

Terror and Wellbeing

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Document Version
Final published version

Publication date:
2006

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Citation for published version (APA):
Raffnsøe, S. (2006). *Terror and Wellbeing*. Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy, CBS.

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Download date: 15. Oct. 2024



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WP 1/2006

MPP Working Paper No. 1/2006 ©
January 2006
ISBN: 87-91839-13-0
ISSN: 1396-2817

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Ich halte es für wahr, daß die Humanität endlich siegen wird, nur fürchte ich, daß zur gleichen Zeit die Welt ein großes Hospital und einer des anderen humaner Krankenwärter werden. (Goethe til Frau von Stein)

Terror and Wellbeing

Sverre Raffnsøe

At times, the overarching context that binds us together and provides us with a common social frame of reference manifests itself most clearly when we are mindful of our own weak-spots. Where will it hurt most if we ourselves are hit? Where in our society are we so acutely sensitive that the slightest touch will send us reeling?

Currently, it seems that terrorism provides an excellent example of the kind of activity that hits us where it hurts most. This is most prevalent in global reactions to the terrorist attacks on New York, and more recently in Madrid. A comparable sensitivity has its precedent in recent European history, in the form of state and public responses to the politico-ideological terrorism of the *Rote Armée Fraktion* and *Brigate Rossi* in Germany and Italy in the 1970s.

The effects of relatively rare and isolated incidents of terrorism such as these are not to be measured in terms of the material damage they inflict. From the socio-rational point of view, the collapse of two sky-scrapers in New York can hardly be conceived of as a global catastrophe. And to the extent that terrorist activities are perceived to be isolated exceptions to the rule of the well-ordered life of civil society, neither do they pose a realistic threat to the life of the individual citizen as such. The risk of a citizen becoming the victim of such an attack is infinitely small compared to the risk of dying in a traffic accident, without traffic thus similarly becoming an issue of global concern. The most remarkable characteristic of the terrorist attack lies in the reactions that it provokes; the widespread feeling of insecurity, together with an uncertainty about the consequences that the reactions themselves may engender in civil society. By far the most serious and dangerous aspect of the terrorist attack is the symbolic character it acquires. The problem of terrorism in most general terms is, therefore, not simply a case of 'our' having been hit, but rather of 'our' having been hit on the most vulnerable spot in our central nervous system, causing us not simply to react, but overreact.

Terrorism singles itself out as a political action that seeks to shake established sociality and confidence by means of unanticipated acts of violence that strike when least expected precisely where we feel ourselves to be most secure. Thus terrorism challenges more than just the individual lives taken for granted by the citizens of civil society; it also has an impact on the relations existing between individuals and the social institutions that provide for their welfare and regulate their lives.

Terrorism can cause angst and anger among governments and the governed, not simply because it poses a substantial threat to the lives of individual citizens, but as a psychological image of a threatening unease that will never entirely disappear in spite of constant efforts to dispel it. The terrorist attack has an effect on social life not as an isolated event, but by virtue of the deeper currents that it stirs up and the reactions it subsequently provokes.

Terrorist activities take on significance in the public imagination, causing patterns of emotional overreaction, because - on a symbolic level - they challenge the very contract that saturates society; the social contract that is constantly reproduced in and through the welfare society, its institutions and the various forms of social interaction it imbues. This contract is a somewhat nebulous agreement about welfare that manifests itself in a manifold of ways, and through which the 'signatories' collectively agree to provide for one another's welfare and improvement. The contract rests upon the notion that the price we pay for the acceptance of its benefits is the issuing of a relatively comprehensive license to involve ourselves in one another's lives. The contract on social welfare knits us into a network of close, detailed and concrete ties, each of which can be questioned individually, but which collectively can never be simultaneously severed. We agree to maintain and develop this contract by confirming it in and through a whole range of daily activities.

The agreement to extend security and welfare by exercising a covert but indiscriminate form of institutionalised violence, which in its non-institutionalised form proves to be difficult to protect society against, serves to provoke terror. In response, terrorists bring a contract that seems almost all too God-given into sharp focus (as who, in their right mind, wants anything other than welfare and improvement?) – at the same time revealing its arbitrary and precarious status.

Terrorism demonstrates that humankind and the humane are not threatened by external relations alone. From the outset, humankind has been part of and subjected to the caprices of an "inhuman" nature. Throughout its history, mankind has continually tried to combat the threats that nature has posed by working on it, reshaping it and attempting to achieve hegemony over it. Our relation to nature still appears open-ended, a relation we have to reflect upon, among other things, in the ecological sphere. Throughout history, humankind has also lived in and as subject to his own inner nature. The fact that we are part of nature, that we have been allotted a finite life-span and are constantly vulnerable to disease, also serves to threaten our security and welfare. This has been the challenge to medicine throughout the ages.

Terrorism exposes the fact that the social agreement to improve the conditions of the species is threatened from within. It demonstrates that welfare and security can be challenged not just by nature, but by unpredictable social forces that it is difficult to prevent or to inoculate ourselves against. It shows that interpersonal relations contain an ineradicable antagonism that continually threatens to escalate and erupt into violence. It illustrates that the social contract is not just under siege at the hands of

‘external’, contingent natural processes, but can be torpedoed ‘from within’ by endogenous social phenomena in spite of any contractual commitment.

The final menace and challenge to our contract on social welfare might seem to be the most internal and incomprehensible threat of them all. In recent times we have sought to eliminate and socialise this threat against the humane and its social relations by assimilating it into the contract on social welfare. The asocial within the context of the social, however, remains impossible to dispel, constantly assuming new shapes and forms.

The unremitting assault on the existing social contract, which finds its most radical expression in terrorism, has not led as many might assume to its weakening. To the extent that it has never been realised in its purest form, the contract on social welfare is intrinsically flawed, but this fact has not yet led us to consign it to the dustbin of history. On the contrary, in the face of such challenges, it appears as an unfinished project, which must be pursued with renewed energy in order to bring it to fulfilment.

Terrorism does not, however, just reveal a relation in the social fabric that resists internalisation and remains irreducible in relation to the social contract itself. It also serves to reveal a mutual polarisation between the contract and terror; a reciprocal double-reference that leads to a mutual growth and intensification. The efforts to expand welfare and the anxiety that terrorism engenders, reciprocally challenge and reinforce one another, feeding off each other in an ever ascending spiral. The potential evolution of this polarity into a fear of being afraid and the effort to secure security threatens to establish an ever-widening vortex that can spiral out of control, turning the current crisis into a lasting way of life.

Prior to terrorism’s emblematic provocation and re-actualisation of the current social bond, the social contract had already insinuated itself as a monolithic, omnipresent complexity, reaching deep into our individual and collective lives in a detailed fashion of which we are, for the most part, only ever dimly aware, even when discussing the future destiny of the welfare state. It saturates our discourse on economics and civil society. It is the mould in which the rules for all social intercourse, as well as our identities as people, are cast. So deeply entwined and embedded are we in its mesh, forming as it does the unquestioned foundation of the world in which we feel ourselves at home, that we have insurmountable difficulties analysing the very logic that conspires to shape us. Thus we find it difficult to relate with any degree of discernment to that which ultimately determines us.

Across the entire political spectrum, from conservatives and liberals to socialists and populists alike, there is an unarticulated consensus that the main task of the political system is to contribute to and improve our common and individual welfare. Through its concrete institutions, the welfare state provides citizens with a whole range of offers that he or she is unable to refuse. In the face of infirmity and disease, hospitals and the health sector provide us with the prospect of prevention and cure. In the face of unemployment and social difficulties, we are offered membership of unemployment

insurance schemes, employment agencies and benefits. In face of the risk of being involved in unanticipated accidents, we have the opportunity to take out insurance policies that will award us a suitable, proportionate pecuniary compensation. It is thus impossible to avoid the logic of welfare without appearing to be a complete idiot. In the welfare society of today, we can observe the existence of a diffuse but widespread contract concerning mutual care, which has become the single most cohesive element in the social fabric. According to the terms of this contract, we agree to care for all and everyone. In our welfare society, we are currently drawn together into a community by the common aim of the furtherance of humanity, which, in turn, has enabled us to achieve a rich, unprecedented multi-faceted development.

The logic of the welfare society does not, however, allow of a simple reduction to mutual well-meaning care. The price for subscription is the acceptance of the interference of others in our daily lives. And the very fact that - in terms of its actually resulting in a final satisfactory state of affairs - the welfare project is impossible to implement, has not led us to abandon it. On the contrary, it has led us to eternalise it. Thus we reach agreement on a perpetual self-improvement and mutual amelioration; an agreement to “cure one another to death”, while establishing the very crisis we seek to address as a normal state of affairs.

The form of social character insisted on and idealised by the welfare society was already anticipated by Goethe. The contract on welfare presupposes and incorporates a generalised mutual self-sacrifice. In the welfare society, leaders appear to have been appointed the pastoral task of taking care of those they lead. Managers and management exist for the sake of those they are to manage, and are expected to show restraint and self-sacrifice in relation to them. However, even the individual to be managed does not figure as an end in him- or herself. Those who are led are expected to contribute to the welfare project in an accountable fashion, while perpetually and voluntarily surrendering the will to take individual responsibility for their own fate, accepting the advantages that the welfare agreement has to offer while agreeing to let the society determine the general course of their lives. With the welfare society, we have established a general mutual servility, in which no individual enjoys the status of a final end, but in which all are expected to overlook and sacrifice themselves in favour of the general good and a common humanity. Indeed, it could be argued that in the name of common welfare, we enact our own reciprocal deaths and mortification on a daily basis.

When we have first recognised the contours of a pattern of self-sacrifice and self-denial, it becomes virtually omnipresent. It manifests itself in current patterns of organisation and work-place culture in both the public and private sectors, where increasingly more is expected of us in a manifold of ways. Here stagnation is a taboo, and we are all expected to be our own individual small-time entrepreneurs who are constantly willing to adapt in a life-long learning process, both for our own sakes and in accordance with the needs of an ever-changing labour market. We are also expected to demonstrate an affective and total commitment to the company or organisation to which we are attached at any given time. This means that we have to be possessed of the

capacity to imagine the unit of which we ourselves are an integral part; that we – in and through our own activities – are attentive to, contribute to and show devotion to the organisation, not as it is as such, but in respect to the common task of its continued and continual development. This auto-developmental, self-realising and thoroughly demanding task presupposes the continual adaptation, self-regulation, self control and self-denial on the part of each individual, while at the same time leaving the same individual to live in anticipation of a pending integration into a welfare society that has yet to be brought into being. And an organisation and work culture of this character is far more embracing now than ever before. It can seem monolithic, encompassing all our affections, our commitment, and – in the final analysis – our entire existence, subjecting it to the continual pressure of a readiness to adapt.

The meek, well-meaning and empathetic welfare society of mutual care reveals its own merciless intrinsic logic most clearly when its central precepts of welfare and security are most seriously challenged, and its ability to guarantee them is most threatened. In this situation, the obverse side of this logic becomes most apparent, in its sheer intolerance of anything that stands in its way. This relation is revealed most conspicuously in the face of terrorism, whose declared goal is the promulgation of fear. In response to a challenge of these dimensions, the welfare society tends to deviate from a broad range of traditional constitutional principles, tacitly declaring what is tantamount to a state of emergency. Similarly, on a smaller scale perhaps, the welfare society is often prepared to suspend ordinary guarantees of civil rights to certain of its members who are deemed to be abusing the system and exploiting it to their own advantage and in accordance with their own selfish aims. Welfare society, it seems, is ultra-sensitive to anything that impedes it in the business of providing its sacred care. Already in Denmark in the 1930s the race hygiene policies of the Social Democratic government demonstrated the ever-present antinomy at the heart of welfare society; seeking to improve collective and individual life with a programme that authorised the destruction of life. With the totalitarianism of the 20th century, the destructive aspect of the ethos of species - welfare was at its most brutal. The holocaust and the GULag should perhaps be understood less as freak errors and more as a result of political dispositions relating to security.

While the welfare state is a relatively new phenomenon, its roots can be traced deep into a long pre-history. As the introductory quotation illustrates, the outline of the welfare rationale had already been etched in the latter half of the 18th century. The welfare state is an essential part of the Danish and West European cultural heritage that is currently being exported to the rest of the world with the help of international security policies.

There may well be reason to fear the consequences of a generalised state of emergency based on a desire to improve and promote our model of welfare. There is a danger that it will no longer simply be in the health sector that we cure each other to death, but in our social praxis at large, through a perpetual self improvement that neutralises and assimilates everything that threatens us, and - in the long run - perhaps

even death itself. In the process, we risk losing ourselves, as we refashion the world into a huge hospital in which we become one another's nurses. Yet another danger is that we literally run the risk of curing ourselves to death. In our quest to find a cure that can neutralise any external threat, we run the risk of evoking precisely that which our cure is supposed to eradicate. This could well be the consequence of the current overshadowing struggle against terrorism and the states that allegedly fund it, through which certain aspects of the logic of welfare are exported to the far reaches of the globe.