

FROM “PURIFICATION OF THE WORLD” TO PERSONAL PATHOLOGY

Paul Hollander



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RJ What incites intellectuals to support political violence and even terrorism? What makes violence so intellectually attractive?

First of all, it occurs through a perverted idealism, when intellectuals believe that violence is necessary in order to create a new, greatly improved society. Secondly, it occurs when intellectuals are impressed by the willingness to use violent methods – seen by them as proof of authentic commitment.

Many Western intellectuals have been concerned by their own insufficient contribution to the creation of a better society, by only talking and not doing enough. So when they see the revolutionaries, guided by their moral certainty (fanaticism) and acting ruthlessly, they are impressed and full of admiration. Subordinating personal squeamishness to a higher purpose (or the good of the collective) has always been another way of legitimating such violence.

RJ What is the reason that some Western intellectuals sympathize with terrorists in Palestine, the Caucasus, and the Arab world, and even try to justify their cause?

Western intellectuals sympathize with these terrorists partly for the same reason they used to sympathize with communist systems: because the terrorists share their hostility towards their own societies – it is the principle that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” In addition, these intellectuals have decided that the terrorists represent the “underdog,” the victims of Israel or the U.S., or Western imperialism, or capitalism. There may also be an element of anti-Semitism connected with the intense hostility towards

RJ Is it possible to find intellectual justifications for violent measures of fighting with society’s vices?

If the state has a legal monopoly on violence, it must fight crime by legal means. Of course, ordinary citizens have no legal or moral right to use illegal methods in fighting with the problem they deem to be troublesome.

RJ What are the basic justifications of excessive political violence?

It should first be pointed out that such violence is often denied or kept secret by the perpetrators, so they don’t have to provide any public justification – e.g. the Holocaust or the mass murders under Stalin and Mao. Insofar as there is a justification offered, it is usually some type of self-defense. A general justification of this type of violence is that it is a precondition for creating a morally superior political system, that eradicating the enemy, whatever its definition, purifies society or the entire world.

In some individual cases personal pathology might also have played a part, i.e. pleasure derived from mistreating people; but, of course, this does not explain large scale political violence that was

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Israel, but this is even more difficult to prove. **Terrorists (especially the suicide bombers) also impress some Western intellectuals with their apparent “authenticity,” as they unite theory and practice, word and deed.**

rooted in the commitment to create a better world (as defined by the perpetrators of the violence) – all means were ultimately justified by their lofty goals. ■

Paul Hollander was speaking with Dmitry Uzlaner