

## IF MEN DEFINE SITUATIONS AS REAL THEY ARE REAL IN THEIR CONSEQUENCES

Review of Adam Zamoyski. 2014. *Phantom Terror: The Threat of Revolution and the Repression of Liberty 1789-1848*. London: William Collins

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The true initiate is he who knows that the most powerful secret is a secret without content, because no enemy will be able to make him confess it, no rival devotee will be able to take it from him.

Umberto Eco. Foucault's pendulum

The so-called Thomas theorem would probably best define Adam Zamoyski's book. In a history of the years between 1789 and 1848, he shows how the fear of revolution and the belief that there was an organized conspiracy to overthrow the governments of the day shaped the contemporary politics. It shows how the search for this phantom conspiracy and phantom revolution led to the development of the contemporary surveillance state<sup>1</sup> with the rulers determined to get into the heads of their subjects and to deal with the potential subversion before it happened.

The book is beautifully written, its sombre topic diffused by the sarcastic style of the author. It is full of amusing anecdotes about the leaders of the times and their subjects, and paints a picture of the forces of order of the times which would strongly resemble a caricature if it was not based on true facts and real, well-researched events. At the same time, the events described are rather tragicomic. The eagerness to please (and thus to uncover as many 'plots' as possible) and the blunders of 'secret agents'

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<sup>1</sup> The subtitle of hardcover edition reads 'Political Paranoia and the creation of modern state 1789-1848' which is another good representation of the author's intent.

stifled legitimate protest, suppressed some political ideas and landed people in jails or even gallows for largely imaginary crimes.

The inability of the people, both the leaders and the followers, to deal with the contingency of events that followed the storming of the Bastille is palpable throughout the book. In order to make sense of what was going on, they tended to resort to conspiracy theories and to see behind any discontent the hand of Illuminati or the *Comité Directeur*.<sup>2</sup> The author challenges their views by providing an impressive amount of factual details on the events of these sixty years, showing clearly the contingent nature of their occurrence.

It is very salutary to read this type of history, which clearly challenges traditional linear historical writing where one event inevitably leads to another, with society developing along a preordained path and the 'causes' lead directly to 'effects'. Most of the great upheavals mentioned throughout the book, 'revolutions' in various places of Europe, have a farcical character about them and the private lives and fears of the leaders of the day have as much to do with the development of events as the 'historical forces' or process of industrialization. The July revolution of 1830 in France addressed a political grievance, but could well have been thwarted if the King had actually acted; in the Decembrist 'rising' in Russia, the bewildered soldiers brought out by their officers thought "Constantine and constitution" ... to refer to Constantine and his wife.' (p.333) The pinnacle of the book, the 'revolutions' of 1848, caught everyone off guard not because the conspirators in them were so well hidden from view, but precisely because they were not planned at all, came as a surprise for the participants themselves and on occasion, as in Berlin, were caused by nothing more than the incidence of good weather. It is thus, only in the minds of the rulers of the day that all these contingent events came to form a coherent story. The monarchs of the day were right to fear their own shadow, yet this was more because of their own actions than because of some great conspiracies bound to overthrow them right from the start. The examples of this abound in the

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<sup>2</sup> The former were invented by the revival of mysticism of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the later – a product of French revolution, both groups were used to show that behind all the discontent, disturbances and upheavals there was a vast conspiracy to overthrow the 'thrones and churches'. They captivated minds of such prominent figures of the day as the Tsar Alexander and Prince Metternich.

book. The mild Polish Constitution of 1791, passed by the King and nobility, blessed by the Pope, was branded 'Jacobin' by the Empress of Russia Catherine II, who moved quickly to dismantle the Polish state and persecute all involved in the constitutional process. The Poles rose against the Russians in 1794, 'confirming' that they were indeed 'Jacobins' (all of them, the King included). All the revolts, uprisings and insurrections in Poland were treated as a part of this 'grand conspiracy' to overthrow the ruling monarch, which, obviously, had nothing to do with the local conditions. Austrians treated any disturbances in Italy and German states in exactly the same way.

The Russian and Austrian governments were to a significant degree concerned with such nationalist upheavals, yet they were even more adamant to stamp out any possible resistance inside their principal nationality domains (both empires were multinational, but were dominated by Russians and Germans respectively). Consequently, in Russia, they outlawed all innocent (literary and the like) associations, which made them move underground and 'discover the thrill of conspiracy' (p.328); in Germany they clamped down on all displays of nationalist sentiment, which made it more militant and virulent; all over Europe they introduced webs of surveillance of the population which made people unwilling to talk, but did nothing to make them love their rulers better.

The book is a strong indictment of Metternich, the all-powerful chancellor of Austria, who, due to his belief in the conspiracy, not only stifled the aspirations of the rising nationalists in Italy, Germany and Poland making them more radical in the process; held back Austrian economic development by resistance to any innovation and by overwhelming expenditures for the military, used more to clamp down on the local disaffections than to fight wars with external opponents; and 'welcomed' all the disturbances of the time, as they proved for him the existence of this grand conspiracy.

It also gives voice to those who tried to resist the temptation of fear. Duc de Richelieu, a fugitive from the French revolution and later Prime Minister of France, wrote that 'It cannot be denied that the intoxication of the French in these unfortunate times is a real fanaticism, and that those who are styled patriots really do form a sect. ... It will be with this one as it has been with all those which have agitated the world. If it is

left to itself it will die and vanish into the void from which it should never have emerged; if, on the contrary, it is persecuted, it will have its martyrs and its life span will be prolonged far beyond its natural term.' (p.37) The statement would be familiar for those studying terrorist movements of our days, many of which rely on the government overreaction to increase their numbers of supporters, following the logic of action-reaction-action, where the action of the groups provokes unmeasured response, leads to more recruits and the possibility of more action. Even the author of the most acclaimed book on the Illuminati conspiracy of the time, Augustin Barruel, invited his readers to fight the supposed conspiracy with 'society, humanity and conservatism' (p.20). This invitation, however, was heeded by few of his addressees.

The author invites the reader to draw parallels for herself between his depictions of the world in the sixty years after the French revolution and the realities of today. Those parallels are indeed easy to draw and quite troublesome to behold: the web of secret police that entangled European societies after the French revolution, and managed to uncover numerous plots, yet most of them of their own concoction<sup>3</sup>; the feeling of 'being watched' developed in the societies, the members of which had their mail opened all the time and their conversations both in public and in private recorded by the policy, which reflect the scandals of surveillance of our own time; Burke's designation of 'anyone who did not hold the same views as himself' (p.45) as a terrorist and his 'surprising lack of faith in democracy's ability to defend itself by standing by its own values' (p.68) should also sound familiar to anyone who followed the news of the current 'war of terror'.

The author hints at some parallels in the chapter titles, such as 'War on Terror,' 'Suicide Terrorists' and 'The Empire of Evil'. While some historians object to building such analogies, for a political scientist it is a salutary reminder of the amount of cases available to anyone interested in the role and effects of fear and paranoia in political life. The author may be a little harsh on the elite figures of the times, who succumbed to the quite natural desire for order and clarity in times of disorder and ambiguity, yet the effects of their actions do warrant some harsh words.

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<sup>3</sup> For the parallels of our time, see the article of one of the most prominent researchers and advisors on terrorism policy Marc Sageman and his 'indictment' of the use of 'agent provocateurs' for sending 'impressionable youth' to prisons in the US (Sageman 2013)

In short, the book is a must for anyone who is interested in the origins of our fears and their public expressions, of the government uses of largely imaginary terror to push through more and more control over the private lives (and even thoughts) of the citizens to which not only the autocratic regimes, such as the Russian one, but also more benign and liberal ones can easily succumb. The moral of these sixty years is simple and still valid today: ruling with fear, whether of the government itself, or its contesters lurking in the shadows, is not the way to bring about social cohesion and resilience to terror whatever form it would take. That lesson is useful for the leaders and opinion makers of our day to learn as well.

## Reference

Sageman, Marc. 2013. 'The Stagnation of Terrorism Research' in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* at <http://chronicle.com/blogs/conversation/2013/04/30/the-stagnation-of-research-on-terrorism/> Accessed on 2 April, 2016.