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CAPTURE AND IDEOLOGY

Acts of terror are perpetrated by people who are captured by an idea. At some point in their development, terrorists often become enthralled by the belief that they are fighting for a cause larger than they are, a truth that transcends the self. Such ideologies, whether political or religious in nature, are all-encompassing systems of belief, potent stories that render a frustrating and complicated world seductively simple.

To the faithful, ideologies promise a kind of immortality, beyond the gates of heaven or in the chronicles of world history. In the case of radical Islamism, this promise is made all the more powerful by a profound sense of political injustice. Since the dawn of colonialism, devout Muslims have been under attack, economically and politically oppressed, or forbidden from living in accordance with their own laws and customs. Part of the appeal of radical Islamism is the promise of a return to an idealized past, a golden age when the faithful lived in harmony with God and with one another.

But al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS, are by no means the only groups to yoke utopia to violence. By their

very definition, ideological narratives such as Hitler's theory of Aryan supremacy, the political paranoia of Stalinism, and the genocidal fervor of the Khmer Rouge promise to deliver the faithful from the confusing, complicated, ambiguous everyday if only they pledge themselves to fighting the oppressor. It is a seductive and powerful promise, one that preys on the individual's desire to escape the confines of the self, all in the name of a greater path, to connect to something more meaningful.

The most horrific acts of violence or terrorism are, then, not merely expressions of sadism or depravity. Often, at the heart of seemingly inexplicable violence lies capture, or what political scientist George Kateb calls "ideological half-thinking."

Kateb has devoted his career to the role of ethical deliberation in liberal democracies. He is, in this sense, a direct descendant of Hannah Arendt, perhaps the West's most trenchant theorist of political evil. For Arendt, the atrocities of twentieth-century history—Stalin's gulag and Hitler's death camps—could not be explained through the traditional vocabulary of the vices. Behind such seemingly inexplicable events was not some demonic creativity. Rather, these full-scale atrocities were perpetrated by people who were captured by ideological half-thinking or, as Kateb puts it, "ideas that are not carefully thought through but that are so attractive that they get us to act as if we were beside ourselves, indeed not ourselves."

Ideology can lure us into a kind of trance: we are, by our very nature, susceptible to ideas that allow us to make sense of the world in all its teeming diversity. As Kateb explains, these fictions are so seductive because they "lend the world a coherence, a kind of power or beauty, that it did not otherwise have." These narratives depart from everyday reality in order to invest in "a completion, a structure, a magnificence" that reality otherwise lacks. All too often humans have acted on such fictions, hoping to realize that magnificence, and in so doing, have become willing to destroy everything that exposes the story as untrue.

Arendt identifies this pattern of capture in the great tragedies of modern history. Ideology, in all its many guises (jihadist martyrdom or anticommunist hysteria or the desire for *Lebensraum*), promises

nothing short of spiritual redemption, albeit by worldly measures. Many people who initially know such an ideology to be fictitious, or invented, eventually come to see it as real, even inevitable. "You begin by telling a story," Kateb explains, "and the longer you tell it, the louder you say it, the more you're taken in by the deception that you thought you were putting over on someone else. It's now being put over on you by yourself. . . . If a story begins in contrivance but nonetheless affects people's actions, if it seems to be making things happen, then, *Why, look, it's working. It has to be true. It couldn't be otherwise.*"

We know that in the process of capture, attention becomes progressively automated and focused; judgment and critical thought recede, replaced by a "pre-reflective" mental state. Kateb explains how ideologies appeal to this biological mechanism: "We all have susceptibilities, vulnerabilities. Things that sweep us up, exert an almost impossibly strong influence on us." Once we are within their grasp, "we find ourselves committed before we know just what has happened to us."

These susceptibilities extend the radius of capture beyond the private struggles of the addict, the suicidal patient, the obsessive artist, and the school shooter. What was once personal becomes social, even societal. Still, the quest for elusive and illusory control revolves around the seduction of "if only": If only I had a drink, a hit of cocaine. If only the entire world recognized this truth, lived according to these rules.

In the twenty-first century, one ideological force that has confounded Western understanding has been the pull of radical Islamism.

THE AMERICA I HAVE SEEN

"The American," wrote Sayyid Qutb in 1951, "is primitive in his appreciation of muscular strength and the strength of matter in general."

For the Egyptian religious scholar, this primitiveness was nowhere more evident than on the football field. Unlike its European counterpart, the "rough American style" had "nothing to do with its

name, for the foot does not take part in the game." Rather, Qutb explained to his readers, each player tries "to catch the ball with his hands and run with it toward the goal, while the players of the opposing team attempt to tackle him by any means necessary, whether this be a blow to his stomach, or crushing his arms and legs."

Qutb was just as struck by the sight of American fans as they cheered on the grunting quarterbacks, or whooped at smoky boxing championships and "bloody, monstrous wrestling matches." Their ardor was pure "animal excitement born of their love for hardcore violence": "Enthralled with the flowing blood and crushed limbs," these creatures delighted not in athleticism but in displays of savagery: "Destroy his head. Crush his ribs. Beat him to a pulp." In Qutb's mind, lurking in the grandstands of suburban America was the senseless barbarism that defined a barbaric nation.

Sayyid Qutb was an unusual spectator in the football stadium of Greeley, Colorado. Born in 1906 to a respectable but struggling family in Upper Egypt, he spent his childhood in the rural village of Musha. His early education was primarily religious: by the time he enrolled at a recently opened government school, he had memorized the entire Qu'ran. A quick-witted and diligent student, Qutb managed to secure a highly sought-after place at a teacher training college in Cairo after graduation.

In the 1920s, the Egyptian capital was a bustling, chaotic city of cinemas, cafés, and grand boulevards adjacent to medieval slums. To the pious Qutb, Cairo was at once alluring and repellent: its cosmopolitan elite disdained local customs and sought to shed Islamic traditions in favor of Western cultural values. By the 1930s, Qutb had found a spiritual home for himself among the city's leftist intelligentsia, penning reviews and poetry in Egypt's fledgling literary journals.

With the outbreak of World War II, Qutb's journalism became increasingly politicized: he decried the abuses of Allied troops, who "ran over Egyptians in their cars like dogs." The Americans, he declared in 1946, are "no better than the British, and the British no better than the French." All Westerners were "sons of a single loathsome material civilization without heart or conscience." Around the

same time, Qutb wrote a sharp denunciation of Egyptian radio stations for broadcasting morally debased popular songs; only spiritually exalted music should be aired, he argued.

Perhaps because of his increasingly strident political journalism, Qutb received a grant from the Egyptian Ministry of Education to travel to the United States to study the American education system. Perhaps the Egyptian government wanted to contain the unruly intellectual's radicalization, or simply keep him out of Egypt for a time. In any case, in 1949 Qutb set off for the Colorado State College of Education.

It was in Greeley, Colorado, that Qutb first encountered football—and the equally perplexing institution of the American church. Qutb observed that despite Americans' fervor for building churches, they had little interest in "the spirituality of religion and respect for its sacraments," and "nothing was farther from religion than the American's thinking and his feelings and manners." Americans, Qutb concluded, go to church not for spiritual uplift but for "carousal and enjoyment, or, as they call it in their language, 'fun.'"

In his travelogue, Qutb records the landscape of 1950s suburban America: "Each church races to advertise itself with lit, colored signs on the doors and walls to attract attention, and by presenting delightful programs to attract the people much in the same way as merchants or showmen or actors." To the Muslim visitor, even more disturbing than neon church signs was the free commingling of religion and sex: ministers felt "no compunction about using the most beautiful and graceful girls of the town" to attract parishioners.

For Qutb, this spectacle represented the contradictions at the heart of American society. Repulsed by its secularism, materialism, and moral laxity, he decided to return to Egypt early. His frustration with Western culture, however, followed him back to Cairo: he soon resigned from the civil service and joined the Muslim Brotherhood, a grassroots organization dedicated to the revival of traditional Islamic values throughout the Arab world. In the political maelstrom of midcentury Egypt, the Brotherhood represented a powerful rebuke to the incursion of Western culture and to the rise of secular ideologies throughout the Islamic lands. The creation of a Jewish

state in Israel and the resulting displacement of Palestinian Arabs only added a sense of urgency to the Brotherhood's call for action against the forces of the secular West.

In 1954, Qutb was arrested and charged with orchestrating an attempt to assassinate Egypt's secularist president, Gamal Abdel Nasser. Over the course of his imprisonment, other members of the Brotherhood were regularly arrested and tortured by Egyptian authorities: guards suspended the prisoners with their arms tied behind their backs, beat them with clubs, and subjected them to near drownings. One particularly sadistic guard killed twenty-one Muslim Brothers and wounded nearly twice as many when they refused to break stones in a local quarry.

As Qutb witnessed the maimed corpses of his comrades being carried through the corridors of the prison, his sense of injustice transformed into indignation. For Qutb, the line separating *Hizb Allah*, the "party of God," from *Hizb al-Shaytan*, the "party of Satan," could not have been starker.

Qutb was incredibly prolific while imprisoned; during his twelve years of confinement, he wrote his most widely read works. These volumes, including *Milestones*, were smuggled out of Cairo's Tura Prison, copied by hand, and circulated throughout the Islamic world. In *Milestones*, Qutb's worldview became increasingly Manichean; he called for the "extermination of all Satanic forces and their ways of life." Qutb blamed "Zionist Jews" and "Christian crusaders" for all the ills of modern society, from prostitution and drug abuse to capitalistic greed and spiritual anomie. "Humanity today is living in a large brothel!" he proclaimed. "One has only to glance at its press, films, fashion shows, beauty contests, ballrooms, wine bars, and broadcasting stations! Or observe its mad lust for naked flesh, provocative postures, and sick, suggestive statements in literature, the arts and the mass media."

In the face of this moral and spiritual corruption, he argued, Muslims were morally obligated to wage war against the forces of *jahiliyya*, or pre-Islamic ignorance and barbarism. Only a literal interpretation of the faith (a return to the *salaf*, or "fundamentals") would bestow on mankind true freedom. In every other system, men

serve other men, Qutb explained; in Islam, men serve only Allah. "Islam is a universal truth," he concluded, "acceptance of which is binding on the entire humanity. . . . If anyone adopts the attitude of resistance, it would then be obligatory on Islam to fight against him until he is killed or he declares his loyalty and submission."

Qutb urged his readers to view the Qu'ran not as a theological tract but as a manual for action, "as a soldier on the battlefield reads his daily bulletin so that he knows what is to be done." The controversial "Sword Verse" of the holy text, which commands the faithful to take up arms against paganism, was to be interpreted not as broad spiritual guidance but as an operations manual for jihad. In this sense, Qutb is the intellectual who most immediately shaped the thinking of today's radical Islamist leaders, and his works continue to occupy a central place in the canon of militant groups, including al-Qaeda and Islamic jihad. It is no coincidence that Qutb's younger brother, Muhammad, taught the young Osama bin Laden.

Qutb returned again and again to the myth of a golden age. He was enthralled by nostalgia for a bygone era (albeit an imagined one) defined by spiritual clarity, social cohesion, and moral simplicity: "Mankind today is on the brink of a precipice, not because of the danger of complete annihilation which is hanging over its head—this being just a symptom and not the real disease—but because humanity is devoid of those vital values which are necessary not only for its healthy development but also for its real progress." These virtues, he believed, could be found in the early Islamic era, long before the tides of colonialism eroded the social and political values of the Muslim world. Only by reclaiming Islam as a way of life, an all-encompassing social and political system, could Muslims restore their civilization to its former glory. Qutb dedicated *Social Justice in Islam* to "the youth whom I behold in my imagination coming to restore this religion as it was when it began . . . striving in the way of God, killing and being killed, believing profoundly that glory belongs to God, to His Apostle and to the believers."

In August 1965, Qutb was rearrested and sentenced to death for plotting to overthrow Nasser's secular government. When Nasser offered him the chance to avoid execution, Qutb staunchly refused

to negotiate with his enemy and remained stoic in the face of his impending death. In a June 1966 letter to the Saudi Arabian author 'Abd al-Ghaffar 'Attar, he described himself as having undergone a spiritual epiphany in prison: "I have been able to discover God in a wonderful new way. I understand His path and way more clearly and perfectly than before. My confidence in His protection and promise to the believers is stronger than ever before."

After his execution in 1966, Qutb was hailed as a martyr by not only fellow members of the Brotherhood but Muslims worldwide who had found in his writings an escape from spiritual confusion. "Death," Qutb insisted, "does not represent the end. Life on earth is not the best thing God bestows on people. There are other values and nobler considerations." Here, Qutb quoted from the Qu'ran: "If you should be slain or die in God's cause surely forgiveness by God and His grace are better than all the riches that [others] amass. If you shall die or be slain, it is to God that you should be gathered." In a world that seemed hell-bent on silencing the faithful, few words could have provided greater comfort to the spiritually and politically dispossessed.

"Believers," Qutb enjoined, "fight those of the unbelievers who are near you, and let them find you tough; and know that God is with those who are God-fearing." He described the heavenly paradise that awaited those Muslims willing to embrace martyrdom; there, they would "rejoice in what Allah has bestowed upon them of His Bounty." Those who die in the service of Allah, Qutb proclaimed, "are alive, with their Lord, and they have his provision."

Qutb's belief in a golden era not only captured him, but also provided the ideology to capture future generations of followers.