Guest Editorial:
On the Protean Nature of Crime

Julio Arboleda-Flórez

In the editorial of the February issue of this journal, our Editor-in-Chief, Dr. George Palermo, questions whether we are witnessing a different type of criminal behaviour, to judge by the terrorist attacks in New York. Dr. Palermo wonders about psychodynamic explanations leading to the concomitant immolation of the perpetrator at the time of the criminal deed. Is it mandated by rational thinking about the need for self-sacrifice in the interest of a “cause,” or by a subconscious wish driven by a deep sense of guilt? This question deserves further elucidation. Unfortunately, we have no means to peek into the soul of the suicidal bomber, but we could speculate about a “new criminology” that is independent from the perpetrator and in which the perpetrator is as much a victim as a victimizer.

Crime independent from the perpetrator is not a new phenomenon. On occasions, the perpetrator may not be fully aware of the damage inflicted on the victim as is exemplified in the article in this issue concerning adolescent prostitution in Nigeria. The “john” seeking sexual pleasures with an adolescent, sometimes a prepubescent child, is just the paying instrument at the end of a system of systematic sexual abuse of the child with the profits going to third parties far away from the scene of the crime. Other times, the perpetrator is just a pawn being manipulated by others directly through threats, or through appeals to sacrifice for a cause. Manipulation of others to become cannon fodder to advance a particular social or political point of view is not new either. What seems to have changed in this respect, however, is the beneficiary of the crime, from the perpetrator or from a small group of committed individuals as seems to be the case with the IRA or the Colombian FARC, to a cause, regardless of cost to anybody. At the bottom of the change in this type of crime is the belief that the final victory of a point of view is well above any other considerations and that sometime in the future, millions will benefit from the deed. Security of the self or of other members of the group or suffering to be inflicted on a countless and anonymous number of potential victims are secondary issues not worth debating about.

The terrorist’s fanatic belief in the cause is further solidified though the stark reminder of subjugation and poverty as happens among the Palestinians in Janin or Ramallah. Further solidification of the belief in the cause also develops through the appeal to a higher being whose magnanimous rewards will be showered on the sacrificial lambs in the afterlife as happened among the terrorists in New York.
Both groups of individuals apparently make the facile calculus that there is only one reason for their distress, Israel or the United States, and that would that reason be excised, all their difficulties in this and in the afterlife will be over. Yet, there is a difference in the two groups, for the Palestinian terrorist seems to have a clear sense of destiny and the ultimate achievement is perfectly articulated—statehood in the near future for the survivors. For the New York plane terrorist, however, the goals may have not been that clear, the beneficiaries were not clearly spelled out, and the reward was not articulated in earthly returns.

Although, as indicated, we will not be able to tell what was the ultimate motivation of a suicide bomber in Tel Aviv or of the New York plane kamikazes, we may be able to map out their personality characteristics through the use of psychological autopsies. Yet, this will not be enough because we will have to keep in mind that the final incentive for their criminal action and personal sacrifice may have been the urgings of master manipulators offering statehood or heavenly rewards. Without such, the act would have not occurred. It should be understood also that the manipulator might not be manipulating ignorant or illiterate individuals exploiting their naivete or a lack of political sophistication; this would be an easy explanation. In fact, the perpetrators might themselves be intelligent and highly educated individuals, highly sophisticated, but fanatically committed to the cause.

The maximization of impact is another change in criminology. What is sought is no longer a personal gain whose profits have to be rapidly enjoyed as in rape, or spent as in mugging or robbery, or seeking anxiety relief as in neurotic crime, but an anonymous mayhem whereby the more the victims the better. The aims are to impress on the powerlessness of the state to protect the citizens and on the felt vulnerabilities of the latter, as citizens will feel equally powerless to effectuate any change that could provide any protection. The uncertainty and suddenness of the attack would tend to maximize its impact, as potential victims become paranoid and lose internal peace and equanimity and actual victims fruitlessly seek reasons for the event or search on how they could have behaved differently to protect self or others—hence the importance to understand that the psychodynamics of the crime have changed from the victimizer to the victim and that the impact of the event has become more important than its preparation and execution.

The change in criminology that we are witnessing is also punctuated by a call to atavistic religious, cultural, and historical roots. We all should agree that the deeds of a few religious zealots using the name of God, or Allah, should not be equated to the sacred tenets of a particular religion. The fact remains, however, that Islamic imagery and symbols are being used by the manipulators and that no loud backlash or denunciations against this misuse of sacred symbols have actually been heard from the minarets of the mosques in the countries from where the terrorists hail. A silent acquiescence seems to condone the misuse of the symbols. It may be that in the minds of the believers, Jihad is holy war, no matter whether it is called by a rabid mullah in Iran, an irate preacher in Saudi Arabia, Osama bin Laden, or the Prophet Himself.
As such, therefore, the face of criminology, crime, and the criminal has changed. Psychodynamic explanations may actually serve very well to understand the alienated youngster shooting schoolmates and teachers, and they could also explain the tortuous mind of the poor criminal wracked by neurotic contortions. Equally, socioeconomic considerations often suffice to understand the crime of hungry city dwellers seeking sustenance or seething in anger at economic exploitation. But neither psychodynamic explanations nor socioeconomic pronouncement will be enough any longer to explain the new criminology. We will have to find some other avenues to explain this new type of criminal and criminal behavior that have to take into account historical and ancient cultural and religious elements as well as contemporary grievances for the group, not just the individual perpetrator. Group dynamics and the need to seek cohesiveness by identifying an external threat or demon and a deeper understanding of sociopolitical as well as of geo-economic changes may provide better avenues for explanation of the new criminology than traditional psychological and socioeconomic explanations. I trust a search along these lines could go a long way to answer Dr. Palermo’s timely question.

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