Terrorism and Globalization

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Abstract

This chapter relates the material circumstances of globalization to cultural trauma and the spiritual disorder of pneumopathy. Eric Voegelin asserts that the pneumopathological terrorist suffers from a disease in which evil assumes the form of spirituality. Terrorist organizations, such as Aum Shinrikyo in Japan or Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda, construct an imaginative “second reality” in which the murder of innocents is seen as contributing to a magical transformation of the world. This kind of terrorism replaces pragmatically rational pursuits with pathological spiritual aspirations in which Weapons of Mass Destruction and suicide bombings are both seen as appropriate instruments in an apocalyptic struggle between Good and Evil.

Introduction

“Terrorism shows the dark side of globalization”—the American Secretary of State Colin L. Powell made this observation on April 30, 2001, some sixteen weeks prior to the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. He was commenting on a report issued annually by his department that indicated, among other things, an 8 percent increase in international terrorist attacks during the previous year. Two hundred of the 423 attacks recorded in the State Department inventory were directed against the United States. Other observers of international terrorism have made similar remarks.

In this chapter I focus on three points. The first is that, to understand contemporary terrorism, one must begin by examining its context: the modern world, both in its material and in its spiritual dimensions.

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2 (http://www.nytimes.com/2001/05/01/world/).
Second, I analyze recent trends in terrorism that might answer the question: What, if anything, is new about early twenty-first century terrorism? Third, I consider briefly the significance of terrorism for the contemporary historical process of globalization.

**Context**

The great political confrontations of the twentieth century involved democratic regimes against totalitarian ones. One need simply to recall the obvious: the general war of 1939-1945 was followed by a generation-long cold war. In contrast, “the defining issue of the early twenty-first century will be whether the democratic community can control dangerously chaotic strategic affairs in the vast, troubled regions outside its borders, which are not being made permanently peaceful by globalization.”

The bimodal structure of twentieth-century international affairs seems, therefore, to have been perpetuated into the twenty-first century. There are, however, some significant social and political differences to which we must attend, beginning with material considerations.

In 1991, Thomas Homer-Dixon argued that war and civil violence are likely in the future to result from conflict over environmental resource scarcities such as water, arable land, forests, and fish, not commodity scarcities. The social indices for his prognostication are also well known. Global population over the next half-century has been projected to grow from about five and a half billion to around nine billion, and most of that growth will be in countries that have a low probability of future prosperity. Most do not have “information-age” economies; many are agrarian and are characterized by dysfunctional governments and poorly educated workforces. These places may not be able to provide minimal government services—defense of the realm and the administration of justice, to use Western medieval categories; they are almost certain not to be friendly to the West. Internally, environmentally stressed regimes can range from the frankly totalitarian, as in Iraq during the time of Saddam Hussein, to the loose kind of warlord balances of Somalia. Such countries are not eagerly awaiting the beneficial effects of a globalizing world. Indeed, with or without globalization the existing situation seems pregnant with a future of chaotic turbulence and trouble in many places, not ecumenic tranquility.

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