

In stark contrast to previous terrorist activity, often based around national liberation movements, there seems to be no particular objective behind driving a lorry into a crowd celebrating Bastille Day in Nice, France on July 14th, killing 84 and injuring 308 before being shot by police only 5 minutes after driving onto the promenade. Described as an Islamist terrorist attack, it is hard if not impossible to understand such actions in the same terms as say Irish republican or even Basque separatist activity in the past. Political campaigns of the past have often started with a broader programmatic list of demands a group of people have organised and militated around. Usually a resort to terrorist tactics come out of such campaigns failing to realise their objectives and/or a viewpoint of the terrorist wanting to ignite a wider response by a spectacular or symbolic action or perhaps provoking a terrible crackdown by authorities attempting to crush any opposition.

Following the barbaric attack in Nice, Germany saw the shooting of nine people in a Munich shopping centre, followed by a Syrian refugee blew himself up in the Bavarian town of Ansbach, wounding 12 others. There is little or no connection to many of these recent attacks, or between the attackers, other than what appears to be an exaggerated sense of alienation or displacement. Although not all of such nihilistic attacks are perpetrated by people saying they do them in the name of Islam, Anders Breivik's orgy of killing in Norway in 2011 shows strong similarities in many ways, there is often a recent conversion to the cause of Islamism. The link with Islam is often more through familial background than any real continued devotional behaviour.

Profiles of many recent jihadis would indicate a people who are often well educated, with middle class backgrounds and relatively bohemian lifestyles, far from any devout religious activities. Many perpetrators of these angry actions have petty criminal records, indicating a detachment from the societies they live in and lacking in the respect for community life you might expect from strictly religious and loyal types. So the Islamist tag is on the one hand rather confusing in terms of drive, but often useful in providing a motif rather than motive.

So what possible motive can those described as Islamist terrorists have? Unlike campaigns that do follow a programme or have a series of demands to be realised, the contemporary terrorist activities seem to be wholly nihilistic, born of alienation from any meaningful connection with society more broadly. Indeed, a hallmark of the alienation is often an active desire to break from whatever meaningless connections there are in the short period leading to the attacks. And here is the more difficult aspect of what can be done to weaken the lure of such spectacular demonstrations of the perpetrator's alienation from society.

Society has to find ways of expressing a more positive and future oriented vision of purpose, including economic expansion and political and social integration. The recent era of the politics of technocracy, with the advancement of experts deciding things for us and trying to minimise the role of the demos really does need to be challenged by a renaissance of democracy. In this sense, the EU referendum vote in the UK is a welcome event in the way it has given life to the idea that we can have an impact through collective action, and a positive push back against managerialism in politics. The response by some to dismiss the demos as too stupid or ignorant to be trusted with such a decision is definitely the trend we need to combat.

There's an interesting response in the news today from Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray, France where community leaders in Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray said they did not want to "taint" Islam by having any association with Adel Kermiche, the 19-year-old jihadist who killed Fr Jacques Hamel in his hometown in northern France. Mohammed Karabila, president of the local Muslim cultural association and imam of one of the town's mosques, told Le Parisien: "We're not going to taint Islam with this person. We won't participate in preparing the body or the burial." Whilst I'm not religious, I think any attempt to hold the line in defending civilised values should be applauded.

The campaign to promote and defend civilisation, valuing rather than denigrating the lives of our fellow citizens is a difficult one today, especially when many who you would expect to be doing this are busy trying to circumvent the demos by denigrating their capacity to determine their own voting intentions, future allegiances and taking responsibility for their actions. We are most definitely in a serious struggle for humanity and the battle for ideas has never been so important. This is a battle we can't afford to cede any ground on, and token gestures of involving people in consultation just won't do. There are no easy fixes for nihilism, but we really have no alternative.