



Dedicated, well-armed sociopaths who'll stop at nothing

By William Eaton

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I'm just waking up. News radio. Listening for the weather. The solemn voice of a commentator:

. . . what we're dealing with . . . dedicated, well-armed sociopaths who'll stop at nothing to impose their will on as much of the world as possible.

It's July 2015. I'm in the USA. Even groggy I know who the commentator has in mind. But halfway to the shower the thought occurs: Not a bad description of another bunch, of a particular large nation these past 50 or 100 years. Not a bad description of the world's major corporations?

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Of course we'd like to know what stage we've come to in the evolution of the word "sociopath," but I think the word now means something like:

People to whom other people are recognizable only for whatever capacity they may have to serve the great "me." And thus, among other things, these others can be mistreated, exploited, killed, and even brutally killed without the sociopath giving any of this much thought. If my interests are being served and advanced, all is well.*

Carpet-bombing of civilian areas might thus be thought a prototypical sociopathic action. Or such bombing could be thought a tactic—not unlike televised beheadings, public hangings, and lethal injections—tactics that tough, clear-sighted leaders resort to when they are faced with ruthless enemies. Perhaps enslaving other people (or wage slavery? sweatshop wages?) is not sociopathic but just a tough approach to making a living for oneself (the slave trader or slave owner). But certainly overloading ships with slaves (human beings) in such conditions that some or many may not survive the voyage—this would certainly seem to fall under the mistreated or brutally killed categories of the sociopath definition. As might the killing of unarmed people by law-enforcement officials.

Perhaps the argument could end up something like this. There are other people in the world who are more sociopathic than we are. Or, we're all sociopaths on this bus (loaded with humanity); that's why we need to kill or otherwise subjugate specific others (or all others?) before they subjugate us. And if this means taking terrible, urgent measures—Hiroshima and Nagasaki come to mind—welcome to *realpolitik* and human life.

2

What was it that got the comedian Bill Maher in such trouble after 9/11? He said something that was taken to be insensitive and anti-American, and he was shuttled off the air, or to a corner of the air. Thus, it does not seem a winning strategy to propose to Americans that the phrase about "well-armed sociopaths who'll stop at nothing to impose their will on as much of the world as possible" might be as apt a description of US as of THEM.

What I would propose, however, is that this is an essential discussion, a sort of first discussion, prerequisite to any further considerations of foreign policy or of our nature and identity. In psychology this could be termed "owning our projections." (See Robert Bly: "Whenever we seek to avoid the responsibility for our own behavior, we do so by attempting to give that responsibility to some other individual, organization or entity.")

"[A] good portion of our political ideas are still nothing but words intended to hide and restrict our true selves," the Mexican poet, essayist and Nobel Prizewinner Octavio Paz

* *Collins English Dictionary* says that "sociopath" is a synonym of "psychopath," and thus means "a person afflicted with a personality disorder characterized by a tendency to commit antisocial and sometimes violent acts and a failure to feel guilt for such acts." The *Macmillan Dictionary* proposes: "someone whose personality makes them behave in ways that are dangerous to other people."

writes in *El laberinto de la soledad* (The Labyrinth of Solitude). And certainly, yes, among other things, our pundits and politicians—and pundits and politicians since ever there were such—do a great job of taking our harshest and most aggressive characteristics and projecting them onto outsiders, be they foreign nations or fellow citizens with iconoclastic ideas. In this way, and as in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, we are always at war with external entities and forces that are made to appear worse than us, but who may also be seen as embodying our own “worst” characteristics, or those characteristics we feel most uncomfortable about.

It was the great genius of the Civil Rights Movement to get the TV cameras turned inward and to enact for the cameras scenes of oppression that were supposed to be typical not of the “Free World” but of life “beyond the Iron Curtain.” In those lands that claimed, not entirely truthfully of course, to be dedicated to that strange and disturbing principle “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need.” For a good deal of the progress that has been made in reducing the racism of American institutions we have to thank the Cold War, television, and the existence of an alternative political and economic system (albeit behind a curtain). For a moment we had to own some of our projections and address some of our sociopathology.

3

It might be said that, in order to have any kind of sensible political debates or to come to any level of self-knowledge, we need to have—and to be able to have—public discussion of the extent to which lines about stopping “at nothing to impose their will on as much of the world as possible” can apply to us. Or, more generally, and slipping into presidential rhetoric, our strength as a nation may be measured by the extent to which we are willing to discuss who we are and who we might be.

In an impossibly ideal world, pundits and political leaders would encourage such debates. (By contrast, I was once confronted by Hillary Clinton on *The Daily Show*, and she was saying that in her travels around the world she’d been impressed by the fact that everyone thought the US was a great country. As wife of the President or as US Secretary of State, you are likely to hear quite a lot about what a great country you come from, but you are not likely to be so stupid as to take these words at face value. And so it is more than just patronizing to reprise these diplomatic niceties on television. The odd image that comes to mind is of an echo chamber in which the various roles that we play, rather robotically, may be heard resounding until nothing intelligible can be recognized, and until silence is what one longs for.)

This matter of stopping at little or nothing to impose our will is only one of several essential discussions we need to have. At *Zeteo* we once received a quite intriguing paper from a brilliant philosopher, and it made various assertions about what happens in a democracy. One of my reactions was that, at present, we have a better idea what the word “sociopath” (or even “philosopher”) means than what the word “democracy” does. Does it mean, say, a system in which a fraction of the population periodically bothers to state its

preferences regarding candidates who have been previously chosen by a combination of major business interests and the rigid self-interests of “voting blocs”? As regards the latter, I have in mind groups of people who will go to the polls en masse to support any candidate who opposes gun control or who supports gay marriage or increasing Social Security payments to the elderly.

I do not wish to say that such a “democracy” is bad. Let us begin by discussing what we mean when we use the word “democracy” (or “bad”). Or—when we trumpet the virtues of “democracy” to the rest of the world—what, in fact, are we selling (or imposing)? It would likely be a great deal, and perhaps enough, to simply have an open-throated and open-eared discussion of all the hopes, fears, and self-interests we have attached to “democracy,” and of the experiences that have given rise to these emotions and seeming needs, and to our particular uses of this word.

I also have in mind that one of the ways Socrates got himself killed was by calling his fellow citizens’ attention to the fact that they knew well words that touched on their most cherished values—courage and excellence and love, for example—but they had little idea what those words meant. It might be said that the ancient Athenians had as little idea as we do of what their real values were, or of the gaps between their ideals and their behaviors. (In *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels sought to explain how such gaps get created. Their assertion: inside a ruling class “one part appears as the thinkers of the class, its active, conceptive ideologists, who make the perfecting of the illusion of the class about itself their chief source of livelihood.”)

4

“We [Mexicans] get drunk in order to confess; they [North Americans] get drunk in order to forget,” Paz writes in *El laberinto*. This long essay, first published in 1950, says a great deal that remains relevant about the large country that has cast its shadow over Mexico. (As part of imposing our will, we took half of Mexico’s territory—all or parts of what are now Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, Utah and Wyoming. Of course Mexico is itself a taking of the Spanish conquistadores, and the Aztecs before them were not a peaceful people.)

Along with “solitude,” a key word in Paz’s text (as translated) is “masks.” Last year, when my son and I again visited Mexico, I re-read Paz’s book, and, for reasons I cannot as yet fully explain, I was particularly taken by the following idea:

The Revolution [1910–20] became an attempt to integrate our present and our past, or—as [the Mexican philosopher] Leopoldo Zea put it—to “assimilate our history,” to change it into a living thing: a past made present. This effort at integration, this return to sources, contrasts with the attitude of the intellectuals of the time, who not only failed to understand the meaning of the revolutionary movement but even went on playing with ideas that had no function whatsoever except as masks.

A friend, a psychotherapist, once challenged my use of the word “intellectuals,” proposing that I seemed to imagine there being a distinct class in the United States, of intellectuals, and, as best she could tell, no such class existed. There were many teachers and people employed in academia, journalism, publishing, think tanks. There were many more people who fit the Russian idea of an *intelligentsia*, people, such as she herself, working in various professions which involved mental skills and labor. But she did not see the United States as having a whole class of people who could be described as intellectuals.

“Whatever,” as kids have been known to say. My sense is that our commentators, pundits, academics, think tankers, journalists, TV documentary makers, et al., spend a good deal of time playing with ideas whose chief function is to serve as masks. And we but rarely try to see ourselves for who we are. In our many conversations—in therapists’ offices, in legislative chambers, on television, in restaurants and bedrooms—how often do we try to integrate our present and our past? The institutions large and small that employ us, or solicit our business and support, tend to treat people us as if our reason for being was to serve their interests and those of the capital invested in the institutions. We are recognized as consumers, laborers, voters (and even as neurosurgeons, senior managers, entrepreneurs, investment bankers, and venture capitalists), but rarely as people.[†] And we are thus lost, and lose ourselves, in a kind of fog.

Paz’s proposal is: “If we tear off these masks, if we open ourselves up, if—in brief—we face our own selves, then we can truly begin to live and think.” He immediately goes on to say: “Nakedness and defenselessness are awaiting us. But there, in that ‘open’ solitude, transcendence is also waiting; the outstretched hands of other solitary beings.”

I would, first, come back to the previous statement. What I am proposing is that we do not truly begin to live and think until we open ourselves up and take a look inside.[‡]

Credits & Afterword from T.S. Eliot

[†] All the furniture and equipment in our large organizations is now tagged with QR codes. How many more weeks can it be before we are too? See [The Future in 900 Words](#), written not long ago, yet already outdated.

[‡] From [There is No Solution](#), somewhat paraphrased here: All of us restrict our thinking most all the time in order to function. To try to keep ourselves separated from looming mortality, to repress disturbing memories, socially unacceptable desires—we must close large chambers of our brains and keep other masses of cells working overtime watching the doors. The cerebral capacity that remains is more than sufficient to accomplish most human tasks—even to bribe and steal, lead huge armies, conduct sophisticated scientific experiments. Yet something has been lost; the individual’s range of thinking, imagination, and feeling are constrained. Insight may be reserved for those moments when all the doors are open—or perhaps it is reserved to those individuals (Pascal? Adorno?) who can tolerate having a great number of doors open a great deal of the time.

Image at top is from [Philip Greenberg](#)'s photographs of sculptures by James "Son Ford" Thomas, which will be on view through 7 August 2015 at New York University's [80WSE Gallery](#). Greenberg's photographs appeared in Roberta Smith's review of the show for the *New York Times*: [Art Carved From Inequality](#), July 9, 2015.

The "well-armed sociopaths" line is from Sam Litzinger, sitting in for Charles Osgood, "The Osgood File," [CBS Radio Network, July 8, 2015](#). The phrase in its context:

Some analysts say it's as if the Pentagon doesn't really seem to understand what we're dealing with—which is, in essence, a bunch of dedicated, well-armed sociopaths who'll stop at nothing to impose their will on as much of the world as possible.

That's pretty scary. And critics inside and outside Congress say, requires tougher—and riskier—action than the U.S. has been willing to take so far.

Statement by Robert Bly, poet and guru ("leader of the mythopoetic men's movement"), apparently appears in a book called *The Four-Fold Way*, by Angeles Arrien (HarperOne, 1993).

Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude and The Other Mexico, Return to the Labyrinth of Solitude, Mexico and the United States, The Philanthropic Ogre*, translated by Lysander Kemp, Yaro Milos, and Rachel Phillips Belash (Grove Press, 1985).

George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. First published in 1949.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*. Part I, translated S. Ryanzanskaya, (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1964), as reprinted in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., edited by Robert C. Tucker (Norton, 1978), 173. The proposition in its context:

The division of labour, which we have already seen above as one of the chief forces of history up till now, manifests itself also in the ruling class as the division of mental and material labour, so that inside this class one part appears as the thinkers of the class (its active, conceptive ideologists, who make the perfecting of the illusion of the class about itself their chief source of livelihood), while the others' attitude to these ideas and illusions is more passive and receptive, because they are in reality the active members of this class and have less time to make up illusions and ideas about themselves. Within this class this cleavage can even develop into a certain opposition and hostility between the two parts, which, however, in the case of a practical collision, in which the class itself is endangered, automatically comes to nothing, in which case there also vanishes the semblance that the ruling ideas

were not the ideas of the ruling class and had a power distinct from the power of this class.

An essay that touches on one of the points made in the present piece: [NRALGBTQ, Montaigbakhtinian.com](http://Montaigbakhtinian.com).

Afterword

As Paz himself notes in a later essay, “The Philanthropic Ogre,” T.S. Eliot, in “The Hollow Men,” written in the aftermath of the First World War, well described an aspect of our current circumstances. Paz quotes these lines:

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow

I will quote, too, from earlier in the poem:

Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats’ feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar

Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion;

Those who have crossed
With direct eyes, to death’s other Kingdom
Remember us—if at all—not as lost
Violent souls, but only
As the hollow men
The stuffed men.