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Terrorism

Michel Wieviorka

If one considers, for instance, the country reports on terrorism that are published each year by the US Department of State, it is clear that the terrorist threat is a preeminent issue for many countries in the world, much more today than in the sixties or the seventies, when it began to appear as a major challenge. Today, Al-Qa’ida, in spite of the death of Ben Laden, and, maybe, the weakness of its position in Pakistan today, is an important organization, with a great number of affiliates and more or less informal allies, for instance in sub-Saharan Africa and in the Middle East; countries such as Iran or Syria still appear as state sponsors of terrorism, and chemical, biological or nuclear terrorism are presented as part of a “global challenge”.

Islam is not the only religion connected with terrorism, which has also been carried out, for instance, in the name of Hinduism or in name of a sect, as was the case in Japan with Aum Shinrikyo, which released sarin gas in the Tokyo Subway, killing thirteen people in March 1995. Moreover, religious terrorism is not the only form of the phenomenon, which can also be nationalistic, as has often been the case in history, for instance when acting in the name of Irish, Basque, or Palestinian liberation. Terrorism can also appear in rich western countries in connection with extreme left or right ideologies. Examples include the actions of the Red Brigades in Europe and the Weather Underground in the USA in the seventies and eighties; more recently in Norway when Anders Behring Breivik killed 77 persons, most of them young members of a left political party, in July 2011; or in Oklahoma City, where a bombing perpetrated in April 1995 by Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, both supporters of “survivalist” militia movements opposed to Federal authority and gun control, killed 165 people.

In many respects, terrorism is an ideal subject for comparative sociology. On one hand, what is referred to as “terrorism” constitutes a phenomenon which can be defined (even if, as we shall see, this is not easy) and which therefore possesses its own unity from a theoretical point of view. On the other hand, this phenomenon varies in time and space. Comparison therefore enables us to evaluate the differences within a single framework and, in the last resort, it enables us to improve the definition of this framework.

For the social sciences, terrorism is a minor subject; it was long considered “something dirty” and neglected by researchers. There are several explanations for this.

Terrorism Is a Minor Subject
Some explanations are related to the very working of the subjects concerned. As terrorism is not listed amongst the themes classically considered important, it has only rarely been included in the headings of dictionaries and other traditional volumes such as “encyclopedias”, “textbooks” or state of the art publications and disciplinary conformism meant that it was not very attractive. Students who chose it for the subject of their thesis ran the risk of becoming marginalized in relation to the academic community in their subject and to be less well placed than others thereafter on the academic market—this risk being all the greater as terrorism is a problem which is at the crossroads of political science, history, sociology, even of law—and it is difficult to set it at the core of any one of these subjects. Those who are already recognized researchers who choose this subject—as was my case in the 1980s—run the risk of making themselves over-conspicuous in professional circles, of not obtaining the financing required for surveys and, moreover, of falling prey to all sorts of misunderstanding and suspicions: peers wonder whether the researcher is not fascinated by the subject, those in power either wonder what sort of relation they have with the “terrorists” or expect them to act as informants or the intelligence services, while the actors whom they study are always liable to endeavor to turn the relation which the researcher is trying to establish with them to their advantage.

Other explanations concern the phenomenon itself. For a considerable period of time, terrorism was perceived as an occasional phenomenon, something extraneous to the normal working of society, possibly as a sort of curiosity even if some of its manifestations did impress its contemporaries or, later on, some of the major thinkers: the Russian populists who fascinated Albert Camus, or the French anarchists at the end of the 19th
and beginning of the 20th century and the Macedonian, Armenian, Bosnian and other nationals at the same period, extreme left groups, and sometimes also, but more rarely, extreme right groups in several societies in the course of post-industrialization as from the 1970s last century; Palestinian nationalists but also the Basques and the Irish at the same period, etc. Experiences of this sort have given rise to countless texts, but they have only very rarely been considered as primarily instances of terrorism and analyzed with the tools of the social sciences. Apart from journalists’ texts which tend to be dominated by a quest for the sensational, they have at best given rise to a series of articles, reports or books which come under the heading of “expert’s report”—a business which is particularly flourishing, for example, in the United States and in Washington D.C. in particular where the think tanks, specialized journals and consultants on this subject are legion, not to mention the official or semi-official services which specialize in anti-terrorism. A few respectable researchers have nevertheless at times produced useful texts on terrorism, such as the historian, Walter Laqueur. But, on the whole, the best works, those which really contribute something fresh and serious, have for long been those which touched on the theme of terrorism but did not make it their main subject, their prime interest being in phenomena of which it constituted a deviation, an extreme, a specific dimension of a more general action—such as a national movement or a political struggle. If we take, for example, the bibliography of The Making of Terrorism it is easy to see that the most authoritative references are of this sort. Moreover, given the lack of any significant investment in the social sciences, it is perhaps in literature that we find the most illuminating texts on terrorism—one only has to read Dostoievski to realize this.

Finally, if terrorism is “something dirty” it is undoubtedly also because it refers to forms of action which are themselves “dirty” and to which correspond methods of political and repressive action themselves somewhat unsavory, including in democracies. The term “terrorism” is in fact extremely negative, there is nothing noble about it and it is even often used to deride, even criminalize, those to whom it is applied. The only period in which the actors themselves have at times used this term to refer to themselves, and with no qualms, is that of the Russian populists and its social-revolutionary extensions. Thus Vera Zassoulitch, who had injured a Russian officer known for his brutality with the prisoners declared to the jury (which, moreover, acquitted her): “I am not a criminal, I am a terrorist”. Twenty years later, Boris Savinkov—a social-revolutionary leader in the Russia of the beginning of the 20th century—described himself as a terrorist as we can read in his very interesting Memoirs of a Terrorist.

The discrediting associated with the use of the term “terrorism” makes of it an everyday category which it is not easy to transform into a sociological category. A transformation of this type is even more difficult to implement given that the very image of the terrorist is usually that of a barbarian, someone insane or with a pathological personality—which periodically various pseudo-scientific studies endeavor in vain to prove. Describing it in other terms, for example by seeking meaning behind the apparent insanity is to come up against an instant consensus which massively rejects any approach to understanding—is it not common parlance to say that any attempt to understand and explain terrorism is to justify it?

Nevertheless, frequently, in symposiums or specialized studies, reference is made to a fundamental difficulty which it is impossible to resolve, namely that those who are terrorists for some are combatants for liberty or résistants for others. But in fact this is another way of eluding a scientific approach to the phenomenon and precluding any satisfactory definition.

The transition from everyday language to a scientific vocabulary is a particularly delicate operation here and one which implies a capacity for distancing and reflexivity which it is difficult to encourage. At least until the 1990s one of the specificities of terrorism was that it only came to the forefront in sporadic fashion. When there was not a period of intense terrorist activity there was no social or political demand for it to be studied and researchers were not encouraged to take an interest in it. When bombs were exploding or attacks being made, airplanes being hijacked or kidnappings on the increase, the researcher, questioned by the media or even by political authorities was summoned to explain the issues, here and now and therefore to act as an expert; an occurrence much more frequent than any invitation to take some distance from the events, to analyze the lengthy processes culminating in this extreme violence or to consider the scope of the term “terrorism”. Moreover, the anti-terrorist...
action of the authorities, which is usually accompanied by very intense attention from the media, encourages the proliferation of specialists whose competence is at times open to doubt. This results in academic production being drowned in floods of specialized literature—usually of mediocre quality—and which discredits it; all that glitters is not gold. Journalists surfing on the crest of the news, experts informed by secret service agents, lawyers, magistrates or politicians who all tend to manipulate and who themselves get their information from journalists and specialists, writers who are more concerned with ideology than with the desire to produce documented, in-depth knowledge: all sorts of actors contribute to making “terrorism” an object which appears to belong to others rather than to social science researchers. Jean-Paul Brodeur has observed this and stated that it is preferable to speak of a subject which is “theatrical” rather than “something dirty” for this type of phenomenon which gives rise to passionate interest from the public when it occurs, with a drama unfolding on a symbolical level and provoking, as he explains, a desire for catharsis which prevails over any interest in knowledge.5

All this only goes to reinforce the idea that, in the last resort, as far as terrorism is concerned, those who know do not speak and those who do speak know nothing. We might add a further remark which stems from the very functioning of the anti-terrorist discourse: anti-terrorism is in fact a set of proposals which are the outcome of the interplay of all sorts of actors, pressure groups, governmental agencies, media, etc. whose interests are very far from being restricted uniquely to the fight against this particular form of violence. Understanding what is said about terrorism and about the way in which it should be countered in a given society may therefore involve attempting to understand how this society functions and not only analyzing terrorism properly speaking.6

The Concept of Terrorism
But today terrorism seems to be a permanent feature, as a threat and, often, as a reality which is sufficiently important to justify systematic consideration in which the social sciences must play their part. To confront a challenge of this sort, it is appropriate that it cease to be a minor and “somewhat dirty” object. Now it would in no way suffice to propose serious and well documented historical analyzes: it is essential to go to the core of the theoretical difficulties which hinder its understanding and to formulate a concept of it.

This concept must enable us to go beyond the aporia or doubt which consists at the outset in considering any judgement of a “terrorist” experience as relative, recalling that while there are those who perceive it as such, there are others who deny this and who, on the contrary, valorize its violence. In fact, this state of mind functions by amalgamating two elements of definition which it is urgent to distinguish analytically, even if it means thereafter articulating them in the concrete approach to “terrorist” experiences. On one hand, terrorism must be approached from the angle of the methods to which it has recourse, and on the other from that of the meaning which it expresses but, as we shall see, which it also corrupts.

On one hand, terrorism comes under instrumental action; it can be defined as the implementation of tools and resources at a modest cost in comparison to the effects expected by its promoters. Is it not possible for example, for a terrorist group with a few hand guns or a few kilos of explosives to destabilize a regime, end a government, in short to obtain results out of all proportion to the means used? This first part of the definition of terrorism has the merit of stressing its highly rational character. The actors here are capable of elaborating a strategy, of calculating, of equipping themselves with instruments within their reach and, if necessary, creating difficulties for a State which is infinitely more powerful than they are. They may appear to be more intelligent in this respect than the governments which they confront. Thus, while for years American strategists had been drawing up very sophisticated approaches and imagining particularly elaborate scenarios of nuclear, chemical or bacteriological terrorism, the authors of the attacks on 11 September 2001 went up in airliners after having acquired the rudiments of flying, their only weapons being penknives or cutters. In the face of States which have military and police forces at their disposal, terrorism, in its instrumental dimension, has resort to inexpensive tools, easily acquired, which come from civil society and which belong to a repertory which is always restricted: each group or each organization has its own, which often acts as its signature in the eyes of the specialists responsible for identifying the authors of an attack or the hijacking of a plane. Speaking of terrorist methods cannot be a question of drawing up a list of techniques, since they
vary from one experience to another; it involves primarily stressing a disproportion, an extraordinary asymmetry, since the mobilization of modest means will enable terrorists to confront or to get at governments endowed with the most powerful resources possible.

In many respects, technological change facilitates the task of terrorist actors today. With internet, they have access to information for example about how to construct fatal instruments, they can communicate with each other or indulge in activities of proselytism and propaganda to the point that people refer to "Wiki-Qaeda", "e-jihad" and "Cyber Islamism". In the past, states had technological and scientific resources which were not accessible to private individuals, whereas today the actors in civil society have access to a huge market of products and knowledge—this sustains the fears of seeing the implementation of "bioterrorism" and other threats of this type.8

Rational instrumentality is not unknown to the world of terrorists. Here we still have to introduce a recent element, but one which complicates the analysis of this dimension of the phenomena: the rise in suicide attacks. For, when the terrorist does more than risk his life, when he gives it, with no reservations, and when this is, at least in part, a personal decision, it then becomes difficult to speak of a modest investment, disproportionate to the results expected. Here, rationality can no longer be the object of a costs/advantages type of calculation, except to consider that the choice of suicide operations and the decision of martyrdom can be attributed not to those who are going to kill themselves, but to the leaders of organizations who manipulate or instrumentalize individuals ready to kill themselves. Now, even if the vast majority of Islamist suicide operations imply an organized procedure,9 research, and we shall come back to this, precludes postulating systematically and exclusively this scenario of heteronomy and absence of meaning for those individuals who are going to kill themselves.

This brings us directly to consider the second dimension constituent of terrorism, which is its relationship to meaning. The approaches which reduce the phenomenon to its sole dimensions of instrumental violence, of means, therefore, in the service of an end, can never make us forget that the terrorist act, from the point of view of its protagonist, does have a meaning. Whether the actors express themselves or not, for them their action is loaded with meanings. The specificity of these meanings is that they are always different from what they would be if they were not implemented violently. The resort to violence is always accompanied in terrorism by distortions or deviations when compared with what the meaning of the same action would be without the use of weapons, explosives, etc.

In some cases, an ideology makes up for the loss of meaning, the terrorist acting because the meaning escapes him and he wishes to maintain it artificially. Thus, for example, in the 1970s and 1980s, Italy experienced a wave of extreme-left terrorism which focused uniquely on the working class movement whereas this movement was on the decline and losing its historical centrality and the workers in no way identified with this violence. The greater the distance between the figure of reference—the working class—and the discourse claiming to personify this figure at the topmost level of the revolution—the more the bearers of this discourse tend to get carried away into unlimited violence. This loss of meaning can result in the nihilism of the "demons" which Dostoevsky describes so well. But one has to be cautious here and not tack this schema over-hastily onto the facts: André Glucksman, the philosopher, was mistaken when he interpreted the "9–11" attacks in the light of this model for, as it happened, there was a plethora of meanings in the violence rather than a lack of it.10

In other cases, the violence accompanies a rationale of overload of meaning, in which the actors attribute a religious and metaphysical significance to their political and social expectations. This is the case, (to which we shall return) in the terrorism associated with radical Islamism.

In yet other cases, what we see is an end to the capacity to reconcile elements of meaning which previously could function together without major difficulties. Thus, ETA, the Basque separatist organization, came to the fore under Franco and voiced the hopes both of those who wished to liberate the (Basque) nation from oppression under Franco, by ending the political dictatorship and declaring the (Basque) nation from oppression under Franco, by ending the political dictatorship and also expressed the expectations of a working class which, at the time, was numerous, but severely repressed. At this point, the violence of ETA was limited and, above all, symbolic. Then democracy was established, the Basque nation obtained a large degree of autonomy and deindustrialization put an end to the centrality of working class struggles.
It was at this point that the violence of ETA took a genuinely terrorist turning, sometimes even without limits, the only way of keeping alive the myth of an action speaking at one and the same time in the name of an oppressed nation, a proletariat forbidden to express itself and a mobilization against the repression of the Spanish state which was said to be democratic in appearance only.

Sometimes the terrorist act includes, or liberates, dimensions of gratuitous violence or sadism, which has no relation whatsoever with the meaning of the action and no import of an instrumental type—for example, when the guards of people who have been kidnapped and who will be liberated in exchange for a ransom submit them to cruel and humiliating treatment. This aspect is to be found in some terrorist experiences, but it is not central there. It is nevertheless the case that terrorism is a special type of political violence. The political issues at stake are borne by, if not invaded by, rationales of both loss and overload of meaning which lead it either to infrapolitical forms of behavior, in which the dominant element becomes economic, even villainous, close to organized crime, for example, or else towards metaphysical forms of behavior in which the dominant element goes beyond the political and even, in the case of religion, beyond life on earth.

The less meaning is lost, or distant, in relation to what it would be without the resort to violence, the more the latter appears as instrumental and the less it is justified to speak in terms of terrorism. Terrorism therefore is seen in all its conceptual purity when, on the contrary, it no longer maintains any link with the real world, with a social, national, cultural or political figure of reference which could identify with its acts. Terrorism conforms to its concept in extreme, perhaps even exceptional, cases, where only its protagonist is likely to be able to confer legitimate meaning on its action and where no figure of reference whatever can identify with it. In all other cases, it is “impure”, imperfect and incomplete. When al-Qaeda organized the “9–11” attacks, it evoked revulsion all over the world, but also applause—explicit to varying degrees—amongst the Muslim masses in some countries: in these instances, it is not possible to speak of “pure” terrorism. When the Italian Red Brigades killed bosses or political leaders in the name of a working class which rejected their violence and when, apart from their members, they no longer had any symbolic or ideological recognition, they became truly terrorist—moreover, it was at this point that they became weaker and vulnerable to the repression which put an end to their experience.

The definition of “pure” terrorism may appear to lead to a paradox. For, whereas in reality the phenomenon is of a political nature we are proposing a “pure” concept which departs from the political. This concept is in fact the extreme point of the phenomenon, its outcome when the rationales of loss and overload of meaning enter their terminal phase, departing from reality, when violence turns in upon itself and is no longer uniquely a problem of armed repression in the face of individuals or groups who proclaim their own legitimacy for lack of the least social, cultural or political legitimacy. But in practice the phenomenon is almost always “impure”; it almost always retains a contact, even very limited, with a population of reference, a social reality, pockets of sympathy or understanding and it is this practical “impurity” which means that it remains political.

Classical Terrorism
As a historical reality, terrorism resembles many other social or political phenomena: there have been considerable changes since the period between 1960 and 1980 in the last century. To be more precise: it has gone from the classical era to the global era. Some observers challenge this image of a distinct change or break. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, for example, while not minimizing the innovations introduced by radical Islamism which has, as he says, “replaced the omniscient and all-powerful central Committee by a flexible network” insists on recalling that “modern terrorism is a European invention dating from the 19th century… Recently, its main source of inspiration has been the extreme-left terrorism of the 1960s and 1970s”.

He considers that the techniques of the Islamists, their symbols, the style of their communiqués, etc., borrow massively from the extreme left groups of the past. One might add, to follow him for an instant, that the practice of suicide is not a novelty in terrorism. The terrorists at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century took risks which verged on suicide to approach their target with a bomb, a pistol or a knife. Bobby Sands in 1981 and other IRA (Irish) members, Ulrike Meinhof in 1976, Andreas Baader in 1977 and other members of the Red Army Fraction (German) all committed suicide in prison—it
is true that their gesture involved no other deaths but their own.

The fact remains that Enzensberger himself, a few lines further on in the book referred to, weakens the hypothesis of historical continuity by noting that Islamist terrorists “are in reality pure products of the globalized world which they combat” and that “in comparison with their predecessors they have made a lot of progress, not only in the techniques which they employ, but in their use of the media”. While it would be absurd to postulate a complete break, it does nevertheless seem more relevant to insist on the elements of transition from one era to another rather than on those which indicate a degree of continuity. This transition can be observed materially by analyzing the forms and meanings which terrorism assumed yesterday and comparing them to those of the present day. There have also been considerable changes in the categories which we can now use to consider this phenomenon.

In the period from 1960 to 1980, terrorism was in the main the concern of the analytical framework of the nation-state and its extension, international relations. Within the nation-state—or at least within sovereign states, it corresponded to three major headings. It could be extreme-left, extreme-right, or nationalist and separatist. By far the most widespread expression of extreme-left terrorism was played out in Italy, but it affected numerous other societies in varying degrees of industrialization: West Germany with the Red Army Faction and the Revolutionary Cells (RZ), France with Action Directe, Japan with its Red Army, Belgium with the Revolutionary Communist Cells, and Greece, Portugal, and several countries in Latin America with various terror groups. It originated in what I then called an inversion in which the protagonists of violence, in the deviation of post-1968 leftism appropriated the categories of Marxism-Leninism, altered them to suit themselves and then spoke in the name of a proletariat, or others, which they in no way represented. On each occasion, they challenged the power of the State even if in some cases they did try to be international and establish themselves in a space other than national and if they did vigorously denounce American imperialism. Extreme-right terrorism was not as widespread, but was also borne along by projects for the seizure of state power and was linked to the presence, in the machinery of the states concerned, of sectors which were themselves open to such projects. Finally, and still internal to sovereign states, terrorism could be the mode of action of nationalist movements wishing to impose the independence of a nation which it might also be a question for them of arousing by means of violence. In Europe the Basque and the Irish movements were thus characterized by resort to the armed struggle and by comparable forms of organization, in particular with the same type of tensions between “military” and warlike rationales and “political” approaches more open to negotiation.

Furthermore, international terrorism was in the main the doing of actors claiming to adhere to the Palestinian cause, either in central fashion—for example with the killing of Israeli athletes perpetrated by Fatah in 1972 in the Olympic village in Munich—or in peripheral fashion, with in these instances the intervention of groups which tended to be manipulated by “sponsor” States (Syria, Libya, Iraq…) and attempting to weaken the central rationale of the PLO and preventing any negotiated solution in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The ASALA (Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia) resembled in some respects the Palestinian groups on which it was modeled all the more so as, like them, in crisis-ridden Lebanon it found a territory propitious to its brief prosperity.

The characteristic of classical terrorism, that of the period from 1960 to 1980, was that it was active within a “Westphalian” world—a world which it was possible and legitimate to approach in the categories which Ulrich Beck calls “methodological nationalism”. Terrorism originated within societies which themselves lay within States; it conveyed political and ideological deviations which referred back to projects either for taking power in a State or to setting up a State and it was borne by avant-gardes who identified with the direction of history, the working class and the nation. And, symmetrically, the struggle against terrorism was an affair in which each State was involved uniquely for its own benefit—which did not preclude appeals to international solidarity. Classical terrorism was perceived and described as a threat affecting States, their order and, possibly their territorial integrity.

Global Terrorism
The “9–11” attacks revealed what it was possible to glimpse, in fact, almost ten years before: the entry
into the "global" era of terrorism. This era had in fact been inaugurated by various episodes conveyed by radical Islamism, with in particular the first attempt at an Islamist attack in New York in 1993, which had already targeted the towers of the World Trade Center, or yet again the hijacking of an Air France plane in Algeria in December 1994 by Islamists whose project was to crash the plane over Paris. This hijacking was itself followed a few months later by a series of attacks in France which were part of the same "global" rationale since they combined international dimensions (the extension of the Algerian Islamist struggle outside the national space of Algeria) and dimensions internal to French society (crisis in the suburbs, social exclusion, the experience of racism reversed into violence).

One can even go farther back in time and find the beginnings of global terrorism in the attacks in which a suicide bomber driving a delivery van destroyed the American embassy in Beirut (April 1983), then the attack on the headquarters of the French contingent of the multinational security force and the American marines barracks bombing (October 1983). These are, according to the most likely hypotheses, the first expressions of Hezbollah, a movement which claimed to be born by the project for an Islamic revolution throughout the region, and which also intended to finish with the State of Israel, and which from this time onwards, was capable of mobilizing people destined to commit suicide in their actions.

The fact remains that the globalization of terrorism was demonstrated in spectacular fashion with the attacks on 11 September 2001. With these attacks the phenomenon can no longer be analyzed in the categories of “methodological nationalism” as the classical limits between rationales internal to sovereign states and the external, so-called international, rationales had become blurred. The authors of the "9–11" attacks moved around in a global space, their careers took them from the society in which they were born, Saudi Arabia and Egypt in this instance, to other societies like Sudan, Pakistan and Afghanistan where they met, were educated and trained, creating bonds of solidarity which were to become active in the form of networks throughout the world, and then to places where they had the benefit of complete freedom of action on the part of the state, with the cooperation of the Talibans whom they had subjugated. They were at home in several countries in Europe including Germany where some of them attended universities, in the England of “Londonistan” and its mosques where the most radical speech went unchecked, and in the French suburbs. These actors, contrary to what is usually assumed, were not the expression of a reality, somewhat traditional community from which they might have emerged giving direct expression to their expectations, but on the contrary were people who had been uprooted and were very far from any such community. They came from a transnational neo-umma, in the words of Farhad Khosrokhavar, an imagined community which tends to be formed in the poor areas of the major global cities in the modern world rather than in traditional rural areas. In their action, there were rationales that were reminiscent of those of the most modern capitalism possible—it has even been stated that Bin Laden the leader of al-Qaeda had been guilty of "insider trading" when speculating on the stock exchange on the consequences of the attacks that his organization was preparing.

Actors of this type function in networks with considerable flexibility; they know how to plug in and unplug without difficulty and, given their instrumental rationality, they use the most advanced technologies of communication beginning with the Internet. Their terrorism is also global as a result of its meanings which do not stop at a State in which the aim is to take power, or become independent. Their aims are at global level and even extend beyond the world in which we live being projected into the after-life. Breaking with the traditional forms of community life, their Islamism—inseparable from the concept of Djihad (holy war) transcends national frontiers and aims at the destruction of the West, including by martyrdom and therefore by a sacred death; this West which at one and the same time fascinates them and, in their opinion, excludes and despises Islam and the Muslims.

The attacks on 11th September 2001 were not the first expression, liable in future to be surpassed, of this terrorism expressed by transnational actors but a paroxysm, an extreme case. Thereafter, numerous attacks were made in the name of al-Qaeda, or at least associated with this organization, but they did not present the same transnational purity, in other words, a blending of global-level dimensions with others, more classically set in the framework of the state targeted. Moreover, it is to these hybrid expressions which
articulate world-level, supranational aspects with internal aspects of the states concerned that the idea of a globalization of terrorism applies the best. Whether it be a question of the attacks in Riyadh, Casablanca and Istanbul in 2003, those in Madrid (March 2004) or yet again in London (July 2005) in each instance, the actors articulate, in ways which vary from one instance to another, the two dimensions which constitute “global” terrorism. On one hand they are at one and the same time, at least in part, and at least for some of them, immersed in the society in which they act, the end product in these instances of social exclusion and lack of respect; they express an acute feeling of not finding their place in this society or, yet again, they convey a rejection of its international politics. On the other hand, they are bearers of transnational, religious rationales and, if need be, are linked to global level networks. Consequently they concern simultaneously an imagined community of believers with no material base and a real-life community, for example, of Moroccan immigrants (Spain) or Pakistanis (England) or yet again the poverty-stricken masses living in the most deprived areas of Casablanca or Istanbul. Their action is neither uniquely internal or classical, nor uniquely transnational, but both at the same time. This, moreover, is why the answers to this “global” terrorism themselves combine two dimensions: military and defense dimensions vis-à-vis the outside world on one hand and police and internal security on the other.

In some instances, the transnational dimension itself is slight, even non-existent and the terrorist action is in the main limited to its classical dimensions. This is the case with the suicide attacks committed by Palestinians against targets in Israel. The practice of martyrdom is an innovation in Palestinian action which has only recently become Islamist. But above all, this violence emanates directly from a real-life community, the populations of the territories placed under the control of the Palestinian Authority, and the references to Islam remain subordinate to the national struggle. The transnational dimensions of the action are of little import and, if it is possible to speak of terrorism, it must be recognized that the latter remains classical and not global.

“Global” terrorism is deployed in a space which is therefore edged by two extreme limits. At one extreme it is purely transnational—this was the case with the 11 September 2001 attacks; at the other extreme, it is classical, as least when it is a question of its frame of reference—this is the case with the Palestinian attacks in Israeli territory.

Is this global terrorism entirely new? In the past, the classical age of the phenomenon, numerous actors had transnational trajectories, cut off from any rooting in their society of origin. The three Japanese who opened fire at the airport of Lod in Israel on 30th May 1972 (26 dead) had come to serve the Palestinian cause, just as, throughout the 1970s, the Germans of the Revolutionary Cells, the Movement 2 June or the Red Army Faction collaborated with terrorist Palestinian groups, or with the “sponsor” States. In these instances there was effectively deterritorialization on one hand and networking of all these actors on the other. But it was more a question of international support for a national cause than of a global action. The violence was intended to be on behalf of the Palestinian movement; the existence of the networks, which numerous experts described as a “red thread”, was uniquely due to the support or the tolerance of certain states.

Is global terrorism the monopoly of radical Islamism? It is true that terrorist actors other than Muslims do exist today throughout the world and that many armed movements, be they nationalist, ethnic or borne by another religion (Hinduism, for example) use them. But radical Islamism is the only one to combine global, metapolitical aims and a possible rooting within a sovereign state in various parts of the world. As a result, there is less room left for violent actors other than Islamist, as was observed in spectacular fashion in Spain. The terrible attacks on 11 March 2004 in Madrid (191 people killed) were first attributed by the government to ETA before it became clear that they were the work of Maghrebian migrants. Not only did José María Aznar’s Partido Popular lose the elections which were held a few days later for having erroneously accused ETA, but the Basque separatist organization itself was in a way a victim of Islamic terrorism and was also obliged to impugn such extreme violence; henceforth its legitimacy in the use of arms and explosives was weakened. This is why we can say that, by its intervention in Spain, al-Qaeda signified the historical decline of ETA—even if this organization continues to exist and to deal murderous blows to Spanish democracy.

But let us add here that Islamist terrorism is not unified or homogeneous, far from it. The resort
to extreme violence claiming to represent Islam mobilizes actors who become involved in highly conflictual games amongst themselves as we see today in Iraq where al-Qaeda is far from having the monopoly of attacks.

More generally, if we consider classical terrorism, that of the 1960s and 1970s, one can see an image of a tendency to split. Yesterday’s rationales were primarily political, obsessed, as we said, by seizing state power or by the establishment of a new state. In the present-day world, in comparison with the classical age, terrorist action is either more than political, overdetermined by its dimensions of sacred global combat, with no possibility of negotiation—radical Islamism reigns here, it is metapolitical—or else, less than political concerned in these cases with economic profit while maintaining contact with the political. This, for example, is the case in Colombia with the FARC, who have become infrapolitical forces, today on the decline. This either brings the actual phenomenon closer to the concept of "pure" terrorism or else, on the contrary, moves it farther away making of it a primarily instrumental and economic type of violence with a tendency to Mafia-like practices. This evolution does not preclude the existence of nationalist or comparable movements, still liable to resort, classically, to terrorism but of necessity confined and reduced to their local issues.

Notes

* This text takes up elements of ch. 8 in Michel Wieviorka’s book, Neuf leçons de sociologie, (Paris, Robert Laffont, 2008).


2 This is why, in the 1980s, as a French researcher, I avoided research subjects where my belonging to France would have exacerbated the difficulties. I studied the extreme left terrorism in Italy, instead of Action directe and the Basque separatism of ETA instead of Corsican nationalism.


4 Boris Savinkov, Souvenirs d’un terroriste, (Paris, Payot, 1931 [1909]).


8 See for example John Robb, Brave New War: the Next Stage on Terrorism and the End of Globalization, (Hoboken, John Wiley and Sons, 2007).

9 See for example Robert Pape, who advances the figures of 95 percent in “The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism,” The American Political Science Review, 97(3): 346–350. And, by the same author, the frequently quoted book Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism, (New York, Random House, 2005).

10 André Glucksman, Dostoievski à Manhattan, (Paris, Robert Laffont, 2002).


12 Idem, p. 31.

13 In Ulrich Beck, Qu’est-ce que le cosmopolitisme?, (Paris, Aubier, 2006 [2004]).