The Australian media on the origins of terrorism

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Considerable media coverage has been devoted to the heartfelt remarks of 20-year-old student Joe Frost to a memorial meeting for the victims of the Bali terror bombings of October 1. Addressing a crowd of more than 1,000 in his hometown of Newcastle last Thursday, Frost summed up the mood of many: "This kind of thing always happens to someone else. I've heard many people say that over the last few days and I've said it myself. But the reality is that bomb hit us that night, and it's hit our whole community, and so tonight we come here and as we said in the homily, we come with questions. Now one question on my mind is: why did this happen?"

Frost's comments were the subject of an editorial in the *Australian* last Saturday. As with almost all the media commentary, its purpose was not to provide an explanation or understanding of this latest atrocity, but to render such a thing impossible.

According to the *Australian* there is only one answer. It is to be found "in the minds of the fanatics motivated by hatred of the West and inspired by the lie of martyrdom" and in the ideology of fundamentalist Islam which regards "ordinary Australians as mortal enemies, fodder for its terrible designs."

Similar themes were taken up elsewhere. An article by the ex-radical Christopher Hitchens published in the *Age*, headlined "Seeking rationality is futile", put the bombings down to "the power of theocratic propaganda". Similarly, an editorial in the *Daily Telegraph* described the terrorist attacks as a "hallmark of evil", a "horrific reminder of the capacity that exists within a small percentage of mankind to commit appalling crimes against their fellow humans" inspired by the evil ideology promoted by "the monsters behind Jemaah Islamiyah."

Editorial writers and media pundits frequently point to the "medieval" philosophy of the terrorist groups, and their inability to come to terms with "modernism." But nothing recalls medievalism so much as the pundits' own references to "evil forces" "monsters" and the explicit repudiation of rationality. Such "explanations" are reactionary in the deepest historical sense. They explicitly reject all the advances in thought over the past 300 years that have been grounded on the understanding that it is possible to provide a scientific explanation for all social phenomena.

Providing a rational explanation does not mean extending support or justification for the phenomenon under investigation. As Leon Trotsky once remarked in another context: "As a rose does not lose its fragrance because the natural scientist points out upon what ingredients of soil and atmosphere it is nourished, so an exposure of the social roots of a personality does not remove from it either its aroma or its foul smell."

The Australian declares: "One notable difference between the aftermath of this month's attacks and the Bali bombings that left 202 dead three years ago is that on this occasion even the left/liberal commentariat has backed away from blaming everything but the perpetrators. As with the battle of ideas that followed September 11, 2001, the targets for blame for the October 2002 atrocities in Bali included the victims (immoral, ugly, Western tourists), global poverty, the US, the war on terrorism, George W. Bush, John Howard, Israel or all the above. Perhaps the horror of July's London Underground bombings and Bali 2 has finally convinced this clique that no justification exists for spilling innocent blood for evil ends."

Leaving aside the utter hypocrisy of the *Australian*, which every day pumps out justifications for the spilling of innocent blood in the war on Iraq, let us turn to the central assertion made here: that to expose the social roots and causes of a phenomenon is to justify or support it.

According to this method, the countless historians who have sought to uncover the roots of fascism in the history of Germany, the violence unleashed in World War I, the problems created by the Versailles Treaty and the crisis of German and world capitalism in the 1920s and 1930s—to name but a few factors—are guilty of trying to justify the crimes of Hitler and the Nazis.

Simplistic "explanations" for the eruption of terrorism may satisfy simple minds, or those whose critical facilities have been completely deadened by the incessant media barrages denouncing the evils of "evil", but they will not satisfy anyone seriously trying to probe Joe Frost's question.

A moment's consideration makes clear why. If terrorism can be explained by the power of evil, then why has this evil only recently arisen? After all, according to the head of the Australian Federal Police, Mick Keelty, terrorist bombings of the kind seen in Bali were not even on the police planning horizon as little as five years ago. "To us five years ago it would have been absolutely foreign to think that somebody would blow themselves up in order to kill Westerners," he declared last week. What has changed so dramatically in that time? And if the cause is radical Islam then why has it become so powerful now?

If the bombings have been inspired by radical clerics such as

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Abu Bakar Bashir, then how is it that he and others are seemingly able to find an endless stream of recruits willing to sacrifice their lives? And why do such forces enjoy support in Indonesia?

Any genuine probing of the social and political origins of terrorism establishes why there has been such a concerted campaign to prevent such an examination.

The recent rise of reactionary Islamic-based organisations is bound up with the increasingly aggressive role of US imperialism—starting with the Gulf War of 1990-1991—and the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq. Organisations such as Al Qaeda and its offshoots represent disaffected sections of the bourgeoisie in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Contrary to the rhetoric they espouse, the real agenda of these organisations is not the establishment of a Caliphate from Spain to Indonesia—the latest fantasy created by the White House "spin doctors"—but an accommodation with imperialism that will provide them with greater economic and political power.

The fact that they have been able to win support, especially from young men, is a product of the deep-going hostility felt by large sections of the population to the explosion of imperialist re-colonisation and the free market agenda and deepening social polarisation that accompany it.

Indonesia is a case in point. The so-called Asian crisis of 1997-98 saw the deepest economic slump in the region in the post-war period coupled with a series of "free market" measures, imposed by the International Monetary Fund, to extract the money owed to major banks and financial institutions and to create the conditions for even deeper penetration by Western financial capital, especially from the US.

Economic processes are not the only factors at work. Islamic fundamentalist groups—no matter how reactionary—were actively promoted by the imperialist powers during the Cold War because they provided a bastion against the "spread of Communism". And nowhere more so than in Indonesia.

In the bloody coup of October 1965, which brought General Suharto to power and secured Indonesia as a US ally, the CIA provided the names of leading members of the Communist Party to the army, which then utilised Islamic groups to organise the mass murder of between 500,000 and one million members of the party and its affiliated peasant and trade union organisations. More recently, various "Islamic jihadists" from Indonesia and other parts of South East Asia played central roles in the US-organised operations against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan at the end of the 1980s.

Revealing the roots of terrorism does not absolve the terrorists, nor does it justify their activities. But it does lay bare the social soil out of which they arise—a soil whose nourishment is continually supplied by the political economy of global capitalism and the foreign policies of its ruling elites. It also establishes why any of the so-called "solutions" based on beefed-up anti-terror laws and repression, coupled with the stepping up of the "free market" agenda, will only create more recruits for terrorist organisations and even greater tragedies in the future.

The factors we have elaborated so far by no means provide a complete explanation of the rise of terrorism. The question still remains: why in Indonesia, and elsewhere, are social tensions unable to find a more progressive outlet? Why have the reactionary religious fundamentalists been able to capitalise on the alienation and hostility felt by millions of people, especially from among the youth?

The answer is to be found in the crisis of the international workers' movement. The old national-based organisations and their political perspective—trade unionism and reformist politics in the advanced capitalist countries, anti-imperialist movements in the oppressed countries—have collapsed under the impact of the sweeping changes arising from the globalisation of capitalist production. The collapse of the Stalinist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was the highest expression of this process. The false identification of Stalinism with socialism and communism over decades has created enormous confusion and left millions to conclude that there is no alternative to the depredations of the current social order.

Not for the first time in history, political consciousness, at least to this point, is lagging well behind social reality. The resulting crisis of perspective in the working class has provided the conditions for the growth of all sorts of poisonous political weeds, among the most noxious of which is religious fundamentalism.

But the very economic and political processes set in motion by the globalisation of capitalist production—above all the fact that working people all over the world face a common struggle against the same globally-organised corporations and financial institutions—are creating the objective conditions for the development of a genuine international socialist movement of the working class, far exceeding anything that has gone before. This is the perspective on which the World Socialist Web Site is based.

And such a movement will make short political shrift of the various reactionary fundamentalist and terrorist organisations, whose growth in the recent period is, in the final analysis, an expression of the decay of the capitalist order itself.

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