

TERRORISM

THE SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY



JOSEBA ZULAIKA

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FOR MARITXU ERLANZ DE GULLER
FOR HER PROPHECIES

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Rethinking the War on Terror

Counterterrorism has become self-fulfilling and it is now pivotal in *promoting* terrorism. This book is an attempt to prove it.

There is now near consensus, on both the Left and the Right, that the war in Iraq has been a catastrophe and that the War on Terror has made the United States far less secure than before. Yet we barely understand the thinking that, with the generalized approval of the public, led us to this situation. Why the sense of missed opportunities and failure of George W. Bush's presidency? A response requires understanding the role of counterterrorism in designing public policy.

In order to think and write terrorism without thereby further constituting it, the preliminary task at hand is conceptual: What are the impasses and blind spots in counterterrorist thinking that led us to the self-fulfilling nature of the War on Terror?

The first part of the book is devoted to the ways in which discourse creates and perpetuates the very thing it abominates. It repeats the call in my book *Terror and Taboo* (coauthored with William Douglass) for an exorcism against such culture—"Terrorism discourse must be disenchanting if it is to lose its efficacy for all concerned,"¹ terrorists and counterterrorists alike. I fully agree with Richard Jackson's conclusion that "resisting the discourse is not an act of disloyalty; it is an act of political self-determination; and it is absolutely necessary if we are to avoid another stupefying period of fear and violence like the cold war."²

There is little doubt by now that terrorism discourse *creates* its own reality.

My arguments here go beyond discourse analysis. Terrorism is premised on the *will* of insurgents, rebels, fighters, terrorists. Terrorism studies are about tactics, financial networks, organizational structures, ideologies, psychological types—the observable expressions of the terrorist agenda. But first we must reckon with the terrorist as an individual subject. We are baffled by his or her seeming madness, the horrific freedom of his *amor fati*, the willing acceptance of death and killing as one's mission, the embrace of a truth that can only be expressed in the form of terroristic massacre. And it is a madness that is all the more disconcerting because we know it is strategically willed and aimed directly at us for reasons that we cannot clearly see nor accept. These issues cannot be properly addressed without the awareness that the terrorist subject is deeply engaged in the politics of the unconscious, including the Freudian “death drive” expressed in willfully embracing suicide.

Counterterrorism's ignorance of the languages, cultures, and histories of the people it purports to monitor is proverbial. The crisis of knowledge begins with the quality of the intelligence when the analysts are not able to look into their own ideological investments. What is one to make of the fact that scores of people in the intelligence community had known for months that two of the people who were going to take part in 9/11 were living in the United States, yet nothing was done about it? According to the findings of the 9/11 Commission (officially, the National Commission on Terrorists Attacks upon the United States), “evidence gathered by the panel showed that the attacks could probably have been prevented.”³ Why such blindness? What needs to be established is that the system had sufficient evidence to know about the upcoming plot yet it *preferred not to know that it knew*. These are problems that derive directly from a faulty epistemology—beginning with the placement of the entire phenomenon in a context of taboo and the willful ignorance of the political subjectivities of the terrorists. They have to do with what counts as a standard of evidence, what is valuable information, what type of experience should be respected, what sort of associative logic links together various kinds of events, and other various contexts and mind-sets.

One only has to compare Paul Bremer's and David Petraeus's policies in Iraq to become aware of the disastrous self-generating logic of counterterrorism. The ecounterterrorist Bremer acted as if anything touched by Saddam Hussein was contaminated with evil and drove tens

of thousands of former soldiers and officers into the insurgency; the military man Petraeus studied the culture and ended up negotiating with and partially dissolving the enemy. The counterterrorist is typically like the proverbial dumb policeman who, by ignoring the actor's subjectivity in its complex interaction of cultural background, social motivation, and unconscious desire, is unable to read the evidence in front of his eyes while taking seriously "evidence" deliberately planted by the criminal to fool him. What is required is to make the sweeping change from the policeman's to the detective's mind frame. We went to war against Hussein because we did not figure out that he was *bluffing*.

What kind of writing can do justice to the terrorists' suicidal madness? Since at least the Old Testament, writers have dealt with murder; far from utterly alien human beings, murderers have been depicted by writers as all-too-human members of ordinary communities; at times heroicized, at other times their actions are deplored as tragic, they are always the objects of intense curiosity and study. Before he wrote his "nonfiction novel" *In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote spent hundreds of hours with the multiple murderers Perry Smith and Dick Hickock. They became for him anything but tabooed people. In fact, he projected himself into Perry's life and concluded that he was too much like himself. The final result is that Capote *knew* his murderers thoroughly and intimately—they could not lie to him, nor would he underestimate their human potential. Counterterrorism thinking precludes in principle the subjective knowledge of a Truman Capote or a detective or an ethnographer. Hence, I argue in this book, the categorical blunders and the systemic blindness.

A Self-Fulfilling Temporality: Waiting for Terror

"It is not *if*, but *when*"—how many times have we heard this mantra of every expert turned prophet warning the viewer of the impending catastrophe of nuclear terrorism? The seemingly wise caution assumes that, by ruling out the conditional "if" from terrorists' evil minds, we are reaffirming our own unconditional certainty. The assertion of "when" invokes some real time rather than the Beckettian type of waiting that characterizes terrorism.

On the one hand, the real success of counterterrorism is when a foreseeable attack does *not* happen. Thus counterterrorists can legitimately claim each day in which another 9/11 does not take place as a success; these non-events prove they are right in their premises. Yet, on the other hand, if and

when an attack does occur, then counterterrorist thinking can also say “we told you so” and argue that they were *always* right in their predictions. In short, whether there are terrorist attacks or not, counterterrorist knowledge pretends to be always right. Such imperviousness to historical events points to a time warp that goes to the heart of counterterrorist mythology. The waiting implies in fact that historical time has surrendered itself to a fateful future. The strategy of the terrorists consists of creating terror by acting randomly and against innocent bystanders—the actions are thus perceived as if they were utterly unpredictable instances, beyond any actual temporal process, almost unplanned sudden outbursts that are outside of historical time. Such instantaneous *atemporality* finds its true counterpart in the counterterrorists’ fatalism of “not if, but when”—a surrender to a passive temporality that is simply inevitable Fate, rather than an active temporality emerging from a new political will to determine the actual reasons, sources, and solutions to the sudden violence. If the terrorists are acting and planning against us in an inevitable and nonhypothetical manner, there is nothing we can do to prevent their course of action. A next step in such fateful thinking is that the terrorists’ actions are not based on hypotheses and premises either—they are born out of hatred and arbitrary blame. The result is the same: there is nothing we can possibly do to restrain them. The consequence of this mind-set is that the counterterrorist loses interest in the intellectual premises, subjective motivations, and political goals that underlie and guide terrorist actions; his only concern is how to react against utterly dangerous, secretly sinister actors that he does not know.

Sociologist Robert Merton defined and formalized the consequences of the self-fulfilling prophecy: “The self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a *false* definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the original false conception come *true*. This specious validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuates a reign of error. For the prophet will cite the actual course of events as proof that he was right from the very beginning. . . . Such are the perversities of social logic.”⁴ It was false that al Qaeda was in Iraq before March 2003 (the excuse to go to war) but it is true that there is al Qaeda in Iraq now—which serves as justification for Bush to continue the war.

Historical events, large and small, are affected by such self-fulfilling prophecies. One can hardly assess the cold war without taking into account the predictive logic by which the perceived threat of annihilation forced an armaments race. Or can we understand the behavior of the financial

markets during the last decade without such a hypothesis? In the field of education, the ways in which the attitudes and expectations of teachers will influence students' performance can be tested and measured. Symbolic interactionists have elaborated on the idea of the self as an inherently self-fulfilling prophecy.⁵ Current counterterrorism is another prime example of that most classic of sociological truisms that Merton labeled "the Thomas theorem": "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences."⁶ Once the situation is defined as one of inevitable terrorism and endless waiting, what *could* happen weighs as much as what is actually the case. The primary definition of our political reality as dependent on controlling the future becomes in itself the terrorists' fundamental victory *now*. One example of such radical subversion of temporality is the adoption by the Bush administration of the doctrine of *preventive war* in a nuclear era. Only the figure of the Terrorist and its potential for a nuclear attack can justify it. This is in keeping with the assumption of nuclear monopoly by the United States inherent in its promise to disarm *after*, and not before, the rest of the world eschews nuclear arms.⁷ Such a time warp ensures that the very building and possession of nuclear arsenals is no longer the real issue; rather, it is the future possibility that potential terrorists might one day obtain the remnants of ours. The Evil is not the reality that we now have nuclear arms, rather it is the *desire* of others to have them in the future.

During the decade of the 1980s, when almost no one can remember a single terrorist fatality in the United States, terrorism was still frequently hailed as the country's number-one threat—it was the fantasized enemy of the waiting for terror. How did President Ronald Reagan's terrorism sideshow become the overwhelming discourse in U.S. politics, media, and everyday life after 9/11? Already with President Bill Clinton, particularly after his improved standing in public opinion polls in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City massacre, "terrorism" became a dominant frame through which American politics had to be interpreted. Far from remaining a discourse in which the boundaries between the real and the fictional were never clear, terrorism became a functional reality of American politics that could be deployed in the midst of any political crisis. If, with Clinton, terrorism turned into an autonomous prime mover of enormous consequences, effecting national policy and legislation, with President George W. Bush the War on Terror has become the sole mission of American politics. If with Reagan and Clinton terrorism had been "naturalized" into a constant risk that is omnipresent, a sort of chaotic principle always ready

to strike and create havoc, with Bush it became the prime *raison d'état*, the one enemy against which society must now marshal all its resources in an unending struggle.

What is remarkable in the use of the “war” rhetoric is the confusion of the various *types of warfare*—from a conventional military invasion of Iraq, to the proclamation of this being a battle in the worldwide War on Terror, to the nuclear danger posed by combining the desires of “rogue regimes” with terrorists, to the denials of an insurgency in Iraq. The most deceptive premise about the War on Terror is that *it is war* understood literally in conventional terms. Previous to all these types of warfare, there is the “religiously sanctioned moral duty”⁸ to fight the evil of terrorism, a war that is rooted as much in morality as it is based on military technology. Only this religious apocalyptic frame can explain how President Bush could turn “the axis of evil” into the cornerstone of U.S. international politics. “Terrorism” is the catalyst for confusing all these levels of warfare. One obvious result of such confusion was that soon after the occupation of Iraq U.S. soldiers were confronted with a humiliated Iraqi population that consisted of millions of potential “terrorists.”

After 9/11 there was a clear displacement of the taboo concerning weapons of mass destruction into the taboo of terrorism. Saddam Hussein represented the master Terrorist because not only had he manifested an undisguised appetite for nuclear might, he had also used chemical weapons against his own people (with U.S. help and silence). More than ever the issue became *who* would be allowed to possess the bomb. Even if the probability that terrorists will develop or acquire a nuclear device is shown by the experts to be extremely low,⁹ the very possibility materializes in apocalyptic alarm once the situation is one of waiting for terror. What matters is the prophecy that Saddam Hussein or a terrorist group might one day have them. Since “the greatest failure of the new approach [by the Bush administration] was its belief that it could indefinitely maintain a global double standard,”¹⁰ the figure of the Terrorist serves to displace and obfuscate the dangers coming from the difficulties of controlling the spread of nuclearism. Similarly, the moral bankruptcy of a war premised on plain falsehoods is too much to bear—unless we are fighting a crusade against the demonic figure of the Terrorist.

In the end, as stated by Begoña Aretxaga, the terrorist and the counter-terrorist interface within “a structure and *modus operandi* which produce both the state and terrorism as fetishes of each other, constructing reality as an endless play of mirror images. This play of terrorism is what makes

the State (with a capital S) and Terrorism (with a capital T) so real, organizing political life as a phantasmatic universe where the ‘really real’ is always somewhere else, always eluding us.”¹¹ Thus we get the Catch-22 of a labyrinthine, self-fulfilling repetition.

The analytic challenge is to show the time loop by which Empire and Terrorism produce each other simultaneously. What do Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini, Saddam Hussein, Muammar Qaddafi, Manuel Noriega, Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, and Osama bin Laden have in common? Their careers are intimately tied to U.S. counterinsurgency. Khomeini appeared on the political stage during the 1953 Iranian coup engineered by the Central Intelligence Agency; Hussein came to power “on a CIA train”¹² in the early 1960s; Qaddafi had extensive dealings with former CIA arms dealers; Noriega, Rahman, and bin Laden worked side by side with the CIA. They all were close allies of the United States only to later become its nemeses—the archterrorists. The same schizophrenic dynamic can be seen in the ease with which counterterrorism has forced the United States to switch sides regarding those countries accused of sponsoring terrorism: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, and Pakistan have all switched back and forth from being friends to becoming the sponsors of terrorism. Both plots, the one of the ally and the one of the terrorist, are generated by *the same self-fulfilling process*.

One time loop that we should be particularly concerned with has to do with the constitution of terrorist subjectivities. We must pay attention not only to the militant as the author of the act but also to the subject’s anticipated *passage à l’acte*, a terrorist subject that is itself displayed as the ultimate “work of art” and weapon of the dispossessed. The terrorist subject is inaugurated by the event of such *passage*, “the event is precisely the ‘crystal’ of the duality; it is the moment when the subject, encountering herself, splits. In other words, the event exists only in this montage of these two subjects.”¹³ If we want to understand 9/11 we must also see it as the montage by which the subjects who perpetrated it had been “inaugurated” to it for years previously. To see how the prediction of the terrorist subject becomes self-fulfilling, all we need is look at the case of Timothy McVeigh whose plot was scripted to the last detail by the dominant terrorism discourse.¹⁴

The War on Terror, by legitimizing preventive wars, by passing into law the Patriot Act, by normalizing torture, by turning neoconservative fantasies into policy priorities, has become the last ideological refuge for an imperial military. The 9/11 attacks turned the United States into a victim

and justified self-defense, but it did something else as well: it provided the perfect excuse for the *just war* and for implementing an agenda that includes advancing further weapons of mass destruction while displacing their overwhelming threat onto the terrorists.

The crucial issue is how to conceptualize this dynamic of mutual denial and mutual constitution between the couple terrorist/counterterrorist. It displays the qualities of “the edge” as a feature intrinsic to the Lacanian Real, “a duality that has nothing to do with the dichotomies between complementary oppositional terms (which are ultimately always two sides of the One) . . . the edge as the thing whose sole substantiality consists in its simultaneously separating and linking two surfaces. This specific duality aims at the Real, and makes it take place through the very split that gives structure to this duality. It is a duality that simultaneously constitutes the cause, the advent, and the consequence of the Real—but also a duality that thereby captures or expresses the Real.”¹⁵ It is the duality of such an edge that must be grasped regarding the duality terrorism/counterterrorism as well—despite their intimate linkage, the relationship is a “nonrelationship” in the Lacanian sense that the very impossibility is what *constitutes* it.

But How Can That Be?

Since terrorism is so tabooed, the reader can legitimately ask what my subjective position is regarding the terrorist. Since my youth I have been confronted in the Basque Country with the existence of militants in the underground armed group ETA (Euskadi and Freedom). My own response to ETA’s violence was to write an ethnography around the perplexing realities of murder justified as a political necessity by the nationalists. “But how can that be?”—that was the question thrown at me by my neighbors when the village informer and bus driver of my own village was murdered by the ETA one Saturday morning. My mother was on the bus among the housewives who had gone shopping. During their ride back home she saw the two young men, pistols in hand, advance toward the driver, shouting at him, “You are a dog!” before killing him. The hysterical housewives fled the bus and were brought to the village by passing drivers. I found my mother in shock, sitting on the doorstep, unable to climb the stairs to our home. Other women who had witnessed the crime were on the street, still sobbing. “But how can that be?” is all they could say, their faces twisted in horror.

I composed an ethnography trying to make sense of that “But how can that be?”¹⁶ I provided historical, sociological, and cultural models of performance that could help contextualize, albeit never *explain*, the bewildering phenomenon of murder. But are you allowed to attempt an ethnography of murder? Is it morally and politically correct to keep ethnographic detachment when murder is at stake? Nobody in the discipline would question that you could write of infanticide, regicide, or headhunting, and produce a valuable monograph without anyone assuming that you favored killing infants or kings or decapitation. But can you employ the anthropological perspective as a distancing device to study “terrorism”? This book is grounded on the radical ethnographic legacy of modern anthropology, one that was summarized by Clifford Geertz as “looking into dragons, not domesticating or abominating them, nor drowning them in vats of theory.”¹⁷ Affirming a common humanity with savages and terrorists is not only the inaugural premise of such tradition but also an epistemological necessity.

Anthropologists of my generation, informed mostly by the works of Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber, have taken for granted the profound interaction between individuality and collectivity. This perspective sympathizes with Antonio Gramsci when he wrote in his essay “What Is Man?” that “it is essential to conceive of man as a series of active relationships (a process) in which individuality, while of the greatest importance, is not the sole element to be considered.” Gramsci’s view was that “the individual does not enter into relations with other men in opposition to them but through an organic unity with them, because he becomes part of social organisms of all kinds from the simplest to the most complex.”¹⁸ This might be reasonable for ordinary social relations, but when you are dealing with the taboo of terrorism, can you postulate that the terrorist has some ties and dependencies with his or her community, his or her culture? Still, the interdependence between the individual and the collective does not deny agency. The subject can in fact change those relations. An ethnographic approach to the phenomenon of political terrorism will in fact place emphasis on both sides of the equation: on the structure that conditions the militant’s actions, and on the purposes that both guide and fool the actor. Both moves are unwelcome for the counterterrorist who would not grant the terrorist any leeway as a subject.

A central theme to the entire terrorism/counterterrorism dynamics is *innocence*. Terrorists by definition kill innocent victims chosen randomly—hence their aberration in every military, legal, or moral sense. There is no