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Culture or Conflict? Escalation toward Terrorism

Abstract

Conflicts arise and, no matter what they are about, turn violent if there are no institutions within which they can be carried out by other means. Such unregulated conflicts intensify the process of establishing unambiguous identities, which appear to safeguard personal integrity and dignity. Therefore, terrorism is not the expression of a specific culture (be it Basque, Irish, Tamil, Chechen, Hutu, or Saudi), it is primarily a means of extreme political struggle, following the construction of dichotomies like friend and foe, good and evil.

Lizenz

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Analysen

Roland Eckert

Culture or Conflict? Escalation toward Terrorism

Under the threat of totalitarian regimes in the 20th century, perfection of the state's ability to wield power and control opinion was viewed with good reason as the greatest threat to peace and freedom. Over the last fifteen years, the outlook has changed fundamentally. Decaying state structures and ongoing civil wars in many parts of the world show, as at the time of Thomas Hobbes, that the state's monopoly on the use of force is a necessary (though not sufficient) precondition for peace and freedom. September 11th, 2001, then made clear once and for all that the use of political force by nonstate agents extends its threat through global networks into the industrialized nations of the West. The main form taken by this force is terrorism, whose specific mechanisms and motivations therefore demand analysis. This cannot contribute to a short time remedy but could perhaps facilitate long term prevention.

Terrorism is part of a strategy of "asymmetrical warfare" that avoids open battle with the powers of the state but challenges them to strike back in an attempt to trigger waves of solidarity and support within those population groups of which the protagonists claim to be the avant-garde (Waldmann 1998). From the late 1960s terrorism was increasingly internationalized and financed by private business and fund raising (Hoffman 2002), yet the logic of action remained the same: the immediate goal of this strategy is not "victory" but the spread of fear and terror, which in some cases may indeed cause the enemy to retreat. The success of terrorism depends firstly on whether it can win sympathy or even solidarity among specific segments of the population, i. e. whether it commands or can attract collective solidarity, and secondly on the level of costs the other side is prepared to accept. Thirdly, the recruiting of terro-

rists is linked with transformations of subjective identity that depend on a whole plethora of preconditions.

The creation of collective solidarity as a background and precondition for terrorism and the transformation of the identity of actors do not usually precede conflicts, but form an integral part of the events concerned. The creation of collectives and the transformation of identities are closely linked, but they may diverge. Terrorism in Germany in the 1970s, for example, was successful in transforming the identity of the protagonists but failed to harness collective solidarity because people expressed sympathy not with the revolution but with the state under attack (Eckert 1978).

How do the creation of collective solidarity and the transformation of identities work? Human beings usually have a whole range of identities, constantly adapting their behavior to their current situation as a family member, at work, in clubs and associations, as a neighbor, as a member of a religious, ethnic, or national community. Any such group membership implies limits excluding other possible affiliations: if I am this mother's son, then I am not someone else's; when acting as a doctor, I am not a patient; if I belong to this political party, then I do not belong to another at the same time. While such affiliations in direct everyday interaction are rendered relatively clear and trivially plausible by their complementary roles, membership of imagined communities such as a religion, collective world view, ethnicity, class, or nation depends on many more factors, as it is required to stabilize symbolic borders that are not necessarily manifest or plausible in everyday life. This is why religious communities have always fought against mixed marriages. Two processes in particular can be used to cement imagined communities. Firstly, symbolic borders can be ideologically reinforced by essentializing the corresponding group affiliation (Wetzstein et al. 1999) ("true" Germanness, the "pure doctrine," "hindutva"); secondly, such borders become more powerfully evident as a result of conflicts, and especially life-threatening conflicts with other communities. In such conflicts, individuals are reminded in existential and all-encompassing terms of their protection by and solidarity with a collective, even if they would previously only seldom have considered themselves part of it, or only in certain situations. In this light it is not simply collective identities with divergent traditions that generate conflicts, but it is conflicts (whatever their object) that

generate or are used to radicalize collective identity (Julia Eckert 2003). German nationalism emerged during the Franco-Prussian wars, Kurdish nationalism due to the central state's definition of the Kurds as "mountain Turks." As Marx argued, class consciousness is not linearly related to class structures as such, but constitutes itself in concrete conflicts (between workers and capitalists).

How does this happen? Conflict reinforces one dominant collective identity among many others by means of fear and hope. The more we (as Albanians, for example) are forced to seek protection or the more we attempt (as Serbs) to safeguard the land of the Holy Monasteries, the more we commit ourselves to an ethnic category and are categorized as such by others. Psychologists of perception speak of a heightening of contrast that takes place under conditions of stress. The greater the fear, the more important it is to know which side someone is on. Neighborhoods and circles of friends are swiftly cleansed of potential enemies. Realms of good and evil are defined. Contrary to what Carl Schmitt (1933) believed, the distinction between friend and foe is not the "essence of politics," but a consequence and an instrument of conflict aggravation. Although at first there may be issues where compromise is possible (such as access for an ethnic or religious group to the civil service or recognition of a minority language), finally, what is at stake is the "essence" of the collective identity, which seeks out its own concrete signals and conflict scenarios on this basis. This results, for example, in Ayodhya being posited as the birthplace of a Hindu god as a way of entering into symbolic and real conflict with Muslims. The more energy and time have been invested in such an idea, the higher the cost in human life will be, the "holier" the idea becomes, and the more difficult de-escalation will be to achieve. This is how groups are formed that possess collective solidarity, a capacity for suffering and a readiness for violence, while acting in a "cosmic struggle" (Jurgensmeyer 2000, 242).

Not all members of a potential collective take part in this process of essentialization of the communal identity at the same time in the same way. A range of different interests emerge, such as those of the war profiteers, whose social standing and material situation is nourished by the state of conflict. Their interests will often clash with those of former notables whose business depends critically on peace. They also may differ from the collective's sympathizers living

elsewhere, who contribute significantly to the financing of such movements although their everyday life is not affected, as shown by the funding of the IRA by Americans of Irish origin.

But participation patterns cannot be reduced to economic interests, and that raises the question of the transformation of identity among the actors. Sacrificing one's life to a cause is hardly rational, but it can become rational if there is no other option, which may often be true in the case of child soldiers and juvenile attackers. Sacrificing one's life becomes entirely rational if one has identified totally with the religious, revolutionary, ethnic, or national collective in question (Berghoff 1997). This can take place in two ways: firstly, training can lead to this kind of total identification, especially in juveniles (Elwert 2003), but I consider a more important influence to be humiliation and experiences of victimization and violence by the other side: "religion and violence are seen as antidotes to humiliation" (Juergensmeyer 2000, 187). "In many of the cases (...) not only here religious characteristics led spiritual persons into violence, but the other way around violent situations have reached out for religious justification" (Juergensmeyer 2000, 161). Both violence suffered and violence exercised change a person's world view. They do so by posing inevitable questions without supplying clear answers. (One and the same experience can generate thoughts of self-assertion via revenge and thoughts of nonviolence, and the former will be the more probable outcome, at least as long as there is no external judicial body to which either side can appeal and which is willing to help.)

So what are the links between migration, and violent conflict? In some cases the connection is obvious, especially when native people in a country with high immigration feel threatened. In Germany, the arrival of five million immigrants between 1988 and 1992 allowed fears of an overwhelming foreign presence to be stirred up and xenophobic attacks to be stimulated (Eckert 2002). State-sponsored transfer of population groups from Java to South Kalimantan sparked the ensuing ethnic conflict. Israel's settlement policy in the occupied territories is likely to have similarly aggravating effects on the conflict there.

Things become more complicated when we attempt to analyze the way migrants among themselves contribute to ethnic and inter-communal conflict. There are certainly many Irish people in the Uni-

ted States, Hindus in Britain, Kurds in Germany, and Muslims around the world who support their ethnic or religious movements, even violent ones. But these are the same people who have learned to operate with different identities, adapting to various situations and focusing their ethnic or religious identity on the corresponding holidays and festivals.

But precisely this "sectioning off" of ascriptive identity is ambivalent. The inherent process of abstraction from conventional everyday culture can lead to both relativization and radicalization of communal identity. According to one estimate, only a smaller part of North African immigrants in France are practicing Muslims. At the same time, this group includes a considerable number of Islamists. Their fundamentalist development is due precisely to their removal from local and family traditions and their independent interpretation of the Koran. Similar causes have been documented for the emergence of the fundamentalist Caliphate movement in Germany (Schiffauer 2000). Migration creates a life situation that poses many questions without prescribing specific answers. One of the possible answers is a radicalization of group affiliation. The more people feel humiliated or in a state of victimhood (Montville 1990) the more chosen traumas (Volkan 1999) make sense and generate collective identities. These radicalized collective identities often are adopted by new members in a process like a religious conversion or epiphany. This can happen without any individual deprivation, for instance among migrants who make a decision on their cultural discrepancies and adopt radical partisanship (Schiffauer 1999). In terms of cultural theory, this can be interpreted as a phenomenon of the selectability of meaning. Not only social positions that can be reached by achievement, but also ascriptive attributes such as gender, religion, and ethnicity become subject to individual choice—at least in terms of meaning for the individual. Via the media, via television, and the Internet, a global market in identity models is established. The attribution of existential meaning, even to ascriptive identities, is then an act of choice in this field. Gandhi's dhoti, the ultraorthodox attire of New York Jews, the Mao-look of the May 1968 generation, the dreadlocks of Rastas and the prophet's robe of Islamist chiefs are all symbols and forms of self-stigmatization in the sense of a chosen tradition. This also means that fundamentalism is not a traditionalist

response to modernization, but a modern answer to the dwindling status of tradition.

In this light, it is not just the continuing existence of archaic group affiliations that jeopardizes the triumph of Kant's vision of a cosmopolitan society—it is thoroughly modern processes of selectable identity susceptible to *radicalization in and via conflicts*, generating a threat to world peace. Huntington's concept of a "clash of civilizations" is wrong. Increasing contact between cultures leads to a range of reactions. The return to specific traditions, to "blood and belief, faith and family" (Huntington 1996, 126) is only one option among others, not necessarily the dominant one. Moreover, fundamentalism in most cases is not violent (Marty/Appleby 1991, 814). Conflicts do not simply result from this return to traditional values. They may have quite different causes, including the struggle for land, for water or for a share in the state's exploitation machinery, as well as conflicts over public morals and cultural hegemony.

Nonetheless, conflicts, however they arise and whatever they are about, turn violent if there are no institutions within which they can be carried out by other means. Such unregulated conflicts (Dubiel 1992; Hirschman 1994) intensify the process of establishing unambiguous identities, the construction of friend and foe, of good and evil. Contrary to what Huntington believes, in the beginning it is not the shift to traditional identities that produces conflicts, but conflicts which produce, among other things, a reduction in the diversity of identities to those that appear to safeguard personal integrity and dignity—and these can (but need not) be fundamentalist ones. Due to colonial and post-colonial conflicts in the Middle East we could observe a "consumption" of various ideologies: nationalist, socialist and now religious ones. Terrorism is therefore not the expression of a specific culture (be it Basque, Irish, Tamil, Chechen, Hutu, or Saudi), it is primarily a means of extreme political struggle. Beyond this, it is also both a consequence and a cause of differences between communities radicalized by unregulated conflicts. Juergensmeyer writes, "my own conclusion is that war is the context for sacrifice rather than the other way round" (Juergensmeyer 2000, 169). For these reasons, entering into the spiral of revenge is hardly a promising approach, and certainly not sufficient. No doubt, all conflicts can hardly be regulated, far less so if they are protracted. Yet in the long term the fight against terrorists will only succeed if it

proves possible to halt the radicalization of the communities whose avant-garde the terrorists claim to be. In this fight, conflict regulation (Eckert/Willems 1992), mediation and, in certain circumstances, the kind of power mediation seen in the former Yugoslavia are the only sustainable solutions.

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