

Twilight of the wolves: on terrorism, psychology and the Left

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This article is a reflection as well as a personal response to Islamic terrorism, psychology and the political Left. It discusses Nietzsche's notions of active and passive nihilism in response to a *New Statesman* article by Slavoj Žižek and the shortcomings of contemporary psychology in responding to the Arab world.

Keywords: jihad; Žižek; Nietzsche; the Left; Humanistic Psychology

Terrorist threats and liberal platitudes

I have to confess that, after the initial shock of reading of the Paris attacks in early January this year on the *Charlie Hebdo* and the *kosher* grocery shop, I found myself lingering on the details of the three killers – their background and their lives before the fateful day of the mass shootings. I tried to picture and feel what might have gone on in their minds before their decision to go on a rampage, destroying the lives of several people and dying in the process. Somewhat perversely, I felt compelled to do this *before* any other political, ethical and religious consideration. The two Kourachi brothers and Amédy Coulibaly were all in their early thirties, all of them living precariously, whether unemployed or doing odd jobs or involved in crime. I didn't go far in my attempt to get inside their minds because soon I began to feel dizzy: I imagined the adrenalin and fear, the screaming of the victims, the blood, horror and despair, the killers' decision to die as 'martyrs': I felt sick to the core. I turned to a different page of the newspaper for solace, for some wisdom, or even cheap comfort. I couldn't find any of this in Ian McEwan's eulogy of *Charlie Hebdo* journalists (McEwan, 2015). I find his now customary pontificating (often at unison with Rushdie and Amis since the beginning of the 'war on terror') infuriating. It is then sobering to recall Merleau-Ponty's reflections on the smugness with which we in the West forget that 'Western liberalism rests upon the forced labour of the colonies' (Merleau-Ponty, 1969, p. 1). And there is no doubt that the shadow of colonial France and the Algerian war of independence lingers in the background of the hatreds and tensions behind the Paris attacks, which religious narratives alone do not explain, but dangerously over-simplify. Echoes of the Algerian civil war did come to France in the mid-1990s, with several attacks in Paris, most of which failed, and in the deprived *banlieue* some of the Algerian fighters became heroes, including a young man, Khaled Kelkal, whose capture and killing by police was paraded on national TV (Hussey, 2015).

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Bread and poetry

There may be other reasons as to why I felt so compelled to ‘understand’ and, for a brief moment, even try to identify with the Paris killers. I’ve never been involved in serious crime. I did buy and imbibe illegal substances, travelled a few times without a ticket and shoplifted in one or two bookstores – all during those important formative years. Once in Bologna, the first cradle of scholarly life in our venerable Europe, I was chased in the street – I may have been 21 or so – by a Feltrinelli bookshop assistant who objected to my expropriation of Lautréamont’s *Songs of Maldoror* from their shelves. I run fast and so did he, both leaping on the cobblestones, our steps echoing through the stony arcades. Finally I gave up, fearing he would call a moustachioed, gun-toting *carabiniere*. I stopped, gasping for air. I gave the book back, apologized and blurted out in all truth: ‘I so want to read these poems but I have no money’. He let me go without calling the police. With a faint smile on his dutiful face, he said: ‘I can understand stealing *bread* if you are hungry; but *a book*?’ I’ll never forget these words for as long as I live. I think he meant that it’s okay to steal bread if you are hungry, and that books are for those who have money.

The Conservative London mayor Boris Johnson recently described jihadists as ‘wankers’ (Fogg, 2015), socially excluded young men who ‘can’t get women’ and so turn to violence and terror. As often with Mr Johnson, people laugh his comments off. It’s all jolly good fun, really. I have had my fair share of unemployment and ludicrously low-paid jobs. I have felt deep in my bones the deep unease of social exclusion. I too, if I’m honest, paid my occasional tribute to the god Onan, and Johnson too must have performed his own dutiful offerings, though admittedly he found other channels for the very same masturbatory prowess by posing as the new Winston Churchill on a ridiculous City bicycle. Perhaps it is a matter of personal taste, but given the choice between becoming a thoroughly self-serving, dangerous buffoon and masturbating in the privacy of one’s home, I’d go for the second option any time: it is more pleasurable, and it doesn’t harm those Londoners forced to pay the earth to rent a bedsit.

Having experienced social exclusion first-hand, I felt the righteous stirrings of resentment rising up in my belly against a society that favours the rich, rewards the unadventurous and is usually run by smooth-talking pimps. Some of the anger that this perception rightly or wrongly generated over the years was channelled into the student movement. During my years at the Liceo Classico and later at university, street-fighting, clashes with the police and skirmishes with right-wing militants were the order of the day. On one occasion, towards the end of summer, the national leader of the neo-fascist group scheduled a rally in the town centre near our campus. Many of us saw it as a provocation. We had to act quickly, but since no one was prepared to take the risk, my friend ‘Giorgio’ and I decided to give it a go. For the entire week before the rally we discussed how to disrupt the event. We came up with various plans, but none felt right. In the end it was decided: we would burst into the cordoned square, become magically invisible to the riot police and like Pink Panthers scare off the dishonourable bunch. It didn’t matter that Giorgio was overweight, and that I didn’t have a clue. We were high on adrenalin. Things would work out. Inspired by our gesture, the oppressed would run to the square and chase the fascist pigs out of our town for ever.

We didn't plan it right of course. It soon became a joke all over campus. Several people had seen us walking from the petrol station with a plastic container, and some of our flatmates even spotted the windproof matches and the bottles. We gave it up and laughed it off the next day over a beer or two. But it was no laughing matter; I knew it all too well, for I had lost a friend two years before, killed by a fascist youth who also happened to be my classmate at the Liceo. I also knew that many more of the clashes and skirmishes we carelessly got involved in could have turned tragic.

Good Morning, Night

I have never been a terrorist, but many of us cheered when, one day short of my 21st birthday, the Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro was kidnapped in broad daylight by the Red Brigades. It took me years to understand fully how delusional, tragically wrong and ultimately self-defeating the kidnapping was, a reflection that is shared by many activists of my generation, with some of the implications portrayed in the moving film *Good Morning, Night* (Bellocchio, 2003). The state showed its true face by refusing to negotiate with the *brigatisti* and placidly allowing Moro to be killed. The even sadder thing was that Moro, compared to many heads of governments the West has known in the post-war years, was in fact a decent man. And I didn't mention the five people in Moro's entourage who were killed during the kidnapping.

Some of the fellow travellers of those difficult years decided to capitulate and opt for the sort of bourgeois complacency that is in many ways parallel to the smugness and ineffectiveness of New 'Blue' Labour in the UK – the 'invertebrate Left' so brilliantly described by Perry Anderson (2009). Others went through prison and social isolation, and some of these came up with a renewed faith in our human potential. A great example is that of Renato Curcio, once head of the Red Brigades, who through years in prison understood the political and ethical mistakes of that era, and went on to create something positive and inspiring, including the publishing company Sensibili alle Foglie, and the championing of humane psychological work in the prisons and among the victims of psychiatric abuse and segregation. The name of the publishing company (meaning 'Sensitive to Leaves') comes from a letter that a woman, a victim of psychiatric abuse, wrote to one of the publishers:

She said that in spite of the things she had to endure (including psychotic drugs, physical restraint, insulin-induced coma, and electroshocks); in spite of all that had been done to assault her sensibility, she had somehow managed to maintain emotional responsiveness to her own pain and to the suffering of those locked up with her. She had also jealously kept her 'sensitivity to the leaves and all living things', which was to her the most important thing. (Sensibili alle Foglie, <http://www.sensibiliallefoglie.it/>, my translation)

Liberté, Égalité, Complicité

Joe Sacco (2015) penned a brilliant cartoon in response to the recent attacks. He felt sad at the death of his colleagues at *Charlie Hebdo* but didn't feel like 'beating his chest' (ibid.) in righteous anger and defiance. He also reflected on the fact that tweaking the noses of Muslims is an uninspiring way of using one's craft; that *Charlie Hebdo* fired cartoonist Maurice Sinet for allegedly writing an anti-Semitic strip. He is right: it has become impossible to voice even mild reservations to the political and military hegemony of Israel in the Middle East without being preposterously

accused of anti-Semitism. Automatically linking criticism of Israel to anti-Semitism is also very dangerous, as Tariq Ali (2015a) pointed out, for youths who may be historically less aware of the *Shoah* may accept the accusation with a simple shrug.

For *Charlie Hebdo* it is absolutely fine to insult Muslims, but any criticism of Israel is taboo. The tragic offshoot of the West's complicity with Israel is the vanishing of any hope for the Palestinians, for no one dares any longer to dream of a Palestinian state.

Sacco invites us to consider how disastrous a violent, confrontational response would be towards Muslims perceived as different from 'us', a response that is gaining popularity as neo-fascists and populist racist groups gain ascendancy all over Europe.

It would appear that no coherent and substantial response or analysis to the real and present danger of Islamic terror has come up from the political Left. In fact, responsibility for both the catastrophic resolution to join George W. Bush in his senseless 'War on Terror' in 2003 and to send the British army to Helmand province in Afghanistan in 2006 belong to ex-'leader of the Left' Tony Blair. There has been virtually no response from the philosophical/psychological humanistic field represented in these pages, either. The official political Left has given in to the desublimated joys of sniffing beatifically, from time to time, the heady exhalations of government seats. And it seems that Humanistic Psychology is barely able to conceive a concrete social and political dimension outside of our own precious 'self-actualizations', 'high levels of consciousness' and varied degrees of unverified 'authenticity'. And so we assuage our guilt with worthy ecological pronouncements or protestations in favour of woolly notions of 'difference'. But neither the political contemporary Left nor the humanistic tradition possesses a true understanding of Muslim culture. This dawned on me painfully when working over a period of six months with a Muslim client in his early thirties, whose 'existential crisis' and 'need for independence' I had read entirely within the Euro-American frame of reference of my psychotherapy training. Needless to say, I failed to meet him.

Twilight of the wolves

The distancing between Islam and the West happened on both fronts, however, and for a series of reasons (including the White House's unconditional complicity with Israel's ongoing and shameless violation of human rights). In the early 1980s, the playwright and writer Jean Genet (2003) had registered the first signs of a metamorphosis that would slowly turn the Palestinian *fedayeen* from a libertarian-Marxist guerrilla movement, on a par with other liberation groups across the globe, to one increasingly married to Islamic militancy (Bazzano, 2012). The word 'Palestinian' used to come before 'Muslim' (or 'Christian' or 'Secular', and whatnot) and was strongly and more accurately associated with a displaced people, robbed of their dignity and who, as such, were a powerful reminder of the condition of all oppressed and displaced people all over the world. It was only later that the Palestinian cause took on, and was associated with, a distinctly Islamic identity.

To describe the phenomenon he had so presciently observed, Genet used an image that is both striking and menacing. It is a common French expression for dusk: *entre chien en loup* (between dog and wolf), a time when one cannot tell the difference between dog (*chien*) and wolf (*loup*), but also a time of uncertainty when one creature may transmute into the other. When Genet hesitantly suggested this to the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) leaders, he was met with a chorus of disapproval.

He never mentioned it again but recorded the date of his insight: 'As one of their leaders told me today, 8 September 1984, that such a thing was impossible, let's pretend this digression was never either written or read' (Genet, 2003, p. 255).

A thief, prostitute and hoodlum, Genet neatly represents the *other* at the margins of a dominant culture, one whose very existence puts into question the sacrosanct notion of identity. It is tempting to call him a 'nihilist', one who blatantly fails to respect the principles on which civilized society rests. The word 'nihilist', once rarely mentioned apart from tales of nineteenth-century Russian anarchists, has recently gained greater currency, and is often applied to Islamic terrorists. But we need to be clear as to what nihilism is, and for that purpose I would like to turn to one thinker who saw through the phenomenon of nihilism: Friedrich Nietzsche.

Active and passive nihilism

For Nietzsche (1990), nihilism manifests as *denigration of life*: it gives more importance to dogmatic accounts of life rather than life itself. It does so in three ways: via religion, morality, and traditional philosophy. *Religion* supplies consoling explanations of our bewildering human situation through notions of sin, redemption and creation. *Morality* opts for a table of commandments and prescribed behaviours, a seemingly firm structure more reassuring than the scarier option of ethical freedom and responsibility. *Traditional philosophy* substitutes a difficult and daring *will to create* with a *will to truth* based on fear.

'Will to truth' rests on the notion that truth is already there somewhere, pre-existing from eternity, prior to our ever-new human experience, and all we have to do is find it. The nihilism of religion, morality and philosophy betrays, for Nietzsche, an elemental *fear of becoming*, i.e. fear of the unpredictable and dynamic dimension into which we are thrown. The nihilist considers becoming – what phenomenologists will later call *Lebenswelt* or the life-world – to be nothing (*nihil*). Why? Because life is imperfect, impermanent and perishable, especially when compared to the imaginary perfection, permanence and eternity of an abstract notion of *being*. The nihilism inherent in religion, morality and conventional thought gives frightened people the illusory fortitude of a providential order, and a totality that may or may not be called 'God'. Nihilism is appealing because it exempts us from the troubles of experiencing our life first-hand and then *describing* it (as phenomenologists will later say), of *acting* freely and responsibly, and of *creating* new values. We are then let off the hook, as it were, and can placidly walk through life half-asleep, applying existing explanations of the world in the same way as we pick recipes from a book.

The originality of Nietzsche's position is twofold: he turns the notion of nihilism on its head, from 'lack of values' to excessive dependence on them at the expense of lived life. He also states that there is *no turning back* from nihilism. Nihilism must be wholeheartedly, actively embraced. This is a task that neither religion nor philosophy and least of all morality can perform: it is a task for a *psychologist*, or a physician of culture. He draws the line sharply between *passive* and *active* nihilism. Passive nihilism is what we normally do, i.e. accept a logocentric, metaphysical explanation of the world. Active nihilism implies *seeing through* the inherent emptiness of all our notions of truth, recognizing them as expressions of our creaturely survival. As Gianni Vattimo puts it, 'we have projected the conditions of our preservation as predicates of being in general' (Vattimo, 2008, p. 136).

I referred above to the practice of active nihilism as the province of the psychologist; this may sound strange to some readers, but it is pertinent, for one of the things active nihilism can achieve, following the path traced by Nietzsche, is the dismantling of one of our most cherished illusions: the existence of the self. It is reductive to read Nietzsche as an ‘individualist’, for the individual is not the final kernel of decision and responsibility. On closer scrutiny, what our philosophical tradition refers to as ‘individual’ is really a *dividual* (Nietzsche, 1994), beautifully defined by Vattimo (2008, p. 163) as ‘an instance that breaks through’.

Psychoanalysis-while-u-wait: a response to Žižek

Commenting in the pages of the *New Statesman* magazine on the Paris attacks, the Slovenian philosopher Žižek gets this crucial distinction between passive and active nihilism spectacularly wrong (Žižek, 2015). He reads ‘active’ literally, as in ‘activist’ or ‘being active’, preferring action to contemplation, i.e. running around shooting people with a Kalashnikov, actively giving the extra kick to an ailing civilization. By contrast, passive nihilists are presumably those who flick through TV channels munching on crisps while hearing news of more wars and massacres. To portray the passive nihilist, Žižek quotes Nietzsche and his notion of the ‘last man’.

I was astounded by the stupidity of this interpretation, and infuriated by his opportunistic reading of Nietzsche, a thinker he systematically criticizes for having heralded Nazism. This is an ignorant thesis that is sadly shared by many on the British Left, with the honourable exception of T.J. Clark and Keith Ansell-Pearson. It is comfortably summoned by Žižek to substantiate his thesis. The *Last Man* is that ‘apathetic creature with no great passion or commitment [who is] unable to dream, tired of life, he takes no risks, seeking only comfort and security, an expression of tolerance with one another’ (Žižek, 2015).

True, Nietzsche’s writings lend themselves to numerous interpretations. I have plundered from that Nietzschean notion myself in the pages of this journal (Bazzano, 2014). But there is one important element that cannot be misconstrued: the advent of the Last Man is *unavoidable*, and for Nietzsche this must be embraced and worked through, alongside the death of God and the demise of His shadows. There is profound sadness in registering this debacle, but also a sense of tragic joy, for then we are presented with the urgent task of creating *new* values. These are necessary for the healthy dream of a utopian future, what Benjamin (2012) calls ‘the living source of humanity’s biological force’ (p. 790, my translation). Without them, all we have is ‘the murky pond out of which the stork pulls babies’ (ibid.).

There is a fundamental difference between Nietzsche’s creation of new values and Žižek’s appeal to a ‘Cause’ with a capital ‘C’. What Žižek invites us to do is effectively *regress* by clutching at the last shadow of God. I don’t read his position as Lacanian, Hegelian or even Marxian; I see it as *Wagnerian*. The youthful radicalism of Richard Wagner (a musician Žižek idolizes) gave way to the embracing of a life-denigrating version of Christianity in the style of the late Schopenhauer. Wagner went from generous if confused Bakunian and bohemian longings to the cosy certainties proffered by organized dogma and the narcissistic reassurance of setting overblown tales of redemption to music for an audience of privileged cultured philistines – that very same uninterrupted lineage that goes from Bayreuth to Glyndebourne. Briefly stated, Žižek is a neo-Wagnerian peddler of certainties, but he is unique in providing incendiary and

counter-intuitive sound-bites from the safety of his professorial armchair. A cover of one of his books has him standing in front of upturned, burned cars during the London riots. Never mind that he criticized the rioters for not having a coherent political programme or a solid leadership, which is the same trite argument made in the course of history by Stalinists whenever a genuine, spontaneous revolt takes place. As a sharper commentator among a herd of somnambulist scribblers, Žižek is thoroughly engaging. But he is part of that same club of dogmatists – whether believers in the Almighty Market or in a vengeful version of Islam – who want us to embrace a Cause.

According to Žižek:

When a Buddhist encounters a Western hedonist, he hardly condemns. He just benevolently notes that the hedonist's search for happiness is self-defeating. In contrast to true fundamentalists, the terrorist pseudo-fundamentalists are deeply bothered, intrigued, fascinated, by the sinful life of the non-believers. One can feel that, in fighting the sinful other, they are fighting their own temptation. (Žižek, 2015)

The above portrayal of the 'Buddhist' is almost flattering, if it were not cartoonish and naive. It is an image stuck to Indian Buddhism of two millennia ago. Where on earth are these placid, otherworldly Buddhists? And rather than asking the truly important and, in this political climate, *taboo* questions (e.g. 'Why are these young men driven to commit terrible acts?'), the terrorists get the psychoanalysis-while-u-wait treatment, free of charge, care of Slavoj. Boris Johnson calls them 'wankers'; Žižek gives them Lacanian treatment. Is Slavoj Žižek the Boris Johnson of the Left? Both provide great entertainment; both are specialists in the populist art of the tactless sound-bite. Žižek chastises 'false Leftists' who, in his view, denounce 'any critique of Islam [as] an expression of Western Islamophobia'. He goes on to say:

The result of such stance is what one can expect in such cases: the more the Western liberal Leftists probe into their guilt, the more they are accused by Muslim fundamentalists of being hypocrites who try to conceal their hatred of Islam. This constellation perfectly reproduces the paradox of the superego: the more you obey what the Other demands of you, the guiltier you are. It is as if the more you tolerate Islam, the stronger its pressure on you will be. (Žižek, 2015)

The above statement forswears political analysis for third-rate psychologism. But there is more. Echoing some of the most cartoonish descriptions on 'the clash of civilizations', he moralistically attributes the split 'between the First World and the fundamentalist reaction' along the lines of the opposition 'between leading a long satisfying life full of material and cultural wealth, and dedicating one's life to some transcendent Cause' (Žižek, 2015), this time summoning W.B. Yeats and his poem 'Second Coming', where he famously wrote, 'The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity' (cited in Žižek, 2015), and adapting it to our split world of anaemic liberals and heated fundamentalists. But the latter are not truly driven by impassionate conviction, Žižek concludes. Why would they feel 'threatened by a stupid caricature in a weekly satirical newspaper?', he asks rhetorically; because, he answers 'psychoanalytically', 'they themselves secretly consider themselves inferior' (Žižek, 2015).

But *Charlie Hebdo's* caricatures were not 'stupid': they were gratuitous and offensive. And to explain away the psychology of the jihadists in this way is to gloss

over the profound ethnic, social and economic wounds inflicted by the West, which is sloppy as well as unforgivable for someone who calls himself a ‘Lacanian Marxist’.

I agree with Žižek on one point: the rise of Muslim fundamentalism is a sign of the failure of the Left – its shameless capitulation to the market and the corporations – a failure of praxis as well as theory. We are effectively living in what Tariq Ali (2015b) aptly calls ‘the twilight of democracy’; and without a resurgence of the Left – both in the West and in the Arab world – the future looks very grim indeed.

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Notes on contributor



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