After Brussels Its Time to Challenge our Authorities And Move Beyond Prevent

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27 April 2016

Another year has confronted us with yet another tragedy in another European Capital – Madrid in 2004, London in 2007, Paris last year – and, most recently, Brussels. The litany of such incidents, augmented by countless other atrocities further afield and perpetrated originally by those claiming connections to Al Qaeda but now eclipsed by similarly asserted affiliations to ISIS, seems set to continue. Accordingly, it makes sense for a publication called Sustainable Security to ask what, if anything, has been sustainable about responses to terrorism worldwide since 9/11?

After Brussels, many of the usual suspects with connections to the world of security have been wheeled out as usual to offer advice on the need for ever greater scrutiny at airports. But, having made air-side a challenge to reach through a panoply of checks and scanners, it seemed inevitable to those who understood displacement that attacks would simply migrate to the less scrutinised entrance spaces. We could turn these into fortified complexes too – only for the locus of atrocities to move on again – or we could begin to ask more challenging questions of our authorities.

Of course, none of us wishes to sit next to a deluded individual about to detonate their device on a plane or Metro train. In that regard, security and intelligence gathering are absolutely necessary. But they are clearly not sufficient as, despite the billions spent in hardening private facilities and civic spaces, including transport hubs since 2001, the evidence still serves to remind us that determined individuals – and even a few chancers – will get

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through. It is simply not possible to secure all of society, all of the time. Prevention – in this sense at least – is far too limited a goal.

What's more it has often been the authorities who have ended up 'doing the terrorists' job for them'. To call for three days of national mourning after the latest disasters may seem sensitive to those who lost a loved one – but it flies in the face of the rhetoric of resilience and those who claim the need for a rapid return to normalcy. In that respect, the public often display considerably greater courage by determinedly meeting together for vigils in open spaces, whilst the authorities advise against collective gatherings and look to cancel concerts and sporting events.

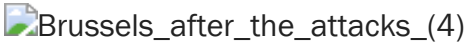
Brussels_after_the_attacks_(4)

Image of Bourse, Brussels after terrorist attacks in March 2016. Image by Romaine via Wikimedia Commons.

There can never be security solutions to social problems. At best, these conceal the underlying challenges that lie ahead. Worse, operational fixations allow those in charge to evade articulating a broader vision for their societies. This latter aspect shapes both the perpetrators – who appear sometimes to almost drift into becoming radicalised through their being disengaged from a world that offers them (and others) little by way of vision or ambition – and the respondents – who are lulled into a phoney sense of knowing what they are doing and why, when in fact they have little appreciation for, or understanding of, the dynamic they seek to redress.

In such a situation, it may indeed only be the public who can maintain a modicum of humanity through their determination – albeit unavoidable in most instances – to get on with life. They are also apparently not so readily fooled by

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the rhetoric of the self-styled 'jihadists' who represent no-one and whose actions in the name of Islam most Muslims deplore, nor by the actions of the authorities who, by securitising the world, hope to make their task easier whilst providing themselves with a flimsy – if largely unconscious – sense of purpose in an age when they seem to lack any other.

But there are others, critical of the authorities, whose narrative and interpretative framework we should be just as critical of and interrogate too. If, as we are often told, alienated individuals in corroded communities in run-down districts have a supposedly understandable sense of grievance – at the racist hostility they encounter, as well as with regards to Western foreign policy – then why is it that not all brought up under such conditions respond the same way, or that the terrorists target civilians, including children as in Lahore, rather than government ministries?

In the aftermath of the Cold War, security increasingly became represented through the prism of human security whereby the referent for security shifted from the state to the individual and, in particular, the latter's assumed existential sense of vulnerability. This, in turn, opened the door to securitisation – the possibility that the state and other actors might transform specific problems into security-related concerns in the pursuit of their agendas. Foremost among these have been the securitisation of health and the securitisation of development. So might there now be a securitisation of education too?

Securitisation allows challenges to be 'constructed as a matter of national security', encouraging a demands for perpetual preparedness, constant surveillance and eternal vigilance. It offers unfocused authorities clear actions to engage in, thereby making 'an uncertain future available to intervention in

the present'. This coincides with the rise of risk management that also readily become an organising framework in periods lacking clear direction. Worse, by promoting an emphasis on procedural management through expert knowledge these both disenfranchise people from the possibility of solving their own problems and allows the authorities 'to become fixated on external threats rather than examining their own internal confusions'.

Another critical factor here appears to be the race to the bottom that best describes identity politics today. The end of the Cold War, and with it the gradual erosion of the politics of Left and Right that had defined it, left a big gap where collective social discourse, debate and deliberation ought to be. It is this hole in values and vision that the use of identity as a claim on resources – particularly through attempts to define particular groups as being the most oppressed or victimised – has sought to fill. Many campaigners have now learnt to play this game. There is evidence to suggest that today's terrorists do so too.

But, rather than challenge such approaches, governments the world over have often indulged the claims and patronised the claimants accordingly. Far better to deal with individuals and groups prostrating themselves to you and making claims for remedy or therapy than having to confront those who are being Bolshie and demanding more. In an age when the authorities are not so sure of whom they are themselves – having sought to disown aspects of their imperialist past to the point of self-loathing and confusion – as well as sensing themselves isolated, it makes for a perfect match.

While campaigners understandably concern themselves with government moves to introduce a Communications Data Bill – the so-called 'Snoopers' Charter', now renamed the Investigatory Powers Bill – what many fail to recognise is the extent to which such a push from above has been facilitated by

erosions to absolute freedom of expression down below. The notion, for instance, that students are vulnerable and need to be protected by the authorities, whilst appearing in the new Prevent Duty, first emerged as the gradual extension of various campaigns for 'no platform', 'safe space' and 'trigger warnings' promoted by Students' Unions across the UK and US.

Prevent is an affront to liberty, not least in its infringements on academic freedom, but the notion that everyday social relations are 'toxic' and ought to be scrutinised by the powers-that-be is entirely mainstream. This latter has served as a mechanism whereby febrile individuals and institutions, as well as directionless authorities have been able to catch up with the popular mood that fears active engagement and robust exchanges of opinion by playing the 'victim card' and looking for protection. Notably, the language is one that presumes a passive, innocent and sponge-like public – young people and others are (it would seem) simply 'drawn into terrorism' by those who groom them, thereby diminishing their agency and, inadvertently, absolving them of accountability for their actions.

At a recent dissemination session I attended relating to the Prevent Duty at which an eager regional coordinator presented upon its trajectory and implications, I was particularly struck by this use of the language of protection. Authorities are merely implementing a 'duty of care' we were advised, for people who might be 'influenced by' ideology. The notion that it might be the specific role of Higher Education to influence young people, or of the state to inspire us all with ideas, was not countenanced. And, ironically for institutions now driven by the need for so-called evidence-based policies, the positivist 'what is' question was replaced by a speculative 'what if'?

As I have also noted elsewhere, we were advised that Prevent had now shifted 'from a moral duty to a legal duty'. In that regards, the presenter, who described themselves (and us) as a practitioner (as opposed to a planner maybe) was at least refreshingly honest. But that we now invoke the law to attempt to prevent terror should alert us more significantly to the failure of the authorities to win the moral argument or to engage their own public. Free speech and privacy are messy matters of course, as is real life. But attempts to shy away from this are worse for us all.

That is the real challenge ahead – one that no amount of legislation or intelligence and security can by-pass. Academics will continue to debate what the real causes of terrorism today are, as well as how best to address these. In the meantime, the authorities, following the cue of a nervous culture and lacking any coherent vision for society of their own have assumed that they know what to do and are acting accordingly through their enthusiastic practitioners.

It is what we want for society beyond the terror and our responses to it that really needs debating.

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