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THE NEW REPUBLIC

February 11, 1978

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Terrorism: The War Against All
Bernard-Henri Levy

Every man his own state.

The War Against All

by Bernard-Henri Levy

Today Western Europe lives in a time of bombs, guns and Molotov cocktails. In Germany, in Italy and in France, an old catch phrase returns, hoarse and desperate, that violent action is the purest form of revolt. Men and women rise up—vagabonds of

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nothingness, mutineers of nihilism—and fight against evil, in the presence of a silent people. This is called *terrorism*, and I maintain that, even more than the Eurocommunism which so troubles President Carter, tomorrow this will probably be the key problem of the so-called liberal societies. The phenomenon spreads, in theory as well as in practice, and as always, intellectuals drag behind and have yet to produce even a sketch of an analysis. Thus these few remarks, worth whatever hypotheses are worth, which see things in the only

currently tenable and serious perspective: that of history or, better still, of genealogy.

Reduced to its most simple expression, the substance of the terrorist discourse is as follows: there are good and bad deaths, bourgeois lives and proletarian lives, and "respect for life" is worth nothing when confronted with the political imperative of expediting the revolution. What does that mean and, above all, what does it imply? Behind the revolutionary phraseology in which it clothes itself, an analysis of this type has a name: a legitimization of murder, a *politics of crime*. In concrete terms, a politics of crime implies this thesis, however strange it may appear: there are *progressivist corpses and reactionary carcasses*. This thesis can still say to itself: in the war of all against all which is the history of the modern world, there are *suspect victims* (a category first established by the Convention in 1793 during the Reign of Terror) and *privileged executioners*. And finally, behind this kind of conviction, there is an unexpected ghost who abruptly returns to lurk in the unconscious of men and women who pass for anarchists and romantics: the ghost of old Janov, formerly a legislator of letters and sciences, presently the great accountant of just and unjust sufferings. Thus a first remark: by extending the barbed-wire fence of politics even into the realm of morals, modern terrorism is an enlarged Janovism, a triumphant Janovism for which the "Red Brigades" in Italy and the "Baader-Meinhof gang" in Germany posthumously realize the most insane promises.

These bad deaths, these bourgeois deaths—what use is made of them? What *political* use, in the overall work of revolution? A reactionary supplicant is no longer a supplicant, nor a reactionary, nor even a dead person: but a vivid *example*. An assassinated journalist is hardly an adversary, much less a foil: rather, a sign or an *icon*, brandished in the heat of a struggle. The struggle, in this perspective, becomes an *exchange of signs*, a Grand-Guignol-like spectacle where the saraband of bodies and heads whirls like a merry-go-round. The victims—no matter whether innocent or guilty—become disincarnated corpses, aseptic carrion, mute and frozen effigies reduced to the level of pure *symbols*. And, there as well, the apostles of political crime rediscover another of our old acquaintances. A familiar figure whom they would probably disavow, but to whom they are uncannily close: the figure of free market capitalism in its completed structure and definition. Capitalism says: men are pure things, abstract and equivalent, measured by their exchange-value, in an infernal world that deprives and diminishes them. The terrorist answers: men are pure signifiers, no less abstract and equivalent, a political combustible fuel where the desire for revolt catches fire. Merchandise and signifier: deep down they are the same thing, or in any case the same treatment of "human matter." Terrorism is not at all the revolt that it claims to be: rather, it is the exacerbated form of a spectacular capitalism.

I know very well that this politics of the symbol, this

symbolic politics prides itself on an organic relationship to the "masses" of which one never stops singing the power and the glory. But what masses and, above all, what relationships are at issue in this diabolic game of legitimized murder? I fear that, for the terrorists, the masses are precisely a *mass*, amorphous and lethargic, thought of in the antique and reactionary image of the slumbering beast who wakes up at long intervals, in furious starts. I wonder if this reverence, too ardently proclaimed, does not conceal a colossal distrust, that of the classic intellectual lending his knowledgeable head to the soulless body of the people. And I am in any case certain that, in this strange hubbub where no common people are held responsible for the silence into which they are in fact coerced, another ghost always leads the dance: that of Karl Kautsky, the infamous theoretician of consciousness that comes from the outside, the subtle policeman of injected and imposed ideology, the immortal inventor of the "sciences" of revolution. Everyone knows with how many tragedies, slaughters and camps the people have paid for these "sciences." Even so, it is interesting to see them reactivated. For we are decidedly far from libertarian romanticism and very near, on the contrary, to the totalitarian dialectic.

In fact, experience proves that, starting with schemas of this kind, one no longer hesitates to sacrifice the common people themselves as well as class adversaries. Who will make us believe that all the supplicants of Lod airport were in effect fascists, accomplices of "imperialism?" Who is being made fun of, when it is declared that the hostages of Mogadishu are all former Nazis? The Red Army knew very well that there were *also* little people there: but little people thought of as the loam of the new mankind, cannon-fodder of the future; innocents whose deaths matter little when compared to the radiant future of tomorrows that will sing; but proletarians perhaps, to whom martyrdom is an honor, the petty cash of paradise. Let's make up our minds to admit it: these celebrated "masses," so covetously claimed, are the first and dearest hostages of terrorists.

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This dazed people to whom they claim to appeal are actually first game for the glorious red guillotines. An old, very old acquaintance is here as well: this is exactly what was said and done by the first great paranoiac of the contemporary period, the only, the true founder of the modern totalitarian State. I mean Saint-Just the virtuous, who only stopped when his virtue reigned over a cemetery. Saint-Just the revolutionary? Yes, but in the same sense as Baader: to make the revolution means to expropriate the masses from their present; that is to say, from their only home.

This entire logical delirium is worth something only for the strange strategy that founded it: the liberal States are fascist States which are unaware of that fact, the task of a revolutionary is to force them to unmask themselves, the goal of terrorism is to provoke them into hardening their stance. We have already commented on the absurdity of this tactic. Some good minds have demonstrated the masochism that it implies. What interests me is that we are once again on familiar ground. This is very much the conduct of the German and Italian Communists up until the end of the 1930s, a strategy dictated to them by a Comintern under the boot of Stalin. It had the concrete result of bringing the brown plague to power and of playing Hitler's game. Above all, it broke the resistance of the European proletariats and delivered them, at parade-rest, to the first death camps. Terrorist strategies are still, in other words, Stalinist tactics. Their politics of "the worst" is that of Thorez, Togliatti and so many others. And a large capacity for amnesia is required in order not to agree on this: a strange passion for

ignorance, for nonrecognition, behind the *dance macabre* of our new orphans, of the old family council of the Stalinist tradition.

What else do the facts tell us? What are—in Italy, for example—the tangible results of the actions of the Red Brigades? I do not claim that they have revived Mussolini. I do not even say that they have made the bed of neo-fascism. I do not know if, permeable to the most dubious infiltrations, they have (as is sometimes claimed) the function of provocation. But it seems clear to me that, for want of fascism, they are the best possible agents of barbarism with a human face. They are the best psychological cement for the new order that rules in Rome, the accursed counter-foil [*repoussoir*] against which the new police of souls is fashioned. Romantic apostles of individual violence, they are behind the scenes during the meeting between Argan, the Communist mayor of Rome, and Pope Paul VI. Because of them, self-proclaimed adversaries of social-fascism, the granite language of the historic compromise is being firmed up, far beyond any electoral sphere. Against them for the moment, and tomorrow doubtless against all the people, is being concluded the holy alliance of fear between the two great Churches of the West, the Marxist and the Christian, the bureaucrat and the theocrat. Their work will be finished when Berlinguer, the new Noske, carries out on a haggard and probably consenting crowd the miracle of his "final solution."

The case of Germany is different, but hardly more shining. There, too, I do not say that the State is heading toward a renewal of Nazism. I am not even sure that the real problem is the current growth of



Drawing by Marek Halter

political repression. I do not subscribe to the too facile slogan, "Schmidt-Strauss, same battle." But I believe that the stakes are elsewhere and, in a sense, much higher. The new fascism is in heads rather than in apparatuses that it sets up. The action of the Red Army Faction provokes not so much a flood of repression from above as a fantastic demand for authority that comes entirely from below. In the hearts of ordinary people, fascism lets loose this colossal demand for power that we can currently observe. Millions of citizens are busy as informers and general spies. The entire country lives under self-surveillance. Sixty million men and women do not cease to demand more, always more, police and law-and-order. No longer one, but sixty million German states. As many states as terrorized individuals. As many executioners as victims. To bind Schmidt to the truth has in fact had only one result: to multiply the "form-State," to exasperate "the ideal of the State" in heads, in short to institute the first society which, at last, realizes the wish of old Hegel: a society where, in order to be free one chooses to make oneself a state.

In practical terms, what does all this imply? Between state terrorism and individual terrorism a diabolical spiral starts, making one the source of the other. On one hand, he who says that the P. 38 pistol represents the only possible politics and who, at the instant in which he says it, creates the very situation which justifies him. On the other hand, he who answers that we must respond to individual terrorism with repression and who, in supporting it, makes his decree into a necessity. A politics of crime, in presenting its terrorist attacks as military acts, permits the adversary to represent all militant opposition as a crime against the common good. To politicize crime (as the terrorists do) is in point of fact the equivalent of criminalizing politics (as the Communists do). I say that there is a spiral of violence here, a terrible clockwork mechanism that aims at no more and no less than the halting of politics and the obstruction of any alternative. No one knows who will win this strange game, but we know quite well who will be the big loser: those authentic dissidents who, in Germany as in Italy, try to invent forms of deviation and dispute in relationship to states and to apparatuses. And I believe it is urgent that we take concrete cognizance of this fact before it is too late, and the vital forces of the Left meet the fate that is promised them.

I have talked of a "spiral," of a "dialectic of violence," suggesting by that a game with two partners, exchanging the signs of war from both sides of the same mirror. I am not sure, on reflection, that this image is the best. As a matter of fact, we must radicalize it. Why? Because I believe, for instance, that the true inventor of terrorism—the first to have at least forged the concept, if not to have practiced the art—is not an anti-authoritarian rebel, but a founder of the State and a Jacobin through and through: Saint-Just. Because it is

too often forgotten that terrorists did not invent skyjacking; it is the invention of a sovereign state, a national government, that of France hijacking Ben Bella's airplane. Because perhaps not enough has been made of the rather troubling fact that, when the Federal Republic of Germany elaborates its special anti-terrorist laws, it explicitly defines the imprisoned terrorists as "hostages" of the Government. In short, because there are, here as elsewhere, a certain number of indications that prove at least one thing: the terrorists are going to borrow their methods and their weapons from the secular arsenal of the state. Strictly speaking, and in terms of accurate genealogy, there is no terrorism other than that of the state itself, if individuals reproduce its procedures. In the Baader madness there is also, strictly speaking, *the will to make oneself a state*. Terrorism "exchanges." Terrorism "negotiates." There is nothing there except the paranoiacal desire to deal with the sovereign, with the emblems of sovereignty. To measure oneself to the state on the site of its majesty. To persist, above all, in order to become in turn the sovereign.

Terrorists are thus the great modern invalids of the ideal of the state. This paradox enlightens us little as to the real reasons for terrorists; once again, we must recall a bit of history. Too often we forget what the great Russian anarchist tradition really was—the same one to which the terrorists implicitly refer, and where they probably find their essential roots. A complacent hagiography always presents terrorism as a current of liberty, hostile to despotism, dedicated to the destruction of the state. But in truth its birth can only be understood in terms of a decrepit state, the 19th-century Russian state, where it was a matter of uncanny reinforcement much more than of destruction. Let us re-read, or rather let us read, Netchaiev, who writes that the "police" should be the "religion" of modern times. Let us decide to read the statutes of this "society of the axe" that he came to found in Russia, under orders from Bakunin, where we can find the definition for a revolution that would seem to mistake itself for a military campaign. Let us re-read Bakunin himself, who for a century now has passed for a heroic resister of the ukases of father Marx, and who was probably—his own writings testify to the fact—the most fanatical partisan of dictatorial order, the submission of the individual. Today's terrorists have not betrayed Shigalovism.* On the contrary, they never stop reciting its heavy lesson: more, always more of the state, the police, and discipline.

The times, have changed, you will say, and the western states hardly resemble the Russian state of a

*Translator's note: Shigalov, the epitome of the mad ideologist, is a character from Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed* who follows inexorably the logic of his argument, until it produces the reverse of the expected results. His famous saying: "Starting from unlimited freedom, we arrive at unlimited tyranny."

century ago. Granted, this is true; but the terrorist movements have added to the old lesson a determination of importance that finishes the fixing-on of its face. They are the first to have grown up in the shadow of Auschwitz, mass murder and the atomic bomb. They are the first to act in the setting of super-powerful states holding the instruments for a collective planetary suicide in their hands. They are the first witnesses of an age that will go down in history as the one that, in politics, introduced the dream of absolute death. And I believe that, at least from a phantasmal point of view, the politics of the bomb and the Molotov cocktail is the real "double" of that of murder by the state and the atomic bomb. The current seductiveness of violence can be understood only in the perspective of a new principle of dissemination, or even democratiza-

tion, of violence. To the menace of genocide that states carry within themselves, terrorists answer with more, always more atom bombs; that is to say, with P .38 pistols. Children of Hiroshima, the guerillas never cease to harp upon that primitive scene.

It is not a justification of them to say that, here again, they are the toys of a terror that in fact does not belong to them, and that they exhaust themselves in mimicry of a liturgical gesture which they will never cease to repeat. Nor is it a condemnation of them to see, not the enraged opponents of modern forms of power, but their diligent incense-bearers, the last true devotees of the religion of State. I ask only that we see in them the pale clowns and murderers of Western memory, the last adherents of its secular pathology: what Machiavelli (already) called "the need for the state."