

Preface for Alessandro Orsini

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The terrorist wave of the late 1960s and 1970s is still a baffling phenomenon despite the passage of four decades and the publication of many books and articles. The use of terrorism can be understood during foreign occupations, which stimulate partisan movements to arise and liberate their country (“One man’s terrorist is another man’s partisan”). One can understand even if one does not approve the rise of terrorism during revolutions and even waves of terror, as occurred during the French Revolution in 1792-1793. It is always possible to explain the use of terrorism to fight repression. However, why should terrorism become widespread during periods of prosperity and democracy such as there occurred during the 1960s, 1970s, and the early 1980s in Western Europe and to a lesser extent in the United States? It is true that the period was not the height of either financial or political well-being either in Italy or Germany—the countries where terrorism was most widespread—during that time-frame, but conditions hardly account for the pervasiveness of the phenomenon. Highly sophisticated economies and modern democracies, on the whole, characterized both areas despite problems. Despite this situation, there is no way that the troubles of the time explain the terrorism that occurred in an unprecedented era of economic prosperity and freedom.

When unusual phenomena occur, scholars and other observers, naturally enough, look at the existing context and conditions in their search for explanations. In the case of

the terrorism that shook the world, and significantly, the *Western* world, from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, this method has failed. What if the cause of *that* terrorism were unconnected to the economic, political, and social conditions—if they contributed a framework but were not the crux of the problem?

It is this possibility that Alessandro Orsini examines in this extraordinarily well-researched and well-documented book. As a scholar, Orsini considers existing conditions but does not find that these explain sufficiently the terrorism of the age in Italy, the center of the phenomenon. Even more disturbing, Orsini has found that the type of terrorism we experienced has deep roots in Western thought, has existed in different forms for ages, even if Western society has managed to isolate it, and can recur precisely because its origins are independent of objective economic, political, and social conditions, even if it takes advantage of them to advance its agenda. But what agenda? A disturbing implication of Orsini's analysis is it would do no good to try to meet their demands, because the agenda of the terrorists is a mystical one that can never be satisfied.

What Orsini has examined is the terrorist mind-set; what he has discovered is that it always exists just below the surface, is difficult to cope with, is difficult to change, is irrational, and is likely to resurface at any time under conditions we cannot predict. Orsini's main focus in examining the mentality that pervades terrorists is, primarily, the Red Brigades, the most important leftist terrorist organization, but he extends his research to rightist terrorism as well.

Central to Orsini's thesis is the "religious" conception that terrorists have of the world, traced back to the Reformation and beyond, but "religion" interpreted in its worst,

not in its best, sense. The important phenomenon he reveals as the guiding light of the terrorists is the Gnostic view of reality, and ancient and recurrent idea that sin pervades the world and that a few elect individuals (themselves) have the overwhelming task of cleansing it. Nothing is more important to the terrorist than purifying the world and eliminating the sin that permeates it. For the Gnostic, this task means that individuals who infect the earth like a plague must be either avoided or destroyed. Some Gnostics are “passive,” according to Orsini, and they protect themselves from infection by isolating themselves; others are “active” and they are compelled by their own character to take immediate steps to eliminate those who pollute it by their very existence. From here we have the author’s emphasis on the role of intolerance—the inability of the rebels-turned-prophets to forgive, indeed, to live with, the carriers of sin (as they see them), or, as we might also express it, infection. However, the terrorist is still human, even if he or she is on a mission. It is not easy to kill or maim a person who has not done you any personal, direct harm but enter into a category of sinners or polluters of all kind. How does the terrorist bring himself or herself to become an avenging angel of a revolution designed to change the world by application of a mentality that, after all, is intimately linked to elitism; and, dare one say it, “divine” choice, where history replaces God? The way to do so is to reduce the victim to a non-human, a mentality and a method that Orsini explains very well.

The reader who is familiar with the history Nazism and Communism will discern the certain familiar themes. Orsini’s book demonstrates and develops a subtle link between extreme left and extreme right, both out and in power. The book expresses an

idea articulated before but categorically rejected by leftist intellectuals that here gains new credence because of the author's research and the volume of evidence that he has gathered. This point is bound to contribute to the debate that no doubt that will make this a controversial book, but it is an argument that cannot be ignored.

If scholars do not continually revise and re-think their own works and accepted canons and interpretations, what is the use of doing research? Orsini is extremely well-read, but he began his research with an open mind, following where it led him. This is a technique more honored in the breach than in the application, but one to which Orsini has remained faithful. It is clear from his argument and documentation that his book at the same time provides a fresh interpretation while adding to our knowledge and keeping always present the need to delve into history to explain current phenomena. Even more important is how this book combines an inquisitive mind, excellent research, and clear scientific analysis, with the passion that one always hopes one will find in a young scholar. In the best of cases, passion should not interfere with method, nor with analysis, but enhance them. This book is loyal to that principle. In sum, this is An important book that increases our knowledge of terrorism and the prestige of the Italian university in the United States. It is a book that will leave its mark. The book should receive a quick English translation, and I look forward to aiding the effort.

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