

Introduction

MODERNITY
AND VIOLENCE

We have just ended a century of violence, one possibly more violent than any other in recorded history: world wars and colonial conquests; civil wars, revolutions, and counterrevolutions. Although the magnitude of this violence is staggering, it does not surround us.

The modern political sensibility sees most political violence as necessary to historical progress. Since the French Revolution, violence has come to be seen as the midwife of history. The French Revolution gave us terror, and it gave us a citizens' army. The real secret behind Napoleon's spectacular battlefield successes was that his army was not made up of mercenaries but patriots, who killed for a cause, inspired by national sentiment—what we have come to recognize as the civic religion of nationalism. Reflecting on the French Revolution, Hegel wrote that man was willing to die for a cause of greater value to him than life itself. Maybe Hegel

should have added: man is also willing to *kill* for such a cause. This, I think, is truer of our times than it was in the past.

The modern sensibility is not horrified by pervasive violence. The world wars are proof enough of this. What horrifies our modern sensibility is violence that appears senseless, that cannot be justified by progress.

Such violence gets discussed in two basic ways: in cultural terms for a premodern society and theological terms for a modern society. The cultural explanation always attributes political violence to the absence of modernity. On a world scale, it has been called a clash of civilizations. Locally—that is, when it does not cross the boundary between “the West” and the rest—it is called “communal conflict,” as in South Asia, or “ethnic conflict,” as in Africa.

Political violence in modern society that does not fit the story of progress tends to get discussed in theological terms. The violence of the Holocaust, for example, is explained as simply the result of evil. Like premodern culture, evil too is understood outside of historical time. There is huge resistance, both moral and political, to exploring the historical causes of the Nazi genocide. By seeing the perpetrators of violence as either cultural renegades or moral perverts, we are unable to think through the link between modernity and political violence.

The Modern State and Political Violence

The year 1492 was the onset of the European Renaissance and the birth of political modernity. It is also the year Christopher Columbus set sail for the New World and the year the armies of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella conquered the city-state of Granada, then seen as the last Muslim stronghold in western Christendom.

Thus, 1492 stands as a gateway to two related endeavors: one the unification of the nation, the other the conquest of the world.

The unification of the nation led to the birth of the nation-state. Today, political modernity is equated with the beginning of democracy, but nineteenth-century political theorists—notably Max Weber—recognized that political modernity depended upon the centralized state monopolizing violence. The nation-state centralized the formerly dispersed means of violence into a single fist, capable of delivering an awesome blow to all enemies of the nation, internal and external. It was also the political prerequisite for a civil society.

Europe on the threshold of political modernity thought of the nation in terms of culture and race. In the Spain of Ferdinand and Isabella, the nation was first and foremost Christian. The unification of Spain began with an act of ethnic cleansing: 1492 was also the year Ferdinand and Isabella signed the *Edict of Expulsion*, designed to rid Spain of its Jews. The unified Spanish state gave its Jews a stark choice: baptism or deportation. It is estimated that about seventy thousand Spanish Jews converted to Christianity and remained in Spain, only to be plagued by the Inquisition, which accused them of insincerity. Of the remaining 130,000, an estimated 50,000 fled to the North African and Balkan provinces of the Ottoman empire—where they were warmly welcomed—and about 80,000 crossed the border into Portugal. The expulsion from Spain came at the close of a century that had witnessed the expulsion of Jews from one part of Europe after another. In 1499, seven years after the *Edict of Expulsion*, the Spanish state gave its Muslims the same choice: convert or leave.

So the history of the modern state can also be read as the history of race, bringing together the stories of two kinds of victims of European political modernity: the internal victims of state

building and the external victims of imperial expansion. Hannah Arendt noted this in her monumental study on the Holocaust, which stands apart for one reason: rather than talk about the uniqueness of the Holocaust, Arendt sited it in the imperial history of genocide. The history she sketched was that of European settlers killing off native populations. Arendt understood the history of imperialism through the workings of racism and bureaucracy, institutions forged in the course of European expansion into the non-European world: "Of the two main political devices of imperialist rule, race was discovered in South Africa, and bureaucracy in Algeria, Egypt and India." Hannah Arendt's blind spot was the New World. Both racism and genocide had occurred in the American colonies earlier than in South Africa. The near decimation of Native Americans through a combination of slaughter, disease, and dislocation was, after all, the first recorded genocide in modern history.

The idea that "imperialism had served civilization by clearing inferior races off the earth" found widespread expression in nineteenth-century European thought, from natural sciences and philosophy to anthropology and politics. When Lord Salisbury, the British prime minister, claimed in his famous Albert Hall speech on May 4, 1898, that "one can roughly divide the nations of the world into the living and the dying," Hitler was but nine years old, and the European air was "soaked in the conviction that imperialism is a biologically necessary process which, according to the laws of nature, leads to the inevitable destruction of lower races." Its paradigmatic example was in Tasmania, an island the size of Ireland where European colonists arrived in 1803, the first massacre of natives occurred in 1804, and the last original inhabitant died in 1869. Similar fates awaited, among others, the Maoris of New Zealand and the Herero of German South West Africa.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, it was a European habit to distinguish between civilized wars and colonial wars. The laws of war applied to wars among the civilized nation-states, but laws of nature were said to apply to colonial wars, and the extermination of the lower races was seen as a biological necessity. In *A History of Bombing*, Sven Lindqvist writes that bombing originated as a method of war considered fit for use only against uncivilized adversaries. The first bomb ever dropped from an airplane was Italian, and it exploded on November 1, 1911, in an oasis outside Tripoli in North Africa. The first systematic aerial bombing was carried out by the British Royal Air Force against the Somalis in 1920. In the Second World War, Germany observed the laws of war against the western powers but not against Russia. As opposed to 3.5 percent of English and American prisoners of war who died in German captivity, 57 percent of Soviet prisoners—3.3 million in all—lost their lives. The gassings of Russians by Germans preceded the gassings at Auschwitz—the first mass gassings were of Russian prisoners of war in the southern Ukraine. Russian intellectuals and Communists were the first to be gassed in Auschwitz. The Nazi plan, writes Sven Lindqvist, was to weed out some 10 million Russians, with the remainder kept alive as a slave-labor force under German occupation. When the mass murder of European Jews began, the great Jewish populations were not in Germany but in Poland and Russia, where they made up 10 percent of the total population and up to 40 percent of the urban population "in just those areas Hitler was after." The Holocaust was born at the meeting point of two traditions that marked modern Western civilization: "the anti-Semitic tradition and the tradition of genocide of colonized peoples." The difference in the fate of the Jewish people was that they were to be exterminated as a whole. In that, they were unique—but only in Europe.

This historical fact was not lost on intellectuals from the colonies. In his *Discourse on Colonialism* (1951), Aimé Césaire wrote that a Hitler slumbers within "the very distinguished, very humanistic and very Christian bourgeois of the Twentieth century," and yet the European bourgeois cannot forgive Hitler for "the fact that he applied to Europe the colonial practices that had previously been applied only to the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India and the Negroes of Africa." "Not so long ago," recalled Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), "Nazism turned the whole of Europe into a veritable colony."

The first genocide of the twentieth century was the German annihilation of the Herero people in South West Africa in 1904. The German geneticist Eugen Fischer's first medical experiments focused on a "science" of race mixing in concentration camps for the Herero. His subjects were both Herero and the offspring of Herero women and German men. Fischer argued that "mutatoes," Herero-Germans born of mixed parentage, were physically and mentally inferior to their German parents. Hitler read Fischer's book *The Principle of Human Heredity and Race Hygiene* (1921) while he was in prison and later made him rector of the University of Berlin, where Fischer taught medicine. One of Fischer's prominent students was Josef Mengele, who conducted notorious medical experiments at Auschwitz.

The Native's Violence

The link between the genocide of the Herero and the Holocaust was race branding, which was used not only to set a group apart as an enemy but also to annihilate it with an easy conscience. Historians of genocide traditionally have sketched only half a history: the annihilation of the native by the settler. The revolutionary the-

orist Frantz Fanon has written how such attempts could then trigger the native annihilating the settler. Fanon has come to be regarded as a prophet of violence, following Hannah Arendt's claim that his influence was mainly responsible for growing violence on American campuses in the 1960s. And yet those who came to pay homage to Fanon at his burial hailed him as a humanist. Fanon's critics know him by a single sentence from *The Wretched of the Earth*: "The colonized man liberates himself in and through violence." This was a *description* of the violence of the colonial system, of the fact that violence was central to producing and sustaining the relationship between the settler and the native. It was a *claim* that anticolonial violence is not an irrational manifestation but belongs to the script of modernity and progress, that it is indeed a midwife of history. And last and most important, it was a *warning* that, more than celebrate this turning of the tables, we need to think through the full implications of victims becoming killers.

We find in Fanon the premonition of the native turned perpetrator, of the native who kills not just to extinguish the humanity of the other but to defend his or her own, and of the moral ambivalence this must provoke in other human beings like us. No one understood the genocidal impulse better than this Martinique-born psychiatrist and Algerian freedom fighter. Native violence, Fanon insisted, was the violence of yesterday's victims, the violence of those who had cast aside their victimhood to become masters of their own lives. He wrote:

He of whom they have never stopped saying that the only language he understands is that of force, decides to give utterance by force. . . . The argument the native chooses has been furnished by the settler, and by an ironic turning

of the tables it is the native who now affirms that the colonialist understands nothing but force.

For Fanon, the proof of the native's humanity consisted not in the willingness to kill settlers but in the willingness to risk his or her own life.

To read Fanon is to understand not only the injury that fuels the violence of the native but also the fear that fuels the violence of the settler. Anyone familiar with the history of apartheid in South Africa would surely recognize that it could not have been simply greed—the wish to hold on to the fruits of conquest—but also fear, the specter of genocide, that stiffened white South African resolve against the winds of change blowing across the African continent. That same specter seemingly also haunts the survivors of the Holocaust in Israel, yesterday's victims turned today's perpetrators.

Before 9/11, I thought that tragedy had the potential to connect us with humanity in ways that prosperity does not. I thought that if prosperity tends to isolate, tragedy must connect. Now I realize that this is not always the case. One unfortunate response to tragedy is a self-righteousness about one's own condition, a seeking proof of one's special place in the world, even in victimhood. One afternoon, I shared these thoughts with a new colleague, the Israeli vice chancellor of the Budapest-based Central European University. When he told me that he was a survivor of Auschwitz, I asked him what lesson he had drawn from this great crime. He explained that, like all victims of Auschwitz, he, too, had said, "Never again." In time, though, he had come to realize that this phrase lent itself to two markedly different conclusions: one was that never again should this happen to *my* people; the other that it should

never again happen to *any* people. Between these two interpretations, I suggest nothing less than our common survival is at stake.

9/11

The lesson of Auschwitz remains at the center of post-9/11 discussions in American society. An outside observer is struck by how much American discourse on terrorism is filtered more through the memory of the Holocaust than through any other event. Post-9/11 America seems determined: "Never again." Despite important differences, genocide and terrorism share one important feature: both target civilian populations. To what extent is the mind-set of the perpetrators revealed by the way they frame their victims culturally? Not surprisingly, the debate on this question turns around the relationship between cultural and political identity and, in the context of 9/11, between religious fundamentalism and political terrorism. I have written this book as a modest contribution to this debate. Rather than offer the results of original research, this interpretive essay seeks to explain political events, above all 9/11, in light of *political* encounters—historically shaped—rather than as the outcome of stubborn cultural legacies.

The book is really divided into two parts. The first part consists of a single chapter: chapter 1 offers a critique of the cultural interpretations of politics—what I call Culture Talk—and suggests a different way of thinking about political Islam. It traces the development of different tendencies, including the recent rise of a terrorist movement. The chapters that follow explain how Islamist terror, a phenomenon hitherto marginal, came to occupy center stage in Islamist politics. As such, it provides an alternative interpretation of 9/11. I argue that rather than illustrating a deep-seated clash of civilizations, 9/11 came out of recent history, that of the late Cold War.

I define the late Cold War as lasting from the end of the American war in Vietnam to the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990, with the era of proxy war stretching to the recent war in Iraq. If the war in Vietnam was the last Cold War engagement in which American ground troops directly participated in large numbers, the war in Iraq marks the first post-Cold War American engagement in which that prohibition was fully lifted. Between the two lies an era of proxy wars.

The late Cold War was an era of proxy wars marked by two developments. Both were distinctive initiatives of the Reagan administration's foreign policy. They also point up important similarities between the Reagan and the current Bush administrations, illuminating the mind-set of the "war on terror" after 9/11.

The changes in foreign policy during the Reagan era were responses to the revolutionary overthrow of pro-American dictatorships. The Reagan administration saw these revolutions, particularly the 1979 Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua and the Islamist Revolution in Iran, as setting a trend of reversals after Vietnam. It was against this backdrop that the Reagan administration concluded that America had been preparing to fight the wrong war, that against the massing of Soviet troops on the plains of Europe, which was likely never to take place. Reagan called on America to wage the war that was already on: the war against yesterday's guerrillas who had come to power as today's nationalists, from southern Africa to Central America. The Reagan administration portrayed militant nationalists as Soviet proxies. The shift in focus made for a shift in strategy and a new name: low-intensity conflict. This initiative was the first distinctive characteristic that marked the foreign policy of the Reagan administration.

The second initiative was the shift from "containment" to "rollback," which called for the subordination of all means to a

single end: the total war against the "evil empire." Even though couched in hypermoral language, this venture began as an amoral "constructive engagement" with the apartheid regime in South Africa. As official America held hands with Pretoria, the latter moved to harness political terror as the most effective way to undermine militant nationalist governments in the newly independent Portuguese colonies of Mozambique and Angola. As the battleground of the Cold War shifted from southern Africa to Central America and central Asia in the late seventies, America's benign attitude toward political terror turned into a brazen embrace: both the contras in Nicaragua and later al-Qaeda (and the Taliban) in Afghanistan were American allies during the Cold War. Supporting them showed a determination to win the Cold War "by all means necessary," a phrase that could refer only to unjust means. The result of an alliance gone sour, 9/11 needs to be understood first and foremost as the unfinished business of the Cold War.

To the extent my point of view is shaped by a place, that place is Africa. I was a young lecturer at the University of Dar es Salaam from 1973 to 1979. As the U.S. defeat in Vietnam in 1975 coincided with the collapse of the Portuguese empire, the last European colonial power in Africa, the center of gravity of the Cold War shifted from Southeast Asia to southern Africa. From 1980 when I returned to Makerere University in my hometown of Kampala, Uganda, right up to the end of a three-year stay at the University of Cape Town in South Africa in the late nineties, I participated in ongoing debates about the political violence raging in independent Africa: what were we to make of movements, like Renamo in Mozambique and, increasingly, the Inkatha Freedom Party in

South Africa, that targeted civilian populations rather than military concentrations and became my generation's first experience of political terror? Wary of press and politicians co-opted by the establishment who characterized this form of violence as an unfortunate cultural manifestation—"tribal" "black-on-black" violence—we looked for explanations in the rapidly changing political landscape. On 9/11 I was in New York City where I had moved from Cape Town in 1999. The more I participated in teach-ins and discussions around 9/11, and encountered those who thought it signaled the onslaught of "Islamic terrorism" on the American heartland, the more I was reminded of those cultural explanations I had heard the decade before in southern Africa.

I have no intention of explaining away either political ethnicity or political Islam as the result of a Cold War American conspiracy. Political Islam, like the thinking that champions "tribalism," is more a domestic product than a foreign import. But neither was bred in isolation; both were produced in the encounter with Western power. Political Islam was born in the colonial period. But it did not give rise to a terrorist movement until the Cold War. What particular circumstances made it possible for terrorism to be transformed from an ideological tendency into a political force? There was a common ground that nurtured both "black-on-black" violence in Africa from the mid-seventies and "Islamic terrorism" globally from the early eighties. That common ground was the late Cold War after Vietnam. Even if crafted from local raw material, both political tendencies crystallized as strategies to win the Cold War.

For those worried that I see 9/11 through lenses crafted in an earlier era—the late Cold War in Africa—I can only hope that this perspective will bring fresh illumination to a subject of common concern, without obscuring the ways in which 9/11 has indeed come to mark a turning point for America and the world.

Good Muslim, Bad Muslim

Listening to the public discussion in America after 9/11, I had the impression of a great power struck by amnesia. Acknowledging the epochal significance of the event should not necessarily mean taking it out of a historical and political context. Unfortunately, official America has encouraged precisely this. After an unguarded reference to pursuing a "crusade," President Bush moved to distinguish between "good Muslims" and "bad Muslims." From this point of view, "bad Muslims" were clearly responsible for terrorism. At the same time, the president seemed to assure Americans that "good Muslims" were anxious to clear their names and condolences of this horrible crime and would undoubtedly support "us" in a war against "them." But this could not hide the central message of such discourse: unless proved to be "good," every Muslim was presumed to be "bad." All Muslims were now under obligation to prove their credentials by joining in a war against "bad Muslims."

Judgments of "good" and "bad" refer to Muslim political identities, not to cultural or religious ones. For those who have difficulty thinking of cultural (and now religious) identity as distinct from political identity, don't forget the predicament faced by earlier conscripts of Western power. Was not the secular Jew, first in Europe and America and then in Nazi Germany, compelled to recognize that Western modernity had turned "the Jew" from just a cultural or religious identity to a political one? Was not historical Zionism the response of secular Jews who were convinced that their political choices were limited by this political identity imposed upon them?

There are no readily available "good" Muslims split off from "bad" Muslims, which would allow for the embrace of the former and the casting off of the latter, just as there are no "good" Chris-

tians or Jews split off from “bad” ones. The presumption that there are such categories masks a refusal to address our own failure to make a political analysis of our times. My hope is that this book will contribute to such an analysis as a prelude to framing real choices.

Chapter One

CULTURE TALK;
OR, HOW NOT TO TALK
ABOUT ISLAM AND
POLITICS

This moment in history after the Cold War is referred to as the era of globalization and is marked by the ascendancy and rapid politicizing of a single term: culture. During the Cold War, we discussed socioeconomic or political developments, such as poverty and wealth, democracy and dictatorship, as mainly local events. This new understanding of culture is less social than political, tied less to the realities of particular countries than to global political events like the tearing down of the Berlin Wall or 9/11. Unlike the culture studied by anthropologists—face-to-face, intimate, local, and *lived*—the talk of culture is highly politicized and comes in large geo-packages.

Culture Talk assumes that every culture has a tangible essence that defines it, and it then explains politics as a consequence of that essence. Culture Talk after 9/11, for example, qualified and explained the practice of “terrorism” as “Islamic.” “Islamic terror-