

Brussels 22/3 (Guest blog)

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2016-3-24

The Brussels attacks should prompt serious introspection about European society, but are also part of the internationalisation of the Syrian war, writes LSE Media and Communications Associate Professor [Dr Bart Cammaerts](#)

Being a Belgian it was a weird and surreal day on Tuesday, but surrealism is after all a defining characteristic of the Belgian soul. From very early in the morning, messages from colleagues and friends started pouring in: 'are you ok, are your family and friends ok?' As far as I know now they are and my thoughts are with those that were caught up in the atrocities committed in Brussels.

As I was teaching the whole day, I was not able to listen or watch the live media coverage as the day evolved, but after catching up with it, it occurred to me that a lot of the media and political discourses were very similar to what we heard after 9/11, the 7/7 London bombings and after the more recent Paris attacks. Unfortunately, no lessons have been learned. In essence, what we see is the repeated construction of a stark and essentialist dichotomy between the righteous and above all civilized 'self' and the barbaric evil 'other', the [process of othering](#) at work without room for nuance, raising a barrier to prevent us from going down the route of self-reflexivity or auto-critique.

After such horrific events, the lack of an appetite to be reflexive, rational and considerate is to some extent understandable, but at the same time also deeply problematic as a refusal to do so means giving an exclusive platform to those political forces and discourses that see these indiscriminate violent acts which are designed to cause maximum fear and panic as instrumental in the process of 'othering', as mere ammunition in their already existing narratives of anti-immigration, anti-cosmopolitanism, of reestablishment of borders, and of articulating a stark 'us' and 'them' distinction.

There are many problems with this, but let me highlight two important ones here. First, what is positioned as the 'other' is most often not the 'other' at all, but rather part of 'us'; I have called it ['the other within'](#) (and this not only applies to the very recent attacks in Brussels, but also Paris and previously London too). It concerns, by and large, young guys that were born and grew up in our societies, went through 'our' educational system. Through these systems, they are supposed to have been acculturated into in our democratic society which is supposed to be inclusive, responsive and representative of the interests of all. However, this is clearly not the case as these youth are radicalized, rejecting the society they are part of, even to the extent that they are able to enact and/or justify such atrocious acts. Why is this? And why do we exclusively ask what is wrong with 'them' and how the communities they emerge from need to disavow them without questioning what is going wrong in/with our societies to elicit and foster this kind of deep-seated hatred and raw violence. The easy and classic answer of those invested in the process of othering is that even asking this question is apologetic, but this is not the case. Just because I plead for an introspection of Western society and of how we treat the other within, does not mean that I condone these atrocious acts.

Secondly, there is undeniably an international context here that needs to be acknowledged. The fact that a lot of Belgian, French as well as UK youth over the last couple of years went to Syria to fight and came back to Europe more radicalized, hardened, and well-trained certainly played a role here. What many, deliberately or not, refuse to emphasise and point out, however, is that Europe, the US, Russia are all directly engaged and implicated in a brutal and ongoing armed conflict in Syria.

In a way, I think, it is rather surprising that there is this level of astonishment. Why are we surprised that the persistent bombardments by a coalition of Western countries, resulting in the destruction of Syria and parts of Iraq, would not lead to any real consequences for Europe itself? It is now becoming clear that the 'under the radar' war we are waging has a genuine impact on Europe, for example at the level of a refugee crisis that is threatening the

European project, but also in terms of bringing the war and the violence that is an inherent part of war to our capitals. In this regard, our violence is deemed to be necessarily and unavoidably legitimate and 'theirs' is not. The attacks in Paris and Brussels, but also in London and Madrid before that, are cases of serving the horror and devastation we cause 'there' on daily basis back to us, but arguably on a much lower scale than what we cause there at a much more sustained level. But we have a plethora of media eager to amplify the spectacle of terror in such a way that results in the moral and psychological impact of 30 deaths in Belgium being more heartfelt and more devastating than the hundreds of thousands of dead and many more wounded in Syria.

This does not imply that I want to minimise 'our' 30 victims by juxtaposing them with 'their' victims, but we all collectively delude ourselves that the story of the victims of that war will only be written 'there' and not 'here'. The fact is that it is not a story of the benevolent self and the barbaric other. It is much much more complex and nuanced. 'We' are victims but also in a way perpetrators through what our governments sanction and enact, likewise those we consider the perpetrators are also victims.

By Bart Cammaerts

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