985).
29 Quadrennial Defense Review, p. iii.
31 Bush, “The President’s State of the Union Address”.
33 Paul Valadir, “Le mal politique moderne”, Études (February 2001). Francis Fukuyama is, of course, the most prominent author to argue that liberalism constitutes such a completed project: The End of History and the Last Man (New York, 1992).
and, perhaps more importantly, innovative solutions to addressing it.\textsuperscript{34} Several convincing reasons can be found to support such a position.

Much like Rumsfeld’s metaphorical portrayal of the burglar as an “evil guy”, the rhetoric of “evil states” removes the phenomenon of terrorism into the realm of irrationality. Evil, then, is a term of condemnation for a phenomenon that can neither be fully comprehended nor addressed, except through militaristic forms of dissuasion and retaliation. This is why Klusmeyer and Suhrke see the rhetoric of “evil” as an “analytical cul de sac” that prevents, rather than encourages understanding.\textsuperscript{35} It certainly leaves far too many questions unanswered. This is particularly fateful in the domain of terrorism, where even the meaning of the term is of an intensely political nature. The killing of innocent civilians, for instance, is not enough to define an act of violence as terrorism. If that were the case, then a variety of US interventions, from Iraq to Afghanistan, would need to be classified as terrorist acts. The issue, rather, revolves around who can legitimately employ violence to further certain political goals. “What is described as terrorism by one group may be variously regarded as heroism, foreign policy, or justice by others”, stresses Grant Wardlaw in a classical study on the subject.\textsuperscript{36}

The key to understanding terrorism, then, does not lie with violence as such, but with the differences between legitimate and illegitimate uses of force. And this division, in turn, is directly linked to issues of statehood and sovereignty. Max Weber famously described the state as a human community “that claims the monopoly of legitimate use of physical force within a given territory”.\textsuperscript{37} But the question of violence and legitimacy clearly goes beyond the territorial bounds of the sovereign state. At an international level too, the state claims to have a certain right to the legitimate use of force. And it is from this claim that emerges the moral distinction between war (a legitimate act of violence perpetuated by a state) and terrorism (an illegitimate use of violence perpetuated by a non-state actor.) Whether or not innocent civilians are killed is a rather secondary question if viewed from such a vantage-point. This of course does not mean that one cannot justify the use of force for certain purposes. A military response in the spirit of \textit{jus ad bellum}, or a humanitarian intervention designed to stop a genocide, may be justifiable according to international law, even if innocent civilians are killed in the process. But such a justification becomes far more difficult — both legally and ethically — if a simplistic rhetoric of evil obscures the political content of the struggle over the legitimate use of force. More difficult as well becomes the task of criticising authoritarian regimes that use the rhetoric of “evildoing terrorists” to suppress domestic political dissent.\textsuperscript{38}


\textsuperscript{35} Klusmeyer and Suhrke, “Comprehending ‘Evil’”; pp.27, 29, 35, 37.

\textsuperscript{36} Grant Wardlaw, \textit{Political Terrorism: Theory, Tactic and Counter-measures} (Cambridge, 1989), p.5.


\textsuperscript{38} Possible examples of problematic usage of the term include the Turkish and Iraqi treatment of Kurds, the Israeli position towards Palestinians, Russia’s suppression of Chechen rebels and Malaysia’s treatment of oppositional forces. A related negative component of the rhetoric of evil has to do with its mystifying impact. Consider Karl Jaspers’ correspondence with Hanna Arendt about the latter’s investigation into “radical evil”. Jaspers believed that attributing such a concept to the Nazis would provide their actions with a transcendental philosophical significance, with some sort of
Some go as far as arguing that a rhetoric of evil entails an “evasion of accountability”, for the normative connotations of the term inevitably leads to policy positions that “deny negotiations and compromise”. How is it, indeed, possible to negotiate with “evil” without being implicated in it, without getting sucked into its problematic vortex? The difficulties are evident. This is why the American government could not and did not negotiate with the Taliban leaders of Afghanistan. Even though none of the terrorists involved or implicated in the 11 September attack was of Afghan origin, a link to the Taliban regime was clear enough. The only policy option, then, was an ultimatum and, once it expired, military action. “The opposition between good and evil is not negotiable”, Allan Bloom already noted at the time of Reagan. It is a question of principles, and thus a “cause of war”. Bloom is right in noting this inevitable consequence, but he is mistaken in pointing out that criticising the logic of “good versus evil” leads into a “value relativism” that portrays the struggle over meaning simply as “insubstantial stuff, existing primarily in the imagination”. The struggle over values is an essential element of politics.

The Closing of American Defence Thinking

For some policy makers and political commentators the American rhetoric of evil signifies a fundamentally new approach to foreign policy. Rumsfeld heralds the arrival of “new ways of thinking and new ways of fighting”. Stephen Walt speaks of “the most rapid and dramatic change in the history of US foreign policy”. Significant changes did, indeed, take place. The inclusion of a preventive first-strike option, for instance, is a fundamental departure from previous approaches, which revolved around a more defence-oriented military policy. But at a more fundamental, conceptual level, one can find far more continuity than change in the US position. That in itself is not particularly striking, for, as Stephen White stresses, the “grand platitudes that have sometimes appeared in the immediate aftermath of seemingly decisive and irreversible steps forward tend to have an ephemeral character”. What is striking about the American policy response to 11 September is the return to the familiarity of dualistic and militaristic cold war thinking patterns, which took place instead of an attempt to address the security challenges of the new millennium.

One of the most consequential policy reactions to 11 September is a massive increase in US military expenditures. President Bush’s budget for 2002 included, in his own words, “the largest increase in defence spending in two decades”. In more concrete terms, this meant a 15 per cent increase, adding $328 billion to the military budget in the year 2002 alone. With all the planned increases the USA will reach a total

44 Bush, “The President’s State of the Union Address”.

defence spending of $1.700 billion in five years, or approximately twice as much as all the European Union countries together.\textsuperscript{45}

The fight against global terrorism serves as a justification for the massive US military build-up. Whether or not this dramatic act will have an impact on preventing terrorism is an open question. Michael Cox, for instance, is highly sceptical, stressing that most weapons President Bush requested would make little difference to the fight against terrorism.\textsuperscript{46} Consider the fact terrorists used very primitive means — simple knives and well-coordinated actions — to hijack the airplanes with which they then attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. No military equipment, even the most sophisticated, can ever eliminate such a threat nor a range of other vulnerabilities. The extremely costly space-oriented missile defence system, for instance, offers no protection from primitively equipped yet highly effective knife-yielding or truck-driving suicide-bombers. Any society — and an open and democratic society in particular — is always vulnerable to terrorist attacks. Better intelligence may detect some terrorist plans at an early stage. Policing and military methods may protect important buildings or events from attack. But policing methods can never shield a society entirely from terrorism. And yet, following Rumsfeld’s logic of the “evil burglar”, virtually all expenditures are directed solely towards increasing defence spending.

More than anything else, the US military build-up reflects a strong desire to re-establish the sense of safety and certitude that existed prior to 11 September. And this process inevitably leads back to the familiarity of past political habits. As a result, national defence is being emphasised, even at a time when most threats are of a transnational nature. Particularly relevant here is a new form of US unilateralism, which can be seen in such domains as the refusal to uphold important international conventions, from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty to the Kyoto Protocol on climate change. The fact remains, of course, that the nation-state is an increasingly inadequate forum to meet the security challenges of the new millennium. Some form of transnational collaboration is required.\textsuperscript{47} Undermining existing multilateral agreements and international law, as much of the unilateralism of US foreign policy has done since the inauguration of President George W. Bush, jeopardises the very instruments that could be essential for an effective and internationally co-ordinated fight against terrorism.

The same binary view of the world presented in Samuel Huntington’s clash of civilisations and cultures still dominates the response to 11 September, as Nira Yuval-Davis stresses.\textsuperscript{48} The fundamental division remains one between an inside (the nation-state, western civilisation etc.) that is safe, secure, protected, and an outside (the

\textsuperscript{45} Cox, “American Power before and after 11 September”, p.272-273.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., p.272.

\textsuperscript{47} If there is an argument to be made for strengthening national severity in the fight against terrorism, then it has to do with helping war-torn societies — whose lawlessness offers fertile ground for terrorist training camps — to re-establish a minimum level of order and statehood. See Herfried Münkler, “The Brutal Logic of Terror: the Privatization of War in Modernity”, Constellations, Vol. 9, 1, pp.66-73.

anarchical international realm, a foreign civilisation etc.) that constitutes a source of danger and insecurity. What has changed is the nature of the Feindbild: the “evil” communist empire has now been replaced with the threat of a fundamentalist Islam that promotes terrorism. Such a threat does, of course, exist. Terrorism is real, and so is the danger of extremist discourses that promote violence. To embark on a critical investigation of responses to 11 September is not to question these dangers. Rather, it is to search for a type of understanding and policy approach that can most likely break the cycle of violence.

The Taboo Question “Why?”

The rhetoric of good vs evil, and the return to militaristic Cold War thinking patterns, has largely removed the question of “why” from discussions of 11 September. Acts of evil are too irrational to be subject to causal or correlational explanation. And a military-based approach to terrorism focuses almost exclusively on intelligence, dissuasion and retaliation, rather than understanding and prevention. But taboo questions are in many ways essential to finding an appropriate response to 11 September: how is it possible that a seemingly senseless act of catastrophic terrorism is carried out by a relatively large group of well-educated volunteers willing to die? How can we turn the hatred and violence that inevitably emerges from such a destructive act — and the (violent) responses — into a force that drives us forward towards a more peaceful future?

Many allies of the USA, particularly in Europe and the Arab world, have been unhappy about an approach to fighting terror that revolves exclusively around military means. This sense of unease has further increased with the American announcement of a first-strike policy. European governments and intellectuals tend to stress the need to address a wider range of problems that cause conflict, including inequality and poverty. In an attempt to retain a global coalition against terrorism, President Bush departed from his previous position and acknowledged, during a speech in the German Bundestag, that poverty creates terror by driving people into the arms of terrorists.49 But Bush’s statement is hardly more than diplomatic lip-service. It is neither compatible with his militaristic “good versus evil” rhetoric nor backed up by respective policy changes and funding priorities. No major budget item, for instance, has addressed the global fight against poverty. And no major policy speech has acknowledged that 24,000 people dying every day of malnutrition is an international crisis that requires immediate action.

Drawing a link between poverty and terrorism is not unproblematic, especially in the context of an understandably emotional public discourse that follows a major terrorist attack. The position of Agnes Heller illustrates this dilemma well. She strongly opposes any attempt to link world poverty, and the increasingly wide gap between rich and poor, to 11 September. Indeed, she goes so far as to argue that that “the terrorist attack has nothing to do with America’s previous actions, good or bad”.50 On some level Heller is certainly correct. The actual and suspected terrorists were almost exclusively university educated and well-to-do middle class citizens; “frustrated intellectuals”.51 Poverty can hardly be seen as their personal motivation to embark on acts of terror.

50 Heller, “9-11, or Modernity and Terror”, p.56.
51 Ibid., p.64.
But neither can the case of 11 September be used to discount global poverty as a major source of instability and violence. This is especially the case if one scrutinises the rather problematic notion of causality. In the context of increasingly complex transnational political dynamics, the duality of cause and effect is hardly an adequate tool for analysis and understanding. Causality is perhaps no more than a continuum of interconnected cross-territorial dynamics from which we arbitrarily isolate a few pieces and then neatly fit them, as Nietzsche once expressed it, into the image we had already made ourselves of the world.\(^{52}\) And that image absolves the key decision-makers of the western world from the responsibility of addressing “domestic” problems in other parts of the world. But many questions remain. How can so many people be willing to die for a political cause? In the months after 11 September hardly a week went by without a Palestinian suicide bomber claiming civilian casualties somewhere in Israel. Some of these actions could perhaps be explained by the influence of “propaganda”, by the fact that suicide bombers become heroes and martyrs. But such an explanation is not sufficient. Brainwashing has its limits.\(^{53}\) To argue that poverty and Israeli politics had nothing to do with the suicide attacks is intellectually and politically disingenuous. And so is the claim that American actions had nothing to do with the terrorist attack of 11 September. Problematising such statements is, of course, not to justify suicide bombings and other acts of terrorism. Nor is it to claim that the USA was in some ways responsible for the act of catastrophic terrorism. The point, rather, is to understand complex linkages — causal or merely correlational — that could offer clues to the phenomenon of terrorism and possible responses to it.

**Towards an Aesthetic Engagement with Terrorism**

The complexities of terrorism, and of world politics in general, cannot be understood or addressed by dogmatic approaches that simply advocate a return to “realism, not abstract philosophising”. And yet, such approaches are as prevalent in academic analysis as they are in popular discourse. Consider one of the most influential and sophisticated contemporary commentators on international affairs, Alexander Wendt: “Poetry, literature and other humanistic disciplines are not designed to explain global war or third world poverty, and as such if we want to solve those problems our best hope, slim as it may be, is social science.”\(^{54}\) As Kant already knew, and as this essay outlined at the outset, such an approach is problematic because it provides a few dominant forms of insight, usually those emerging from reason, with the power to synchronise a variety of otherwise rather disparate faculties, from imagination to intuition. The consequences are manifold.

The techno-strategic language of defence analysis, for instance, has become the most accepted — and by definition most credible and rational — way of assessing issues of terrorism and security in general. The (realist) language that defence intellectuals speak is not only highly abstract, but also sanitises war and creates a distance from the grotesque realities of nuclear weapons.\(^{55}\) The terms created through this techno-strategic language, such as “clean bombs” or “collateral damage”, make it possible for analysts to focus on technical issues without having to deal with the

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possible moral consequences of their work, including the prospect of what Herman Kahn once called a “wargasm” — a nuclear holocaust that precipitates the end of humanity. Fortunately, the Cold War was one of the very few arms races that did not culminate in outright war. But the realist mindset and language that had guided its strategic “logic” continue to delineate our understanding of security. This is the case virtually anywhere from elite decision making to popular culture: from the tightly controlled press releases during the Kosovo and Afghan wars, which portrayed bombing activities in the most abstract and sanitised language possible,56 to the latest award-winning computer game, which simulates a situation in which “your goal is world domination by obliterating your opponents in seven global territories, reaching the ultimate state of Wargasm.”57

A fundamental paradox emerges: On the one hand an array of abstract metaphors has removed our understanding of defence issues further and further away from the realities of conflict and war. On the other hand we have become used to these distorting metaphors to the point that the language of defence analysis has become the most accepted — and by definition most credible and rational — way of assessing issues of security. The ensuing construction of common sense provides experts — those fluent in the techno-strategic language of abstraction — not only with the knowledge, but also with the moral authority to comment on issues of defence.58

The realist strategic mindset also narrows down issues of defence to military means alone, delegitimising virtually all other approaches to understanding and addressing issues related to war and conflict in general. The consequences of such a narrow approach to terrorism are far-reaching even in domains that seem, at least at first sight, not particularly political. Consider New York in the immediate wake of the 11 September attack. A plunge in tourism, combined with a decline in charitable contributions and cuts in the city’s cultural budget have led to a serious crisis in the arts community. The Guggenheim Museum laid off eighty people, or 20 per cent of its staff. The Museum of Modern art cancelled a planned $650 million expansion. Many smaller organisation and individuals suffer even more.

Is art indeed dispensable in a destitute time? Should funding to the arts community be relegated to a lower level of priority when we are faced with the seemingly more urgent and important challenge of fighting global terrorism? Should we put all our hope into the realist “burglar logic” and corresponding social scientific ways of understanding and dealing with terrorism? The result would be fatal, intellectually and politically.

If faced with a challenge as difficult and as serious as terrorism we need to use as many insights as possible, not only the practices of reason and logos that had triumphed in the wake of the Enlightenment, but also a range of other, more sensuous and perhaps more tangible, yet equally important forms of insights, from the poetic to the purely visual. The dynamic of art perfectly illustrates this issue.

56 See Michael Ignatieff, *Virtual war: Kosovo and Beyond* (New York, 2000).
57 See www.wargasm.net [accessed April 2001].
58 Cohn stresses that a range of highly legitimate concerns about security and safety can thus simply not be expressed through the existing techno-strategic language. The word “peace”, for instance, has become intertwined with airy-fairy forms of idealism that have no grounding in the realities of existing security dilemmas. The only possible way of responding to these “real world” issues is through a realistic (i.e. realist) assessment of threats and an adequate rational response to them. Few recall, of course, that the so-constructed “reality” is itself rooted in a highly subjective and political array of metaphorical abstractions. See Cohn, “Sex and Death”, pp. 334-337.
Kant reveals why. Kant saw judgements of the beautiful and the sublime as examples of instances where one faculty does not rule over others. Aesthetic judgements are questions of taste that take place somewhere in the “middle between understanding and reason” — without either of these faculties determining the rules for identifying the object that is to be judged.\textsuperscript{59} Art thus has the potential of offering insight that cannot be reached or even comprehended by way of rational analysis. It is important that such aesthetic explorations do not get lost in a political environment that tends to reduce strategic discussions to interactions among a few select members of the policy community. This, of course, is not to say that artistic representations will necessarily lead to better insight or more adequate policies. The poetic “transgressions” of Ezra Pound, Louis-Ferdinand Céline or Martin Heidegger amply demonstrated that art can be just as suffocating as other forms of domination. But that in itself does not invalidate aesthetic insight.

Whether in the form of images, narratives or sounds, works of art not only add layers of perception or sensation, but also promote interactions among different faculties. This is precisely why Kant used judgements of the beautiful and the sublime as prime examples of the attempt to find ways of allowing each faculty to cultivate its unique insights and passions. Consider, for instance, at how Picasso’s \textit{Guernica} has given us insight into the Spanish Civil War and the human psyche not because it sought to recognise purely external appearances. This work of art has influenced our collective memory more than most, if not all, political analyses and history books together. The significance of \textit{Guernica} is located in the fact that it allows us to see, experience and remember political reality in new ways by moving us back and forth between imagination and reason, thought and sensibility, memory and understanding, without imposing one faculty upon another.

The sensibility that aesthetic insight may generate, and that instrumental reason is unable to apprehend, also includes the unknown, the unseen and the unthought. For Walter Benjamin this is the very task of art: to generate a demand for which a sense of need has not yet arisen.\textsuperscript{60} To think of the unthinkable, however, is not as far-fetched as it seems at first sight. The same lack of understanding often occurs in the realm of international politics, where accidents and unanticipated events take place frequently but are hardly ever theorised.\textsuperscript{61}

Consider the immediate response to the terrorist attacks of 11 September. Faced with such an unexpected and immense event, the reactions were by and large similar to those Kant describes when faced with a powerful object, such as a storm or an erupting volcano. The prevalent faculties, including reason, are confronted by their limits and reduced to impotency, for they are unable to grasp the event in its totality. The result is incomprehension, pain and fear, which expresses the gap between what was experienced and what can actually be apprehended by thought.\textsuperscript{62} It is at such moments in particular that we need to promote productive relationships among different faculties.

faculties. Aesthetic explorations of sensibilities may well offer insights that cannot be reached or even comprehended by approaches that rely exclusively on the realist burglar-logic of defence intellectuals.

Needed at moments of incomprehension and despair is not a repression of ambiguity and an ensuing return to the familiarity of past intellectual and political habits, reassuring as this move may seem at first sight. Decisions that have to be taken at such crucial historical junctions cannot — or at least should not — be based on past experiences or accumulated knowledge alone. Decisions that emerge from encounters between imagination and technological reason can never be based on certainty. That is, indeed, the very essence of a decision: that it is a leap of faith beyond the known. A decision is a terrible thing, Kierkegaard already knew, because its consequences can by definition not be calculated at the moment it is taken. 63 Knowledge cannot absolve us of taking responsibility. But our political options would broaden significantly, if we found more ways of appreciating the insight of those who aesthetically explore the interactions have been banished or subjugated by the prevalence of instrumental rationality.64

Conclusion

Aesthetics is an important and necessary addition to our interpretative repertoire. It helps us understand why the emergence, meaning and significance of a political event can be appreciated only once we scrutinise the representational practices that have constituted the very nature of this event. To broaden our knowledge of terrorism does, however, require more than simply adding a few additional layers of interpretation. It calls for a significant shift away from a model of thought that recognises external appearances and channels them into one form of common sense, towards an approach that generates a more diverse but also more direct encounter with the political. The latter allows for productive interactions across different faculties, including sensibility, imagination and reason, without any of them annihilating the unique position and insight of the other.

The transition from understanding the complexities of terrorism to articulating an adequate response to them is, of course, not easy. An essay-length exposé can at best locate the most promising directions of such an engagement — and they all point toward the need to promote a self-reflective, broad and open approach towards the phenomenon of terrorism. Indeed, the very threat of terrorism stems, as Agnes Heller correctly stresses, from totalitarian and closed systems of belief.65 As a result, one of the most difficult policy challenges consists of exploring how liberal-democratic traditions of thought can serve as a basis for fighting terrorism without sacrificing their best features, those of tolerance and openness.66 Such a challenge would need to entail a willingness to heed and engage positions that are different from our own, perhaps

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64 For further analyses see, for instance, William E. Connolly, The Ethos of Pluralization (Minneapolis, 1995); and James Tully, Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity (Cambridge, 1995).


even threatening to our most deeply held convictions. Roxanne Euben knows that the challenge today is to try to understand such different positions and voices, “despite the danger they may present, and also because of that danger”\(^\text{67}\). To embark on analytical and political closure — that is, to rely exclusively on rational forms of analysis and on realist policy descriptions — would be a fatal strategy — fatal because it denies the possibility of dialogue. Fatal because it narrows intellectual endeavours as well as policy options. Fatal, above all, because it threatens the very foundations of what is to be defended against terrorism. Only with tolerance can intolerance be defeated. Only with openness can closure be avoided. Only with breadth can narrowness be overcome.