

**The Perennial Wild Men. The 'war
on terror' is their fear of a wild
planet**

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Contents

Power and Chaos 3
Wild Origins 6
Unveiling the Myth 8

Despite 9/11, Americans are still more likely to be struck by lightning than by terrorists, but only obsess about the latter.¹ They are thousands of times more likely to be shot by spouses, neighbours or workmates than terrorists, despite which they vigorously defend their ‘right to bear arms’. The sociologist William Catton has done us all the favour of putting fears about terrorism in context:²

The annual death toll from influenza in the United States is almost ten times the seven or eight year global toll from terrorism, yet most people tend to think of flu as more of a nuisance than a dire peril.

US foreign policy is led by a ‘war on terror’ that has killed more people — typically as ‘collateral damage’ — than the ‘terrorists’ targeted by several orders of magnitude and blithely draws up lists of conveniently oil-rich ‘terrorist states’ to intimidate or invade when it is in fact only the US itself that has been judged terrorist by the International Court for Reagan’s 1987 mining of Nicaragua’s harbours. Claiming the ‘war on terror’ is in defence of Freedom (capital F used ironically to indicate the ‘freedom’ concerned is purely abstract rhetoric never to be applied in practice), administrative ‘anti-terrorist’ legislation has practically extinguished any freedoms of assembly, association and expression, reinitiated internment without trial and McCarthyism in America, and jailed Black people (called ‘Portland Asians’ as they were devout Moslems!) for exercising their supposed ‘right to bear arms’ for self-defence against transparently obvious state tyranny in the more hick, Islamophobic parts of the nation.

The absurdities and hypocrisies of the ‘war on terror’ should be obvious to anybody not mummified by the Flag, but on that you can go and read anything by Noam Chomsky or the small industry of liberal publishing around him if you need to. The purpose of this essay is not to further elaborate on such detail, but to examine why ‘terrorism’ has exercised such a firm grasp on the modern imagination. ‘Terrorism’ has not just been sold through the spectacle of media manipulation or its logical flipside, public gullibility — those are but the techniques of power — but has actually taken root. We must go a lot deeper to understand the unique appeal of ‘terrorism’ — why it is being sold, rather than some competing compliance brand.

Power and Chaos

The term ‘terrorism’ has been so tainted by political expediency that it now has no agreed definition. As the Reagan administration showed over Nicaragua, those labeled ‘terrorist’ by others won’t willingly accept their definitions, and even when someone takes the rare and strange decision to label themselves ‘terrorist’ — as FC

¹ Joseba Zulaika and William A Douglass’s *Terror and Taboo: The Follies, Fables and Faces of Terrorism* (Routledge, 1996), p.6.

² *ibid.*, p.5.

(the Freedom Club) did in the Unabomber manifesto, *Industrial Society and Its Future* — others may refuse them this label because they feel it confers *too much* prestige!

Thus, having sold FC as a much-needed example of domestic terrorism throughout the entire 1980s, the FBI relabeled Unabomber suspect Ted Kaczynski a “serial killer” when he came to trial in 1995 as they’d been so humiliated by their inability to catch him in almost two decades, undermining their credibility (and potential funding) as an effective counter-terrorist force (and, incidentally, FC’s potential to inspire further militancy).

At best, terrorism is defined as some sort of non-state-level indiscriminate targeting intended to bring about a crisis in the state unable to meet its Social Contract obligations to protect its own citizenry. At worst — and this is really the point, its utility as a mechanism for maintaining State power — terrorism’s definition all too easily broadens out to mean ‘anything opposed to us’.

Again, you can check out concerned liberal scholarship for the more obvious implications of this — such as how, by appealing to Social Contract theory, terrorists paradoxically affirm the State they’re attacking and statehood generally, although this should hardly come as a surprise concerning nationalist groups — but that is not my purpose here. What interests me is that the indiscriminate nature of terrorism is mirrored in the indiscriminate nature of its definition. Lacking numbers or firepower to take on the armed forces of the state toe-to-toe, the terrorist adopts tactics of clandestinity and unpredictable, symbolic attacks. Consequently, the terrorist could be just about anyone and — more significantly — so could his or her target.

Many advocates of armed struggle will huff and puff about this, insisting *they* are not terrorists because *they* are very careful in their selection of targets. Well, all the best to them, but the State is playing the equally inevitable opposite game of narrowing down who the terrorist is likely to be to as small a group as possible and presenting potential targets as as large a group as possible, as everyone else, to isolate and provoke discrimination against the struggle’s supporters. It is standard militant rhetoric that unlike in conventional warfare, one successful action is the equivalent of a thousand additional symbolic ones, those that *could* have been hit and *may* be in future. This, in part, explains why reactions to terrorism in terms of overestimation of personal threat is so great — so useful both to terrorist *and* counter-terrorist. Clearly, the target’s perception of their targetability is something largely out of the militants’ control. Even if they have been strict about what is and is not an appropriate target to date, the very virtue of guerilla warfare, its unpredictability, means that new targets will be sought in future. Also, aside from rare highly-disciplined and typically compromised groups, militant groups are highly Protean, inclined to splits, breakaways and even government pseudogang activity, meaning splinter groups may well hit targets the parent group refuses.

What, then, are we really looking at here, this perception of anonymous, random violence? *We are looking at chaos*. And how does this culture deal with chaos? What

is its perception of that? As the celebrated anthropologist Mary Douglas writes in her seminal *Purity and Danger*:³

As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder... Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment.

On a visceral cultural level, then, terrorists are not the worthy chaps with legitimate grievances and desperate but necessary measures they take themselves for, *they are dirt*, social pollution to be removed from State society like some deadly plague organism — typically by the State itself and its loyal subordinates, the better to magnify its own power. The Bush administration, for one, uses exactly this rhetoric — likely *unconsciously* appealing to society’s instinctual revulsion against pollution, given Dubya’s proverbial lack of erudition — and it is no surprise that references to terrorists acquiring germ weapons and ‘dirty bombs’, all previously the exclusive property of governments, are now the typically baseless stock in trade of anti-terrorist propaganda.

From this, it should be obvious what the State gets out of terrorism — to the point of promoting and controlling terrorist groups, as the Italian government did during the ‘years of lead’ in the 1970s, on an ‘eternal threat, eternal loyalty’ principle⁴ — but how do the terrorists benefit? Of course, being portrayed as monsters totally beyond social norms enhances the appeal and power of some, those that believe their revolution really will smash social norms, appealing to others thinking likewise and enhancing the symbolic intimidation of those that do not (the ‘multiplier effect’ discussed above).

However, there is more to it than this. As Douglas argues at great length, what is taboo is sacred as well as polluting. Those challenging the order of the universe define themselves not just as dirt, but also as godlike. Guerillas are often criticised for élitism precisely because their actions are seen as requiring a revolutionary courage, clear-sightedness and dedication that is beyond the majority to emulate, that is effectively superhuman.

Similarly, in death — and such activity surely invites death and torture, which is an attempt to kill the revolutionary’s spirit, what “a positive effort to organise the environment” means in this context — martyrs are revered in a quasi-religious manner, piously put ‘above criticism’ and iconised as propaganda tools much as were the saints of Medieval Christianity, as intercessors with the Divine (or the historic / material forces as the Left would have it...). To their great discredit, some guerillas actively

³ Mary Douglas’s *Purity and Danger: An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo* (Routledge, 1966), p.2.

⁴ Gianfranco Sanguinetti’s *On Terrorism and the State* (Chronos, 1982), which focuses particularly on the ‘hoax’ of the Moro kidnapping, though this aspect of Italian politics has always been a ‘hall of mirrors’ strangely reminiscent of Orwell’s highly realistic but satirical portrayal of inter-war Trotskyism (‘Emmanuel Goldsteinism’) in 1984.

promote such personality cults precisely because they are élitist, promoting their own power at the expense of others' liberty.

Wild Origins

Because definitions of terrorism are so contested, so too is any prospect of identifying the first terrorists. Some say the 'White' royalists of Brittany opposing the French revolution, though this looks like a conventional national liberation struggle to me. Some would say the Assassins that wrecked dynastic havoc during the Middle Ages, but the Zealots preceded them by a millennia and were the same, only less ambitious. No doubt some would say the first ape to ambush another along the trail was a 'terrorist'. Again, this pedantry does not interest me. What does is the origin of the chaotic, violent stereotype of terrorism, with all its symbolic force.

Who, then, was 'outside society' as the stereotypical taboo-busting terrorists now are? The answer, given in Aristotle's *Politics*, was "the Barbarians" or to contextualise it with the full quote:⁵

Humanity is divided unto two: the masters and the slaves; or, if one prefers it, the Greeks and the Barbarians, those who have the right to command; and those who were born to obey.

Yes, the question of who was outside social norms was an important one in ancient Greek society because it determined who could make slaves and who could be made slaves. Implicitly also, it defined who could make laws, or else slaves would just make laws freeing themselves. Despite abundant evidence of other civilisations abounding in the ancient world — not least Egypt or the rival Persian empire — the great Philosopher so revered by Mediaeval scholarship preferred logic to common sense and went on to argue that non-Greek societies had no laws (rather than that Greek law somehow overrode theirs) and that non-Greeks therefore lived in a state of Nature like animals, and that enslaving them was therefore probably even sort of doing them a favour introducing them to Greek civilisation... This patently absurd, self-serving argument would be vastly elaborated as 'White man's burden' in centuries to come.

Inspired by Aristotle and no doubt bored by their own, overcontrolled society, the Mediaevals fantasised about the pagan state of Nature, imagining wild, bearded Green men in the woods bedecked with leaves and antlers, living life without restraint much like the Greek Dionysus or Roman Pan. Whether this was a folk remembrance of the Neolithic (itself not wholly an oasis of human freedom thanks to religious and work impositions) or idealisation of the lives of greenwood outlaws, such ideas pervaded Medieval society to such an extent that representations of Green men survive as ironic

⁵ Hugh Thomas's *The Slave Trade: The History of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1440–1870* (Picador, 1997), p.26.

/ talismanic church gargoyles, rural pub signs, springtime village Springtime customs and even in literature, as in *Gawain and the Green Knight*.

The late-Mediaeval Sir John Mandeville — who is neck and neck with Heroditus as ‘father of lies’, history-wise — portrayed these wild men as “eat[ing] both flesh and fish all raw”, alongside all those on nonexistent, distant islands with faces in their chests and feet big enough to function as sunshades.

Amusing fantasy perhaps, even a sign of yearned-for natural freedom, but in practice such stereotypes were applied exactly as the Greeks did. On arrival on the Carib island he named Hispaniola in 1492, Columbus was quick to insist Mandeville’s fantasies were reality, reporting back to distant Spain:⁶

Men with one eye, and others with dog’s noses, who ate men, and that when they took a man, they cut off his head and drank his blood and castrated him.

Clearly, these Caribs were beyond the law and hardly human. In the enslavement of the Gaunches on the Canary Islands that had been going on simultaneous to Columbus’s colonisation of the New World, Isabella of Castille had already had Aristotle’s apologia for slavery rewritten, substituting the word ‘Spanish’ for ‘Greek’ in de Coroba’s infamous 1460 primer, *Garden of Noble Maidens*.⁷ Because of the vagaries of Christian — as opposed to Greek — religiosity, Isabella went one step further than Aristotle in arguing not that “A slave is a property with a soul”, but that they were essentially soulless, like animals, and therefore their labour could not be lost to the Church through manumission by conversion. Consequently, millions of Caribs perished mining in Columbus’s silver mines in less than a decade, best illustrating who was ‘savage’ and who best benefited from “the law of nations”.

This is a key point; as US retaliation for ‘terrorism’ is orders of magnitude greater than the initial terrorist act or even what they’re capable of, so the ‘wild’ or ‘savage’ is recast as a projection of the Civiliser’s own unrestrained violence, their true savagery alibied. In his mythopaeic *Against History, Against Leviathan*, Fredy Perlman points to the transformation of wilderness from being simply a place of Nature outside human control to a place of subjective terror, of potential ambush, due to the introduction of Civilised warfare and its unreasoning fears to it:⁸

The world outside Ur is not the wilderness our word will designate. Their wilderness clearly is not the forest or desert, the plants or animals, since the nature-loving temple residents have all these brought into the city.

Could it be that their wilderness is the wilderness created by the Lugal [war leader] and his men; the battlefields surrounding all of Sumer’s towns,

⁶ Zulaika and Douglas, *op cit.*, p.154.

⁷ John Connor’s ‘Precedent for the New World’ in *The Rise of the West: A Brief Outline of the Last Thousand Years* (Green Anarchist Books, 2001), p.68.

⁸ Fredy Perlman’s *Against His-story, Against Leviathan: An Essay* (Black & Red, 1983), p.24.

the settings of raids and counter-raids, the scenes of torture, slaughter and capture.

If the wild was not itself ‘savage’, it might be a desirable alternative to Civilisation — indeed, to the survivalist Right, its supposed Darwinian savagery is precisely why it is desirable — and in any case, this paranoid perception where the Civilisers’ violence is attributed to what they designate non-Civilised as it is beyond their control rationalises its destruction in the name of ‘self defence’.

Forgive the stridency of the example — though it is easier to see what is typical when an example is falsely presented as exceptional — but Nazi imperialism and its inevitably atrocious consequences were characterised by exactly such paranoid projection, which presented the German people as surrounded by overwhelming numbers of communists and other supposed *untermenschen* as well as a nonexistent ‘world conspiracy’ of Jews, with real genocide ‘justified’ as a response to this projected, imaginary threat.

To make this threat ‘real’, the Nazis even faked incidents, burning the *Reichstag* (the German parliament) in 1936 and then blaming their own handiwork on ‘red savagery’, the better to reinforce their own tyranny. Though such reasoning verged on the clinically insane, it perfectly suited the aggressive ideology and expansionist aims of a clinically insane state, not that the Nazis have been the only such state evident in modern times...

Unveiling the Myth

The language used to describe modern terrorists exactly matches that used to describe the Medieval wild men. John Pilger evokes the familiar Washington media’s stereotype of “Flag-burning, embassy-storming, bearded, *wild men* of Islam”⁹ [my emphasis] whilst Likud zealot Benjamin Netanyahu referred to hijackers as “wild beasts that prowl our airways and waterways”¹⁰ and as GAL carried out their merciless campaign of cross-border assassination of Basque activists, the Madrid press wrote most tellingly of:¹¹

The activists of ETA, who are not men, who are beasts... No human rights come into play when a tiger must be hunted. The tiger is searched after, is hounded, is captured, and if necessary is killed.

The ETA fighters assassinated were, of course, human beings and not tigers — the point is they were equated with these animals symbolically, as peculiarly savage

⁹ John Pilger’s ‘The World’s worst Terrorists are based in Washington’, www.users.bigpond.com/nlevine/worstterrorists, p.3.

¹⁰ Zulaika and William, *op cit.*, p. 157.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p.157.

creatures of the wilderness, even though tigers, too, rarely pose a real threat to humans not encroaching on their own territory and are really the ones disproportionately threatened by such encroachment.

Uncivilised humans, animals and Nature itself are equated, united in being seen as soulless and chaotic, fit only to be ordered and controlled by law-making humans for their own benefit. This is the lesson of that other great Christian garden myth, that of God giving Adam mastery over Nature in Eden. How much this stereotype has been employed to characterise terrorists as chaotic forces of Nature in need of human mastery is illustrated by Malcolm Timbers' Jungian analysis of terrorism as infantile and unconscious:¹²

By drawing on the works of Jung and Nietzsche, I am attempting to show that the terrorist is influenced by an archetypal element in Nature that is historically represented by the god Dionysus in an extreme, distorted sense, while, in this game, the West represents an extreme and distorted Apollonian element as a civilization bent on dominating and exploiting Nature... I personally knew a FLQ terrorist¹³ who also talked a lot about ecology and spoke of the Earth unconsciously, in an infantile manner, as a metaphor for the mother's body. That is, mentally he was in the Oedipal role of the hero-son saving the Earth / Mother from being ravished by the evil Father / Capitalism.

It is a natural conclusion that if Man (and they mean 'Man') can regulate 'soulless' Nature better than it can itself after billions of years evolving its own self-regulation, and if simple societies stable for millennia are better run by Civilisers than by their own people (who, though mature adults with social skills far in advance of the Civilisers, are conveniently "like children" in need of a patriarch), so terrorists are prey to unconscious destructive urges and too need to be ruled or crushed.

There is no question of intrinsic value here, that in all humility the Civilisers might possibly be the ones that are in the wrong. Like Freud, Jung believed we had to suppress what is natural and spontaneous, instinctual, in us in order to cooperate and create 'shining cities', higher consciousness and higher Civilisation. In fact fantasies of omnipotence and of being at the centre of a universe made solely for oneself is more typically associated with infantile consciousness and more exactly typifies the

¹² Malcolm Timbers' 'On the Apollo vs Dionysian Conflict' in 'The Psychology of Terrorism' series, *Mysterium Journal of Suffering and Death*, www.geocities.com/aquapontica/terrorism. I hasten to add that this is quoted not because I in any way endorse Jungianism — unlike Freud, Jung felt no good reason to flee the Nazis, to put it mildly — but rather because Timbers himself unconsciously discloses Civilisation's own assumptions about terrorism.

¹³ The FLQ were the Quebec Liberation Front, an early-1970s clandestine Leftnationalist group seeking separation of French speakers from Canada. Not given to indiscriminate violence, they could hardly be called 'terrorist' in terms of strict definitions.

mentality of the Civiliser, the conquerer, the engineer, bending the whole world to their own control.

If these arguments are starting to ring bells with some readers, it's because they are very familiar. Dan Quinn concludes *Ishmael* by mythologically noting:¹⁴

The Takers' [Civilisers] story is, 'The gods made the world for man, but they botched the job, so we had to take matters into own own, more competent hands.' The Leavers' story is, 'The gods made man for the world, the same way they made salmon and sparrows and rabbits for the world; this seems to have worked pretty well so far, so we can take it easy and leave the running of the world to the gods.

This, then, is the unveiling: the 'war on terror' is a misnomer. The Civilisers' true motive is to exert absolute control over the entire world, over what is wild in human nature and beyond it — even at the expense of their own laws. Terrorism is selected only because it is a particularly distasteful manifestation of natural resistance to their encroachments, an obstacle to the further accumulation of the monopoly of violence on behalf of the State. The 'war on terror' is then actually a war on freedom and a war on Nature (including even human nature), an attempt to eliminate everything not under the control of a select few from the world. Terrorists are not the infantile, chaotic forces of Nature anti-terrorists pretend — in fact, typically they are tainted by the same authoritarian drives as those they seek to 'liberate' the rest of us from third-hand — but in the realm of the symbolic, what is truly real has long been eclipsed by its representation. For the world-eating Civilisers, their projections of free humanity are monstrous, cannibalistic — but even these are preferable to those, like Terminators, that "can't be bought off, can't be stopped, that just keep coming".

In his *Technological Society*, ex-French Resistance fighter Jacques Ellul pointed out that for a security state to work effectively, everyone must be treated as a potential threat, the better to identify and neutralise actual threats. Unfortunately, the machine logic of Efficiency means any resistance to this, stemming from a desire for autonomy, even privacy, moves citizens into the 'threat' category and tightens the security state's intolerant definitions of 'terrorism' still further.

As the supposed bearers of social disorder, today's terrorists are called monsters. Tomorrow, inevitably, we will all be called terrorists. To truly live as free human beings, we are given no option but to challenge this man-made prison of a society and to fight. In fighting, however, we must never forget how to live, never allow them to reduce us to the level of symbolic cyphers.

¹⁴ Daniel Quinn's *Ishmael* (Bantam, 1992), p.241.

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