

Looking at Terrorists¹ as Human Beings

by Pat Patfoort

1. Introduction

We are working since more than 25 years on situations of violence and towards nonviolence using the MmE-method, based on the Major-minor or M-m model and the alternative of the Equivalency- or E-model. We worked in many different countries, with many different cultures, and with a large variety of groups, like children, parents and host parents, teachers (of 'regular' schools and of schools with handicapped children), students, nurses and caretakers (in hospitals, homes for elderly people, handicapped people, immigrants), priests and nuns, trade unions, physicians, police departments, ex-drug addicts, delinquent youth, prisoners, guards in prisons, judges, judicial social workers, several inter-ethnic groups (like in Kosovo, in the Caucasus, Hutus and Tutsis), and also rebels in West-Africa.

2. Similarities and differences

We worked with people who did kill other people and people who didn't. There are similarities and differences between both groups.

The most important similarities are :

- 1) In both groups -ourselves included-, when people feel put in a minor-position -that means when they feel humiliated, threatened, attacked, insulted, not respected, dishonoured-, their instinct of self-preservation produces energy to try to get them out of this minor-position. And this is a very positive and healthy thing for all of them. If this doesn't happen, people get into the mechanism of the internalisation, in which they destroy themselves.
- 2) Both groups -still ourselves included- far mostly use the Major-minor model to get out of their minor-position, that means people try to put themselves in a Major-position
 - either against the person who did put them –even unconsciously- in a minor-position : then they get into the mechanism of the escalation;
 - or, in case for some reason they can't put themselves into a Major-position against this person, against any third person they can find to put in a minor-position : then they get into the mechanism of the chain;

Sometimes it also can be considered as a combination of an escalation and a chain : this is when the person they put in a minor-position is a different person from the one who did put them first in a minor-position, but in some way is considered as belonging to the same group (for instance same gender, same nationality, same religion).

- 3) Both groups look for all possible ways and means to put themselves in a Major-position, and to remain in it.

The most important difference between 'criminals' and other people is situated in which kind of ways both use, particularly in relation to the distinction between invisible and visible ways (see fig.1).

¹. The word 'terrorist' is used here in the way people usually consider it in the western world.

The visible ways are the ones which are generally seen as really hurting, as seriously putting people in a minor-position : by contact with the body (hitting with the fist or the foot, slapping, spitting, biting, pulling the hair) or by interposition of an object (a usual object like a bat, a kitchen knife or a bottle; or a weapon, which is an object specially made to put other ones in a minor-position).

The invisible ways are the ones which usually are not seen as really hurting, as seriously putting people in a minor-position : the non-verbal language (attitudes, facial gesture, smiles, intonation, the volume of the voice) and the words. Or at least they officially are considered as hurting less than the visible ones. The proof of this is that they are much less punished, or even not punished at all. This is the case as well on the level of education, when children behave in such ways, as on the societal level, where people who use visible ways get a fine or are put in prison in contrast to the ones using invisible ways are not put in prison, or at least much less. The first kind of people is called an 'aggressive' one, is a 'criminal'. The second one is considered alright.

What is contradictory with this manner of judging and handling these two ways, is that the invisible ones are not necessarily always less hurting than the visible ones. In many cases it's even just the opposite. So it doesn't fit to only consider the visible ways as hurting and violent, and the invisible ones as not violent and acceptable and not punishable and civilised. It's not right that the people using invisible ways are considered as not being violent and are not punished while the people using visible ways are considered as violent and are punished. This distinction is not right but nevertheless is used as a general criterion to put someone in jail or not.

In fact both ways –visible and invisible- are violent. Any way to put oneself in a Major-position is an act of violence, and not necessarily less because it's an invisible way. This distinction between visible/reprehensible and invisible/acceptable originated in the fact that most people only know the Major-minor system (the left column), and don't think there could be another one (the right column). This distinction has been made to have some way out for violence inside of that column. But there is no way out for violence inside of that column. By making it invisible, we don't eliminate or reduce the violence, but only make it less visible and thus often less manageable. On the other hand, when another column shows up, the one of the Equivalency, besides the one of the Major-minor model, then it becomes much more easy to accept that the invisible ways for putting oneself in a Major-position also are means of violence, as well as are the visible ones. Because then we have a way out for violence in that column.

So criminals are much more using visible ways to put themselves in a Major-position, and the so-called 'normal' people are using invisible ways. And how does it happen one uses the one or the other? Everyone tries not to use the visible ones, because everyone knows these are punished in our western mentality. But to be able to do this, one must be able to develop enough invisible ways. The more one has experienced invisible ways and has been trained in them, especially during the childhood, and the less one has experienced visible ways, the more easy it is not to use visible ways, and so to behave in a so-called civilised way. And the more one has experienced the visible ways and one has not been raised with invisible ways, the more chances there are one will use visible ways. This is no excuse at all for criminals, just an observation.

3. The bottleneck of violence

- 1) Wanting to get out of the minor-position is inherent to all human beings, to human nature. The energy for that is produced by our instinct of self-preservation. The bottleneck of violence is not the fact that people want to get out of their minor-

positions. Because there are two different ways to do that, not only the one following the Major-minor model, resulting in violence, but also the one following the model of Equivalency, resulting in nonviolence.

- 2) The problem of violence is also not a question of using invisible or visible ways. Because all of them are hurting, making people suffer.
- 3) The real problem is the fact that people get out of their minor-position by putting themselves in a Major-position, following the Major-minor model.

4. Similarities and differences between different warfare's

We just saw how most of the time people present putting oneself in a Major-position with invisible ways as better than with visible ways, and present it even as acceptable. In a comparable manner, there is another distinction which is often made : the one between so-called 'classic', 'civilised' or 'accepted' warfare, and other ones, like terrorism. And in this case again, most of the time people not waging war in a so-called classic and civilised way are considered as inhuman, monstrous, vile, barbarian. As if war ever could be something which is not inhuman, monstrous, vile and barbarian... There is no good or acceptable way to make war, and other ones. They just all are reprehensible. And the difference between both is surely not that the amount of civilians killed is smaller with the 'classic' war. And, by the way, aren't soldiers human beings too?!

Too often, 'terrorists' are presented as not human. But in fact they are the soldiers of this type of war. So we should compare terrorists with soldiers, not with 'normal' human beings. Terrorists often are considered as inhuman because they kill other people, but soldiers do that too, and not necessarily less civilians than other soldiers, and often a lot of children, directly or indirectly (as refugees for instance, through starving or sicknesses). As suicide-bombers they choose to kill themselves, as part of their religious commitment, or because they want to die for a good cause. How many soldiers in the West didn't give their life just for a flag or for honour? Or by solidarity or being afraid not to be respected anymore (for instance if they would desert). Suicide can be a way of internalisation of violence, so turned against oneself, but can also be a way to get oneself out of ones minor-position. This even can happen in the civilian life : for instance a woman who couldn't find any way to stop the relationship her husband had with another woman, did commit suicide to stop this, what effectively worked out.

The images linked as well to terrorists as to soldiers by their own people are the ones of proud and courageous people, who fight for justice and peace. And each side is judging the own soldiers as courageous vs coward or insane for the other side, strong vs weak, good vs bad. It just depends which side is deciding. But they both use violence, the Major-minor model, in a visible and a more or less organised and numerous ways.

So the question should not be : How do people become terrorists, but how do human beings become soldiers of any kind? Why do our societies produce machines with soldiers and weapons as components? And the answer is still the same : we don't know how to defend ourselves in a different way than the Major-minor way.

The Major-minor principle can be used for both terrorism and 'classical' warfare with two objectives :

- to get oneself out of a minor-position;
- but also, when oneself is already in a Major-position, but one is still feeling frustrated of having been for a long time in a minor-position before, or one is afraid to fall into the minor-position, to put oneself higher and higher in a Major-position (for instance

when one humiliates or tortures prisoners who were part of the group which previously was the dominating group, the previous enemies).

The fact Westerners don't consider terrorism as a kind of warfare, or worse than warfare, makes it often difficult to handle situations of terrorism. For instance, when Osama Bin Laden sends following message on April 15, 2004, through two Arabic radios : "Our actions are a reaction for what you did to us. On March 11 we did kill Europeans because they killed Muslims in Afghanistan and Iraq. If Europe doesn't attack Muslim states anymore then we too shall stop. I offer Europe a truce. And on Sept 11 2001 we killed Americans because they collaborate with the Israeli.(...). We still need to take a revenge for the murder on the Palestinian leader Yassin.", then the president of the European Commission Prodi answers : "How could you react on this statement?! There is no possibility to negotiate under terrorist threat." Yet groups considered terrorists have already been willing to engage in cease-fires, such as the 3 months truce by the radical Palestinian organisations Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Al-Axa Martyrs Brigade started on June 27, 2003. And the U.S. forces attacking Falluja in Iraq ended their assault in April 2004 under an arrangement involving resistance forces they had labelled terrorist.

5. Why?

Human beings have an instinct of self-preservation. So terrorists have an instinct of self-preservation too.

Human beings need to defend themselves when they feel put in a minor-position. So terrorists also need to defend themselves when they feel put in a minor-position.

The instinct of self-preservation makes that human beings produce energy to get out of their minor-positions. So this instinct also makes that terrorists produce energy to get out of their minor-positions.

Most human beings –ourselves included- usually get out of their minor-positions by putting themselves in Major-positions. That's what terrorists do too.

Most human beings –still ourselves included- look for all possible ways and means within their reach to put themselves in a Major-position. Terrorists do that too.

Most of the time people look at the victims of terrorism and at the actions of terrorism, and give only attention to these. These are of course very important. But too often we forget to also give some space in the picture to the terrorists as human beings they are. This is important to be able to situate this kind of conflict in the frame of conflict management. And doing this we can get to a new dimension and a more constructive way of dealing with this kind of conflict.

So why are people using acts of terrorism? Why do they do this? Because they feel put in some strong way in a minor-position, and they don't know how to get out of this position without these ways. They don't know other ways to do it.

6. Strong feelings in a minor-position

On April 18, 2004, I was at my home in Belgium, watching the news on television. I was looking at how 300.000 Palestinians were accompanying the remains of the new leader of Hamas, Abdel Rantisi, who just had been killed by the Israeli army, and this one month after the former leader Sheik Yassin had been killed by the Israeli army, and a few days after the

Israeli prime minister got full support from the American president for his unilaterally decided plan to divide the territory and against which the Palestinians were very angry among other things because they had not been consulted... When I was watching, I deeply could feel the tremendous despair and feeling of impotency underlying the anger of all those people... People in this kind of situations need strongly to get out of their minor-position. When they don't know how to do it otherwise than using the Major-minor system, and the only way they know in the Major-minor system is terrorism, that's how human beings become terrorists. And the deeper they feel put in a minor-position, the harder and the more extreme they will put themselves on their turn in a Major-position, and this for two reasons : first because of the congruent reaction against what happened to them previously, and secondly because the deeper they are the less they have to loose.

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