

## Theater of War . . .

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**B** ARGING THEIR WAY OUT OF THE *Charlie Hebdo* offices, out of breath, the fanatical killers reportedly blurted out: “We have killed *Charlie Hebdo*” and “We have avenged the Prophet Muhammad.” The horror that one naturally feels on learning of this monstrous massacre should not put a gag on our capacity to question the absurdity of such pathetic war cries. Over and beyond the all-too-usual explanations provided by the inevitable pundits who will no doubt dish up some rehash of the “clash of civilizations” thesis or trundle out ad nauseam their latest retooled blurbs on the “radicalization of the suburbs” (despite the fact that, this time, the terrorists seem to have been born *inside* Paris’s enchanted ring road!), over and beyond the usual prophets of doom and decadence who will inevitably strike up their adagios about *l’identité malheureuse* (the misfortunes of [French national] identity), the *suicide français* (suicide of France), or the West’s voluntary prostration before Islam, and so continue to earn the most macabre of dividends, the time may perhaps at last have come to soberly take stock of what has really been going on since the mid-2000s, not only in France but in Europe in general.

We have been the Hamlets of a strange theater, a stage of hastily assembled planks on which a howling tragedy, the self-fulfilling prophecy of the collapse of Western Europe—of its values, its culture, its identity—has been wantonly billed night after night. The debates about national identity, the shocking hijacking of the notion of *laïcité*, today shamelessly assimilated with a form of “cultural hygiene,” the sickening surf of best sellers, all repeating the same hollow mantra about the decadence that is sapping our strength, the attendant collapse, the fatal erosions of globalization, are each and all in their own way bit players in this monstrous staging of our collective anguish—which is, by contrast, real enough. This anguish is that of encirclement, of being surrounded and having to, as it were, “circle the wagons,” and is no doubt collectively experienced by many inhabitants of Europe, formerly the world’s heartland, today not so much.

There are two leading roles in this thunderous play. First and foremost, we have the “People”—French, German, Austrian, Norwegian, Dutch, or British—who are purportedly subverted or perverted in their identity. The other lead role falls to the “outside enemy,” the insidiously pernicious oppressor, mainly played by the Muslim, within whose breast slumbers a fundamentalist, within whose heart is coiled a deadly jihadist, that vicious relay of an Islamic *international*, poised to pounce on wide-eyed Europe, or on the whole of humanity. But bit parts may be reallocated to the Roma, the homosexual, all sorts of walk-on players. Then there are the two main supporting roles. First, the shining knight who rises up against decadence, the hero who “senses” the People’s mood in the same way that a prophet is cognizant of God, and who has the People’s ear in the same way that the horse-whisperer has the horse’s. The second supporting role is that of the villain: the traitor or Bobo, the deadbeat multiculturalist, or the journalist, vaguely assimilated with the horrible *élite bienpensante*.

So why then do these fanatical murderers loudly call on heaven, invoking Allah, Muhammad, or al-Qaida? Might it not be because they belong to the “community” of certain Muslims who have progressively strayed into radicalism? Here the record must be set straight: such is not often the profile of today’s jihadists. In the 1990s and up to the early 2000s, theologically radicalized, religiously trained personalities (often with university educations) were indeed in evidence, as exemplified by the individuals who planned the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Today, things are very different: we are up against frustrated young people, who end up becoming enmeshed in and taking seriously the collective role-playing game where they can conveniently slip into the flamboyant part of the jihadist we love to fear so much. This role, so monstrous in “our” eyes, becomes desirable for “them” precisely because it is so monstrous for “us.” Their taste for murderous folly feeds into the feelings of humiliation, resentment, and desire for vengeance “they” nourish.

It is important to underline that they have become jihadists all of a sudden—not progressively but suddenly, just like that. Only the day before yesterday, they might have been busy drowning their resentment in drink or flirting with girls in very “non-halal” nightclubs, and still today they are generally infrequent readers of the Koran, simply because they have no knowledge of classical Arabic, and have retained a few formulaic catchphrases recited in a loop mainly because they seem to provide justification for their desire to get into a fight. Generally, they very rarely attend Friday prayers, or do so just to keep up appearances, to have an effect. Consequently, the strategy that consists in training homegrown imams can hardly be relevant.

Conversely, they “play” at jihad for hours, via the Internet, through online games, among groups of chosen “friends,” whom increasingly they end up meeting, with whom more and more frequently they set about setting the world aright, planning “spectacular” actions against their “enemies.” They are the sworn enemies of the “true Europeans”; they know it by rote, it is drummed into them all day long, and now they have taken the fact on board; they are even proud of it. Symmetrically, “their” enemies are those who insult them, who threaten them, whose most visible, emblematic symbols they aspire to target. In the troubled mind-set of these second-rate actors—but high-potential murderers—*Charlie Hebdo* thus was turned into the symbol of the enemy in the B-series Clash of Civilizations scenario to which they feel increasingly committed.

It is certainly not by “deradicalization” that the problem will be solved, because to become a *radical*, you need a minimum number of theological frequent-flier miles and not just slogans repeated in a loop. But these new jihadists do not belong to the classic al-Qaida networks; they buy into them as one buys into a brand or a label. They fall headlong into jihadism from the start,

as one falls for a fad, without even going through the tick-box of Islam. And so they can launch into the meticulous preparation of a terrorist attack just to play the part, and so begin to exist for themselves and for the world, which they will have succeeded in making shudder. That is why they may spring up anywhere, without warning, however ingenious the endeavors of our doughty security forces to dismantle their networks.

The whole thing is too volatile, rhizomatic: no sooner dismantled here, reborn over there, each and every one of us being potentially susceptible to taking up the improvised role of “hero,” of defender of “his own” endangered culture. Be it that of Islam, and you get the risk of a new Mohammed Mehra; of “Old Europe,” and here comes the threat of another Anders Breivik! What we are really going to have to come to grips with one day soon is that it is this constant ratcheting up—or hasty patching up with rotten old planks—of the creaky stage set of the Culture Wars, now typical of our narcissistically impaired Old Europe, which itself results in such moments of uncontrollable acting out, completely unrelated to any process of religious radicalization. Truly, when all is said and done, those who, directly or indirectly, have over the years been erecting so sick and sad a theater must have the greatest responsibility to face! A