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# The Violence of the Global [1]

[Jean Baudrillard](#)

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Today's terrorism is not the product of a traditional history of anarchism, nihilism, or fanaticism. It is instead the contemporary partner of globalization. To identify its main features, it is necessary to perform a brief genealogy of globalization, particularly of its relationship to the singular and the universal.

The analogy between the terms "global" [2] and "universal" is misleading. Universalization has to do with human rights, liberty, culture, and democracy. By contrast, globalization is about technology, the market, tourism, and information. Globalization appears to be irreversible whereas universalization is likely to be on its way out. At least, it appears to be retreating as a value system which developed in the context of Western modernity and was unmatched by any other culture. Any culture that becomes universal loses its singularity and dies. That's what happened to all those cultures we destroyed by forcefully assimilating them. But it is also true of our own culture, despite its claim of being universally valid. The only difference is that other cultures died because of their singularity, which is a beautiful death. We are dying because we are losing our own singularity and exterminating all our values. And this is a much more ugly death.

We believe that the ideal purpose of any value is to become universal. But we do not really assess the deadly danger that such a quest presents. Far from being an uplifting move, it is instead a downward trend toward a zero degree in all values. In the Enlightenment, universalization was viewed as unlimited growth and forward progress. Today, by contrast, universalization exists by default and is expressed as a forward escape, which aims to reach the most minimally common value. This is precisely the fate of human rights, democracy, and liberty today. Their expansion is in reality their weakest expression.

Universalization is vanishing because of globalization. The globalization of exchanges puts an end to the universalization of values. This marks the triumph of a uniform thought [3] over a universal one. What is globalized is first and foremost the market, the profusion of exchanges and of all sorts of products, the perpetual flow of money. Culturally, globalization gives way to a

promiscuity of signs and values, to a form of pornography in fact. Indeed, the global spread of everything and nothing through networks is pornographic. No need for sexual obscenity anymore. All you have is a global interactive copulation. And, as a result of all this, there is no longer any difference between the global and the universal. The universal has become globalized, and human rights circulate exactly like any other global product (oil or capital for example).

The passage from the universal to the global has given rise to a constant homogenization, but also to an endless fragmentation. Dislocation, not localization, has replaced centralization. Excentricism, not decentralization, has taken over where concentration once stood. Similarly, discrimination and exclusion are not just accidental consequences of globalization, but rather globalization's own logical outcomes. In fact, the presence of globalization makes us wonder whether universalization has not already been destroyed by its own critical mass. It also makes us wonder whether universality and modernity ever existed outside of some official discourses or some popular moral sentiments. For us today, the mirror of our modern universalization has been broken. But this may actually be an opportunity. In the fragments of this broken mirror, all sorts of singularities reappear. Those singularities we thought were endangered are surviving, and those we thought were lost are revived.

As universal values lose their authority and legitimacy, things become more radical. When universal beliefs were introduced as the only possible culturally mediating values, it was fairly easy for such beliefs to incorporate singularities as modes of differentiation in a universal culture that claimed to champion difference. But they cannot do it anymore because the triumphant spread of globalization has eradicated all forms of differentiation and all the universal values that used to advocate difference. In so doing, globalization has given rise to a perfectly indifferent culture. From the moment when the universal disappeared, an omnipotent global techno-structure has been left alone to dominate. But this techno-structure now has to confront new singularities that, without the presence of universalization to cradle them, are able to freely and savagely expand.

History gave universalization its chance. Today though, faced with a global order without any alternative on the one hand and with drifting insurrectionary singularities on the other, the concepts of liberty, democracy, and human rights look awful. They remain as the ghosts of universalization past. Universalization used to promote a culture characterized by the concepts of transcendence, subjectivity, conceptualization, reality, and representation. By contrast, today's virtual global culture has replaced universal concepts with screens, networks, immanence, numbers, and a space-time continuum without any depth. [4] In the universal, there was still room for a natural reference to the world, the body, or the past. There was a sort of dialectical tension or critical movement that found its materiality in historical and revolutionary violence. But the expulsion of this critical negativity opened the door to another form of violence, the violence of the global. This new violence is characterized by the supremacy of technical efficiency and positivity, total organization, integral circulation, and the equivalence of all exchanges. Additionally, the violence of the global puts an end to the social

role of the intellectual (an idea tied to the Enlightenment and universalization), but also to the role of the activist whose fate used to be tied to the ideas of critical opposition and historical violence.

Is globalization fatal? Sometimes cultures other than ours were able to escape the fatality of the indifferent exchange. Today though, where is the critical point between the universal and the global? Have we reached the point of no return? What vertigo pushes the world to erase the Idea? And what is that other vertigo that, at the same time, seems to force people to unconditionally want to realize the Idea?

The universal was an Idea. But when it became realized in the global, it disappeared as an Idea, it committed suicide, and it vanished as an end in itself. Since humanity is now its own immanence, after taking over the place left by a dead God, the human has become the only mode of reference and it is sovereign. But this humanity no longer has any finality. Free from its former enemies, humanity now has to create enemies from within, which in fact produces a wide variety of inhuman metastases.

This is precisely where the violence of the global comes from. It is the product of a system that tracks down any form of negativity and singularity, including of course death as the ultimate form of singularity. It is the violence of a society where conflict is forbidden, where death is not allowed. It is a violence that, in a sense, puts an end to violence itself, and strives to establish a world where anything related to the natural must disappear (whether it is in the body, sex, birth, or death). Better than a global violence, we should call it a global virulence. This form of violence is indeed viral. It moves by contagion, proceeds by chain reaction, and little by little it destroys our immune systems and our capacities to resist.

But the game is not over yet. Globalization has not completely won. Against such a dissolving and homogenizing power, heterogeneous forces -- not just different but clearly antagonistic ones -- are rising everywhere. Behind the increasingly strong reactions to globalization, and the social and political forms of resistance to the global, we find more than simply nostalgic expressions of negation. We find instead a crushing revisionism vis-à-vis modernity and progress, a rejection not only of the global techno-structure, but also of the mental system of globalization, which assumes a principle of equivalence between all cultures. This kind of reaction can take some violent, abnormal, and irrational aspects, at least they can be perceived as violent, abnormal, and irrational from the perspective of our traditional enlightened ways of thinking. This reaction can take collective ethnic, religious, and linguistic forms. But it can also take the form of individual emotional outbursts or neuroses even. In any case, it would be a mistake to berate those reactions as simply populist, archaic, or even terrorist. Everything that has the quality of event these days is engaged against the abstract universality of the global, [5] and this also includes Islam's own opposition to Western values (it is because Islam is the most forceful contestation of those values that it is today considered to be the West's number one enemy).

Who can defeat the global system? Certainly not the anti-globalization movement whose sole objective is to slow down global deregulation. This movement's political impact may well be important. But its symbolic impact is worthless. This movement's opposition is nothing more than an internal matter that the dominant system can easily keep under control. Positive alternatives cannot defeat the dominant system, but singularities that are neither positive nor negative can. Singularities are not alternatives. They represent a different symbolic order. They do not abide by value judgments or political realities. They can be the best or the worst. They cannot be "regularized" by means of a collective historical action. [6] They defeat any uniquely dominant thought. Yet they do not present themselves as a unique counter-thought. Simply, they create their own game and impose their own rules. Not all singularities are violent. Some linguistic, artistic, corporeal, or cultural singularities are quite subtle. But others, like terrorism, can be violent. The singularity of terrorism avenges the singularities of those cultures that paid the price of the imposition of a unique global power with their own extinction.

We are really not talking about a "clash of civilizations" here, but instead about an almost anthropological confrontation between an undifferentiated universal culture and everything else that, in whatever domain, retains a quality of irreducible alterity. From the perspective of global power (as fundamentalist in its beliefs as any religious orthodoxy), any mode of difference and singularity is heresy. Singular forces only have the choice of joining the global system (by will or by force) or perishing. The mission of the West (or rather the former West, since it lost its own values a long time ago) is to use all available means to subjugate every culture to the brutal principle of cultural equivalence. Once a culture has lost its values, it can only seek revenge by attacking those of others. Beyond their political or economic objectives, wars such as the one in Afghanistan [7] aim at normalizing savagery and aligning all the territories. The goal is to get rid of any reactive zone, and to colonize and domesticate any wild and resisting territory both geographically and mentally.

The establishment of a global system is the result of an intense jealousy. It is the jealousy of an indifferent and low-definition culture against cultures with higher definition, of a disenchanting and de-intensified system against high intensity cultural environments, and of a de-sacralized society against sacrificial forms. According to this dominant system, any reactionary form is virtually terrorist. (According to this logic we could even say that natural catastrophes are forms of terrorism too. Major technological accidents, like Chernobyl, are both a terrorist act and a natural disaster. The toxic gas leak in Bhopal, India, another technological accident, could also have been a terrorist act. Any plane crash could be claimed by any terrorist group too. The dominant characteristic of irrational events is that they can be imputed to anybody or given any motivation. To some extent, anything we can think of can be criminal, even a cold front or an earthquake. This is not new. In the 1923 Tokyo earthquake, thousands of Koreans were killed because they were thought to be responsible for the disaster. In an intensely integrated system like ours, everything can have a similar effect of destabilization. Everything drives toward the failure of a system that claims to be infallible. From our point of view, caught as we are inside the rational and programmatic controls of this system, we could even think that the worst

catastrophe is actually the infallibility of the system itself.) Look at Afghanistan. The fact that, inside this country alone, all recognized forms of "democratic" freedoms and expressions -- from music and television to the ability to see a woman's face -- were forbidden, and the possibility that such a country could take the totally opposite path of what we call civilization (no matter what religious principles it invoked), were not acceptable for the "free" world. The universal dimension of modernity cannot be refused. From the perspective of the West, of its consensual model, and of its unique way of thinking, it is a crime not to perceive modernity as the obvious source of the Good or as the natural ideal of humankind. It is also a crime when the universality of our values and our practices are found suspect by some individuals who, when they reveal their doubts, are immediately pegged as fanatics.

Only an analysis that emphasizes the logic of symbolic obligation can make sense of this confrontation between the global and the singular. To understand the hatred of the rest of the world against the West, perspectives must be reversed. The hatred of non-Western people is not based on the fact that the West stole everything from them and never gave anything back. Rather, it is based on the fact that they received everything, but were never allowed to give anything back. This hatred is not caused by dispossession or exploitation, but rather by humiliation. And this is precisely the kind of hatred that explains the September 11 terrorist attacks. These were acts of humiliation responding to another humiliation.

The worst that can happen to global power is not to be attacked or destroyed, but to suffer a humiliation. Global power was humiliated on September 11 because the terrorists inflicted something the global system cannot give back. Military reprisals were only means of physical response. But, on September 11, global power was symbolically defeated. War is a response to an aggression, but not to a symbolic challenge. A symbolic challenge is accepted and removed when the other is humiliated in return (but this cannot work when the other is crushed by bombs or locked behind bars in Guantanamo). The fundamental rule of symbolic obligation stipulates that the basis of any form of domination is the total absence of any counterpart, of any return. [8] The unilateral gift is an act of power. And the Empire of the Good, the violence of the Good, is precisely to be able to give without any possible return. This is what it means to be in God's position. Or to be in the position of the Master who allows the slave to live in exchange for work (but work is not a symbolic counterpart, and the slave's only response is eventually to either rebel or die). God used to allow some space for sacrifice. In the traditional order, it was always possible to give back to God, or to nature, or to any superior entity by means of sacrifice. That's what ensured a symbolic equilibrium between beings and things. But today we no longer have anybody to give back to, to return the symbolic debt to. This is the curse of our culture. It is not that the gift is impossible, but rather that the counter-gift is. All sacrificial forms have been neutralized and removed (what's left instead is a parody of sacrifice, which is visible in all the contemporary instances of victimization).

We are thus in the irremediable situation of having to receive, always to receive, no longer from God or nature, but by means of a technological mechanism of generalized exchange and common gratification. Everything is virtually given to us, and, like it or not, we have gained a

right to everything. We are similar to the slave whose life has been spared but who nonetheless is bound by a non-repayable debt. This situation can last for a while because it is the very basis of exchange in this economic order. Still, there always comes a time when the fundamental rule resurfaces and a negative return inevitably responds to the positive transfer, when a violent abreaction to such a captive life, such a protected existence, and such a saturation of being takes place. This reversion can take the shape of an open act of violence (such as terrorism), but also of an impotent surrender (that is more characteristic of our modernity), of a self-hatred, and of remorse, in other words, of all those negative passions that are degraded forms of the impossible counter-gift.

What we hate in ourselves -- the obscure object of our resentment -- is our excess of reality, power, and comfort, our universal availability, our definite accomplishment, this kind of destiny that Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor had in store for the domesticated masses. And this is exactly the part of our culture that the terrorists find repulsive (which also explains the support they receive and the fascination they are able to exert). Terrorism's support is not only based on the despair of those who have been humiliated and offended. It is also based on the invisible despair of those whom globalization has privileged, on our own submission to an omnipotent technology, to a crushing virtual reality, to an empire of networks and programs that are probably in the process of redrawing the regressive contours of the entire human species, of a humanity that has gone "global." (After all, isn't the supremacy of the human species over the rest of life on earth the mirror image of the domination of the West over the rest of the world?). This invisible despair, our invisible despair, is hopeless since it is the result of the realization of all our desires.

Thus, if terrorism is derived from this excess of reality and from this reality's impossible exchange, if it is the product of a profusion without any possible counterpart or return, and if it emerges from a forced resolution of conflicts, *the illusion of getting rid of it as if it were an objective evil is complete.* [9] For, in its absurdity and non-sense, terrorism is our society's own judgment and penalty.

## Notes

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[1] Initially published as "La Violence du Mondial," in Jean Baudrillard, *Power Inferno* (Paris: Galilée, 2002), pp. 63-83.

[2] "Mondial" is the French term for "global" in the original text.

[3] "Pensée unique" in French.

[4] "Espace-temps sans dimension" in French.

[5] "Contre cette universalité abstraite" in French.

[6] "On ne peut pas les fédérer dans une action historique d'ensemble" in French.

[7] Baudrillard refers here to the US war against Afghanistan in the Fall of 2001 in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks.

[8] "L'absence de contrepartie" in French.

[9] Emphasis in original text.

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Jean Baudrillard is an internationally acclaimed theorist whose writings trace the rise and fall of symbolic exchange in the contemporary century. In addition to a wide range of highly influential books from *Seduction to Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Baudrillard's most recent publications include: *The Vital Illusion*, *The Spirit of Terrorism* and *The Singular Objects of Architecture*. He is a member of the editorial board of CTheory.

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