The Psychology of the Terrorist Based on Joseph Conrad's Vision

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The key location of Conrad’s story is quite close to the place of our conference last year. The task of Mr Verloc, the secret agent of a foreign power is to blow up the first meridian in Greenwich as an absurd, "almost unthinkable (...) act of destructive ferocity" (Conrad, 1907/1926: 38). Verloc obtains the bomb from a specialist and teaches his brother-in-law, a poor boy "only fit for an asylum", how to use it. But the boy bungles it and blows himself up. The consequences are fatal for Verloc's wife and for Verloc himself. I need not relate the story, which, one of our colleagues dealt with (Landau, 2003), focusing on the psychoanalytical motives for the poor boy's killing. My goal is quite different, namely to present and interpret how Joseph Conrad portrays the terrorist in The Secret Agent written almost one hundred years ago.

Conrad presents three character variations. Let's start with the most laconically described one. "The terrorist, as he called himself, was old and bald (...) An extraordinary expression of underhand malevolence survived in his extinguished eyes.(...) 'I have always dreamed of a band of men absolute in their resolve to discard all scruples in the choice of means, strong enough to give themselves frankly the name of destroyers (...) No pity for anything on earth, including
themselves, and death enlisted for good and all in the service of humanity (...) And I could never
get as many as three such men together" (Conrad, ibid. 46-47). Not a man of action, not even an orator. „With a more subtle intention, he took part in an insolent and venomous evoker of sinister impulses which lurk in the blind envy and exasperated vanity of ignorance, in the suffering and misery of poverty, in all the hopeful illusions of righteous anger, pity and revolt. The shadow of his evil gift clung to him yet like the smell of deadly drug in an old vial of poison". Thus is he described by Conrad's omniscient narrator (Conrad, ibid. 52).

Although he calls himself a terrorist when the term was not at all fashionable, this man performed not one terrorist act. If we accept that "bombs are your means of expression" as one of Conrad's characters put it when speaking of terrorists, then he ought to have a serious identity crisis which, however, he does not. He is a braggart who seems to be the least harmful of his kind. Reconsidering, however, his verbal behavior, innocence is rather far away from him. His profession is to arouse hostile impulses in the masses. He does nothing else and this is more than enough to exploit the misery, ignorance, envy, and despair which often go together with poverty.

Verloc – about whom we get to know much more – combines a longing to play a role, a longing for money, conviction, and acting on the other spur of the moment. It is certain that the idea of such a terrorist act, let alone the implementation of it would never have entered his mind by itself. Cowardice combined with scheming meant that it would not be he who took the bomb to the scene. Here his wife helped him unintentionally. She told him several times that "You could do everything with the boy (...) He would go through the fire for you", adding later, "That boy just worships you" (Conrad, ibid. 188, 190).

Verloc was not insensitive. Following the tragedy he tells his wife sincerely: "You understand I never meant any harm to come to that boy. (...) I didn't feel particularly gay sitting there and thinking of you" (Conrad, ibid. 234). As far as he was able, he loved his wife and liked the boy. Certainly, he did not want to cause any pain to him. It was not his way to kill anybody. He did not have any diabolic traits. Although, the terrorist act was definitely insane, it did not
threaten human life. Nevertheless, Verloc's deed sprang from his base character that was insignificant in vain, since it represented a public danger. Verloc has no remarkable abilities; his uninteresting appearance matches his internal qualities.

His above-average ability was his oratorical bass. This was unsatisfactory for a career in line with his ambition. Although he had no moral restraint, his longing for money and for adventure would not have made him a secret agent had he not, as a young soldier, begun spying because of a woman. He was sentenced to imprisonment, and, following his release, he would have needed to make a serious effort to reach even an average honest level. He therefore chose the other course without hesitation. And now he was not too happy, although he felt no guilt, remorse or repentance. He would not have objected to even his-brother-in-law's terrible death, there been no incriminating evidence left behind afterwards.

"His prestige with the Embassy would have been immense if – if his wife had not had the unlucky notion of sewing on the address inside Stevie's overcoat. Mr Verloc who was no fool, had soon perceived the extraordinary character of the influence he had over Stevie (...) he had calculated with correct insight on Stevie's instinctive loyalty and blind discretion. The eventuality he had not foreseen had appalled him as a humane man and a fond husband. From every other point of view it was rather advantageous. Nothing can equal the everlasting discretion of death. (...) Stevie's violent disintegration, however disturbing to think about, only assured the success" (Conrad, ibid. 238). Destruction is appropriate if useful to him.

However, one seriously misread Verloc if one thought that this self-image as an important man would have disturbed his self-image as a "humane man". "He nourished no resentment against his wife. (...) 'What's done can't be undone. (...) What you want is a good cry'" (Conrad, ibid. 239, 244). "I don't blame you. But just try to understand that it was a pure accident' (...) His generosity was not infinite, because he was a human being and not a monster, as Mrs Verloc believed him to be.(...) 'I am fond of you. But don't you go too far'" (Conrad, ibid. 259-260). Unilaterally he was a harmonious man although he was on bad terms with the outer world, he was on good terms with himself.
I shall concentrate on the third variation, the specialist as I have called him, with some understatement. He is the most peculiar – and if I may say – the most real character of the novel. He is ready to blow up even himself. He is a "dingy little man" and is nicknamed the Professor because he was an assistant demonstrator in chemistry at some technical institute, before securing a post in the laboratory of manufacturer of dyes. "The lamentable inferiority of the whole physique was made ludicrous by the supremely self-confident bearing of the individual" (Conrad, ibid. 66). He is not afraid of arrest. "I don't think they could get one of them to apply for a warrant (...) they know very well I take care never to part with the last handful of my wares. I've always by me. (...) In a thick glass flask" (Conrad, ibid. 69). Unfortunately, "A full twenty seconds must elapse from the moment I press the ball till the explosion takes place". That is the weak point. But the result is absolutely guaranteed. A terrible black hole with corpses torn to pieces. A perfect detonator is his goal. "I depend on death, which knows no restraint and cannot be attacked. My superiority is evident" (Conrad, ibid. 72).

The Professor despises the representatives of the social order and not less the revolutionary propagandists because all of them are the slaves of convention. His idea of morality is freedom from any kind of hypocrisy. He unambiguously prefers death as a means. Modifying somewhat Conrad's already quoted statement about terrorists in general that "bombs are your means of expression", we should say in his case: "Bombs are your only possible means of expression." He sees the goal quite clearly: "a clean sweep and a clear start for a new conception of life. That sort of future will take care of itself if you will only make room for it" (Conrad, ibid. 77). His father was "a rousing preacher of some obscure but rigid Christian sect – a man supremely confident in the privileges of his righteousness. In the son (...) this moral attitude translated itself into a frenzied Puritanism and ambition. (...) To see it thwarted opened his eyes to the true nature of the world, whose morality was artificial, corrupt and blasphemous. (...) The Professor's indignation found in itself a final cause that absolved him from the sin of turning to destruction as the agent of his ambition". "To destroy public faith in legality was the imperfect formula of his pedantic fanaticism; but the subconscious conviction that the framework of an established social order
cannot be effectually shattered except by some form of collective or individual violence was
precise and correct. He was a moral agent" (Conrad, ibid. 85).

His appearance and mentality were unfit for the acquisition of power and fame through
clever engagement. Although he has some qualifications, real career possibilities lay rather far
from the noncomformism and high ambition by means of which he compensates for his
miserable physique. Following on his father's example, he becomes a fervent believer. He is
sure what is important for him is at the same time fundamental and wonderful for mankind also.
Now he is disappointed, because of Verloc's unfortunate endeavour, but his hopes are in the next
more powerful and more successful action. Nevertheless, sometimes he feels that people are
apathetic and that no threatening deed can move them at all. "Such moments come to all men
whose ambition aims at a direct grasp upon humanity – to artists, politicians, thinkers, reformers,
or saints" – remarks Conrad's omniscient narrator, reading in the Professor's mind (Conrad, ibid.
86).

As the Professor works on a new and perfect variety of bomb, he will, according to his self-
image, come to occupy the place of an epoch-making creator as an inventor, artist and saviour in
one person. The significance of his work will be revolutionary, not only in the technical, but in
the psychological and social sense, too. Although he does not get drunk by uttering a stream of
words as do Chesterton's parodistic figures a year later, nevertheless the sacred moment grasps
him, too. "The man who throws a bomb is an artist, because he prefers a great moment to
everything. He sees how much more valuable is one burst of blazing light, one peal of perfect
thunder, than the more common bodies of a few shapeless policemen" (Chesterton, 1908/1937:
12), says Mr Gregory, the poet and conspirator. And one should not forget that De Quincey
(1827/1959) was ahead of Conrad and Chesterton, even as regards an ironical approach to the
subject, when nearly two hundred years ago he considered political murder to be one of the fine
arts. He pointed out that the murder of kings and statesmen is particularly seductive for artists
fascinated by theatrical effect. And De Quincey added that the ultimate aim of murder as one of
the fine arts is identical with that of tragedy as defined by Aristotle, namely to arouse pity and
fear in order to produce catharsis in the audience. For today we could substitute the murder of passers-by for the murder of kings of kings and statesmen, media effect for theatrical effect, and horror for pity and fear.

"The world is mediocre, limp, without force. And madness and despair are a force. And force is a crime in the eyes of the fools, the weak and the silly who rule the roost" (Conrad, ibid. 311), says the Professor. He is beyond good and evil, indeed. He is not directed by whimsical impulses or by necrophilic character traits full of longing to destroy only for the sake of destruction and to blow to pieces anything that is living (Fromm, 1973). Nevertheless, the Professor enjoys destruction caused by any technical means, thus showing his strong necrophilic inclination. One understands his moral superiority with horror. He entirely lacks the hypocrisy, self-deceit and pragmatic cynicism of Verloc, who would not have objected to his brother-in-law's terrible death had there been no trace left of it. For him destruction is appropriate if it useful. In contrast to this serious, but obviously and unfortunately human weakness, the Professor's "ascetically clear thinking" is inhumanity itself.

"And the incorruptible Professor walked too, averting his eyes from the odious multitude of mankind. He had no future. He disdained it. He was a force. His thoughts caressed the images of ruin and destruction. He walked frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable – and terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world. Nobody looked at him. He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men" (Conrad, ibid. 313). These are the last words of the novel. It is in this alarming way that Conrad's narrator bids farewell to the reader.

The Professor's paranoid possession – which would fit perfectly into Dostoevsky's wonderful novel *The Possessed* – has no place for such social emotions as love, pity, sympathy, or compassion. He is totally insensitive towards innocent people's sufferings. His only problem is how destruction can be made greater. His consistency has no limits. He lives in the fascination of destructive altruism. We respect him as a precursor of the later suicide terrorist of the real world.
Conrad tells us in a preface written later that his novel had some nonfictional basis (an attempt to blow up the Greenwich Observatory, the terrible death of a half-witted man and his sister's suicide all at the end of the 19th century). The writer's decision is that only the "ironic method" is appropriate; "the whole treatment of the tale, its inspiring indignation and underlying pity and contempt, prove my detachment from the squalor and sordidness" (Conrad, 1920/1983:9). This is why he changes flexibly and utilizes ambiguously the author's narrative and the protagonists' direct or indirect speech (Hawthorn, 1990). As the omniscient narrator of the story, he outlines the interests of foreign powers, state power and poverty, but only as background factors. He suggests that even the worse circumstances would not cause terrorism in the absence of people who are distorted and committed to destruction, which they usually enjoy.

It seems to me that the idea of a necessary relationship between frustration and terrorism as a specific kind of aggression is far from Conrad's clear viewpoint. In contrast to some noisy opinion leaders who being competent in something, feel competent in everything, I suppose that Conrad would not think it self-obvious that a) aggression is a consequence of frustration, b) aggression is directed against the cause of the frustration, and c) that if one wishes to avoid a repetition of the aggression, one has to stop the frustration. As a matter of fact, all the three statements are totally wrong.

a) The main hypothesis was advanced than six decades ago (Dollard, Miller et al., 1939). According to this, any occurrence of aggressive behavior is preceded by frustration and vice versa, frustration always leads to aggression. But the hypothesis was modified by the most important co-author even two years later, emphasizing that aggression is only one of the possible responses following frustration (Miller, 1941).

b) Even if the result is aggression, you cannot predict from frustration how and against whom violence will be realized, or how you can stop it. To declare that a "healthy society" is free from the problems of frustration and aggression, is an empty rhetorical trick. Fromm (1973) is right to point out that you cannot achieve anything important without a series of frustrations. To be able to endure frustration is an integral part of the human condition. A given degree of
suffering together with frustration for one group of people is constructive, while even a lower
degree of it can trigger destructive actions with another group. The psychological meaning of
frustration, i.e. the relationship to frustration closely depends on the context. An obvious such
context is the course of contemporary militant Islam.

c) Experimental studies verify that hostile and aggressive patterns of behavior are weakened
significantly if they cannot reach their goals or will be punished soon (Zilmann, 1979). Not only
is aggression not a necessary consequence of frustration, but avoiding the repetition of
aggressive actions requires the frustrating potential of instigators by punishing them effectively.

Similarly to any other complex literary work, Conrad's novel can be interpreted in a many
kinds of way. The degree of freedom enjoyed by an interpreter is relatively great, but it is not
limitless. A literary text cannot be considered a projective test. The validity of different
interpretations can be investigated when you compare their common points in the text. It is sure
that if Kirschner's (1968:81) interpretation, namely, "as an artist, Conrad might well have
sympathized with the Professor" is right, then mine is completely wrong. And you may believe,
or, even more, you may say, that Conrad's whole text "detaches itself ironically from its own
vision" as Eagleton (1996:160) states; nevertheless I see no reason to change my view according
to which the main characteristic of this text is just how much vision is suffused with irony,
forming an inseparable unity. Not because it is in full accordance with Conrad's comment; after
all the author, too, may judge his work erroneously, but because his text does in fact show this
unity. Eagleton's additional statement that "the Professor, who, wired up for instant self-
consignment to eternity, is thus a graphic image of the text itself" (ibid. 163) seems to me
ridiculously absurd.

One should remember that Conrad's narrator has explicitly spoken about the Professor's
subconscious conviction which justifies any kind of violent means against the established social
order. Even more, the narrator himself has presented some Freudian and Adlerian types of
trauma behind the Professor's unconscious motives. As a matter of fact, we can say that they are
the secret agents.
I find it rather instructive when Houen (2002:44), following on Michel Serres emphasizes that "the force of a traumatic event is conserved all the more when denied its effects, and keeps on acting long after its occurrence: 'We must presume that the physical trauma – or more precisely, the memory of the trauma – acts like a foreign body, which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work.' The trauma force is indissociable from the vacillation between memory and body that is describe in this passage. The unconscious itself is a secret agent, for the traumatic event already exists as a memory but never ceases to happen again, forming links with other times (...) Freud's and Breuer's early psychoanalytic writings on hysteria and trauma are particularly pertinent to the issue of terrorism at the time – particularly in so far as they posit transferences between the body and mind, violence and terror."

Unfortunately, this much is not enough for the author. He extends the idea of unconscious to social life as such and speaks of the "political unconscious" which "begins to develop around transferences between subjects" (ibid.). I do not, of course, deny that intersubjective relations can generate psychological processes, but solely in the subject on the one hand, while the political unconscious is – even if someone finds it an appealing phrase – a nonexisting psychological phenomenon on the other hand.

It is rather remarkable how much not only ideologically directed critics of bel esprits, but also terrorists have misinterpreted Conrad. I do not, of course, think of Islamic terrorists, whose favorite readings are, as you must know, somewhat different. Again, Kaczynski, the Unabomber, has emphasized: "A revolutionary movement offers to solve all problems at one stroke and create a whole new world." This is tantamount to the statement by one of Conrad's characters the Professor: "You are perfectly determined to make a clean sweep of the whole social creation." Kaczynski used the name Conrad or Konrad "when checking into hotels." He read Conrad's novels "about the dozenth time", said his family. According to a professor of English, "An extremely resentful person might see the Professor as a kind of revolutionary saint". Another professor said – and I fully agree with him – that the Unabomber "completely misunderstood Conrad". He saw all these people as "scum" (Scanlan, 2001:159-160).
For an ironical person, the given reality loses its validity completely. In a certain sense an ironical person is prophetic as he points out something that is coming but does not know what it will be. He leaves his epoch, his society and takes a stand against them. The future, which is, however, behind him, is hidden for him, says Kierkegaard (1961). No doubt, Conrad's ironical artistic imagination is ahead of life, although even he does not guess how the prototype will be perfected and will burst into blossom the reality, in both the technical and the political respects.

The twenty seconds required for the Professor's bomb on his body to detonate is rather disagreeable for the terrorist; surely he is not out of the wood, after all, not to speak of the possibility that the situation will transform detrimentally during precisely this time and that the number of victims could therefore be much smaller than it could have been. But it is a more serious deficiency that the Professor wishes to use his epoch-making invention only in case of his arrest. Yet he has realized that his weapon is good for attack as well. You can choose place, time and destructive force. The Professor—only he or she can throw the first stone at him, who would have behaved differently in his situation—has not, however, taken the measure of the unlimited possibilities, the use of which is a mere issue of true belief, an even truer belief than his. What is Conrad's vision? It is "(...) deadly, like a pest in the street full of men." Why should a suicide terrorist target a whole bus, even an airliner, and why should he blow up a plane either on the ground or in the air thoughtlessly, when he could direct it against any building he/she judged appropriate? For him/her, there is no greater value than the number of people blown to pieces, at the same time destroying everything that they or similar persons have produced so far.

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Works Cited


