



Rethinking Civil Liberties in a Counter-Terrorism World

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The most exasperating misuse of language in our political culture is also the most dangerous. This is when we are told that we are living in an ‘age of terrorism’ or that we are partisans in a ‘war on terror’. Such terms have no meaning that can be located in the representative work done by these words in the past.

An ‘age of’ something suggests the occurrence of the thing concerned on such a regular basis that it can be said to characterize the times in a way that is different from all those other ‘times’ through which we have lived or which our culture has experienced. But ‘terrorism’ is an uncertain term with no shared meaning. The moment we agree on what it involves — let’s say the killing/harming of civilians or doing great physical damage (or both) to communicate a political message — is the point at which we can see immediately that there is no age of terrorism in the conventional sense at all, that in fact such bouts of violence are few and far between — hardly ever occurring in North America and practically absent from a Western European society that has endured far more frequent episodes of subversive political violence in the past.

It is the same with ‘war on terror’. The word ‘war’ prepares us for mass mobilization, for casualties on a large scale, for attacks on our political liberties and on our state’s geographic integrity. Above all, it suggests some structured group of persons — a community, a nation, a state — on which we are waging our war. It is not conventionally possible to make war on a state of mind,

or even on a technique of violence: we would not feel able to declare ‘a war on anxiety’ or one ‘on kidnapping’ or ‘on aerial bombardment.’ It is true that these warrior metaphors had begun to infiltrate our language even before the attacks of 11 September 2001 — in the 1990s we had the ‘war on drugs’ and the ‘war on serious crime’ and to this day we are occasionally mustered to play bit parts in the ‘war on obesity’. But the current war on terror is of a different order altogether, connoting an all-consuming series of battles with an evil and malignant Other that is intent upon our destruction.

There are many things that could be said about the reasons behind the deployment of the language of war and terror in these new ways: the genuine trauma of 9/11 as far as most Americans are concerned; the translation of the emotional response to that event into a policy of world-wide aggression, which was strengthened by the fact that it happened to suit powerful forces within the United States for reasons unconnected with the attacks themselves; the desire of many of the allies of this most powerful nation in the world to express solidarity at what the leaders of these various, smaller states judged to be a critical time; the self-fulfilling effect of the war on terror, in that

Paddy McCann
The Window
1995
oil on canvas
162 x 130 cm
courtesy of the artist

it has greatly exacerbated the campaign of terrorism (in occupied and formerly occupied territories at least), which it was supposedly initiated to suppress; and much else besides. These are not the focus of this essay. Instead, our concern here is with how the war on terror has exposed levels of hostility, unprecedented in the democratic era, to the protection and promotion of civil liberties, and with what can be done to counter this hostility. The point can be made about the US, the UK, Ireland — indeed, about large numbers of liberal societies. It is true that in many of these places during the Cold War the civil liberties of left-wing radical activists, politicized labour leaders and members of indigenous communist parties were on occasion greatly restricted. It is also the case that terrorism laws in at least some of these countries in the 1970s and 1980s had a chilling effect that went well beyond the violent subversives at whom they were primarily aimed. But the repression of these past decades did not threaten to reconfigure liberal democracy's whole relationship with freedom in the way that the generality, pervasive effect, unendability and international cohesiveness of the current war on terror threaten to do.

Those who care about civil liberties need to take this danger seriously and organize properly in order to fight back. This must involve some serious reflection on what is meant by civil liberties, how far the term extends, what it encompasses and how best to deal with the tensions that are inherent in it, tensions that have been exposed by the pressure that the concept of terrorism has put on the term. This essay is offered as a contribution to such a discussion. It argues that the subject of civil liberties has got where it is today by creative exploitation of the pressures that result from three paradoxes that lie at its heart. These relate to national security, to democracy and to political violence. Terrorism law threatens to expose these paradoxes and, in so doing, to tear apart the structures that hold the

concept of civil liberties together, leading — if we are not careful — to a reconstitution of these same liberties in an altogether more reactionary, more authoritarian form. And yet despite this, it is clear that progressive vigour can be restored to civil liberties so that their emancipatory and radical dimensions can be sustained even in the face of this antagonistic anti-terrorism narrative.

National Security

The first paradox can be simply put: to be effective, civil liberties protection must provide a mechanism for its own failure. Or to put it another way, an absolutist civil liberties culture is not one in which civil liberties are afforded unqualified protection. The point here is not just the obvious one that every guarantee of the right to vote and to the freedoms of expression, assembly, association, and so on, necessarily have to contain exceptions on account of the fact that these concepts are simply too wide to be of use without further modification. This is of course true: even the entitlement to vote is predicated on a minimal level of mental capacity and, as the public law cliché puts it, no one has the right falsely to shout fire in a crowded cinema. But the point is deeper than this. Democratic freedom sometimes requires the truncation of these rights even in their political, civil libertarian manifestation.

It is not inherently contradictory for a democratic culture to prohibit certain kinds of political expression, whether in the form of speech, membership of an organization or public protest. Most democratic states ban many substantive communications that could broadly be described as forms of political expression. How wide or narrow such censorious actions are depends on the history and politics of the state concerned and in particular on how fragile and/or vulnerable its institutions are to the sentiments being banned: the Germans today are understandably more anxious about

Rowan Gillespie
Victims of Hate (front)
 34 x 33 x 19 cm
 courtesy of the artist



Nazis than are the Americans, the British keener to crack down on racially motivated hate speech than other countries that do not share its colonial past and diverse population. The European Convention on Human Rights contains a number of clues as to what is going on with these apparent subversions of civil liberties. Many of the key civil liberties set out in that document are capable of being overridden when certain legitimate goals come into play and when this derogation is prescribed by law, but, crucially, this can be done only when it is considered 'necessary in a democratic society'. Article 17 declares that 'Nothing in this Convention may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or perform

any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein or at their limitation to a greater extent than is provided for in the Convention.' If things get really rough, this paradigmatic political rights charter permits states to derogate from their obligations under it in 'time of war or other public emergency threatening the life of the nation' (albeit only 'to the extent strictly required by the exigencies of the situation').

Most democratic constitutions have clauses along similar lines. If they do not, the responsible authorities tend to read them as implied in the document (if they are judges) or to assert them (if they are elected leaders). The important civil libertarian point to

make is that this should not surprise us or disturb us as a matter of principle. The test of a successful democratic culture is not its willingness to implode when faced with illiberal forces inclined to misconstrue the freedoms offered by such a society as invitations to destroy it. This is the case whether the threat comes from the Left, the Right, or from some pre-modern brand of politicized religion. The willingness of representative democracy to equip itself to fight against forces that would destroy it must entail an openness to the curtailment of civil liberties, where this is judged essential to survival. Those who reject this premise as an unwarranted invitation to authoritarianism are likely to be closet libertarians, verging on anarchists, rather than civil libertarians in the political sense in which the term is being used here.

If there can be no serious argument against the need for such a democratic override button, however, there is great controversy over who should have the right to push it. The difficult question is not one of principle but of practice. This is where the pressure arises. The issues were simpler before mass suffrage. Power was then in the hands of élites whose invariable tendency was to confuse the threat they individually (or as a class) faced with a danger to the country as a whole. In such situations, the claims of national security were often a mere camouflage for the vested interests that lay behind them. In 1688, King James II no doubt thought he was putting England first even while parliament put him to flight for, among other misdeeds, 'endeavour[ing] to subvert and extirpate ... the lawes and liberties of this kingdome'. Two generations later, the justly celebrated civil liberties case of *Entick v. Carrington* (1765) established that the British executive branch's version of state necessity did not necessarily accord with that of the law of the land. The importance of this case lay in the way it established on behalf of the judges a claim to have a shared responsibility for the

assessment of what kinds of abridgement of civil liberties were required in the name of national survival. Many of the advances in civil liberties in eighteenth-century Britain were made in the courtroom, by brave judges, courageous counsel and unintimidated juries.

With the growth of the democratic movement at the end of that century and its revival after a period of repression inspired by anxiety about the possible contagiousness of the French Revolution, advocates of civil liberties found themselves facing the hostility not only of a propertied class used to parliamentary power but also of their allies on the bench, now increasingly unsettled by the prospect of sharing power with the merchants and other beneficiaries of the Industrial Revolution. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the national interest, in Britain and in other countries, was wheeled out to provide a rhetorical veneer for class partisanship, but once again it was unsuccessful. Resistance to a widened franchise involved savage repression, military attacks on protesters and, when the modest reform measure of 1832 came up for debate in Britain, warnings of imminent national doom in both Houses of Parliament. The same cycle was then played out in the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a truly democratic culture secured its niche in the industrialized West with the support of the socialist and trade-union movements and via a strong commitment to a universal right to vote. Ireland's anti-imperialist struggles of the nineteenth and early twentieth century fit a similar pattern, with the dispute in its case being about the composition of the national entity as well as the supposed threat to national survival.

So much for the past, when resistance to the democratic goals of civil libertarians turned the assertion of even the basic freedoms of expression, assembly and association into highly dangerous acts, potentially

Rowan Gillespie
Victims of Hate (back)
 34 x 33 x 19 cm
 courtesy of the artist



reasonable or seditious if the authorities chose to see things that way. With an elected parliament to which the executive is accountable and upon which it depends for support, the entitlement of those who decide what can be done in the name of national security has become less of a subject of controversy. The ministers asserting the need to constrain civil liberties for these reasons have been able to invoke their democratic mandate as a moral basis for their action. In Britain, the US and elsewhere, this made the crackdowns on radical political speech during the Cold War both possible and, broadly speaking, tolerated by the general public. During the period 1945-89, there

was a general acceptance that the challenge to the legitimacy of the state was real enough to warrant defensive action. The courts as well as the legislative and executive branches in most liberal democracies accepted this assumption, as did important regional tribunals like the European Court of Human Rights. Certainly, this meant that there were allegations of partisanship in the protection of civil liberties, with certain categories of persons being quite unable to actualize their rights, while others (less subversive of authority) were free to protest as they wished. But allegations of double standards were thought a price worth paying for the preservation of democratic

structures. The same was broadly true of the terrorism laws prior to 9/11: these were sharply focused and usually applied with the kind of restraint that could only flow from a culture whose commitment to freedom and democracy did not feel challenged by the sporadic acts of relatively weak — albeit occasionally very violent — subversives.

The change since 9/11 has been in the way in which terrorism laws have become generalized and in the flimsiness of the national security claims that have underpinned their expansion. We see this in the extraordinary attempt by the current president of the United States to establish himself as commander-in-chief in a never-ending war on terror that places him above his country's own constitution, able, in his view, to disregard legislative and legal constraints on his actions. It has been evident as well, though as yet to a much lesser degree, in the British reaction to 9/11; this initially involved detention without charge for suspected international terrorists and has now led to a scheme of 'anti-terrorism control orders', restrictions that can be imposed on suspects without proof of any criminal activity (albeit subject to judicial oversight). Large numbers of countries have followed in the repressive paths blazed by these supposedly model democracies. Even the United Nations, depressingly, has joined in the action, with Security Council resolutions having led to a return to blacklists of banned persons and groups, resolutions which, when challenged, have been held by many judges (including the important Court of First Instance of the European Court of Justice) to be beyond the reach of human rights inquiry. Much of this activity is predicated on a definition of terrorism so vague that it permits action against persons whose only offence is that of radical political activity. It is this potentially broad field of attack on civil liberties that anti-terrorism law has opened up, which, allied to a ratcheting up of the anti-terrorist rhetoric and the resulting chill that affects

the whole democratic culture, has rendered the changes of the recent past potentially so dangerous as compared with the anti-communism and anti-terrorism of the more distant past.

The civil libertarian must answer these developments. The first point is to acknowledge that civil liberties are not absolute: to claim otherwise is to fly in the face of history. But having acknowledged this, the defender of civil liberties must insist that no elected leader can have a blank cheque to act as he or she wishes in the name of national security, that the fact of democratic legitimacy is not sufficient to warrant the seizure of such a power. Judgements as to what is required to ensure national survival must be shared, with the legislative, but especially with the judicial, branch. Civil libertarians must swallow whatever suspicions they might have had of the judges ('right-wing', 'reactionary', 'illiberal', etcetera) and recognize that because the authoritarian tendency has made such advances recently, judges have found themselves in the front line of the defence of freedom. This is an odd place to see them, it is true, but they must be cheered on nonetheless. This is the case when the British House of Lords rules that detention of suspected international terrorists is a breach of human rights, when the US Supreme Court, largely composed of Republican appointees, decides that President George W. Bush has gone too far even for them, and when the International Court of Justice bravely castigates the Israeli Wall. There are many other examples as well — the news on the judicial front is not at all as bad as is sometimes supposed by those of us who are dyed-in-the-wool critics of judicial conservatism. But the 'war on terror' has made liberals of us all. When the executive and legislative branches have been won back to the civil libertarian side, we can go back to arguments about how judges are holding up social progress, but now is not the time for such luxurious disputes.

Democracy

If the first paradox is concerned with the subject of civil liberties' requirement to contain within itself the seeds of its own destruction, the second is likewise taken up with absorbing another contrary impulse within its deep structure. The historic purpose of civil liberties as the law and practice of political freedom has been to secure a representative system of government; in its classic form this is what all the protesting and speech-making and associating has been about. The achievement of this form of rule does not, however, bring an end to the subject of civil liberties or even a restriction of it to the legislative arena; rather the reverse. In fact, one of the tests of the success of a democratic culture is its willingness to accept political expression that is not focused on the duly elected representatives of the community, but that lies well outside the parliamentary mainstream. This continued appreciation of the need for popular protest in a country with plenty of formal democratic channels open to it is another historical legacy of civil liberties, which fortunately we have been unable — so far at least — to shake off. During the democratic revolution of the seventeenth century through to the mid-twentieth century, civil liberties had to exist separately from the legislature because (albeit to a progressively lesser extent as time went on) that body was not representative in a truly democratic sense. But the Suffragettes were the last civil libertarian movement in the West that was able to say with perfect clarity that the elected persons making decisions about their future were in no way their representatives, having achieved their positions on the basis of votes cast by one gender only.

If the democratic developments of the twentieth century did not render the subject of civil liberties redundant, they did affect it in important ways. With universal franchise

having been largely achieved by the late 1920s, civil libertarian energy found itself caught up in a new field of battle. The main arena of dispute has not been about winning power to change the system but about exercising the rights to freedoms of expression, assembly and association in order to influence legislators in favour of particular points of view. Highly relevant at this juncture is the fact that so many of the world's people are now, formally at any rate, citizens of states organized entirely on democratic principles. In such places governments have a new way of rebutting public protest — pointing not to the substantive error of the policy change that is sought, but rather to the inadmissibility of the mode of bringing it to the legislators' attention. The country is a democratic one, the relevant decision-maker tells the crowd: go and write to your MP/TD/Senator, run for office or seek to inform opinion in more orthodox/less invasive ways. This democratically rooted counter-attack on civil liberties was first in evidence during the Red Scare in the US in the 1920s and the General Strike in Britain in 1926. In both cases, government ministers justified their actions — draconian emergency regulation, strong police action, tough prosecution policies — with a new authority based on their democratic legitimacy and the existence of alternative mechanisms for calling executive decision-making to account. More recent protests that have similarly been on the margins of political debate have been equally vulnerable to control on the basis that such forms of protest are unnecessary in today's free society: examples in Britain include CND activism in the early 1980s, Stop-the-City protests, eco-demonstrations, and other forms of direct action.

Of course, the political leadership did not in the 1920s and 1930s, and does not today, regard an operative democratic system of government as a sufficient basis for the removal of political freedom altogether:



Brian Maguire
Strange Fruit
2003
lithograph A/P 1
(edition of 20)
courtesy of the artist

the paradox lies precisely in the need to continue to allow those earlier hard-won civil liberties. The men and women who run Britain or Ireland today recognize the need for civil liberties as a matter of principle, and concede the legitimacy of this or that

particular public protest as a social fact, but it by no means follows that they welcome the practice of public protest with open arms. These democratically elected officials cannot help but see themselves as the current winners in an impeccably fair electoral race

and with a consequent monopoly of wisdom, which public protesters are seeking by the short cut of direct action to undermine. From time to time ministers are emboldened to take a tougher line with protest than might otherwise have been expected; on such occasions, their negative energy suggests an underlying sense of grievance about the need for public protest in general. The frustration of Tony Blair's administration at the anti-war protest mounted over many years in Parliament Square by Brian Haw, that led to legislation specifically designed to remove him, is one example; the same prime minister's whipping up of national anger about a proposed May Day demonstration in central London in 2001 was another. What we see in each case is a playing out of the tension between democracy and civil liberties, which is, in turn, a direct result of this paradoxical necessity for continuing the protection afforded by civil liberties in a country where civil liberties appear to have achieved their goal.

The new climate of anti-terrorism places fresh pressure on this ambiguous approach to extra-parliamentary activity. The breadth of the definition of terrorism in most legal frameworks, already noted as usually going beyond acts of violence, makes it possible for the police and security services to be deployed not only against violent subversives but against those involved in direct action and public protest as well. These expansive readings of the law are not resisted by a political leadership that in its heart of hearts is not clear why, in these truly democratic days, any public protest is really required. So, when the police use their anti-terrorism stop-and-search powers to harass protesters on their way to a demonstration outside an arms fair, as happened recently in the UK, the authorities feel no embarrassment and continue to authorize the laws that have permitted such abuses to occur. Only when publicity becomes really intense, as when the terrorism laws were invoked in 2005 to prevent a member of the Labour Party, who

had been ejected from the party conference for heckling the foreign secretary, from returning to his seat, is there enough anger generated to secure an official apology. The civil libertarian needs to meet this official antipathy to public protest by explaining afresh why the forms of democracy do not mean the end of civil liberties, why public protest is a vital part of good government and why the laws on terrorism should be restricted to the core of serious criminal acts, to which they ought exclusively to refer: murder, manslaughter, causing explosions, and the like — not general destabilizing behaviour, as is often the case today. The civil libertarian needs to be unafraid to argue that instability, inconvenience, disconcerting direct action, and the like, are routes to a better democratic future, not evidence of terrorist subversion.

Political Violence

The final paradox can be more briefly stated than our first two. It flows from both, and its central relevance to contemporary discussion of political freedom will be immediately grasped. The subject of civil liberties presents itself as necessarily involving a rejection of political violence as a matter of principle, but in fact it has in the past depended on exactly this sort of violence, or the threat of it, for its success. This is not only a point about the way in which parliamentary government was established in England, Ireland and the US by means of a successful usurpation of power, backed by the force of arms. It is a reference as well to the political ferment that built up for mass suffrage across the industrialized world in the nineteenth century. It encompasses the politically inspired subversion of the Chartists and the famous willingness of the Suffragettes to engage in subversive violence to achieve their ends. Just as the English parliament of the 'Glorious Revolution' spoke of the need for rights to secure the nation from the disorder



A security man removes 82-year-old Walter Wolfgang after he heckled Britain's Foreign Secretary Jack Straw as he delivered a key note speech during the annual Labour Party Conference on 28 September 2005 in Brighton, England. Photograph: Scott Barbour/Getty Images.

of a failed royal despotism, so, generations later, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 asserted in its preamble that it was 'essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law'.

The civil libertarian needs to be unafraid of remarking that the achievement of political freedom has depended on violence in most countries, and that there are situations of imperial domination or domestic tyranny where even today this is the only progressive option. The language of terrorism needs to be tackled head-on so that it ceases to

be the overarching prohibition on political violence, regardless of context, that it has recently become. Such tackling of fundamentals will make the position of the civil libertarian easier because less defensive. The legacy of the successful subversion upon which the subject of civil liberties is built produces an ambiguous relationship between it and political violence: generally condemning the latter but being quick to ensure that those accused of it receive a fair trial; deploring criminal acts but being ready to accept and defend conduct that is well into the zone of the lawless; complaining about the abuse of police discretion rather than the undeniable fact that a law has been broken; agreeing that inflicting injuries to persons is wrong but being a bit uncertain about property; and being more than willing to describe as merely robust direct action what others would call a criminal mob.

This edge to the subject of civil liberties is what keeps it honest, stops it becoming the handmaiden of power, makes it serve rather than challenge the established (democratic) order. But it does leave civil liberties vulnerable to being tarred with the wrongs of others. The answer is a dual commitment to democracy and the criminal law, with the former being a *sine qua non* for the ruling out of subversive violence and the latter being the best way in which to protect the rights of the majority without destroying individuals and whole communities in the process. The civil libertarian should argue unashamedly for the replacement of the language of terrorism with the language of the criminal law, for a return to policing rather than military metaphors to describe this branch of serious crime. In order to ensure the continued survival of civil liberties as a subject, it needs to be shown successfully that all the threats posed by terrorism can be catered to by the criminal process, invigorated by reform and by a stronger international cohesiveness if needs

be, but criminal (rather than administrative or emergency-based) nevertheless.

Conclusion

It is in the state's recent and growing preoccupation with terrorism that civil liberties as a subject has faced its greatest challenge in the democratic era, with the exposure of all the three paradoxes discussed above combining to impose immense pressure on it. The alleged necessities of counter-terrorism have already compromised the right to life and the prohibition of torture and inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Its demands have also impacted severely on other basic freedoms, such as those of liberty, speech, assembly and association. It would be absurd to claim that civil liberties are dead or dying in the liberal democratic world. But they are certainly under severe attack from a variety of sources; chief amongst these is the idea that the West is engaged in some kind of global 'war on terror' or 'clash of civilizations', which threatens the integrity of the nation in such exceptional and unprecedented ways that exceptional and unprecedented actions are needed to defend it, that (to quote Tony Blair, who has driven so much of the reorientation in this area) 'the rules of the game are changing'.

The health of civil liberties as a subject depends on its being able to balance the tensions that flow from its paradoxical need to provide exceptions to itself, its continued insistence on the legitimacy of extra-parliamentary opposition, and its determination — rooted in its violent history — not to regard all disturbances of public order as inherently wrong. The danger of the counter-terrorism discourse is that it leads to a collapse of all these tensions in the direction of security and away from civil liberties. A tranquil state that is rooted in fear is not a free society. ■