The Violence of Meaning

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In our present situation, where »terrorism« has become the proclaimed enemy of »civilization,« one needs to pay particular attention to the ethical and political implications of the meanings ascribed to it. The use of fear and anxiety for political purposes—as terrorism is often defined—is not only generated by explosions, bombs, and kidnapping or other direct means. Manipulation through fear and anxiety fueled by dominant ideological constructs could be as terrorizing—if not more, due to their »indirect« nature. The ease by which a »war on terrorism« is constructed out of a horrific event that cost thousands of lives may itself be a more significant terror than the horror of the World Trade Center tragedy.

The age of retaliation and of »zero tolerance« and the inability to engage in dialogue or in intercultural understanding is taking us to the brink of what some people termed a »civilizational conflict,« where violence is justified in the name of a so-called »civilization.« The meaning of terror may wane by comparison to the terror of meaning when it is constructed and circumscribed within a mono-cultural and exclusive terrain of interpretation. As renewed talk of »barbarism« and of »civilization« is closing down the venues of dialogue between various cultures, a brave new approach to international relations is being consolidated. The approach inherent in the »war on terrorism« ignores history and culture, or the complex aspects of any situation, and builds on an ignoble self-righteousness and a sense of superiority that takes us back to the days of the »might is right« approach in international politics.

While the end of the Cold War may have been an opportunity to start an intercultural dialogue and build on social and distributive justice to live in a better world, the meaning of »September 11« and the way it is interpreted and understood, the way it is disseminated and explicated, is making the »war on terrorism« an excuse to erect new barriers and to build insurmountable walls between different people. The crime of the century may not be the killing of a few thousand people in New York and Washington, or the killing of thousands of people in Afghanistan and Iraq, but the construction of a new global »ideology« built on the self-righteous superiority of certain people and on a total lack of dialogue with, and of understanding of, the majority of the world population.

What a few thugs did on September 11 is criminal, but how that criminal act has been used and is being used is even a worse crime. The rhetoric, ideology, and belief associated with the dominant discourse of the »war on terrorism« are closing down all venues of inter-cultural and cross-cultural understanding and are reproducing the same blind hatred that motivated the September 11 disaster but on a global scale. That kind of mono-cultural superiority and exclusivity is reminiscent of the days of imperialism and colonialism. Rather than opening venues of intercultural understanding, the ideology that wants to fight »barbarism« only constructs a cultural superiority based on a generalization that associates a few thugs with vast populations of particular religions or ethnicities. The terror of the meaning of the »war on terrorism« is aggravated by the sheer stupidity and lack of insight of those leading it and disseminating its ideological discourses: those who cannot let go of the Cold War and who are using a tragedy of great proportion for their own benefit by perpetuating fear and anxiety in order to take better control of certain situations and turn these to their own advantage. Such a »war« is merely a tool of constructing an enemy that would allow the powers to be to

evade addressing issues of social equality and of distributive justice on a global scale while empowering them to impose their will on any population that does not comply with their demands—by labeling them as »terrorists« and constructing them as enemies.

The »war on terrorism« is shifting the balance of the international order. After the Cold War, the global system could have moved further towards an order where the »rule of law« may have become possible and where »international law« could have become more enforceable and more developed. The opportunity was ripe to balance freedom with social justice and to build a more egalitarian world order. Unfortunately, from its start, the »war on terrorism« has been intent not only on undermining most previous achievements but its actual consequences have been actively eradicating most of the advancements towards bettering humanity. The rule of law is constantly undermined as warlike activities— including military, political, and economic—are implemented unilaterally by a few countries without any official declaration of war on another state—but on individuals or groups of individuals that are not associated with any state and whose prosecution should fall under the jurisdiction of criminal justice. The total disregard of the sovereignty of other nations, under the excuse of pursuing »terrorist« individuals or groups, has also undermined a basic tenet of international law built on the respect of the sovereignty of nations and of peoples.

The disastrous tragedy that was the 9/11 terrorist attack does not justify the condemnation of whole populations to mass bombing and/or to suffer the consequence of a terrific war machine. The war on terror is a war of words and of control of interpretations: it imposes and creates meanings that terrorize populations worldwide and undermine the rule of law and the respect for human rights and civil liberties of numerous citizens—

especially Muslim or Arab minorities. It is also a tool of control that certain countries are using to apply strong-arms tactics that are reminiscent of the days of colonialism and imperialism. The »terror« that is becoming more widespread in the 21st century is the one associated with calculated manipulation of situations that achieves real political and economic goals through the sheer violence of power.

It is the role of every human being interested in building a safer, gentler, and more egalitarian world to reject the terror of the proclaimed »war on terror« and to call for the reestablishment of the rule of law in the international arena and to seriously address »real« problems that affect millions of people, such as poverty, hunger, mass extermination, diseases, repression, etc. While the terrorist attacks that killed over three thousand people in a few countries are horrendous crimes that need to be dealt with seriously, by pursuing the culprits and bringing them to justice, these crimes certainly do not warrant setting »terrorism« as *the global* threat. Poverty, hunger, mass extermination, diseases, and repression pose a much more serious threat to the majority of the world population: thousands of lives are the innocent victims of this threat 365 days a year! The international mobilization and the worldwide commitment that we are witnessing today could only be justified if it were aiming at the eradication of such a real global threat—and not in the name of a »war on terrorism.« But this proclaimed »war« may be an indication of yet another real threat facing humanity: the »terror« associated with the use of fear and anxiety to impose the rule of a few privileged and powerful countries over the rest of the world.