extract from: *The Myth of the Closed Mind.* Chicago: Open Court. 2012.
Dr. Ray Scott Percival.

Is the fanatic open to criticism? Fanatical terrorists, revolutionaries, *kamikaze* pilots, hunger strikers, and others, are put forward as examples of violent ideological emotion completely devoid of reason. Weber might have put this sort of behavior in the class of 'value-rational action' or 'affectual behavior'. If this were admitted, then the associated ideologies might be beyond effective criticism. We will see that, despite seeming imperviousness, the fanatic is open to both self-criticism and external criticism.

Gustave Le Bon and Walter Laqueur

Gustave Le Bon, an influential writer on ideology and argument, held just such a view. Speaking of terrorists he says:

> The mentality of martyrs of every kind is identical, whether political, religious or social. Hypnotized by the fixity of their dream, they joyfully sacrifice themselves to the triumph of an idea without any hope of recompense in this world or another. . . . Persecution of them is powerless and only renders their example contagious. . . . These facts and all those of the same order are very instructive. They prove the power of the mystical mind which is capable of triumphing over pain and dominating feelings considered to be the very basis of our existence. What could reason do against it? (Le Bon 1979, pp. 214–15)

Le Bon's position confirms the soundness of the present approach, for he generalizes his point to political, religious, and social martyrs. Le Bon is indeed an important influence, which can be traced through prominent figures such as Adolf Hitler, whose views on propaganda are similar to and ultimately derived from Le Bon's.

An echo of this sort of theory can be heard in more recent writing. Laqueur in *The Age of Terrorism* maintains that

> The main difficulty is not that the rational model is useless with regard to people engaging in suicide missions (of which there are only few), but that it tends to ignore factors such as frustration, anger, fanaticism, aggression, etc., which are very frequent in terrorism. Above all, economic man is a rational being wishing to maximize beneficial returns; few people would go into a business in which the chances of success are as dim as they are in terrorism. (p. 153)

The fanatic, who wittingly sacrifices everything he values to a single cause, who is unmoved by the perceived effectiveness and cost of his actions, is a myth. It has always been acceptable to romanticize and mystify the fanatic, either to portray him as subject to otherworldly laws or as unintelligibly crazy. The fanatic himself often has an interest in projecting this image of his own personality, since it makes his threats more

convincing (consider Paul's behaviour, near the end of *Dune*, in convincing the Emperor and the Guild that he really will wipe out spice production if he does not get his way).

The fanatic is as subject to the laws of economics as Adam Smith's greengrocer. The hunger striker in the Maze prison or the *kamikaze* pilot, both fighting for what they believed to be justice, were acting under a rational assessment of their goal and the price they thought they would have to pay in terms of forsaken opportunities. That price could have been too high. In fact for some potential recruits to the IRA the price was too high, as is evident in declining recruitment at the time of the hunger strikes. Le Bon's contagion evidently has its limitations.

Laqueur himself seems dimly aware that skilful negotiation with terrorists has had some successes, but he does not draw the conclusion that this must be so because they are not zombies but rational beings who act in the light of what they perceive to be effective and economical means. The fact that their beliefs and values may be wildly at odds with our own does not place them outside the field of economic analysis, and likewise does not make them immune to argument and criticism. This position of Laqueur's is odd considering that in his introduction he points out that increased repression decreases terrorism: terrorist incidents were more frequent in Spain only after Franco died, while terrorism in West Germany and Turkey grew under a movement to more social democratic or left-of-center governments (p. 6).

Laqueur states that "few would go into a business with as little success as there is in terrorism." Really? The great majority of new businesses, well over ninety percent, fail permanently in their first few years. The percentage success of terrorism in attaining its political objectives is higher than that. But even if Laqueur's factual claim were true instead of demonstrably false, it hardly supports his conclusion. Suppose that 99.9 percent of new businesses failed almost immediately; still, there would be the other 0.01 percent; would their proprietors be acting outside any 'rational model'?. Laqueur's argument here is like saying that since only a small percentage of the population become directors of international banks, economic theory cannot apply to those who strive to become directors of international banks. The chances of becoming a world champion boxer are exceedingly slim for most men. Does that mean that world champion boxers pay no heed to such things as the sacrifices involved and the financial incentives held before their eyes? Just as there is natural variation in height, weight, hair color, there is natural variation in personality traits and values. Economic theory is not tailored to one personality type or even the average man, nor confined to certain

sorts of values and the means for their attainment; economic theory applies to all values and all scarce means. Mises argues that marginalist economic theory, properly interpreted, implies that wherever there is action there are subjective costs and benefits and marginal theory applies just as strictly in non-financial as in financial contexts.

Are the chances of success in terrorism very thin? If the objective is to terrorize, it would seem that anyone can be a terrorist. If Laqueur responds by denying that terrorism is that simple, but rather involves delicate planning and has complex ulterior motives, then it becomes difficult not to view terrorism as rational action. Complex and delicate planning and execution does not logically entail sensitivity to cost, but it does rule out a zombie-like state or a mind excessively disturbed by anger or frustration. Without a rational model of human action how could one explain why the terrorist plans at all? Laqueur supplies no answer. Is the terrorist indifferent to how long he spends planning, even when the opportunity cost of increased planning may be fewer or less well prepared missions? Laqueur could say that the terrorist just picks a mission at random and blindly tries to see it through even if it means sacrificing many other certain and easy missions to this one highly costly and ineffective mission. But this would not explain Laqueur's own point about repression curbing terrorism. I am not arguing that an alternative model is logically impossible, only that Laqueur has not supplied one.

Laqueur's mention of terrorists involved in suicide missions is misleading (though Laqueur was writing before the great expansion of suicide terrorism). The terrorist who plans his own death reasons that the attainment of his end will involve his death and is prepared to sacrifice his life for this end. There is nothing irrational in choosing to sacrifice one's own life because one values the end one hopes to attain sufficiently highly. Costs that would deflect others from their path may fail to deflect the terrorist. Nothing that Laqueur says contradicts the conjecture that if the terrorist could achieve his objective without sacrificing his life, he would do so. But even if the terrorist valued suicide for its own sake, committing suicide would still be rational. However, the facts about actual terrorists do not bear out the conjecture that this is a significant part of terrorists' motivations. Laqueur does not present us with an example that cannot be interpreted in terms of economically rational action.

Suicide Terrorism Pays

Are suicide terrorists crazy? Are they attacking us because of who we are? Does their religion make them do it? These questions trouble many

people. Robert Pape, author of *Dying to Win*, actually took the trouble to find out the facts and get the answers. As a matter of fact, the answers are No, No, and No.

Pape set up the only comprehensive database on terrorists. At the time Pape wrote his book, the database contained every suicide bombing and other attack around the globe—315 attacks in all—from 1980 through 2003. Drawing on this careful work, Pape argues that terrorists are not in the least crazy. All terrorists are rational agents with definite goals and use definite means to achieve them.

Neither Pape nor I are defending the *morality* of the terrorist's actions. Being rational is not the same as being good. The murderer who meticulously plots the killing of his aunt so that he can get his hands on her life's savings is highly immoral, but no one would dispute that his murderous plotting is completely rational. Let's have a look at Pape's account.

Pape found that suicide terrorists are guided by the definite goal of repelling foreign military occupation. It's not aimless, unplanned violence.

> Most suicide terrorism is undertaken as a strategic effort directed toward particular political goals; it is not simply the product of irrational individuals or an expression of fanatical hatred. The main purpose of suicide terrorism is to use the threat of punishment to compel a target government to change policy, and most especially to cause democratic countries to withdraw forces from land the terrorists perceive as their national homeland. (Pape 2005, p. 27)

Suicide terrorism is a strategy for weak actors in a conflict. The terrorist, being militarily weak, cannot conquer the target country, but he can impose an unacceptable cost on its government.

> So the only coercive strategy available to suicide terrorists is punishment. Although the element of "suicide" is novel and the pain inflicted on civilians is often spectacular and gruesome, the heart of their . . . strategy is the same as the logic of states when they employ air power or economic sanctions to punish an adversary: to cause mounting civilian costs to overwhelm the target state's interest in the issue in dispute and cause it to concede to the terrorists' political demands.

The suicide terrorists magnify the coercive effects of punishment because they have the following advantages:

a. suicide attacks are generally more destructive than other terrorist attacks, because an attacker who is willing to die is

more likely to complete the mission and cause maximum damage, the attackers can conceal weapons on their body and make last minute adjustments more easily than ordinary terrorists, they can more easily infiltrate heavily guarded targets, because they don't need escape routes or rescue teams, and they can use especially destructive methods such as suicide vests and ramming vehicles. Between 1980 and 2003, suicide attacks amount to 3 percent of all terrorist attacks, but accounted for 48 percent of total deaths due to terrorism.

b. The willingness to die is itself a signal of more pain to come, as it suggests that they cannot be deterred. This can be orchestrated by the terrorist organisation and portrayed as martyrdom and sacrifice for the religious and political community. The threat of further attacks then looks more plausible.

c. Suicide terrorist organisations can better heighten the fear of future attacks by breaching taboos on potential targets.

Terrorists have learned that suicide terrorism works. Between 1945 and 1983 there was almost no suicide terrorism. The recent rise in suicide terrorism goes back to the perceived success of the Hezbollah in ousting the United States from Lebanon in 1983 when terrorists drove a truck loaded with explosives into the marine barracks, murdering hundreds of marines and killing themselves. Ronald Reagan pulled the troops out shortly afterwards, exactly as Hezbollah had hoped and intended. Observing this, other terrorist groups learned that suicide terrorism pays.

Nationalist politics is the main cause, not religion. They are not attacking us because of who we are or because of our religion. The terrorists see their actions as national defense. The religious difference between the occupying power and the occupied country's people only reinforces the feeling among the occupied that their society will be radically transformed and is an easy way of demonizing their enemy. It also makes it possible to justify martyrdom as a tactic. But the pivotal cause is foreign occupation. Hamas and Al-Qaeda have concentrated their attacks on the respective occupying powers: Hamas on Israel, Al-Qaeda on the United States, UK, and allies who have troops stationed in what they see as their homeland countries. These terrorist organizations have never done joint operations or shared information. The overwhelming majority of suicide terrorists in Al-Qaeda have been recruited from occupied countries or their adjacent neighbors, very few from the largest

populations of Islamic fundamentalists: Pakistan (149 million), Bangladesh (114 million), Iran (63 million), Egypt (62 million), Nigeria (37 million). The most active terrorist group in the world, the Tamil Tigers, are not religious (in the theistic sense) at all—they are Marxist-Leninists and therefore atheists, and are actively hostile to religion.

Seeing this latter point about the Tamil Tigers as fatal to his position—that suicide terrorism must be due to religion—Sam Harris tries to defend it by an exercise in what can only be called associative thinking:

> the Tamil tigers are often offered as counterexamples to the claim that suicidal terrorism is a product of religion. But to describe the Tamil Tigers as "secular"—as R.A. Pape . . . and others have—is misleading. While the motivations of the Tamils are not explicitly religious, they are Hindus who undoubtedly believe many improbable things about the nature of life and death. The cult of martyr worship that they have nurtured for decades has many of the features of religiosity that one would expect in people who give their lives so easily for a cause. (Harris 2006, p. 229 n2)

Millions of people throughout history have believed improbable things about life and death without becoming suicide terrorists. The fact that there is a sociological phenomenon that Harris chooses to call "martyr worship" within a Marxist-Leninist group that has a similarity to religious martyrdom, carries as much weight for his case as the fact that organized criminal gangs will often have their own rituals and heroes. Are all groups with rituals and heroes religious? This style of argument—in which "martyr worship" is cross-blurred with "hero admiration"—is as flawed as a court finding someone guilty by association. Pape's argument is more subtle, because religion can—sometimes cynically—be used as a way of cultivating community support for what is a secular goal and the means of achieving it.

Harris cannot see that nationalism may be a much more potent force for deathly conflict than religion. Most wars for the last several centuries have been national, not religious wars. Harris overlooks the extent to which ordinary and non-religious people engaged in what they regard as a national conflict will sacrifice themselves for the goal of repulsing an invading nation. But one only has to remember World War II. Think of the Royal Air Force in the Battle of Britain, for example. The life expectancy for a spitfire pilot was four weeks, but this grim statistic did not still the flow of British, Polish, Canadian, Czech and other volunteer pilots. Hundreds of pilots flew bombing missions over Germany from which they knew they would not return.

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