

Bastards of Privilege

by Theodore Dalrymple

Some people, no doubt, will have been surprised to learn that the seven young Islamic fanatics who slaughtered 20 customers, mainly foreign, in a restaurant in Dhaka, Bangladesh this weekend weren't impoverished or downtrodden, like so many of their countrymen. On the contrary, they were scions of the small, rich, and educated local elite. They were privileged as only the rich in poor countries can be privileged.

No one should have been surprised by this, however. Viciousness knows no class barriers and education is often more an aid than a hindrance to extreme evil committed in the name of ideology. The Soviets recruited their useful idiots in the West not from the supposedly ignorant proletariat, but from the ranks of the educated and the intellectuals. Even such pitiless people as the Soviets, though, didn't expect their recruits personally to hack people to death if they couldn't recite the *Communist Manifesto*—and then go straight to heaven as a result.

Early reports suggest that some of the killers fanaticized themselves only recently: from strumming guitars to decapitation, as it were, in three months. The parents of the alleged perpetrators found it difficult to believe that their sons—previously polite and without apparent problems, indeed with “humanitarian” sentiments of the modern kind—should have suddenly turned so psychopathically brutal. They seemed to be ordinary boys, not like Shakespeare's Richard III, as described by his mother:

Thou cam'st on earth to make the earth my hell. A grievous burden was thy birth to me: Tetchy and wayward was thy infancy. Thy school-days, frightful, daring, bold, and venturous . . .

Where a child is cruel to animals, thieving, lying, and disobedient from an early age, we expect little good of him later in his life. It seems the perpetrators were not like this, nor could they have expected anything but a smooth passage through life. Lack of prospects was certainly not what impelled them.

Adolescence is a turbulent time, of course, and some privileged young people in impoverished countries feel guilt at their own privilege (not that it prevents them from exercising it); revolutionary movements are often led by some sprig of the upper class. But something else is required to make ordinary young men act in so conscienceless a fashion. Here, I think, we have to turn to Solzhenitsyn:

Macbeth's self-justifications were feeble—and his conscience devoured him. Yes, even Iago was a little lamb, too. The imagination and spiritual strength of Shakespeare's evildoers stopped short at a dozen corpses. Because they had no ideology. Ideology—that is what gives evil-doing its long-sought justification and gives the evildoer the necessary steadfastness and determination. That is the social theory which helps to make his acts seem good instead of bad in his own and others' eyes. . . . That was how the agents of the Inquisition fortified their wills: by invoking Christianity; the conquerors of foreign lands, by extolling the grandeur of their Motherland; the colonizers, by civilization; the Nazis, by race; and the Jacobins (early and late), by equality, brotherhood, and the happiness of future generations.

After the downfall of Communism, Islamism is the only ideology that supposedly answers all life's questions and can appeal to the adolescent search for certainty about what life is for. It appeals only to born Muslims and a small number of converts. It has none of the cross-cultural appeal that Communism did, for example. But why person x rather than person y falls for it—that is a question that can never be fully answered.

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