FORUM

Terrorism, Evil, and Everyday Depravity

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This essay expresses ambivalence about the use of the term “evil” in analyses of terrorism in light of the association of the two in speeches intended to justify the United States’ “war on terrorism.” At the same time, the essay suggests that terrorism can be regarded as “evil” but only when considered among a multiplicity of “evils” comparable to it, for example: rape, war crimes, and repression.

The most recent appropriation of the term “evil” by President George W. Bush’s administration has caused me to hesitate in thinking about terrorism as “evil.” The Bush administration has been deploying the term in conjunction with “axis” and refers with the combination “axis of evil” to the al Qaeda network and the weave of individuals, organizations, and especially states that support it (Bush 2002). The association of “evil” with “axis” in this context is probably intended to evoke memories of World War II and use them to create a parallel that equates the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism” with the United States’ war against the Axis forces; hence, against Nazi Germany and its retinue of associates and followers, including in particular Imperial Japan, a point reinforced just after the attacks of 11 September 2001 by comparisons of these attacks and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

By equating its “war on terrorism” with the United States’ war against the Axis forces during World War II, the Bush administration has been obviously trying to secure, and this far has been quite successful (though the actual rate of this success is declining) in securing for itself a position of leadership in what it portrays by implication as a “just” and even “good” war. This leadership is not merely military but also ethicopolitical and the success of the Bush
administration’s assumption of an ethicopolitical leadership has to be attributed at least in part to its reliance on the idea of “evil.” Popularity, “evil” is an idea with religious, and in the United States quite Christian, undertones. As such, it justifies a relentless and prolonged struggle that must be engaged not only because “evil” ought to be fought but also because it is by persevering in the struggle against “evil” that one proves one’s moral mettle and worth (see Ricour 1967).

This is all quite righteous, and I am concerned about contributing to the cloak of noble rectitude being constructed by the Bush administration. If I am to discuss terrorism as “evil,” especially in an analysis of it that responds to the attacks of 11 September 2001 and to terrorist attacks that follow that date, I think that I might necessarily become complicit in a discourse that I do not condone. And yet, why should I let the Bush administration seize and control an extremely powerful ethical term, especially as it is becoming very clear that the notion of “evil” is in need of a post-Nietzschean restoration simply because of the enormous weight of human inhumanity (see, for example, Baudrillard 1993 and Lara 2001). We are surrounded by atrocities, both old and new, and could make use of robust and potent ethical concepts to think about them. “Evil” seems uniquely promising in this respect.

However, upon examination, the concept of “evil,” secularized, might not be too promising. As “evil” sheds the mythical representations that construe it as “pure” and make sense of it only in contrast to “pure goodness,” it becomes less clear what might qualify as “evil” (see Baumeister 1997). The debates in the Left following the attacks of 11 September about United States’ arrogance, let alone its actual role in the wretchedness of so many worldwide and how this contributes to the background conditions behind the attacks, illustrate the confusions that accompany the secularization of “evil.” In so complex a situation, the loss of the binary opposition of “pure goodness” versus “pure evil” seems to yield convoluted judgments (see Hitchens 2001).

In addition, “evil” secularized might be just a bit too abstract an idea for speaking about the specific modalities that human inhumanity takes, including terrorism, particularly of the 11 September kind, which is indiscriminate and disregards one of the most important constraints on the violence of war—the distinction between “civilians” and “combatants.” The abstractness of secularized “evil” is attested to, for example, in the work of Adi Ophir who, in an attempt to think of “evil” ontologically, exactly in order to be able to comment in a secular way on outrageous brutalities, works with “evil” as a noun rather than an adjective and declares that “evil” is part of what is and that it “is the set of vicious wrongs and their order” (2001, 11).

Abstractness removes one from the actual horrors of concrete “evil.” One stops witnessing when one abstracts so much and gets away from the phenomenological experience of the suffering of real people. Abstractness, in other
words, undermines the work of the imagination on which a “spectator” who is on the outside of some immediate horrendous event connects to embodied people in pain, as a case in point, on the morning of 11 September to the embodied people in the World Trade Center dying instantaneously just as they register shock, or dying more slowly as they try to escape, or as they fall out of melted and broken windows.

And yet, Ophir, though making abstract claims, is right: “evil” is ontological and thus part of what is; or as he seems to suggest, it is actually “evils” in the plural that should be conceived ontologically. Terrorism, I think, can be counted among the many “evils” that are part of what is, not necessarily better or worse than many others, even if more dramatic than some, staged often less as a military operation and more for the effects of its depiction in the media and especially its telecasted reproductions.

It is important to emphasize the extent to which the “evil” of terrorism is, most of the time, quite ordinary when compared with many other “evils.” There are monstrous “evils,” such as genocide or the kind of wholesale chattel slavery practiced in the United States prior to the Civil War (see Thomas 1993). There are also ignoble yet petty “evils,” such as social discrimination—an evil that is psychically wounding but does not necessarily have other effects on one’s material well being, on, for instance, one’s schooling, employment, housing, or judicial treatment. Terrorism cannot be likened to either of these in any way that illuminates the kind of “evil” it is. Corresponding or analogous “evils” to terrorism might be certain war crimes (see Gutman and Reiff 1999), perhaps paradigmatically rape in war, or rape more generally considered (see, for example, Bar On 1991, 107–25; Card 1996a, 5–18; and Card 1996b, 97–117).

The analogy between terrorism and rape can be developed in a variety of ways. Here I want to call attention only to a victimization usually suffered as a function of a group membership itself basically involuntary. Women, the primary victims of rape, are raped because they are women. Similarly, terrorist attacks target people because they can be assigned some specific group identity.

The analogy that can be drawn between terrorism and rape does not, I think, testify to something essentially masculine about terrorism. Violence in general has been and still is a “male” prerogative. At the same time, this is a contingent and changing fact. There have been in the past and there are currently women terrorists. But due to the habituated association of violence and “maleness” and the hegemony men have over the means of violence, women’s participation in terrorism has not been focused on and women continue to be rarely suspected of terrorism.

War crimes and rape are not the only “evils” that are like terrorism. There are other more prosaic “evils” also similar to terrorism. As I write this Palestin-
ians are committing suicide bombings almost everywhere in Israel, and almost every day, and the Israeli military is entering the Palestinian territories. The declared aim of the current massive Israeli military incursion is the curtailing of Palestinian terrorist attacks on Israeli citizens. These attacks have made life in Israel utterly miserable due to the actual suffering of people killed and wounded; the suffering of their families and friends; the fears that are preventing people from conducting even the business of everyday life; and because terrorist attacks have contributed to a deep economic crisis literally impoverishing a great number of Israelis, both Jewish and Palestinian.

I believe, however, that Israel’s military response to Palestinian terrorism demonstrates how incapable Israel is of giving up its repression of the Palestinians and participating in an honest political dialogue whose terms it does not dictate in advance. The “evil” of Israel’s repression of the Palestinians—usually not so obvious as it is right now, and for the past thirty-five years appearing in many ways administratively mundane—while not deem as such by many Jewish Israelis and not considered at all by many outside of Israel and Palestine, is not too different from the “evil” of Palestinian terrorism.

By saying that Israel’s prolonged repression of the Palestinians and Palestinian terrorism are similar kinds of “evil,” I do not mean to imply that since 1967 Israel has been involved in state terror with respect to the Palestinians (as is claimed, for example by Chomsky 1986), a terror, perhaps, such as that practiced by the Argentinean and Chilean juntas. While repression depends on violence and violence can cause feelings of terror, the violence behind repression is not always of the terrorizing version; that is, a violence for which no distinctions matter and in front of which no innocence is possible. Israeli repression has been, on the whole, sophisticated even when Israel has unleashed its military. There are always rules of engagement that, though not necessarily and lately not even frequently complied with, do restrict Israeli military personnel from terrorizing one and all Palestinians. The presence of such rules of engagement, probably admixed with self-interested or indifferent bad faith, prevents Jewish Israelis and others from appreciating the parity between the “evil” of Israeli repression of the Palestinians and the “evil” of Palestinian terrorism.

The importance of noticing that parity, or moral equivalence, exists between the “evil” of terrorism and the “evil” of repression, and one of the reasons for a careful differentiation between kinds of violence that permits unterrorizing and terrorizing varieties, is that this lets the term “evil” range over a diverse domain. Without the intricacy and richness arising out of the variance in the domain to which the term “evil” is applied, all “evils” become one, measured against an identical standard resulting, among other things, in absurd disavowals and repudiations, as well as fierce competitions for recognition of “evils” suffered.
Jewish Israelis and Palestinians vie with each other for such recognition and pursue their rivalry as a public relation campaign, thereby reifying the “evils” of terrorism and repression, a process that makes it so much harder to not use a single emblematic yardstick for “evil.” Yet there are many “evils,” and with the renunciation of the religious connotations with which the idea of “evil” is associated, it is urgent to think of “evils” as having only a Wittgenstenian “family resemblance” (1968, 32) to each other, making some comparisons possible but no more than that. Anything else has, right now, both improper ethical ramifications and dangerous political consequences especially to the very idea that “evil” is and ought to be subject to debate if the struggle against it is not individual but rather common and collective.

So I come full circle to my initial concern about complicity in an official discourse of “evil” that I believe is deployed manipulatively in order to mobilize support and silence opposition. While I have fewer doubts than before that one could think ethicopolitically productively about terrorism as “evil,” I feel even more cautious than before about how I go about this kind of thinking because the images of terrorism, repeated so many times, are beginning to stand in for “evil.”

Notes

1. In the United States, World War II is taken as exemplary (see Walzer 1971; Terkel 1984).

2. Note that in the recent past the term “evil” was relied on by another conservative Republican president of the United States, namely, President Ronald Reagan, who used the term “evil empire” to refer to the Soviet Union. President Reagan appealed directly to World War II (Reagan 1982).

3. The model for the kind of attack that took place on 11 September 2001 was developed initially by the Right Wing Zionist Irgun and Lehi in their fight against the British and for an independent State of Israel. It was elaborated further, first in Algeria during its decolonizing struggles against the French and later by the Palestinians in their fight with Israel. The Irgun/Lehi innovation for terrorism was to attack not only combatants but also civilians (see Rubinstein, 1987, 199–201; Bar On 2002).

4. I am borrowing the term from Hannah Arendt with a nod to Guy Debord and the Situationists so as to emphasize the tension of choices that the “outsider” to suffering has (Arendt 1958, 50–58, 175–81, 199–212; Debord 1977).

5. However, as has been commented, current warfare too is an audio-visual event (see, for example, Ignatieff 2000).

6. Linkages between social and other forms of discrimination tend to exist. Yet, as the experience of Jews under modernity in Central and Western Europe demonstrates, the relationship between various forms of discrimination is rather contingent, and social discrimination can go on at the same time that other forms of discrimination collapse (see Ben-Sasson 1976, 727–1016).
7. The violations of the rules of engagement are at times severe and involve acts that can easily be classified as war crimes. See http://www.gush-shalom.org/archives/forum.html (March 2002).

References
