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TERRORISM AND THE MEDIA: AN ITALIAN POINT OF VIEW
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The terrorist phenomenon is evolving. From its "national" beginning, geographically circumscribed, is now becoming "international". Apparently, the actions of isolated "micro-groups" is now supplemented and integrated by the intervention of sovereign States and their Secret Services. Even the original ideological component of many terrorists is less apparent, maybe less important. A number of experts identifies the "new terrorists" as "suppliers of special services", retailers of death and terror. In their new specificity, therefore, it is the means that becomes the end. Terrorism is a style, chosen by many different criminals: the revolutionary end of conquering power through terror is less and less credible (and, in fact, it never became real, even in the past, as Laqueur pointed out); as a counterbalance to this loss of faith, however, terrorist tactics have been chosen by the organized crime, by isolated individuals, by mercenaries of undercover wars, by anarchists, etc.

This explains, at least partially, why the Media have serious difficulties in dealing with the problem. Should Terrorism, at least the international one, be considered as a form of warfare, then it would be easier, and logical, to consider a number of restrictions of the Media coverage, along well-known (if somewhat uncertain) lines. But indirect wars are not as well cut as the direct, traditional ones. And Terrorism itself, even as an extreme form of warfare, is a murkier phenomenon mixed up with normal criminality as well as inter-State rivalries. In this situation it would be difficult to conceive a policy of restrictions for the Media, different from the acceptance of the need of a "complete and reasonable coverage" of terrorist events (to utilize Katharine Graham's words).

The difficult part, of course, is to decide what is "complete and reasonable" at the same time. The journalist is linked to a day to day operation of a very short term nature, where the objective is more to tell it all than to tell the "Truth". It is difficult however to escape the impression that the Media have a role and a responsibility vis-a-vis Terrorism, as at the same time they are considered as potential allies or enemies by the terrorists themselves, and are put under pression by the State, to reveal their sources of information or to cooperate in the police work. The Italian Media in particular, and the Italian journalists, have experienced bloody and wild direct attacks against themselves: journalists like Casalegno, of La Stampa, and Tobagi, of Il Corriere della Sera, have been killed by terrorists willing to intimidate our Free Press. No other possible defense exists, for journalists, than "going public". But "how" ?

Generally the State oppose almost any form of publicity, as far as terrorist attacks and operations are concerned. The Media generally accept that, when they are clearly told that a piece of news, if published, could

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endanger actual anti-terrorist operations. But they have constantly refused a general and systematic black out. It can be true that a single terrorist act, per se, causes less objective damage than other criminal acts, but receives more attention, thereby increasing its "social value", its disruption, because of sproporionate coverage by the Media.

While it can be true that the Media's coverage of some terrorist act could become an insurance policy for hostages, the reverse might also apply. Take for example the case of the abduction and killing of the former Italian Premier Aldo Moro, in 1978. The immense coverage of the event by the Media, during the 54 days of the crisis, didn't succeed in saving Moro's life. On the contrary, looking at those days from a distance, one could think that a different, more restrained attitude, with a less dramatic coverage and a "de-escalation" of the perceived importance of the hostage, could have been of some help. The problem however is if that was at all possible.

The Media are instrumental in conveying to the public the relative importance of the "news", as they perceive them, but they are not the sole responsible of such a perception.

First of all the Media don't live in isolation from their society. One of the peculiar features of the Italian political life, is the disproportionate importance given (in the Press as well as in the actual relationship between Parties) to any kind of microscopic change or message, originating from a limited number of key political figures: and Moro was prominent between them. His abduction therefore was bound to be perceived first and foremost as a great political event, to be treated by political journalists and commentators (up to the editors), leaving on a side the usual, less preeminent crime reporters. This, in turn, increased the space and the dramatic contents of the coverage (its "value").

Second, the attitude of the Media is at least partially dependent from the decision of the Government. It is impossible to "ignore", or even downgrade the value of Terrorism in the Media, when the Government react to it with measures of an exceptional nature. The bombing of Libya has certainly increased the news-value of international Terrorism (especially if a repetition of the bombing is said to be likely). Special legislation against terrorist will have a similar effect.

The Italian Government did rapidly understood the risk of implementing a kind of vicious circle, helping the terrorist to achieve at least one of their objectives: the official and public recognition of their high "nuisance value", thereby deciding to avoid, as far as possible, any kind of special legislation or direct or indirect official recognition of the terrorists as "legitimate interlocutors" of the State. Terrorism was to be considered as a form of crime, downgrading or denying its political motivations and claims. The Italian Press, after the experience made during the Moro's crisis, while not always in agreement with this interpretation, and sometime ill at ease with some clearly perceived contradictions, did in general accept the soundness of such a strategy, putting terrorist news into the "crime" category.

The basic features of this Italian anti-terrorist approach can be summarized as follows: firmness against terrorist's claims (rejecting their

role as "interlocutors" of the State); avoidance, as far as possible, of "symbolic" exceptional legislative measures; increase of the "information" activity of the Police and of the other Security Services; better coordination and timely exchange of informations inside the State and between States; preservation of the traditional way of life of the civilian society (business as usual, at least on the surface). None of these measures however can guarantee a rapid and effective cure of the terrorist disease. On the contrary, they sum up as a kind of slow "attrition strategy", waiting for the terrorists to effectively self-defeat themselves, for lack of perceived successes and structural incapacity of staying in action longer and more resourcefully than the State.

It is a somewhat painful and cruel strategy, leaving to the enemy the glamour of many short term victories, and denying them the political and social exploitation of their success, but has at least the advantage of exploiting a major source of strength: resistance against change. It might be less useful against the present International Terrorism, due to the different nature of the new terrorists, and the divergent reactions of the Western States.

In fact, what was downgraded nationally did sometime receive an unexpected and dramatic boost internationally. The French Government, for instance, reacted badly and incomprehensibly to the Italian anti-terrorist strategy, granting rights of sanctuary to a number of Italian terrorists, thereby accepting their self-identification as "political refugees", and partially undermining or delaying their disbandment. The same thing is happening today, on a larger scale, as far as International Terrorism is concerned. While the Italian preference would clearly be one of downgrading the perception of the importance of International Terrorism, the reality of the exceptional measures, with high news-value, taken against it, is making such a strategy infinitely more difficult.

Should we implement a different, more active strategy however, the role and responsibility of the Media might become very difficult indeed. If the terrorist is identified as the major enemy to be defeated with the utilization of exceptional means, militarily or otherwise, the entire nature of the fight will change and the news-value of terrorist actions will increase.

Interesting French researches on the relationship between Terrorism and Media (those by Roger Dufour, between them), speak of a psychological feed-back between Media and Public Opinion, working on the collective "imaginary" of the Society. Terrorism becomes Theatre, notable performances avidly absorbed by the "imaginary" of the Society, to feed herself; and the Media, the journalists, are the playwrights. To do that however, all the dramatis personae in the play should be perceived more or less on the same level, with the same degree of legitimacy as actors. In short, one should upgrade the terrorists and downgrade the State.

When that is done, the role of the Media follows, according to almost obliged lines.

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