

Zero-Sum Game: The Savage Vision Driving a Terror-Ridden World

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The atrocities in Brussels — and they are horrific, criminal atrocities — are not occurring in a vacuum. They are not springing from some unfathomable abyss of motiveless malevolence. They are a response, in kind, to the atrocious violence being committed by Western powers on a regular basis in many countries around the world. And just as there is no justification for the acts of carnage in Brussels (and Paris and Turkey and elsewhere), there is likewise no justification for the much larger and more murderous acts of carnage being carried out by the most powerful and prosperous nations on earth, day after day, year after year.

The Western powers know this. For many years, their own intelligence agencies — in study after study — have confirmed that the leading cause of violent “radicalization” among a small number of Muslims is the violent Western intervention in Muslim lands. These interventions are carried out for the purpose of securing the economic and political domination of Western interests over lands rich with energy resources, as well as their strategic surroundings. That they have not even the slightest connection to “liberating” people from religious or political persecution, or making the world “safer,” is glaringly transparent. They are about domination, pure and simple.

Indeed, this point is scarcely disputed, although champions of domination claim it is a good thing. For decades, one has heard the argument from American exceptionalists that “if we don’t do it” — that is, if we don’t dominate the world militarily and economically — “then somebody else will.” The implication, of course, is that such a “somebody else” will be far worse than our own divinely blessed, goodhearted selves.

There is a fiercely primitive worldview underlying this philosophy (which is held almost universally across the American political spectrum, and in those countries who cling to the coattails of American dominance). It says that violent domination is the only reality in human affairs: one must dominate, or be dominated. One must eat or be eaten. One must kill or be killed. There is no alternative. If “we” don’t dominate — by force if necessary, doing “whatever it takes” — then it is a given that some other power will do so. Domination and power are all that exists; the only question is how they are distributed, and who controls that distribution. And there is no price too high to pay in order to gain — or maintain — that control.

You can see how this primitive belief plays out in domestic politics too. More and more, politics across the Western democracies (and other nations as well) are revolving around the question of who should dominate in a society — or more specifically, who feels their domination over society is being threatened. This dynamic is driving nationalist movements across the board. In the United States, it is expressed in the panic and dismay felt by an

increasing number of white people — especially but by no means exclusively white males — that their “natural” domination of American society is slipping away. They want to “take our country back,” or else they’ll be overwhelmed — dominated — by a flood of unworthy others: African-Americans, Mexicans, Muslims, homosexuals, women, etc. This self-pitying fear has been rife in right-wing discourse for decades, and has now burst into the open, and into the mainstream, with the likely nomination of Donald Trump as presidential candidate of a major party.

Again, the dynamic of domination is key: since nothing exists outside this dynamic, since there is no other way, then one group MUST dominate the others. The idea of equal citizens working, living, and sharing together is a fantasy in this worldview. If blacks or immigrants or women or gays are perceived to have gained a small share in the national life, then that share must have been “taken” from the dominant group. And since, in this view, domination is the goal of all groups, since it is the organizing principle of human life, then those upstart groups are not just seeking a fair share of society’s bounty and freedoms and opportunities; no, they are actually aiming to subjugate the dominant group. In this extremely limited worldview, life is always a zero-sum game. To give someone else more opportunity means less for yourself, and your kind. The freer someone else is, the less free you are. There is only so much to go around. You will find more sophisticated and empathetic worldviews on grade-school playgrounds, or in wolf packs.

And so we come to the foreign policies of Western nations today. They are all, without exception, built on the goal of securing effective control (in whatever form) of economic and strategic resources for the benefit of their own power structures. Again, it is beyond dispute that these policies do *not* involve trying to make the world a better, safer place so that their own citizens might pursue their lives in peace. These policies manifestly do *not* involve trying to achieve “security” for their own people. Those who advance these policies knowingly and deliberately accept the fact that they will invariably cause destruction abroad and “blowback” at home. They know and accept that these policies will destabilize the world, that they will radicalize some of those who suffer from them, that they will lead to less security at home, that they will drain public treasuries and leave their own people to sink in broken communities with decaying infrastructure, mounting debt, shrinking opportunities, bleak futures and despairing lives.

They know all of this is true — not only because they can see it happening with their own eyes, as we all can, but also because their own experts tell them, time and time again, that this is so. But they accept all this as the price that must be paid to advance and maintain their dominance. In the words of Madeline Albright, when she was confronted with the fact that the US/UK sanctions on Iraq had at that time killed at least 500,000 children, our leaders believe this price “is worth it.”

In private, they no doubt tell themselves that it is the domination of their good and “special” nation, or the domination of the worthy “values” of “Western civilization” that they are trying to secure with their policies, by doing “whatever it takes.” But in practice, of course, the chief beneficiaries of these policies are invariably the ruling classes of the nations involved. This has become much more brazenly evident in recent years, as the conditions and prospects of even the middle classes are so clearly deteriorating. There is little room left to pretend that the “rising tide” of militarized hyper-capitalism is “lifting all boats” when even those who once benefitted from expanding opportunity (in the post-war boom) are now sinking. (The poor, of course, have almost always been invisible.)

The people in Brussels — like the people in Paris, and like the far greater multitude of victims in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Sudan, Somalia, etc — are, yes, “reaping the whirlwind” of Western foreign policy. The criminals who carried out the most recent attacks have adopted the mindset of our Western elites, who teach the world, day after day, that the destruction of innocent lives is an acceptable price to pay in order to achieve your objectives. You can and must do “whatever it takes” — even if whatever it takes is, say, the death of half a million innocent children. Or a war of aggression that leaves a million innocent people dead. Or drone-bombing a wedding party. Or sending missiles into a hospital. Or sitting in the Oval Office — your Peace Prize gleaming on the mantelpiece — while you tick off the names of victims on your weekly “Kill List.”

We wonder how these terrorists can commit such barbarous atrocities as we see in Brussels — even while most of us happily countenance, even celebrate, far more extensive and continuous atrocities committed by our leaders in pursuit of domination. Then we pretend that the former has no connection to the latter. Yet the targets of these foreign policies live through a hundred Brussels attacks, a dozen 9/11s every year. We teach violence to the world — brutal destruction of individual lives, of societies and communities, of entire nations — yet are shocked when the world responds in kind.

I will say it again: there is absolutely no justification for the murder of innocent people such as we saw in Brussels today. None. But crimes of equal horror — killing innocent people, disrupting the lives of millions of others, and filling them with fear — are being carried out, routinely, and on a much larger scale, by the leaders of our Western nations and their allies. This too is equally unjustifiable, and is worthy of the same level of rejection and outrage we rightly apply to the Brussels atrocity.

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