

ISIS, Al Qaeda and The Wretched of the Earth

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The 1991 Australian coming-of-age film *Flirting* features a central character, Danny Embling (played admirably by Noah Taylor), who asks himself before being drawn into a boxing match, ‘I wondered if my old friend Jean-Paul Sartre would have fought in a situation like this’. Embling climbs into the ring, is duly knocked down and is thereupon offered a cigarette by a hallucinatory Sartre, ringside but distant from the concerns that had seen Embling laid out on the canvas.

If Embling had read more than Sartre’s philosophical novels, and had moved on to Sartre’s Sorel-inspired introduction to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, he would have had a good sense of precisely when and under what circumstances Sartre would have seen violence as appropriate. Shifting from his usual interrogation of the dialectic between facticity and freedom, Sartre laid out a strong endorsement of radically violent subaltern revolt against the systemic violence of the coloniser. Discussing the Algerians’ turn to violence in the war of decolonisation against the French, and Fanon’s defence of it, Sartre maintained that

this irrepressible violence is neither sound and fury, nor the resurrection of savage instincts, nor even the effect of resentment: it is man re-creating himself. I think we understood this truth at one time, but we have forgotten

it — that no gentleness can efface the marks of violence;
only violence itself can destroy them.¹

Such violence, he argued in the best Bakuninite tradition, was not merely destructive but also creative. With pre-colonial Algeria irrevocably lost and colonial French Algeria collapsing under the internal contradictions of liberal imperialism, only violence could push history forward in the Maghreb.

Keen to shield Algerian nationalists from the condemnation of the French, Sartre warned of the hypocrisy of metropolitan horror in the face of Algerian terrorist violence, declaring to his French audience, ‘You, who are so liberal and so humane, who have such an exaggerated adoration of culture that it verges on affectation, you pretend to forget that you possess colonies and that in them people are massacred in your name.’ Going further, Sartre explicitly laid the blame for Algerian violence at the feet of the French colonisers. Algerian violence was merely the violence of the French returned to them by those upon whom it had hitherto been visited:

This is the age of the boomerang, the third stage of violence: it flies right back at us, it strikes us and, once again, we have no idea what hit us. The "liberals" remain stunned: they admit we had not been polite enough to the "natives," that it would have been wiser and fairer to grant them certain rights, wherever possible; they would have been only too happy to admit them in batches without a sponsor to that exclusive club—the human species; and now this barbaric explosion of madness is putting them in the same boat as the wretched colonists. The metropolitan Left is in a quandary: it is well aware of the true fate of the "natives," the pitiless oppression they are subjected to, and does not condemn their revolt, knowing that we did

¹ For Sartre’s introduction, see Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, New York, 2004, pp.xliii-lxii.

everything to provoke it. But even so, it thinks, there are limits: these guerrillas should make every effort to show some chivalry; this would be the best way of proving they are men. Sometimes the Left berates them: "You're going too far; we cannot support you any longer." They don't care a shit for its support; it can shove it up its arse for what it's worth.²

Of course, the phenomenological Left was not united on this score. The *pied-noir* existentialist Albert Camus wanted no truck with Sartre's endorsement of Fanon's call for the purgative rigours of radical violence. Famously, at the time of his acceptance for the 1957 Nobel Prize for Literature, Camus reproached those who endorsed an 'ends justifies the means' ratification of violence in the Algeria he knew,³ by attempting to re-shift the focus of victimhood away from the colonised Algerians onto the French victims of Algerian terror, or perhaps most charitably from abstract notions of justice towards the corporeal effects of terrorist violence: 'People are now planting bombs on the tramway of Algiers. My mother might be on one of those tramways. If that is justice, then I prefer my mother.'⁴ More radical than this deflection of the question of violence, however, was his sense that in endorsing the radical violence of Algerians the European Left had capitulated to a force that had nothing in common with their own political objectives, but which was determined to create an atavistic state purged of all but Muslims.⁵

²See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, pp.xliiii-lxii.

³ For an argument Camus' Algeria was a literary simulacrum that obscured colonial reality, see Emily Apter, 'Out of Character: Camus's French Algerian Subjects', *Modern Language Notes*, 112(4), 1987, pp.499-516.

⁴ Albert Camus, *Algerian Chronicles*, (trans A Goldhammer) Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2013, p.216. On the fallout from the 'Stockholm Incident', see Elizabeth Hawes, *Camus: A Romance*, Grove, New York, 2009, p.253

⁵ Andrew Hussey, *The French Intifada: The Long War Between France and Its Arabs*, Faber and Faber, New York, 2014, pp.177-178.

Hannah Arendt cautioned against Fanon's, but more particularly Sartre's paean to violence, by inverting Clausewitz's notion that violence was politics conducted by other means. In essence, Arendt argued that an authentic 'political violence' was impossible, given that violence was intrinsically anti-political. For Arendt, violence foreclosed the possibility of acting politically, that is to say co-operatively. Instead, violence was an artificial enhancement and ultimately an abandonment of the political power of the violent-prone minority, who recognizing their inability to effect change, and opted instead for instrumental force to change the prevailing differentials in material strength in their favour. In this way, violence, while in extreme times a potential means of clearing the ground for the commencement of politics, could not itself be political.⁶

Reading the war against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, a *bellum omnia contra omnes* if ever there was one, throws up the same question as that posed by the troubled teenager Danny Embling: would Sartre fight here? Would he condone fighting? Not on the side of the United States and its latest iteration of the 'coalition of the willing', but on the side of ISIS? Are Salafist jihadists the FLN of our generation, the freedom fighters perceived as terrorists by a blinkered metropolitan commentariat? This is no mere loose provocation, as troubled and untroubled young people the world over have packed their bags to fight for the rashly proclaimed Islamic Caliphate, inspired by the lure of a rock that is higher than they, a foundational metanarrative that can overcome their rootlessness, an ideological home, or perhaps simply a testing ground. Much has been said about 'home grown terrorists' in the

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1969. For a more detailed analysis along these lines, see Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, 'On Politics and Violence: Arendt Contra Fanon' *Contemporary Political Theory* 7, 2008, pp.90–108.

stunted pages of the boulevard press (“Mother Asks: Where Did I Go Wrong?”), but there remains a certain incomprehension of the jihadi who leaves the creature comforts of the West and sneaks across the Turkish border into Syria to risk life and limb for the new caliphate. Such figures seem a thousand times more motivated and ready for radical violence than other objects of metropolitan fear, such as their beer-swilling radical right-wing counterparts, who in Germany have crystallised under the frank banner of ‘Hooligans Against Salafists’.⁷ Not since Spain in the 1930s have so many from so far afield taken up arms to fight in what is essentially a civil war. While politicians seek ways to confiscate their passports or block their return to their countries of origin, the historian can only hope they are keeping detailed diaries for posterity.

Unlike amongst Sartre’s Parisian leftist enclaves during the Algerian War, there has been no intellectual lionisation of today’s jihadists, despite their own claims of being an anti-imperial fighting force. What might this mean; have we deafened ourselves to a Mesopotamian Fanon or a Levantine Aimé Césaire as a result of the pernicious effects of a liberal intellectual consensus after the ‘end of history’? What public intellectual today would dare offer an approving introduction to Sayyid Qutb’s *Milestones* or the collected works of Hasan al-Banna, Abu Musab al-Suri or Abu Basir al-Tartusi, brandishing the sword on their behalf as Sartre did then? It would be surprising to find any. The dominant line of analysis is certainly that of Albert Camus; that it is the innocent

⁷ The HoGeSa or ‘Hooligans Against Salafists’; are a uniquely stupid blend of football hooligan with the usual suspects of Germany’s far right scene who have thus far come together to drink and riot on the streets of Cologne. See <http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article134122427/HoGeSa-die-Angst-vor-der-naechsten-Eskalation.html> The *salonfähig* face of contemporary cultural chauvinism in Europe might be seen as being represented by as ‘Pegida’ the self-professed ‘Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West’.

victim of subaltern terror – Camus’ mother - who spurs Western military action, rather than being the indirect product of it. An obsession with not so much the Geneva Conventions (do these still exist?) as a sense of what constitutes the Queensbury rules of Western warfare has led to a wholesale rejection of jihadist insurgency as unbecoming, unseemly and vulgar. The West, it might be said, has unsurprisingly rejected subaltern violence not because it is opposed to violence – witness the spate of wars in the Middle East since the end of the Cold War – but rather on the grounds of taste, of their aesthetic combat preferences, which prefers a quiet and unobtrusive mass bombing campaign in the Levant to a single nail bomb on public transport, a siege in a café or a massacre in a press office. The extension of the warzone to Western cities and populations has seen any potential sympathy for the claims of freedom fighting evaporate. Precisely as Sartre had said it would.

But what of ‘the cause’ and its defenders? On the surface, there are certainly some superficial similarities between the situation that Sartre and Camus faced and the present one. The entire history of neo-imperial violence in the Middle East cannot be brushed aside as somehow irrelevant to the current insurgency. Like a recalcitrant customer in Colin Powell’s Pottery Barn, the United States and its allies (including Australia) deliberately broke Iraq, only then to find that they couldn’t afford to pay for the damage they caused and were left to slink away from their mess in the hope that those who came behind them would sweep up the shards. This has proved to be an ineffective strategy for nation building.

There is also some symmetry to Sartre’s notion of the boomerang effect of Western violence in the region. It does not take an advanced degree in cultural studies to view the macabre

dramaturgy of ISIS's mode of warfare, with its emphasis on ritualistic and very public killings, as a knowingly grotesque inversion of the sanitised industrial production of dead bodies produced by the impersonal war machine of liberal states. But it is not a mere delight in removing the veil of politeness from warfare and confronting the West with the actual nature of death in the theatre of war that motivates ISIS in its atrocities and war crimes. Like Sartre's Fanon - who differs from Fanon's Fanon in important ways - ISIS uses the 'purifying' fires of violence as a rallying point for its followers and for the creation of their new polity. By committing war crimes, they demonstrate that for them, there is no way back.

But there are other things at play here. As much as the assumptions of unlimited Western power would invite critics to take all credit for martial or pacific Muslim agency the world over, there is far more going on than crude anti-imperialism. The tendency to blame Western violence, as blameworthy as it is, for everything, strips regional actors of their agency. The few experiments with genuine electoral politics in the region (such as the 2012 Egyptian election, and the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council election, which admittedly, given their highly complicated domestic context cannot be said to speak directly to Syrian and Iraqi conditions) have suggested that Islam remains a potent political force, particularly in the aftermath of the breakdown of the hitherto dominant political order. Arguably, the exclusion of political Islam from Middle Eastern political processes can only currently be achieved by external or internal coercion, which only exacerbates rather than alleviates the social conditions that offer it political legitimacy in the eyes of many politically aware Muslims.

This has long been the case. Few remember who Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez al Assad, steamrollered into oblivion within

screaming distance of the Orontian norias of Hama in 1982. It was Syria's insurgent Muslim Brotherhood Islamists (and the hapless civilians in their vicinity) who were massacred in the bloody crescendo of an ongoing Sunni challenge to the ruling Alawite minority who ruled Syria's secular Ba'athist state. Saddam Hussein's dictatorship over Iraq's Shi'ite majority (and Kurdish minority) was hardly more benign, killing tens of thousands of Iraqi Shi'ites after their uprising in 1991.

Even this does not begin to explain the current militant synergies between Iraq and Syria; because (crudely put) Assad's Syria had been oppressing militant Sunnis while Hussein's Iraq had been oppressing militant Shi'ites. The final aligning twist only came when the war to find Iraq's weapons of mass destruction came up empty handed but dislodged not only Saddam Hussein, but his Sunni Ba'athists, who, having been purged from authority, took up arms, many under the banner of Islamic militancy. The previously dominant Sunnis now entered a period of self-defence from the perceived predations of the US and the newly empowered Shi'ite majority, who had forgotten neither who had oppressed them nor which techniques had proven most effective in oppressing them. Under these conditions, the shift from a discredited Ba'athism to Salafism as an ideology of Sunni identity was swift and effective.⁸

In Syria, it took the power vacuum created by the Arab Spring (who today speaks of the Arab Spring?) to destabilise central Ba'athist power sufficiently to enable anti-regime violence to thrive. Unsurprisingly, the military anaemia of the modest Syrian liberal opposition quickly gave way to the region's battle hardened

⁸ Ali A Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq. Winning the War, Losing the Peace*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 2007, pp.240-248.

jihadists, inexplicably encouraged by Assad as a prophylactic against reform.⁹ Unleashed by Assad, and encouraged by Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (who feared Kurdish nationalism more than Sunni radicals), ISIS promptly bit the hand that had fed it. Meanwhile, Iran, with its long porous border with Iraq threw its weight behind the Shia resistance to ISIS in Iraq as well as doing what it could to prop up Assad in Syria through its Hezbollah proxy.¹⁰ Assad has also enjoyed the generous support of Putin's Russia, which for reasons that have everything to do with Russia's domestic 'Muslim question' feels far more comfortable with secular dictators than Islamist insurgents. Entering into this quagmire (despite Barack Obama's insistence that the dominance of their military hammer did not mean that 'every problem is a nail'),¹¹ the US created yet another 'coalition of the willing', this time initially supporting the Kurdish resistance against ISIS (much to the chagrin of Turkey), but slowly insinuating 'military advisers'. At the same time, the US had to find the correct form of words to obscure the fact that this saw them become proxy brothers in arms with Hezbollah and Bashar al-Assad. The US has also had to try and stop Turkey from bombing the fervently anti-ISIS (but PKK aligned) Kurdish peshmerga, whose autonomy in Northern Iraq and Syria is, again, seen by Turkey as a far more lasting threat than a transient ragtag ISIS caliphate.

⁹ For Assad's initial support of the jihadists, see Lina Khatib, 'Assad's fatal strategic mistakes' <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/03/al-assad-fatal-strategic-mistak-201432910353132476.html>

¹⁰ On Hezbollah's role in the region, see http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/hezbollah-leader-delivers-defiant-speech/2014/11/04/5da02d85-6ef0-4abc-afd0-4d3aa28ed0d6_story.html

¹¹ For Obama's short-lived non-interventionist foreign policy doctrine, see <http://america.aljazeera.com/watch/shows/inside-story/articles/2014/5/28/intervention-vs-isolationwhatwillbeobamasforeignpolicylegacy.html>

If causality, motivation and catalyst for political violence in post Ba'athist Iraq and Syria all seem terribly complex that is because they are. As in the final days of French Algeria, the old world of Ba'athist Syria and Iraq has died, but a new world has yet to be born. But that is where the similarities stop. Unlike Sartre's all too neat view of the war between France and a monolithic FLN (which in itself was a much looser coalition of different forces than Sartre ever let on), ISIS and its adherents cannot be viewed through the Manichean lens of the putatively heroic struggle of the subaltern against the coloniser. Rather it should be seen as kaleidoscopic warfare, where the geostrategic aims of the US in the post Ba'athist countries of Syria and Iraq are pitted not only against the crumbling state militaries of those countries, but also against those of newly emboldened state players such as post-Kemalist Turkey, post-revolutionary Iran, and neo-interventionist Russia, as well as against the priorities of players aspiring to state status, such as the nationalist Kurds, and the transnational, post-al Qaeda jihadists of ISIS and other assorted militias. This is a situation in which the various players are operating on the assumption that there is no right or wrong, only interests and the zero-sum means of realising them at the expense of the other players.

To return to the original conundrum, of whether or not to fight, it would seem that viewing ISIS as a 'classic' force for decolonisation and liberation would be a serious error. Sartre might have had cogent reasons for supporting the end of colonialism in Algeria, but ISIS in the Levant and Mesopotamia, with its commitment to a hyper-religious, highly authoritarian state is not the same beast as the notionally socialist FLN. Even the most strenuous strain of revolutionary wishful thinking would struggle to find common cause with the theocratic fantasies of ISIS. Why would anyone, much less the remnant left, support such messianic

vanguardism? Built on secular materialism and having spent a century divesting itself of the theological straitjacket of Leninism and more than two centuries carefully filleting the metaphysical, pseudo-progressivism of the *Weltgeist* from the Hegelian *corpus*, why would anyone entertain the teleology offered by the supporters of the latest *möchtegern* Caliphate? ISIS may not be merely an ‘apocalyptic death cult’ (there are important material interests that matter to ISIS too),¹² but it is certainly not an unproblematic force for regional decolonisation. So to be clear: there is nothing that ISIS offers that could be supported on the grounds offered by Sartre for supporting Algerian nationalists.

That said, any decision to support those militarily opposing ISIS – the Kurdish peshmerga, Hezbollah, the United States and its coalition of the willing, the Russian-backed Assad government of Syria, the Shia-dominated government of Iraq – should be aware that they too carry with them not merely a set of ideological assumptions, but are also serving broader material interests of their own, and that these actions have long term ramifications for an already highly dynamic region. There is no Archimedean point from which purposive, apolitical military assistance to those on the ‘right side of history’ can be coolly offered. Some of the interests being fought for are arguably laudable; the preservation of Kurdish autonomy (which might, however, destabilise Turkey), the protection of Yazidi and Christian minorities (which might have been done more effectively through humanitarian channels such as the UNHCR). But even these aims constitute a negative agenda, in the sense that fighting ISIS serves only the short term problem of defeating a particular incarnation of jihadi radicalism. Witness the

¹² For Tony Abbott’s assessment of ISIS, see <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/30/tony-abbott-intensifies-rhetoric-about-isis-calling-it-an-apocalyptic-death-cult>

sudden re-emergence of Al Qaeda in Yemen, or the rise of Boko Haram in Nigeria. How many more Osama Bin Ladens, springing from a seemingly inexhaustible Hydra's head, must US Navy Seals shoot before regional structural choices regarding the relationship between politics and Islam (or Islam as politics) are stabilised? The current military campaign deliberately leaves open (must leave open) the longer term geostrategic future of Iraq and particularly Syria, where the choices seem to be between the religious war criminals of the Islamic Caliphate, the secular war criminals of the Assad regime or an imposed 'Western' government that could survive only through the garrisoning of the region with hundreds of thousands of troops for a generation – an imperial option that Afghanistan has demonstrated can also end at best inconclusively.

The choices are all unsavoury. This is where Žižek, the *Pagliacci* of the Left, seems correct, when he argues against the imperative to intervene senselessly:

Better to do nothing than to engage in localised acts the ultimate function of which is to make the system run more smoothly... The threat today is not passivity, but pseudo-activity, the urge to 'be active', to 'participate', to mask the nothingness of what goes on. People intervene all the time... The truly difficult thing is to step back, to withdraw.¹³

This is not an argument for quietism or pacifism, which equally erroneously propose to do nothing *on principle*. Unless the act is more than an empty signifier, however, a towering and violent gesture of helplessness, then it should be left undone. Anything else would be simply the politics of Sartrean *mauvaise foi* – bad faith – at the level of the state, where states act more or less knowing what they're fighting against, but with no idea what

¹³ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*, Profile Books, London, 2009, p.183.

they're fighting for. And, as Camus sought to remind us, military violence is not the sum of all potential action. Instead, a structural critique might be mounted that is not merely 'a plague o' both your houses!' but constructively establishes a path between the homicidal irrationality of radical jihadism and the Western fantasies of imposing a totalising liberal world order. Once again, it is Žižek who has begun this process, arguing that 'fundamentalism is a reaction – a false mystification of course – against a real flaw in liberalism which will continue to generate new fundamentalisms. As such, left to itself, liberalism will slowly undermine itself.'¹⁴ This is a start, but it still pays insufficient heed to the intricacy of local dynamics that intersect with and corrode the more obvious global structuring factors. Still, as he at least makes clear, repudiating ISIS and Al Qaeda's claims to be fighting for the Muslim subaltern (who has more than enough cause for complaint) does not necessitate an endorsement of the overarching logic which underpins the West's renewed entanglements in the Middle East any more than it requires an endorsement of the geostrategic ambitions of Iran, Russia, China, Turkey or any other party.

The question of whether to fight, to deploy violence (or as it is generally described 'to intervene') from afar in an ostensibly civil war cannot be decided on principle, but rather on the given situation. In Iraq and Syria the situation is far from conclusive in terms of precisely what action it demands and what ends action might serve. Sartre's Manichaeic introduction to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* offers us no real guide for action in this zone of kaleidoscopic warfare, any more than does the West's Manichaeic understanding of ISIS as a nihilistic death cult devoid of a material political agenda. Yet, as the existentialist Simone de

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, "Der Liberalismus braucht der Linke" <http://www.taz.de/Slavoj-iek-ueber-Charlie-Hebdo/!153100/>, last viewed 20.01.2015.

Beauvoir illustrates, the facticity of the given situation can be overcome through authentic political choices that move beyond servitude to secular or religious metanarrations that claim to have uncovered and serve the *telos* of history. Correctly, Beauvoir insists upon the centrality of choice, not merely between binary forms of action, either ‘for or agin’, but rather whether to act or not to act.¹⁵ In the abstract, this is the process of embracing an authentic political freedom that refuses false binaries. In concrete terms, it is an injunction not to fight simply because there is a fight to be had.

About the Author

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¹⁵ Kimberly Hutchings, ‘Simone de Beauvoir and the Ambiguous Ethics of Political Violence’ *Hypatia*, 22(3), 2009, pp.111-132.