THE FEAR OF BARBARIANS

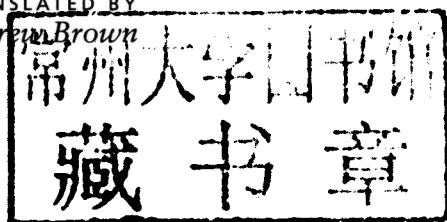## TZVETAN TODOROV

THE FEAR OF BARBARIANS

BEYOND THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS

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In memory of
GERMAINE TILLION
and
EDWARD SAID

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Introduction: Between Fear
and Resentment

The twentieth century was dominated, in Europe, by the conflict between totalitarian regimes and liberal democracies. Following the Second World War, after the defeat of Nazism, this conflict took the shape of a global Cold War, intensified on the margins by various limited 'hot' confrontations. The actors in these were clearly identified. On the one side, the bloc of the Communist countries, extending from East Germany to North Korea, initially dominated by the Soviet Union. On the other side of the 'Iron Curtain' around these countries lay the West, the 'free world', essentially comprising the countries of Western Europe and North America, under the leadership of the United States. Outside this antagonism there was a third actor, a varied assortment of non-aligned countries, politically neutral, called the third world. The Earth was thus divided up on political criteria, even if other characteristics played a role too: the Third World was poor, the West rich, while in Communist countries the army was rich and the population poor (but not allowed to point out this discrepancy).

This situation lasted for over half a century. I was especially aware of it since I was born in Eastern Europe, in Bulgaria, where I grew up before going to live in France when I was twenty-four. It seemed to me that this division of the countries of the world would last forever – or at least until the end of my life. This may explain the joy I felt when, around 1990, the European Communist regimes collapsed one by one. There were no longer any reasons for setting East against West, or for competing in the struggle for world domination: and all hopes were permitted. The old dreams of the great liberal thinkers would finally come true. War would be replaced by negotiation; a new world order could be established, more peaceable than

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the previous world of the Cold War. I do not think I was alone in placing my faith in this desirable development.

Only twenty or so years later, it has to be admitted that this hope was illusory; it does not seem that tension and violence between countries will disappear from world history. The great confrontation between East and West had relegated various kinds of hostility and opposition to the background: these soon started to re-emerge. Conflicts could not just vanish as if by magic, since the deep reasons for their existence were still there; indeed, they were quite possibly becoming even more influential. The world population is continuing to grow rapidly, while the territory on which it lives remains the same size as before, or, indeed, is shrinking, eroded by deserts and threatened by floods. Worse, vital resources – water, energy – are diminishing. In these circumstances, competition between countries is inevitable – and this implies that those who have less will become increasingly aggressive towards those who have more, and the latter will become increasingly worried about preserving and protecting their advantages.

These are permanent features of the landscape, but some new developments have also been occurring. Even though numerous hot spots are still found across the world, sometimes exploding into violence, their action remains limited in space, and no global conflict comparable to the Second World War has broken out for over sixty years. This absence of any major confrontation has enabled a veritable technological revolution to happen peacefully right in front of our eyes; and the latter, in turn, has greatly contributed to the strengthening of contacts between countries in the process known as globalization.

This technological shake-up has affected several different domains, but some advances have had a particularly strong impact on international relations. The most evident concerns communication, which has become incomparably more rapid than in the past, and is also taking many channels. Information is instantaneous, transmitted by both words and images, and it can reach the whole world. Television (and no longer just radio), mobile phones, email, the Internet: once we might have complained about being short of information, but now we are drowning in it. One of the consequences of this change is that the different populations on our planet are spending more time with each other. Words and images are making people more familiar with one another, standardized products circulate across the entire world, and people too are travelling more than ever before. The inhabitants of rich countries go to the lands of the poor to do business or enjoy

a holiday; the poor try to reach the lands of the rich to find work. If you have the means, travel has become much faster.

The intensity of communication and the ever-accelerating familiarity between countries and people have positive and negative effects; but one other technological innovation is a source of nothing but apprehension. This is the ease of access to weapons of destruction, in particular explosives. Anyone and everyone, it now seems, can procure them without difficulty. They can be miniaturized and carried around in your pocket; they are so sophisticated that they can kill tens, hundreds or thousands of people in a single instant. Bomb-making instructions are easily available on the Internet, the products needed to make them are sold in supermarkets, and a mobile phone is all you need to set off an explosion. This 'democratization' of weapons of destruction creates a completely new situation: it is no longer necessary to resort to the power of a state in order to inflict heavy losses on your enemy, since a few highly motivated individuals with even a minimum of financial resources are enough. 'Hostile forces' have completely changed their appearance.

These major technological achievements have had consequences for people's lifestyles, but they have not entailed the immediate disappearance of the old world – obviously, they could never have done so. What they *have* produced, however, is a juxtaposition of contrasts, in which the archaic is found cheek by jowl with the ultramodern. This simultaneous presence of opposites can be found within a single country, as well as between countries. The Russian or Chinese peasant is just as far removed from the way of life found in Moscow or Shanghai as the peasants of the Rif and Anatolia are from the inhabitants of Paris and London. The world of the former is dominated by a 'vertical' communication, ensuring the transmission of traditions; that of the latter, in contrast, is characterized by the force of 'horizontal' tradition, between contemporaries permanently linked to a network. What is striking here is the fact that the two worlds are not unaware of each other: images from both worlds circulate across the whole planet. And they do more than just see each other: ruined peasants leave their lands and make their way to cities in their own countries or, preferably, to cities in rich countries. Global metropolises, found in every continent, contain populations of different origins and, naturally, of extremely varied customs and manners. And thus it is that a *niqab* (veil covering the whole body) can be seen next to a G-string. (But both are forbidden in French schools!)

It is easy to guess at the results this collision between widely differing traditions might well lead to. In some people, it engenders

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envy, or rejection, or both at once; in others, it inspires contempt, or condescension, or compassion. The former have the superiority of numbers, and of a sense of anger, on their side; the latter have technology and sheer might on theirs. The mixture is explosive, and the number of conflicts is on the increase. The map of these conflicts, however, is not the same as that imposed just after the Second World War.

These days, we can separate out the world's countries into several groups, depending on the way they are reacting to these new circumstances. However, they can no longer be distinguished on the basis of political regime, as at the time of the confrontation between Communism and democracy; nor by big geographic divisions, as, for example, between North and South (since Australia is in the South and Mongolia in the North); nor between East and West (since China and Brazil often turn out to be similar); and even less between civilizations. In the eighteenth century, discussing the human passions that stir a society, Montesquieu introduced a notion that he called 'the principle of government': virtue in a republic, for instance, and honour in monarchies.[1] These days, too, a dominant passion or social attitude imbues government decisions as well as individual reactions.

I am fully aware of the risks one runs in schematizing things this way and freezing situations that are necessarily forever changing. Several social passions are always acting together at any one time, and none affects all the members of a population; their very identity is mobile and does not assume the same appearance from one country to another. In addition, the hierarchy between them is forever evolving, and one country can easily pass, in the space of just a few years, from one group to another. And yet their presence is undeniable. To describe this division, I will start out from a typology recently suggested by Dominique Moisi,[2] filling it out a little and adapting it for my own purposes, without forgetting the simplifications it will necessarily entail.

I will call the predominant passion of a first group of countries *appetite*. Their population often feels that, for various reasons, it has missed out on its share of wealth; today its time has come. The inhabitants want to benefit from globalization, consumption and leisure – and they will not skimp on the means needed to achieve this. It was Japan which, several decades ago, first went down this path, and it has been followed by several countries in South East Asia and, more recently, by China and India. Other countries, and other parts of the world, are now setting off down the same road: Brazil, and,

possibly in a not too distant future, Mexico and South Africa. For several years, Russia seems to have been following the same route, turning its defeat in the Cold War into an advantage: its development no longer has to be reined in by ideology; nor does the enrichment of its citizens. The country no longer needs to take part in the competition for world hegemony.

The second group of countries is that in which *resentment* plays an essential role. This attitude results from a humiliation, real or imaginary, allegedly inflicted on it by the countries with the most wealth and power. It has spread, to various degrees, across a good part of the countries whose population is mainly Muslim, from Morocco to Pakistan. For some time, it has also been endemic in other Asian countries or in some countries in Latin America. The targets of this resentment are the old colonial countries of Europe and, increasingly, the United States, held responsible for private misery and public powerlessness. Resentment towards Japan is strong in China and Korea. Of course, it does not dominate everyone's minds or all activities; nonetheless, it helps to structure social life, since, like the other social passions, it characterizes an influential and highly active minority.

The third group of countries is distinguished by the place occupied in them by the feeling of *fear*. These are the countries that make up the West and that have dominated the world for several centuries. Their fear concerns the two previous groups, but it is not of the same nature. Western, and in particular European, countries fear the economic power of the 'countries of appetite', their ability to produce goods more cheaply and thus make a clean sweep of the markets – in short, they are afraid of being dominated economically. And they fear the physical threats that might come from the 'countries of resentment', the terrorist attacks and explosions of violence – and, in addition, the measures of retaliation these countries might be capable of when it comes to energy supplies, since the biggest oil reserves are found in these countries.

Finally, a fourth group of countries, spread across several continents, might be designated as that of *indecision*: a residual group whose members risk falling thrall, one day, to appetite or resentment, but who for the time being are not so affected by these passions. Meanwhile, the natural resources of these lands are being pillaged by nationals originally from the other groups of countries, with the active complicity of their own corrupt leaders; ethnic conflicts spread desolation among them. Certain strata of their population, often wretched, try to gain access to the 'countries of fear' which

are wealthier than their own, in order to enjoy a better standard of living.

I am not really competent to describe in detail each of these groups of countries. I live in France, within the European Union, so in the group designated as being dominated or in any case marked by fear; it is also the only one which I know from inside. I am going to restrict my subject even more, and limit myself to just one of the relations that can be observed here: the relation with countries and populations marked by resentment. My reason for attempting to analyse this particular passion is that it often seems to have disastrous results. The point that I would like to develop can be summed up in just a few words. Western countries have every right to defend themselves against any aggression and any attack on the values on which they have chosen to base their democratic regimes. In particular, they must fight every terrorist threat and every form of violence vigorously. But it is in their interest not to be dragged into a disproportionate, excessive and wrong-headed reaction, since this would produce the opposite results to those hoped for.

Fear becomes a danger for those who experience it, and this is why it must not be allowed to play the role of dominant passion. It is even the main justification for behaviour often described as 'inhuman'. The fear of death that menaces me or, even worse, menaces those who are dear to me, makes me capable of killing, mutilating and torturing. In the name of the protection of women and children (here at home), many men and women, elderly people and children have been massacred (abroad). Those people that it is tempting to describe as monsters have often acted out of fear for their dear ones and themselves. When you ask South African policemen and soldiers why, under apartheid, they killed or inflicted unspeakable sufferings, they reply: to protect ourselves from the menace to our community posed by the blacks (and the Communists). 'We did not enjoy doing this, we did not want to do this, but we had to stop them from killing innocent women and children.'[3] But once you have agreed to kill, you also consent to the next steps: you torture (to obtain information about 'terrorists'), you mutilate bodies (to disguise murders as attempted muggings or accidental explosions): all means are good when victory is the aim – and fear needs to be eliminated.

The fear of barbarians is what risks making us barbarian. And we will commit a worse evil than that which we initially feared. History teaches us this lesson: the cure can be worse than the disease. Totalitarian regimes presented themselves as a means for curing bourgeois

society of its failings; they created a more dangerous world than the one they were fighting against. The current situation is probably not as serious, but it remains disquieting; there is still time to change direction.

The excessive or badly targeted reaction of the countries of fear is manifested in two ways, depending on whether fear is produced on their own territory or on the territory of others. In the latter case, the countries of fear have yielded to the temptation of force and replied to physical aggression by deploying disproportionate military means and waging war. The United States is an exemplary embodiment of this reaction, following the attacks of 11 September 2001, when it intervened directly – or encouraged intervention – in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon. European Union countries generally follow American policies but only reluctantly, grumbling and dragging their feet. These direct military interventions are complemented by what has been called the 'war on terror', responsible, among other things, for illegal detentions and acts of torture, as is now symbolized by the names Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib and Bagram.

Now, this policy leads to a twofold failure. It makes the enemy stronger, and it makes us weaker. This is first and foremost because the aggression to which it is a response is not a matter of states but of individuals (temporarily protected, admittedly, by the Afghan Taliban when the latter were in power) who cannot be reached by massive bombings or army occupation. But it is also because what we have here is a resentment and vengeance born of humiliation, which cannot be eliminated by inflicting a new military defeat on a country – quite the opposite. The American Army or its allies may destroy the enemy armies, but in so doing they merely stoke the resentment of the population, which is the real source of the initial aggression. The tortures inflicted also feed into the desire for vengeance. The individuals responsible for anti-Western attacks live with the feeling that their passions are just, and their ideas true; now, as Pascal said 350 years ago, 'violence and truth have no power over each other'.[4] In addition, this policy destroys the Western world from within, since, in order to defend the democratic values that we cherish, we are led to abandon them! How can we rejoice in our victory over a horrendous enemy if, in order to vanquish him, we have had to become like him?

When 'all is permitted' in the fight against terror, a counter-terrorist starts to become indistinguishable from the initial terrorist. Furthermore, all the terrorists in the world think they are counter-terrorists,

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merely responding to a prior act of terror. They are not the only ones: it is always possible, and easy, to find a prior violence that supposedly justifies our present violence. But, on this way of reckoning, war will never end.

These criticisms of the reaction of the American government to the aggressions its country has suffered do not proceed from any alleged anti-Americanism. On the contrary, they are part and parcel of a debate within the United States itself, and are motivated by the increasing gap between the ideals proclaimed and what actually happens in real life. On the political level, the decisions made by the United States are not all that different from those which many other countries would have made. However, they draw attention to themselves much more, and attract more criticism since, on the military level, the US occupies an altogether exceptional position. Its destructive arsenal is incomparably greater than all others, and there are fewer obstacles to its use: every other country fears the reaction of the United States. It is the high efficiency of US military technology that makes it the most dangerous country – for the others, but for itself as well: its nuclear weapons could endanger the life of the whole planet.

Inside Western and, in particular, European countries, where for several decades a significant minority of people from the 'countries of resentment' has lived, we also find situations that illustrate how the cure is worse than the malady. This minority practises a religion – Islam – different from that of the majority; and, above all, in the way its social life is organized, this minority gives religion a place it does not hold in contemporary liberal democracies of any stripe. The result, across a whole series of issues affecting everyday life, is friction between different sectors of the population. How can this friction be lessened? It is here that we encounter an unfortunate reaction, namely 'firmness', a euphemism for intolerance.

Nobody is entirely satisfied with the conditions in which he or she lives: we often have the impression that these conditions are getting worse. Whose fault is this? It is tempting to seek a simple answer and an easily identifiable guilty person or group: it is this temptation that produces populist movements and parties. The populism of the left replies: it's the fault of the rich; we need to get hold of their goods and distribute them to the poor. The populism of the right defends, not a social class, but a nation, and replies to the same question with the answer: it's all the foreigners' fault. Xenophobia constitutes the minimum programme of the parties of the extreme right, who have been obliged to abandon their other favourite themes (anti-

Communism and racism). For several years, these parties have increased their audience in a good half of the member states of the European Union. Nowhere do they play first fiddle but, here and there, they have become indispensable to the coalitions in power. If the latter want to remain in power, they need to satisfy the demands of the extreme right when it comes to immigration and cohabitation – otherwise they risk losing electors' votes.

This general xenophobia is strengthened by what has to be called Islamophobia, even if this term is sometimes used improperly. The two forms of rejection overlap only partially: Islamophobia concerns only one kind of immigrant, but it does not stop at a country's frontiers; nevertheless, most immigrants in Europe today are indeed of Muslim origin. Now, attacking immigrants is not politically correct, whereas criticizing Islam is perceived as an act of courage; so the latter can be found in place of the former.

There are many reasons, some of them very longstanding, why Europeans reject Islam. Islam long appeared to be a rival to Christianity. Today, it embodies a form of religiosity from which Europeans have taken a long time to free themselves: the secular-minded thus reject it even more violently than do Christians. Muslim countries were colonized by European powers over several centuries; ex-colonists were forced to return home when decolonization occurred, filled with a feeling of both superiority and bitterness. Members of the formerly colonized populations are now coming to settle in the homes of their former colonizers, though not as colonists: how can this not lead to hostility towards them? Add to this the resentment felt by those former colonized and new immigrants or their, by now European, descendants – a resentment that impels them to set off bombs in London and Madrid, Berlin and Paris: the danger they represent is not just imaginary. Finally, geographical (and geological) chance has meant that several of these Muslim countries hold the planet's main energy reserves. As the cost of petrol, or the bill for keeping one's house heated, increases, being dependent on people one used to rule is painful.

All of these reasons, and a few others too, no doubt, mean that the criminal, or shocking, acts committed by certain Muslims are explained by their identity as belonging to a certain religion and even as being originally nationals of certain countries. On the basis of this generalization, it becomes easy, by lumping things together in succession, to introduce into the public debate a discourse of stigmatization that is not suffered by any other group. Media personalities declare, pretty much on all sides, that Islam glories in hatred and

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violence, that it is also the stupidest religion in the world, that the children of immigrants speak broken French, and that one should be proud of being islamophobic. In the Netherlands, a flamboyant populist, Pim Fortuyn, published *Against the Islamization of Our Culture*; shortly after his assassination (by a true-born Dutchman), the party he had founded won 17 per cent of the seats in parliament. Filip Dewinter, the leader of the Flemish Interest party in Belgium, declared, 'Islam is the enemy number one, not only of Europe but of the whole free world.' Experts on Islam, who suddenly popped up all over the place, were all too glad to explain to the media that Islam is intrinsically wicked and needs to be fought. The *effect of* this hostile atmosphere? Those who claim a Muslim identity feel rejected by the society in which they live, and take refuge a little more in their real or imagined traditions.

Neither international relations nor relations between groups of the population inside a single country can be made harmonious by waving a magic wand. The causes of friction or hostility are often real, and do not result from mere misunderstandings. However, I do not think that we can reach any worthwhile results by waging war abroad and fomenting intolerance at home. But we should not pretend that the world is a rose garden, or stop actively combating terrorist threats. Resort to armed force cannot be eliminated from the relations between nations or groups of nations, but it requires a much more subtle analysis of each individual situation. On the other hand, democracy does not definitively suppress inner conflicts, but gives us the means to manage them in a peaceful way.

The military interventions of these last few years have not brought the hoped-for results. The same could probably be said of the war on Iran that Western leaders envisaged in their speeches starting in 2007. The choice of a different course of action would in no way mitigate any negative verdict on a theocratic regime, on its policing of morals and its attacks on press freedom, on the conditions of detention in the prisons of Iran or the provocative declarations made by its president. Nevertheless, rather than tagging along after the neo-conservatives of Washington, the European Union should in this regard set an example, hoping that the United States will fall in behind it.

Renouncing intolerance does not mean that *everything* needs to be tolerated. In order to be credible, an appeal to tolerance has to start out from an intransigent consensus about what, in a society, is considered as intolerable. It is usually the laws of a country that define this basis, together with certain moral and political values that are