



## The mimetic politics of lone-wolf terrorism

Journal of International Political Theory

2015, Vol. 11(1) 145–164

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DOI: 10.1177/1755088214555598

ipt.sagepub.com



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### Abstract

Written at a time of crisis in the project of social and political modernity, Fyodor Dostoevsky's 1864 novel *Notes from Underground* offers an intriguing parallel for the twenty-first century lone-wolf; it portrays an abject, outcast, spiteful unnamed anti-hero boiling with rage, bitter with resentment and on the verge of radicalisation. A Girardian reading of the poetic truths contained in Dostoevsky's work is able to provide important keys to explain the contemporary transformation from 'fourth-wave' religious terrorism to 'fifth-wave' lone-wolf terrorism. Such a reading argues that it is mimetic rivalry – rather than much-trumpeted forms of religious violence or cultural differences – that fuels the triangular relation between governments, terrorists and civilian victims at heart of terrorist acts. This approach is further able to blend social inquiry with an account of the individual, in fact anthropological, conditions of lone-wolf terrorism by tracing the globalisation of resentment and the individualisation of violence to the hyper-mimeticism characterising the globalisation of late modernity. Finally, a mimetic reading of 'fifth-wave' terrorism accounts for the turbulence of a global politics in which victimhood and scapegoating no longer have the ability to stabilise social order and warns against a future where violence proliferates and escalates unchecked.

### Keywords

Fyodor Dostoevsky, globalisation, lone-wolf terrorism, René Girard, resentment

When poison gases no longer suffice, an ordinary man, in the secrecy of a room in this world, will invent an incomparable explosive, compared to which the explosives currently in existence will be considered harmless toys. And another man, also ordinary, but a bit sicker than others, will steal this explosive and will climb up at the center of the earth, to set it on the

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spot where it can have the maximum effect. There will be an enormous explosion that no one will hear, and the earth, once again a nebula, will wander through the heavens, freed of parasites and sickness.

Svevo (2001 [1923]: 437)

Over the last 3 years, a number of high-profile attacks in countries as diverse as France, the United Kingdom, Norway and the United States have alerted scholars of international security, government officials and the general public to the rising incidence and gravity of acts of political violence perpetrated by single individuals. 'Beware the lone-wolf terrorist', read the headline of a popular US magazine just a few weeks after the attack of 15 April 2013 at the Boston Marathon which killed three people, injured more than 250 and wrought a calculated economic damage of around US\$300 million (*NBC News*, 2013). That such loss of life and revenue was allegedly inflicted by just two individuals, Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, armed with rudimentary home-made explosive devices and a toy car remote control, is clear proof that it takes fewer and fewer individuals today to create more fear, damage or death than was probably ever possible in the past.

Scholarly debate has focused on the privatisation of violence traditionally equating this issue with the rise of non-state actors (Keohane, 2002), the mushrooming of private military companies engaged in the provision of security (Avant, 2005) or, from a conceptual point of view, the important shift of security from public good to commodity (Krahman, 2008). However, the privatisation of security is also increasingly about private individuals crossing the threshold of violence, turning terrorism more and more into a human and personal affair (Atran, 2010). The diffusion of authority, the erosion of sovereignty and fragmentation of power that characterise the post-Cold War global scenario have combined with the revolution in information and communication technology to facilitate the convergence of two trends: on the one hand, not just the privatisation but increasingly the individualisation of violence; on the other hand, what I argue in this article is the globalisation of resentment.

Ten years after the 9/11 attacks, the weakening of Al-Qaeda due to the decapitation of its key leadership cadres (Johnston, 2012) might signal the beginning of the end for terrorism's fourth wave, that of religious terrorism (Rapoport, 2002), and the coming of a fifth wave (Simon, 2011) in which 'solo terrorists', 'lone operators' and 'self-radicalised' individuals will become 'the greatest concern to society', as US President Obama rather presciently stated in an interview in April 2011, a few weeks after the killing of Osama Bin Laden (Associated Press, 2011). If this was indeed the case, it would bring the trajectory of modern terrorism curiously to full circle. The origins of modern terrorism are often traced to the anarchist movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that turned the revolutionary lessons of eighteenth century state-sponsored *la Terreur* into the individual 'propaganda of the deed' (Chaliand and Blin, 2007; Laqueur, 2004; Zarakol, 2011). The foremost intellectual of anarchism, Mikhail Bakunin, urged followers to use the technological breakthroughs of the late nineteenth century – such as Alfred Nobel's invention of dynamite in 1867 – and operate individually to demonstrate the dramatic potential of violence as

a tactical and didactic device (Joll, 1970; see also Carr, 1961 [1937]). Terror became embodied not so much in large, hierarchical organisations or tightly knit horizontal networks, of which Narodnaya Volya offered, however, a good example, but most importantly in what today would be referred to as a ‘leaderless resistance’ – individuals who often acted on their own initiative, organised their own attacks and declared themselves ‘not murderers, but terrorists’ (Vera Zasulich quoted in Rapoport, 2002).

Fyodor Dostoevsky’s 1864 novel *Notes from Underground* (2012 [1864]) was written at a time of looming social and political crisis, at the cusp between the twilight of czarist Russia and the rise of anarchism and later Socialist revolution. Truly path-breaking as a literary work, although utterly despised in its homeland – Lenin famously described Dostoevsky as a ‘superlatively bad’ writer (Pevear, 1993: ix) – the entire novel consists of the interior monologue of an unnamed anti-hero: an abject, outcast, spiteful man boiling with rage, bitter with resentment and on the verge of radicalisation. Friedrich Nietzsche saw in *Notes* possibly the finest exploration of the abyss of nihilism, and in its monologue he could hear ‘the voice of blood’ (quoted in Hibbs, 2002: 156; cf. Nietzsche, 1977 [1887]: 468; on Dostoevsky’s influence on Nietzsche, see Miller, 1973; Shestov, 1969 [1903]).

Dostoevsky’s novels are also central to the work of a markedly different contemporary thinker, the French-American anthropologist and literary critic René Girard. The key elements of Girard’s (1965, 1977, 2012a) mimetic theory of desire (Palaver, 2013a) were assembled not from abstract philosophising but were found nested amid the stories and characters that populate novels such as *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Eternal Husband* and, most of all, *Notes*.<sup>1</sup> According to Andrew McKenna (1998), ‘much of what Girard has gone on to assert about human desires and scapegoats [...] he learnt from Dostoevsky’.

How can Dostoevsky be relevant to the study of terrorism in the age of globalisation? Can the Underground Man reveal important mechanisms and truths about its solitary perpetrators? And finally, should literary texts have a role and status in the field of political ‘science’ and the study of violence? In this article, I answer all three questions in the affirmative. To do so, in the first section of the article, I engage with Dostoevsky’s novel and sketch a portrait of the unnamed lone-wolf of St. Petersburg. I then turn to Girard’s own engagement with Dostoevsky to situate the novel’s themes within Girard’s mimetic theoretical palimpsest. Third, I argue that mimetic theory can be particularly useful in the explanation of terrorism, despite its curious neglect in the field of terrorism studies, particularly when it comes to identifying and accounting for the causes of the rise of lone-wolf terrorism. To substantiate my claims in the last part of the article, I draw on material from the recent lone-wolf terrorist attacks in Norway, the United States and the United Kingdom.

## ‘A Cry of Terror’<sup>2</sup>

From a crack in the floorboards of a St. Petersburg flat rises the voice of the Underground Man. *Notes* is his inchoate confessions or stream of consciousness *ante litteram* – pages and pages of ‘apparently idle chatter’ presented in a time-bending fashion and ultimately resolved ‘by catastrophe’ (Dostoevsky quoted in Bakhtin, 1984 [1963]: 41). The Underground Man does not have a name because he embodies too many. He offers a literary portrait of real-world figures such as Sergey Nechayev, possibly the most well-known

terrorist and nihilist of 1860s Russia, author of the anarchist manual *Catechism of a Revolutionary* (Laqueur, 2004). He foreshadows and speaks for a number of other Dostoevskyan characters, variants of the same ‘underground psychology’ (McKenna, 1998): Rodion Raskolnikov of *Crime and Punishment*, Peter Verkhovensky of *Demons* and Ivan Karamazov of *The Brother Karamazov*. Finally, and despite the qualifier at the outset of the novel, the Underground Man speaks for Dostoevsky himself who, as a former member of the revolutionary Petrashevsky Circle and ‘wannabe terrorist’ in the late 1840s, had paid for his closeness to the underground with a death sentence converted to 4 years in a prison of Siberia.

*Notes* does not concern one individual only, and, ultimately, it cannot. As the annotation at the outset of the novel makes clear, the Underground Man ‘not only may but *must* exist in our society, if you take into consideration the general circumstances in which our society was formed’ (Dostoevsky, 2012 [1864]: 8).<sup>3</sup> Far from merely providing the profile of a pathological psychology, *Notes* was thus intended as an intensely social novel, a contribution to the intellectual and social discourse of nineteenth century Russia. The face of the Underground Man, Dostoevsky warns us, is more familiar than we may wish to admit (cf. McKenna, 2002: 5):

As far as I myself am concerned, I have merely carried to an extreme in my life what you have not dared to carry even halfway, and, what’s more, you’ve taken your cowardice for good sense, and found comfort in thus deceiving yourselves. So that I, perhaps, come out even more ‘living’ than you. Take a closer look! (Dostoevsky, 2004 [1864]: 118)

Although the anti-hero of *Notes* does not have a name, the targets of his anger do. Most notably, Dostoevsky’s work was an invective against Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s 1863 novel *What Is to Be Done?* (Frank, 1967). Published just one year before *Notes*, Chernyshevsky’s novel had given voice to the hero of a generation of Russian utilitarian radicals and utopians: Raskolnik, ‘the healthy rational egoist, the ingenious man of action’ (Frank, 2000: 1). It was Chernyshevsky’s novel that inspired Lenin to become a revolutionary and to write his 1902 political pamphlet bearing the same title. According to Dostoevsky’s biographer Joseph Frank (1967), it was also this novel that, more than *Das Kapital*, provided the ‘emotional dynamic’ that made the Russian Revolution possible (p. 68). In his soliloquy, the Underground Man vents his rage against what he perceives to be the totems of that society – modernity, materialism and Westernisation.

‘If ever a critique of pure reason was written, it is to Dostoevsky that we must go to seek it’, wrote Lev Shestov (1975 [1929]: 78) referring to *Notes*. To the Underground Man, ‘the supreme revelation of scientific thought’ appeared as a ‘prison wall, a thing of terror’ (p. 27):

Reason, gentlemen, is a good thing, that’s indisputable, but reason is only reason and satisfies only the rational abilities of a man, whereas desire is a manifestation of one’s whole life, that is, all of human life, including reason and including all its little itches. And although, due to this manifestation, our life often turns out to be rubbish, still it is life and not just the extraction of square roots. (p. 36)

A life lived according to the utilitarian paradigm is, according to the Underground Man, not life at all but 'merely logistics'. Human beings, however, are not 'piano keys upon which the laws of nature play with their own hands' (p. 39); this is testified especially by the existence of those all-to-human desires that fly in the face of self-interest, of rationality and sometimes even of survival.

Attempts to apply the logic of enlightened self-interest to society can only end up building colossal and terrifying structures. The Crystal Palace, built in London for the Great Exhibition of 1851 and visited by Dostoevsky during his European travels of 1862, is elected by the Underground Man as symbol of the triumph of modern, industrial capitalism and of its disastrous consequences. Embodying the pretensions of utilitarian technology, a modern vaudeville of rational utopia, the Crystal Palace is, nothing but a bluff, a 'pouffe' according to the Underground Man. It is the torments and suffering of the underground that reveal its social violence and moral void, and how infinitely preferable a 'henhouse' could be to someone who wants to 'stick his tongue out furtively, or gesture rudely from inside your pocket' (p. 44). That the Underground Man writes his *Notes* from a cavernous 'mousehole', a 'rotten and awful' (p. 12) basement flat on the outskirts of St. Petersburg – the 'ideal city' created ex novo by Peter the Great according to Western urban canons – adds further poignancy to the contrast.

But who is the Underground Man? The opening lines of the novel provide a disarming introduction: 'I am a sick man ... I am a wicked man' (Dostoevsky, 2004 [1864]: 5). One of the thousands of civil servants populating the city of St. Petersburg, in eternal competition with office colleagues for ever-diminishing rewards, the Underground Man is a disaffected, humiliated and estranged individual who for 40 years has been listening to the chatter of the city above his head and now cannot contain himself anymore:

I'm convinced that our sort, the underground ones, should be kept on a short leash. We may only be able to sit for forty years in the underground, but when we do come out into the light and burst forth we talk and talk and talk. (p. 46)

The Underground Man spends his days in hysterical, frenzied swings of exaltation and despair, scheming and plotting revenge against those who insulted him with their indifference. Most of all, not without perverse vanity or a sense of victimary pride, the Underground Man feels excluded, ignored and crushed: 'no one was like me and I was like no one else. I am one and they are *all*' (p. 55, emphasis added). The second half of the novel recounts his effronteries against his perceived oppressors with a tragi-comic tone, amid aborted duels and foiled plans of attack. Unable to set things right with his contenders, his rage and spite ultimately lash out against an alternative target. The prostitute named Liza is far from powerful or threatening; indeed she could well be portrayed as a victim just as the Underground Man. However, instead of solidarity or kindness from a fellow downtrodden being, she only attracts his wrath. In the last pages of the novel, it is Liza who is made into 'the cause of it all' (p. 138) and ends up paying accordingly. Logical preamble to the first half of the novel, the episodes and relations recounted in the second half make the book's incipit finally intelligible. They lay bare the 'root causes' and defining dynamics of the underground, its protagonists and their torments.

## Human desire and social violence in the underground: A mimetic approach

Despite the disparaging reception it encountered at the time of publication and its continued lack of popularity in Russia, *Notes* came to occupy a pivotal position in Dostoevsky's work and in the Western literature more generally. The novel appears to mark a genuine watershed between the author's early, conventionally romantic writings and his later masterpieces – such as *Crime and Punishment*, *Demons* and *The Brothers Karamazov* – of which it anticipates virtually all the most important themes. *Notes* is also believed to have exerted a key influence on existentialist literature, most especially through Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Scheler, for having articulated a *mal de siècle* which later came to be known as *ressentiment* – a frustrated desire which begs to be avenged, a 'toothache' that, in the words of the Underground Man, disturbs the sleep, strains one's heart and makes the protagonist scream in exasperation: 'feel it yourself, every minute of my toothache' (p. 22).

For different but not entirely unrelated reasons, Dostoevsky's work has also been deeply influential in the development of that mimetic theoretical palimpsest that René Girard (1965) began assembling in his first major work, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. Here, Dostoevsky figured as one of the key novelists analysed, together with Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert and Proust. In *Resurrection from Underground*, originally published in French exactly 50 years ago, in 1963, Girard turned his gaze exclusively to Dostoevsky to probe deeper into the novelistic mechanisms underlying his major works and use them as building blocks of his mimetic theory. The conclusion reached is characteristically bold: according to Girard (1976), 'Dostoevsky was the greatest modern revealer of that [mimetic] desire' (p. 1179). Girard's engagement thus offers ample material to apply a fully mimetic lens to Dostoevsky's writings, starting from *Notes* – in fact, it is through works such as *Notes* that mimetic theory comes to life.

The Underground Man's ramblings about the nature of desire are a first case in point. In the last but one page of his *Notes*, the protagonist writes,

We are all agreed that 'life' as we find it in books is much better. And why do we make such a fuss sometimes? [...] *What do we want? We don't know ourselves ...* Why, we do not even know where we are to find real life, or what it is, or what it is called. Leave us alone without any books, and we shall at once get confused, lose ourselves in a maze, we shall not know what to cling to, what to hold on to, what to love and what to hate, what to respect and what to despise. (Dostoevsky, 1958 [1864]: 240, emphasis added)

Dostoevsky here pokes fun at the vitiating role that the literature had for the generation of romantic radicals to which the Underground Man belonged. But his deeper point coincides with the Girardian insight about the essentially free-floating and unattached nature of desire (Girard, 2012b [1963]: 76). Beyond the romantic illusion of a spontaneous and 'authentic' self, the desire of the Underground Man, to use Girard's terminology, is always a desire *according to the Other* (Oughourlian, 2007), a desire not intrinsically generated but acquired or relinquished by imitation or mimesis.

The Underground Man's idea of what is desirable or appropriate is thus deduced either from books or from a series of influential 'Others' – peers, colleagues, officers,

former classmates – whom he tries to emulate in the hope of sharing their apparent social success. The Underground Man, in a Girardian sense, is obsessed with his models. The importance of these models becomes truly enormous and in fact ‘monstrous’ (Girard, 2012b [1963]: 76), however, when it is clear that every attempt to rise to their perceived stature ends up in failure, with the Underground Man ridiculed and abandoned in a corner of the Hôtel de Paris, ‘crushed and ruined’ (Dostoevsky, 2012 [1864]: 88).

According to Girard, this simple pattern, whose engine is mimetic rivalry, is the veritable genesis of the Underground Man’s obstacle-addiction, resentment and consequent resort to violence through the identification of a scapegoat. *Notes* provides a vivid account of all three phases, crucial to the escalation of human desire into social violence.

The protagonist of the *Notes*, Girard (2012b [1963]: 88) writes, is a fully ‘emancipated and modern man’, devoid of pre-constituted convictions deriving from religion or social status. Yet, he is at the mercy of a number of models whom he tries to emulate in the desire to ‘fit in’ among them. As every attempt is frustrated and thwarted, he quickly becomes obsessed not with the final goal of his every attempt (‘I ended with moral conquest, and afterwards I couldn’t even imagine what to do with the conquered object’ (Dostoevsky, 2012 [1864]: 144)), but rather with his models-turned-obstacles or ‘walls’ as described in the novel.

Every time he bumps against models-turned-obstacles, however, his thirst for power (Dostoevsky, 2012 [1864]: 120) and his metaphysical desire to be, or fuse with, the model increase. His sentiments, defeated, bounce back as *re*-sentment. There is something masochistic (or, more correctly, pseudo-masochistic; Cowdell, 2013; Palaver, 2013a, 2013b) at play here, Girard notes. ‘Masochists cannot find their self-esteem except by a brilliant victory over the one who offended them’ (Girard, 2012b [1963]: 14) which, however, never comes because of the power and status differential. The underground hero therefore ‘pitifully and tragically crashes into every obstacle on his path – like a moth drawn to the flame that consumes it’ (Dupuy, 2008: 40).

The underground thus becomes a repository of frustrated mimetic desire or resentment. It remains bottled there until it can be vented against a victim that, in the novel, comes by the name of Liza, the prostitute. A classic example of scapegoat chosen at the bottom of the social pyramid, an outcast herself, Liza with her ‘pale face with its martyr-like gaze’ shows the second half of the ‘underground law’ of obstacle-addicts, according to Girard. ‘Underground people are irresistibly attracted to those who spurn them and they irresistibly spurn those who are attracted to them, or even those who do no more than treat them kindly’ (Girard, 2012a [1963]: 81). Confident in the weakness of this particular ‘Other’ and aspiring to the ‘divinity with which in his anguish he has clothed [...] his petty persecutors’ (Girard, 1965: 185), the Underground Man finds an opportunity to imitate the cruelty of his rivals-turned-obstacles. It is in the encounter with Liza that the Underground Man finds a route to violent empowerment and turns from a pseudo-masochist into a pseudo-sadist.

In order to complete this transition, however, the Underground Man must construct a narrative able to justify his sudden change of role – he must resort, in other words, to a victimary narrative. According to this script whose ultimate purpose is to keep the circle of violence from breaking, as a victim himself the Underground Man feels entitled to victimise another by reassigning to her the pain of his failure, humiliation and inferiority.

It is why, in the novel, Liza suddenly becomes constructed as ‘the evil one’ – the one responsible and who is to answer ‘for everything’, the ‘cause of it all’ (Dostoevsky, 2012 [1864]: 138, 141):

A terrible spite against her suddenly boiled up in my heart; I think I could simply have killed her. [...] ‘It’s she who caused it all’, I thought. [...] I had to take my revenge on someone, get my own back. [...] I was humiliated and so I wanted to humiliate. I had been ground to a rag, and so wanted to show my power. (p. 139)

Before we label the Underground Man as a masochist or a sadist, though, and we dismiss his recourse to violence as a consequence of a unique, individual psychopathological condition, it is necessary to return to the very beginning of *Notes*. As Dostoevsky’s initial qualifier states, the Underground Man is nothing but the necessary result of a set of relations and wider societal circumstances – not only *may* he exist, but he *must*. This provides an important point around which Girard develops his reflections on the complex relation between individual and societal violence, psychological and sociological plane.

For Girard, it is obvious that the Underground Man lets out much wider societal tensions: ‘When physical violence is suppressed, as normally happens in modern civilized life, all frustrated rivalries go underground and show up as “psychopathological symptoms,” the very symptoms exhibited by underground characters in Dostoevsky’s masterpieces’ (Girard, 2012b [1963]: 77). But it is not simply that society ‘favours’ the emergence of those symptoms in already pre-disposed individuals. More radically, ‘there is a profound agreement between social reality and individual psychology’; in fact, ‘it is impossible to distinguish the two’:

To comprehend the obsessions of Dostoevsky’s minor functionaries one must imagine the Czarist bureaucracy in the middle of the nineteenth century [...]. The process of ‘depersonalisation’ undergone by the mass of subordinate officials becomes all the more rapid, effective and underhanded as it becomes *confused* with the fierce but sterile rivalries engendered by the system. The individuals constantly opposed to one another cannot understand that their actual personalities are in the process of dissolving. (Girard, 2012b [1963]: 21, emphasis added)

Far from the analytically clean-cut process of interplay between social structures and individual agency, Girard’s mimetic theory points to the rather more radical impossibility of conceptualising agency outside of structures. In fact, it highlights the necessity to ultimately replace this analytical dichotomy with a fully *relational* ontology in which human desires and social order become inextricably linked.

### **‘Terror, terrorism and terrorists’:<sup>4</sup> A Girardian reading**

Despite their conceptual promise, Girard’s insights have only been partially applied to the issue of terrorism (Jürgensmeyer, 1991, 2008; Palaver, 2013b; *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 1991; Zurawski, 2002) and are so far yet to be applied explicitly to terrorism perpetrated by ‘lone-wolves’. Mimetic theory, however, can yield an agile and yet powerful conceptualisation of this type of political violence, one in which the voice of the Underground Man still resonates. This conceptualisation not only overlaps with some of



the more social-scientific frameworks developed in terrorism studies; crucially, it helps us further illuminate their key operating mechanisms.

First, according to one of its foremost scholars, Alex P. Schmid (1984, 2013), terrorism stands out from other forms of political violence, including warfare, in one crucial way. In their violent pursuit of political ends, terrorists typically identify two kinds of targets: primary targets and secondary targets. Primary targets are the terrorists' political opponents – these can be the state apparatus, its institutions or the symbols of its political power. Secondary targets, on the other hand, are those who will bear the actual brunt of the terrorists' violence, often innocent civilians and defenceless non-combatants. Through their own death, they deliver the terrorists' political message to its intended recipient (Schmid, 1984: 92).

Terrorism rests therefore on a peculiar triangular relation of perpetrators, targets and victims (Schmid and De Graaf, 1982: 176; see also Schmid, 2013: 93). Drawing on Girard's insights, it is not difficult to see that the driver of this triangular relation is, quite simply, a form of mimetic rivalry. The competition over the bone of political power between states and terrorists casts them in the mimetic roles of, respectively, model and rival. This implacably leads to violence inasmuch as the object of rivalry remains non-divisible and exclusive, as political power often is, and the focus of the competition gradually shifts from the conquest of power to the two opponents' very existence. Furthermore, it is the engine of mimetic rivalry that is responsible for the typical tit-for-tat spiral of imitation that often morphs the methods of terrorism and counter-terrorism together and makes them 'enemies in the mirror' (Wheatcroft, 2005) or mimetic doubles. Sacrifice and scapegoat are central to this type of political violence. Consider, for instance, what is possibly the oldest definition of terrorism available, namely, Sun Tzu's ancient maxim of 'kill one, frighten ten thousand' (Schmid, 2011: 99). This reads as a curiously inverted version of the Gospel's depiction of sacrifice: 'better [...] to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed' (John 11: 50).

A mimetic approach, however, can also shed light on a number of more specific features of contemporary terrorism, in particular the move from 'fourth-wave' religious terrorism to 'fifth-wave' lone-wolf terrorism. Interestingly, Dostoevsky and nihilism have been a frequent reference point for a variety of post-9/11 contributions, and yet none of these have considered their mimetic implications (Glucksmann, 2002; Ignatieff, 2005; *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 2013; Pasha, 2011, 2012).

To start with, the contemporary condition is one which International Relations (IR) theorists over the last two decades have abundantly yet often nebulously referred to as 'globalisation'. Girard (2012a), however, identifies in it the more specific condition of 'end of all external mediations'. Globalisation, according to Girard, reveals the ultimate secret of political modernity: the fragmentation and increasing impotence of territorial sovereign states in both governing the political process and controlling violence (Cowdell, 2013). With the triumph of the principle of equality, enshrined in the liberal democratic ethos and central to the project of secular modernity, the idolatry of the tyrant as mediator is 'replaced by hatred of a thousand rivals' (Girard, 1965: 119; cf. Cowdell, 2013: 25), in a move from external to internal mediation. This move has progressively unleashed a dangerous 'crisis of degree', that is, the escalation of unchecked competition among political subjects—turned individual sovereigns. The age of globalisation brings

this process to its climax and appears to be hysterically mimetic, but also tragic and apocalyptic in so far as absolute equality comes to approximate absolute tyranny (Palaver, 2013a; see also Tocqueville, 1990: 137). The imperative of ‘keeping up with the Joneses’ is thus replicated in every segment of the personal, social and political landscape. The result, according to Girard (2001), is a mimetic rivalry on a global scale (Doran, 2008).

Four interconnected trends derive from this state of affairs and provide critical ammunition for the rise of lone-wolf terrorism. First, at the heart of the contemporary global mimetic crisis one does not find, according to Girard, those much-trumpeted forms of religious, racial, ethnic, civilisational, cultural differences, but rather a frustrated mimetic desire – that is, a thwarted desire of *identity*, a desire according to an *Other*, a desire to be another. The radical openness created by globalisation, with its inescapable mediatic spectacle and its endless reverberations, creates relentless *competitive* rather than cooperative effects and the potential for the rise of disaffection whenever winning or successfully emulating the model becomes impossible. Resentment thus goes global.

Second, the process of globalisation is increasingly experienced not so much in the aggregate of organisations – be them states or transnational entities – but in the private lives of individuals. To paraphrase Hannah Arendt (1963), the frontline has been internalised. Lone-wolf terrorism in the age of global resentment is characterised by the decreasing importance of those organisational pyramidal structures and closely knit networks which in the past were seen as indispensable sources of legitimacy, authority and capabilities (Turk, 2004). Today, individual ‘self-radicalisation’ outside, or on the margins of, accepted interpretations of the political or religious norm appears to be the rule. The immediate availability of the means to violent empowerment – equipment, instructions, ammunitions and weaponry can be easily found on the Internet (Weimann, 2012) – flows from the state’s eroding monopoly on force and adds further cogency to the trend of an ever-increasing individualisation of violence.

Third, around ‘fifth-wave’ terrorism, one can witness the explosive convergence of internal and external, direct and indirect forms of scapegoating. A global mimetic rivalry in fact creates an inevitably wide spectrum of casualties (Wydra, 2012). First of all, there are victims of nobody in particular, to paraphrase Paul Dumouchel (2011), except of that indifference which today functions not as ‘a psychological disposition of certain agents, but as a new institutional arrangement’ of globalisation and modernity, a suffused yet systematic process of scapegoating without a subject (p. 255). Unchecked competition simply means that people who cannot keep up fall by the wayside – or through the cracks in the floorboards of a St. Petersburg flat, to cite Dostoevsky – often without society noticing. Furthermore, more direct forms of scapegoating are also unceasingly applied to domestic politics and international politics. Domestically, the logic of scapegoating and victimhood proliferates in those contemporary biopolitical practices such as racial profiling in which minorities become disproportionately criminalised for the ills of society. These usually respond to the need to maintain or restore order to a community, deflect violence and absorb rivalry at times of ‘moral panic’ (Cohen, 1972). Internationally, it is foreign policy that becomes the vehicle of scapegoating and foreign ‘outsiders’ that become the victims (Campbell, 1998; Neumann, 1988). As is increasingly clear in the post-9/11 climate, however, it is no longer possible to adopt foreign policies which systematically scapegoat populations in far-away lands in the hope that these strategies will

never hit home (Brighton, 2007; Hill, 2013). In Western multicultural societies, scapegoating bites back, creating the potential for terrorism at home and short-circuiting the violent mechanisms through which order is maintained.

Finally, globalisation multiplies the opportunities for the ad hoc construction of victimary narratives functional to the violent transformation of victims into victimisers. Following the second part of the ‘underground law’, as articulated by Girard (2012b [1963]), the nihilistic mystique of violence ‘beyond good and evil’ ‘originates in the victims of this situation, the obstacle-addicts, who blame their own discomfort on the restrictions [of] the social order’ (p. 85). Revenge thus becomes cloaked as just retribution, and terror is presented, in an echo of Robespierre’s formula, as ‘nothing else than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible’. The pain of frustrated mimetic desire is re-assigned to another category of scapegoats, usually defenceless civilians, in a sacrifice which, however, is useless as it does not stabilise, let alone resolve, any of the underlying dynamic within mimetic desire. The circle or, rather, the triangle of violence can thus continue in what is not merely a tragic feature of global politics but essentially, according to Girard (2012a), a truly satanic one.

### **‘The voice of your brother’s blood is crying from the ground’: From the underground to lone-wolves**

Strong mimetic themes can be identified in the fastest growing strand of contemporary terrorism that is lone-wolf terrorism. In this section, I will draw on a number of recent incidents to suggest, first, that mimetic theory provides a powerful and illuminating reading of this form of terrorism; second, that this reading is more revealing than accounts based exclusively on an all-catching category of ‘religious violence’, and especially Islamic fundamentalism and, third, that an engagement with literary texts such as *Notes* might provide an important reminder as well as point of contact with the contemporary underground. To do so, in this section, I turn to the Oslo and Utøya shootings perpetrated by Anders Breivik on 22 July 2011, in which 77 individuals were killed; to the Boston Marathon attack of 15 April 2013, which was carried out by the Tsarnaev brothers and left 3 people dead and 250 injured; and finally, to the killing of a British soldier in Woolwich, on the streets of London, by Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale on 22 May 2013.

To start with, the impact of globalisation and the end of ‘external mediations’ is traceable in the extreme individualisation at work in the process of self-radicalisation which underlies all these three attacks. Admittedly, because of the nature of both the terrorist acts and the investigations, it is difficult to categorically exclude the importance of particular institutions in facilitating the transformation of resentment into violence. However, it is striking that a regular feature of these recent attacks has been the salient role played by the Internet. In the case of the Tsarnaev brothers, and in response to the explicitly Islamic framing of the attacks contained in early accounts, analysts recently concluded that a religious explanation is problematic as it is clear that ‘their Islam was a Googled and decontextualized faith’ (Brissett and Dodd, 2013). Testimony from relatives and friends of the two Tsarnaev brothers have confirmed that the role played by ‘Misha’ – Mikhail Allakhverdov, an Armenian émigré converted to Islam who was initially accused of having ‘radicalised’ the older of the Tsarnaev brothers – was less decisive than Tamerlan’s own and

independent quest, which involved spending 'long hours on the Internet reading Islamic websites, as well as U.S. conspiracy sites, like Alex Jones' InfoWars' (Reitman, 2013).

Similarly, in the case of Anders Breivik, 'the Internet appears to have been a key tool, both in ideological terms and operational terms' (Pantucci, 2011b: 36). Breivik's self-published, 1500-page long manifesto titled '2083: A European Declaration of Independence' was arguably a collection of online content mostly copied and pasted from extremist right-wing and anti-Muslim websites. 'On the periphery of the far right and anti-Muslim ideological community in Europe', Breivik did not establish any strong operational or ideological links with any specific groups, acting essentially alone (Pantucci, 2011b: 34; BBC News, 2012). In the case of the main Woolwich's suspect, Michael Adebolajo, a direct involvement in the activities of the now-banned Islamic extremist group Al-Muhajiroun was documented in the aftermath of the attacks, as was his participation in the South-East London criminal gang scene. However, and rather crucially, neither of the Woolwich attackers had been tasked to kill or behead Lee Rigby by any of these organisations – indeed, they were considered to be 'independent guys' who 'would float about', attracted to Islam because of its 'street rep' and its promise of personal salvation in equal measure (Githens-Mazer, 2013; *The Guardian*, 2013). What unites these cases, therefore, is, on the one hand, their status as independent, rather than vicarious or tasked acts of violence and, on the other, their use of terror as a form of individual self-expression.

Second, in so far as they offer examples of failed assimilation in multicultural and liberal Western societies, the three attacks tell a powerful story of frustrated mimetic desire and demonstrate the ubiquity of resentment as well as the toxicity of humiliation in fuelling terrorism (Silke, 2003: 40). A failed mimetic process left the perpetrators of the attacks reeling with a sense of cultural schism or social exclusion – humiliated, obsessed and ultimately repulsed by the model-turned-rival of Western modernity. The aspirational parable of Tamerlan Tsarnaev is, in this respect, rather telling. After having adopted a wholly Western outlook and pursued the 'American dream' as a prospective member of the US Olympic boxing team, it was when his application for US citizenship was rejected that his hopes for a glamorous life, together with his identity as an American, were dashed. At that point, the door to radicalisation opened – violence was chosen over the option of being the stay-at-home father of a small girl in a cramped, subsidised apartment on the periphery of Cambridge, MA (Caryl, 2013). A similar tale of social indifference and exclusion that clashed with rather grandiose expectations and preceded a radical, violent turn is also present in Breivik's story (Borchgrevink, 2013). As Mark Anspach (2012) among others noted, Breivik was 'a legend in his own mind' but a misfit in reality. 'Breivik hated the young people at the summer camp [in Utøya] because they were the cool kids', while he was a nobody. He was so concerned with recognition and models, however, that he had invested £400 in the home-made uniform with which he posed online, complete with fake medals.

Soon after the Woolwich attacks, the extent to which Michael Adebolajo was increasingly living a life marginal to the culture of his British-Nigerian, Catholic family also became clear, as did the MI5's failed attempt to groom him as an informant and bring him back into the British cultural fold (ITV News, 2013). Adebolajo's trip to Kenya and Tamerlan Tsarnaev's trip to Dagestan can be both read as an attempt to bridge these gaps

and replace an impossible and frustrating model with an achievable one, an attempt to construct an identity in which they could be protagonists, if not heroes. It is a testimony of the profound mimetic dynamics at work in the Boston attacks that the Tsarnaev brothers – who, like in a Dostoevsky novel, were one the mirror image, or ‘double’, of the other – reached the ever-elusive status of models only through their acts of terror: ‘Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has put Tamerlan, dressed in his crisp, white Saturday Night Fever shirt and aviator shades, in the pages of its most recent Inspire’ magazine, while Dzhokhar has not only ‘a growing and surprisingly brazen fan club – #FreeJahar – and tens of thousands of new Twitter followers’ (Reitman, 2013), but was controversially put on the cover page of 1 August 2013 edition of the *Rolling Stone*, in a pose that reminded many of the late Jim Morrison.

Third, the attacks can be read as further instances of that process of proliferation of scapegoating, sacrifice and victimhood that characterises the escalation to extremes of the global condition. To start with, all perpetrators of the attacks identified themselves as victims – either individual victims or part of a larger victim group (i.e. the Muslim *umma*, in the case of the Boston and Woolwich attacks, or the white European Christendom, in the case of the attack in Norway). To some degree, they did catalyse and found themselves at the receiving end of large societal processes of internal and external scapegoating. These were explicitly articulated and finally came to the fore only after the attacks. In the case of Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, for instance, it was racial profiling and mistrust towards their Chechen and Islamic background that made them into Muslim fundamentalists and excluded them from the American ‘body politic’ (*The New York Times*, 2013). Explaining that Tamerlan was named after the fifteenth century Central Asian warlord Amir Temur, who referred to himself as the ‘Sword of Islam’, whereas Dzhokhar had gotten his name from a Chechen jihadist and independist, the media operated that ‘othering’ and casting off of suspects outside of the borders of the imagined community which is the typical fate of scapegoats (*The Daily Beast*, 2013; *The New Republic*, 2013).

Racial and religious discrimination was also working in the case of the Woolwich attacks, with Black Islamic terrorism providing the explanatory master key of the attackers’ profile as well as of the attacks, all of which caused an all-too predictable backlash against Muslim communities in London and elsewhere in the United Kingdom. In the case of Anders Breivik, one could argue that it was his initial framing as mentally ill that operated as a scapegoating technique – as Breivik noted in court, ‘no one would have asked for a psychiatric examination had he been a “bearded jihadist”’ (*The Independent*, 2012). It was his identity as white supremacist, aside from his killing spree, that got him in trouble in a tolerant society such as Norway – his far-right extremism could not be part of the Norwegian self-understanding to the point that it had to be framed as ‘psychotic’. Naturally, the more successful the process of scapegoating, the greater the strengthening of the societal bond among the ‘insiders’ of the political community (Rapoport, 1991: 127ff). To understand the social and political capital of scapegoating, suffice it here to recall the surge in patriotism in the Boston area and beyond after the capture of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, with large crowd gathering in public spaces waving the American flag; how viral the displaying of the Norwegian flag on social networks became after the arrest of Anders Breivik on the Utøya island (Borchgrevink, 2013) and finally, the strong boost in

popular support for the armed forces in the wake of Lee Rigby's funerals (*The Huffington Post*, 2013).

Finally, and in the last analysis, these attacks are a tragic reminder of the second part of Girard's 'underground law', that which transforms victims into victimisers and presides over the multiplication of scapegoats and the further escalation of violence. In all three instances, the attackers constructed or latched on to a victimary narrative that enabled them to reassign the pain of their resentment to other members of society and cast them as 'evil'. In line with Ramon Spaaij's (2012) observations on lone-wolves, this was achieved by embedding and interpreting personal problems in terms of some larger political narrative of grievance or cause. Hence, the appeal and danger of grand narratives of humiliation such as Al-Qaeda's, which weaves the personal and social plane together (Fattah, 2013). The filmed monologue of Michael Adebolajo speaking in front of phone cameras, as well as Dzhokhar Tsarnaev's Twitter posts and handwritten bloody messages on the inside walls of the motorboat where he was found, reproduced this victimary narrative of humiliation. Anders Breivik, in turn, used the exact mirror-image narrative, that of humiliation by Islamic invasion, to further the political and ideological agenda of the far right. A demographic and generational remark is also instructive here. For the current generation of lone-wolf terrorists, the Internet has become particularly instrumental in the construction of individually crafted, highly de-historicised and decontextualised narratives, which are easy to buttress by 'factoids' found online and superimpose on a variety of political and personal grievances (Pantucci, 2011a: 3). Victimary narratives, however valid these may be, enable attackers to divide the world in 'us' versus 'them' terms – or in Dostoevsky's terms, 'I am one and they are all'. Thus, Lee Rigby was constructed as a soldier who had 'killed Muslim people in Muslim countries' (*The Times*, 2013) and hence deserved to die. Similarly, yet outside of the Islamic discourse altogether, Anders Breivik constructed the youth of Utøya as 'multicultural political activists' and, as such, 'evil monsters' who were participating in a 'political indoctrination camp' – their killing was therefore 'atrocious, but necessary'. Dzhokhar Tsarnaev distilled his contempt for 'them' in the even shorter expletive: 'Fuck America' (Reitman, 2013).

This process inevitably created new victims as well as new scapegoats. The sacrificial element was particularly evident in the Woolwich attack, where the body of the dead soldier was not only killed but placed in the middle of the road, mutilated and beheaded in a manner inevitably reminiscent of the tradition of scalping and trophy-taking in war (Harrison, 2012) as well as of sacrificial animal rituals in ancient religions. Differently from the Woolwich attack, but exhibiting a similar sacrificial significance, the victims of the attacks in Norway shared the scapegoat's quality of being 'without blemish' – the prototype of the innocent and privileged, indeed the 'chosen' youth of the country. Finally, in the case of Boston, among the three casualties and more than 250 injured victims, specific individual stories emerged and reflected the framing of victims into 'martyrs', showing a resilience in the political community which no doubt mirrored the resilience, stamina and competitiveness of the marathon runners themselves. The most well-known case in this respect is that of Jeff Bauman and Carlos Arredondo, the marathon double amputee and the man with the cowboy hat who rescued Bauman after the blast and closed his gushing arteries with his bare fingers.

## Conclusion

A mimetic reading of *Notes* delivers important insights into the nature of lone-wolf terrorism and its contemporary rise on the global political landscape. It shows how mimetic rivalry fuels the triangular relation between governments, terrorists and civilian victims at heart of terrorist acts. It blends social inquiry with an account of the individual causes of lone-wolf terrorism by linking resentment and obstacle-addiction to the hyper-mimeticism characterising the globalisation of late modernity. It radically downplays explanations based on the category of 'religious violence' by tracing the rise of lone-wolf terrorism to the process of individualisation of violence and globalisation of resentment. Finally, it accounts for the turbulence of a global politics in which victimhood and scapegoating no longer have the ability to stabilise social order, but in fact make violence proliferate and escalate further.

At this point, two criticisms can be raised against Girard's mimetic theory in its application to lone-wolf terrorism. The first criticism relates to the idea of causation that mimetic theory employs in linking human desire and social violence. As is often the case with 'root cause' explanations of terrorism, this can be considered determinist, reductionist and ultimately mistaken in its treatment of necessary causes as sufficient. Not everyone who is resentful will choose to employ violence and become a terrorist. Similarly, the availability of victimary narratives or even of violent means to carry out attacks will not necessarily translate every frustrated desire into an act of terror. Mimetic theory thus is problematic insofar as it fails to highlight the role of contingency, history and process. This is, however, crucial if one wants to explain outcomes in open-ended systems such as social and political life.

The second criticism overlaps with an argument often issued against Dostoevsky himself and his works, including *Notes*. Both Girard and Dostoevsky could be criticised for presenting an essentially conservative account of history, one in which modernity is ultimately equated with violence and 'tradition' holds the key to peace. In this account, violence can never be 'just' and necessary, legitimate and justified – it is always presented as the giving into the perverse (in fact, satanic) logic of mimetic rivalry. The fundamental function of violence (and war) as an institution of international politics and as means of social change (Bull, 1977) is thus disavowed, as is the value of violent resistance arguably embodied by 'freedom fighters' and terrorist groups over centuries. Girard has explicitly defended Dostoevsky from some of these accusations:

Dostoevsky, sooner or later, will be better understood because he is the only one who already understands. He understands that the law is not responsible for the mimetic crisis. He also understands that the modern world is in a mimetic crisis unlike any other. At his worst, he only looks back with nostalgia at the comfort of the law, while it still lived. At his best, he knows that there is no return. (Girard, 1976: 1184)

The more fundamental point of whether violence can have a positive social function is ignored, however, and in fact denounced in both. If 'politics can no longer save us', political violence is also condemned to fail. The only true alternative is therefore personal and religious: revelation, grace and non-violence (Girard, 2012a). The fragility of this solution, however, is apparent as soon as one considers, on the one hand, the reality

of cultural and religious diversity and, on the other, the demands that this makes on individual conscience.

If the prognosis and epistemological approach to the problem of political violence seem dubious, the value of engaging with mimetic theory and the literature that made it possible is, however, undoubtable. There is something prophetic and unsettling in works such as *Notes*, a monologue highly reminiscent of the terrorist literature of today, made of martyrdom statements, manifestos and ‘rants’. On the strength of Girard’s two-part ‘underground law’, mimetic theory reveals the double-sided nature of these acts of communication – part truth and part lie, part prophecy and part manipulation.

At the very least, an engagement with these stories can nurture that attitude of empathy and understanding which motivated Dostoevsky himself to write of ‘the multifarious motives by which even the purest of hearts [...] can be drawn into committing such a monstrous offence’ (Frank, 2002: 100).<sup>5</sup> This might convince us to look into the abyss of terrorism and recognise sides of ourselves in its reflection. As Thomas Mann once wrote about his ‘brother’, Adolf Hitler,

A brother – a rather unpleasant and mortifying brother. He makes me nervous, the relationship is painful to a degree. But I will not disclaim it. For I repeat: better, more productive, more honest, more constructive than hatred is recognition, acceptance, the readiness to make oneself one with what is deserving of our hate. (Mann, 1939; see also Kurzke, 2002)

The larger implication of this point is that social science cannot do without the literature – understood as artistic form able to unveil the generative mechanisms of social history – if it aims to go beyond platitudes and probe the most primitive manifestations of political violence through an enquiry into the desires and fantasies that generate them (Pelikan Straus, 2006: 198). As Mikhail Bakhtin (1984 [1963]) once stated with regard to Dostoevsky’s literary work, ‘artistic form, correctly understood, does not shape already prepared and found content, but rather permits content to be found and seen for the first time’ (p. 43; see also Bleiker, 2009). As such, ‘only a pseudo-science’ can ‘run counter to the greatest literary works of our literary heritage’ (Girard, 1976: 1181). In this respect, mimetic theory is an invitation to go beyond strict disciplinary divisions in the attempt to reach a more holistic understanding of the place of violence in the political and social order:

All it would take to revolutionise our knowledge of man would be an understanding by [...] anthropologists and political scientists alike of how and why, in this tragedy, their two disciplines are really one. (Girard, 1991: 219)

## Notes

1. Among the literary sources of mimetic theory, only Shakespeare can be said to matter as much as Dostoevsky; see Girard (1991).
2. Shestov (1969 [1903]: 169).
3. All quotes from *Notes* are from the 2012 translation by Natasha Randall, unless otherwise stated.
4. Tilly (2004).
5. After all, it was Dostoevsky’s failure as a terrorist that had made him a novelist (Cowdell, 2013: 158–159; McKenna, 2002: 7).



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