

# The Psychodynamics of Terrorism

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## **The Psychodynamics of Terrorism**

“One has, I think, to reckon with the fact that there are present in all men destructive, and therefore anti-social and anti-cultural, trends and that in a great number of people these are strong enough to determine their behaviour in human society.”

Sigmund Freud (1927, p.7)

On Tuesday September 11th 2001, commercial planes were hijacked and set on course to cause the most devastating terrorist attacks of modern history. The world watched in real time the television images of the 110 story twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York implode while people were jumping from windows and bystanders were screaming their horror. No one was left indifferent. These images of the massacre are tragic reminders of the many acts of terrorism that have occurred all over the world for as far back as has been recorded.

Although it is beyond the scope, and the aim of this paper to address any of the very real and determining political and social factors that give rise, and foster terrorism, we hope, nonetheless, to shed some light on the psychodynamics of the phenomenon. Psychodynamics that we believe are shared to a large extent both by the terrorist and by the witness of his acts, that is, by us all. The basic idea that will be developed in this essay is that a symbolic equation is unconsciously made between acts of destruction that occur in reality and fantasized threats of internal destruction. Indeed, feelings of distress and despair are evoked not only because a destruction of symbols is

carried out in real life - that which provokes an intolerable sense of insecurity - but also because, on an intrapsychic level, the very existence within us of good internal objects with which to identify is threatened.

In order to offer a tentative theoretical demonstration of this hypothesis, we will focus on the intrapsychic processes present in authors and witnesses of terrorist acts. Firstly, a discussion of the psychological effects of terrorism on witnesses is proposed; then a clinical vignette illustrating these propositions is presented, and discussed. Finally, a hypothetical psychodynamic portrait of the terrorist is suggested, discussed, and followed by concluding remarks.

Nonetheless, despite our attempts at understanding such tragedies, this essay can by no means entertain the pretence of grasping the complexities of terrorism. We leave to others, more knowledgeable in philosophy, political and social sciences, the important tasks of understanding the social, historical and geopolitical factors that give rise to terrorism, and to address the moral aspects of the problems we face when dealing with the devastation terrorism leaves in its wake.

### **Psychological Effects of Terrorism**

Remember witnessing the horror in New York and Washington last September 11<sup>th</sup>. We saw people running madly, throwing themselves out of windows, or walking aimlessly, some manifestly injured. Although we did not

see the dead, we knew there would be thousands of victims. We heard the survivors tell of their miraculous escape from horror; we listened to parents recount the telephone conversations with their love-ones, just prior to their violent deaths. But do we identify only with the victims? We suggest, to the contrary, that the relational movements of projective identification set about by our witnessing all this horror bring out two series of identifications: identification with the victim and identification with the terrorist.

### **Divergent identificatory movements**

Although we imagine, and identify ourselves more freely with the victims, we, nonetheless, also carry out the same type of identification with the terrorists, be it only through the normal process of empathic projective identification. But moreover, some degree of identification with the terrorists is inevitable because of the presence in us all of violent component drives, and of identification with bad part-objects. Thus, we experience anxiety and psychological pain simultaneously from two similar, albeit divergent, processes of identification.

As a result of these two divergent identificatory movements, important dynamic effects are produced in the equilibrium of one's inner world. Indeed, association of the victim with good internal objects provokes distress since these objects are attacked, wounded and threatened by death through

symbolic equation with the terrorist acts. Such a threat to internal objects also constitutes a blow to the self, in identification with these objects.

These identificatory movements, and their associated emotional reactions, may also be compounded by the precariousness of the link to one's internal objects. In fact, the objective scene of destruction may act as an unconscious reminder of the vulnerability of one's good internal objects, bringing back fundamental anxieties concerning their existence, and integrity. In these circumstances, even a distant witness can become a victim of the terrorist act, traumatized as it were, by experiencing anew the intense feelings of helplessness of past.

Furthermore, confusion may be experienced, particularly by those that lose contact, through the effect of these identificatory movements, with good internal objects as an inner conflict is brutally awoken by simultaneously identifying with the victim, and with the terrorist. Indeed, whereas, on the one hand, a part of the self, associating the victims of the terrorist acts with good wounded internal objects, feels overwhelmed with distressing affects such as fear, terror, helplessness and intense sadness; on the other hand, another part of the self, in identification, albeit in a more defended manner, via the terrorists to destructive component drives and bad internal objects, is assaulted by feelings of hatred, anger, fury and rage. Thus, the horror of the objective scene is displaced onto the internal scene where a battle, source of anxiety, even of

dread, opposes a destructive part of the self to another that is felt as good but wounded. Such a conflict can be experienced as an impasse. When this happens, tremendous feelings of despair arise.

### **Two psychological solutions**

Theoretically, when facing such a dilemma, two psychological solutions can be sought. One consists in efforts to repair the good internal objects, thus sustaining their internal characteristics, and the view of life associated with the depressive position. The second solution sets in motion a regressive pull to the schizo-paranoïd position. Splitting, and a defensive use of projective identification are thus resorted to in order to protect oneself, and one's internal objects, from attack.

Although the first reaction helps us to deal better with the intense emotions and anxieties awoken, it is a much more difficult avenue. It implies the capacity to attempt intrapsychic reparation, which brings about depressive affects, and the painful recognition of one's powerlessness in the face of destruction. Not surprisingly, particularly when horrendous events such as the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington occur, this ideal solution is most often impossible to achieve immediately, the self being overwhelmed with contradictory feelings, and anxieties. This perturbation is all the more important that one's destructive fantasies, and wishes are intense.

One cannot easily escape the regressive pull such an internal struggle entails. Although temporary, regression seems the rule rather than the exception inasmuch as the use of splitting mechanisms becomes the shortest route to rediscovering that one's good internal objects are intact. The need to reinstate intactness of good internal objects, to reaffirm their predominance is often, in a first phase, tantamount to denying the impact of the horror, and putting terror at bay. When reality confirms one's innermost destructive impulses, it is quite difficult not to resort to splitting, and its acolyte, defensive projective identification to protect oneself from guilt, and overpowering anxieties. The Ego, however, is greatly impoverished by this solution since it severely reduces inner freedom to work out the conflict. Vicious circles of attacks and counter-attacks thus form in one's mind; the soul is setting itself up to justify revenge and retaliation.

Sadly, to protect good internal objects, and the part of the self identified with these objects, splitting must be accentuated. Mirroring war strategies of real life, "terrorists" and victims must be kept well apart on the internal scene. Through defensive projective identification, "aggressors" become stigmatizable in reality, hence reinforcing the protective effect of splitting by distancing the Ego still further away from the hatred and the rage awoken. Although projective identification is mostly seen as a pathological defensive strategy when it is conceptualized by Klein (1946), and further developed by Bion (1962, 1963), it is also seen by these authors as a mechanism involved in normal psychic

processes. But in the immediate aftermath of a terrorist act, a fine line separates its use as a normal process involved in empathy, and communication from its use as a regressive defensive mechanism (Brunet & Casoni, 1996, 2001). Notably, the involvement of splitting specifies its pathological use (Brunet, 2000). Indeed, when resorted to in a defensive aim, the destructive impulses that form the basis of such projective mechanisms must be treated with splitting in order to maintain some Ego function. Lest the Ego become totally overwhelmed to the point of self-destruction by violent attacks against internal objects, splitting must be solidly implanted.

### **Calming the anxiety through vengeance**

Thus, many people are tempted by revenge since the illusion, entertained by the Ego, that by killing external persecutory objects it will be freed, once and for all, of destructive impulses, and bad part-objects constitutes a powerful motivation. In fact, it often appears as the only way to protect oneself of unbearable anxiety. In cases where projective identification is excessive, such an unconscious strategy to avert anxiety induces a wish for destruction, not only of the terrorists involved, but also of whole groups of people who become assimilated with these persecutory objects.

Such a strategy helps to grasp the reactions of some governments in times of crisis. History is sadly filled with illustrations of the formidable destructive power such individual psychological strategies can generate when

they are shared by groups of people who hold political office. Looking back, however briefly, at religious wars and genocides, or to a lesser extreme, to the determination of some groups to restrict civil liberties, or promote totalitarian-type laws are sufficient illustrations of the strength of groups sharing such defensive strategies. When psychic reparation is deemed impossible, a sense of urgency to get rid of the projected external persecutory object is felt lest it destroy us first. Moreover, such projection of "all things evil" on an exterior "enemy" is a recognized stratagem resorted to by war tacticians, and may be also be used by some politicians, or governments who deem it useful to focus the attention of the masses on an outside target rather than on domestic issues.

Many psychoanalytical authors have already observed how resorting to hostility, and revenge often aim at averting depressive anxieties. Indeed, Abraham (1924) was the first to establish the link between the desire for revenge and separation anxiety. Horney (1948) postulated that the wish for revenge contributes to a feeling of self-protection against hostility coming from the "outside" as well as from the "inside". From her point of view, the desire for revenge is also used to suppress feelings of hopelessness. Searles (1977b) suggests that the function served by the desire for revenge is to defend against the awareness of affects loaded with depressive anxiety. In this sense, the wish for vengeance is used to avoid being affected by grief. Melanie Klein (1955) writes that a regression towards the schizo-paranoid position might

take place as an attempt to escape depression. Other authors also put emphasis on the link between fantasies and affects of vengeance, and a defensive struggle against guilt (Brenman, 1985; Castelnuovo-Tedesco, 1974; Socarides, 1966)

Thus, relief from the pain of sadness, and the suffering associated to depressive feelings is sought through the use of fantasies of vengeance that can be sustained only by continual splitting, and the defensive use of projective identification. But Klein (1940) reminds us that such defensive strategies are also a part of the normal process of mourning. Hopefully, such a solution is only a temporary one as it prevents further psychic growth, condemning one to perpetual vicious cycles of anger, rage, destruction, and fear of retaliation. When destruction calls for destruction, there is no way out of the cycle. Aeschylus portrayed this moral dilemma and ethical impasse eloquently in the *Oresteia* more than 2000 years ago.

Just as Aeschylus concludes that the goddesses of revenge must accept to transform themselves into goddesses of benevolence caring for the prosperity of mortals, the capacity to repair wounded internal part-objects and to identify with these repaired internal objects allows one to “prosper” by regaining trust in oneself, and confidence in others and in the world. The psychological effect of repairing internal objects, and restoring the link to them is to permit hope. This leaves one able to sustain the predominance of love

over hostile impulses. The imperative need to split and to project dangerous part-objects is consequently weaker. Also, reparation allows one to forgive oneself for attacking good internal objects. The part-objects that were, in the past, split from the self, can hence be reintegrated. As projective identification is not used in the sole purpose of expulsion, a more realistic vision of oneself and of others becomes possible. However, to achieve some inner peace, one must accept to deal with the pain and the sorrow that ensues and is awoken by identification with both the terrorists and the victims.

### **Clinical Vignette**

**(For reasons of discretion, the clinical case has been omitted in the version)**

### **Theoretical discussion (of the clinical case)**

When confronted with terrorism, empathy, through projective identification processes (Klein, 1946; Segal, 1964), makes one identify with all the human motivations, emotions and people involved. We unconsciously identify with the terrorists, with their hatred and their destructive impulses because such component drives exist in each of us; as well we identify with the victims, their pain, suffering and wounds. When, such as Mr. E, a regression towards splitting, and defensive projective identification occurs, it appears as if the Ego is unable to tolerate the proximity of the conflictual impulses, and affects that these divergent identificatory movements entail. Inasmuch as the dangerous part objects, and parts of the self identified with these objects are

not expelled through splitting, and defensive projective identification, the fear of destroying what good is left is felt as unbearable. However, Mr. E's feeling dazed, and unable to truly believe what happened indicates that, although denial is active, it is not quite successful in paralyzing the Ego's capacity for reality testing. In this sense, the regressive pull is not extreme, he is struggling to resist the temptation to identify massively with the terrorists, and their hatred. But splitting, and defensive projective identification are nevertheless sufficiently active for him to feel liberated of intolerable bad part-objects, giving free reign to feelings of triumph and manic affects.

Thus it is only during the following day's session that the denial of the reality, and the immensity of the tragedy are tentatively acknowledged. But, the moral struggle that Mr. E confronts himself to the day following the terrorist attacks leaves him at a loss. The temptation to resort again to projective mechanisms is strong since it succeeds in protecting him against the feelings of the emptiness that are triggered by the loss of the projected good part-objects; projection he resorted to in order to protect them from envious attack.

Its only when splitting lessens, as evidenced in the last session of the week, that working through of these conflicting identifications can bring relief of the distress. This, of course, never occurs once and forever. Rather it must be fought for over and over, which in itself is often a cause of discouragement, and a motivation to regress to the simpler route paved by the omnipotent relief

splitting, and defensive projective identification provide. However, the ambivalence between love and hate; envy and concern can only be worked out when omnipotence is forsaken. Although the working through of such conflicts entails much suffering, it alone can successfully permit one to overcome the despair caused by the feeling of inhabiting a damaged inner world.

### **The Psychodynamics of the Terrorist**

We propose that a similar psychodynamic scenario, due to two sets of identifications, occurs in the terrorist. Beyond the use of rationalization to justify acts of destruction (Brenman, 1966; Castelnuovo-Tedesco, 1974), theoretically, we suggest that there seems to exist, also for the terrorist, a strong identification with victims, creating in his inner world fantasies of wounded, or destroyed internal objects, with which his Ego identifies. So, through his acts, he feels to be in danger both of physical death owing to his actions in reality, but also of psychological death owing to his struggle with his identifications with (former and current) victims he identifies with. Indeed, the battle raging in the witness also rages within the terrorist whose resultant paranoid anxieties are exacerbated by his actions in real life.

By following through the hypothesis presented above, we suggest that the psychodynamics of the terrorist should reflect, for the most part, similar intrapsychic phenomena as those described as occurring in the witness of terrorist acts. Previous work on the psychological conditions that lead to the

commission of criminal acts by ordinary people in cultic groups form the clinical basis for this hypothesis (Casoni, 1997, 2000, in press).

Thus profound identifications with victims, not the ones he will make, but ones in his own life (including himself, as proposed by Socarides, 1966), constitute an intense motivation for the future terrorist to resort to vengeance as a means of conjuring his overwhelming anxiety, and despair. He falls into the trap of passionate hatred to calm the dread of a world, internal and external, void of good objects. As has been convincingly demonstrated by Bion, notably in *Second Thoughts* (1967), and more recently by Aulagnier (1984), excessive use of splitting and projective identification brings about the belief that destruction of good part-objects and of the self is not just to be feared in the future, but thought to have already occurred. This constitutes, in our view, one of the psychological reasons, beyond ethical considerations, why massive social injustice cannot be justified.

### **Is reparation still possible?**

At this point of discussion, one wonders if the solution offered by mourning; i.e. that is dealing with the issues of the depressive position, is within reach of an individual who kills in reality, and not just in fantasy. Theoretically, we can suppose it possible since psychic reparation is carried out primarily on the internal scene (Rey, 1983). However, it appears to be very difficult to sustain fantasies of repaired internal objects when one has really

destroyed an external object. This massive identification with the aggressor results in tremendously powerful representations of oneself that can only be counterbalanced by equally powerful representations of oneself as a heroic figure. Such split representations become necessary in order to counterbalance the despair one experiences when the desires for revenge, and destruction have been acted out in the real world.

Additionally, such massive identification with the aggressor most often will be followed by the projection on the external world of good internal objects in order to protect them from inner destruction; a very impoverishing process. Inasmuch as the terrorist identifies entirely with his murderous act, he unconsciously feels forced to expel good internal objects so as to keep them from total destruction. Most often, these good, idealized, part-objects are projected onto the leader, God, and one's life hereafter. Suicidal conduct, and kamikaze action hence become not only tolerable to the Ego, but also a means of responding to both the conflicting identifications, and the despair awoken by the depletion of one's inner world. Thus, the struggle, and ensuing anxieties awoken by massively identifying both with victims and aggressors are magically annulled by the effect of extreme splitting, and defensive projective identification. In fact, terrorist acts are a means, in themselves, to do away with moral conflict since the omnipotence that characterizes such acts paradoxically confuses all distinctions between good and bad. Similar mechanisms have been noted in criminals (Brenman, 1966; Brunet, 1978; Brunet, et al, 1985;

Castelnuovo-Tedesco, 1974; Klein & Kogan, 1986), and in some cult leaders and followers (Casoni, 1997) who become very envious of those onto which they have, unconsciously, projected their good internal objects. This particular phenomenon could establish a fundamental difference between witnesses and authors of terrorist acts.

### **The destructive effect of envy**

Therefore, for the terrorist, as for the criminal, identification with bad objects and expulsion of good ones create an even greater disequilibrium than in witnesses, that which gives even more weight to the unconscious motivations that support violent acts. But, the necessity to expel good internal objects is inevitably accompanied by very strong feelings of envy, as the external world is then seen as possessing all the good and desirable objects; the terrorist, again identified with the victim, feeling himself deprived of all sources of goodness, and of all possibilities of libidinal satisfaction.

Whereas envy, on the part of the terrorist, seems to play a determining role in the choice of target victims, their innocence, both real and symbolic, is the cause of the greatest of despair on the part of the witnesses. In fact, the typical choice of victim is probably the most terrifying aspect of terrorist acts for witnesses, as those who are attacked are total strangers to the conflict, and very often children and persons who symbolize innocence, or goodness. This

one observation differentiates terrorists from other murderers who, most often, will kill either another criminal, or people they interact with.

Cruelly, the choice of victim by the terrorist is not a whim of fate. Rather it corresponds to the terrorist's aim, which although unconscious, is to destroy good objects since they are a source of an intolerable feeling of envy. Although the rhetoric points to the destruction of "bad", of evil, of Satan, the discourse points to another direction. In the words of Georges Abdallah, condemned terrorist, at the opening session of his trial in Paris: "Either there will be peace for all Arab people on the entire Arab territory, or there will be no peace anywhere for anybody." (La Presse, 25/02/87).

While jealousy has its foundation in love for its object; envy, on the contrary, is based on hatred, and the desire to destroy an object deemed out of reach. Paradoxically, envy, by attacking good internal objects through their representatives in the outside world, undermines the potential one has of feeling worthy of love, and of self-love through identification. Introjective identification hence becomes almost impossible owing to the destructive nature of envy. Segal (1964) notes, to that effect, that the lack of good introjections strips the self of its capacity of growth. The outcome of which is a vicious circle whereby envy prevents introjection of good objects into the self, which in return increases the feelings of envy.

**Despair follows**

On this account, when the terrorist kills people who unconsciously represent good internal objects, he's not only targeting these direct victims but is also attacking the good internal objects of all those that witness his murderous act. When we feel profound despair, we are attuned to this aim, we feel our own goodness has been attacked, that our own good internal objects have been wounded, maybe even mortally. This particularly comes through when, via extensive media coverage, terrorists seek central stage, as if coercing the whole world into being helpless witnesses to their acts. This is the manner whereby terrorism provokes terror and despair in millions of people who fear for their threatened internal objects because they identify and suffer with the victims, but also because they identify their own component drives with the passionate hatred of the aggressors.

In this sense, the terrorist seems to attempt to "drive the other crazy" as described by Searles (1977a). Assuredly, the disequilibrium provoked by terrorism has the power to initiate temporary regression in all its witnesses. Unfortunately, many people do not recover easily. Thus the terrorist succeeds in luring others into his own intrapsychic field: that is a position where guilt is so easily evacuated.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that many pathways may lead to destructive acts towards innocent victims, and that religious fanaticism when it is supported by particular group dynamics can cause great harm (Casoni, 2000). However, the present paper deliberately puts aside these circumstances in order to study the psychodynamics present in witnesses and authors of terrorist acts.

The pernicious and harmful results of terrorism are not limited to those who die, as terrorism succeeds in attacking the good internal objects we need to identify with. Every time a terrorist strikes, he seems to insidiously destroy hope in humankind. Terrorism is pernicious also because powerlessly, as witnesses, we are driven to defend ourselves, by regression, from the threat of depressive affects, that which the terrorist himself carefully avoids.

Although indirect witnesses, we all felt deeply disturbed by the images of destruction we saw, heard, and read about through the media coverage of the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks. As we are still trying to understand, many are overwhelmed by sadness, guilt, despair, fear, anger, hatred; a whole range of conflicting emotions. Regretfully, there will never exist a complete, and long-lasting solution to terrorism, only isolated, partial, and never totally successful endeavors. Nonetheless, as Italian president Sandro Pertini stated a few years ago when facing an increase of terrorism in his country: "Whoever gives in to fear will have to undergo violence". To yield to fear could thus be interpreted as

surrendering to revenge, and to the illusionary security offered deceptively by splitting, and defensive projective identification.

Although the easiest psychic solution to the conflicting identifications brought about by terrorism is through regression to splitting, and defensive projective identification, it constitutes an impasse, as it is the source of a vicious circle of insidious anxiety, and despair. However, the solution offered by mourning the loss of one's illusion of invulnerability, although more painful, renders tolerable the idea that there is no perfect, total and magical answer to the terrorist problem. The fact that there are some envious and dangerous people in the world who kill their fellow men, and that it is impossible for all of them to disappear magically seems to echo the fact that there are, in our own inner world, destructive and envious part-objects, which we cannot magically, or totally eliminate.

Probably, we all carry within ourselves parts that are a little bit terroristic, a little xenophobic, intolerant, envious, and destructive. Even though it may be tempting to try to expel these parts of ourselves, to face the pain that integration of good and bad part-objects implies is probably the only way to overcome despair in the long run.

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### Abstract

This paper proposes the idea that the intrapsychic phenomena provoked in witness of terrorist acts is strikingly similar to what goes on in the mind of the terrorist. The effects of witnessing terrorist acts is thus seen to trigger a regressive pull towards the use of splitting, and projective identification in order to defend oneself against despair. A clinical case study is presented to illustrate these propositions. Finally a theoretical essay describing the psychodynamics of the terrorist is proposed, and intrapsychic differences between witnesses and terrorists are discussed.

### Résumé

Les auteurs proposent l'idée que les phénomènes intrapsychiques provoqués chez les témoins d'actes terroristes ressemblent aux processus actifs chez les auteurs d'actes terroristes. Le fait d'être témoin de terrorisme provoque, en effet, une poussée régressive vers l'utilisation du clivage et de l'identification projective afin de protéger le sujet contre le désespoir que l'attaque contre les bons objets internes provoque. Une présentation clinique sert à illustrer ces propos. Puis un portrait psychodynamique hypothétique est proposé du terroriste et les différences intrapsychiques entre témoins et terroristes sont discutées.