

**BERMAN, PAUL (2003). *Terror and Liberalism.***

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9—A ‘realist,’ like a Marxist, is someone who, no matter what bizarre events may take place around the world, will profess not to be surprised. This is ‘realism’s weakness, though. Wisdom consists of the ability to be shocked.

In the ‘realist’ picture of the world, wars break out because some nation’s desire for wealth, power, and geography brushes up against some other nation’s equally tangible desire for the same. Nation number two summons its allies; and everyone draws his gun.

26—[In *The Rebel*, Camus] recognized that, at a deep level, totalitarianism and terrorism are one and the same. He recognized that, if only we could discover the roots of totalitarianism, we would have discovered the roots of terror as well, and vice versa.

27—The God of the Old Testament instructs Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, and Abraham doubts the instruction and struggles to resist it, for a little while—and Abraham’s doubt and his struggle testify to the sincerity of his belief. In Ramadan’s opinion, the impulse to rebel in Western culture follows directly from the esteem that is accorded to skepticism and doubt. You begin with skepticism and doubt, and you push those attitudes one step further, and you arrive at full-scale rebellion. And those particular traits—skepticism, doubt, rebellion—have, in the end, produced a lot of misery in the Western countries today.

27—In the Koran’s version, Abraham hears God’s instructions, and readies himself to comply. There is no struggle, no temptation to rebel. In Islam, submission is all. Submission to God allows Islam to create a unified, moral, and satisfying society—at least potentially, even if the flesh-and-blood Muslims in any given era have forgotten their religious obligations. Submission is the road to social justice, to a contented soul, and to harmony with the world.

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40—And so, the First World War got underway in the logical manner of a pinball machine, with war bouncing from one corner to another. Only, something was new. The Tides of European irrationality and mass murder, which had been surging up and down Africa, now went pouring across the European continent itself. Soldiers from the most advanced and civilized countries slaughtered one another on a factory basis, until 9 million people had been killed, and another 21 million wounded—industrial statistics that seemed to bear no connection at all to the narrow and rational concerns that everyone had invoked at the start of the war. It was, in the phrase of Lieutenant Charles de Gaulle, “a war of extermination.”

43—Man was guilty, in Lenin’s eyes; but History with a capital H was innocent. When Lenin acted, he acted in History’s name. He ordered killing en masse and everything he did was, by definition, as innocent as the lamb. Shoot more professors, was one of Lenin’s secret orders. Not even Saint-Just had ever given such an order. And, very quickly, Lenin’s movement, having seized power in St. Petersburg in 1917, spread all over Europe and around the world. Everywhere the new movement displayed a weirdly frenetic dynamism, beyond anything that could have been seen in the nineteenth century. It was an emotional forcefulness that derived, ultimately, from the movement’s cheerful willingness to put Bolshevism’s enemies to death, and an equally cheerful willingness to put to death random crowds whose view on Bolshevism were utterly unknown, and a further willingness to put to death the Bolsheviks themselves (no one has ever murdered more Communists than the Communist Party of the Soviet Union), and a willingness to accept one’s own death, too—all for the best of reasons. The idea was, in Baudelaire’s phrase, to whip and kill the people for the good of the people. And the whipping and killing got underway.

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45—On the topic of death, the Nazis were the purest of the pure, the most aesthetic, the boldest, the greatest and most sublime of death's victims, too – people who, in Baudelaire's phrase, knew how to *feel* the revolution in both ways. Suicide was, after all, the final gesture of the Nazi elite in Berlin. Death, in their eyes, was not just for others, and at the final catastrophe in 1945 the Nazi leaders dutifully converted their safehouses into mini-Auschwitzes of their own.

46—And the ideal was always the same, though each movement gave it a different name. It was not skepticism and doubt. It was the ideal of submission. It was submission to the kind of authority that liberal civilization had slowly undermined and which the new movements wished to reestablish on a novel basis. It was the ideal of the one, instead of the many.

47—These city dwellers have sunk into abominations. They have been polluted by the whore of Babylon. ..The pollution is spreading to the people of God. Such is the attack from within... But these attacks, from within and without, will be violently resisted...The subversive and polluted city dwellers of Babylon will be exterminated, together with all their abominations. The Satanic forces from the mystic beyond will be fended off. The destruction will be horrifying... Afterward, when the extermination is complete, the reign of Christ will be established and will endure a thousand years. And the people of God will live in purity, submissive to God.

48—There was a people of God, whose peaceful and wholesome life had been life had been undermined...There were always the subversive dwellers in Babylon, who trade commodities from around the world and pollute society with their abominations.

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49—The Satanic forces were always pressing on the people of God from all sides. ... The coming reign was always going to be pure – a society cleansed of its pollutants and abominations. ... The structure of that purified, unchanging, eternal reign was always going to be the same. It was going to be the one-party state (for the Bolsheviks, the Fascists, the Phalange, and the Nazi) – a society whose very structure ruled out any challenge to its own shape and direction, a society that had achieved the final unity of mankind. And every one of those states was governed in the same fashion, by a great living symbol, who was the Leader.

50—The Leader was a superman. He was a genius beyond all geniuses. He was the man on horseback who, in his statements and demeanor, was visibly mad, and who, in his madness, incarnated the deepest of all the anti-liberal impulses, which was the revolt against rationality. For the leader embodied a more than human force. He wielded the force of History (for the Bolsheviks and Communists); or the force of God (for the Catholic Fascists); or the force of the biological race (for the Nazis). And, because this person exercised power that was more than human, he was exempt from the rules of moral behavior, and he showed his exemption, therefore his divineline quality, precisely by acting in ways that were shocking.

Lenin was the original model of such a Leader—Lenin, who wrote pamphlets and philosophical tracts with the confidence of a man who believes the secrets of the universe to be at his fingertips, and who established a weird new religion with Karl Marx as god, and who, after his death, was embalmed like a pharaoh and worshipped by the masses. But Il Duce was no less a superman. Stalin was a colossus. About Hitler, Heidegger, bug-eyed, said, But look at his hands.

Those leaders were gods, every one of them. There was a god like that in every moment and in every country, someone deranged, virile, all-powerful, a god who thrilled his worshipful followers, a

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hero with blood on his hands, someone freed of the humiliating limitations of ordinary morality, someone who could gaze on life and death with blasé equanimity, someone who put no value on life, who could order mass executions for no reason at all, or for the flimsiest of reasons. For the Leader was always a nihilist, a Nechaev, a Stavrogin from *The Devils*—except no longer on a tiny scale, marginal, ridiculous, and contemptible. On the contrary, in the twentieth century, Nechaevs and Stavrogins popped up in every country of continental Europe, and took power, and commanded armies and police forces and popular movements. And every one of those Leaders behaved as God behaves, dealing out what God deals out, which is death.

51—In each version of the myth, before the Reign of God could be achieved, there was always going to be the war of Armageddon – the all-extermimating bloodbath...It was going to be a pitiless war – a war on the model of the Battle of Verdun, delivering death on an industrial basis. A war of extinction. *Viva la Muerte!* cried one of Franco’s generals. For death was victory, in the new imagination.

51—These several European movements announced many highly imaginative programs for human betterment, and those imaginative programs were always, in their full-scale versions, impractical—programs for the whole of society that could never be put into effect. But death was practical. Death was the only revolutionary achievement that could actually be delivered. The unity of mankind, the reign of purity and the eternal – those goals were out of reach, in any conventional or real-world respect. But unity, purity, and eternity were readily at hand, in the form of mass death. So the Leader issued his orders. And the remnant were slain with the sword of him that sat upon the horse...

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52—Why should Europe have been unable to export its spirit of self-destruction, too?

68—The Koran points to another contemptible characteristic of the Jews—their craven desire to live, no matter at what price and regardless of quality, honor and dignity.

108—Kanan Makiya has coldly and bitterly explained that Saddam's Baath Socialism always rested on a doctrine of love – a love for the Arab nation, a love for the greatness that the Arabs have achieved in the past and will achieve in the future, a love in which the individual person hopes to merge his own identity. And the flip side of the Baathist love was a doctrine of cruelty – a cruelty that symbolized courage and virtue, the virtuous courage that was needed to bring about the resurrected Arab Empire.

108—Khomeini's revolution, by contrast, worshipped piety, the flip side of which was martyrdom... In a pious and revolutionary spirit, Khomeini organized his 'human wave' attacks – mass frontal assaults by thousands of young men, advancing to certain death at the hands of Saddam's poison gas and land mines. Khomeini whipped up a religious fervor for that kind of mass death – a belief that to die on Khomeini's orders in a human wave attack was to achieve the highest and most beautiful of destinies. All over Iran, young men, encouraged by their mothers and their families, yearned to participate in those human wave attacks – actively yearned for martyrdom. It was a mass movement for suicide. The war between love and piety, which was, from another angle, a war between cruelty and suicide.

108—The war lasted eight years. It killed upward of a million people.

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109—It was the eastern front of the Second World War, updated. It was Hitler against Stalin.

109—Soon enough he rounded up 100,000 Kurdish men and boys, machine-gunned them, and had them bulldozed into their graves.

109—The cruelty that Saddam had shown with his poison gas and his minefields, the savagery of his repressions, his refusal to be influenced or discouraged by the sufferings of his own people – those were the qualities that allowed the great man to stand up and proclaim himself the leader of the Arab nation. For cruelty was love, and invasion was Arab unity, and mass death was brotherhood. ... a step toward Arab union and strength.

110—And as piety, devotion, and patriarchy bloomed, in every country a new kind of politics came into flower. It was the politics of slaughter – slaughter for the sake of sacred devotion, slaughter conducted in a mood of spiritual loftiness, slaughter indistinguishable from charity, slaughter that lead to suicide, slaughter for slaughter's sake. It was a flower of evil. And this new politics, in its bright green Islamist color, proved to be sturdy.

110—Between 1992 and 1997, a full 100,000 people are said to have been killed in the Algerian civil war, vast numbers of them by outright massacres in village after village, chiefly by the Islamist radicals.

119—Azzam yearned for the martyrdom of scholars—The extent to which the number of martyred scholars increases is the extent to which nations are delivered from their slumbers, rescued from their decline and awoken from their sleep. He continued—“History does not write its lines except with blood. Glory does not build its lofty

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edifice except with skulls. Honor and respect cannot be established except on a foundation of cripples and corpses.”

119-20—Here is another example of this same idea, from Ali Benhadj, one of the principal Islamist leaders of Algeria, who has been quoted by the French scholar, Frederic Encel. Benhadj said, ‘If a faith, a belief, is not watered and irrigated by blood, it does not grow. It does not live. Principles are reinforced by sacrifices, suicide operations and martyrdom for Allah. Faith is propagated by counting up deaths every day, by adding up massacres and charnel-houses. It hardly matters if the person who has been sacrificed is no longer there. He has won.’

I could go on quoting—but, enough. Surely this, you will say, cannot be Western—surely this kind of talk, at last, is exotic! But this is how the leaders of Germany used to speak, sixty years ago. Bolsheviks were not afraid to speak like that. *Viva le muerte!* said Franco’s general. This is not exotic. This is the totalitarian cult of death. *This* is the terrible thing that got underway more than eighty years ago.

121—For it is very odd to think that millions or tens of millions of people, relying on their own best judgments, might end up joining a pathological political movement. Individual madmen might step forward – yes, that is unquestionable. ... But, surely, millions of people are not going to choose death, and the Jonestowns of this world are not going to take over entire societies. The very idea of a pathological mass movement seems too far-fetched to be believable.

122—Which interpretation to believe, then – that millions of people have gone out of their minds and have subscribed to a pathological political tendency? Or that small numbers of corrupt and zealous journalists and propagandists are painting disoriented pictures, at the behest of powerful and conservative social classes?



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Or, let us suppose that, in some remote tropical backwater or untracked desert, a social or political movement does appear to be showing, in fact, signs of a pathological attachment to murder and suicide. In that case, there has got to be a rational explanation. Perhaps small groups of exploiters or imperialists, through their terrible deeds, have driven thousands or even millions of people out of their minds.

133—The defiant exhibition of infant corpses at the Palestinian funerals, the macabre posters, the young men marching through the streets dressed in martyrs' shrouds – these statements and actions showed with perfect clarity that, in the popular imagination, utopia and the morgue had been blended, and the 'street' did understand, and death was the goal. And, all over the world, good-hearted people who observed those scenes had to ask—can this really be so?

133-134—Is the world truly a place where mass movements bedeck themselves in shrouds and march to the cemetery? This seemed unthinkable. And, all over the world, the temptation became great, became irresistible, to conclude that, no, the world remains a rational place, and pathological movements do not exist, and slanderers are weaving lies on behalf of narrow material interests. No, suicide terror must be – it has to be, perhaps in ways invisible to the naked eye – a rational response to real-life conditions.

134—People around the world rushed to suggest ways in which the apparent mass pathologies were anything but pathologies, and terror was reasonable and explicable and perhaps even admirable.

143—The suicide bombings produced a philosophical crisis among everyone around the world who wanted to believe that a rational logic governs the world – a crisis for everyone whose fundamental

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beliefs would not be able to acknowledge the existence of pathological mass political movements.

143—The protests explained the unexplainable...The need to defend the rationality of world events was no longer as great.

144—In the midst of those other, smaller suicide terror attacks came the much bigger one, the 9/11 attack on American targets. And, at once, with the alacrity of firehouse dogs responding to a bell, any number of people stood up all over the world to propose yet another variation on the same systematic denial. There was the same reasoned insistence that nothing unreasonable was taking place, the same argument that everything was rational, the same claim that it was foolish to be shocked, the same affirmation that ordinary explanations of normal human behavior could account for every last amazing development, if only we would open our eyes.

144—A single thought underlies the original version of Chomsky's linguistic theory, and it is this: Man's inner nature can be calculated according to a very small number of factors, which can be analyzed rationally. No shadow of the mysterious falls across the nature of man.

153—Ultimately, the error was conceptual. I think it was a version of the same error that was made by the anti-war French Socialists of the 1930's and the other people I have just described. It was an unwillingness, sometimes an outright refusal, to accept that from time to time, mass political movements do get drunk on the idea of slaughter. It was a belief that, around the world, people are bound to behave in more or less reasonable ways in pursuit of normal and identifiable interests. It was a belief that the world is, by and large, a rational place. That belief was not just a left-wing naiveté. In the United States, that belief was very nearly universal.

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Everyone, unto the chiefest of Indian chiefs, turned out to be a simpleminded rationalist, expecting the world to act in sensible ways, without mystery, self-contradiction, murk, or madness. In this country we are all Noam Chomsky.

154—The giant struggles and cataclysms of the twentieth century, fascism's attempt to conquer the world, communism's world revolution—those were lavic consequences of that original explosion, the catastrophe of 1914, rolling across the world in the years that followed.

159— 'Faith,' said Benhadi, Algeria's Islamist, 'is propagated by counting up deaths every day, by adding up massacres and charnel-houses.'

159-160—The revolt against liberalism that got underway after 1914 has never run out of energy, and the impulse for murder and suicide continues to rocket around the globe. ... This script, which used to be the Gothic lettering of German, and later was Cyrillic, and lately has been Farsi and Arabic, and which, in any alphabet, spells out the same apocalyptic explanation for why, in this hour of Armageddon, masses of people should be killed.

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