Religion and Terrorism

Brighi, E.

This extract is taken from the author's original manuscript and has not been edited. The definitive, published, version of record is available here:

http://www.palgrave.com/de/book/9781137552808

The Handbook of Mimetic Theory

Terrorism and Religion

Elisabetta Brighi, University of Westminster
e.brighi@westminster.ac.uk

2015 will be remembered as the year in which France was struck by the worst terror attacks in its peacetime history. The combined number of fatalities from the 7 January attack at the *Charlie Hebdo* headquarters and the series of coordinated attacks of 13 November – which included a mass shooting at the *Bataclan* theatre – points to the worst level of terrorist violence on French soil since the anarchist wave of terror in the 1890s and the series of Algeria-related attacks of the 1960s and 1990s. Seen in historical perspective, the killing perpetrated in Paris may mark a new chapter within the escalating trajectory of political violence not only within France, but arguably within European and global society as a whole. When called to reflect on the significance of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, the renowned sociologist of late modernity Zygmunt Bauman noted that these events crowned 'the lengthy process of deregulation – indeed, the "de-institutionalisation", individualization and privatisation of the human condition', including of the condition of violence.[1]

Since his literary forays into global politics, the future of war and the rise of terrorism, René Girard's writings have inspired an increasing body of literature concerned with applying the insights of Mimetic Theory (MT) to contemporary terrorism.[2] His characterisation of the global age as hypermimetic and of contemporary violence as bearing the marks of the sacred and of an impending, escalating apocalypse must be read in the context of his life-long preoccupation with the mutual imbrications of religion, politics and violence.[3] In this short essay I will gesture at four fruitful areas of dialogue between MT and the analysis of terrorism. Firstly, mimetic theory can help making sense of the fundamental triangular dynamics at the heart of terrorisms old and new by pointing us to another triangular structure, that through which desire is mimetically constituted. Secondly, MT is especially well placed to illuminate the centrality of scapegoating and sacrifice in violent acts of terror – and in thus decoding the sacred subtext of 'fourth-wave', religious terrorism. However, thirdly, MT offers also conceptual tools to move beyond the reading of post-9/11 terrorism as 'religious violence', instead exploring resentment as an affect and mode of desiring central to contemporary acts of terror. Fourthly and finally, MT provides the potential, so far untapped by the majority of scholars in both MT and terrorism studies, for another explanation of terror that looks at the 'two sides of mimesis' and, far from stigmatising *a-priori* its violent and divisive nature, emphasises instead its social, empathetic and constitutive import.

Mimetic Theory, Violence and Terrorism

Girard's insight into the triangular and mimetic nature of desire need no summarising, except to note briefly that MT debunks the romantic illusion of a spontaneous, autonomous and 'authentic' self and shows instead the essentially free-floating and unattached nature of desire – a desire constantly shaped by models, invariably acquired or relinquished by imitation, and always *according to the Other*.[4] Rather than dyadic or monistic, according to Girard the fundamental structure of human relationships is triangular – connecting subjects, models and their mimetic object of desire in intimate and often violent ways.

Despite its conceptual promise, Girard's triangular schema has been only partially applied to the study of terrorism. Yet, precisely in this context, it commands careful examination. According to one of its foremost scholar, Alex P. Schmid, terrorism stands out from other forms of political violence, including warfare, in one crucial way. In their violent pursuit of political ends, terrorists typically identify two kinds of targets: primary targets and secondary targets. Primary targets are the terrorists' political opponents – these can be the state apparatus, its institutions, an occupying power, etc. Secondary targets, on the other hand, are those who will bear the actual brunt of the terrorists' violence, often innocent civilians and defenceless non-combatants. Terrorism rests therefore on a peculiar triangular relation of perpetrators, targets and victims.[5]

Drawing on Girard's insights, it is not difficult to see that the driver of this triangular relation is, quite simply, a form of mimetic rivalry. The competition over the bone of political power between states and terrorists casts them in the mimetic roles of, respectively, model and rival. This implacably leads to violence inasmuch as the object of rivalry remains non-divisible and exclusive, as political power often is, and the focus of the competition gradually shifts from the conquest of power to ending the opponent's very existence.

If this insight from MT helps explain the fundamental political dynamics driving terrorism, however, MT can also say something about counter-terrorism. Particularly, it can illuminate the typical tit-for-tat spiral of imitation that often threatens to morph terrorists and governments into 'mimetic doubles' or 'enemies in the mirror', against a background of escalating levels of violence. MT can solve the riddle of the slippery slope of counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency because it reveals that imitation is the engine of rivalry. Despite entering the conflict as sworn enemies and continuing to profess unreconstructed political, ideological and even religious differences, a violent reciprocity between government and terrorists is often created in and by the process. As Didier Bigo has recently noted concerning counter-terrorist measures adopted in the wake of the Paris double attacks, the mimetic dynamic at the heart of the response of the French government – that reciprocated bombs with bombardments – seems to be sadly repeating this pattern.[6] Further, echoing Girard's intuitions, it is precisely when the secret behind this reciprocity is kept hidden that violence can reach its highest intensity. It is when violence speaks not its name, but rather becomes framed as 'security', that we can see the mimeticism of desire assuming the most terrifying forms.

The Return of Religion, the Return of Terrorism?

Since the 9/11 attacks, terrorism has been most often equated with religious fundamentalism and interpreted in the context of the return of religion from that 'exile' imposed by Western secular modernity. Analysing the historical development of international terrorism, David Rapoport famously identified a 'fourth wave', that of religious terrorism, characterised by deadlier attacks, a more frequent use of suicide bombing, and the pursuit of non-negotiable aims defined in exclusionary religious terms.[7]

The terrain of 'sacred violence' is possibly the one most extensively explored by MT. It is not by coincidence that the literature on terrorism and MT has most often been mediated by, and imbued with, a concern with religion.[8] Girard's hypothesis that religion and politics may have their roots in this 'immense effort to keep the peace',[9] by ritualizing and thus containing of violence, seems to resonate with a form of violence whose *modus operandi* is the creation of scapegoats. The centrality of sacrifice is, in fact, a common denominator to the conceptual palimpsest of MT as well as terrorism, both old and new. Consider, for instance, what is possibly the oldest definition of terrorism available, namely Sun Tzu's ancient maxim of 'kill one, frighten ten thousand'. In 'fourth wave', religious terrorism, this sacrificial (and sacred) motive is doubly and explicitly invoked.

As suggested by Wolfgang Palaver, the return of sacrificial and archaic violence is only further exacerbated by the establishment of that 'empire of trauma' which anthropologists Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman identify as being a constitutive cipher of the contemporary moral economy.[10] Although the diffusion and appeal of victimary narratives has been often explained as specific to those 'religions of lament' of which Islam is one, the reality is that the sacralization of the victim has grown from an Abrahamic religious injunction to a ramified global political reality.[11] There is little doubt, however, that victimary narratives appeal most to individuals and communities who have experienced colonial oppression or the trauma of military defeat. The narrative of humiliation suffered by Arabs and Muslims at the hands of the US since 9/11 is a case in point.[12] As Jessica Stern has recently noted concerning ISIS, the grand narrative of humiliation and redemption 'most appeals to those who feel they have lost something'.[13] ISIS has publicly framed the rise of its jihad as a chance to finally 'remove the garments of dishonour, and shake off the dust of humiliation and disgrace, for the era of lamenting and moaning has gone and the dawn of honour has emerged anew'.[14]

Whether the narrative of contemporary terrorism stems from the return of archaic religion, from a radical condition of envy vis-à-vis the wealth of developed nations, or from a more political desire for retribution and, ultimately, justice remains, however, an open question. This question calls to the fore another aspect of MT which has been recently linked to terrorism – the globalisation of resentment in the hypermimetic world of late modernity.

The End of Mediations and the Globalisation of Resentment

Does the post-9/11 terrorism really stem from a politics of difference (especially religious difference) or from a frustrated desire for identity? First-wave analyses of terrorism from a mimetic perspective have tended to privilege the former. The latter, however, seems just as plausible an explanatory route. Rather than rooted in the 'second great moment' of Girard's theorising – namely, the scapegoat mechanism as the origin of political order – this analysis focuses instead on the coming together of the first and third main strand of Girard's work, concerning the escalation to the extremes of a mimetic pattern of desiring which, once freed of all mediations and constraints, has truly gone global.[15] Interestingly, this also opens up MT to a healthy and overdue dialogue with other branches of the Social Sciences similarly engaged in theorising the contemporary condition.

Within the sociology of late modernity, Zygmut Bauman and Ulrich Beck have both argued that late modernity is a time of individualisation, a tragic kind of individualisation.[16] Political theorist Wendy Brown has characterised the contemporary subject as permanently caught in a condition of radical envy and failure: envy experienced towards the model of the sovereign, liberal individual and failure to measure up to the idealised standard of the 'middle class'.[17] William Connolly has similarly identified in the globalization of capital – with its production of extreme inequality – and the globalization of contingency, the perfect breeding ground for a

kind of affect which Girard studied intently, i.e., *ressentiment*.[18] As brilliantly put by Brown, 'nakedly and tragically individuated, […] starkly accountable, yet dramatically impotent', the contemporary subject 'quite literally seethes with *ressentiment*'.[19] This diagnosis of late modernity is surprisingly close to that offered by Girard.[20]

Resentment and *ressentiment* are arguably at the heart of the moral economy of contemporary terror. Scholars investigating the psychology of terrorism have long agreed that resentment provides one of the fundamental drivers of radicalization. As Annette Baier noted, terrorism has the power to make resentment felt.[21] The contemporary crisis of the sovereign state and of its monopoly on legitimate violence has further led to a creeping informalisation, privatisation and, ultimately, individualisation of violence: individual self-radicalisation fuelled by resentment has thus become a path to violent empowerment and terror. In ways that parallel the ascendance of modern terrorism and its anarchist phase, scholars are now speculating about a 'fifth-wave' of terrorism in which self-styled terrorists, lone operators and self-radicalised individuals constitute the greatest concern to society. The new terrorist movements such as al-Qaeda and ISIS are being understood as global and yet diffused 'micro-structures' that combine 'global reach with microstructural mechanisms that instantiate self-organizing principles and patterns'.[22] The new terrorist networks rely on a diasporic and horizontal pool of volunteers prepared to act independently, sometimes with only the most tenuous association with terrorist movements. Violence today is thus increasingly carried out by individuals and inevitably influenced by affective patterns highly susceptible to the power of imitation.

If there is a thread common to the latest wave of terrorist attacks, including those in Paris, it is arguably the way in which personal resentments resonate with and are embedded in larger political narratives of failure and grievance, as mobilised by al-Qaeda and now ISIS.[23] And yet, there is an ambiguity at the heart of contemporary terrorism which is reflected in the gap between the two affective states of resentment and *ressentiment*: the former understood as desire to re-establish standards of justice in the face of odious forms of inequality and exploitation; the latter as a frustrated, misdirected and generalised sense victimhood and envy. Interestingly, in Girard's work these two affective states tend to fold one into the other. Yet, a more probing inquiry into this confluence as well as into its moral and political consequences appears to be warranted and, perhaps, even urgent.[24]

The Two Sides of Mimesis: Terrorism and Global Society

As once noted by neuroscientist and mirror-neurons expert Vittorio Gallese, there are always two sides to mimesis. While imitation in its acquisitive, appropriative mode can lead to violent outcomes, in its non-rival forms imitation is central to a host of human phenomena, such as empathy, responsible for social cohesion and cultural transmission.[25] Within MT, however, terrorism has often been interpreted through the analytical lens of acquisitive mimesis – as such, leading scholars to foreground its violent and tragic nature. By moving well past debates about rationality, however, an expanding body of literature within terrorism studies has recently focused on the latter aspect: the social, cooperative, and empathic face of terrorism. It may be appropriate then to finish this short chapter then by sketching out the features of another possible area for future dialogue between MT and terrorism studies.

At a time when most scholars were intent on explaining the terrorism of al-Qaeda through an analysis of its leadership[26] – not least in the attempt to validate their assumption that Osama bin-Laden was the 'mastermind', and hence main culprit, of the 9/11 attacks – other scholars started to question such expectations of hierarchy. Through a meticulous ethnographic inquiry scholars such as Marc Sageman and Scott Atran presented a view of Islamic terrorism as less concerned with the dogmas of this religion and its leaders, and more

dependent on a 'leaderless', horizontal congeries of networks of friends and 'bands of brothers'.[27] More recently, Andrew Silke and Rick O'Gorman have extended this line of inquiry by exploring terrorism, through evolutionary psychology, as a form of altruistic and prosocial behaviour. Noting a striking difference from ordinary criminals, Silke and O'Gorman observe that terrorists generally believe not only to be acting justly but, most importantly, to be serving others: 'a terrorist movement usually presents itself as a self-declared vanguard representing the interests of the aggrieved'.[28] Terrorism therefore is not only about difference, but it is also about identity; not only about scapegoating, but also about empathy.

As Oliver Roy noted, the recent double attacks in Paris seem to confirm that brotherhood, both in a literal and metaphorical sense, constitutes a central category within terrorism.[29] This may be a less comfortable side of mimesis to analyse – especially for a body of work, such as MT, that has tended to offer transcendental solutions to political problems on the basis of Girard's own dictum that 'politics can no longer save us'. Yet, without a more germane exploration of the moral value of resentment and the political uses of violence, terrorism may remain an enigma too uncomfortable to fully decode.

Bio note:

Elisabetta Brighi is Lecturer in International Relations in the Department of Politics and IR at the University of Westminster. She works at the intersection of International Security and International Political Theory and has co-edited, most recently, The Sacred and the Political (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

---

[1] Zygmunt Bauman, 'The Charlie Hebdo Attack And What It Reveals About Society', *Social Europe*, 13 January 2015, available at http://www.socialeurope.eu/2015/01/charlie-hebdo/.

[2] See, especially, Réne Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2010); Réne Girard, 'What is occurring today is a mimetic rivalry on a planetary scale: An interview with Henri Tincq', *Le Monde*, 6 November 2001. For applications, see Wolfgang Palaver, 'Terrorism vs Non-Violent Resistance', *Journal of Religion and Violence* 1, no. 2 (2013): 193-215; Elisabetta Brighi and Antonio Cerella (eds), 'Special Issue on Mimetic Theory and International Studies', *Journal of International Political Theory* 11, no. 1, 3-164; Elisabetta Brighi, 'The Mimetic Politics of Lone-Wolf Terrorism', *Journal of International Political Theory* 11, no. 1 (2015): 145-64.

[3] Réne Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987); and *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).

[4] See JM Oughourlian, *The Genesis of Desire* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2007).

[5] See Alex Schmid, *Political Terrorism. A Research Guide to Concepts, Theories, Data Bases and Literature* (Amsterdam: North Holland Publ. Company, 1984); and Alex Schmid, and Jan de Graaf, *Violence as Communication* (London: Sage, 1982).

[6] Didier Bigo, 'Comment briser le cercle de la vengeance?', *Mediapart*, 30 November 2015. Available at https://blogs.mediapart.fr/didier-bigo/blog/301115/comment-briser-le-cercle-de-la-vengeance.

[7] David Rapoport, 'The Four Waves of Rebel Terror and September 11', *Anthropoetics* 8, no. 1 (2002), available on http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0801/terror.htm.

[8] See, for instance, Marc Juergensmeyer (ed.) *Violence and the Sacred in the Modern World* (London: Frank Cass, 1992).

[9] Girard, *Things Hidden*, p. 32.

[10] Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Palaver, 'Terrorism vs Non-Violent Resistance'.

[11] See Harald Wydra, *Politics and the Sacred* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[12] Khaled Fattah and K.M. Fierke, 'A Clash of Emotions: The Politics of Humiliation and Political Violence in the Middle East', *European Journal of International Relations* 15, no. 1 (2009): 67-93.

[13] Jessica Stern, 'What Does ISIS Really Want Now?', *Lawfare*, 28 November 2015, available at https://www.lawfareblog.com/what-does-isis-really-want-now (20 December 2015).

[14] A. M. Al-'Adnani, 'This is the Promise of Allah', 29 June 2014, available at https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2014/06/.

[15] For the periodisation, see JG Williams (ed), *The Girard Reader* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003).

[16] Ulrich Beck, 'Living in the world risk society', *Economy and Society* 35, no. 3 (2006): 329-345.

[17] Wendy Brown, "Wounded Attachments," *Political Theory* 21, no. 3 (1993): 390–410.

[18] William Connolly, 'A World of Becoming' in Alan Finlayson, *Democracy and Pluralism* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2010), 229.

[19] Brown, "Wounded Attachments", 402. For an encounter between MT and political theory, see Elisabetta Brighi and Antonio Cerella, *The Sacred and the Political* (London: Bloomsbury-Continuum, 2016).

[20] See also Stefano Tomelleri, *Ressentiment: Reflections on Mimetic Desire and Society* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015).

[21] Annette Baier, 'Violent Demonstrations,' in R.G. Frey and C.W. Morris (eds.), *Violence, Terrorism, and Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 54.

[22] Karin Knorr Cetina, 'Complex Global Microstructures: The New Terrorist Societies' in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 22, no. 5 (2005): 214.

[23] Ramon Spaaij, *Understanding Lone Wolf Terrorism: Global Patterns, Motivations and Prevention* (New York: Springer, 2012)

[24] Some initial remarks in this direction are in Elisabetta Brighi, 'The Globalisation of Resentment', forthcoming.

[25] Vittorio Gallese, 'The Two Sides of Mimesis', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 16, no. 4 (2009), 21-44.

[26] Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

[27] See, for instance, Scott Atran *Talking to the Enemy: Faith, Brotherhood, and the (Un)Making of Terrorists* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010).

[28] Rick O'Gorman and Andrew Silke, 'Terrorism as altruism: an evolutionary model for understanding terrorist psychology', in Max Tayor et al. (ed), *Terrorism and Evolutionary Psychology* (London: Routledge, 2015), 158.

[29] Olivier Roy, 'France's Oedipal Islamist Complex', *Foreign Policy*, 7 January 2016.