

At the Risk of Repeating Myself, Lumpenterrorism is Now with Us

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It will come as no surprise to my regular readers to find here an idea I have been advancing for several years, and on which I have written at greater length in the recently published *Terrorisme pour les Nuls* [Terrorism for Dummies]. Repetition being a key element of pedagogical technique, I offer a further new account of this work.

Karl Marx invented the concept of the lumpenproletariat (the “ragged-trousered” proletariat, the underclass) in his *German Ideology*, published in 1845.

For a long time, terrorism was an affair of state. You needed to obtain support, aid, assistance, training camps, weapons, finance, passports, and the other means of survival from a state in order to be able to operate. The great empires thus had “push-button” access to an apparatus that allowed them to launch, or to pause, a campaign of terror depending on their needs, or on their changing alliances.

Since 1979 and after the fall of the Shah of Iran, and the 1989 fall of the Soviet Union, the appearance of a new form of terrorism, unlike previous versions, has changed the game. Besides the issue of what we thought we should call Al Qaeda, we have seen the return of more or less independent actors to the terrorism mix.

This has been intensified by the way the Internet can act as an incubator, accelerating the process of radicalization, and by the fact that some of the new actors are no longer imported from outside, but are in fact born inside the Western target countries. Embedded terrorists have gradually replaced imported agents—when they are not simply converts from within the circles of Islamic radicalism, which is far from being the main perpetrator of terrorist acts, at least in the West.

With Khaled Kelkal in 1995, and then the Roubaix Gang in 1996, France has had a painful experience of these hybrids—part gangsters, part terrorists—who slip between the administrative cracks and escape the attention of the various organizations of the state, which seem incapable of mounting a coherent response. Sixteen years later, Mohammed Merah reminded us that the same process was still going on. Indeed, a lengthy reminder had already appeared in a study into Radicalization in the West, the *Homegrown Threat*, carried out for the NYPD in 2006 by Mitch Silber, and supervised by Alain Bauer:

While the threat from overseas remains, many of the terrorist attacks or thwarted plots against cities in Europe, Canada, Australia and the United States have been conceptualized and planned by local residents/citizens

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who sought to attack their country of residence. The majority of these individuals began as ‘unremarkable’—they had ‘unremarkable’ jobs, had lived ‘unremarkable’ lives and had little, if any criminal history.

The threat now comes from hybrid groups and opportunists capable of rapid transformation. There is a new criminal melting pot combining religious fanaticism, massacres, piracy, and trafficking in people, drugs, arms, toxic substances, and diamonds. We are seeing the emergence of a spectrum of criminal terrorism, a kind of gangsterrorism, involving people who no longer fit into the neat pigeonholes so cunningly prepared for them. Lacking the imagination to grasp such complexities, the bureaucratic structures try desperately to make the realities fit in with their view of how things should be. But the realities rarely oblige.

In the United States, Canada, Belgium, Israel, and France, we are now seeing microattacks, generally carried out by one or two operators armed with whatever comes to hand—knives, machetes, or vehicles, and sometimes hunting weapons or the equipment typical of small-time crooks and, less frequently, automatic weapons.

A new terrorism has come into being. The core of which is made up of radical Islamists who have perverted their religion, but there are also nonideological groups, such as mafia-style gangs, who are willing, particularly in the Sahel, to act as subcontractors, while maintaining their own trafficking activities.

Hundreds of young people, caught between two cultures—born or raised in the West, but unsure of their roots—have set off to fight in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Bosnia, Syria, and Libya, and they do it in the name of a cause and of a faith, taking part in a war they did not start, in a struggle they believe to be just. The question we must ask is not about what to call them (terrorists, resistance fighters, combatants), but about the way in which their eventual return and the danger they potentially represent can be managed.

The appearance of the lumpenterrorists is more worrying. They provoke the same media outcry as much more serious attacks, but most significantly, early detection of them is extremely difficult.

Faced with the increasing difficulties of planning operations in the West, the big players of amorphous Jihad have turned to inciting isolated individuals to act in their stead, using whatever means they have at their disposal. It is not accurate to describe these people as “lone wolves”—the unthinking use of this catchall term in the fight against terrorism actually adds to the general confusion.

They may share the same interests or the same “faith,” but the “lone wolf” depends on no other person. According to Ramon Spaaij:

Lone wolves are characterized by the fact that . . . they operate individually [and] . . . do not belong to an organized terrorist group or network . . . and their *modi operandi* are conceived and directed by the individual without any direct outside command or hierarchy. . . . The lone wolf terrorist is typically someone who acts out of strong political, religious, or ideological conviction, carefully plans his or her actions, and may successfully hide his or her operations from those around them.

Spaaij also differentiates the “lone wolf” from the “lone madman,” whose aims are intrinsically idiosyncratic (a word defined by Webster’s Unabridged as “peculiar to the individual”), completely self-centered, and deeply personal.

Thus, to take the most coherent examples of this, we might look at those lone wolves who have their own ideology, expressed and generally made known in the form of a work of reference, who have or make their own arsenal of weapons, and who carry out their activity completely alone: Theodore “Ted” Kaczynski, the Unabomber, active in the United States from 1975 to 1996; David Copeland, a nail-bomb specialist in London, in 1999; and Anders Breivik in Norway, in 2011. To these can be added the known assassins of public figures such as Robert Kennedy and Pim Fortuyn, who are believed to have had individual motives and operational methods that allow them to be classified in this group.

In all the other cases, we do see lone operators, but they are lone operators who maintain strong links to structured groups, and have regular, direct, and indirect contact with preachers, or with the leaders of terrorist groups; this leads us to classify them with autonomous, but nonindependent groups. A newspaper’s special envoy is not a “lone journalist;” he or she is simply working at a distance from the editorial board.

Similarly, especially at the present time, there are the lone madmen, whose problems are recognized and clearly identified, but generally underestimated. We have moved, in the space of a few years, from hyperterrorism to gangsterrorism, and on to lumpenterrorism. Each wave leaves behind its dregs, who survive somewhere, perhaps within some group that manages to outlive the others.

Despite being less effective and less spectacular than the large-scale attacks of the period from 1996 to 2004, the nature of these microattacks—little more than gnat bites—is such that they impact very noticeably on everyday life, especially if each microevent, however dramatic, is presented in a way that makes it sound like another 9/11.

The paradox of what we are seeing at present is that it seems more like a series of death spasms than the arrival of a new wave or a new generation; the latter seem to prefer to engage out on the ground, as in Chechnya, Kosovo, Libya, Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere.

Paradoxically, beyond the horrific facts and the suffering of the victims and those close to them, it all looks more like the death throes of a cycle that began with the 1996 Declaration of War against America, rather than any process of renewal. A new and different phase has begun, based around known and recognized causes. But we must never lose sight of the essential issue, lying beyond even the tension surrounding the Palestinian question. What we are now seeing is, above all, a problem arising out of the relationships between the Sunni monarchies and their Western allies, who are increasingly clearly being seen as “hypocrites,” a particularly insulting term in the language of Arab diplomacy. After 1979, the United States abandoned all its historic allies, and then belatedly changed its mind again. The appearance of ISIL, a powerfully equipped and barbarous mercenary army, seems the clearest Sunni response to the United States over the thaw in its relations with a nuclear Iran. The

Wahhabis have no intention of idly watching the resurrection of the Persian Empire, even if it means moving closer for the moment to the new Ottoman Empire that is under construction.

Then, there will probably come a change of alliances—China is ready and waiting.