

TERROR: POLITICS BY OTHER MEANS

Fred Harrison

Politicians use the concept of terrorism to mislead seekers of solutions. President Bush's 'war on terror', for example, tells us more about the nightmares of neo-conservatives in Washington than about the use of terror to achieve political ends. By exploring the full context in which force is employed, we can identify the roots of the problem.

A historical and sociological approach to the fault lines in society would reveal, for example, that the 'clash of civilisations' – the West versus Islam – camouflages the frustrations that result in challenges to the authority of the State.

There are three major ways to mobilise people whose interests are excluded by the political process.

- **Organised crime.** The Mafia is one model. It did not challenge the state itself. Rather, its 'families' operated as parallel sources of authority (with commensurate rewards) within the State.
- **Liberation armies.** These are driven by ideologies that do challenge the legitimacy of the state. People coalesce into guerrilla units that adopt military postures, operating in the countryside (eg. El Salvador) or towns (eg. the IRA in the British Isles).
- **Religious movements.** Alienation may lead to the focus of material aspirations in an other-worldly form under the direction of charismatic theologians, who use sacred concepts to challenge secular authorities.

Western intelligence services are not required to identify the common origins that link these three forms of organised dissent. Such an analysis would raise political questions that Western governments – particularly those with a deep history of colonialism – would find embarrassing.

In essence, the historical problem was the failure to

establish States on foundations that united everyone on the basis of natural justice. Modern states evolved as part of the systematic exclusion of large numbers of people from the riches made possible by scientific and technological progress. These gains, in the main, were expressed as increases in the rents that people were willing to pay for the use of land and natural resources. Because people's equal rights were abused by the political elites, land tenure became a tool of

exploitation. People were dispossessed of their traditional access rights to land, and it was no accident that the State failed to compensate for this loss through the tax system. Thus, the State became embroiled in the struggle over the spoils from economic growth.

The Mafia, for example, originated to meet the needs of peasants who suffered from the amalgamation of land into large estates in Sicily. In

time, however, what had started as a self-help way of life was corrupted. The Mafia learnt how to extract a share of society's land rents by paying bribes to bureaucrats to obtain construction contracts.

The pact between the State and land owners – a privileged relationship – is the biggest obstacle to the abolition of the poverty that divides communities.

Land owners could not get away with monopolising the surplus income of their

communities (rents) without the collusion of the State. That is why the law is automatically on the side of land owners in disputes involving the dispossessed. Not surprisingly, therefore, organised expressions of discontent over poverty brings people into conflict with the law.

Colombia, in South America, illustrates the complexities of a problem rooted in the colonial land grab. Centuries of poverty nourished the crime that would one day be consolidated in an institutionalised form. In this case, drugs became the commodity that could be used as the regular source of income. The buoyant market in North America and Europe meant that the peddlers could maximise their income if they organised themselves into a commercial structure: *ergo*, 'organised crime'. But with the narco-dollars piling up in the banks, it was tempting for the drug barons to become the owners of land. That brought them into conflict with the poor, the class from which they sprang.

By the 1980s, the landless peasants who sought salvation in socialism began to employ guerrilla tactics. The owners of *latifundia* and the drug barons formed the para-militaries to protect their land. The outcome was the corruption of the crooks who turned on everybody. Rory Carroll, *The Guardian's*

correspondent in Latin America, summarised this in these terms: "The para-militaries grew into a powerful force that trafficked drugs, stole land and slaughtered peasants".

The US Congress may now hold hearings into the corruption that links multi-national corporations to Colombia's para-military groups.

But the politicians will not address the systemic flaws that nurture the frustrations which drive people to extra-legal activities.

Nor do politicians have an interest in investigating the roots of organised terror executed in the name of Islam. And yet, the suicide bomber in the Middle East is animated by 'unseen' historical forces that are similar to those that produce the drug baron in South America and the warlord in the African Congo. These are symptoms of the fault lines in society which can be tracked back to the failures of governance. Political elites are as culpable as the clerics and criminals who exploit the dispossessed in the pursuit of rewards either in heaven or on earth.

Without a full documentation, this general thesis will not be understood by people schooled in the political traditions of Western Europe. That is why we need a new appraisal of the roots of organised violence, for without the appropriate reforms, Western approaches to dissent will continue to exacerbate – not solve – the profound discontent that leads to terror as politics by other means. **L&L**

The paperback edition of Fred Harrison's Boom Bust: House Prices, Banking and the Depression of 2010 was published last month by Shephard-Walwyn (£14.95).