CHAPTER 1

Historical Faces of Terrorism
1.1 Ancient avatars of Terror

Terrorism, which has usually been associated with revolutionary, anti-state violence, is a rather modern term. Nonetheless, early forms of it can be traced back to ancient times. If, for example, tyrannicide—the assassination of a tyrant—can be seen as a case of revolutionary violence inflicted upon an unjust and unethical political regime (or corrupt king), the notorious case of the murder of Hipparchus, brother of the Athenian tyrant Hippias, might fit the pattern. In 514 BC Hipparchus was assassinated by Harmodius and Aristogeiton who, after Hippias was finally overthrown, were extolled by the Athenian crowds as their true liberators from tyranny. In fact, a monument to the two assassins was erected in the ancient Agora of the city—purportedly the first monument in Ancient Greece to honor humans rather than gods. Of course, one of the most famous cases of tyrannicide in history was the assassination of Julius Caesar, an act which was just as famously defended by Plutarch and Cicero. The people that conspired against him, members of the Senate who called themselves “The Liberators,” were abhorred at his appointment as “dictator for life” as well as his demagogic tendencies. Thus, his assassination—“execution” might have been named by terrorists today—was retrospectively presented as a duty to the people of Rome. For Cicero, to kill a man is atrocious but to kill a tyrant—a title that had already taken on very negative connotations—was noble, therefore morally justifiable: “[I]f anyone kills a tyrant . . . he has not laden his soul with guilt, has he? The Roman People, at all events, are not of that opinion; for of all glorious deeds they hold such a one to be the most noble.”

Despite the determination and cynicism of the aforementioned conspiratorial acts—the killing of Hipparchus and the assassination of Julius Caesar—we cannot say that they fall easily within the strict category of “terrorism,” whose basic constituent as a term is “terror” that is felt not so much by those directly implicated—the actual victims—as by onlookers, bystanders, fellow-citizens, etc., who are the real targets. One of the well-known instances of terrorist violence as we mean it today, as activity that needs to be witnessed to have an impact at all and one that is full of symbolism and provocation—all those elements creating a cumulative aesthetic of terror—was the terrorism unleashed by the Sicarri in Judea against Roman sympathizers. The Sicarri (“dagger-men” in Latin) first emerged approximately twenty years before the
destruction of Jerusalem by Roman emperor Titus in 70 AD, and spread terror among Jews who were suspected of being in close cooperation with Rome. They did not target Romans directly but their fellow citizens, so that both would get the message.

One might safely argue that the Sicarri approximated the modern conception of terrorism for the additional reason that their methodology rings familiar to a modern-day thinker of terrorism: if Julius Caesar was treacherously dragged to the Senate to be given the fatal blow by Marcus Brutus, the Sicarri carried out assassinations in public areas and in broad daylight so that they could easily get away with it by blending with the bustling crowds. Therefore, if Caesar was reputed dead through rumor and hearsay, a Sicarri killing was immediately attested to by the public which would naturally be horrified by the atrocious deed, intimidated, and eventually deterred from acting in a way that was not in the pure interest of the terrorist group. In essence, eye-witnessing was crucial for the success of the deed. Another point of contiguity between terrorism as an aesthetic/symbolic act and Sicarri terrorism is terrorism’s propagandist nature. More particularly, the Sicarri group, just like Islamist terrorism today, resorted to terrifying deeds in order to inculcate the seed of insurrection in the hearts of others who would thus be coerced into fighting with the terrorists against the status quo. In other words, the group intended to reinvigorate the spirit of resistance by perpetrating acts that could be imitated by other people. At any rate, their dramatic acts of public violence might be said to have anticipated today’s TV networks and their capacity to proliferate images of horror, thus exerting immense psychological influence upon people that are by no means directly involved in the act of terrorism perpetrated.4

More than a thousand and a half years later, the hope of provoking a popular revolution via a reinvigoration of the spirit of Catholicism prompted Guy Fawkes, alongside twelve other conspirators, to plot against King James I of England and blow up the House of Parliament by detonating the thirty-six barrels of gunpowder that had been stored beneath it.5 The Gunpowder Plot of November 5, 1605, which failed because Fawkes was discovered the night before, epitomizes terrorist violence in an obviously modern sense, namely as an unprecedented and impressive strike aspiring to shock as well as win over potential admirers and supporters of a common (Catholic) cause. The plotters used technology—huge quantities of gunpowder—in a “novel” way, in order to provoke a spectacularly massive explosion with a high death toll. The strike differed from previous ones in its non-fastidiousness: this time,
collateral deaths were not out of the question since the idea was to inflict symbolic as well literal (material) violence upon an entire institution rather than merely a person—even if that person was the King himself. There was nothing strictly personal against the members of the Parliament. Actually, there were many Catholics in it whose lives would be gladly spared, such as William Parker, 4th Baron Monteagle, who was the one to receive an anonymous letter stating that he should stay away from the building in the next few days as something horrible was about to happen. The letter was sent by one of the conscience-stricken conspirators who felt pretty nervous about the possibility of harming Catholics. But that was precisely the cause of the plotters’ downfall; the letter gave away their secret scheme and led to their execution.

If there is a moral in this story, it has to be about how utterly devoid of sentimentality and morality a terrorist act must be in order to attain its goals. If one of the plotters had not “gone soft,” so to speak, their plans would not have fallen through. It could be said that, on the one hand, the Gunpowder Plot took anti-state (proto)terrorism to a wholly new level due to its (initial) nonfastidiousness (the possibility of collateral casualties being an acceptable one) as well as its potentiality for massive destruction; but on the other, this enhanced new version of terror quickly reverted to an older form of “conscientious” proto-terrorist mentality born of the unwritten ethical law of refraining from harming the “innocent.”

In the history of revolutionary violence in Western Europe, the English Civil War of the 1640s looms large as the event that legitimated tyrannicide and probably paved the way for the French Revolution a century and a half later. The conflict between Puritans, led by Oliver Cromwell, and Anglicans who adhered to royalty caused the overthrow of King Charles I and his public execution in 1649 for being “a tyrant, a traitor, and murderer, and a public enemy of the Commonwealth of England.” What was new about Charles’ execution was not the execution itself; many leaders and kings had been killed in cold blood. It was the public and ritualistic character of the execution as well as the fact that the king was tried and subsequently executed by his own subjects that presented a novel development in the course of politically and religiously-motivated violence. The spectacular dimension of the decapitation (the rendering, that is, of the decapitation into a spectacle) constituted an aestheticizing of death which, paradoxically, reinforced the legitimacy of murder committed by the new revolutionary government. In addition, it helped consolidate a culture and practice of terror throughout Cromwell’s reign that merely replaced the
former terror, that of the king’s, which shows that revolution is a two-edged sword. Albert Parry comments upon how easily revolutionary violence may slip into sheer terrorism unleashed, with the best of intentions, by the new state:

Such terror is double-edged. It is the terror used to achieve the overthrow of the existing government. It is also the terror employed when these very same terrorists, having tasted victory and seized the state, wield their new-found power to victimize their opponents, both real and imagined. In both categories, the weapons are intimidation, systematic violence, continual bloodshed. The aim of the game is “revolution.” Its slogan: “In the name of humanity and justice.” And while the method of these terrorists of both categories appears to be revolutionary, the substance of their activities is reactionary.9

Terrorism, admittedly, did not begin as anti-state but rather as state terrorism. Cromwell’s reign could be seen as a precursor of the state terrorism imposed by the Jacobins after the French Revolution of 1789. It is important to keep in mind that modern terrorism itself acquired its contemporary characteristics from the reign of terror enforced from the fall of 1793 to the summer of 1794. Maximilien Robespierre, leader of the Jacobins, is thought to be the father of terrorist thinking in his conceptualization of Terror as a kind of virtue that protects the citizens from the disorder and chaos wreaked by so-called “enemies” of the state. Robespierre, in the following excerpt from his Report upon the Principles of Political Morality Which Are to Form the Basis of the Administration of the Interior Concerns of the Republic, condenses in a few lines his philosophy as well as his conception of the ethics of political violence:

Without, all the tyrants encircle you; within, all tyranny’s friends conspire; they will conspire until hope is wrested from crime. We must smother the internal and external enemies of the Republic or perish with it; now in this situation, the first maxim of our policy ought to be to lead the people by reason and the people’s enemies by terror. If the spring of popular government in time of peace is virtue, the springs of popular government in revolution are at once virtue and terror: virtue, without which terror is fatal; terror, without which virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing other than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible; it is therefore an emanation of virtue; it
is not so much a special principle as it is a consequence of the general principle of democracy applied to our country’s most urgent needs.\textsuperscript{10} If we put Robespierre’s words in the context of pre-revolutionary France, we will discover that much of what he says makes sense. Before 1789, France had no political parties and its people had very few rights. When the revolution erupted, King Louis XVI of France was the absolute sovereign. Around him revolved the privileged class of the nobility which hardly paid any taxes and wanted to ensure that things would basically remain the same in the political scene of the country. From 1789 to 1792 the new National Assembly destroyed the Old Order, abolished the authorities of the king and declared that the people were to become the only source of power. Soon France would be a republic. However, the assassination of Jean-Paul Marat, a journalist and an adherent to the Revolution and the Jacobins, led Robespierre’s rule down bloodier paths by converting a revolutionary state supporting the freedom of the people from monarchical repression into a ruthless dictatorship which would suppress people’s rights even more than the regime it replaced. The suspicion that the aristocracy, with the help of other counter-revolutionary forces from other countries, contemplated the overthrow of the republic turned what was the “Great Fear”—the raw violence exerted on the elite by the peasants who burned down premises and houses of the aristocracy and smashed records—into the Great Terror (la Grande Terreur), vestiges of which we may discern in the excerpt from Robespierre’s address.

During the Great Terror or Reign of Terror, which, we should not forget, was established in the name of the people of the republic as a way to protect the revolution against its enemies, approximately 32,000 people fell victim to the new regime’s tactics and were executed as potentially conspiring against the Revolution. For Robespierre, “virtue was the mainspring of a popular government at peace, but that during the time of revolution virtue must be allied with terror in order for democracy to triumph.”\textsuperscript{11} For the Jacobins the system of terror “had a thoroughly positive meaning, as did the word that they occasionally used to describe themselves: \textit{les terroristes}. What Robespierre described was a dictatorship of the majority, with the minority left naked and unprotected. . . . Virtue was defined as self-abnegation, a devotion to civic duty. . . . And although virtue sprang from the people, it transcended them. . . .”\textsuperscript{12} This is very often the case with terrorism. It, unknowingly or not, transcends its very own cause. In fact, one of the problems with terror is that it often “leads to more terror, because it coarsens political dialogue and destroys traditional
barriers against the use of large-scale violence to solve major political and ideological questions. The use of terror sets precedents that are hard to undo, particularly when they are as visceral as the public execution of thousands [in the case of the French revolution]."13

1.2 State terrorism, the sublime, and the propaganda of the deed

The French Revolution did not only lay the groundwork for terrorism as we know it today, but it also set the philosophical and political parameters of the sublime, a notion which had re-emerged in eighteenth-century aesthetics mostly through the work of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. The aesthetic category of the sublime was associated, in both thinkers, with the subjective feeling of terror before an event of absolute forcefulness. For Burke, the sheer fact of regicide constituted such an act of terrible sublimity. In fact, Burke is credited with the very translation of the French word terroriste into English when, in a letter to Earl Fitzwilliam in 1795, he cried out against the revolutionaries by calling them hell hounds and terrorists. The sublime as paralyzing terror before an instance of extreme, asymmetric violence is one of the key terms of this study insofar it introduces terrorism and, its constituent element, terror, as intrinsically aesthetic rather than simply political terms as far as their impact upon the subject is concerned. Simultaneously, sublimity in terrorism will be conceptualized as a glimpse of the . . . “inconceivable” itself, in terms of the incomprehensibility, unexpectedness but also terrible immediacy of the terrorist strike. In this light, (sublime) terrorism is not far from Lyotard’s notion of the unrepresentable as something which cannot be fully (re)presented cognitively and rationally.

For Kant, the sublime is precisely the heterogeneity between image and concept or, rather, the impossibility of finding examples from the imagination that can do justice to a concept. At issue, here, is not sublimity as aesthetic sensibility per se, but as distanced aesthetic reaction provoked at the sight of a certain terrible image. Both Kant and Burke presume that the sublime is not an objective quality inhering in an object but a subjective feeling before (the image of) that object. More intriguingly,
they assume that there is necessarily some distance between the one who experiences that feeling and the object under appreciation, otherwise there can be no “sublimity” involved. That intervening distance is aesthetic, in the sense that it places the terrifying object under aesthetic scrutiny while locating the image of terror in the realm of aesthetic experience. Terrorism, that is, will be seen as a terrible image as well as praxis that thrives on aesthetics and subjective experience by relying upon spectators’ aesthetic sensibility to promote its terrible ethics.

Of aesthetic and philosophical nature are many of the theoretical justifications of terrorist violence by anarchist (that is, anti-state) individuals and groups. In an 1849 manifesto entitled “Murder,” Prussian anarchist and writer Karl Heinzen endorsed the view that assassination and political violence were the things that made the world . . . go around and history progress:

We must call a spade a spade. The truth must out, whether it seems amiable or terrible, whether it is dressed in the white of peace or the red of war. Let us then be frank and honest, let us tear away the veil and spell out in plain speech what the lesson is which is now being illustrated every day before our eyes in the form of actions and threats, blood and torture, cannons and gallows by both princes and freedom-fighters. . . ; to wit, that murder is the principal agent of historical progress.14 Heinzen justifies violence and murder on the basis of their historical “necessity.” The underlying assumption is that historical progress can only be effected through the exertion of raw power by both revolutionary and counter-revolutionary agencies. Killing, for him, is never moral, “but in practice it is frequently depicted otherwise. . . . Because states . . . had thus shown the concepts of morality and justice to be relative, governments could not legitimately reference those standards when violently oppressing their opponents.” Why should violence “be denied to freedom-fighters, the true moral forces of their age?”15

If “murder” is the only existing truth, then apparently we must accept it as a natural law of life and flaunt it as the guiding principle behind people’s actions. In the name of “frankness” and of a transcendental version of truth, Heinzen unveils his vision of humanity not in terms of a Hobbesian distinction between evil and good but in terms of a philosophical investigation of humanity’s supposedly natural urge to act or become extinct. Noticeably, figurativeness and tropes—“let us tear away the veil”—perform a decisive role in the rhetoric of the anarchist who calls for bloody
action, as if real, literal violence needed the fictional guise of literariness and metaphor to establish itself as historical necessity. In advancing terrorism, Heinzen also anticipated the leading role of technology in conventional and nonconventional warfare in the future and more importantly, justified genocidal violence on a massive scale such as totalitarian and fascist terror.  

Picking up where Heinzen had left off, Sergei Nechaev, a Russian Revolutionary, wrote *The Catechism of the Revolutionist* when he was in exile in Switzerland together with Michael Bakunin. *The Catechism* is a pamphlet on ways of setting up secret societies which would dedicate themselves to merciless destruction. Those societies would have no ethical restraints since the very state that they opposed was not bound by any rules of morality either. Nechaev believed that subscribers to the revolutionary cause should be completely cut off from friends, families and their social circles, thus devoting themselves to the success of their activities. In his pamphlet we may discern an early conceptualization of what we today call “collateral casualties” or even the latency of the “nobody’s innocent” postmodern credo, insofar as he seemed to think that whereas the revolution would take place in ordinary (poor) people’s name, the latter were disposable to the extent that they allegedly could not live up to the expectations of a real revolution by working alongside revolutionists against the oppressiveness of the state. As Nechaev famously wrote, the revolutionary “is a doomed man,” by which he meant that either he will be lost for the sake of the revolution or made unnecessary by the ideal circumstances in a post-revolutionary Russia. Dostoevsky used the figure of Nechaev and his ideas in his novel called *The Devils* (alternatively translated as *The Possessed*) published in 1872.

One of the most influential concepts in the history of revolutionary terrorism is the so-called “propaganda by the deed,” that was first used by Carlo Pisacane, an Italian anarchist who believed that spontaneous insurrection was in the veins of the downtrodden who just needed to be inspired by a sensational hit perpetrated by those already immersed in the culture of revolution. He wrote the following:

> Propaganda of the idea is a chimera. The education of the people is an absurdity. Ideas result from deeds, not the latter from the former. . . . The only work a citizen can do for the good of the country is that of cooperating with the material revolution: therefore, conspiracies, plots, attempts, etc., are that series of deeds through which Italy proceeds toward her goal.
Pisacane thought that the lower social classes did not have time to read pamphlets and manifests about a potential revolution—the drudgery of reality was enough for them. So they needed to act rather than read. Theory could not lead to practice, while education was not a prerequisite of action; on the contrary, violent action preceded (the need for) theoretical education. Indeed, violence was educative due to its didactic aspects: “Violence was necessary not only to draw attention to, or generate publicity for, a cause, but also to inform, educate, and ultimately rally the masses behind the revolution. The didactic purpose of violence . . . could never be effectively replaced by pamphlets, wall posters, or assemblies.” People would not be educated till they were free, and education did not precede freedom. In other words, physical violence was, by itself, a political language that could be spoken and understood, or even a rhetorical tool which could be employed as a means of negotiation between the interested parties.

The first terrorist group to implement Pisacane’s words concerning deeds as forms of propaganda was the Narodnaya Volya (People’s Will) established in 1878 with the intention of opposing the rule of the czar. This terrorist organization did not resort to indiscriminate spectacular killings but rather targeted specific individuals for their symbolic value as representatives of the tyrannical czarist regime. Interestingly, the Narodnaya Volya adhered to an ethical code according to which no innocent blood should be spilled, so any subversive activity that jeopardized the lives of people that were irrelevant to the group’s target was quickly aborted. After eight failed attempts, the Narodnaya Volya finally succeeded in assassinating Czar Alexander II on 1 March 1881. Most of the conspirators were soon captured, which spelled the end of the organization. However, the news of the assassination spread across Europe and encouraged would-be revolutionaries to engage in analogous activities against tyrannical rule on the continent. That was an impressive re-enactment of the “Propaganda by the deed” credo: the death of Alexander was the deed that propagated the subversive ideologies and philosophies which would later underpin future terrorist acts. In simple terms, the deed had spoken in an educative language that everyone could sense and now it befell the theorizing pamphlets and speeches to explain what exactly the deed itself had said.

A few months after the assassination, an anarchist conference entitled “Anarchist International” was held in London, the main purpose of which was to openly declare its allegiance to revolutionary tactics and anti-state activity. The Narodnaya Volya
had unknowingly accomplished its mission. The very concept of a massive terrorist wave potentially working undercover ignited unfamiliar emotions, such as fear, that ironically promoted further the goals of various subversive organizations whose power depended largely upon rumor and propaganda while feeding off the public’s deepest nightmares. As is evident, a terrorist act is hardly meaningful unless it is communicated, made known to the general public that constitutes an “audience” which is called upon to appreciate, ethically as well aesthetically, the act of terror at hand.

The “propaganda by the deed” dogma was readily adopted by theorists of anarchy and proto-terrorism such as Johann Most, Morozov and Peter Kropotkin. Kropotkin elaborated upon the powerfulness of this dogma by arguing that “actions which compel general attention . . . in a few days make more propaganda than thousands of pamphlets.” In 1880, Morozov insisted that success “of the terroristic movement will be inevitable if the future terroristic struggle will become a deed of not only one separate group, but an idea, which cannot be destroyed by people.” The idea, that is, which is inspired by the terrible deed, will become immune to people’s manipulative tendencies. Johann Most, on the other hand, emphasized, consciously or not, the manipulative aspects of calling for revolutionary action when, in 1884, he wrote the following in his anarchist newspaper Freiheit: “We provoke; we stroke the fire of revolution and incite people to revolt in any way we can. The people have always been ‘ready’ for freedom; they have simply lacked the courage to claim it for themselves.” A year later, he provided a more detailed exegesis of what he thought of anarchist methodology:

   The great thing about anarchist vengeance is that it proclaims loud and clear for everyone to hear, that: this man or that man must die for this and this reason. . . . Once such action has been carried out, the important thing is that the world learns of it from the revolutionaries, so that everyone knows what the position is. . . . [I]mmediately after the action has been carried out, especially in the town where it took place, posters should be put up setting out the reasons for the action in such a way as to draw from them the best possible benefit.

In this passage it is made clear that anarchist (terrorist) groups prioritize terrorizing deeds—for instance, assassinations—over a priori theoretical explications of a future political murder because they cut right through the society’s heart and appeal to
people’s senses rather than their power of reasoning. There is no message involved other than the shocking act that “proclaims loud and clear for everyone to hear” its own righteousness. By being “loud,” those deeds exhibit their superiority to mere words which are “empty” and “silent” and therefore undermine the political urgency of anti-state violence. More significantly though, the act has to be retrospectively advertised and brought to the attention of the public as a political statement that needed to be made loud and clear. The efficacy of such a statement hinges upon its immediacy, sheer physicality as well as fundamental irrationality, all of which make sure that the act will inevitably be imprinted in the memory of ordinary people and thus become a potential factor of change in the future.

Colonialism and the struggle against it were equally important platforms for disseminating the “culture” of terrorism. Before the withdrawal of the British from India in 1947 after a massive nonviolent opposition to the colonial authorities—through peaceful disobedience, mostly—there had emerged voices calling for armed resistance to the oppressor as the only means of liberation. In the late 1920s an Indian terrorist, Bhagwati Charan Vohra, member of Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA), publicized his manifesto entitled The Philosophy of Bomb in which he opposed Mahatma Gandhi’s nonviolent, anti-terrorist, tactics as utopian and futile:

[Terrorism] instills fear in the hearts of the oppressors, it brings hope of revenge and redemption to the oppressed masses. It gives courage and self confidence to the wavering, it shatters the spell of the subject race in the eyes of the world, because it is the most convincing proof of a nation’s hunger for freedom. . . . There is not a crime that Britain has not committed in India. Deliberate misrule has reduced us to paupers, has bled us white. As a race and as a people we stand dishonored and outraged. . . . We shall have our revenge, a people’s righteous revenge on the tyrant.23

As a contradiction in terms, the “bomb’s” “philosophy” (how can we talk of bombs and philosophy in a single breath?) is to blow away the underlying “rhetoric” of continuous exploitation (of the colonized) through the exertion of sudden and extreme violence upon the ruling power’s representatives. The “philosophy” of terrorism, as implied by Vohra, consists in the subjects’ awakening to the actual, the “real” reality encompassing them. The “hunger for freedom” mentioned is, in a sense, the hunger for removing the veil of deception and imagined reality—by “shattering the spell”—
or the strong desire to resist passivity and meaninglessness through engaging in real, tangible, action that not only liberates a race or nation literally from the yoke of a colonial tyrant but also helps it to reconnect with real, authentic living.

Besides, therefore, from the purely political and pragmatic aspect of national independence and freedom, there is the question of the aesthetic dimension of the individual will to propose physical action against theoretical insurgence and sterile philosophizing. The aesthetics of this kind of political action is rooted in a deep-seated truth connected with the supposedly lower-class status of the terrorist: “[W]hile terrorists have always claimed to kill on behalf of the oppressed, they have almost always come from the well-educated, middle-class families. Members of the oppressed classes, on the other hand, are usually the ones who turn them in to the authorities.” It is very frequently true that those that speak and act in the name of the poor are members of the elite, who, disaffected by the complacency and apathy of their own class, decide to throw themselves into ostensibly meaningful action in order to regain their long-lost sense of the real—“real” as the reality of violence. When Alain Badiou touched upon the twentieth century’s fascination with the authentic, it was the legitimating force of violence and destruction that he had in mind: “There exists a passion for the real that is obsessed with identity: to grasp real identity, to unmask its copies, to discredit fakes. It is a passion for the authentic [that] can only be fulfilled as destruction. . . . The passion for the real is always the passion for the new—but what is the new?” If the passion for the authentic is the passion for the authentically violent and the new, then the desire to witness or experience palpable reality engenders the need to extricate oneself from theory and fantasy—which are embedded, for instance, in ideology—by participating in the physical “nowness” of violence. If we are to take Badiou’s words seriously, what well-educated, upper-middle-class terrorists really desire is their (re)entry into the real world through a reinvigorated sensation about who they are and how they can make a difference in the world they live in. In a way, for them, participating in a terrorist organization is felt as a means of interfering critically with the mechanics of the universe. That feeling is moral and aesthetic insofar as it concerns the agony of individual existence and the possibility of an attempted living through the senses.

Upper-middle-class, elitist or not, terrorists are usually seen as individuals facing personal issues that have to do with their own (lack of) self-confidence as well as the power games they are caught up in. Franz Fanon, eminent political theorist and
psychiatrist from the French colony of Martinique, was a staunch believer in the utility of forceful anti-colonial struggle, and held that violence is a “cleansing force” which liberates the troubled youth from her “inferiority complex” and “inaction” turning her into a being with inner strength and determination. On the other hand, Joseph Conrad, writing at the turn of the twentieth century, thinks of terrorists as “fools victimized by ideas they cannot possibly believe. . . . While they mouth slogans or even practice anarchist beliefs, their motives are the result of self-display, power plays, class confusion, acting out roles.” Conrad here unravels the consciously, or not, performative and theatrical dimension of terrorism, the pretentiousness that is often implicit in the articulation of terrorist dogmas as well as the lust for real power that characterizes many terrorists who, for example, while decrying the immorality and arbitrariness of state authorities, are, in essence, more than willing to take over from them and exercise just as harsh a violence as soon as they come into power themselves.

1.3 Totalitarian terror, philosophy and the Real

The totalitarian regimes established in Europe in the immediate aftermath of “successful” revolutions during the first half of the twentieth century are perfect exemplifications of the hypocrisy (also implied in Conrad’s reference to “class confusion” and “power play” above) occasionally characterizing former revolutionaries who, when finally coming to power, resort to monstrosities that are very similar to, or even worse than, those committed by the previous regime. A case in point was, of course, the Jacobins’ reign of terror in the eighteenth century, whose twentieth-century equivalent was the Bolshevik revolution in October 1917 and Stalin’s subsequent politics of purging the state of its own dissidents. The 1930s saw the rise of totalitarian regimes like those of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and, of course, Stalinist Russia, and prepared the ground for a conceptual shift in the meaning of terrorism which, as a term, would no longer denote exclusively anti-government, revolutionary, violence but would expand to the violence—more specifically, the terror—exerted by a totalitarian state against its own people as well. But what is totalitarianism?
The term is used] to refer to regimes under which a population is completely subjugated to a political system that aspires to total domination of the collective over the individual. Totalitarian regimes strive to invade and control their citizenry’s social, economic, political, and personal life. Such forms of government are typically permeated by a secular or theocratic ideology that professes a set of supreme, absolute values that are propagated by the leadership. Repression of individual rights and loyalty to that ideology are their salient characteristics. . . . Because totalitarian governments want to transform human nature, they exercise thought control and control moral education. In other words, repression is carried out not only against people’s actions but also against their thoughts.28

Physical violence is just one of the main tools employed by a totalitarian regime. Fear, psychological coercion, mental manipulation and brain-washing are other, far more important methods of terrorizing a population into submission, as has been beautifully shown by George Orwell in his ominously allegorical novel entitled 1984. The despot in a repressive regime is both a political and religious leader with almost supernatural powers, who supposedly unifies the citizens under the banner of solidarity and collectivity. The populace is thus made to believe in an ostensible kind of togetherness, which is, though, uniformity or collective apathy in disguise. The terrorism or terror of the people, inspired by the politico-religious leader but disseminated by his utterly dehumanizing bureaucratic machines and institutions, consists in imbuing every person with the idea that she has no right to function as an autonomous individual. Totalitarian ideology dictates that individual initiative amounts to high treason; the only “individual,” who, after all, is not an individual anymore because he has been elevated to the status of a Godly figure, is the despot or dictator.

In general, terror is exercised on the citizens when the latter do not seem to subscribe to the (one and only) political party’s utopian ideology. In the Soviet Union, Stalin deemed an enemy of the state someone who would not openly and enthusiastically endorse the universalist vision about the establishment of an eternally classless society in which humankind would allegedly thrive; whereas in Nazi Germany, Hitler’s ideology capitalized on the establishment of a Thousand-Year Reich built upon the idea of the superiority of the Aryan race.
Despite the dominance of the “terror” ingredient in both instances, there are fundamental differences between insurgent, anti-state terrorism and totalitarian, state terror(ism). Both undoubtedly aspire to ignite fear and the feeling of insecurity, but they do it for different purposes and in ways that appeal differently to the aesthetic sensibilities of the people. Revolutionary, anti-government terrorism uses violence in order to generate fear “with the aim of destabilizing or degrading an existing social order,” whereas state terror uses violence “to generate fear with the aim of stabilizing or preserving an existing social order (my emphasis).” Thus, terrorists “aim to promote chaos and disarray” as they want “people running for cover. The perpetrators of state terror want . . . people marching in step. Spectacular acts of public violence are designed to produce disruption and panic. The shadowy operations of secret police . . . produce silence . . . and the desire to make oneself inconspicuous. . . .” In different terms, the noise from an anti-state terrorist outrage is deafening, whereas the methods and effects of state terror are much more insidious and noiseless but just as effective on the citizens’ minds. In fact, the apparent absence of a reasonable and visible cause of fear under a totalitarian regime creates, paradoxically, evermore terror and panic in people’s hearts.

What twentieth-century totalitarian terror addressed, according to contemporary philosophy, was the possibility of acting in and for the present and not for the sake of an indefinable future—Nazism’s “final solution” exemplifies precisely that. For Badiou, the twentieth century is not a century of ideologies in the sense of the “imaginary and the utopian” like the century before, but rather the time for feeling the importance of “what is immediately practicable, here and now.” He later adds rhetorically: “What does the century have to say about itself? At any rate, that it is not the century of promise, but that of realization. It is the century of the act, of the effective, of the absolute present, and not the century of portent, of the future,” like the nineteenth century. Arguably, in this century of “the absolute present” it is the state that has monopoly on terror and violence, not anti-state entities. Especially after the Second World War, the nation-state may exert asymmetric, terrorist violence by exempting itself “from the rule of law: it gives itself permission to do whatever it deems necessary to crush the enemy, and it, the state, alone will decide when it is safe to return to normality,” argues Gene Ray. In this phase of emergency and exemption, the state mobilizes “all techno-instrumental capacities toward political ends, including the end of terror.” In other words, a nation-state may initiate a terror program on the
enemy through the use of enhanced technology—for instance, the nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki—and also feel free to terminate that program whenever it wishes. That kind of eruption of sophisticated technological violence could indeed be linked, according to Ray, to the notion of the sublime as conceived in contemporary times: it would be the *contemporary* sublime.

After World War II, the meaning of terrorism changed again as it assumed revolutionary connotations once more. Certain anti-colonialist groups in Algeria, Cyprus or Kenya that fought for the independence of the indigenous populations from the colonial rule were typically treated like terrorist organizations by colonial powers. The aforementioned National Liberation Front (FLN) struggling for Algeria’s independence from 1954 to 1962 was probably the last organization to engage in violent anti-colonial activity after the War. The FLN finally succeeded in forcing the French out of Algeria but not without enlarging the scope of its activities to include the indiscriminate killing of innocent civilians—by bombing bars packed with students, for instance—in order to attract international attention.

In the 1960s and 70s, the main faces of terrorism were still revolutionary but there was a new development: the rise of radical nationalist and ethnic separatist groups such as the Organization for the Liberation of Palestine (PLO) or the Basque ETA. These terrorist organizations were entirely ideologically motivated, while images of the extremely violent incidents they engaged themselves in were widely disseminated through the media of the time—mainly the TV—which contributed to the “internationalization” of the terrorist event, that is, its transformation from a “local” event into one that grasped the attention of, implicated emotionally or even fascinated millions of other people/viewers from many countries. In the case of the PLO, terrorism’s internationalism became even more reinforced because of the highly inventive, unexpected and extremely effective methodology adopted. The specific tactic of hijacking passenger aircraft, not simply to divert them towards different destinations but also to bomb them or capture innocent international travelers as hostages added, through the help of “live” televiusal transmissions, to the attractiveness and spectacularity of the terrorist act and turned the terrorist frequently into a heroic figure and the terrifying event into an object of international fascination.

In the late 1960s, it wasn’t just Palestinian terrorism that emerged as a modern internationalized phenomenon; movements of Left-Wing terrorism made their appearance in countries that belonged to the developed and affluent world, such as the
USA, West Germany, Italy, Greece and others. It was the highly anti-militaristic spirit of the 60s that gave rise to a newly-awakened political consciousness as well as a rebellious frame of thinking that opposed the complacency and apathy of the Western world which was supposedly wallowing in filthy consumerism and decadent opulence. The Red Army Faction (RAF) in West Germany and the Marxist Leninist Red Brigades in Italy during the 1970s stand out as groups that denounced precisely the lifestyle of the West and, in the latter case, even pursued Italy’s withdrawal from the NATO coalition. It could be said that such groups, born of thriving democracies, took their lead from or, in some instances, imitated the Palestinian fighters’ innovative practices and methodologies. In fact, the RAF was trained by the PLO at its guerilla camps in Jordan before it returned to Germany to implement its newly-gained knowledge in real terrorist action.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s there was a considerable decline in leftist and ethnic separatist terrorism and a simultaneous rise in religious terrorism. By 1995 almost half of the terrorist organizations around the globe were of religious nature. One of the basic reasons for the reappearance of religion as motivation for terror relates to the Iranian Revolution, back in 1979, which turned Iran into an Islamic republic whose major intention was to spread the Islamic fundamentalist law across Muslim countries. The fall of the Wall of Berlin and the decline of Communism which marked the end of the Cold War almost a decade later were additional significant factors for the onset of religious terrorism, insofar as a New World Order—spearheaded by the specter of global Capitalism—was established as the sole legitimate ideological power on the planet. Now, what are the main characteristics of religious terrorism? For the religious terrorist violence is first and foremost a sacramental act or divine duty executed in direct response to some theological demand or imperative. Terrorism thus assumes a transcendental dimension, and its perpetrators therefore often disregard the political, moral, or practical constraints that may affect other terrorists. Whereas secular terrorists, even if they have the capacity to do so, rarely attempt indiscriminate killing on a truly massive scale because such tactics . . . are regarded counterproductive, if not immoral, religious terrorists often seek the elimination of broadly defined categories of enemies and accordingly regard such large-scale violence not only as
Religious terrorism, that is, has its own transcendental ethics that far surpasses, especially in its modern and “ultramodern” variations—post-1980 and-1990 Islamist/Jihadist terrorism—conventional (human) morality and the unwritten laws of compassion and sensitivity.

As already seen, religious terrorism is hardly a new phenomenon. The Zealots and the Sicarri during the Roman occupation of Judea mentioned above; the Thugs, a cult from India committing, for nearly a period of a thousand years (starting off in the seventh century), acts of sacrificial terrorism against unsuspecting victims in honor of Kali, goddess of death and destruction; the Assassins, a Muslim group springing from the Shi’a Ismaili sect, fighting against the Christian invaders of Syria and the neighboring lands between AD 1090 and 1272; the Catholic subversion of Protestantism in Europe in the early modern period—as illustrated previously by the Gunpowder Plot incident—typified the historical symbiosis of religion and violence in Europe and elsewhere and set the stage for the flourishing of modern-day religious terrorism. The brutality of Al-Qaeda and, most recently, of ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) raised the bar for terrorism by redefining ruthlessness, cruelty and even the meaning of terror itself in the twenty-first century.

At the time of writing this project, Islamist fundamentalism is dramatically challenging our traditional conception of terrorism as a phenomenon which is allegedly too remote to have any real repercussion on the Western citizen. The 9/11 terrorist attacks sent a message that was loud and clear: no one is safe anywhere in the world because no one is to be exempted from the threat of terrorism. And if the repetition, on our TV sets, of the video footage of the passenger aircraft smashing into the WTC aestheticized, uncannily, the terrorist outrage by turning it into some kind of fiction (we don’t get to see any real blood or the suffering of the victims), the unprecedented atrocities committed by ISIS—beheadings or even crucifixions of hostages in front of a camera—and uploaded, in real time, on the internet by the terrorists themselves leave us no option but to interpret their unspeakable actions as the advent of the horrifically but authentically real. A new kind of “propaganda by the deed” is looming in the horizon insofar as the crudity of a terrorist act overshadows, dwarfs, the ideological or political premise it is allegedly based upon. The reality of gruesomeness emerges as something that is above and beyond theoretical, ideological,
or political legitimation. In a nutshell, religious fundamentalist terror at the turn of the twenty-first century is one of the platforms upon which flourishes the real as *material*, rather than virtual or metaphysical, reality.

The media are very important not just in communicating the terrorist act but also in making it happen, since no act of political violence can be deemed effective or successful (in putting its point across) unless it is made *known* to the general public (in the case of terrorist violence from its early forms up until the 1960s) or *shown* to it (from the late twentieth century onwards). In other words, the media are complicit in the occurrence of the terrorist act to the extent that it is the terrorizing image of the deed that draws attention to the political (?) objective of the terrorists by appealing to the sensibility of those that attest to the horror of that image. As I argue, one cannot possibly discuss terrorism and the politics of it without referring to aesthetics, since, to put it philosophically, the terrorist event constitutes an aesthetic experience of the unexpected—a “successful” terrorist attack is one that no one anticipates. Moreover, precisely because there are no specific root-causes for the phenomenon of terrorism, we can’t (and shouldn’t) try to rationalize it. In order to truly understand terrorist violence and capture its magnitude we will probably have to “tone down” our reasoning capacities and simultaneously engage our senses and imagination. If we could feel, or *imagine*, the excruciating pain and horror of the victim of terrorism, we would likely be able to capture the intrinsic irrationality of terrorism.
Notes

1. Later, however, Herodotus as well as Aristotle debunked the Liberators or “Tyrannicides” by alluding to the danger of confusing criminal murder with revolutionary action.


6. Of course, as we have seen, terrorists usually claim to have a morality that is superior to the conventional morality of the others. No terrorist admits that she is immoral.

7. In a 2005 ITV programme called *The gunpowder Plot: Exploding the Legend*, an exact replica of the House of Lords was constructed and subsequently destroyed with gunpowder so that the effects of the explosion could be studied more diligently. The experiment demonstrated that the explosion planned by Guy Fawkes would have been lethal for all members of the Parliament. See Adam Sherwin, “Gunpowder plotters get their wish, 400 years on,” timesonline.co.uk, October 31, 2005, accessed February 10, 2015.


10. This report was an address delivered at the National Convention (February 1794). Excerpt taken from *Modern History Sourcebook: Maximilien Robespierre: Justification of the Use of Terror*, retrieved January 10, 2015, from http://www.fordam.edu/halsall/mod/robespierre-terror.html and *Modern
12. Law, p. 63.
13. Ibid., p. 64.
15. Law, pp. 70-1.
21. Ibid., p. 266.
26. See Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 94. Fanon was of the opinion that Algeria could get rid of the French rule only if it
resorted to violence. No wonder he was a source of inspiration for the National Liberation Front (FLN), a “terrorist” organization that began, in 1954, its own struggle for Algeria’s independence from France.


30. Ibid., p. 15.


32. Ibid., p. 58.


34. Hoffman, p. 86.

35. Ibid., pp. 88-9.

36. In fact, for the Assassins, sacrificing themselves during a deed of terror against Christians was not only an act of honor but a real duty towards God and the holy writings. In that sense, they could be viewed as the exact precursors of today’s Islamist and Jihadist terrorists.
Bibliography


