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Identity, Negation and Violence

I.

As something to be talked and written about, as a phenomenon with nearly hysterical descriptions and pronouncements routinely added to its name as a mobilizing theme for politicians, armies, navies and air forces, 'terrorism' has now lost a good deal of its power. A mere matter of months ago thousands of Americans cancelled trips to Europe because they feared the terrorist threat; in April 1986 the United States raided Libya during the prime time TV news in order, it was said, to deal with the terrorist threat posed by Libya (on a pretext—the bombing of a West Berlin disco—which has since proved *not* to be Libya's doing). All during the period from 1983 through 1985 and 1986, 'terrorism' claimed public attention on a scale hitherto unknown. At the behest of the US administration—amplified by dutiful, unreflecting media—numerous governments made pronouncements about, and any number of moves against, terrorism, so much so

that during this period the Secretary of State elevated terrorism to the status of 'number one' foreign policy problem for the United States and, he went on to suggest imprudently, for the world.

As a result, even though attention to terrorism has quite noticeably diminished, the word still comes easily, trippingly to the tongue. Now, it would be disingenuous at this point for me *not* to connect terrorism as a word and concept with perhaps one reason for my examining of the subject in these reflections. The reason, of course, is that mainly in the United States, but also generally speaking in the West, terrorism is by now permanently, and subliminally associated in the first instance with Islam, a notion no less overused and vague than terrorism itself. In the minds of the unprepared or the unalert, Islam calls up images of bearded clerics and mad suicidal bombers, of unrelenting Iranian mullahs, fanatical fundamentalists, and kidnappers, remorseless turbaned crowds who chant hatred of the US, 'the great devil', and all its ways. And behind the wave of 'Islamic' images battering the US's unprotected shores stand the string of Palestinian terrorists—hijackers, masked killers of airport crowds, athletes, schoolchildren, handicapped and elderly innocents—who in the unexamined popular mythology of our day are presumed to have begun the whole shameful and frightful thing. Since I am known as having associations both ethnic and national with Palestine and with Islam, I am therefore presentable before audiences as someone who, when it comes to terrorism, really knows (in the invidious sense of the word) what he's talking about.

The Need for Explanation

I will not waste the reader's time by saying more about this deplorable concatenation of assumptions, other than quickly to allude to that combination of discomfort and resentment which remains with me from the moment I begin to take on the subject. Nevertheless, it has seemed to be also true that despite the tremendous damage caused by 'terrorism' itself and representations or reactions to it, there are some reflections that can be made about both, reflections whose articulation is made possible by the abatement in organized public hysteria I spoke of a moment ago. Precisely that abatement will, I think, enable us to reconnect representations of 'terrorism' to contexts, structures, histories and narratives from which, during the word's period of greatest prominence, its representations appeared to be severed.

For the most striking thing about 'terrorism', as a phenomenon of the public sphere of communication and representation in the West, is its isolation from any explanation or mitigating circumstances, and its isolation as well from representations of most other dysfunctions, symptoms and maladies of the contemporary world. Indeed, in many discussions there is often a ritual of dismissing as irrelevant, soft-headed or in other ways suspicious, anything that might explain the actions of terrorism: 'Let's not hear anything about root causes,' runs the righteous litany, 'or deprivation, or poverty and political frustration, since all terrorists can be explained away if one has a mind to it. What *we* should be after is an understanding of terrorism that helps us defeat it, not an explanation that might make us feel sorry for the terrorist.' Thus

terrorism was stripped of any right to be considered as other historical and social phenomena are considered, as something created by human beings in the world of human history. Instead the isolation of terrorism from history and from other things in Vico's world of the nations has had the effect of magnifying its ravages, even as terrorism itself has been shrunk from the public world into a small private world reserved tautologically for the terrorists who commit terrorism, and for the experts who study them.

No less strange was the common agreement in expert literature and rhetoric that no real definition of terrorism was actually possible. It is true, of course, that writers like Clare Sterling and Benjamin Netanyahu felt no compunction about defining terrorism as whatever seemed inimical to the West, Israel, the Judeo–Christian tradition and Goodness, but it would be wrong and misleading to accuse all writers on terrorism of such robust self-confidence. Many are like Walter Laqueur, one of the most respectable academic specialists who began work on the subject well before the recent vogue. Laqueur frankly admits that 'no definition of terrorism can possibly cover all the varieties of terrorism that have appeared throughout history; peasant wars and labour disputes and brigandage have been accompanied by systematic terror, and the same is true with regard to general wars, wars of national liberation and resistance movements against foreign occupiers.' Later he tries somehow to rescue his topic from this welter of ubiquity, valiantly suggesting that even though terrorism resists definition it can be discussed in the context of movements that have used 'systematic terrorism as their main weapon'. But when he asserts that that practice begins in the second half of the nineteenth century (*Terrorism*, New York 1977, p. 11) we will, I think, have lost faith not only in his philosophical acuity for trying to describe something that he says cannot adequately be described, but also in his historical sense for studiously ignoring the revolutionary Terror of France some seventy-five years earlier.

It is less on Laqueur's own failings than on terrorism as an apparently isolated but identifiable disturbance that I wish to concentrate. In fact the appearance of isolation has almost always been misleading. For terrorism has regularly appeared in contemporary conjunction with, among other stigmatized groups, Islam, Palestinians, Iran and Shiism—that is, objects, concepts, peoples and cultures poorly and antithetically known, and therefore more liable to technical, metaphysical, and ultimately ideological constructions. There is first the powerful aura of the exotic, and even the literary, that surrounds terrorism. Its literary roots are Eastern, and if one thinks of Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* or Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, the Assassins and Thuggees, there is in addition the *louche*, the gratuitous, the senselessly cruel that adheres to it. Moreover, the terror of terrorism appears indiscriminate and generalized: no one is safe from it, none insulated, none immune. Facts and figures are not easy to get hold of, although the hint of vast numbers of casualties is always there, from the random explosive set off in a market place to the nuclear device that just might kill uncounted thousands. Rarely does one hear the tonic reminders of the disparity in violence between individual terrorists and conventional armies, given

by Gillo Pontecorvo to Larbi Ben M'Hidi in *The Battle of Algiers*, 'Give us your bombs and you can have our women's baskets.'

These techniques of decontextualization and dehistoricization are not new and have occurred elsewhere in colonial or post-colonial situations. Irish resistance to British rule, for instance, was routinely classed as terrorist by British writers who then built on the classification a theory of retributive response that quite ignored historical specificity, proportion or concrete analysis. Thus Robert Louis Stevenson wrote in 'Confessions of a Unionist' (1888) that so unsuccessful had British policy been in Ireland ('Through sentimentality, through the craven vagaries of a popular assembly, we have suffered the law to tumble in the muck') that 'Irish lawlessness' had triumphed, along with the 'Irish appeal to violence'. Therefore he advocated no change in British colonial abuses 'until the whole machinery of terrorism is destroyed', and this by a wholesale brutality meted out by 'vigilance committees'. Any other policy would be succumbing to 'maudlin sentimentality'. Curiously enough Stevenson's editor in 1988, Jeremy Treglown, does not flinch from Stevenson's 'call for an end to terrorism in Ireland', only from his inability to say 'how the extirpation of violence is to be brought about in practice'. Thus does the inebriately self-justifying revulsion provoked by the word leap across the years with little regard for context or power. Similar rhetorical flights were routinely in evidence when Cypriot or Mau Mau 'terrorists' were discussed in the post-war years.

Terrorism and the Islamic World

But the issue that chiefly concerns me here is terrorism as it engages public awareness of the Middle East and of the Arab–Islamic world in particular. The presence of this region and its people in discussions of terrorism is, I believe, quite unique. To my knowledge, of no other country, no religion, culture or ethnic group except Islam and its societies, has it been said that terrorism is, after a fashion, endemic. This is argued by several of the Orientalists who contribute to perhaps the most visible and influential of the popular anti-terrorist manuals, the collection edited by Benjamin Netanyahu, *Terrorism: How the West Can Win*. By the nature of the argument, evidence is problematic, but it is bandied about anyway, with curious results. All sorts of strange objects appear—for example, the Islamic mind, ancient feuds, remarkable but unnameable proclivities to wanton violence—all of them attesting to essential traits that supposedly have been there eternally and are susceptible neither to historical change nor to any sort of amelioration.

Since 'terrorism' is indefinable and entirely negative, these arguments for its connection with Islam and/or Palestinians have rarely been opposed. The point is that there is hardly any way, there are few enunciative opportunities, to oppose such arguments about terrorism without also seeming to be *for it*. Unanimity is intimidating, particularly on this scale, but during the full-scale terrorist alert—for example, during the 1986 bombing of Libya or the 1985 TWA hijacking you could not deny the Islamic ingredient, you could not present supervening arguments, you could not prevent the guilty associations from

spreading, without also appearing in some way to explain, hence condone, the outrage. The framework was entirely hostile to anyone who did not accept the perfect equivalence between the State which seemed to be attacked, and injured innocence; indeed, very little inhibits the framework from expanding to include, on the part of the United States, the Western heritage, morality and outraged virtue.

Perhaps the most sensible intervention in the verbal dust-storm has been Eqbal Ahmad's, which appeared in the May–June 1986 issue of *MERIP Reports*. Ahmad's premise is that terrorism—'acts of intimidating and injuring unarmed, presumably innocent civilians', acts for which there are five sources, 'state, religion, protest/revolution, crime and pathology', of which 'only the first three have political motivation'—does exist and is a source of genuine concern, but needs analysis and discrimination if we wish to do 'justice to its victims, or to understanding' on both sides of 'the ideological boundary'. Ahmad offers a set of half-a-dozen guidelines for analysis. These are: terrorism is connected to 'the need to be heard', since it 'is a violent way of expressing long-felt, collective grievances. When legal and political means fail over a long period a minority of the aggrieved community elicits the sympathy of the majority with violent acts.' Moreover, Ahmad continues, 'anger and helplessness produce compulsions towards retributive violence'—a factor that explains the violence not only of the helpless but also of the powerful: 'I have pounded a few walls myself when I am alone', said President Reagan in 1985. Then we should acknowledge the sad truth that 'the experience of violence at the hands of a stronger party has historically turned victims into terrorists.' Similarly, 'when identifiable targets become available, violence is externalized'—that is, people pass from the stage of pounding walls to shooting what stands before them.

Ahmad's last two points are the most complex, and have to do with a subtle interplay between the technology of weapons and of the media on the one hand, and political ideology on the other. Examples of massive and senseless violence enable the spread of terrorism. Thus the Indochinese war, history's most visible superpower intervention, conducted at a high level of organization, effectiveness and cruelty, showed the way governments can plan violence against civilian populations; the emulations of this violence by poorly organized and goalless small groups are also attempts to imitate the legitimization asserted by states who use violence to gain dubious and unclear ends. Finally Ahmad suggests that the more detailed, territorially grounded and concrete the ideological goal as set forth by insurgent and revolutionary groups (e.g. the Vietnamese, Algerian, Cuban, Angolan and Nicaraguan uprisings) the less likely the possibility of spectacular and intimidating violence. 'Revolutionary violence tends to be sociologically and psychologically selective. It strikes at widely perceived symbols of oppression—landlords, rapacious officials, repressive armies. It aims at widening the revolutionaries' popular support by freeing their potential constituencies from the constraints of oppressive power.' To dispersed or homeless peoples the appeal of terror is the ease and instantaneity of transportation, whose symbols are the airplane and airport, of coercion, whose instrument is the small lethal hand weapon, and of communication,

whose mode is the electronic media, which offer an immediate means of directing a message. Thus have the invisible and terror-filled wars waged by states been challenged by the frightening visibility of unpredictable acts of violence by small bands of adventurers.

What further distinguishes Ahmad's contribution to the enormous literature, the widely diffused imagery, the much-marketed expertise on terrorism is something left implicit in his remarks: the role of the interested observer. He writes from the perspective of a militant whose support of anti-imperialist struggles has not, however, stilled his *critical* sense. So much of the current discussion and representation of terrorism simply *assumes* the disinterestedness, detachment and objectivity of the author. Yet it is a truism of contemporary interpretative theory that no such position can or ever did exist. Thus, to take as an example a social discourse based on the construction of an observer who articulates the discourse, *anthropology* presumes to offer scientific material about 'Others' afforded to ethnographic experts, whose power to observe, live among, participate in the lives of foreign societies is premised on the power of *their* constituencies to travel abroad, do anthropology, etc. Similarly, with few exceptions the discourse of terrorism is constituted by an author whose main client is the government of a powerful state opposed to terrorism, but also anxious to shield itself from arguments about perceptions of its own (quite routinely barbaric and violent) behaviour. Why this is so should be obvious, since the disproportion between state violence and (so-to-speak) private violence is, and always has been, vast.

Nowhere is this paradigmatic rhetorical combination of client-appeal and blockage more clear than in the work of political scientists in Israel and the USA, states whose recent foreign policy has been staked on the fight against terrorism, a political decision arrived at consciously and therefore ideologically as a method for dealing with resistance to US–Israeli power; in addition this decision made it possible for the government-sponsored outpouring against terrorism either to screen or to legitimize the governmental violence of both countries.

Campaigns of Disinformation

Consider Israel, which in many ways has pioneered the notion that democracies, because they are democracies, are especially liable to gratuitous terrorism. According to the respected Israeli journalist Amnon Kapeliouk, writing in *Le Monde Diplomatique* in February 1986, Israeli policy-makers began in the mid-1970s the discipline of describing as terrorism everything done by Palestinians to combat Israeli military occupation; the decision coincided with the growing international prestige and legitimacy of the Palestinian national movement. In this decision, of course, Israel was following the path taken by other regimes of colonial occupation (the French in Algeria, the Americans in Vietnam, the South African government in its description of the ANC and its resistance). By the summer of 1982 this campaign of indiscriminate disinformation led to some of the tactics of Operation Peace for Galilee, where what was a massive war against a sovereign country and a national liberation movement could be described as a campaign against terrorism. The distinction of the Israeli informational manipulation of

the word 'terrorism' was that it was done more or less in conjunction with the most powerful media apparatus available—no other sub-imperial power in history could avail itself of so formidable an imperial system as the American. The result was that more or less anything that disturbed the peace and was ostensibly done by someone of whom Western civilization was thought to disapprove, was called a terrorist outrage.

Until the television screen was suddenly filled with images of Israel's siege and devastation of Beirut and South Lebanon during the summer of 1982, 'terrorism' was supposed by most journalists and audiences to be an almost Platonic essence inherent in all Palestinians and Muslims, without historical, social or political circumstances or conditions. Even more important, however, the discourse of 'terrorism', counter-terrorism, terrorist expertise obliterated all the historical processes that might conceivably have produced so many terrorists and so many acts of terror. In the case of Israel, the Palestinian argument had posited the existence of a society and of a people, of a nation in short, whose continuity had been shattered in 1948, and whose subsequent travail was, in the main instance, the result of a continuous war against the Palestinian people by Israel which to the Palestinians proclaimed itself to be conducting a war that made no distinctions between civilians or armed combatants, between refugee camps, hospitals, schools, orphanages, and what the Israeli military command regularly referred to as terrorist nests. Readers will appreciate that I speak here as an engaged Palestinian and not as a political scientist, and they will, I trust, grant me the right to say that despite the wall-to-wall coverage of the Palestinian struggle as an extended terrorist assault upon Israel, the record is a dreadful one, in the loss of thousands of Palestinian lives, of homes destroyed, of literally uncountable human catastrophes suffered by this nation of Palestinian terrorists. I do not need to say here how the recent mass insurrections and sacrifices of unarmed Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank testify dramatically to, on the one hand, an entire history of iron-fisted, anti-terrorist Israeli policy of repression, and, on the other hand, the vacant political message, equally anti-terrorist, delivered to them by the Israeli government which has acknowledged only a conflict between terrorism and democracy.

Gradually the *intifadah*, or uprising, in the Occupied Territories has increased in intensity, has further laughed out of court the notion that Palestinian resistance equals terrorism, has irreversibly transformed the shadowy status of Palestinian nationalism into proto-statehood, and Israeli policy into a dying colonialism. But what has been revealed to Palestinians by the *intifadah* is the true political mass basis for all national liberation movements, in which neither the uninstructed gun alone nor the random (if understandable) outrage has anything like the moral and mobilizable force of coordinated, intelligent courageous human action. When one of the uprising's leaders in Gaza was asked by a journalist how unarmed children, men and women so routinely defied Israeli troops, the answer testified elegantly to how a popular movement had in fact banished terror. 'Fear,' he said, 'has been forbidden.' And that was that.

But I also want to say that in the specific case of 'talking terrorism' in the Middle East, distinctions and connections have simply not been made enough. There *has been* terrorism, there has been cruel, insensate, shameful violence, yes, but who today can stand before us and say that violence is all, or even mainly, on the side of the labelled 'terrorists', and virtue on the side of civilized states who in many ways do in fact represent decency, democracy, and a modicum of 'the good'? I must therefore confess that I find the entire arsenal of words and phrases that derive from the concept of terrorism both inadequate and shameful. There are few ways of talking about terrorism now that are not corrupted by the propaganda war even of the past decade, ways that have become, in my opinion, disqualified as instruments for conducting rational, secular inquiry into the causes of human violence. Is there some other way of apprehending what might additionally be involved when we now unthinkingly use the word 'terrorism'? Is there a style of thought and language that pretends neither to get past the word's embroiled semantic history, nor to restore it, cleansed and sparkling new, for further polemical use?

II.

Throwing up unfamiliar, or at least newer settings in which to set the unpleasant tingling induced by the word 'terrorism' is a worthwhile alternative to simply attacking habitual uses of the word. The very totalism, the radical and impermeable oppositions that set off the word from its use by the enemies of terrorism furnish a beginning. We normally encounter the word not when used by terrorists to describe what they do, but rather to identify and fix a particularly pernicious assault upon humanity, like Conrad's throwing 'a bomb into pure mathematics' in *The Secret Agent*. But things are rarely left to indirection and suggestion. Contemporary 'terrorism' is identified with terrorists, who, as I have been saying, are most often 'our' enemies, Muslim, Palestinian, etc. Similarly 'we' are the West, moral, collectively incapable of such inhuman behaviour, etc.

What I want to draw attention to here, on both sides of the absolute line separating terrorism from its opponents, is that there is assumed to be a perfect correspondence between terrorism, terrorists, and Islam or Palestine, if the terrorists are Palestinian Muslims, just as on the better side of the contest, 'we' completely embody morality, the West, and so forth. In other words there is a process by which various identities in alignment end up by fusing completely with each other: the terrorist with Islam, communism, and whatever other undesirable identities we wish to foist on him, the opponent with all the desirable qualities which, one assumes, fit around 'us' like a perfect body stocking.

Even when the analyst of terrorism tries to take a 'middle path' the compacting of identities proceeds apace. I have in mind the rather ambitious book by Beau Grosscup entitled *The Explosion of Terrorism*, in which the author tries quite intelligently to separate out the ideological hype and flat-out exaggeration that flaws most of the writing on the subject. His approach, which he calls a middle way between polemic and apologetics, is historical and situational, but he too is obliged to

incorporate cultures, peoples, traditions and regions of the world, with more or less complete congruence, to the practice, if not the essence, of terrorism. To some degree this is an exigency of writing and exposition—how, for instance, can you talk about people who describe themselves as Iranian fighters without somehow associating Iran as a whole with their style of fighting?—but to some degree also the difficulty stems from the modern habit of connecting people with their identities as members of a national group.

There is no other way. So deeply ingrained is the tendency to funnel society into the mould prepared for it by the nation-state, that we cannot conceive of societies except as thoroughly congruent with the state, as if the teleology of all social entities was the state. To some extent, of course, this is an understandable tendency for thought in an age so dominated by nationalism, the nation-state, and various statist ideologies. Any reader of the vast literature on modern nationalism, especially some of its better works like Hugh Seton-Watson's *Nations and States* or Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, will testify to the compelling logic of statism, and to the manifest difficulty of escaping its premises, or of thinking outside its limits. This is one among many reasons for admiring the efforts made by Pierre Clastres in *Society Against the State* to criticize the biases that have infiltrated most of our thinking about society. But he is a singular exception to the rule pervading most political discourse.

Terrorism in short must be directly connected to the very processes of identity in modern society, from nationalism, to statism, to cultural and ethnic affirmation, to the whole array of political, rhetorical, educational and governmental devices that go into consolidating one or another identity. One belongs either to one group or to another; one is either in or out; one acts principally in support of a triumphalist identity or to protect an endangered one. Very often 'terrorists' end up reproducing the very structures that have 'alienated' them (Sendero Luminoso, the Abu Nidal group, etc.). The interplay of identity and alienation is therefore total, and it can be observed in a brilliant epitomization in one of the daring mytho-poetical archeologies offered by Vico speculatively in an early section of *The New Science*. Vico speaks here of the origins of authority in 'the world of the nations', and tries to explain the prevalence everywhere of matrimony and religion as the two fundamental components of the modern state. The passage deserves quotation in full because Vico quite amazingly and presciently stakes social order and identity upon the confinement of disorderly energies by the fearful terror of Jove's power:

> Authority was at first divine; the authority by which divinity appropriated itself the few giants [these are Vico's first human beings] we have spoken of, by properly casting them into the depths and recesses of the caves under the mountains. This is the iron ring by which the giants, dispersed upon the mountains, were kept chained to the earth by fear of the sky and of Jove, wherever they happened to be when the sky first thundered. Such were Tityus and Prometheus, chained to a high rock with their hearts being devoured by an eagle; that is by the religion of Jove's auspices. Their being rendered immobile by fear was expressed by the

> Latins in the heroic phrase *terrore defixi*, and the artists depict them chained hand and foot with such links upon the mountains. Of these links was formed the great chain of which . . . Jove, to prove that he is king of men and gods, asserts that if all the gods and men were to take hold of one end, he alone would be able to drag them all. . . . Hence it was that the giants gave up the bestial custom of wandering through the great forest of the earth and habituated themselves to the quite contrary custom of remaining settled and hidden for a long period in their caves (paras. 387–8).

Vico is trying first to describe the birth of divine authority, then in the section about the giants' settling down, of human authority. According to the Sophists, he says, this is the way the world is 'girdled and bound'. Tityus and Prometheus seem to be models for heroic individuals who have gone too far in living beyond the strictures laid down by Jove; therefore they must be visibly punished and permanently fixed in place, their hearts eaten out. Most other human beings, however, are prepared to accept the places offered them as domestic beings—hence matrimony and religion—by Jove. These early peoples come to inhabit caves, and later houses, but the important thing is that they cease wandering around. Jove's terror is used to tame human terror, to fix it in social, and subsequently in national pigeon-holes, although Vico does not minimize either the heroic or the transgressive terror of Jove, whose imposing gifts for authority and punishment directly antecede the modern state's monopoly on coercion.

The Logic of Identity

Thus terror emanates from any attempt to live beyond the social confinements of identity itself; and terror is also the means used to quell the primal disorderliness of the unconfined human being. After Vico a number of social theorists took up his vision of the modern social or state order as one in which authority is based principally upon the organization of coercive power, and neither upon national consent nor upon a benignly ordained and pre-existent harmony. Thus, for example, Sorel's notion of the general strike as a violent disruption of an unreasonable social nexus stems from such a supposition. Fanon's whole theory of colonial counter-violence (which contains in it some of the transgressive heroism that Vico assigns to the vanquished titans) answers to the rationalized violence of the colonial order, with its separation of the colonial from the native city, its attempts to include the native as a subordinate example of universalized 'Graeco–Roman' values, its swiftly retributive inclination when it is challenged or otherwise inhibited by its subaltern victims. Finally, there is Foucault's description of the order, discipline, discourse of society, gathering into itself the numerous specialized technologies for controlling, surveying, and manipulating knowledge and its producers, subject only occasionally to the heterogeneous, quixotic, venturesome counter-violence of the outcast, the visionary, the prophet.

In the contemporary contest between stable identity as it is rendered by such affirmative agencies as nationality, education, tradition, language and religion, on the one hand, and all sorts of marginal, alienated or,

in Immanuel Wallerstein's phrase, anti-systemic forces on the other, there remains an incipient and unresolved tension. One side gathers more dominance and centrality, the other is pushed further from the centre, towards either violence or new forms of authenticity like fundamentalist religion. In any event, the tension produces a frightening consolidation of patriotism, assertions of cultural superiority, mechanisms of control, whose power and ineluctability reinforce what I have been describing as the logic of identity. But since what I have been articulating is somewhat abstract and almost metaphysical, it is probably a good idea to be more concrete.

I want to look at two instances in which the power of what Adorno, in an English phrase coined for him by Martin Jay, has called 'identitarian thought' is deepened. These are first, media practice, and second, recent debates on education. Of the way in which immediate experience is emasculated by 'the consciousness industry', Adorno says: 'The total obliteration of the war by information, propaganda, commentaries, with cameramen in the first tanks and war reporters dying heroic deaths, the mishmash of enlightened manipulation of public opinion and oblivious activity: all this is another expression for the withering of experience, the vacuum between men and their fate, in which their real fate lies. It is as if the reified, hardened plaster-cast of events takes the place of events themselves. Men are reduced to walk-on parts in a monster documentary-film . . .'[1]

It would be irresponsible to dismiss the effects of domestic electronic media coverage of the non-Western world—and with them the displacements that have occurred within print culture—on American attitudes to, and foreign policy towards, that world. I have elsewhere argued the case (which is more true today than it was when I first made it over ten years ago) that limited public access to the media coupled with an almost perfect correspondence between the ideology ruling the presentation and selection of news (whose agenda is set by certified experts in close collaboration with media managers) on the one hand, and prevailing government policy on the other, maintains a consistent pattern in the US imperial perspective towards the non-Western world. As a result, US policy has been supported by a mainstream 'identitarian' culture that has not been noticeably forceful in opposing its chief tenets: support for dictatorial and unpopular regimes, a scale of violence far out of proportion with the violence of native insurgency against American allies, a remarkably stable hostility towards the legitimacy of native nationalism, most of which is compressed into the word 'terrorism'. Out of this has come a stubbornly held conviction that American power in the world is the sentinel of freedom, or in President Johnson's words 'the guardian at the gate'.

The concurrence between such notions and the world-view promulgated by the media is therefore quite close. The history of other cultures is supposed to be non-existent until it erupts into confrontation with the United States, and hence is covered on the evening news. Most of what counts about foreign societies is reduced first into sixty-second items,

[1] *Minima Moralia*, Verso/NLB, London 1978, p. 55.

then into the question of whether they are pro- or anti-American (freedom, capitalism, democracy). The ultimate choice facing the professional interpreters of, or experts on, 'other' peoples, as these experts are framed by the media, is to tell the public whether what is happening is 'good' for America or not, and then to recommend a policy for action. Every commentator or expert a potential secretary of state.

The internalization of norms for use within cultural discourse, the rules that must be followed if statements are to be made, the 'history' that is made official as opposed to the history that isn't—these are some of the ways in which all national states regulate public discussion and private identity. The difference today is that the truly epochal scale of US global power, and with it the corresponding power of the national consensus created domestically by the electronic media, have precedents neither in the extent to which it is difficult to oppose this consensus nor in the ease and logic with which one unconsciously capitulates to it. Conrad saw Kurtz as a European in the African jungle, and Gould as an enlightened Westerner in the South American mountains, as capable of both civilizing and obliterating the natives. The same power, but on a world scale, is true of the United States today.

An Imperial Corpus

But my analysis would be incomplete were I not at this point to introduce another important element. In speaking of control and consensus one can use the word *hegemony* advisedly. I do not want at all to suggest that there is a directly imposed regime of conformity in the correspondence I have drawn between contemporary US media discourse and US policy in the subordinate, non-Western world. What I have been discussing is a system of pressures and constraints by which the whole cultural corpus retains its maddeningly imperial identity and its direction. This is why I think it is perfectly accurate to speak of a mainstream culture as possessing a certain regularity, integrity, or a system of predictable stresses over time.

In relation to mainstream American culture, marginalization by the imperial centre means a fate of provinciality. It means the inconsequence associated with what is not major, not central, not powerful—in short, it means association with what are considered euphemistically as alternative modes. And also alternative states, peoples, cultures. There are alternative theatres, presses, newspapers, artists, scholars, and styles. The images of centrality—which are directly connected with what C. Wright Mills called the power elite—supplant the much slower and reflective, the much less immediate and less quick processes of print culture, with its encoding of the attendant and relatively recalcitrant categories of historical class, inherited property, and traditional privilege. Centrality in American culture today is the dominance of the executive presence: the president, the TV commentator, corporate official, celebrity. And, finally, centrality is identity, what *is* powerful, important and ours. Centrality maintains balance between extremes, it endows ideas with the valances of moderation, rationality, pragmatism, it holds the middle together.

And centrality gives rise to semi-official narratives with the capacity to authorize and embody certain sequences of cause and effect, while at the same time preventing the emergence of counter-narratives. The commonest, and in this instance most effective, narrative sequence is America as a force for good in the world, regularly coming up against the obstacle of foreign conspiracy, which is usually perceived as ontologically mischievous and 'against' America. Thus American aid to Vietnam and Iran was corrupted either by communists or by terrorist fundamentalists; the result is 'our' humiliation and the bitterest sort of disappointment. Conversely the valiant Afghanistani *moujahidin* ('Freedom-fighters') have much in common with Polish Solidarity, Nicaraguan *contras*, Angolan rebels, Salvadoran regulars, 'we' support them all. Left to our proper devices, 'we' would assume their victory, but the meddling efforts of liberals at home, disinformation experts abroad, have reduced our ability to help them to the fullest degree.

But to an even greater degree the power of such narratives is to interdict, marginalize or criminalize alternative versions of the same history—in Vietnam, Iran, the Middle East, Africa, Central America, Eastern Europe. A very simple empirical test of what I mean is what happens when you are given the opportunity to articulate a more complex, less narratively sequential history than the official ones carried by the media, which reinforce what corporate, government, and policy spokespersons rely upon. In fact you are compelled to re-tell 'fact' in such a way as to be inventing a language from scratch. The most difficult thing to do then is to suggest that the already existing history and presence of foreign societies may not have responded with automatic assent to the imposition of Western political or military power, not because there was anything inherently wrong with that power but because it was felt to be alien. To venture so apparently uncontroversial a truth about how all cultures in fact behave turns out to be nothing less than an act of delinquency, whereupon you feel that the enunciative opportunity offered you on the basis of pluralism and fairness is sharply restricted to inconsequential bursts of facts, stamped either as extreme or irrelevant. With no acceptable narrative to rely on, with no sustained permission for you to narrate, you feel yourself crowded out and silenced. Anything further you might wish to say or do is likely to become 'terrorism'.

The bleak picture I have drawn is intended to stress in a heightened way the processes of identity-enforcement that are likely to produce rejecting, violent and despairing responses by groups, nations and individuals whose place in the scheme is perforce inconsequential. Thus the triumph of identity by one culture or state almost always is implicated directly or indirectly in the denial, or the suppression of equal identity for *other* groups, states or cultures. Nationalism exacerbates the processes by offering what appears to be ethnosuicide as an alternative to clamorous demands for equality, for sovereignty, for national self-definition. And while it would be a mistake to ascribe all the problems associated with random violence to this maelstrom of escalating identity-demands, it would be an even graver mistake to ignore the process altogether. No one in the United States today speaks about limitations on sovereignty, for example, in rhetoric or in political discourse, and few people

here assume that there is a real alternative for superpowers than more or less to run the world. But if untrammelled aspirations based on projections of world power become the norm for political behaviour, what checks are there on others who may wish *either* to emulate these gigantic ambitions (the way 19th-century novelistic heroes felt that Napoleon was a model to be copied) or to bring down the whole edifice that prevents them from realizing the much smaller ambitions of statehood, cultural independence, self-expression?

As for recent debates on education, my second example, I shall have to be briefer. This audience of readers does not need to be told that post-modernism, post-Marxism, post-structuralism in intellectual discourse have engendered a strongly antagonistic response in many sectors of mainstream culture. Not only has this response involved various defences of 'the canon' of Western humanistic knowledge, but it has produced famously discussed screeds on such topics as the closing of the American mind, and cultural literacy, all of which have had the effect of clearing the space for a sanctioned rhetoric of national identity. This is now embodied in such documents as the Rockefeller Foundation-commissioned study *The Humanities in American Life*, or the various expostulations, much more politically inspired, of Secretary of Education William Bennett, who speaks not simply as an American cabinet officer, but as self-designated spokesman for the West, a sort of intellectual Head of the Free World.

What do such texts as these 'state of the culture' works tell us? Nothing less than that the humanities are important, central, traditional, inspiring. Bennett has gone as far as saying that we can 'have' the humanities by 'reclaiming' our traditions—the collective pronouns and the proprietary accents are crucially important—through twenty or so major texts. If every American student was required to read Homer, Shakespeare, the Bible and Jefferson, then we would have achieved a full sense of national purpose. Underlying all such epigonal replications of Matthew Arnold's exhortations to the significance of culture, is the social authority of patriotism, the fortifications of identity brought to us by our culture, whereby we can confront the world defiantly and self-confidently. This is a drastic constriction of what in more interesting contexts we have learned about culture—its productivity, its diversity of components, its critical and often contradictory energies, its radically antithetical characteristics, and above all its rich worldliness and complicity both with authority and with liberation. Instead we are told that cultural or humanistic study is the recuperation of the Judeo–Christian or Western heritage as free as possible both from native American culture—which the Judeo–Christian tradition in its early American–Puritan embodiments set out to exterminate—and from the fascinating adventures of that tradition in the peripheral non-Western world.

Yet the cultural disciplines have in fact found a hospitable haven in the academy, a historical truth of extraordinary magnitude. To a very great degree, Bennett's most recent rhetorical intervention ('To Reclaim a Heritage') has this accomplishment very much as its target, whereas we would have thought that it has always been a legitimate conception of the modern university's secular mission (as described by Alvin Gouldner) to

be a place where multiplicity and contradiction coexist with established dogma and canonical doctrine. This is now refuted by the rise of a new orthodoxy. Its supposition has been that once having admitted Marxism, structuralism, feminism, and Third World studies into the curriculum (and before that an entire generation of refugee scholars), the American university has sabotaged the basis of its supposed authority: hence, the need for steady tonic infusions of Homer and Jefferson, especially if these are administered by teachers convinced of our culture's superior mission in the world.

If by now the reader will have felt that I have wandered very far from 'terrorism' he/she will be correct, but only because representations of terrorism have been quarantined from the general affirmative and identitarian tendencies in culture at the present time. Yet it would be ridiculously frivolous for me to suggest that the dreadful violence of terrorist actions can somehow be mitigated by acknowledgement of these tendencies. What I am trying to suggest, however, is that it is a more worthwhile endeavour for us to historicize, analyse and reflect upon such tendencies than gregariously and ideologically to go along with the chorus of attacks and patriotic dirges that are lifted when the word 'terrorism' is pronounced. In other words there is room for intellectual discussion that partakes neither of the expert discourse of counter-terrorism, nor of the partisan affirmations about 'our' identity. That kind of discussion may involve taking positions on political conflicts in which terrorism or state-violence are regularly employed, but it would more centrally enlarge the scope of debate and induce a spirit of criticism as an antidote to the general yea-saying.

For it must be incumbent upon even those of us who support nationalist struggle in an age of unrestrained nationalist expression to have at our disposal some decent measure of intellectual refusal, negation and scepticism. It is at precisely that nexus of committed participation and intellectual commitment that we should situate ourselves to ask *how much* identity, *how much* positive consolidation, *how much* administered approbation we are willing to tolerate in the name of our cause, our culture, our state. What could be more disgracefully an instance of Benda's *trahison des clercs* than the political fervour of intellectuals for 'our' side, when so often it has been our side that has been committing the violence in the name of Western virtues, humanism, morality?

Talking about terrorism can therefore become an occasion for something other than solemn, self-righteous pontification about what makes 'us' worth protecting and 'them' worth attacking. In education, politics, history and culture there is at the present time a role to be played by secular oppositional intellectuals, call them a class of informed and effective wet blankets, who do not allow themselves the luxury of playing the identity game (leaving that to the legions who do it for a living) but who more compassionately press the interests of the unheard, the unrepresented, the unconnected people of our world, and who do so not in 'the jargon of authenticity' but with the accents of personal restraint, historical scepticism and committed intellect.