On the discourse and propaganda of anti-terrorism

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"Bullets and missiles are perceived as cool objects prompting the frequent reaction that the early stages of the war resembled an electronic game". (Falk, page 24, 1995)

Introduction

The subject of my inquiry will be the public discourse on terrorism, which has explicitly unfolded since the "terrorist" attack on the World Trade Centre. In the first part I will focus on some propagandistic schemes that have become apparent in the last few months, then I will continue to analyse some theoretical concepts of the ideological matrix of anti-terrorism and terrorism, which leads me to a critique of war. This article is theoretically based on the legacy of Louis Althusser (his theory on ideology and its effects, as interpreted by Rastko Močnik) and some other contemporary thinkers like Richard Falk.

Context and propaganda

To start with, the war of terrorism and counter-terrorism is a new war (Kaldor, 1995), but also it has to be taken into account that it is happening inside the Empire (Negri and Hardt, 2001), or to be precise on the borders of the Empire whose power will expand after installing a new pro-American government. War is one of the constitutive elements of the current global (dis)order (Negri and Hardt, 2001). So, we are faced with the war for re-distribution of wealth and power between global elites, where one comes from the developed North and the other comes from the South. The image of the unreal hunt for Osama bin Laden is merely a disguise for strategic interests of the USA (control of Central Asia and oil pipes).

But what is happening in front of our eyes? The public is exposed to the militant and one-sided messages from the North-based alliance (i.e. USA-led). In the centre of the message there is the old ideological pattern of division into Self - »good guys« and Others – »bad guys« (see also S.Žižek, Z.Kanduč both 2001).

Propagandistic techniques

America' s propagandistic machines (like Pentagon, and its media allies CNN and BBC, to name a few) are using various techniques to promote their ideology of anti-terrorism and the inevitability of war. There were three direct and very recognisable propagandistic operations. The first one was breaking news live about America and Americans under attack, so at the end of the day we all knew that America was going to retaliate. Also, the news and accusations against potential culprits were so strong that the "criminals" simply deserved capital punishment and were not regarded as humans (one of the consequences is the way American authorities are treating prisoners from Afghanistan in Guantanamo Bay). Another technique is a reference to higher fairness regarding the whole nation, and more, leading the entire civilized world in the war against other.

A typical example of "underground" (indirect) propaganda took place during the bombing of Afghanistan (also described by R.Močnik, 2001). All television stations were showing pictures from the global media giant CNN of pilots in technologically elaborated planes F-18 who flew from the aircraft carrier on the Mission. The main problem of journalist report here is that we do not get the real picture. We do not get to know that these planes are killing people, not just military targets but also civilians. Also, we did not see any refugees leaving their homes etc. We could associate this reports wit the old phenomenon of censorship, where American and later also British authorities hailed the media not to show much information (for example to show interview with the leader of Al-Qaeda), because Osama bin Laden could order other terrorist acts to be carried out. The only exception was the TV and radio station al-Jazeera, situated in Qatar. Their journalists critically assessed Taliban and American points of view, but the problem was they could not transmit the message to Western media, since the White House accused them of Laden's propaganda (one can find an interesting article about freedom of press regarding al-Jazeera on the web site, Michael Moran, http://www.msnbc.com/news/643471.asp?cp1=1).

As a response to alternative voices from media and to the present geopolitical situation the Pentagon launched the institutional apparatus of propaganda - the Office of Strategic Influence (for further details check the on-line article of the rightist newspaper New York Times, Dao and Schmitt, 2002: http://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/19/international/19PENT.html). The primary role of the ideologically non-biased office will be the dissemination of "true" lies to foreign diplomats, again with the function to strengthen and exercise control on important global political issues and to set priorities in media agendas .

Defining propaganda

The organized spread of ideas, in other words propaganda, can be seen in the omnipresent »criticism« of global terrorism, without any self-reflection on military actions taken in Afghanistan. In the near future we can expect more "humanitarian

interventions" and wars against global terrorism in the rest of the rogue states, which have to be subordinated to the global hegemonic (dis) order.

As it has been implicitly suggested propaganda is intrinsically linked with strategic spread of ideology. Let us explore some ways of defining ideology. We shall focus on some phrases of the most "prominent" politicians of the era.

Theory of ideology

Having described the "real" situation we can move to theoretical analysis of ideology. At first there is a crucial need to reconstruct the theory of ideology while limiting us just to simplistic views on false consciousnesses would not be theoretically productive.

Ideology and individual

In Althuserrian' s terms, discourse is ideology. We have different kinds of discourses, like political, media, economic, legal and others. For the inquiry presented here the focus will be on media and political discourse. As already mentioned in the text, the ideological matrix is quite simple: white and black. One of the well-known theses of Louis Althusser is: "Ideology interpellates the individuals as subjects" (for detailed study on the theory of ideology see Močnik, 1991, and also 1993). In the case of anti-terrorism ideology, its protagonists try to persuade or to hail individuals in the way that they are going to identify with and believe and that gives the crucial moral and political justification for future fair deeds in the name of democracy and liberty. So, ideology presents an imaginary relation between individual, or rather subject supposed to believe and his or her institutional practices – institutions .

Theory of institution

An important dimension in understanding the theory of ideology is the theory of institution. As Althusser says ideology has its own material existence, in sociological terms, it can be perceived as a social fact (Durkheim). It exists as an institution; it establishes the structural relations between people. Today, the anti-terrorist ideology has established the way people of the North think and also make sense of their social actions. People in these countries are feeling bound and uncritical to support the waging of war against all rogue states. Also, the ideology of Other is perpetuated by the prophesies of conservative thinker Huntington' s "civilizational" conflict. To be sure this pattern is also used by the global terrorist elites that wish to appeal their people, so this process acts like a self-fulfilling prophecy – the circle is being closed.

Phrases

After having constructed the conceptual apparatus we can analyse some phrases of the U.S. president Bush and Osama bin Laden.

Right after the attack on WTC Bush concluded his speech in the words: "We are going to get these folks". With this sentence he already began the politics of revenge and made war legitimate in the eyes of most Americans. They were perfectly "interpellated" in anti-terrorist ideology, of course with the help of some other already mentioned techniques. Maybe revenge is one of the features of human being but it is certainly not legally permissible to attack other states.

One of the greatest phrases that uniformed the worldview on terrorism is: An attack on the civilized world (for details go to: http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/terrornet/). It served the White House to build a coalition, to let the rest of the world identify according to the old saying that you are either with us or against us. Of course most of people did not agree with the attack on WTC, so this could be easily used in the formation of anti-terrorist coalition and its discourse.

On the mentioned web site an interesting phrase of Osama bin Laden can be found: "God has blessed a group of Vanguard Muslims, the forefront of Islam, to destroy America" (page 20). Bin Laden tried to unify Muslims and strong anti-American sentiment in Arab countries, so he tried to establish (manipulate) an imaginary relation between all Muslims. That is a social fact. Here, he did not succeed. But this does not make him guilty of the attack on WTC and above all this gives no legitimate right to the USA to intervene in Afghanistan (again check page 20.)

Ideological message of war against terrorism

In the words of Z.Kanduč (2001): "The biggest danger of the civilised world is terrorism semantically and physically undefined, which can be located everywhere or nowhere…that recruits its members from the poor and fanaticised (Islamic) masses of the Third world".
So, be ready - war against the undefined will be eternal!

Conclusion

The world after 11.9 has not changed so drastically because some forms of repression and escalation of violence has been apparent at least from Genova summit in July 2001 on. To be sure the day 11.9 acts like, in Lacan's terms "tenant-lieu" that legitimizes future violence against "terrorists". The matrix of anti-terrorism and terrorism has to be "overthrown", theoretically and practically. We have to think about alternative discourse from inside, make more efforts and improve political imagination that could reach beyond the Empire. But we have to be aware that this anti-terrorist ethos is overdetermined by the hegemonic ideology of neoliberalism. The Empire, in other words the system of global capitalism is sewing up the holes, which are emerging everywhere. Governments all across the world are shrinking places for manoeuvres for their people and reducing civil rights, which have been fought for over long time. One of the great dangers is well described in the work of Richard Falk. He argues that the North is dominating in all spheres of human society and "beaming its messages everywhere, but hearing few echoes… terrorism and religious extremism are the primary echoes that are heard … but widely shared forms of backlash are rarely reported" (page 13, 1995). One of the worst consequences of the terrorist attack and the escalation of the multidimensional war against it is the great shift of attention from the most important issues of humankind (in the words of Falk: widely shared forms of backlash). These issues are famine, poverty, environmental decay, alienation and others.

The war has to become outmoded and outlawed. It is a social institution, which can destroy but cannot create (Falk, 1995). We have to build hope and build global transactional democratic forces that can bring some positive norms and values with the strong non-violent behaviour. This process is a gradual one, one of bitter fight, though representing the voices of the most vulnerable and marginalized of the world. I would like to conclude with Chomsky' s statement in the interview (2001):

"It is correct to say that this is a novel event in world history, not because of the scale of the atrocity -- regrettably -- but because of the target. How the West chooses to react is a matter of supreme importance. If the rich and powerful choose to keep to their traditions of hundreds of years and resort to extreme violence, they will contribute to the escalation of a cycle of violence, in a familiar dynamic, with long-term consequences that could be awesome. Of course, that is by no means inevitable. An aroused public within the more free and democratic societies can direct policies towards a much more humane and honorable course«.

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