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The Public Psychologies of Terrorism: An Example from France

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Abstract. This article describes several hypothetical intrapsychic phenomena that may be activated to engender terrorist behavior after the publicization of a terrorist event.

Jose Bove is a French farmer and a left-wing militant who has admitted intentionally damaging a McDonald's restaurant in an attempt to help decrease foreign incursions into the French food economy and United States (US) economic sanctions against several French food exports. During Bove's trial, the prosecutor indirectly suggested that the McDonald's attack might have been at least partially responsible for another terrorist attack by Breton militants against another branch of McDonald's in which a one death occurred.

Although Bove protests that he certainly did not intend to precipitate a terrorist attack by Breton militants, the fact remains that there are several hypothesized psychological pathways that could have contributed to such a precipitation. First, the political support, acclaim, and even adulation afforded Bove might have served through vicarious conditioning as a model for other would-be terrorists seeking similar positive reinforcement. Second, the publicization of Bove's act might have disinhibited aggressive or politically violent tendencies in a subgroup of the population in Brittany including Breton militants. Third, Bove's acts might have desensitized target populations of Breton militants to whatever these militants had been up to, thus forcing these militants to escalate their political acts in the service of their political goals. Fourth, the physical similarities between the Bove and Breton acts, the size of the temporal interlude between them, and the fact that both occurred in France to similar proximal targets exemplify the common social psychological criteria contributing to causally or correlatively associating two events.

For all these reasons, the cries of outrage in the courtroom when the prosecutor made his insinuations might bespeak of an ignorance of relevant psychological findings, along with the politically designed rhetoric employed by Mr. Bove's supporters. As well, antiterrorist and counterterrorist authorities might justifiably express outrage. For in today's globalizing world, the intentional and unintentional sequelae of terrorism seem as prevalent as they are unpredictable. (See Crenshaw, M. (2000). The psychology of terrorism: An agenda for the 21st century. *Political Psychology*, 21, 405-420; Prosecutor links attack on McDonald's to a later one. (July 2, 2000). *The New York Times*, p.Y6; Pennell, A. E., & Browne, K. D. (1999). Film violence and young offenders. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 4, 13-28; Thomas, D. C., & Meglino, B. M. (1997). Causal attribution in an intercultural interaction: The effect of stimulus presentation mode. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 28, 554-568; Van Overwalle, F. (1997). A test of the joint model of causal attribution. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 27, 221-236.) (Keywords: Breton, France, Jose Bove, McDonald's, Terrorism.)