

The Mass Psychology of Terrorism

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I

The symbolism of the Twin Towers has been much remarked on: They are said to have represented the forces of modernity in general and global capitalism in particular. Yet oddly, it has been more or less ignored that the towers were also and quite obviously sexual symbols. What might it mean for men to commit mass murder by smashing symbols of desire-desire that in terms of their religious convictions means impurity, decadence, evil-and at the same time destroy themselves? Can it be that those symbols and the set of realities they represented were at the deepest level a source of intolerable attraction and temptation to these men, one that could be defended against only by means of total obliteration? Was the rage that such an act must entail directed solely against an external enemy, or was it also against the actors' own unfreedom? In short, was the hijackers' plunge a spectacular dual act of sadomasochism?

When I raised these questions at the conference from which this book arose, the audience responded with nervous tittering. Perhaps people thought I was trying to make some satirical point they didn't get; perhaps they thought I had gone off the deep end. Or maybe they were merely startled by the intrusion of sex into what was supposed to be serious leftist analysis of international politics. In any case, the reaction was not unfamiliar to me. For a brief period in the 1960s and '70s, a portion of the left concerned itself with the psychosexual dimension of politics; but even then such insights were rarely applied to the international arena. By now, in an era of anti-Freudian backlash and pervasive anxiety about changes in our sexual culture, they have been entirely purged from the political conversation.

This absence is, in my view, disastrous. Without understanding the psychosexual aspect of political violence and domination-and the cultural questions with which it is intertwined-we cannot make sense of what happened on September 11; indeed, we cannot make sense of the history of the 20th century. I don't propose that we discuss psychosexual politics *instead* of the very real, and certainly crucial, economic and geopolitical issues that have shaped the Middle Eastern and South Asian condition, from oil to the legacy of colonialism and the Cold War to the ascendancy of neoliberalism to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Rather, my claim is that the particular

A portion of this chapter appears in somewhat different form in The Nation. (See "Bringing the Holy War Home" in the issue dated December 17, 2001.

kind of crisis Islamic fundamentalism represents erupts when economic and geopolitical issues converge with cultural and psychosexual conflict. Though one member of my restless conference audience accused me of anti-Arab racism for speculating on the hijackers' sexual motivation, I do not view this convergence and its consequences as peculiar to the Arab or Islamic world. Indeed, the paradigm of such crises occurred in Europe with Hitler's rise to power. "Ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia—in which Muslims were the victims—is a more recent European example, notable for, among other things, the mystified reaction of so many observers: How, in a modern European country and a cosmopolitan city like Sarajevo could such an outbreak of barbarism occur? Evidently they were unaware that a similar incredulity had followed the Holocaust.

In fact, the necessary condition for such outbreaks is "modernity"—catchall shorthand for the ongoing, worldwide cultural revolution that includes the assaults of capitalism, science and technology, Enlightenment liberalism, and democratic movements in the broad sense against the patriarchal authoritarian form of social organization that in one or another version has dominated human culture for the last 5,000 years or so. This revolution is only about 200 years old. In the United States and Europe, which are supposed to represent its vanguard, it is very much unfinished; and yet it has had an impact virtually everywhere in the world. It is also riven by contradictions: If capitalism and imperialism have propelled it, so have socialism, communism, and anti-imperialist movements. To add still another layer of convolutions, both capitalist and anti-capitalist, imperialist and anti-imperialist forces have been counterrevolutionary as well—often upholding or opportunistically allying with patriarchal reaction and, more crucially, substituting their own versions of neo-patriarchal, anti-democratic tyranny for the traditional kind. Yet however contradictory and uneven, the cultural revolution has put freedom, equality, and democracy on the world agenda in an inescapable way; and the cutting edge of this project is a challenge to the structure of sexual life, the family, and male-female relations. Enormous psychological conflict, tension, and anxiety are the inevitable accompaniment of changes in this realm. And under certain circumstances those emotions get out of control.

Proponents of the "clash of civilizations" thesis are half right. There is such a clash, but not the kind Samuel Huntington has in mind; this is not a question of 'East versus West. The struggle of democratic secularism, religious tolerance, individual freedom, and feminism against authoritarian patriarchal religion, culture, and morality is going on all over the world. That includes the Islamic world, where dissidents are regularly jailed, killed, exiled, or merely intimidated and silenced by autocratic governments. In Iran the mullahs still have power, but young people are in open revolt against the Islamic regime. In Pakistan before the Afghan war, the urban middle classes worried that their society would be Talibanized. In Afghanistan the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) calls for a secular state. There are feminist movements in all these countries as well as in Egypt, Jordan, Turkey, Morocco. At the same time, religious and cultural reactionaries have mobilized to attack secular modernity in liberal democracies from Israel to the postcommunist countries of Eastern Europe to the United States. Jerry Falwell's view of September 11—that the massacre was God's judgment on an America that tolerates abortion, homosexuality, and feminism—mirrors Osama bin Laden's. Moreover, this clash—this culture war, if you

will—exists not only within regions and within counties, but also within individuals. Social instability and personal ambivalence are its hallmarks.

When I speak of "patriarchal authoritarian" social organization, I refer to the historic institutions of the father-ruled family and monotheistic religion; to the ideology and morality perpetuated by these institutions, even as the institutions themselves weaken or break down; and to those aspects of all existing societies (such as corporate and state bureaucracies) that still model themselves on patriarchal institutions and replicate patriarchal ideology. The basic impulse of patriarchalism, in this sense, is the drive to dominate nature, a project that requires control over sexuality (nature within us), control of women and children (onto whom the anarchy of nature and sexuality is projected), and social hierarchies that assume people's inability to govern themselves. Desire is equated with unbridled selfishness, aggression, and violence. Morality is equated with self-abnegation, repression of desire, and submission to authority.

A traditional function of the family—now seriously challenged or compromised in many societies—has been to acculturate each new generation into this belief system and moral code by promising (if not always delivering) communal solidarity, economic security, love, and a degree of sexual satisfaction to those who obey its rules, while threatening violators with punishments ranging from physical force and violence to economic, social, or emotional isolation. Children characteristically internalize these promises and threats, identifying with their parents' morality and punishing themselves with guilt or shame for transgressing it. The patriarchal religions have served to reinforce this moral system with their conception of God as the ultimate parent; insofar as they retain social authority or political power, their appeal to the inner force of conscience is backed up by communal and legal sanctions. At the same time, religion has offered a pathway to freedom from the constriction and alienation that patriarchal morality imposes: not only the prospect of immortality as a reward for goodness, but access in the here-and-now to a spiritual realm where the constrictions don't apply, where one can make contact with the infinite and experience ecstasy or glimpse its possibility.

Of course, patriarchal morality and religion also condemn murder and other forms of predatory aggression. Their overriding claim to legitimacy even among unbelievers is their enforcement of such prohibitions, without which no society could survive. But here we run into a curious paradox, for in fact violence is endemic to patriarchal culture—violence that is outlawed and punished; violence that is overtly prohibited but covertly condoned; and violence that is sanctioned by state, familial, or religious authority. For defenders of the system, illicit violence is simply an unfortunate product of human nature, while licit violence is a necessary defense against unprovoked aggression and other kinds of anti-social behavior. Skeptics, however, might ask: Can the high level of violence in patriarchal cultures be attributed to people's chronic, if largely unconscious, rage over the denial of their freedom and pleasure? To what extent is sanctioned or unofficially condoned violence—from war and capital punishment to lynching, wife-beating, and the , rape of "bad" women to harsh penalties for "immoral" activities like drug-using and nonmarital sex to the religious or ideological persecution of totalitarian states—in effect a socially approved outlet for expressing that rage, as well as a way of relieving guilt by projecting one's own unacceptable desires onto scapegoats? Might religiously motivated violence, in particular, combine a longing for spiritual transcendence with guilt transmuted into self-righteous zeal and rage rationalized

as service to God?

Most of the time, the ongoing violence of patriarchal cultures is contained and integrated into "normal" social functioning; but periodically it erupts into bloody wars, massacres, sadistic rampages, witch-hunts, the lesser of which make news and the more horrific, history. The 20th century—and now the beginning of the 21st—have been marked by a massive increase in the scale and frequency of such episodes, of which AI Qaeda's holy war is only the latest spectacular example. Not coincidentally, in the same period of history the destabilizing forces of cultural revolution have put traditional patriarchy on the defensive to an unprecedented degree. This is an age in which mass media, mass migration, economic globalization, and the ubiquity of modern technology have vastly increased the points of provocative contact between modernity and its antagonists. Opponents of the cultural revolution have not scrupled to exploit its innovations—from modern mass communications, transportation, and weaponry to elections and civil liberties—while both the avatars of global capitalism and their anti-imperialist opponents have tried to enlist anti-modern movements in their struggles for dominance. As modernizing, liberalizing forces erode the repression that keeps rage unconscious and the social controls that keep violence contained, it becomes ever easier for a match of political grievance to ignite the gas of psychosexual tension, touching off a conflagration. Eventually, the fire is put out, for the time being. The gas remains.

II

In the 1920s Germany was a modern capitalist state with a liberal democracy that was, however, a fragile veneer over an authoritarian, sexually repressive culture; the patriarchal family ruled, subordinating women and youth—though the latter, stirred by new permissive currents, were growing restless. The Germans had no shortage of political grievances: a humiliating defeat in World War I, an economy crippled by unemployment and hyperinflation. The left offered an analysis of why the calamity of the war had happened and attempted to rally workers to fight for their concrete economic and political interests. Hitler instead offered a virulent backlash against Enlightenment values, centering on a racial myth *cum* paranoid fantasy: Aryan Germany had been "stabbed in the back" by the racially inferior Jews—the preeminent symbol of international capitalists, communists, cosmopolitans, sexual libertines, homosexuals, emancipated women, "race mixers," all the contaminating, alien influences of modernity. The majority of Germans, workers as well as the lower middle class, opted for Hitler's fantasy.

Right-wing industrialists supported Hitler because of his anti-communism, in the mistaken belief that they could control him; the Western powers abetted his rise in the hope that he would fight the Soviet Union (a strategy that set up a dramatic case of "blowback"). But Nazism was not a creature of the capitalist, imperialist right; it was a mass movement, of the kind that, ironically, was fostered by the very liberal democracy it despised. As radical psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich put it in his classic work *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, what defines a fascist movement is its "mixture of rebellious emotions and reactionary social ideas."¹ Political abjectness and economic ruin could explain why Germans wanted to rebel, but not why their rebellion took the form of

support for totalitarian, genocidal sadism, or why they were so resistant to democratic and socialist appeals to rational self-interest.

It was in response to this conundrum that Reich and other psychoanalytically minded radicals, including the Marxist social theorists of the Frankfurt School, challenged the conventional economic wisdom of the European left to argue that unconscious psychosexual conflict had played a central role in the triumph of Nazism. In the view of this Freudian left, the liberalism of Weimar had stirred up repressed longings for freedom—and rage at its suppression—that people whose characters had been formed by patriarchalism could not admit. While their anger was encouraged and legitimized by real political complaints, their underlying fear of freedom prevented them from contemplating real revolution.

For the mass of Germans, then, Hitler offered a solution to this impasse: He represented the authoritarian father who commanded submission—only in this case submission entailed the license, indeed the obligation, to vent rebellious rage by supporting and participating in persecution and mass murder. For young people caught between subservience to the family and guilt-ridden desires for freedom and sexual pleasure, this prospect had particular appeal: In the name of patriotic duty they could at once discharge and deny their unconscious hatred of the patriarch by directing that hatred toward the perceived enemies of the fatherland. At the same time, their repressed sexuality could find distorted expression in the sadistic pleasures of actual or vicarious cruelty, in the surrender to a charismatic leader, and in the quasi-religious ecstasy of mass rallies.

If this hypothesis of unconscious conflict allows us to make sense of the spectacle of an entire nation succumbing to a manifestly irrational ideology, it also sheds some light on the ubiquitous claim by Germans, Western governments, and Poles living in close proximity to Auschwitz that they didn't know the Holocaust was going on. I suspect that most *didn't* know, that such knowledge was blocked from consciousness along with a widespread emotional complicity in anti-Semitism. Indeed, the most disturbing implication of the Freudian left analysis is that Nazism was not a phenomenon peculiar to post-World War I Germany but, rather, had fulfilled a potential inherent in patriarchal culture, even in "advanced" societies—a potential that might be activated anywhere by destabilizing political events.

After World War II, the enormity of the Nazi catastrophe could no longer be denied, and so for a time blatant racism and anti-Semitism were socially unacceptable. Liberal Western governments preached tolerance while capital, chastened by the crisis it had barely survived and by the looming presence of the Soviet Union, cooperated with government and labor in curbing its most predatory features, fostering mass prosperity and with it social stability. The USSR and the communist dictatorships of Eastern Europe simply suppressed the culture war, imposing a modern secular regime (albeit without freedom or democracy) by fiat.² Meanwhile, moralists spoke of the Holocaust as an evil beyond comprehension, a confirmation of original sin, proof of the need for religion and the futility of utopian projects. The culture that had produced the Nazis was not confronted; its overtly pathological aspects were merely re-repressed.

This detente did not last long. The 1960s and '70s brought a resumption of culture war in the United States and Western Europe, as a revolt from the left on behalf of racial equality, personal and sexual freedom, feminism, and gay liberation was soon followed

by a backlash of religious and secular conservatives aimed at restoring traditional morality, social discipline, and white male dominance. In the '70s, American business reneged on its compact with labor and the welfare state, launching an era of renewed class warfare: While many factors contributed to this development, including the OPEC oil cartel, America's impending loss of the Vietnam War, and the rise of the transnational corporation, surely part of the story was that corporate investment in high wages and social welfare could no longer buy compliant middle class—on the contrary, economic security had produced a generation with a subversive sense of entitlement.

The '60s revolt in the West was in turn a crucial influence on the democratic revolutions of Eastern Europe; yet the reality of the postcommunist era would turn out to be far darker than the euphoric expectations of 1989. With the collapse of communism, global capitalist triumphalism went into high gear. Neoliberal "shock therapy" and the abolition of communist social benefits devastated Eastern Europe's standard of living at the same time that fascists, nationalist fanatics, and religious reactionaries who had been silenced by communist regimes were once again free to operate. In Yugoslavia the combination proved lethal.

Not long after Francis Fukuyama declared "the end of history,"³ the war in Bosnia would show that, if anything, history was taking up where it had left off in 1945. Yugoslavia was a poor country that had lived fairly well by borrowing from the West; but in the new era, Western banks were calling in its debt and Western governments were turning their back. It was also a country that was superficially modern and profoundly patriarchal, with a traditionalist, sexually repressed population. For a communist-apparatchik-turned-nationalist-demagogue like Slobodan Milosevic, or a fascist like Franjo Tudjman, these circumstances offered ample opportunity to mobilize people's rebellious emotions behind reactionary social ideas. The result was an insane genocidal war in which people turned their rage against neighbors who shared their language and culture—neighbors they had lived with, worked with, married without making ethnic distinctions. And again the world declined to look this irrationalism in the face or examine its roots, preferring to blame evil individuals and "ancient ethnic hatreds."

To examine Islamic fundamentalism through the lens of the last century's history is to discern a familiar pattern: psychopathology brought to the surface by the promise and threat of modernity and aggravated by political oppression. As with fascism, the rise of Islamic totalitarianism has partly to do with its populist appeal to class resentments and to feelings of political subordination and humiliation, but is at bottom a violent defensive reaction against the temptations of freedom. Islamic militants demonize the United States not simply because of its foreign policy—as so many American leftists would like to believe, despite the explicit pronouncements of the Islamists themselves—but because it exports and symbolizes cultural revolution.

In the wake of 9/11 it has often been noted that militant Islamism filled a vacuum created by the failures of secular leftist movements in the Middle East to improve the condition of the people or do away with corrupt regimes, from Egypt to Saudi Arabia, that collaborate with the West's neocolonial policies. And of course those failures are in no small part the result of relentless American opposition to leftism of any sort (in contrast to our support for Islamist fanatics we have deemed to be on our side, from the Saudi rulers to the Afghan mujahadeen). Yet none of this can really explain why so many people should be attracted to a movement that has no agenda for solving their real

economic and political problems but, rather, serves up the fantasy that the answer is murder-suicide in pursuit of a holy war against infidels and the imposition of a draconian religious police state. The appeal of this fantasy cannot be understood without reference to the patriarchalism that governs the sexual and domestic lives of most people in the Islamic world. Osama bin Laden and his gang are themselves products of an ultra-patriarchal theocracy hardly less tyrannical than the Taliban's; if the catalyst for their rebellion was opposition to the Saudi regime, their ideology clearly derives from their upbringing within it.

Another clue to the psychopathology that drives the Islamist movement is its increasingly hysterical Jew-hatred, which has borrowed liberally from both Nazi and medieval Christian polemics. True to its characteristic evasions, the left has tended to dismiss Islamist anti-Semitism as a mere epiphenomenon of justified anger at Israel, which would presumably go away if justice were done. But is it not worth examining the strange mental processes that transmute a political grievance against Israel into a widespread delusion that the Jews masterminded the World Trade Center massacre? And what do we make of the execution of an American journalist who, before being beheaded, is forced to intone, "I am a Jew, my mother is a Jew, my father is a Jew"?

In any case, the war between Israel and the Arab and Islamic worlds has never been *only* about conflicting claims to a piece of land, the homelessness of the Palestinians, or the occupation of the West Bank; if it were, it would have been settled long ago. Rather, Islamist passion for Israel's obliteration has at its core revulsion at the perceived contamination of the holy land by an infidel nation; worse, a modern democracy; even worse, one populated by that quintessentially alien, blood-sucking tribe of rootless cosmopolitans, the Jews. Just as the Europeans once handed their unwelcome Jewish refugee problem to the Arabs, their genocidal anti-Jewish rhetoric has migrated to the Middle East; but the emotions that give the rhetoric its power are strictly indigenous. They are unlikely to be assuaged by an Israeli-Palestinian settlement; they are far more likely to be inflamed.

And if the worst should happen, the world will once again be shocked. We still don't know—and don't want to know.

III

In America it often happens that the lunatic right, in its feckless way, gets closer to the heart of the matter than the political mainstream, and so it was with Jerry Falwell's incendiary remark, and Pat Robertson's concurrence, about the cause of 9/11. There was a flurry of indignation in the media, but basically the incident was dismissed as an isolated moment of wretched excess. Most Americans, from George W. Bush to Noam Chomsky, resist the idea that the attack was an act of cultural war, and still fewer are willing to admit its intimate connection with the culture war at home.

That war has been a centerpiece of American politics for thirty years or more, shaping our debates and our policies on everything from abortion, censorship, and crime to race, education, and social welfare, to the impeachment of Bill Clinton and the 2000 election (with those ubiquitous maps of "blue" liberal coasts versus "red" heartland). Nor, at this moment, does the government know whether foreign or domestic terrorists were

responsible for the anthrax offensive. Yet we shrink from seeing the relationship between our own cultural conflicts and the logic of *jihad*. We are especially eager to absolve religion of any responsibility for the violence committed in its name: For that ubiquitous post-9/11 cliché, "This has nothing to do with Islam," read "Anti-abortion terrorism has nothing to do with Christianity." Post-Enlightenment, post-Reformation, post-feminist, post-sexual-revolution, liberal democratic nation though we are, the legacy of patriarchy still weighs on us: Our social policies on sex and the family are confused and inconsistent, our psyches more conservative than the actual conditions of our lives. We are deeply anxious and ambivalent about cultural issues, and one way we deal with this is to deny their importance, even sometimes their existence.

For the most part Americans speak of culture and politics as if they were two separate realms. Conservatives accuse the left of politicizing culture and see their own cultural-political offensive against the social movements of the '60s as an effort to restore to culture its rightful autonomy. Centrists deplore the culture war as an artifact of "extremists on both sides" and continually pronounce it dead. The economic-justice left regards cultural politics as a distraction from its efforts to win support for a populist economic program. Multiculturalists pursue the political goal of equality and respect for minority and non-Western cultures, but are reluctant to make political judgments about cultural practices: Feminist universalists have been regularly attacked for "imposing Western values" by criticizing genital mutilation and other forms of female subjection in the Third World.

The artificial separation of politics and culture is nowhere more pronounced than in the discourse of foreign policy and international affairs. For the American government, economic, geopolitical, and military considerations determine our allies and our enemies. Democracy (almost always defined narrowly in terms of a freely elected government, rather than as a way of life) and human rights (only recently construed as including even the most elementary of women's rights) are invoked by policy makers mainly to justify alliances or antagonisms that already exist. While the Cold War inspired much genuine passion on behalf of freedom and the open society, there's no denying that its fundamental motive was the specter of an alternative to capitalism spreading across the globe and encouraging egalitarian heresies at home. The one cultural issue that seems genuinely to affect our relationship with foreign states is our mania for restricting the international drug supply (except when we ourselves are arming drug cartels for some strategic purpose). The left, meanwhile, criticizes the aims of American foreign policy; yet despite intensified concern with human rights in recent years, most leftists still share the government's assumptions about what kinds of issues are important: the neoliberal economic agenda and struggles over resources like oil, the maintenance of friendly client states versus national self-determination, and so on. And like the United States, leftists have often displayed a double standard on human rights, tending to gloss over the abuses of populist or anti-imperialist regimes.

Given these tropisms, it's unsurprising that the absence of religious and personal freedom, the brutal suppression of dissent, and the extreme oppression of women in Islamic theocracies have never been serious subjects of foreign policy debates. Long before the Taliban, many feminists were upset by U.S. support for the mujahadeen; yet this never became a public issue. Even now the Bush administration, for all its self-congratulatory noises about Afghan women's liberation, refuses to lead or even allow an

international peacekeeping force in Afghanistan could stop fundamentalist warlords from regaining power.

Back in the 1950s, in pursuit of its Cold War aims In Iran, the United States overthrew an elected secular government it judged too left-wing and installed the tyrannical and deeply unpopular Shah, then dumped him in the face of Khomeini's 1979 revolution. Except for feminists, the American left, with few exceptions, supported the revolution and brushed off worries about the Ayatollah, though he had made no secret of his theocratic aims: The important thing was to get rid of the Shah—other issues could be dealt with later. Ten years later, on the occasion of the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie, the Bush I administration appeared far more interested in appeasing Islamic governments and demonstrators offended by Rushdie's heretical book than in condemning Khomeini's death sentence, while an unnerving number of liberals and leftists accused Rushdie and his defenders of cultural imperialism and insensitivity to Muslim sensibilities. Throughout, both defenders and detractors of our alliance with "moderate" Saudi Arabia have ignored Saudi women's slave-like situation, regarding it as "their culture" and none of our business, except when it raises questions about how Americans stationed in the Gulf are expected to behave. It's as if, in discussing South Africa, apartheid had never been mentioned.

There are many things to be learned from the shock of September 11; surely one of the more important is that culture is not only a political matter but a matter of life and death. It follows that a serious long-range strategy against Islamic fundamentalist terrorism must entail open and emphatic opposition to theocracy, to authoritarian religious movements (including messianic Jewish fundamentalists in Israel and the West Bank), and to the subjugation of women. The corollary is moral and material support for the efforts of liberals, modernizers, democratic secularists, and feminists to press for reforms in Middle Eastern and South Asian societies. Yet to define the enemy as fundamentalism—rather than "evil" anti-American fundamentalists, as opposed to the "friendly" kind—is also to make a statement about American cultural politics. Obviously nothing of the sort can be expected from George W Bush and John Ashcroft, but our problem is not only leaders who are fundamentalist Christians. More important is the tendency of the left and the center to appease the right and downplay the culture war rather than make an uncompromising defense of freedom, feminism, and the separation of church and state. It remains to be seen whether fear of terrorism will trump the fear of facing our own psychosexual contradictions.

NOTES

¹ Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, first English ed., trans. Theodore P. Wolfe (New York: Orgone Institute Press, 1946).

² While this chapter focuses on fascism and religious fundamentalism, a comprehensive discussion of the mass psychology of terrorism would also have to address communist totalitarianism, including such episodes as the Stalin terror, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and the mass killing in Cambodia. Communism has its own distinctive psychopolitical dynamics, whose most striking feature is the Orwellian disconnect between professed values—freedom, justice, peace, etc.—and actual behavior.

³ Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest*, Summer 1989