Confessions of a Terrorist Sympathiser
RICHARD JACKSON

I confess that I am a terrorist sympathiser. Of course, it is a profanity, a kind of blasphemy, to admit to such a thing, perhaps the greatest blasphemy in our society at the present time. Some may also consider that this is not the right time to make this confession and all that it entails. It will be said that in the immediate aftermath of an attack, condemnation and standing united against the enemies of freedom is the only ethically-defensible stance. But, for reasons I hope will become clear, I believe that this is exactly the right time to claim the ignominious label of terrorist sympathiser, and that sympathy for the terrorist is what is most needed right now if we are to break the current international cycle of violence and find more ethical and peaceful ways of responding to the challenge of contemporary political violence.

I am a terrorist sympathiser because I can understand how a young woman from Gaza might consider that she has no real future, nothing but daily humiliations, the continued threat of being shot by an Israeli soldier or firebombed by a settler, or being arrested and tortured by the police. I can understand that she might have had a family member, or a friend, killed in one of the periodic ritualised Israeli invasions of Palestinian territory. I can understand how living under a callous, apartheid-like regime could ignite into a smouldering sense of rage, humiliation, and powerlessness. I can understand how an intelligent, sensitive woman like that might feel that hitting back at her oppressor, that sacrificing her life for her community, that choosing the time and place of her own death, might seem like a way to reclaim her shattered sense of self-worth and self-respect, her agency, her sense of purpose, and in the end, advance the struggle for a free Palestinian state.

I am a terrorist sympathiser because I can understand how a young Sunni man from Bagdad might feel that his childhood had been ripped away from him in an illegal invasion and the civil war it precipitated. I can understand the trauma that comes from witnessing the destruction of his country and the deaths of more than a million fellow citizens. I can understand the process of brutalisation he would go through when as a young boy he sees bodies dismembered on the streets of his neighbourhood by coalition air strikes and the seemingly endless succession of insurgent car bombs. I can understand the rage he would feel at seeing pregnant women shot to death by nervous young American soldiers at a checkpoint.

I can understand his sense of utter horror when members of his family or friends and colleagues were abducted, tortured to death and their mutilated bodies dumped by the roadside by the Shia death squads operating out of the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior – soldiers trained and armed by the occupying U.S. Military. I can understand his humiliation to have had friends swept up and

tortured in Abu Ghraib, sexually violated and the photographs shown all over the world's media.

I can understand how this traumatised, unemployed young man with few realistic prospects of gainful employment or marriage and a family, a young man witnessing his country, his society, his history, his family, his life, being systematically destroyed, chooses to join a powerful, wealthy, successful insurgent group who promise him revenge on his persecutors and the authors of his humiliation – a group which offers a purpose, a mission, a community of brothers, a way out of his sense of powerlessness, a well-paid job. I can understand that this young man might join ISIS.

I can understand a young Muslim woman in France who feels despised by the society she lives in; who is spat upon every day while she waits at the bus stop, and told to go home because she's a foreigner and a terrorist; who is forced to live in an urban slum full of crime and generational hopelessness; who faces discrimination when she applies for a job; who is told what she is allowed to wear in public, and told that she cannot publicly protest against the oppression of Palestine. I can understand that she has also had to watch while her country and its allies invaded, bombed, and tortured millions of fellow Muslims in country after country across the Middle East, year after year for more than a decade. I can understand that she might feel utter powerlessness because there seems to be no way to influence her government's policies. I can understand that she might look at the history of the Algerian FLN and how they fought back against French colonialism and think that a military campaign might have a chance to end the oppression she sees – that if people on the streets of Paris feel the same insecurity that people in the Middle East feel that maybe the public will demand that their leaders change course.

At another level, I am a terrorist sympathiser because I understand that the terrorists hold to the very same moral framework that our own leaders hold to and publically defend. That is, terrorists, just like our leaders, believe that violence can be an effective and legitimate method for achieving their political goals, and that in defence of some values – such as protecting the innocent, freedom, justice – the means justifies the ends – that bombing, even if it causes the collateral or deliberate deaths of the innocent, is sometimes necessary. I understand that soldiers and terrorists often have the same reasons for what they do – they believe they are fighting for their people; they want adventure; they fight for their comrades. Sometimes, the only difference between a terrorist and a soldier, an insurgent or a freedom fighter, is who is doing the labelling – and when the labelling takes place.

I am a terrorist sympathiser because I understand that terrorists are often reacting to the long history of violence our governments have wrought on their societies, through invasion, coups, bombing campaigns, support for

dictatorships, arms transfers, interference – and that they want us to experience the terror and insecurity that they have had to live with. I understand that their violence and our violence is not separate or distinct, but part of the same phenomenon: we attack them with advanced military technology from a distance; they attack us with their bodies, close and personal. It is action-reaction, tit-for-tat, a coordinated dance of mutual killing. Ultimately, violence is relational. Despite the comforting myths we tell ourselves, "our" violence is no different from "their" violence.

In a recent article in the New York Times online, [a Dutch IS member who documents his life on Tumblr](#), defended the attacks in Paris by calling them a fair response to the bombardment of Islamic State positions by the French Air Force. He had earlier stated that assaults on civilian targets in France by the Islamists were "fair game," as, he said, he had "lost count of the hospitals, markets and mosques bombed by the enemies of Islam."

I am a terrorist sympathiser because I can understand how a man like Nelson Mandela, after years of peaceful protests and reasonable requests for freedom and dignity, who, facing increasingly violent suppression by a racist authoritarian regime, felt that he had no real choice but to engage in an armed struggle for meaningful change.

I am a terrorist sympathiser because I understand the former IRA prisoner who guided me around Belfast, and explained how the insecurity and injustice faced by his Catholic community, and the failure of the police to protect them from Loyalist gangs, led him to volunteer to be a member of an army of community protection, as he described it, and later to join the prison protests.

In fact, the life-story of every terrorist I have read or heard directly – from the Basque country, to Italy, Germany, Cyprus, Sri Lanka, Colombia, Kashmir, Chechnya, Peru and elsewhere – has been completely understandable to me. I could not say any of them were inhuman, or nonhuman, or incomprehensible; none of them were the monsters terrorists they are naturally assumed to be.

And lest someone argues that my sympathy is selective, I am also a terrorist sympathiser because I can understand how a young woman, after watching the Twin Towers collapse, would volunteer to go to Iraq to serve as a prison guard, and how after being told that Iraqis were involved in 9/11, how they were the enemies of freedom, how they were killing American soldiers, and how it was essential for them to be 'softened up' for interrogation, might then beat and abuse the prisoners in her wing – might strip them naked and drag them around like a dog on a leash.

Of course, to be a terrorist sympathiser – to even attempt to understand the reasons why someone would make this kind of choice and commit this kind of

violence – is to commit a great blasphemy at this time and place in history. This is never more true than in the moments following a terrorist attack when loud, ritual condemnation is the only socially acceptable response. In our current age, terrorism, along with paedophilia, is one of society's greatest taboos; one of the worst forms of evil there is. In our political discourse, in our laws, in our cultural depictions, in our minds, terrorism is inherently inhuman, savage, demonic – and terrorists are the original bogeyman; the wild man in the woods; the stealer of children. Following the Paris attacks, Malcolm Turnbull claimed the attacks were "the work of the devil". In such a culturally resonant framework, terrorism does not belong to our world, but exists outside of it in a separate metaphysical realm.

In some respects, this is completely understandable, because terrorism involves appalling, spectacular violence, frequently targeted at the innocent. When we see the images, the macabre theatre of terror, we are not equipped to comprehend the moral forces behind it, and as a result, we become mute. It is the same mute incomprehension when we contemplate what it took to enact the mass slaughter of the Jews in the holocaust or the mass slaughter by machete in the Rwandan genocide. In such a situation, faced with the stark cruelty of the organised, deliberate violation of human beings, it is tempting to try and expel the perceived perpetrators out of the realm of everyday human life and politics – to abstract them to a metaphysical plain in which their actions must surely be governed by some kind of inhuman, demonic forces.

At the same time, we have to also acknowledge that our sense of mute horror at the stark reality of political violence is culturally conditioned and determined in part by our own, limited experiences. We don't know what it is really like to live under the shadow of drone warfare, for example. It seems likely that to some communities in Pakistan or Afghanistan, the invisible, infernal machines who stalk people from the skies, and then unleash hellfire missiles which dismember and burn their children and brothers, are the epitome of supernatural evil forces – and not at all the technological, clean machines of war our society believes them to be. The reality is that the difference between being blown apart by a suicide bomber and being blown apart by a missile launched from a billion dollar warship or a predator drone is not related to its real material effects: the same mutilated bodies result; the same horrified survivors must find a way to live with their loss. The only difference is our belief about the legitimacy, and to some degree, the aesthetics of the violence: a computer generated image of a smart bomb dropped on a village in Pakistan looks less barbarous to us than a suicide attack on the streets of Paris.

However, at the risk of being labelled a blasphemer and a traitor, I would argue that it does us no good at all to isolate and expel the terrorist from the human realm to the metaphysical realm. In fact, while it may provide a fleeting psychological comfort, the retreat to "evil" as a framework for understanding

political violence is harmful, intellectually and morally. It is harmful to both ourselves and to others. Intellectually, it is harmful because it is at heart a delusion: there is no evidence that terrorists, or any other person who commits a horrible crime, is non-human, purely evil in a metaphysical sense. Even the worst of us – Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Osama bin Laden, the Rwandan genocidaires, the Paris attackers – were human beings with physical and social lives; with thoughts, feelings, dreams, hopes, fears and anxieties. They made choices, they suffered, they bled. Looking for the source of their actions outside of their humanity is an intellectual dead-end and of no practical use to anyone. We will never understand the roots and causes of human violence if we are unwilling to look for it in the socio-historical conditions of being a human being, and the political-economic conditions of twenty-first century life.

Locating the sources of violence in a non-human metaphysical realm – which includes laying responsibility on a kind of magical conception of the infectious role of wrong ideas – is tempting because it is simple and reassuring: we don't have to look inside ourselves or admit that as human beings we are all capable of, and culpable in, violence. In particular, it allows us to maintain a series of comforting collective delusions about how we, the civilised, democratic West, have constructed the world we inhabit; it deludes us into thinking that [the problem lies elsewhere](), beyond the realm of our own politics, diplomacy, foreign policy, history, imperial decisions. It means we don't have to take responsibility for making and maintaining a world order in which violence is acceptable, where force is used to settle disputes, where millions of young people are trained and equipped with weapons and flags to kill their fellow human beings, where the most powerful nations use technologically advanced death machines to maintain the global order that maintains their privilege. It means we don't have to look at the conditions of the poor, the dispossessed, the persecuted, the under-privileged, the socially disadvantaged, the voiceless. It means we don't have to recognise that terrorism most often emerges from situations where mass movements searching for social justice have been blocked or defeated.

Claire Veale, a French student [writing in response to the Paris attacks](), puts it this way:

It is important to recognize the attackers as human beings, capable of acting and thinking rationally, as it is a first step towards understanding the reasoning behind their actions. Religious fanaticism is simply a vector of violence, as has been the case for many other ideologies in the past, such as nationalism, fascism, or communism. These ideologies are not the root causes of violence. Although this may seem obvious, there is a need to stress that religious extremism is not the reason why a young man would take up a gun and shoot into a crowd, it is simply an instrument to channel their anger.

We must try to look at the very roots of these young men's discontent. Debates

should be opened about the school system, about the ghettoization of urban areas across France, about police violence and domestic anti-terror security measures, about the prison system, about structural racism, about our skewed justice system, about oppressive and strict secularism; and the list goes on. […] Amedy Coulibaly, another actor in the Paris shootings in January 2015, suffered the death of his friend in a police "slipup" when he was 18.

This kind of direct aggression perpetrated on a daily basis adds to the structural violence and discrimination young men from underprivileged backgrounds experience in European societies. War for them is not such a distant, disconnected reality, but closer to their everyday life. Every racist insult, act of police brutality, unfair trial, or discriminatory treatment brings them one step closer to carry out tragedies as the massacre in Paris. We must therefore question the very system we live in and the way of life we defend so defiantly...

Of course, the search for the origins of political violence cannot end here. Not all young Muslims in a Paris slum, or Baghdad, or Gaza, join militant groups or commit acts of terrorism; nor do all American young people become torturers in Iraq or drone operators in Nevada. This is not an argument for a kind of deterministic structuralism; I am not denying the role of individual agency or responsibility. Nevertheless, in the absence of an honest examination of the conditions which construct human subjectivity at this moment in history, we can never hope to understand the roots of contemporary political violence or the possibilities for peaceful alternatives.

Interestingly, a number of scholars have noted how the trope of the "evil" terrorist, as well as some aspects of contemporary counterterrorism, shares features with the medieval witch craze and European conceptions of "the devil". Certainly, the similarities between the inquisition, the language of "evildoers", and the tortuous, confessional interrogational practices seen in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay are disturbingly obvious. In fact, the term "religious terrorism" and the attempt to lay the blame for terrorist violence at the feet of "violent extremism" or the mysterious process of "radicalisation" is part and parcel of this broader framework in which terrorism is expelled from the realm of the material-political world and instead relegated to the metaphysical, spiritual world.

In part, this cultural frame which stretches back over hundreds of years of Western history is one of the reasons why I would argue that sympathy for the terrorist – by way of understanding, and a minimal level of empathetic projection – is not only defensible as an intellectual exercise to better understand the roots and sources of violence. I would go so far as to argue that sympathy for the terrorist is greatly needed at this particular historical moment; it is necessary if we are to break out of the entrenched cycle of violence we are currently trapped in. We need sympathy for the terrorist if we are to find other more ethical,

peaceful and effective ways of responding to terrorism.

Sympathy for the terrorist is also necessary if we are to recover our ethical values and our sense of collective morality. The fact is that the lack of sympathy – of basic human understanding – is deeply implicated in our willingness to send killer drones into far away countries to hunt down suspected terrorists and kill them (and those standing in proximity to them) without any compunction, mercilessly, without any process of weighing of the evidence or any semblance of justice – and without considering the consequences in terms of increased hatred, insecurity, the creation of more militants eager to attack us. The lack of sympathy allows drone operators to [refer to children as "fun-size terrorists"](#) and liken killing them to "cutting the grass before it grows too long". It allows us to never know or acknowledge the names of any of the people killed in our name, and for them to have, as Judith Butler calls them, ungrievable lives.

The lack of sympathy for the terrorist other is implicated in our willingness to kidnap, render, disappear and detain people from the streets of Karachi, or Nairobi, or Aden into a secret system of so-called black sites, beyond the law, beyond ethics and the monitoring of any human rights organisations – and with the cooperation of dozens of Western countries and little outcry from Western publics. It is implicated in our willingness to torture and abuse thousands of prisoners and detainees in Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, Bagram, and elsewhere – to refer to them as "animals", "monsters", the "faceless enemies of freedom", as "a scourge" and a "cancer" in need of excising. It is implicated in the recent extension of the shoot-to-kill policy from the streets of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia, to the streets of Europe. The lack of sympathy for the terrorist is also implicated in our targeting of all Muslims and those who fit the racist imaginary of what a Muslim looks like (such as a Sikh man in a coffee shop) for human rights restrictions, profiling, surveillance, and harassment. It is implicated in our uncaring, xenophobic response to the refugee crisis which we authored in large part by our interventionist foreign policies.

The reality is that since 9/11, in our lack of sympathy, in our dehumanising and demonising of a whole class of untouchable human beings – those labelled as 'terrorists' and 'terrorist sympathisers' – we have opened the door to the worst kind of human rights abuses. After all, if terrorists are evil, monstrous beings outside of the human realm, then there is no reason why they should be protected from torture, from rendition, from extra-judicial assassination by drones or shoot-to-kill policies, from incarceration without trial, from surveillance, profiling, and everyday discrimination. Recovering our sympathy for our fellow human beings, no matter what they are alleged to have done or are suspected of, is a first step towards recovering a semblance of collective morality.

Finally, I want to argue that our complete lack of sympathy for the terrorist is

dangerous because it blinds us to the possibilities inherent in the political – to the possibility that we can change how people act by the way in which we act towards them; to the possibility that underneath the violence and the posturing, they may want the same things all human societies do – security, self-determination, dignity, opportunity, freedom to live the way they choose. It blinds us to the power of dialogue, engagement, political contestation, as ways out of violence. It blinds us to the way in which violence itself can be a form of communication, a cry to be heard, to be listened to. There are enough examples to show that when individuals and political groups have genuine avenues for pursuing their goals and grievances, when they feel that they have a genuine voice, that this can change their political calculations away from the use of violence.

In this respect, in eliminating what has been described as "the grey zones" – those opportunities for dialogue, diplomacy, compromise, forms of accommodation, and those social, political and intellectual spaces of toleration and empathy – our lack of sympathy leaves us polarised, alienated, fearful; it leaves us in a world of sharp distinctions, of black and white crusaders and jihadists, heroes and villains, them and us; it leaves us trapped in an inevitable clash of civilisations. If we jettison our sympathy and understanding, if we expel the terrorist to the realm of the monstrous, inhuman other, we surrender to the violent logic of being either for or against, friend or enemy. And in the process of eliminating the grey zone, we simultaneously eliminate the possibility of imagining or discovering any nonviolent pathways out of the current intractable conflict, or indeed, imagining an alternative politics somewhere between the theocratic vision of ISIS and the neoliberal fundamentalism of the West.

I wrote my novel, *Confessions of a Terrorist*, in part to recover the kind of empathy and understanding we have lost in the past fourteen years since 9/11, before terrorists became the epitome of unfathomable evil. I wrote it so that the terrorist other could speak to us about his reasons and his humanity, so that we could have a dialogue with him about what he really wants, what he feels, what he hopes for. Until we can understand why a person, a human being, someone we might consider thoughtful and idealistic if we spoke to him, would choose to launch terrorist attacks against us, we have no hope of responding in a manner that doesn't simply compound the current cycle of violence. The point here is that sympathy and understanding is at heart a process of imagining ourselves in the life-world of another. This is more easily achieved through the narrative voice than the academic voice.

Of course, as a final note, it is important to point out that sympathising with the terrorist – understanding their motivations, their hopes and dreams, their shared humanity – does not in any way imply condoning their actions, or excusing their moral responsibility for their actions. What terrorists of all kinds do – whether state terrorists or non-state terrorists – is deeply immoral and a violation of

accepted ethical codes of behaviour. I am a pacifist by conviction. I view all forms of political violence – state violence and non-state violence, terrorism and counterterrorism – as morally problematic and empirically ineffective, capable only of creating the foundations for further violence. As Gandhi put it, "I oppose all violence because the good it does is always temporary but the harm it does is permanent". Political violence is in essence the expression of a kind of necro-politics, or anti-politics, that drags us into a place without light or mercy. In the words of Martin Luther King Jr:

The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.

In conclusion, recovering sympathy for the terrorist, recognising their humanity, their politics, their suffering, their aspirations, their sense of self in this particular historical epoch, is essential for understanding the roots of their violent actions. It is also essential for reconstituting our own shattered sense of collective morality, and for recognising and acknowledging our own role in the constitutive violence of the current system. Finally, it is the basis on which we can begin to search for an alternative politics of response to contemporary political violence, perhaps even one based on the moral injunction to love your enemies.