

Shedding light on a Cultural Blind Spot – There is a Cosmopolitan Terror Culture on the Rise

INTRODUCTION

In his book, “The WEIRDest People in the World,” Harvard—Anthropologist Joseph Henrich identifies several psychological traits that are specific for Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) people. The WEIRDest people live in Anglo—Saxon countries, and their psychological key elements are, among others, self—focus, overconfidence in the righteousness of their own values, and the tendency to think more analytically rather than holistically. Being WEIRD means being an extreme psychological deviation in comparison with other cultures on the globe.¹ The resulting nature of this psychological package may lead to a bias in their scientific research, and since the West, and specifically the U.S., could be considered as being WEIRD, they would be at risk of losing sight of a threat that rises under the radar: the rise of a cosmopolitan terror culture.

The reader might think now, “but terrorism is a major issue, at least since 9/11,” and of course that is right. However, with the psychological features of focusing on the individual and overestimating their own competence, the fundamental approach to the matter of the future evolution of a growing terrorism is misleading, since it focuses on the question of how individuals become terrorists and what the political reasons for terrorism are.² These perspectives are highly analytical, trying to define the root causes that lead to terrorism, instead of recognizing that not merely the terrorist individuals are at the center of the phenomenon, but that terrorism itself might have become a self—sustaining system that is now subject to an evolutionary dynamic.³

This essay attempts to develop a perspective on the future of terrorism that relies more on systemic, rather holistic arguments — to follow Henrich’s terminology — that can be perceived as being underrepresented in the discourse.⁴

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM TERRORISM

In one of the author’s previous articles, published by the German Cultural Evolutionary Think Tank TRACE, the argument was made that terrorism — understood as political violence,

¹ Joseph Henrich. *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2020, page 30; 56.

² See e.g. Mark S. Hamm and Ramón Spaaij. *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2017.

³ See Tore Bjørgo and Andrew Silke. *Root Causes of Terrorism*, In: Routledge Handbook of Terrorism and Counterterrorism. New York: Routledge. 2019. Pages 57-65.; Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*, page 53.

⁴ Joe Whittaker. *Rethinking Online Radicalization*. In: Perspectives on Terrorism 16 (4). 2022. Pages 27-40, here page 35.

aiming to generate wide-ranging psychological impacts through terror attacks —⁵ will become an increasing threat in the future, despite the current opposite trend⁶. This forecast relies on the increasing tensions that Peter Turchin modeled on the macro scale of our western cultural system.⁷ Consequently, a growing number of persons who develop aggression and are increasingly susceptible to (political) violence is likely to be expected. This aggression, however, is confronted by highly technologized and competent security and intelligence agencies. A group of discontent people organizing themselves in the framework of a classical civil war party is therefore seen as rather unlikely, since every attempt of such a formation can generally be put down early enough, before it becomes a danger in the sense of a potential counter—sovereign. In order to prevent being detected, anti—status—quo formations must consequently stay fairly small and commit acts of violence that are suitable for such small units. The most efficient strategy for these groups is and will be terrorism. Another crucial element to this argument is that the Islamic State's military successes and their development of a rich repertoire of weapons that are easily applicable, leads terrorists of all sorts to have plenty of opportunities to copy their weapon technologies or at least gather some inspiration about how to develop such self-made weapons. Since it was a highly visible and very successful terror organization over several years, the Islamic State is regarded here as a crystallization point in the evolution of terrorism and as the foundation of the upcoming Cosmopolitan Terror Culture. It is therefore not surprising that other terror groups such as the international and decentralized Atomwaffen Division, encourage their members to learn from jihadists, although they are ideological enemies.⁸

An important thing to note in order to comprehend my perspective, is that I understand culture as a system that works autopoietically, i.e. culture is a system which is self—organizational and structure—deterministic, and seeks to preserve and reproduce itself.⁹ The structure of the system is an interaction of regulatory circuits which have the goal to sustain themselves, thus creating sustainable orders of a higher degree. The degrees are: cellular organism, meta—cellular organism, and the interaction between meta—cellular organisms. A

⁵ Anthony Richards. *Defining Terrorism* In: Routledge Handbook of Terrorism and Counterterrorism. New York: Routledge. 2019, Pages 13-21, page 16.

⁶ Nicolas Stojek: *Zur Evolution des Terrors in Europa*. URL: <http://www.trace-culturevolution.com/trace-press-terror.htm>. (Referenced on 08.08.2022);

⁷ Peter Turchin. *War and Peace and War: The Rise and Fall of Empires*. New York: Plume. 2007; Peter Turchin. 2010. *Political Instability may be a contributor in the coming decade*. In: Nature 463, S. 608.

⁸ Vice: *Neo-Nazis Are Glorifying Osama Bin Laden*. URL: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/bjwv4a/neo-nazis-are-glorifying-osama-bin-laden>. Referenced on 08.08.2022; for the high degree of imitation within the right extremist sphere see Julia Kupper et. al. *The Contagion and Copycat Effect in Transnational Far-right Terrorism: An Analysis of Language Evidence*. In: Perspectives on Terrorism 16 (4). 2022. Pages 4-26.

⁹ See for example Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela. *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding*. Boston and London: Shambhala. 1998.

cultural system is equivalent to the degree of interactive meta—cellular organisms. As Henrich shows, there is no universal cultural system, but many different ones, each functioning in their own ways. This cultural relativism is not a feature of WEIRD cultures. The American idea of bringing democracy and human rights to other cultural spheres shows how deeply engrained universalism is in the American discourses. To prevent cultural blindness regarding the rising Cosmopolitan Terror Culture, a regulatory circuit that creates this new cultural system and aims to sustain it will be described.

THE COSMOPOLITAN TERROR CULTURE

The cultural evolutionary theorists Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson claim that cultures are compiled by sets of cultural parents that enculturate an individual.¹⁰ Being a cultural parent means being a role model that can be imitated by the individual that has to be enculturated. According to the aforementioned systemic structure of orders of different degrees, individuals are not only subject to enculturation but can also *choose* the cultural variants they adapt. By choosing, not the deliberate act of preferring one variant is meant. Choosing is rather about the attempt of the individual organism to find an order of higher degree that fits to its dispositions. Since humans are naturally a cultural species, this order of a higher degree that an individual seeks to conform itself to, is a cultural system.¹¹ Moving forward I will refer to the set of cultural parents and individual as *building block*.

The building blocks of current terrorism are of virtual nature, which means, they are non—locally organized on the internet and other media. This Non—Local Terror Culture is not necessarily cosmopolitan. The massive media coverage that the Islamic State reached with its warfare in the Arabic world and the terror attacks it conducted all over the world is crucial here, since the attention—economic dynamic of the media which favors news about terrorism disproportionately, enabled the Islamic State to reach global attention.¹²

Due to the brutality of the Islamic State's terror, the reports about it were exceedingly emotive. Evoking highly intense emotions forces recipients to choose sides, i.e. identify with one of the portrayed parties.¹³ It is reasonable to expect a significant global resonance for terrorist propaganda due to the aforementioned rise of aggressive sentiment. Moreover, it is known already that the identification with foreign causes has a stable appealing potential in

¹⁰ Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson. 1985. *Culture and the Evolutionary Process*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, page 7.

¹¹ See Joseph Henrich. 2016. *The Secret of our Success: How Culture is Driving Human Evolution, Domesticating Our Species, and Making Us Smarter*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

¹² Hannah Ritchie et. al.: *Terrorism*. URL: <https://ourworldindata.org/terrorism>. Referenced on 15.09.2022.

¹³ Fritz Breithaupt. 2021. *Die dunklen Seiten der Empathie*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, p.103-110.

today's globalized world, as the phenomenon of Foreign Fighters illustrates.¹⁴ The functional mechanism of news reports is utterly important for the spread of the Cosmopolitan Terror Culture. Since news potentially reach the whole world, the number of potential recruits who can be mobilized, is in the billions. On that scale, the term Stochastic Terrorism loses its sense, since the probability of managing to attract new recruits is approaching 100%.¹⁵ Just as Hip—Hop fans listen to Hip Hop music, buy the CDs and join the Hip Hop scene, whether, in Los Angeles or in Tokyo, propaganda channels of terrorist organizations build the Cosmopolitan Terror Culture, relying on the attention—economic impact of their brutal terror acts.

In order to analyze how the Cosmopolitan Terror Culture maintains and reproduces itself, one can study it from a nature—culture —dichotomy perspective. However, as nature is not a factor in this culture, one finds that a Non—Local Terror Culture goes beyond the previously described orders of higher degree, since these are bounded to the spatial connection existing between the individual and the cultural parents, whereas a non-local culture does not need this connection, which affords it much higher “cultural” degree than actual local cultures.

The recruiting process based on media coverage for a Non-Local Terror culture could then be described as follows: said group commits a terror attack that is highly covered by the media and manages to reach multiple local cultures which have susceptible individuals that can be indoctrinated and dragged out of their original building block and added to the new one, the terrorist one.

¹⁴ David Malet. 2013. *Foreign Fighter: Transnational Identity in Civic Conflicts*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

¹⁵ Molly Amman, J. Reid Meloy. 2021. *Stochastic Terrorism and Incitement to Violence: A linguistic and Psychological Analysis*. In: *Perspectives on Terrorism XV* (5). Pages 2-13, page 3.

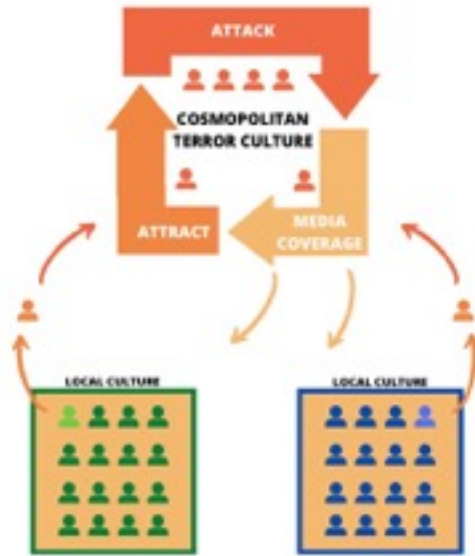


Figure 1. Visualization of the described reproductive cycle of the Cosmopolitan Terror Culture (Author's work).

It is extraordinarily likely for the new recruits to die in the service for their new cultural system. The death tolls in the Islamic State were massive.¹⁶ Since other groups of terrorists have not been at war, unlike the Islamic State, they have generally a smaller death toll. Nonetheless, those who either planned and/or committed terror acts and have been traced by the authorities have, at the very least, been imprisoned. Death and imprisonment are both significant ways to decrease the biological reproductive fitness of terrorists. Therefore, it is primarily the severity of the terror attacks, their resulting widespread coverage, and the decentralized elements of the Non-Local building blocks that further distribute propaganda which enables to build and sustain the Cosmopolitan Terror Culture. In order for this culture to thrive it is not necessary that every element of the building blocks actively engages in terrorism simply creating a sympathetic environment in which the ideals of the group are being promoted, can be enough to encourage the growth of its ranks.

This way, Cosmopolitan Terror Culture relies on a regulatory circuit that prospers mainly on the communicative impact of brutal acts of inclusive fitness by leading the terror culture to reproduce itself non—sexually. The inclusive fitness theorem is applicable here due to the high probability of imprisonment or death for the terrorist committing the violent acts. This means that the communicative impact relies solely on the brutality of the terror attack, regardless of what happens to the terrorist itself.

CONCLUSION

¹⁶ Omar Ashour. 2021. *How ISIS fights: Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Lybia and Egypt*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

If assumed that the presented hypothesis about the emergence of the Cosmopolitan Terror Culture is true, terrorism will become an increasing danger to the security of western nations. If it is also true that especially Americans rely on linear, analytic thinking, as the referenced sociologist and political scientists imply, it should then be likely that the danger of terrorism will be underestimated due to the lack of an appropriate systemic understanding of the matter. Despite all the geopolitical conflicts that come along with the tensions surrounding Taiwan and the Russian attack on Ukraine, it should not be forgotten that an existential global threat is emerging right among us.

Biography

[Nicolas Stojek](#) is currently studying a Master in War and Conflict Studies at the University of Potsdam, Germany. His research focuses on cultural theory, escalation dynamics, and informal warfare. He works for a representative of the German Parliament, is specialized in security politics, and is a member of the private cultural evolutionary and neuroscientist Think Tank TRACE (Transmission in Rhetorics, Arts and Cultural Evolution). This essay reflects his own views and not necessarily those of his employer or TRACE.