Terror

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Terror, from the Old French *terreur,* and conjecturally, through the Latin *terrere,* to an archaic Indo-European verb "to tremble." The concept of terror stands today where any number of paths cross (Lezra 2010, also Derrida 2003, Redfield 2009). It stands between our everyday experience (who has not been terrified by one or another event?); the field of aesthetics (fear, horror, terror – all of these have a long history in the philosophy of art, from Aristotle to Jacques Rancière, passing through Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke); and the practices and philosophy of politics (from Maximilien Robespierre's coupling of *virtue* and *terror* in Revolutionary times to today's so-called "war on terror," various forms of separatist and fundamentalist violence, state terror). Terror's sense in each of these domains seems uncontroversial: every society and every language furnish us with terror. To be terrified, to experience terror, seem to be experiences as universal as the events or circumstances that are said to cause them: we all will tremble at a sudden loss, at the unexpected, with pain or at the fear of pain, from the fear of death and dying. The value attached publicly to the concept is almost without exception negative. (The global film industry has a special relation to terror: it is the domain in which the experience is an explicitly *commercial* token.) The purpose of societies, it seems clear, should be to

reduce as much as possible an individual's exposure to threat, violence, abjection – to terror.

Indeed the first usage of *terreur* that the 1873–74 French *Littré* dictionary records, from Pierre Bercheure's ca. 1350 translation of Livy, concerns "la chose publique," the *res-publica,* the commonwealth*: "Que il voulsissent de celles terreurs delivrer la chose publique. –* That they should want to rid the commonwealth of these terrors" (Livius 1514; also Littré 1873–1874). Terror in this definition becomes "the essence of totalitarian domination," as Hannah Arendt (1948, 464) and Adriana Cavarero (following her) put it, the "realization" and the "execution" of what Arendt calls the "law of movement" (464) – a tendency of thought expressed in fact in the bloody days of the Terror in revolutionary France (between ca. 1792 and August 1794), but characteristic of the great ideologies of the mid-nineteenth century, and consisting in "the refusal to view or accept anything 'as it is' and in the consistent interpretation of everything as being only a stage of some future development" (598; see also Cavarero 2009).

Today, however, these terms and these definitions will no longer serve – not the sense of "society" or "politics" (summoning up the ghosts of *polis* and *politeia* will not exorcise other specters: other cities, other formations of the *agora,* other ways of construing the relation between representation and political value) and not the sense of the word the Arendtian tradition makes out to be their limit: the word terror. To the contrary, today terror must work as a founding, defective concept for political philosophy. Rather than seek to "rid the commonwealth" of terrors, modern political association depends upon producing forms of living and forms of governance or institutions that harbor and protect terror.

This is a deeply counterintuitive claim. Consider *terrorism* rather than *terror*. A terrorist strikes close to home. We know, or imagine, the neighborhoods where the attack occurred; we are familiar with the social and political situation that lead to it; can identify with the victims, who remind us of ourselves or of our

families; we may even on occasion have feelings of sympathy with the groups carrying out the attack (against, for instance, a state whose repression we deplore), but also a great distrust for immediate violent action of the sort represented by the attack. All of these are rather primitive, even adolescent feelings. Suppose we try to take account, in the first place, of the strange economy of the terrorist act: How is the value of the target calculated? Agreed upon? Understood? By whom? What *is* the target of a "terrorist" attack or act? The terrible consequences of the attacks lived since September 11, 2001, from New York to Syria to Paris – both the lives lost, and the resulting consolidation of a militarist and xenophobic ideology – make such questions pressing. We will want to take account, too, in the second place, of the strange identification that many intellectuals feel with the figure of the terrorist – one who can and does act directly, whose politics lie at the other extreme of the highly intellectualized world of the professional academic. The temptation of heroic immediacy – of the heroic immediacy of the pure act – should strike us as a residual romanticism that bears examining, historically as well as philosophically. Although the terrorist act is not in itself – for this second reason – a device on which one can establish any kind of politics suitable to the increasingly differentiated social demands of the twenty-first century, the *first* observation, the strange *economy* or an-economy, of terrorist acts, might provide a clue.

Moving (back) from *terrorism* to *terror*, we strike away from home. With terror, we enter a *political,* rather than a *domestic,* economy; we assume the uncanny force of the truly other's claims. For "terrorism" is not terror, though what are vulgarly called "acts of terror" or "terrorism" can produce terror in the sense I intend it. Terror names the experience fundamental to democratic association in radically differentiated social spheres: the experience of facing another whose interests and whose claims cannot be defined in my language; who faces me in a way I cannot imagine or figure; whose being-other present itself to him or her in a way that may be entirely other to the way in

which our being-other presents itself to me; an-other who does not recognize my home as such, or as mine. Terror registers any person's incapacity to supply a concept, and indeed to supply a satisfactory concept *of* concept, that will bind his or her interests to another person's. From this failure derives a class of unsatisfactory, defective concepts that can be supplied in place of the classical concepts of political philosophy ("autonomy," "freedom," "individualism," "citizenship") – and these defective concepts and the ephemeral, transparent, and reversible institutions that they make possible can be arranged more or less systematically in a weak relation under the heading of what can be called the "modern republic," *la chose publique.*

What, then, *is* this critical experience of terror? Step away from the dominant, Latinate tradition in which the word registers, from Pierre Bercheure to Robespierre to Jean Paulhan. Recall the dissonant chord that Sigmund Freud plays at the beginning of his 1920 work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The context is a discussion of the relation between the neuroses that attend "severe mechanical concussions," including war traumas – "shell-shock," or what today we would call post-traumatic stress disorders provoked by accidents, the shock of war, sudden emergencies – and what Freud helpfully calls the "traumatic neuroses of peace" (Freud 1955, 12). The latter are characterized by their suddenness and by the surprise, fright, or terror (*Schreck*) that attend them. He continues:

> Fright [*Schreck*], fear [*Furcht*] and anxiety [*Angst*] are improperly used as synonymous expressions; they are in fact capable of clear distinction in their relation to danger [*Gefahr*]. "Anxiety" describes a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one. "Fear" requires a definite object of which to be afraid. "Fright" (or terror), however, is the name we give to the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it; it emphasizes the factor of surprise [*betont das Moment der Überraschung*]. (12–13)

The term *Schreck* covers a range of senses, which run in Eng-
lish from horror to pleasant surprise. What most importantly
distinguishes "fear" and "anxiety" from "fright" or "terror,"
though, is the status of the object or circumstance that causes
the affect. Fear is a state of mind caused by distinct objects;
anxiety is caused by the apprehension of a particular temporal
relation to a state of affairs. Finally, *Schreck,* "fright" or "terror," is
attached neither to a distinct object, nor to a particular state of
affairs, nor to a particular apprehension of time. Freud's terror
attaches instead to the disconcerting encounter with something
for which one was not prepared, whose "object-ness" or "state-
of-affairs-ness" is not given, defined, or established. Terror: I
have suddenly encountered something – I don't know what it is,
and I don't know what my encountering it means, and as a result
I don't know what this encounter then may signify for every
other encounter I can imagine, which is to say that this surprise
encounter may not be a surprising moment at all but may extend
to all the other moments that make up what I remember and to
all those that make up what I foresee for myself. In the absence
of an object or an event that provokes terror, no provision can be
made against it (since it's caused by an encounter that's unfore-
seeable), and in the immediate instance no therapeutic means
of overcoming terror present themselves. Terror's effects cannot
be assessed against my past or against the future outcome of my
actions; the possibility of terror is itself, one might say, a source
of anxiety. Once my fright is over in this or that instance, the
terrifying circumstances interpreted, assimilated to a state of
affairs, *objectified*, then I may say in retrospect that I feared this
or that object or circumstance. But to be terrified is to lack both
fear and anxiety: to be in terror is to be without an object one can
reckon with and without a time one can assess. The terror of the
encounter extends beyond the encounter; indeed, it threatens
to become not an anomalous species of but the norm for every
encounter, another name for the *event.*

Terror works otherwise than as a classic concept of association, and must be thought otherwise. It is not, as it is for Arendt or Cavarero, "the essence of totalitarian domination," "the refusal to view or accept anything 'as it is' and in the consistent interpretation of everything as being only a stage of some future development" (Arendt 1948, 464). For me to link myself to another today or to find myself bound to another person requires that I distribute **responsibility** for the survival of ethico-political life and that I attend to and guard the occurring of that distribution. Both of these are ethico-political tasks, roughly of a public and a private sort respectively; each is both a positive as well as a negative task, entered into both **affirmatively** and passively. The public task involves devising formal regimes that both recognize and distribute the exceptional positions of subject and sovereign across citizenship, that design and shelter a wounded and divided sovereignty. The private task entails a different sort of **work** – hermeneutic, destructive, or rather, deconstructive, dispositional. Not *cura sui*, as Foucault would have it, but rather the cultivation of *insecuritas sui*.

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