

Terrorism and Violence in Jonathan Coe's *'The Rotters' Club'*

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Abstract

As the study of violence is nowadays an important research domain in itself in Cultural Studies, particularly in the sub-branch entitled Terrorism studies (which has developed even more, after the historical moment which came to be known as "9.11"), I shall restrict my analysis in this paper to a discussion of theories which apply to The Rotters' Club. I shall refer to the texture of the relationship between power and violence (both terrorist violence and police violence), in the sense of violence which aims at destroying the order and integrity of a system and violence which aims at preserving the system. The second part of the paper focuses on racism in the novel.

The paper shall analyse Coe's novel by means of the inter-disciplinary methodological tools provided by Literary and Cultural Studies, combined with concepts from Political Theory and Sociology.

Keywords

violence, power, terror, racism, subversion

1. Introduction

One of the most influential theoretical supports on this theme is Walter Benjamin's essay *Critique of Violence* (1996) in which he discusses terrorist violence, relating it in a complex and paradoxical way, to the law. This essay has had a particularly strong impact on Post-Structuralism both through the manner of constructing the argument¹² (which is reminiscent of Foucault) and through its relevance for the study of power.

The essay constitutes a long and elaborate answer to the debates surrounding the "distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence" (Benjamin 1996: 238). As Benjamin explains, the state tries to establish a "monopoly on violence", exercising what comes to be labelled as "legitimate violence". The implication is that "the law sees violence in the hands of individuals as a danger undermining the legal system" (Benjamin 1996: 238). He distinguishes between *law-making* and *law-preserving violence*, and in his views,

¹² Through a method which Post-Structuralism later used extensively, Walter Benjamin created a "genealogy of violence", just as Foucault created the "genealogies" and "archaeologies" of power. He starts by analysing under what circumstances can a certain action be considered "violence", and for this, he relates this "natural force or capacity" with the justness of its goals. (Benjamin: 1996)

the modern institution of the police, combines these two functions, as it often intervenes “for security reasons”, “outside the parameters of the law”. (Benjamin 1996: 243).

2. Terrorism and Violence

Early on in *The Rotters' Club*, the narrator introduces us abruptly in the atmosphere of the Birmingham pub bombings in 1974, and into the violence that marked the 1970s, in a country that has been reputed for so many decades for its stability and for its moderate, consensual politics. However, it is for this very reason that this episode has an important role in marking (among several other episodes I shall be discussing in the present subchapter) the disintegration of the *social-democratic consensus* and the values and beliefs which supported it. Coe's choice of scenes seems to suggest that this is the only way in which one can discuss violence as it is always abrupt, as it always breaks, disrupts, causes turmoil and changes the order of things.

The sociologist Malcolm Waters made the distinction between the vision according to which “society was held together by agreement between its members on shared norms” (Waters 1994: 217), supported by what he calls the “consensus theorists”¹³ and the vision according to which “society was riven by intractable cleavages and had to be held together by coercion”, supported by the “so-called conflict theorists” (Waters 1994: 217).

Officially, Britain has accommodated *consensus* both ideologically/theoretically and in practice, and Bill's own beliefs, as the main “ideologue” of the novel, reflect this tendency. Bill's own evolution as a character and his role in the trade union are meant to support this “consensus” view.

However, Coe subverts the universality of this principle. He proves that society is a lot more heterogeneous than initially thought, and does not function for the unique purpose of supporting official politics. History itself has been marked by several moments of violence (and the novel is quite descriptive regarding these aspects) which got “out of control”, in this way inclining the balance in the direction of “conflict theorists”, when discussing the relation between power and the state.

Through a dramatic “causality chain” which has been remarked about *What A Carve Up!* by several critics we have indicated before¹⁴ and which is a general characteristic of Coe's writing, the smallest detail decides a character's life, in this case, literally. In *The Rotters' Club*, Malcolm, a young student, in his early twenties, has a long hesitation about the restaurant he should pick for the special evening in which he wants to propose to his girlfriend, Lois Trotter. He is persuaded by his unconventional, anarchist friend, who is known only by his

¹³ Malcolm Waters refers to “*consensus*” in its most inclusive acceptance, with no intended connection to the British social-democratic *consensus* which dominated political life in Britain from World War II to the late 1970s.

¹⁴ See, for instance: Tew (2004: 48), Thurschwell (2006:29), Head (2002: 47).

nickname, Rolled-Up Reg, to take her to “The Tavern in the Town”. Unfortunately, this is one of the pubs targeted, and the bomb goes off, exactly when Malcolm, ring box in hand, is about to propose. Nick Bentley, the only critic who dedicates¹⁵ a line to this episode comments along the moral-ethical line: “Coe evokes the sense of outrage the event caused in Birmingham at the time, as well as the backlash against innocent Irish people then settled in England”. (Bentley 2008: 6)

My own interpretation only partly agrees with Bentley and goes more along Saul Newman’s and Walter Benjamin’s theses, with one important observation. The narrative technique mirrors the individual-moral reaction and the social-ideological reaction. Coe simply “suspends” the plotline at that stage, the same way as the lives of the characters get “suspended”, never to be recovered to the same extent, again. The effects of terrorism, and their transposition at narrative level are paralleled not only by Sophie, the narrator, but by the omniscient narrator’s voice as well.

Three curtailed narratives, then. Three stories, with no connection between them except that they had been truncated, savagely, when their opening chapters had barely been written. All in the same few days. The same fatal few days. What days those had been, for unfinished stories. (Coe 2001: 226)

Unlike the characters’ lives, the reader can “recover” the events of that evening and their horrible consequences, throughout the novel, and in the sequel, *The Closed Circle*. The violence displayed is, as Saul Newman put it “arbitrary and excessive” (Newman 2005: 103) and I would say the novel goes further than evoking “the sense of outrage.” (Bentley 2008: 6) The act of terrorism affects the lives of all the people present or people connected to them, and, as we shall see, even the ones who do not have any direct connection to the event as such. Among the victims, Malcolm is decapitated and Lois needs almost a decade to recover from the shock, in a special psychiatric asylum.

In his anthology, Nick Bentley explains that the context of the IRA’s pub bombings in the 1970s has been a reaction to the *Bloody Sunday*, which happened on the 30th of January 1972, when the British Army opened fire on a “mostly peaceful demonstration of Irish Catholics in the Bogside area of Derry, resulting in the death of fourteen people” (Bentley 2008: 6). Although the critic certainly does not attempt to justify the actions along an irrelevant, puerile “who-started-it-first” argument, his comments and explanations make us aware of an important aspect. Thus, for a certain community, a violent reaction, which is the response to a violent action, will always seem perfectly justified, from a certain number of points of view, under the form of the “justice” that is being done after some unfair, undeserved event which the respective community has suffered.

Walter Benjamin’s position I have referred to earlier, should be placed in connection with Giorgio Agamben’s theory on *terrorism*. In the article “*Security*

¹⁵ As indicated before, I refer to materials published until January 2011, when the thesis was written.

and Terror”, available on-line under the section *Theory and Event* (2001)¹⁶, Agamben states that the danger of the contemporary “security paradigm” is that “Security reasoning entails an essential risk. A state which has security as its only task and source of legitimacy is a fragile organism; it can always be provoked by terrorism to turn itself *terroristic*.” (Agamben 2001, my italics).

Coe’s political fiction seems perfectly convergent with Agamben’s statements. *The Rotters’ Club* makes no reference to the *Bloody Sunday*, on the contrary, it condemns violence, which always appears absurd, arbitrary and which always “disturbs” the existent system, and implicitly, the balance of power relations. As the people affected can never take revenge on the ones directly responsible for these horrible events, the “reaction” is often as absurd and as “terroristic” (to use Agamben’s term) as the one it opposes. From this point of view, I fully agree with Bentley that the novel presents the “backlash against innocent Irish people then settled in England”. (Bentley 2008: 6).

The people do not wait for the reaction of the state, even in this protective, “pastoral power” representation which the welfare state was associated with. In this case, the state obviously failed to protect them from such events in the first place, as a consequence, “citizens” will take matters in their own hands. If resistance to protective power, initially meant defending the system and negotiating small benefits within it, in the face of this blind, arbitrary, destructive force, “resistance” will turn into a similar reaction, based on the same foundation.

In order to understand the true extent of the social response which followed and how innocent people paid for this blind manifestation of violence, we will have to go to the sequel, *The Closed Circle*, to the scenes in which Claire becomes the focaliser and re-constructs what happened. Thus, a first victim of this absurd and horrid retaliation is an innocent young Irish worker who is trapped and killed in what “seemed like an accident” by some of the extreme right-wing movement sympathisers who organise a plot in which his body is crushed by an extremely heavy piece of machinery. The second one is Miriam Newman, the fancy trade union secretary and Bill’s lover, who is killed because she happened to witness the young Irishman’s murder. The sequel reveals not only the arbitrariness of the retaliation, but also the fact that, in the end, it is absolutely useless and it generates more new wrongs than it helps solve previous ones. The collateral victims of retaliation are not only the physical victims, but many more, who are affectively connected to them, as the entire lives of their family members get ruined, and become set on finding impossible answers to the big questions: “why” and “what happened?”. Claire’s (Miriam’s sister) life is actually constructed around this question, a perpetual search for an elusive answer.

¹⁶ Giorgio Agamben’s complete article “Security and Terror” was consulted on-line under the section *Theory and Event* at: http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/theory_and_event/v005/5.4agamben.html, Volume 5, Issue 4, 2001; E-ISSN: 1092-311X, DOI: 10.1353/tae.2001.0030, or at: <http://www.why-war.com/news/sources/theoryandevent/>.

What is more, it will not only strike against the Irish, but it will extend on all forms of “otherness”, not only ethnical, but also racial. The expression “anti-Irish sentiment” appears in *The Rotters’ Club* in such an explicit way only once, when Harding, the extreme-right wing teenager ironizes the letter to the college magazine, in which Doug Anderton, highlighted its manifestations of “firebomb attacks, lynchings and unprovoked assaults on Irish citizens” and classifies them as a “disgrace”. (Coe: 2001: 235) This clash between the two teenagers indicates in itself the two sides in the ideological battle, which co-exist in society: pro and against. Doug suggests that the attacks were unprovoked, although this is not said in such a direct way, as the critic Nick Bentley does.

The following subsection analyses Racism in *The Rotters’ Club* as one of the most aggressive manifestations of fragmentarian ideological discourses in the 1970s in Britain.

3. Racism

During the 1970s, the British society had to face one more social and political situation which challenged the already delicate power balance, besides the dismantling of the consensus and the welfare state and, as a consequence, the reduction of the benefits citizens had grown accustomed to. This was the unprecedented flow of immigration from the former colonies. *The Rotters’ Club* reflects the way this event affected the balance of social and political power relations, and how it was even attempted to be used for gathering political capital.

Just as in the case of the embrace of socialism of a certain part of society (working classes mainly, but as the novel shows, not exclusively – the cameo of Mr. Nutall, the director of King William’s College, is a perfect example of a socialist intellectual) in the 1970s, this battle is fought both at “ideological” level and at social level.

What Bill and the people he represents do not realise is that, if within a society racism has found its insidious paths, it is very rarely the case that it can be fought through *reason*, the ideological filter on which Bill has founded almost all his political opinions. As we shall see, his mix of socialist and Enlightenment ideas fail when confronted with the socially fragmentarian realities of his time. The mainstream political discourse, which has been that of liberalism, comes under attack in a number of ways.

One of the forms of attacking the liberal dominant discourse is represented by the extreme right pieces of communication presented in *The Rotters’ Club*, under the form of pamphlets, brochures, flyers and pseudo-scientific articles printed on doubtful “wall journals”. Nazi pamphlets are posted in high numbers around the shop floor of the Longbridge plant. The novel strongly undermines the legitimacy of such views and the possibility of being considered coherent ideological views (in any of the acceptations of the term that Robert Leach has mentioned and which I referred to in the Introduction) by rendering them preposterous, the exact opposite of what they intend to be – common-sense principles supported by “scientific” fact.

An interesting phenomenon which sometimes occurs in Coe’s political fiction is the “*subversion*” of the *subversion*, and thus the *reinstalling* of the

“norm”. In *The Rotters’ Club* what the texts of the racist pamphlets attempt to demonstrate, among others, in an embarrassing, pseudo-scientific way, is the inferiority of the black race. The omniscient author, however, renders their arguments ridiculous, destroying any attempt at credibility.

Neither Heath nor Wilson nor Thorpe has the will to stop the tide of coloured immigration into this country. All are slaves to the liberal establishment way of thinking. These people do not just tolerate the black man, they think he is actually superior to the true-born Englishman.

1. The black man is not as intelligent as the white man. His brain is genetically not so well developed. Therefore, how can he do the same job of work?
2. The black man is lazier than the white man. Ask yourselves, why the British Empire conquered the Africans and Indians, and not the other way around? Because the white races are superior in industry and intelligence. Historical **FACT**. (Coe 2001: 38, capitals and bold in the original)

As this paragraph shows, refined or ridiculous ethnical hatred propaganda alike work along the same lines, targeting everything which stands in its way. In this case, although the principles of liberalism included some undeniable positive aspects, such as tolerance, they will come under attack simply because they are, by now, part of the “establishment”. Any political view which calls itself “progressive”, whether morally justified or outrageous, needs to define itself against what has become the “norm”, the dominant discourse.

Somewhere else in the novel, a leaflet of the Association of British People, a “far-right offshoot, more cranky and less organised even than the National Front” (Coe 2001: 37) gets one step further, from the level of de-humanising the object of racial hatred to instigating the locals to refuse to work with them, this time on ethnical grounds. Graphically, the message appears in the novel as written “by hand”.

IRA Bastards killed 12 people
On Manchester bus yesterday
Refuse to work with
Irish Bastards Murderers (Coe 2001: 37)

Although, as I have already mentioned, it was long debated whether it deserves the term of “ideology” (Kershaw:1993, Leach: 2002), it is difficult to contest the social impact of racist or xenophobic ideas at the level of certain strata of society, even in the context of a society which has always called itself open and tolerant. Thus, even if Racism cannot be included in the category of ideologies which Schwarzmantel has called “old”, “traditional” or “established” ideologies of modernity, and it fails Leach’s classification in terms of “intellectual sophistication” of founding ideas, it meets Leach’s criteria in terms of action-

orientation. As Leach explains, in contemporary Britain “overt racism has been long-excluded from elite political discourse” (Leach 2002: 119) and mainstream politicians repudiate racism in all its forms, insisting on “inclusion” politics.

Which is not to say that if political discourse excludes Racism, it does not exist as a force manifested in society, with different degrees of intensity. Coe decides to start from the most severe forms of social manifestation of Racism, which in extreme forms can lead to murder (as in the case of the young Irish worker, after the pub bombings) and goes decreasingly, to the least intense ones.

In this context, one can explain the role of the Trotters’ holiday episode in Denmark in the ideological economy of the novel. Apparently, the “story within story” device looks like an abrupt break in the plotline of the novel, with no other purpose but to explain how Paul Trotter created a bond with Rolf, the little German boy whom he saved from the whirlpool in which the two Danish boys have lured him. However, if we consider the ideological perspective, this episode gets new meanings. It becomes clear both from the author’s perspective and from that of the focaliser – in this case Benjamin Trotter – which represents another reassertion of the ontological stand I have presented at the beginning of the present chapter: “*here-and-now-it-is-better-than-then-and-there*”. The story of the attempted destruction of an entire ethnicity and the international implications of the destructions caused by Hitler’s Third Reich seems a *dystopian* extreme which could never become a possibility in the anti-totalitarian context of Britain. Marie’s family story is the story of the tragic outcomes of xenophobia, anti-Semitism and racism, which during the Third Reich became state ideology and affected, for ever, the story of millions of families throughout Europe, not only in Germany but also in the occupied countries. The text also offers a hint that even in those times *resistance* to an absurd dominant discourse was possible, both personally and politically. Marie praises, briefly, the courage of the Danish people, who have helped save many Jewish families, as well as the protective policy of the King of Sweden, towards all fugitives. However, these are marked in the text as exceptions, as a profound contrast to the contemporary Post-modern subject/individual.

If an overwhelming mix of confusion and political indifference or downright political impotence often dominates the Post-modern subject/individual, in Marie’s family case, during World War II, the feeling of insignificance and impotence appears thoroughly justified. However, this context is meant to delimit itself through a binary-oppositional relation with respect to the British situation. Marie’s story, or rather the story of the persecution of her family, leaves the listeners of her story (the Trotters and their German friends) feeling insignificant in the face of “historical forces over which one has no control”. This is one of Coe’s most effective narrative devices of triggering empathy from the implied reader, as one can even imagine the emotional scars of people left „uprooted, in a word, swept away by forces over which you can have no possible control, historical forces ... You can never recover from something like that, never reconcile yourself to it.” (Coe 2001:123)

Just like Saul Bellow in his earlier prose (particularly *Dangling Man*, *The Victim* and *Herzog*), Coe suggests the central characters of his novels can never be considered the “true” victims, in the classical acceptation of the term. This episode

suggests that the true victims, the ones who cannot make their voice heard in the balance of power, belong to another time or place.

3. Conclusions

From all the elements presented in this paper, it follows a very important conclusion, which is valid for all of Coe's main characters (and, particularly for his intellectuals): their place in society and in its power networks, and the way they negotiate it, is, up to a large extent, their own choice, as a difference with the "true" victims who, with the exception of this episode, are depicted very briefly, in cameo-like scenes.

This doesn't mean that racist excesses do not exist in *The Rotters' Club*, but they are presented both in "ideological" form and in their social outbursts as serious, dangerous, yet isolated cases, the product of a very specific and limited context, which can never get to the level of state doctrine. As long as the "establishment" officially puts forward liberal-democratic views, there is hope that this situation will be avoided. In order to achieve this goal of inclusion and tolerance, the role of the ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) is vital – out of which by far, the most obvious in the 1970s is education. Whether it also proves effective, this is a completely different matter, which Coe's other political novels come to install and subvert, at the same time.

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On-line resources:

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