

Thoughts for Proto-Insurgents in the Age of Terrors

Preface by Rabble to 'The Veil Drops'

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Contents

Legitimacy in the terror age: counter-insurgency	4
The danger of subversives	5
We proto-insurgents	6
Martial vs. Military	6

We repost below¹ a long text “The Veil Drops: anti-extremism or counter-insurgency?” from the third issue of Return Fire magazine. We think it is rich with insights, information and ideas about the situation we are living in today and how we can fight. But we know not everyone has the time and space to dive into a long and complex read like this. So, in order to tempt more people to read it in full, we have added a short preface of our own. This is very much our own personal response, highlighting and developing a few ideas that particularly resonated for us. We do recommend anyone to read the original text in full.

Preface by Rabble: Thoughts for Proto-Insurgents in the Age of Terrors

We live in a world at war. This is nothing new: for thousands of years, civilisation has been nothing but “a continual war against the Earth and humans as part of it”, colonisation, desertification, slavery, massacre, pillage and plunder. What is changing, in Europe, is just that the war is now unavoidably to be seen at “home”: the veil drops. The obvious violence is no longer “elsewhere” at the frontiers and in the colonies.

The authorities call this “war on terror”, whereas really it’s a “war of terror”. The atrocity-dealing death-gangs that pledge allegiance to islamic states or free market capitalist states are two sides of the same coin. In any case, they are just the most obvious faces of the violence that rages everywhere every day, the “pervasive terrorisation” that underlies every aspect of this “world founded on tortures religious, colonial and psychological”.

This essay by Return Fire surveys the deep structures of this every day war of terror. First of all, it gives us a serious rundown of four of the main terror structures we face:

the terror of the borders: that “prefers a migrant drowned than non-registered or imprisoned rather than ‘smuggled’, that seeks to create a terrified and controllable underclass workforce disciplined by fear, racism, precarity and the whims of immigration bureaucrats and police”;

the terror of climate security: as 10% of the world’s population face displacement from floods and storms, in a world without forests, of oceans where more plastic waste swims than fish, and where every catastrophe is mobilised by corporate states presenting themselves as our saviours, and whose solutions are increasing hyper-industrial “green technologies”, genetic engineering, geo-engineering, and new colonial resource wars;

the terror of crisis: austerity, poverty and the end of welfare as “in Europe, the social democratic model of calculated concessions to placate the populace is whisked away piecemeal, replaced with even more debt-slavery and anti-depressants”, protected by private security armies and militarised police;

the terror of terror: death-cults locked in profitable symbiosis with the anti-terrorist security industry, rising para-states and nationalist paramilitaries, mass media inducing paranoia and anxiety.

However, as we list the horrors, it’s crucial to understand that, at its core, terror is not about killing and other physical destruction, but about psychological impact. The aim is not

¹ *The Veil Drops can be downloaded as a pdf here: <http://rabble.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/05-23-The-Veil-Drops-HI-RES.pdf> It can also be read on The Anarchist Library. The full Return Fire 3 magazine and previous issues, including the articles referenced in [square brackets] in the text below, can be read, downloaded and printed via 325.nostate.net/?tag=return-fire*

to wipe out the population, but to subdue and tame it, all the better to dominate and exploit us. To put it another way, as RF highlights throughout, the objective of all good military and governmental strategy is to win our “trust”, secure our acceptance of the regime’s “legitimacy”. To do this, certainly, it may be necessary to kill, disappear, torture, imprison, etc., a few, while seeking to quell and co-opt the majority.

Legitimacy in the terror age: counter-insurgency

Legitimation, winning the consent of the population for rule, has always been the basic task of governance. But the techniques and methods vary greatly. This essay’s contribution is to give us some sharp analysis of contemporary legitimation techniques in the age of terrors.

First of all, as we shift from a state of peace (i.e, war is “elsewhere”) to a state of continual terror-war, the whole of society becomes militarised, transformed into an “armed camp”. In fact, with direct combat now increasingly carried out by mercenaries or drones, this doesn’t mean mass conscription but rather “a matter of inducing the population to identify with a certain kind of order, the imposition of which takes place within the national borders as much as outside them” (quoting CrimethInc). This is an order in which, as a population at war, we spy, police, grass on ourselves, accepting every demand of the war-spectacle and war-economy: “militarised thinking spreading through life” (quoting some German anti-militarists).

To understand how this works, a useful lead comes from studying the field of “counter-insurgency”: specifically, ideas and techniques developed in the US (and elsewhere) by military and political strategists, and their academic collaborators, in response to insurgencies both at home (e.g., the black power and other domestic rebel movements of the 1960s) and on the colonial battlefields.

In essence, counter-insurgency means identifying “(nascent) social tensions” within a population that could give rise to rebellion, and then heading them off by: (a) targeting “(suspected) dissidents”, making predictable and undermining their actions, or removing and destroying them altogether; while (b) co-opting the majority, where this means “convincing people that there are avenues to address their grievances; if they were only to put their energy into trusting or adjusting the system as it exists, that would be the entity which can best care for their needs.” The basic principle, then, is “to restructure the environment to displace the enemy from it”, and so to “COIN a passive population”.

The role of intelligence is clearly paramount. There is a very interesting discussion on the US “Human Terrain Systems” (HTS) programme, in which the US military employed ethnographic researchers in Iraq and other warzones, applying social network analysis to map the “human terrain” of the subject population, its connections, allegiances and potentials for submission or rebellion. In fact the basic ideas developed in the 1960s in response to domestic unrest. Once mapped, state agencies can intervene in the terrain in various ways, from funding NGOs to provide welfare services (e.g., replacing the social programmes “that combative entities such as the Black Panthers briefly pioneered before

they were smashed by the State”), through feeding in drugs and weapons to exploit internal tensions, to radioing in the “airborne armed response team”.

The danger of subversives

RF here raises a very interesting question for us. Why do states devote serious energy to targeting anarchists, or other extremists, when we are so far from threatening the “overthrow of ruling elites”? In fact why, as we have seen in the recent UK “spycops” affairs, do they feel it necessary even to infiltrate “the most innocuous ‘peace’ or ‘justice’ groups”?

One answer is connected to the way that counter-insurgency “does not look at subversives in isolation from the wider public.” Repressive forces with any nous understand that the danger of a subversive action is not the usually minimal damage it causes directly, but if it can prompt or provoke others to take action that can rapidly multiply and spiral through the wider “human terrain”. Subversives are marked “not because we/they pose the biggest threat in and of itself, but because we/they have tendencies to push the more unmanageable elements further during peaks of social tension”. Here RF cites the historical example of “anarchist migrants serving as detonators in 19th century labour struggles from the U.S. to Argentina”. Although they also note another reason: targeted subversives may “serve as a sufficient visible scapegoat for those elements, to be made an example of.”

An illuminating reference here is the RAND corporation counter-insurgency text ‘War by Other Means’, which divides uprisings into three phases: proto-insurgency, small-scale insurgency, and major insurgency. During the first, subversives’ capacity is “small, narrowly based, vulnerable, and incapable of widespread or large-scale violence. Proto-insurgents may be barely noticeable, not seen as having the potential to inspire insurgency, or dismissed as criminals or inconsequential crackpots. Therefore, during proto-insurgency, the most important aspect of COIN is to understand the group, its goals, its ability to tap popular grievances, and its potential. In turn, shaping the proto-insurgency’s environment, especially by improving governance in the eyes of the population, may deny it wider support.” (Or to quote Bob Marley: “every time I plant a seed, he say kill it before it grow”.)

Again, “anti-extremist” counter-insurgency operations can take many forms, of which direct repression is only one. For example, another strategy relies on mobilising “the whole raft of unions, official organisations, pacifists, and other civilisation-reformists hovering to disarm social struggles from within, by denouncing those whose passions lead them to a more direct confrontation with what exists.” As one example, the essay asks about the climate counter-summits such as COP21 in Paris and COP15 in Copenhagen: “What if the mobilization of the entire city and even the protests were nothing but an immense peace-keeping operation?”

We proto-insurgents

The last few sections turn to the possibilities we have, in this dark landscape, for “advancing in rebellion”. Or to put it in the language of the RAND corporation: our potential as proto-insurgents.

We found a lot in this text that resonates with and deepens our own thinking. First of all, here’s the most basic thing, to say it again: “legitimacy is key. Losing that legitimacy is what the States of today fear”. And this implies — given that there is no remaining escape route into “wild lands” beyond the reach of leviathans — that our struggle is fundamentally about undermining and cracking that legitimacy. And this is a battle that most basically works on the level of thoughts, feelings, habits, fears and desires. Which is not to say that e.g., acts of material sabotage are not valuable, but that this is above all a war of propaganda of thought and deed, to use the old term. And that means, we think, not thinking and planning as if we are isolated atoms, but considering the potential for our actions and ideas to multiply and spread as they touch other people.

However, there are very different ways to think about the “social” realm of our actions. This leads us to a second key point of RF’s text, with which we also agree entirely: we need to break altogether with the old model of leftist politics. We don’t want “to embark on a campaign to win ‘society’ over to ‘us’ as a unified opposition”, “to play the State’s game (even as a competitor)”. “Politics” pins struggle into a “separable, classifiable and ultimately avoidable sphere”, the sphere of a game played by experts, politicians, activists, seeking to build up and organise followings in order to take and hold seats of power. The game of politics is a dead end, first of all, because it’s not just avoidable but actively avoided by most people, who can smell the rot a mile off. Secondly, because those who do play it, maybe with the best intentions, are easily co-optable: any intelligent authorities will always offer a few seats at the table to proto-insurgents, turning them into managers who can help ensure things don’t get “out of control”.

Not confining our struggles to the game of politics means making them live in every aspect of “our daily lives”. Domination, exploitation and terror play out in every area of our lives and interactions with others, from the callcentre to the shopping centre to the bedroom, and so must our rebellion. “How can we turn the crises in our own lives into a crisis for the system?” This means individual struggle against our own ingrained submission, conformity and status bullshit. And also finding others to fight alongside, whether close comrades or occasional or fleeting allies, not in the accepted arenas of politics (election, meeting, demo, strike, etc.) but in every kind of encounter.

Martial vs. Military

Another point where we agree with RF is in not fetishising destruction — not making attack into an affair of professionalised militants, and so effectively another removed political sphere. “We have no interests in being specialists in fighting. Rather, we dream of moments which call on each of us to become everything at once; situations which demand that each of

us become fighters and healers, caretakers and firebringers.” (Quoting from ‘We Welcome the Fire, We Welcome the Rain’).

For, as many anarchists have always maintained, destruction and creativity go hand in hand. “A building can be destroyed without constructing a new one, but a relationship of alienation cannot be ended without the creation of another type of relationship. ... Without speaking of the creation of new social relations, we cannot speak honestly about the destruction of the State.” Giving full respect to committed nihilist comrades, as RF point out this means stepping away from the “nihilist proposal” that speaks only of destroying the State (or the whole existing system of domination).

While, at the same time, we cannot create in this world without also attacking. RF put this well by distinguishing “the martial” from “the military”. Militarisation means life impoverished, regimented, made anxious, reduced to service of the war machine. “The martial” means fighting for and as a part of our struggle for life, “not as the science of war, but the art of rebellion”, challenging our passivity and the state’s legitimacy as we break its claimed monopoly of violence. “This is something which has been steadily stripped away from us over the generations; the ability to fight on our own terms, as much as the awareness of the war we inhabit.” We regain it in practice: training, learning new skills, going out alone or forming gangs, and taking action. “This isn’t a call to “armed struggle” but for inclusion of a neglected aspect of a holistic approach to rebellion” (quoting Sea Weed).

In the end, for sure, this essay does not offer a programme for how to advance. Not that we’re looking for one. We know a lot of the paths we need to take — grow our skills and strength as individuals and groups, find comrades, be open to new encounters ... these can even start to sound like platitudes, but they’re right. “Avenues for sharing, discussing and sharpening perspectives and methods is one accomplishment of anarchists and other radicals, in our own limited way so far. Our enemies are well aware of this ...” “Experience tells us that even a little empowerment and picking-up of skills can have a huge impact in one’s character or desires, and with our unconstrained lives at stake, let’s not be stopped by fear of failure.”

And then there are lots of questions, things we don’t know or are just starting to explore. One we’re especially interested in at the moment, that this essay highlighted, is one that we’ve tried to explore as we’ve worked on this site, and still only have glimpses of. How to understand ourselves not as isolated atoms but as accomplices and instigators acting in “social” worlds, without falling into the old political trap of “a campaign to win ‘society’ over to ‘us’ as a unified opposition”. How to think as proto-insurgents whose thoughts and actions can touch many others, including many other rebels and potential rebels, even if we cannot anticipate, far less control, what their effects may be.

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