

The Nice Terror Attack: Mind at the end of its Tether
by Howard Richards
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Although it is less than 24 hours since the truck attack in Nice people are already drawing conclusions, not so much from the few facts that are already known about it as from the pattern of facts that what is already known fits. Just a month ago in Paris a self-identified jihadist named Larossi Abballa used a knife to kill a police couple, a policeman and a policewoman. Now a man reported to have been shouting “Allahu Akbar” (“God is greatest”) uses a truck to attack crowds celebrating France’s national holiday. Etc. Newt Gingrich has already commented that if we do not change the rules we will lose the war. Donald Trump tweets, “When will we learn?”

OK. But what rules should we change? What are we supposed to learn? France’s president François Hollande has announced that in response to Nice France will drop more bombs on Syria and on Iraq. Apparently Hollande wants to be viewed as taking action to do something about the problem, and bombing was what he could think of on the spur of the moment.

Let me suggest that Nice is an opportunity to work on learning what we should be trying to learn anyway: how to live in peace with one another. As Baruch Spinoza pointed out in 1677 –and it was already old news then—anybody can kill anybody. Nice reminds us that the path to peace necessarily is a path through hearts and minds.

The question how to live in peace with one another has an old and good answer, which I think I have a right to state briefly because I have already in numerous published works stated it at length. I will not state in my own words but rather in those of Juan Jose Asenjo, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Seville: Peace is a table with four legs. The four legs are justice, justice, justice, and justice.

Now here is the point where the Nice truck attack brings the mind to the end of its tether: When the mind –I mean the average mind of our fellow earthlings as I read it-- thinks about justice it thinks about law enforcement. The police are supposed to prevent violence by enforcing the law and to bring those who commit violence to justice by arresting them so they can be put on trial. Nice dramatizes the fact that peace through law enforcement is not feasible. Anybody can kill people with a truck, and there is no way to deploy police everywhere to stop that from happening.

What Nice dramatizes can and should be put in terms more general than the threat of radical Islam. Race relations in the USA are equally relevant. Drug gangs in the favelas of Brazil and in the barrios of Mexico are equally relevant. So is ethnic violence in Africa and in Asia. On the surface the tense atmosphere around the world everywhere is like the tense atmosphere in a California jail: everything is about race. A bit below the surface everything is about justice, or rather injustice. It is about anger that begins as deep resentment against injustice experienced as humiliation, and develops as rage dreaming of revenge.

I have not yet fully explained why Nice brings the modern mind to the end of its tether. At one level it is because it is becoming obvious that the police cannot stop the violence. Questions about what the police should or should not do cease to be questions whose answers count as solutions to the problems. Police policy issues about gun control and police profiling of suspects, for example, fade into the background when trucks become weapons. It becomes clearer and clearer that any and all of the world’s countless sick souls twisted and ignited by suffering and rejection have it within their power to act out their violent fantasies.

But there is another deeper level. The police never were expected to create law and order by sheer brute force. In the words of Professor James Brierly it is not the repressive power of the police that establishes the law but rather the moral strength of the law that makes it possible to establish a police force in the first place.

This is where mind is really at the end of its tether. Thinking has a long way to go to catch up to reality. The task of peace education has barely begun. The mind of our times, the mind of the majority, is not yet ready to understand that the civil law that provides the legal framework for capitalism is not a formula for including the excluded. It does not bring the marginal in from the

margins. It is a formula for comforting the comfortable. It protects property. It is justice for the haves. It is not justice for the have-nots. It is the justice of the suburbs. It brings no justice to the ghetto. It brings no justice to the banlieues of Europe where millions of immigrants and children of immigrants from the Middle East, Africa and Asia compete for scarce and low-paying jobs with their whiter hosts.

The justice required has other names: distributive justice, social justice, social integration. These broader senses of justice -- closer to Plato and farther from the law that in Victor Hugo's famous words punishes alike the rich and the poor for sleeping under bridges and for stealing bread - are no doubt what the Bishop of Seville had in mind when he said that justice, justice, justice, and justice were the pillars of peace.

If peace were already established by institutions that functioned reasonably well to meet everybody's needs in harmony with the natural environment, then the police could succeed reasonably well in maintaining order, or at least in keeping disorder from getting out of hand. But the police cannot establish peace. By the same token neither can the army. And neither can "justice" as justice is conceived by average advocates of law and order. Let us hope that this new proof of the need to study peace and to learn peace, written in blood on the Boulevard des Anglais, will be read for it truly is, and not misread as one more reason to keep the poor down by force.

Howard Richards, 15 July 2016