

CULTURE OF VIOLENCE

DISCUSSION POINTS FOR THE ISODARCO WINTER COURSE 8 – 15 JANUARY 2006

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INTRODUCTION

The current paper was prepared with the sole purpose of facilitating the round –table discussion at the 2006 ISODARCO Winter Courses, with the author’s main objective being to highlight some of the relevant points, rather than to produce a full academic article. It appears that the subject (which is quite wide and multifaceted) is highly relevant to the main theme of the Courses, namely, fight against terrorism. However this relevance is often being overlooked or overshadowed by more dramatic, more “marketable” and more populist aspects of anti-terrorism actions and research.

While there is no generally acceptable definition of terrorism, few would deny that violence or threat of violence – at least, against civilians - for political and ideological reasons, constitutes one of its main features. As such, this deserves condemnation and counter-action with a variety of means, including violent ones, where appropriate. On the other hand, it is no less important to understand which factors contribute to the formation of **mentality which presupposes that a human life, including that of a would be terrorist, is easily expendable in the name of some holy goal, or even without such a goal, and that any institution, group or individual, in a position to do so, can resort to coercion by force to deal with other institutions, groups or individuals that have different values or ways of life.** This is the author’s attempt to define the subject, and there may be better ways of doing so. Extreme forms of this culture are extermination, genocide and terrorism.

DISCUSSION

1. It is submitted that **the problem is not limited to a particular type of society, race or religion**; one can even trace it throughout many millennia of human history, although specific particularities differed,

depending on time, place and context. Ritual cannibalism (even performed by a then head of state), after all, has been witnessed in not so distant past. Oklahoma City bombing – the most atrocious terrorist act in the US before 9/11 - has been carried out not by alien infiltrators, but by a couple of local residents; and London train bombs in the UK during the G-8 Summit have been planted by British citizens of the second generation, thus constituting a clear symptom of serious societal problems in the today's world, which the industrial democracies and developing world alike have not been able to address properly. These problems find their manifestation at several levels (no priorities assigned).

- a) Whilst the memories of the WWII subsided, and the fear of the nuclear apocalypses became the nightmare of the past, the public in the developed nations, especially the younger generation, is being increasingly exposed to the image of war as something distant, not affecting their own cities and villages, where “bad guys” are being punished by smart bombs and missiles released by a push of a button from super-modern invulnerable aircraft with explosions, visible only on the monitor screens. In other words, the perception has been created that the war is an easy time-passing. This has been a major feature of media coverage of wars waged by western nations in Iraq, Yugoslavia and Afghanistan. And, to a degree, that was true, due to incredible technological gap between the parties involved. That had two different consequences: perception of impunity amongst those more powerful, and a counter-reaction at least some of those bombed and being frustrated about their inability to respond against the territory of their opponents. It is not a secret that despite a good deal of marketing of smart weapons, the “collateral” casualties among the civilian population have been high. **So, the first problem we face is a greatly simplified image of war.**
- b) Another phenomenon, closely related to the first one: increasing exposure of the younger generation to computer games, videos, etc, the main psychological context of which is violence. You may spend hours at your computer destroying enemies, intruding aliens and other infidels, sitting comfortably in your room; and when sooner or later you are also hit, no problem – normally, according to the script, you have several lives, and after all you can always restart the game anew. The effect is

well known as “**desensibilisation to violence**” (translation from French – desensibilisation a la violence), and it is interesting that experts find it similar to one of the main objectives in the training of young soldiers, especially in the Special Forces. The author believes this is a part of a more general trend in mass media, that is directed to create **simplified mass culture** for the majority (as opposed to elite culture) so as to limit people’s concerns to their household well-being and become insensitive to wider social and political problems and eager to allow somebody else to address them; thus a climate of social apathy and indifference to injustice is being created, which in the long run could be quite detrimental to the future of democracy.

- c) The current spread of the culture of violence is closely connected with the **process of globalization**. There is no generally acceptable definition of globalization either, but there is a widely shared view that **it involves the gradual dilution of state sovereignty** in favor of other actors, be it multinational companies or private security providers. **Outsourcing security** in some major countries is, by itself, a big problem, which deserves a serious study, but for the purposes of this discussion it might suffice to say that as a result we are witnessing a transfer of a wide range of security functions to non-state actors, including the right to use lethal force and some access to weapons of mass destruction. (Examples include a wide range of armed security services offered by the US companies in Iraq, recreation of armed Cossack formations in Russia, various right-and-left-wing militias in some developing countries, sometimes on the payroll of multinational companies and intelligence agencies.) These actors are not accountable to the public in the same way as governments are supposed to be, and some of them have developed ties with the organized crime. A rather controversial question arises in this regard: what is the difference between those privatized military forces and the terrorist groups? More importantly even, **the process of globalization puts under increasing pressure archaic social and power structures**, with the latter trying to preserve their grip on power (and, hence, resources) by waging low intensity conflicts with enemies, while recruiting soldiers from among the former.

- d) Another feature of globalization is hugely increased mobility of people, economic migration, **much closer inter-action of groups with different cultural and religious traditions**. While in the past there were a few countries (mainly, empires) with multi-ethnic population, today it is difficult to name a country, which would not have that feature to some or another degree. This creates additional problems (those of integration, for example) which, if not properly attended, tend to offer fertile ground for the seeds of violence in the pursuit of what one or another group considers to be justified. Finally, globalization puts at the disposal of extremist groups modern means of communications, banking and instruments of mass propaganda with global reach – all of which prove to be quite useful both in ideological and operational terms.
2. It might be useful look at how the **culture of violence** is influenced by **democratic and totalitarian forms of government**. This culture seems to be strongly embedded in societies that have been unlucky to live under dictatorships of various forms and shades, i.e. systems of government based on violence, submission and brutal force.
- a) The **“might is right” complex** and the perception that laws are not there to protect the innocent and deter and punish the offenders, **tend to remain in the minds of individuals for quite some time after a totalitarian system of government goes** to the dustbin of history, thus offering a fertile ground for corruption, hatred, political extremism and violence, which flourish in the absence of forces which previously could keep those manifestation under control.
- b) On the other hand, **democracy, by itself, is not a panacea**, especially **when it fails to be all-inclusive**. The US democracy, the way it had been initially designed, clearly excluded Afro-Americans and Indians; similarly, the current democratic institutions in Western Europe are so far failing to offer equal opportunities to families of economic migrants, creating new lines of tension within European societies. The recent violent protests in France and, on a smaller scale, in Germany, Belgium and Holland have shown that while first generation migrants are basically satisfied by being able to settle and find some income in their new country of residence – their life simply became better, their children have a different point of reference,

namely, a **perception of social inequality and lack of perspective**, compared to native young people of the same age have.

- c) In principle, **democracy has a much better potential to adjust to new challenges by offering non-violent, consensus-building and evolutionary solutions to emerging societal problems**. That requires, however, a certain kind of vigilance and leadership, ability to unite people not against another enemy, but in pursuit of properly defined common goals – something, which is easier said than done. The areas that require attention in this regard are education, culture, integration, equal opportunities and market forces management. Furthermore, the very fight against terrorism should not be allowed to lead to the de-democratization of society.
- d) Whatever the system of government may be, the most favorable conditions for the growth of the culture of violence are created by **disintegration or collapse of local and central governmental institutions** (look at a period of lawlessness and wide spread violence in post- Katrina New Orleans), thus making it imperative to have in place rapid reaction systems, both national and international, for post-conflict and post-disaster rehabilitation of societies.

3. The advantages offered by democratic system of government apply not only to internal affairs of states, but to international relations as well, although the mechanisms and settings are often different.

- a) With the **end of the bipolar system** the world has not become (yet, one should hope) more stable and democratic. The immoral but effective system of self-control, known as deterrence, has lost much of its importance (even where technically it is still of relevance, given the capabilities for mutual assured destruction possessed by the US and Russia and unmatched for the time being by others, the changed political context has diluted it quite a bit); **the basic legal, political and institutional barriers against the use or threat of use of force** and other coercive measures (like primacy of national sovereignty, inviolability of borders, non intervention in internal affairs) **are coming under increasing duress**. This is not to say that all these developments are necessarily negative; for example, an intervention for urgent humanitarian purposes, supported, if necessary, by military or

upgraded police force may well be a necessary thing to do. However, the current international system, including the international law, is not up to date to offer modern and democratic mechanisms and rules for such interventions on an objective, just and non-discriminatory basis. The controversies surrounding a number of interventions and the use of military force, including questions of their legality, over the last 15 years or so led to a widely shared perception of defenselessness of smaller countries in the current unruly international situation. While the reaction of some was to strive to achieve WMD capabilities (successfully, in a few cases), **this perception of unjust world order may well translate in other cases into formation of sub-national, sub-state groups, professing violence.**

- b) A number of nations appear to be building future defense lines against international violence by maneuvering into positions that would make them less dependent on single sources of energy supplies, guaranteed access to other natural resources, exploring new coalitions – in other words, trying to decrease their vulnerability in future contingencies, while little more than a lip service is being paid to strengthening of international institutions based on the rule of law and modernizing the law accordingly. The philosophy behind this is the same old **“position of strength mentality”** which is also conducive to the strengthening of the culture of violence on the global and local levels.
- c) Last, but not least, **unresolved national border and territorial disputes (Kashmir) and foreign occupation (Palestine)**, together with the inability of the international community to help resolve them, cannot but provide a strong incentive to the culture of violence.

- 4. A very difficult question is: **what role religions play vis-à-vis the culture of violence?** One thing seems to be clear – any attempts to determine which religions are better in this sense, are counter-productive and doomed to failure. The fact remains, however, that many wars in the past have been started in the name of one religious objective or the other; many armed forces employ chaplains and priests in the officers’ rank. Furthermore, it appears that religious institutions, as powerful instruments of ideological influence, are often

being used, and agree to be used, to serve the culture of violence, while religions as systems of beliefs and understanding of the world do not necessarily call for that role.

TWO OBSERVATIONS IN CONCLUSION...

Military methods alone will not be sufficient to guarantee that the current fight against terrorism brings about a speedy victory. Moreover, the way this fight has been going on until now, promises to make it a long war, erosion of freedom, social development and democracy itself. The most important victory will be when we manage to make our way of life more attractive, our behavior more moral, and our objectives more humane than those whom we have designated our new enemy. So far many tendencies work in the opposite direction.

Therefore our society should subject itself to careful self-evaluation, be it interpretation of the freedom of expression which, commercialization of culture, the cult of strength or the self-perception of superiority. All this is necessary not just to overcome terrorism, but to guarantee the survival of the humankind in general.

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