**The “War on Terror” Twenty Years On:**

**Reflections Inspired by the Experience of the Kurdish Freedom Movement**

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**The “War on Terror” from the Perspective of the Kurdish Freedom Movement**

The twentieth anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and on the Pentagon in D.C. on September 11th, 2001, invites a critical reflection, a balance sheet of sorts, of the disturbing dynamics and devastating consequences generated by the so-called “War on Terror.”

Let us begin by looking at the global “War on Terror” from the particular standpoint of the Kurdish Freedom Movement. There is an old saying that one person’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter. The Kurdish Freedom Movement has long exemplified the grain of truth in this maxim. Born as a movement of national liberation, conceived in response to systemic discrimination and oppression by the Kemalist Republic, in reaction to the Republic’s intransigent goal of assimilating – if need be annihilating – all traces of Kurdish identity into a homogenised Turkish national imaginary, the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, has been persecuted, criminalised and demonised by the NATO powers-that-be for decades now, branded and dismissed as but a “terrorist” organisation. Indeed, Turkish authorities have consistently treated the PKK as public enemy number one; and as a result, those suspected of belonging to the organisation, or even sympathising with it, have been the victims of successive waves of brutal state repression.

At the height of the war between the Turkish state and the PKK in the early nineties, thousands of Kurdish villages were forcefully evacuated, tens of thousands murdered, a mass exodus provoked. More recently, since the breakdown of peace negotiations in 2015, another brutal wave of state terror has been unleashed, this time including urban settings, leaving another bloody trail of thousands killed and hundreds of thousands forcibly displaced.

The Turkish state continues its ruthless policies of all-out war against the Kurdish people, both within its borders and beyond. The illegal occupation of parts of the Kurdish-controlled north-east of Syria continues unabated, with the ethnic cleansing of Afrin increasingly consolidated. While in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, cross-border operations and airstrikes against PKK targets have killed and injured civilians.

There is, of course, blood on the hands of the PKK, too, though not nearly as much as that on the hands of the Turkish security forces with which it has been at war for four decades now. All of which should lead any analyst who strives for impartiality and objectivity to ask the uncomfortable question: who are the real terrorists here?

The term *terrorism* has a relatively straightforward definition, definitely more straightforward than Weber’s difficult definition of the state. According to Wikipedia, “*terrorism* is, in the broadest sense, the use of intentionally indiscriminate violence as a means to create terror among masses of people; or fear to achieve a financial, political, religious, or ideological aim.” Though the web’s most famous free encyclopedia is quick to add, in a bout of on-line epistemic humility that stands in striking contrast to the boldness with which it dares to define the state, that “there is no commonly accepted definition of terrorism.”

In the context of the ongoing “War on Terror,” the impulse to embrace such reflexivity, to acknowledge the normative dimension and contested nature of the term *terrorism*,is understandable. For the term is wielded with worrisome effectiveness by scare-mongers cum war-mongers in the political arena and the mass media in an extremely demagogic fashion, serving simultaneously to silence dissent and mobilize support for draconian measures at home and illegal wars of aggression abroad. A dose of relativism might indeed appear a useful antidote against such mass intoxication by neo-fascist propaganda techniques.

And yet, as Darnell Stephen Summers has cogently stressed, recourse to this type of relativism in debates about the nature of terrorism has one most unfortunate consequence for defenders of civil liberties and critics of tyranny: namely, it lets the biggest culprits of terrorism off the hook. Who are these biggest culprits? Without a doubt, state actors. Indeed, according to the common-sense definition provided by Wikipedia, the United States of America is by far the most lethal terrorist organisation on the planet. Its NATO partner, the Republic of Turkey, also ranks among the worst offenders. As do all of the U.S.’s fellow members on the UN Security Council.

The Kurdish Freedom Movement now finds itself in the surreal position of being considered and treated by the United States as terrorists on one side of the border (in Turkey), and freedom fighters on the other (in Syria). U.S. officials continue to base their policy on the implausible claim that there are no organic links between the PKK and the YPG. But they would be better off to come clean and admit the links, and to emphasise the urgent need for a return to peace negotiations in Turkey, for a democratic resolution to the ongoing conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state, indeed, for recognition of the legitimate grievances, democratic aspirations and human rights of the Kurds, and of all ethnic and religious minorities, in Turkey, in Syria, and beyond. Any other policy reeks of hypocrisy, and will ultimately prove incapable of contributing to the transcendence of the still-spiralling violence and bloodshed in the region.

Let us step back for a moment, to recall the circumstances surrounding the abduction of the leader of the Kurdish Freedom Movement, Abdullah Öcalan. It was in 1998, under pressure and even military threats from the Turkish government, that Öcalan was forced to leave Syria, where he had been exiled for close to two decades. Thus began a tortured odyssey, which led him first to Russia, then to Italy, then to Greece. While on the run, in August of 1998, Öcalan declared a unilateral ceasefire (the third such ceasefire), which would end when he was captured in Nairobi, Kenya, *en route* to South Africa, on the 15th of February, 1999.

Öcalan’s capture caused an outpouring of emotions, and unleashed as well a wave of violence that included “the assassination of a regional governor and a firebombing that killed 13 people” (Yildiz and Breau 2010, p.19; White 2000, p.188).” The outpouring of emotion in the wake of Öcalan’s capture was perhaps especially visible among Kurds in the diaspora (Romano 2006, p.163). Protests were organized around the world at Greek and Israeli embassies and consulates (both implicated in the arrest, along with the CIA). In Berlin, three Kurds were killed and sixteen injured in an attack on the Israeli consulate, after which the German government threatened deportations should the protests continue (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abdullah\_Öcalan).

Öcalan was taken back to Turkey, and held in solitary confinement at a prison in Imrali Island, in the Sea of Marmara, where he remains to this day. Over 1,000 Turkish military personnel would be stationed on the island to guard the public enemy number one (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abdullah_Öcalan>). A military court would charge him with treason and separatism, and by June of 1999 had convicted him and sentenced him to death (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/monitoring/380845.stm>). Öcalan immediately appealed the decision – and the sentence would later be commuted to life in prison.

Like Nelson Mandela, Abdullah Öcalan is a crucial role player for the construction of a peaceful and democratic resolution to the ongoing conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdish Freedom Movement. The time has come for the freedom of Mr. Öcalan, since, as Mandela once said, “only free men can negotiate.” But rather than freedom, the treatment that Öcalan receives is a brutal, inhumane regime of near total isolation. For over twenty-two years now. While the Council of Europe, and its Committee for the Prevention of Torture, remain for the most part silent, complicit in this brutal, inhumane regime.

The Imrali system of brutal, inhumane isolation put in place for Mr. Öcalan can be seen as a precursor and precedent to the system put in place by the United States in Guantánamo, a system which enshrines a reign of state terror, a system that is unlawful, unconstitutional. And in Turkey, the Imrali system of isolation has subsequently spread like a cancer, across the country, spilling over to other prisons, and throughout society. In the wake of the failed 2016 coup, the regime of isolation spread from Imrali to affect with particular intensity the mushrooming numbers of political prisoners across the country. Such extension of the Imrali system of isolation signifies the institutionalization of fascism. The Constitution is not applied, the laws of Turkey are not applied, international law is not applied, international court decisions are not applied. Instead, impunity, tyranny, are the order of the day.

The rights of prisoners are routinely violated, they are subjected to invasive surveillance and naked body searches, dispersed across the country, far from their families, and tortured and further punished whenever they object or resist. The government is showing off its power in the prisons, and the abuses are getting all the time worse.

Meanwhile, the definition of terror included in the anti-terror legislation is especially expansive, and is being applied quite indiscriminately against all manner of opponents of the Erdogan government. In 2006, a UN Special Rapporteur had “criticized the definition of terrorism as prescribed by Article 1 of the Anti-Terror Code, since the definition was not based on specific criminal acts but on intent or target. According to the Rapporteur, this definition was broad and vague. In such cases people and organizations could be criminalized as terrorists although they did not engage in any violent acts” (“IHD’s Assessment and Recommendations on the Amendments to the Law on the Enforcement of Sentences,” p.3). Furthermore, as the Human Rights Association (IHD) insists, the Anti-Terror Code’s exceedingly broad definition of terror is both unconstitutional and “contrary to international conventions,” and “it infringes upon the essence of the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens” (p.4). Indeed, as they go on to contend, “[w]hen one looks at reports issued by human rights and journalists’ organizations, violations brought about by the broad definition of terrorism can be seen in a crystal clear manner” (p.3).

In such a vein, Human Rights Watch has observed that “[t]he Erdogan government refuses to distinguish between the PKK and the democratically elected Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) which won 11.7 percent of the national vote in the 2018 parliamentary elections and 65 local municipalities in the 2019 local elections” (https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/turkey). Human Rights Watch neglects to add that, when it comes to the PKK itself, the Belgian Court of Cassation ruled in March of 2019 that the Kurdish paramilitary force should not be classified as a terrorist organization, but rather, as a combatant in an armed conflict (<https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/19081-Belgian-court:-PKK-not-a-terrorist-organization>). The silence on the part of the Human Rights Watch on this crucial point is, of course, not surprising, due to the fact that the PKK does remain classified by the European Union and the United States, not only Turkey, as a terrorist organization.

Be that as it may, the Anti-Terror Code is frequently applied to members of all organizations associated with the Kurdish Freedom Movement, without distinction. And moreover, as a representative of the Democratic Regions’ Party (DBP) recently pointed out: ***“They have been labelling not only Kurds but also Turkish opposition as terrorists.”***

The Kurdish question is of course the most sensitive of subjects; and criticisms of the government’s policies of all-out war against the Kurdish people are routinely persecuted under the rubric of the Anti-Terror Code.

The ideas, the demonstrations, the organizations most vehemently repressed, are those associated with the figure of Abdullah Öcalan. What is it about Mr. Öcalan that makes him such an anathema among the Turkish authorities? For one thing, he is seen by millions as the embodiment of the Kurdish nation, the incarnation of the Kurdish will to exist, his persecution emblematic of the plight of the Kurds.

But not only that. While chained to the rock of Imrali, Mr. Öcalan has consistently called for the construction of a peaceful and democratic resolution to the Kurdish question. His is decidedly a voice for peace and democracy, but for democracy of a different, radical and participatory kind. Indeed, in the five-volume *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization* that he has penned as part of his defence, he has elaborated an impressive re-articulation of the core democratic ideal of self-determination, and sketched a program and model of “democratic confederalism,” that serves as an inspiration to his many followers, and that has transformed the contours and content of the Kurdish struggle. No longer is the struggle framed in the classical terms of national liberation; now it has come to be framed as a struggle to construct nothing less than an alternative to the negative dialectic of tyranny and chaos in which the country, the region, the world is increasingly engulfed.

Mr. Öcalan proposes a radical, direct-democratic alternative, one which centers the struggle for gender emancipation, stresses the need for multi-ethnic and multi-religious accommodation, and emphasizes the urgency of environmental sustainability. These are lofty ideals, but they are not only ideals. They are the vision behind concrete, revolutionary developments in the region, those in the north-east of Syria, in Rojava, to be precise. His are words that move masses. Which helps explain why the Turkish authorities are so concerned to isolate him, to silence him, why they indeed consider him public enemy number one.

Let us, therefore, draw some more general, initial conclusions from the experience of the Kurdish Freedom Movement. The global “War on Terror” is indeed Orwellian. It has not rooted out “terror,” but has instead sown it. It has not advanced the cause of human rights, but has instead undermined that cause. It has not spread democracy, but has instead provoked failed states and reinforced tyrannical states. It has not brought the world any closer to peace, but has instead ushered in an era of perpetual war. Moreover, it must not be denied or forgotten, it has contributed greatly to the resurgence of xenophobia, racism, militarism, and authoritarian populism in the U.S., in Europe, and, indeed, across much of the globe.

The “War on Terror” is not only counter-productive in terms of promoting purported values such as human rights, democracy and peace; it is also based on an extremely misleading and oversimplified paradigm for understanding the world. It is a paradigm that deliberately conflates very different types of movements and actors, and that perpetuates naïve (or cynical) idealist notions about “extremist” ideologies as root causes rather than as symptoms that reflect processes of polarization, or as responses to underlying, objective grievances. Indeed, at its core, the “War on Terror” paradigm is profoundly undemocratic. It serves to justify the criminalisation, dehumanisation, and demonization of entire communities, and leads to the replacement of politics by war.

**The “War on Terror” and the Terminal Crisis of Capitalist Modernity**

How, then, to make sense of this “War on Terror”? Is it but a colossal mistake? To make sense of its insidious logic, it is imperative that we situate the global “War on Terror” within the context of the terminal crisis of capitalist modernity and the hegemony of neoliberalism.

Over the past several decades, “national” markets have been increasingly integrated into an emergent global market, albeit on terms dictated by global governing institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO, in which the rulers of the most powerful nation-states exercise asymmetric influence.

However, the rise of the multinational corporation and the subsequent unleashing of the power of global financial networks have reduced the relative autonomy of the rulers of even the most powerful nation-states.

The transnational cohesion and global coordination of the capitalist class has effectively outflanked and progressively undermined the class compromises and limits to commodification that had been negotiated and institutionalised at the level of the nation-state in response to the collective demands of organised labour.

The dialectic of capital versus labour has thus been suspended, the working class for now defeated, the rule of capital triumphant, capitalist social-property relations ever-more unfettered, virtually unchallenged, around the globe.

The consequences of this “victory” are nothing short of disastrous. The global triumph of capitalism has not meant the end of history, certainly not in the sense intended by capitalist ideologues and apologists, though all indications point to, at best, the imminent onset of an irreversible climate catastrophe.

It was a century ago that Rosa Luxemburg diagnosed the alternatives to be socialism or barbarism, and half a century ago that Murray Bookchin upped the ante, declaring the choices to be ecology or catastrophe. In both critical junctures – 1918 and 1968 – demagogic appeals to the nation proved capable of trumping the exercise of collective rationality for the sake of humanity. And so it remains today, even as the self-fulfilling prophecy of the apocalypse approaches.

Now more than ever, the need for internationalist anti-capitalist consciousness and organization, the need to forge a locally-mobilised, globally-coordinated collective will to resist the tyranny of capitalism, is most urgent indeed. Yet, the winds of the *zeitgeist* appear to be blowing in precisely the opposite direction. Witness Trump, Brexit, “fortress Europe,” Erdogan, Modi. The forces of right-wing nationalism, replete with racism, xenophobia, and patriarchy, are surging, in power or on the rise across much of the planet.

How can we explain the ideological efficacy of such reactionary movements and creeds, and the corresponding weakness of the appeal of alternative, radical egalitarian and internationalist imaginaries?

Part of the answer has to do with the crisis of faith in revolution – a crisis born of the failures and crimes of state communism – failures and crimes which have stripped the anti-capitalist left of our once unflinching confidence that the future belongs to us. Whatever their posture while in opposition, once they had seized power, Marxist-Leninist ideologues and cadres quickly succumbed to the cult of the State. Which meant, in practice, the conversion of revolutionary aspirations for human emancipation into support for developmental dictatorships, and by extension, the displacement of internationalism in favour of State-propagated nationalist projects and myths.

Credit where credit is due: capitalism has proven much more dynamic than its adversaries believed. To be sure, the revolutionaries of the past clearly underestimated the buoyancy of capitalism, its ability to survive and adapt in response to successive crises, its capacity to co-opt and incorporate some elements of opposition, while effectively repressing and annihilating others.

In the so-called “core” of the world system, at least, there were material bases that long facilitated the manufacturing of popular consent to the perpetuation of capitalist social-property relations. But material bases alone have never sufficed; instead, they have always been supplemented and reinforced by coercion and ideology.

The power of the coercive state apparatus has become much more technologically sophisticated and overwhelming since the time of the Paris Commune, when the task of “smashing the bureaucratic-military machine” still seemed feasible to the founding fathers of “scientific socialism.” That time has long since passed. Indeed, certainly in any of the rich states, and probably even in most of the not-so-rich states, only if a critical mass among the rank-and-file of military and police forces were to “refuse, resist, and rebel” against orders to repress – or, less likely still, if their commanders were to refuse to issue such orders – could a revolutionary insurrection stand any chance of success.

Which brings us to the matter of ideology. The nation as a mystified basis of community has not only defeated revolutionary, class-based alternatives at multiple critical junctures over the course of the past century; so too has it been institutionalised and thus reified in the educational system, the mass media, the state bureaucracy, as well as by political parties, including the representatives of social-democracy.

The forces of social-democracy, along with their allies in the trade union movement, were together responsible for many of the democratic limits to commodification imposed upon capitalism, especially in the north and west of Europe, in the decades after the Second World War, when social rights expanded, provided by the welfare state. Yet, such accommodation came at a price – namely, the dis-organisation and de-politicization of the working class, their progressive conversion into passive spectators of politics at most, more often than not, into mere consumers. This waning, if not death, of class consciousness helped paved the way for the subsequent victory of neoliberalism, the triumph of the cult of the market.

But the high priests of the cult of the market have seldom insisted that their god be worshipped alone, or even that no other god be worshipped before it. To the contrary, the cult of the market has tended to be propagated in tandem with the cult of the nation, with Social-Darwinist motifs uniting the adoration of the two idols. Emblematic in this regard are the examples of both Reagan and Thatcher, whose formula for electoral success was perspicaciously described by Stuart Hall at the time as “a move toward ‘authoritarian populism’.”

The manifold ways in which national consciousness has been institutionalised, reinforced by the frequent appeals of political elites to supremacist, exclusionary, and patriarchal conceptions of national belonging, for the purposes of dividing and conquering the exploited and oppressed, have effectively hindered the popularity and salience of feelings of transnational empathy, solidarity, loyalty, community and belonging. Despite the existence of global governing institutions, despite the construction of the global market, despite the consolidation of global commodity chains, despite the global power of finance, despite the proliferation of technologies allowing for the global diffusion of information and communication, despite the global threat of climate catastrophe, despite the spread of global epidemics, all of which provide objective material bases for the emergence of demands for global forms of democratic accountability, of demands for global forms of political community, indeed, of demands for the constitution of a global demos.

In a word, the cult of the nation constricts and constrains the horizons of our collective consciousness. It thus undermines our capacity for exercising collective rationality in the face of the urgent social and political problems we must confront together, as members of the human race, if we are to stand a chance of successfully transforming global constellations of social-property relations. Such a transformation is urgently needed not just for the sake of justice. The privileges of the plutocrats, the tyrants, and the war-mongers must be checked, they must be held accountable, because their greed, their lust for power, their lethal ineptitude and their colossal irresponsibility are literally threatening the future of life on our planet. But so long as the cult of the nation continues to mystify our consciousness, we will remain disempowered, or worse, we will remain complicit, condemned to aiding and abetting their crimes.

There is a long history of crimes committed in the name of the nation, especially in the name of those nations that can be classified as “Great Powers.” In fact, the crimes of the past can in large part account for the “Great Power” status of some nation-states today. In this sense, these crimes do not remain in the past, but live on in the present. And they live on in another sense as well: for the lies and propaganda employed to justify the crimes of the past continue to resonate in the present, even when they are not explicitly repeated and defended, but simply downplayed and whitewashed, or even covered over in an attempt to induce historical amnesia. When not confronted directly and deliberately deconstructed, in the name of truth and more than mere reconciliation, in the pursuit of just compensation, the lies and propaganda inherited from the past will continue to weigh on the collective guilty conscience; they will continue to contaminate the collective sub-conscious; and they will thus inevitably seep into, be inflected and reflected in, the contours of contemporary collective consciousness. Which is why conflicts and taboos about collective memory are never just about how the past is remembered, but are instead so often central to struggles for hegemony in the present, pitting those committed to the preservation of the status quo against those committed to alternative projects seeking to contest and transform existing constellations of material and social power relations. “The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”

Behind the myth of the nation lies the power of the state. In the neoliberal period, the cult of the nation has been propagated in tandem with the cult of the market; and both have been propagated in conjunction with the perpetuation of the cult of the state. This claim might sound controversial, given the frequency with which the state is rhetorically pit against the market in neoliberal discourse. However, it is wrong to consider neoliberalism an anti-state ideology *per se*. To the contrary, neoliberal ideologues champion the ideal of the “night watchman state,” even as they berate and deride the so-called “nanny state.”

These gendered terms for distinguishing the allegedly legitimate from illegitimate roles for the state are worthy of note, since they are indicative of the elective affinity between neoliberal “common sense” and patriarchy. At the same time, they reveal that the police and the military are not the objects of neoliberal scorn; nor is investment in the coercive apparatus conceived as standing in contradiction to maintaining a “minimal state.” The provision of social services and welfare, by contrast, are considered as excessive, too costly, even dangerous, over-controlling encroachments on liberty; while regulations on corporate practices are dismissed as burdensome “bureaucratic red-tape.”

A double-standard, no doubt, and one which reveals the very peculiar conception of liberty operative among the high priests of the cult of the market. Not only is it the case that neoliberal ideologues ignore or deny the spectre of corporate tyranny; but perhaps more surprisingly, they tend to remain silent about the spectre of police state tyranny, not to mention outlandish and ever-expanding military budgets. Evidently, the imperative of austerity ceases to apply whenever the dogma of “national security” is invoked.

Which brings us back to the issue of the ongoing, Orwellian War on Terror. Neoliberal hegemony was born as a response to the crisis decade of the 1970s, a decade which witnessed several systemic shocks to the structure of the global political economy, including the end of the dollar-gold standard, the breakdown of the Bretton Woods system and the subsequent transformation of the Bretton Woods institutions, as well as the two OPEC oil crises of 1973 and 1979. These shocks all contributed to the undermining of economic performance and of leverage for and confidence in the Keynesian formulas for countercyclical demand management which had undergirded the social-democratic consensus of the 1950s and 1960s.

Thatcher and Reagan came to power with a plan to revive economic performance by catering to corporate interests through a strategy of deregulation, union busting, and tax cuts. But the pioneers of neoliberalism were also enthusiastic advocates of “law and order” and aggressive exponents of militarism. Such posturing led, especially in the US, to massive increase in rates of incarceration and to astronomical boosts in military spending.

The collapse of the Soviet Union was not only widely celebrated as definitive proof of the virtues of capitalism; it was also interpreted in right-wing circles as vindication of the effectiveness and sagacity of Reagan’s militarist muscle-flexing. Moreover, in geopolitical terms, it provided a crucial window of opportunity for the US to pursue policies of neo-Imperial expansion, principally to secure the control of oil in the Middle East, and thereby effectively to entrench Washington’s ability to dictate the terms of global capitalist development well into the next century.

And thus, the end of the Cold War would consummate not an era of perpetual peace, but rather, an era of perpetual war, with the onset of the War on Terror. The 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon would prove a point of inflection in this regard. Alongside endless wars would come the construction of an ever-more complex surveillance apparatus. The climate of fear and of military aggression thereby induced would help sow the seeds for the resurgence of increasingly belligerent manifestations of right-wing nationalism.

**The Revenge of History**

Let us conclude by honing in on, and trying to make sense of, one act of so-called “senseless” terror by non-state actors. In the run-up to the 2017 independence referendum in Catalonia, some six weeks before it was scheduled to take place, right at the height of the tourist season, on the afternoon of August 17th, a 22-year-old man by the name of Younes Abouyaaqoub, rammed a rented van into a crowd on the Ramblas, murdering fourteen pedestrians and injuring 130 others.

Mr. Abouyaaqoub was born in Morocco in 1995, but had moved with his family to the Catalan town of Ripoll, located ninety miles outside of Barcelona, near the Pyrenees, at the age of four. He grew up in Catalonia, as did nine of the other ten individuals allegedly involved in the plot, a group which included five sets of brothers, ranging in age from 17 to 28, and to whom the BBC referred as a “jihadist gang” (Piranty 2018). Seven of those ten brothers are dead now. Caught up in a whirlwind, propelled into a spiral of violence, spit out of a storm blowing from paradise.

The way the papers told the story was predictable enough – reflecting and reproducing a decontextualized, ahistorical, utterly impoverished social imaginary, a comic book consciousness of sorts, in which a zealot, a villain, was to blame. A man by the name of Abdelbaki Es Satty, a 44-year-old from the Rif mountain region of Morocco, who infected the group of young boys with what Stephen Casmier has ironically dubbed “the all explaining label of *jihadist* extremism.”

The incident was thus interpreted through the lens of security, as but a senseless act of terror, whose roots were to be found in the disease of *jihadist* extremism, which had appeared on the scene as an interruption, causing a deviation from the otherwise natural path of social integration. The realities of systemic discrimination, linked to the criminalisation of communities entailed by the global migration regime, alongside the ongoing, Orwellian war on terror, not to mention the legacy of the deeper history of colonial oppression of Morocco by Spain and France, were covered over, deliberately ignored, only very rarely mentioned. The predicament of these postcolonial migrants, captured so well in Tayeb Salih’s classic, *Season of Migration to the North*, caught “half-way between north and south, unable to continue, unable to return” (1969, p.167), nowhere recognised in the public reaction to this violent act.

Instead, the debate among politicians, and in the mainstream press, was dominated by finger pointing between supporters of the secessionist cause, who denounced the Spanish government for allegedly failing to cooperate sufficiently with the Catalan police in sharing intelligence related to counter-terrorism, and especially for denying the regional police, the *Mossos d’esquadra*,independent access to Europol and Interpol information, on the one side; and supporters of Spanish unity, who criticised the *Mossos* for allegedly failing to collaborate sufficiently with Spanish police and intelligence, and for ignoring warnings coming from the CIA and the Spanish Ministry of Interior about an imminent terrorist attack, on the other (Bayo 2017; Sebastián 2017). Notably, almost entirely absent from the mainstream debate was any criticism of the extra-judicial execution of Mr. Abouyaaqoub in Cambrils, about 120 kilometres southwest of Barcelona, on the coast, some five days after the attack.

The rather ignominious role played by Spain in the illegal invasion of Iraq back in 2003, its part in the so-called “coalition of the willing,” will not soon be forgotten. The campaign of “shock and awe” was state terror at its finest. The bombing of the Atocha train station in Madrid, the following year, was carried out by Moroccan migrants, in retribution for this role. The conservative government’s efforts to pin the Atocha bombing on the Basque group, ETA, backfired, and directly contributed to its ouster in the general election a few days after the bombing (Lago and Montero 2006). The attack on the Ramblas was thus not the first occasion in which Moroccan migrants, the war on terror, and the “national question” were somehow mixed.

The war on terror framing and mentality has deep domestic roots in Spain, with the spiral of violence and repression provoked by ETA in the last years of the Franco regime lasting for more than a generation after the dictator’s death, including a dirty war conducted by the socialist government in the eighties (Woodworth 2001). As a result, the Spanish public, and the Catalan one too, have long been fed a steady diet of “anti-terror” discourse, in the daily news, editorials, and partisan propaganda.

But there was a time when the word terror was not merely an insult or epithet, when the anarchist revolutionary-cum- Minister of Justice could boast, in an homage to his fallen comrade Durruti, in commemoration of the exploits of the action group *Los Solidarios* to which they had belonged: “We made a selection of the very best terrorists of the working class, those who could best return every blow for blow, to bring at long last the victory of the proletariat” (García Oliver 1937).

There is an abyss that separates such sensibilities from ours. Even among those of us who do not look the other way, among those of us who are willing to recognise that our representative-democratic institutions are broken, that they are increasingly contained and controlled by vested interests, by plutocrats and war-mongers, and seem thoroughly incapable of averting an ecological catastrophe that threatens the very future of life on the planet. Even we flinch when it comes to the espousal of revolutionary violence.

The tragic denouements of revolutions past, their ghosts, haunt our imagination. And so we cling to an inconsistent pacifist reflex, in which we reify and even advocate the state’s monopoly of violence, and seem to have forgotten Sartre’s still all-too-timely rebuke:

A fine sight they are too, the believers in non-violence, saying that they are neither executioners nor victims. Very well then; if you’re not victims when the government which you’ve voted for, when the army in which your younger brothers are serving without hesitation or remorse have undertaken race murder, you are, without a shadow of a doubt, executioners. And if you choose to be victims and to risk being put in prison for a day or two, you are simply choosing to pull your irons out of the fire. But you will not be able to pull them out; they’ll have to stay there till the end. Try to understand this at any rate: if violence began this very evening and if exploitation and oppression had never existed on the earth, perhaps the slogans of non-violence might end the quarrel. But if the whole regime, even your non-violent ideas, are conditioned by a thousand-year-old oppression, your passivity serves only to place you in the ranks of the oppressors” (2001, p.21).

To invoke Sartre’s argument here against “the believers in non-violence” is not to advocate any and every act of violence; nor, much less, is it to conflate Mr. Abouyaaqoub’s particularly act of violence with revolutionary violence. Instead, the point is, first, to emphasise the postcolonial/neo-colonial context necessary for understanding that particular act; and second, to bring into relief the violence inherit in the cult of the state, to which both sides involved in the struggle for and against self-determination in Catalonia at least implicitly pay homage.

It is also meant to highlight again the extent to which revolutionary reflexes seem to have been rendered obsolete – how far we are from the likes not only of the Spanish anarchists of the thirties, but also of the likes of Sartre, or for that matter Fanon, in the early sixties – perhaps especially when it comes to the question of violence.

Fanon, like the Spanish anarchists, openly embraced an aspiration for heaven on earth, and was willing to see it through, regardless of the consequences. “The last shall be first, and the first last,” he wrote, adding that “[d]ecolonization is the putting into practice of this sentence,” before concluding, in no uncertain terms:

“The naked truth of decolonization evokes for us the searing bullets and bloodstained knives which emanate from it. For if the last shall be first, this will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle between the two protagonists. That affirmed intention to place the last at the head of things, and to make them climb at a pace (too quickly, some say) the well-known steps which characterize an organized society, can only triumph if we use all means to turn the scale, including, of course, that of violence” (2001, p.28).

The belief in Spain’s “historic destiny in North Africa” had occupied a significant space in the Spanish nationalist imaginary throughout the nineteenth century, the nationalist repertoire replete with calls for a “new crusade against the infidel Moors” (Carr 1982, pp.517, 261). The capture of Tetuan in 1860 “evoked a nation-wide apotheosis,” in Carr’s judgment, “a reflex action of a nation that felt itself growing in prosperity and ripe for colonial responsibility,” the Moroccan war’s popularity in Catalonia “proof that national patriotism could still subsume regional loyalties” (1982, p.261).

By the turn of the century, however, rivalry with France triggered further expeditions which served to “reveal the weakness of the Spanish army,” not to mention “the hostility of [Spanish] public opinion to the expenditure of money and lives in Morocco” (Carr 1982, p.517). In 1909, Maura’s “call-up of reservists” for “renewed military-colonial activity in Morocco” triggered “violent confrontations between the Spanish army and members of the working classes in Barcelona … assisted by anarchists, socialists, and republicans,” in the so-called *Tragic Week* (Wikipedia, “Tragic Week”)*.*

Whereas the working classes showed no interest in sacrificing anything for maintaining a Spanish presence in North Africa, for the Spanish army, “Morocco became their preserve, where dreary garrison life was exchanged for ‘shooting and promotion,” with many generals “dream[ing] of a decisive operation which would join the two zones of the Ceuta and Melilla commands by the conquest of the Bay of Alhucemas” (Carr 1982, p.519).

In 1921, the Spanish army suffered “the most discreditable defeat in its military annals,” when some twenty thousand troops in the eastern zone of Morocco were “driven in panic from advanced positions around Annual into Melilla, and the fruit of a decade of expensive and unpopular war vanished before a few thousand tribesmen” (Carr 1982, p.517). Calls by parliamentarians for responsibility surrounding the so-called “disaster” in Morocco were among the main causes of Primo de Rivera’s 1923 coup.

The forces who routed the Spanish troops, responsible for the “disaster,” were led by Abd el-Krim, who with his brother had organised a coalition of Berber-speaking tribes from the Rif region in the north of Morocco to rise up against French and Spanish colonialization, who would go on to found the short-lived Republic of the Rif. The overwhelming victory “established Abd el-Krim” as a legend, “a master and pioneer of guerrilla warfare,” whose tactics would later come to influence Mao, Ho Chi Minh, and Che Guevara, among others (Wikipedia, “Abd el-Krim”).

In 1925, Abd el-Krim went on to invade French-occupied Morocco, “ma[king] it as far as Fez,” which triggered a brutal response by the French, now in alliance with Spain, who put together a force some quarter million strong, under the command of Marshall Henri Phillippe Pétain, of later Vichy fame, and proceeded to bombard the Rif Republic, using chemical weapons, in the process “inflict[ing] extensive damage on the local Berber population” (Wikipedia, “Abd el-Krim”).

The Rif mountains, the same region where Abdelbaki Es Satty, the man alleged to have infected the young Moroccan-Catalans in Ripoll with the “disease” of *jihadist* extremism, was born. Perchance the ghosts of colonial atrocities past are not so easily put to rest.