On security and terror

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Security as leading principle of state politics dates back to the the birth of the modern state. Hobbes already mentions it as the opposite of fear, which compels human beings to come together within a society. But not until the 18ᵗʰ century does a thought of security come into its own. In a 1978 lecture at the Collége de France (which has yet to be published) Michel Foucault has shown how the political and economic practice of the Physiocrats opposes security to discipline and the law as instruments of governance.

Turgot and Quesnay as well as Physiocratic officials were not primarily concerned with the prevention of hunger or the regulation of production, but wanted to allow for their development to then regulate and "secure" their consequences. While disciplinary power isolates and closes off territories, measures of security lead to an opening and to globalization; while the law wants to prevent and regulate, security intervenes in ongoing processes to direct them. In short, discipline wants to produce order, security wants to regulate disorder. Since measures of security can only function within a context of freedom of traffic, trade, and individual initiative, Foucault can show

that the development of security accompanies the ideas of liberalism.

Today we face extreme and most dangerous developments in the thought of security. In the course of a gradual neutralization of politics and the progressive surrender of traditional tasks of the state, security becomes the basic principle of state activity. What used to be one among several definitive measures of public administration until the first half of the twentieth century, now becomes the sole criterium of political legitimation. The thought of security bears within it an essential risk. A state which has security as its sole task and source of legitimacy is a fragile organism; it can always be provoked by terrorism to become itself terroristic.

We should not forget that the first major organization of terror after the war, the Organisation de l'Armée Secrète (OAS), was established by a French general, who thought of himself as a patriot, convinced that terrorism was the only answer to the guerrilla phenomenon in Algeria and Indochina. When politics, the way it was understood by theorists of the "science of police" in the eighteenth century, reduces itself to police, the difference between state and terrorism threatens to disappears. In the end security and terrorism may form a single deadly system, in which they justify and legitimate each others actions.

The risk is not merely the development of a clandestine complicity of opponents, but that the search for security leads to a world civil war which makes all civil coexistence impossible. In the new situation created by the end of the classical form of war between sovereign states it becomes clear that security finds its end in globalization: it implies the idea of a new planetary order which is in truth the worst of all disorders.

But there is another danger. Because they require constant reference to a state of exception, measures of security work towards a growing depoliticization of society. In the long run they are irreconcilable with democracy.

Nothing is more important than a revision of the concept of security as basic principle of state politics. European and American politicians finally have to consider the catastrophic consequences of uncritical general use of this figure of thought. It is not that democracies should cease to defend themselves: but maybe the time has come to work towards the prevention of disorder and catastrophe, not merely towards their control. On the contrary, we can say that politics secretly works towards the production of emergencies. It is the task of democratic politics to prevent the development of conditions which lead to hatred, terror, and destruction and not to limits itself to attempts to control them once they have already occurred.