

The Infernal Machine.

By Matthew Carr. New York: The New Press, 2006.

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Rarely is reading a book as disappointing as when you begin in vague agreement with the author only to finish by pulling your hair out in frustration. No history of terrorism is ever going to be without controversy: even the decision what to include in that book can be questioned. No self-respecting reader would expect an account that would offer comfortable moral certitude and unambiguous delineation of the world in the Manichean “us” and “them.” Everyone familiar with history would know that reality is a lot murkier and more sordid than the triumphalist accounts of the victors or the tragically heroic epics of the losers would suggest. And yet... the difficulty of writing an objective exposition should not be an excuse for not trying hard enough.

Mr Carr offers a history of politically-motivated violence against civilians perpetrated by non-state actors. The story here begins with Russian revolutionaries who, frustrated by their inability to rouse the peasantry against the Tsarist regime, assassinated the Emperor. It then detours briefly into the pre-Cold War years when assorted anarchists with indiscernible existential motivations wreaked more havoc in the public's imagination than in reality but also when the IRA campaign of terror eventually forced Britain into negotiations over Ireland. The bulk of the book comprises the Cold War era of revolutionary and nationalist struggles (often against colonial rule and often inspired by communist ideology), and the post-Cold War international terrorism which often yokes religion in place of discredited Marxism-Leninism. While the first half of the book is informative and balanced, the last 150 pages are practically unreadable as the author slides from being more or less an objective observer into an acerbic critic of the West who picks events and interpretations to suit his needs. All the more the pity because the underlying thesis is eminently plausible and deserves a better treatment.

Mr Carr is at pains to describe the official propaganda by the government and compare that with the motives of the perpetrators as revealed by their own writings and statements or by their comrades. The contrast is stark and validates the notion that one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter, a claim that is no less true for being such an over-used cliché. As Mr Carr documents, governments routinely describe terrorists as dark forces of evil, enemies of humanity, brutish beasts who revel in violence for its own sake, monsters who glorify mayhem and pursue nihilist apocalyptic agendas inimical to any civilized society, fanatical remorseless killers who can only be stopped by being hunted down and destroyed. This is what Mr Carr terms the “ritualized response” that transcends time, geography, culture, and regime type. Instead of trying to make sense of the phenomenon, this reaction obscures it and often justifies costly countermeasures that are sometimes more horrifying than the deeds they seek to prevent. Rather than trying to find an overarching definition of terrorism, Mr Carr wants to explore why it is that people engage in such violence: is it truly a pathological condition or can we understand it as coherent purposeful behavior by rational people?

The terrorists perceive themselves as noble and heroic participants in a struggle against overwhelming odds, a struggle in which the sacrifice of innocents is a necessity arising out of the severe asymmetry in power. Without the strength to confront the regular military, without recourse to the governing institutions that could redress their grievances, and without access to channels that would enable their voice to be heard, the perpetrators use terror to combat what they perceive as an unjust regime and force an indifferent society to snap out of apathy and pay attention. Mr Carr claims, with excellent reason, that the slaughter of civilians, no matter how repugnant, is almost always a tactic used in pursuit of a political agenda. In other words, it is far from being irrational.

Making sense of it only requires one to examine the context of the conflict and the options available to these people. The goals that such tactics can serve are diverse. Terror can undermine the prestige and the legitimacy of the government by revealing its incompetence and inability to provide security for its citizens, as Begin observed in relation to his campaigns against the British in Palestine (71). It can provoke a disproportionate response that would alienate the public further, as it did when the killing of two British servicemen's wives on Cyprus resulted in a vicious rampage around Famagusta (70), or when the murder of 130 Europeans by the FLN in Algeria resulted in the French forces killing over 5,000 Algerian Muslims in retaliation (93), or when the killing of eighteen civilians by the PFLP in Israel resulted in a military raid into Lebanon (190). Terror can also convince the government that its policies are too costly, thereby coercing it into a more accommodating stance, as it did in Ireland (60). It may even be necessary if a group is ignored by the government and has to demonstrate capability and willingness to inflict harm before its demands are taken seriously (93). Terror is the weapon of the weak who have no chance of surviving a showdown with formidable regular forces arrayed against them. Whereas this has led many to label these tactics as cowardly, they are nothing of the sort. Leaving aside why confronting a gun-toting insurgent with tanks should be considered brave, these tactics are rational responses to a severe imbalance of power. Few people would deem Washington's avoidance of a decisive battle with the British a sign of cowardice. Especially in the south, the "irregular" tactics of the American forces could easily be disparaged by the British in much the same way the Americans themselves could disparage the Indian guerilla tactics during the various wars with the natives. Cowardice simply does not play into it.

If terrorism is then a readily understandable tactic, then perhaps the goals in whose service it is used are irredeemably evil? Unfortunately, more often than not, this is not the case. In fact, in a great many cases one finds it hard not to sympathize with these goals. Whether it is the Irish or Algerian struggles for independence, the Palestinian's effort to secure their own state in the mess that is the Middle East, or the countless attempts to improve the lot of peasants or disenfranchised workers in Latin America, the goal of a just social order is hard not to admire even if one vigorously disagrees with how it must be constituted in practice. After all, some of us have no wish to live on the "happy island" of revolutionary socialism" (152) or in an authoritarian Islamic Puritania where my wife would be unable to show her face in public (93). And therein lies the greatest challenge to Mr Carr's thesis.

You see, in Mr Carr's world, there are really only two types of anti-government violent resistance. One is perpetrated by misguided youths whose goals are so idealistically naive or at odds with the rest of society, and whose means so pathetically inept, that they constitute no real threat to society even if they do manage to pull off the occasional spectacular media circus event. This category includes the early 20th century anarchists, the Red Army Faction (RAF) in Germany, the Red

Brigades in Italy, the Weather Underground in the U.S., and the Japanese Red Army, among others. To these terrorists, the ritualized response is severe overreaction: the costs society pays in curtailed civil liberties, political rights, and police action far outweigh the threat these groups represent. The other type shares goals and is supported by a significant segment of society even if the latter may be squeamish about the tactics. This category includes the Irish Republican Army, the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), the Basque Euskadi ta Askatasuna (ETA), and, of course, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The ritualized response often involves protracted and massively disproportionate violence by the authorities, the extent of which can surpass the carnage of the terrorists. Because it refuses to engage the grievances causing the violence and because these grievances are legitimized by being shared by so many, this response is wrong and counter-productive.

If all of this seems quite reasonable, then it may come as a surprise that Mr Carr never addresses the perennially vexing question of how one may go about dealing with this terrorism. The lurking assumption is that rational people should always be able to resolve their conflicts without resorting to violence. Once we understand the other side, we can open the channels of communication, and work to resolve our differences in a peaceful way. Violence is thus a result of racism, oppression, bigotry, and a distorted image of the other, and image produced by the ritualized response itself. But is this so? Understanding that a group wants to redistribute wealth and create a communist utopia or eradicate decadence and establish an Islamic Caliphate does not bridge the vast chasm between our view of what a society should look like and theirs. If we fail to convince them that ours is the right way and they similarly fail to convince us that theirs is the right way, then what? Do we just agree to disagree? Not when one can resort to violence and decide, once and for all, who is right. Some conflicts are too fundamental to be solvable by holding hands, the trick is to figure out which ones can be. Mr Carr is absolutely correct to insist that refusing to understand the people engaging in terrorist violence is bad policy. But he is also wrong in veering into the other extreme in which any forceful militarized response constitutes *prima facie* evidence of political and moral failure of the government.

And veer Mr Carr does for he goes to great lengths to buttress the heroic image of the terrorists. The examples are too numerous to list so a few illustrative ones must suffice. More often than not, Mr Carr portrays the terrorists as humane individuals engaged in a valiant struggle that forces them into appalling acts, acts they abhor but nevertheless recognize as necessary. So we read about RAF's Ulrike Meinhof's "aversion to bloodshed and her preference for non-violent operations" (145), and about FLN's Yacef Saadi who sheds "clearly authentic" tears while ruminating about a bombing of a dance hall he had ordered (99). No such humanity exists on the other side: the government agents "tended to regard expeditions in search of Mau May as a kind of safari in which they were allowed to kill and torture with impunity" (91) and testimony is proffered about the CIA providing recruits for the Nicaraguan Contras with "large commando knives which were much sought after, since 'everybody wanted to have a knife like that, to kill people, to slit their throats'" (235). In other words, Mr Carr essentially transposed the brutish image from the terrorists to the government.

Then there is the ubiquitous use of scare quotes: when not eschewed altogether in favor of "militant," "insurgent," or "guerilla," the word *terrorist* invariably appears enclosed in quotes, presumably to alert to reader to its subjective nature. The practice becomes more intrusive as relativism spreads to "the 'innocent' and the 'guilty'" (192) even as characterization of Somoza as

a “US satrap” (221) is apparently absolute truth for it lacks the quotes. Mr Carr is busy persuading us that terrorists are forced to use abhorrent tactics but then turns around and, apparently without noticing the irony, deploys the scare quotes: “the counter-terrorist is ‘forced’ to use the methods of the terrorist in order to defeat him” (101).

The heavy-handedness does not stop with the rhetorical flourishes or the grammatical tricks. The selective interpretation of facts often leads straight into conspiracy theories that would baffle students of history. The mask of objectivity comes off on p. 211: “From the mid-1970s onwards, the spectre of international terrorism became part of a sophisticated and wide-ranging right-wing propaganda offensive, which aimed to convince the Western public that the Soviet Union was still pursuing its dream of world conquest even as it edged toward peaceful coexistence.” What follows is the usual laundry-list of bogeymen (individuals and organizations), along with a selected list of events, all designed to create the impression of a well-orchestrated global manipulation of world events by Western capitalists. Mr Carr goes further than most: with a straight face he tells us that when they invaded Afghanistan 1979, the “Soviets fell into the trap” prepared by the U.S., which wanted to provoke that intervention and “convert Afghanistan into a Soviet ‘Vietnam’” (252). If this does not strike one as a bit far-fetched, then perhaps the idea that bin Laden's activities were covertly encouraged by the U.S. government so it could finance an expansion of the defense establishment, would (286). To enhance the sinister aura of a wide-spread conspiracy, Mr Carr even invents an entire discipline, “terrorology,” which was supposedly the domain of various right-wing research activities. In a sleight-of-hand that would be instantly recognizable to Orwell, Mr Carr labels his invention a “pseudo-discipline” (290). By denying the legitimacy of a discipline that does not exist, Mr Carr achieves precisely the effect he wants. The problem is that I, for one, have never heard of this so-called discipline, and I am a professional political scientist whose research is on conflict. Replacing the vast communist conspiracy with a vast capitalist-militarist conspiracy does little to enhance the appeal of Mr Carr's arguments to reasonably informed readers. The increasingly strident and venomous diatribes against the West that fill the last third of the book are sufficient to ruin whatever contribution it could have made to a rational debate on the topic.

In the end, Mr Carr perpetuates the very stereotype he accuses others of peddling. In the conclusion summarizing what he perceives as the atrociously incompetent, mendacious, and manipulative response by the West to 9/11, he writes “The decision to respond to the September 11 attacks through a global ‘war’ was a political and strategic *choice*. There were, and are, other means through which the world might have responded.” (323, emphasis mine). Turning now to the other side, he describes a rage caused by humiliation and indignation, a rage so overwhelming that “even the bloodiest acts of unofficial terrorism are invariably seen by their perpetrators as a legitimate *response* to the actions of their enemies” (325, emphasis in the original). In other words, we, the civilized, have choices. The others, the oppressed, have none. We can decide how to deal with a problem. They can only lash out in rage. This will continue until the civilized societies “address the wider causes and grievances that inspire [this violence] and accept their share of responsibility for even the most ostensibly ‘evil’ terrorist acts” (326). Aside from the vague exhortation to address the so-called “root causes” which are supposedly caused solely by misguided or even sinister Western policies, Mr Carr conveniently ignores the fact that a fervent belief in something, no matter how sincere, does not make it true. The willingness to sacrifice oneself or kill others does not convey legitimacy to one's goals. Its popularity in academic circles notwithstanding, “authenticity,” the idea that a subjective truth, if sincerely felt, is just as valid as an objective fact, is patently absurd.

If Mr Carr wanted to counter the myth that people who engage in political violence against civilians are uniformly evil, irrational, and incomprehensible to a civilized society, then he has succeeded. If he wanted to show that the ritualized government response is often a cure worse than the disease, then he has succeeded as well. But if he wanted to argue that understanding must lead to peace, then he has failed. What if we accepted that “the present eruption of Islamist violence is perhaps a symptom of an imbalance of power and the consequence of decades of manipulation, deceit and hypocrisy in Western foreign policy toward the Arab world” (327)? Leaving aside this thoroughly biased and blatantly incorrect assessment of the problem, would this acceptance lead us closer to a peaceful solution? How do we redress this imbalance of power? By unrestricted nuclear proliferation? By giving these states enough means to kill us so they can sleep tightly at night? Mr Carr is silent beyond the vacuous platitude of developing “a more mature and honest attitude towards violent conflicts.” And if he wanted to suggest that violence is never an appropriate response to violence, then he has failed too. While it may be true that a democracy should be held to higher normative and moral standards than an autocracy, it does not follow that it should commit suicide by tying itself into knots of self-doubt and self-recrimination. We could paralyze ourselves by trying to decide whose cause is “more just,” like Albert Camus did when he could not reconcile his revulsion to terrorism with his desire for a better social order in Algeria (102-105). The difficult question one must answer, and one that Mr Carr serenely brushes aside, is precisely what a democratic polity should do when faced with a violent conflict. In the film *The Battle of Algiers*, journalists question a French colonel about the extreme methods he is using to suppress the FLN. His response is to the point: “I would now like to ask you a question: Should France remain in Algeria? If you answer ‘yes’ then you must accept all the necessary consequences.” No regime, whether authoritarian or democratic, can have its cake and eat it too, not while retaining a smug certitude of its moral superiority.