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TERROR: THE NEGLECTED BUT INESCAPABLE CORE OF TERRORISM

“We are determined to answer the call of history and we will defeat terror.”
U.S. President George W. Bush

“Only by the elimination of terrorism’s root causes can the world hope to succeed in greatly reducing it if not putting an end to it.”
Haig Khatchadourian, The Morality of Terrorism

“What can be done against force, without force?”
Cicero, Letter to his Friends

THE SETTING

On Sept. 11, 2001, during the first year of this new millennium, the cities of New York and Washington D.C. were attacked by terrorists. The loss of life – approximately 3,000 civilians – was exceeded in American history only by battles during the Civil War, although cities in other countries experienced far greater civilian casualties during World War II.

A number of factors make the events of 9/11/01 and their aftermath unprecedented in American history: First, the attacks were perpetrated by foreign terrorists on American soil. Second, U.S. civilian airplanes were transformed into weapons of mass destruction. Third, the U.S. was not in a declared state of war at the time. Fourth, the identities of the perpetrators were unknown and were probably “non-state actors”. Fifth, no one has claimed responsibility for the events of 9/11, in contrast to most other terrorist attacks and acts of violence committed against civilian populations during wartime and since 1945. Finally, millions of Americans, as well as many civilians in other countries, have felt unprecedented levels of stress, anxiety, trauma, and related feelings of having been “terrorized” by these attacks.

According to a study conducted by the RAND corporation and published in the November 15, 2001 issue of The New England Journal of Medicine, 90 percent of the people surveyed reported they had experienced at least some degree of stress three to five days after the initial attacks on 9/11, while 44 percent were trying to cope with “substantial symptoms”. These symptoms include the respondents’ feeling “very upset” when they were reminded of what happened on 9/11; repeated, disturbing memories, thoughts, and/or dreams; difficulty concentrating; trouble falling and/or staying asleep; and feelings of anger and/or angry outbursts. Furthermore, the RAND
study found that 47 percent of interviewed parents reported that their children were worried about their own safety and/or the safety of loved ones, and that 35 percent of the respondents’ children had one or more clear symptoms of stress. The survey concluded with a list of measures taken by these randomly selected American adults to cope with their feelings of anxiety and stress.

How generalizable are these findings? Would these findings be comparable to studies of other populations terrorized and traumatized by political attacks? How long will people feel this way, even in the unlikely event that no significant additional acts of terrorist violence are perpetrated on American soil? And how will everyday citizens and policy-makers behave if there are more events like September 11, 2001?

How might we try to account for the usage of “terrorism” as a political tactic and of terror as a predictable human response to the violence, and threats of violence, employed by terrorists against innocent people? And what might we all learn about terror from the experiences of people around the world who underwent and survived terrifying acts of political violence during the twentieth century?

Is there a common core experience of terror that links the victims of contemporary terrorist attacks to populations who were terrorized during the twentieth century? For example, are the survivors of terrifying acts of political violence committed during the Second World War psychologically and ethically similar to the concentration camp survivors of the Nazi and Stalinist periods? To what degree do their experiences resemble those of the surviving victims of acts of state-sponsored terrorism, such as “ethnic cleansing” and genocide, committed in Eastern and Central Europe during the twentieth century? And what measures – psychotherapeutic, socioeconomic, legal, political, and diplomatic – should taken to aid the victims of terrorism, to prosecute the perpetrators of mass political violence, and to minimize the risks of future terrorist attacks?

These are the questions that orient my phenomenological and cross-cultural inquiry into terror and terrorism. In this essay and in the recently published book (Terror, Terrorism, and the Human Condition, St. Martin’s/Palgrave/Macmillan Press 2004), I will also report and analyze the feelings and thoughts of survivors of terrorist and related attacks, both in the Western Hemisphere and in Europe.

UNRAVELING THE HISTORY AND SCOPE OF TERROR AND TERRORISM

The events of 9/11 and their aftermath constitute a unique variation on an all-too-common historical theme, one played out in terrifying variations in Europe during the twentieth century. These historical events offer us the opportunity to explore and to try to come to terms with our most basic needs, feelings, thoughts, and desires – including vulnerability, rage, meaninglessness, dread, revenge, hostility, conviction, hope, fortitude, courage, faith, and solidarity.

I take a novel approach to understanding the multiple dimensions of terror and terrorism, and I situate and assess the diverse and often divergent meanings and interpretations of these terms, experiences, and events within a comparative and historical framework.

My methods for approaching terror and terrorism are multidisciplinary. They are drawn from phenomenological and trauma psychology, psychoanalytic and political
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theory, comparative politics, ethnography, and oral history. They are informed and undergirded by a conviction that the kinds of nonviolent theory and practices articulated and exemplified by Gandhi and Martin Luther King, as well as by the peace movements of the early 1980’s and by the “Velvet Revolutions” in Germany and Eastern Europe in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, offer us today a practicable model for confronting both the terrorist “wars” outside our persons, and the terrors inside us as well.

The similarities and differences among American, European, Latin American, and Asian interpretations and experiences of terror and terrorism are intriguing and important, especially if we hope to devise culturally appropriate ways of treating the victims of political terror and to facilitate prosecution of the perpetrators of political terrorism.

WHAT IS “TERRORISM”? 

“The term ‘terrorism’ means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.”

DCI Counterterrorist Center, Central Intelligence Agency, p. 3.

“… it (terrorism) is distinguished from all other kinds of violence by its ‘bifocal’ character; namely, by the fact that the immediate acts of terrorist violence, such as shootings, bombings, kidnappings, and hostage-taking, are intended as means to certain goals... which vary with the particular terrorist acts or series of such acts [...] the concept of terrorism is a ‘family resemblance’ concept [...] Consequently, the concept as a whole is an ‘open’ or ‘open-textured’ concept, nonsharply demarcated from other types/forms of individual or collective violence. The major types of terrorism are: predatory, retaliatory, political, and political-moralistic/religious. The terrorism may be domestic or international, ‘from above’ – i.e., state or state-sponsored terrorism, or ‘from below’.”

Haig Khatchadourian, The Morality of Terrorism, p. 11.

“... terrorism is fundamentally a form of psychological warfare. Terrorism is designed, as it has always been, to have profound psychological repercussions on a target audience. Fear and intimidation are precisely the terrorists’ timeless stock-in-trade [...] It is used to create unbridled fear, dark insecurity, and reverberating panic. Terrorists seek to elicit and irrational, emotional response.”


“Etymologically, ‘terrorism’ derives from ‘terror’. Originally the word meant a system, or regime, of terror: at first imposed by the Jacobins, who applied the word to themselves without any negative connotations; subsequently it came to be applied to any policy or regime of the sort
and to suggest a strongly negative attitude, as it generally does today [...] Terrorism is meant to cause terror (extreme fear) and, when successful, does so. Terrorism is intimidation with a purpose: the terror is meant to cause others to do things they would otherwise not do. Terrorism is coercive intimidation.”


“All wars are terrorism!”

Political Slogan.

In searching for a universal definition of “terrorism”, a concept that is as contested (“one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter …”) as it is “open”, I found that “terrorism” has been used most often to denote politically-motivated attacks by subnational agents (this part is virtually uncontested in the relevant scholarly literature) and/or states, (this is widely debated, but increasingly accepted) on non-combatants, usually in the context of war, revolution, and struggles for national liberation. In this sense, “terrorism” is as old as human conflict.

However, “terrorism”, and “terrorists” have become relativized in recent times, since there is very little consensus on who, precisely, is, or is not, a “terrorist”, or what is, or is not, an act of “terrorism”. Thus, who is or is not a “terrorist”, and what may or may not be “acts of terrorism”, depend largely on the perspective of the group or the person using (or abusing) those terms.1

“Terrorism” is clearly a sub-category of political violence in particular, and of violence in general. Almost all current definitions of terrorism known to me focus on the violent acts committed (or threatened) by “terrorists”, and neglect the effects of those acts on their victims. My focus is on the terrifying effects of certain violent acts on the victims of those acts, rather than on continuing the never-ending debate as to who is, or is not, a “terrorist”. Nonetheless, for functional purposes, I propose the following definition of “terrorism”:

Terrorism is a premeditated, usually politically motivated, use, or threatened use, of violence, in order to induce a state of terror in its immediate victims, usually for the purpose of influencing another, less reachable audience, such as a government.

Note that under this definition, states – which commit “terrorism from above” (TFA) – and subnational entities, individuals and groups alike – which engage in “terrorism from below” (TFB) – may commit acts of terrorism. Note as well, that the somewhat artificial distinction between “combatants” and “non-combatants” does not come into play here, since both groups may be terrorized by acts of political violence.

My underlying assumption is that unless necessary and sufficient conditions can be provided by perpetrators of “terrorism from above” (i.e. state actors using “terror bombing” to attempt to break the morale of a civilian population and its government, as has been done numerous times since the Italians bombed Tripoli in 1911), and by “terrorists from below” (ranging from the Russian revolutionaries and defenders of “Red Terror” during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to Al Qu’aeda) to justify their acts, any act that deliberately inculcates terror is, more or less,
unethical. However, there are of course degrees of moral culpability. The decisions by Churchill to target the civilian populations (especially the working class neighborhoods of industrial cities) of Germany for “terror bombings” during World War II, and by Truman to “nuke” Hiroshima and Nagasaki (which had no military significance) are, by this criterion, acts of “terrorism from above”. But they are not morally equivalent to such acts of “terrorism from below” as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 on the United States, or of the acts of other terrorist groups (such as the “Red Army Faction”) during the late twentieth century who targeted civilians as means to achieving perceived political ends. This is not because they are “less unethical”, but, on the contrary, because they more unethical, for both consequentialist and deontological reasons.

From a consequentialist perspective, terror bombings of civilians during wartime have resulted in many more casualties (millions of dead and wounded) than all acts of “terrorism from below” combined. Furthermore, they have rarely resulted in achieving their declared political objectives: The firebombings of German and Japanese cities did not by themselves significantly induce the German and Japanese governments to surrender, rather, they tended to harden to resolve of the indigenous populations to fight harder (as did the German Blitz of England during 1940). Even the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki did not significantly influence, or accelerate, the outcome of the War in the Pacific, because the Japanese government seems willing to have surrendered before the bombings. On the other hand, the terror bombing of Rotterdam in 1940 (which, apparently, may not have been intended by the Luftwaffe) was followed almost immediately by the surrender of the Dutch to the Germans; and Serbia did withdraw from Kosovo soon after Belgrade and other Yugoslavian cities were bombed by NATO in 1999. But in these two cases, the bombing was brief and civilian casualties were probably in the hundreds, and not in the hundreds of thousands, as they were in Germany and Japan during World War II.

Accordingly, the terror bombings committed by Great Britain and the United States, as well as by Nazi Germany and by Japan (principally in China), are classic examples of “terrorism from above”, (TFA) or “state terrorism”, (ST) and they resulted in millions of civilian casualties, without accomplishing their most important political objectives, viz., the profound demoralization of the civilian populations and prompt surrender of their antagonists. But what these state terrorists did accomplish, like their “terrorists from below” counterparts, was the terrorization of huge numbers of people, the use of persons as means to alleged political ends, and the dehumanization and denial of dignity to the objects of their terror bombings. And this is unethical by any known moral criterion.

To sum up the commonalities and differences between TFA and TFB in terms of their respective degrees of moral culpability for terrorizing and/or killing many innocent (and possibly a few “guilty”) people, while both are unethical, TFA usually exceeds TFB in its moral reprehensibility in terms of the:

1. Magnitude, or Scale, of terror, TFA, or ST, is immeasurably more pernicious than TFB, since nation-states under Hitler and Stalin killed and/or terrorized tens of millions of their own citizens in the 1930s and 1940s, and slaughtered millions of “enemies” during the Second World War. Japan, Great Britain, and the United States also killed and/or terrorized millions of “enemies” in Chinese and German cities

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during that war. Latin American, African, and Asian despots and dictators, many with American support, killed and/or terrorized many thousands of their own citizens during the twentieth century. And the United States has used “precision bombing” and “counter-insurgency” campaigns to kill and/or terrorize millions of Vietnamese and other Southeast Asians, as well as civilians in countries ranging from Afghanistan to Somalia. In comparison, the collective efforts of TFB groups, ranging from the IRA and PFLP to Al Qu’aeda, have probably resulted in fewer than 10,000 casualties – a tragedy for all the victims and their families, but in scale not comparable to TFA “collateral damage”.

2. The Culpability, or Degree of Legal and/or Ethical Responsibility, of the people who made the decisions to terrorize and/or kill people unfortunate enough to be living in states at war with their own is also disproportionately skewed toward TFA. Such decision-makers as Hitler, Stalin, Truman, Churchill, Pol Pot, and L.B. Johnson, who collectively issued orders resulting in the deaths of tens of millions of non-combatants and the terrorization of millions of their compatriots, rarely if ever engaged in personally overseeing the soldiers, sailors, and bombardiers who “were just following” (their) “orders”. On the contrary: they were distant and detached from the mass killings that resulted from their policies, and would probably have refused to acknowledge their culpability for any “war crimes” and/or “crimes against humanity” – had they ever been called before an institution such as the International Court of Justice. In contrast, most leaders of TFB subnational groups are themselves directly involved in the terrorist operations, and may even put their lives at risk “for the sake of the cause”. They may rationalize what they do, and justify mass murder by appeals to political motives (as do TFA decision-makers), but they would be, and have been, held individually legally culpable for their “crimes against humanity”, unlike their TFB counterparts (the trials of Serbian leaders may set a notable precedent for a TFA decision-maker to be held legally culpable for crimes against humanity, in this case Bosnians).

TFA and TFB share comparable degrees of moral culpability because:

1. They instrumentalize the victims of their terrorist tactics. Both TFA and TFB turn civilian noncombatants and combatants alike into disposable means to be used (or terrorized) in order to achieve perceived political ends. Along the way,

2. They Dehumanize, Objectify, and Demonize their real and perceived “enemies”, including the leaders of other nations or groups (“The Great Satan”, “The Evil One”, etc.). They also frequently polarize the conflicting parties, esteeming themselves and their followers as “good and virtuous”, with “God on our side”, and denigrating their opponents as “wicked, evil” and frequently “in-” (or sub-)“human”. Citizens of other states who are killed and/or terrorized by their subordinates’ tactics are denoted as “collateral damage”, and “body counts” of those killed are often employed as quantitative measures of an “operation’s” “success”.

3. They use or threaten to use Violence on a Mass Scale, often disregarding and/or prematurely discarding nonviolent means of conflict resolution. From a crude utilitarian perspective, the “costs” of “inadvertent” and or “unintentional” – but nevertheless predictable and foreseeable “friendly fire” and/or “collateral damage” are reflexively seen by many decision-makers to be outweighed by the perceived “benefits” of “victory”. Dialogue, negotiation, diplomacy, compromise, the use of
nonviolent tactics and/or of non-lethal force, and the recourse to international
institutions, are often regarded by both TFA and TFB as, at best futile, and at worst
weak and defeatist.

4. Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), including but not limited to chemical,
biological, and nuclear weapons, are desirable "assets" to both TFA and TFB, even
though the use of such weapons on a significant scale may have global – even
omnicidal and therefore suicidal – consequences. WMD Terrorism is the logical
extension of the "logic of deterrence" and the "ethics of retaliation" (a version of lex
talionis).

Consequently, this "Age of Global Terrorism", dating from the early twentieth
century, when "total war" and "strategic bombing" became acceptable components of
military and diplomatic strategy, has culminated in the progressive obliteration of
important previously-held distinctions. Most notably, there has been a gradual
collapse of the distinction between "illegitimate" (i.e. civilian non-combatants) and
"legitimate" (i.e. military) "targets", as well as of the distinction between "terrorists"
and "the states" (and peoples…) that, allegedly, "support them".

Finally, this century-long process is leading to the erosion of the boundary
between "terrorism" and "war", to such a degree that, since at least the early days of
World War II, for the civilian populations of the affected states, war has, ipso facto,
become indistinguishable from terrorism. Terror, or psychological warfare, has
become a predictable tool to be employed by war planners and policy-makers. This
turn of events is on the one hand a regression to the kind of "barbarism" that preceded
the rise of "civilization" about 5000 years ago in the Ancient Near East, and on the
other hand is a seemingly inevitable consequence of technological "progress"
unaccompanied by a comparable "moral evolution" on the parts of the proponents,
practitioners, and apologists for TFA and TFB alike.

WHAT IS TERROR? HOW DOES TERROR FEEL? WHAT ARE ITS SOURCES?

"The idea that you can purchase security from terror by saying nothing
about terror is not only morally bankrupt but it is also inaccurate.”
Australian Prime Minister John Howard.

"Terror for me was an auditory process. I was terrified all the time but
had no words for it.”
German Survivor of the Allied Bombing of Wurms in 1944-45.

"History is terror because we have to move into it not by any straight
line that is always easy to trace, but by taking our bearings at every
moment in a general situation which is changing.”
Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Humanism and Terror, p. 94.

Unfortunately, despite Australian Prime Minister’s assertion, virtually no one has
talked in a meaningful way about the root of terrorism – terror. This is an omission
that stands out amidst the endless talk of fighting a "war against terrorism/terror". It is
also a glaring lacuna in current scholarly investigations (at least in such major
Western languages as English, German, and French), which focus either on trauma
(and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, PTSD) and anxiety (the clinical literature), or on terrorism, terrorists, and counterterrorism (the social scientific/policy-oriented literature). But there is virtually no serious analysis of terror in the major Western scholarly discourses, with the glaring exception of Spanish (mostly from Latin America) accounts of political terror from above and below. The rest of this essay will try to begin a conversation about this vital, but neglected, core dimension of terrorism. It is very much a work-in-progress, since the research I am undertaking to understand terror and its vicissitudes is still underway.

Is terror primarily a feeling state, an acute and potentially traumatizing kind of anxiety? Does terror lead to an overwhelming sense of helplessness, to a state of unanticipated and uncontrollable panic?

Is the source of terror primarily intrapsychic, some unresolved and possibly unresolvable unconscious conflict between repressed impulses and desires? Or is terror a situationally-appropriate response to an externally induced, environmental cause, one that triggers overpowering feelings of dread and vulnerability?

What is terror’s relation to aggression and violence? Does the intensity of the experience of terror unleash, and even rationalize, aggressive and violent responses to those we blame for our unbearable anxiety?

How do we behave when we feel terrified? Do we seek immediately and automatically to rid ourselves of terror? Do we then transmit this emotionally intolerable condition to others, whom we then brand as “terrorists”, the alleged cause and source of our unease? Is terror contagious, spreading uncontrollably among panic-stricken people?

Does the unbearable heaviness of being in terror compel us to expel, split off, and dissociate terror, as quickly as possible and by any means necessary?

Are “terrorists” really “criminals”, “fanatics”, and “zealots”, wholly “other” to us? Or are they to a remarkable degree the “shadow side” of “civilized peoples”, the unleashed and unrepressed violence lurking in virtually all of us? Do many “terrorists”, especially those with deep ideological and/or religious convictions, have a way of facing death from which we might learn, even if we deplore their taking of human life?

Based on my reading of the extant psychological, psychoanalytic, historical, and social-scientific literature, as well as on a content analysis of 52 interviews I have conducted with survivors of terrifying political violence in 13 nations (ranging from Denmark to Chile, but mostly in Germany, the United States, Spain, and the former Soviet Union), I tentatively conclude: We don’t yet know the answers to these important questions! This is in part because of the lack of good academic discourse on terror (except in relation to horror films and to PTSD, which I believe is a syndrome that may, or may not, follow as sequelae to one or more terrifying incidents, such as a bombing, a rape, or an accident or assault). It is also due to the overdetermined and complex nature of terror, and of its important, but poorly understood, connections to anxiety, horror, panic, paralysis, and trauma.

To initiate a broad-based, multidisciplinary inquiry into terror and its “family resemblances”, I offer the following provisional definition:

The term “terror” denotes both a phenomenological experience of paralyzing, overwhelming, and ineffable mental anguish, as well as a behavioral response to a
real or perceived life-threatening danger, Ex post facto (sometimes as much as 80 years after the events occurred) descriptions of terrifying experiences by people I have interviewed cluster around the following themes:

First, the experience is described as having been overwhelming. The people felt helpless and completely vulnerable during the time of the assault (mostly bombings by airplanes during war).

Second, they described the situation as uncontrollable, a time of loss of autonomy and surrender of self-control to an often unseen, and always menacing, “other”.

Third, the outcome of the event is universally depicted as unknowable and unpredictable – possibly leading to bodily injury and/or death – and the terror is of indefinite if not infinite duration.

Fourth, the salient subjective feeling is that of acute anxiety, sometimes panic, and the cognitive orientation is of profound spatial/temporal disorientation.

Fifth, the person feels their body as frozen, immobilized, and often paralyzed, incapable of self-direction and mobility.

Finally, the intensity of the experience of terror is so great that most people find themselves unable to speak, and later are left wordless when they attempt verbally to describe it. Terror is profoundly sensory (often auditory), and is pre- or post-verbal. The ineffability of terror is a complement to, and often a result of, the unspeakable horror(s) of war(s).

I do not (yet) know if the sample of people I have interviewed is representative of the victims of politically terrifying events (ranging from sniper to aerial attacks) in their own countries, much less globally. Perhaps we will never know. But I do know that to expose anyone to any of the terrors these people have lived through is to commit a significant transgression of human rights and an inexcusable assault on personal dignity. Accordingly, terrorism in all its forms is deeply unethical. In my recently published book, Terror, Terrorism, and the Human Condition, I explore this topic in more detail and in greater depth.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF TERRORISM, AND THE TERRORS OF THE FUTURE

“Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person.”

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 3, United Nations.

“Only by the elimination of terrorism’s root causes can the world hope to succeed in greatly reducing it if not putting an end to it.”

Haig Khatchadourian, The Morality of Terrorism, p. xiii.

“The cardinal principles of humanitarian law are aimed at the protection of the civilian and civilian objects. States must never make civilians the objects of attack and must consequently never use weapons that are incapable of distinguishing between civilian and military targets.”

The International Court of Justice, Paragraph 78, Legality of the Threat Or Use of Nuclear Weapons, Advisory Opinion, 8 July 1996.
Are terror and terrorism a portal into our common human condition? What do the existence of terror and terrorism reveal about the world, one in which our worst fears may indeed come true? Is the future of terrorism to include an ever-escalating series of attacks and counterattacks culminating in global annihilation? Or can such hypothetical, but foreseeable, terrors be minimized by the judicious application of self-restraint on the one hand, and of nonviolent means of conflict avoidance and resolution on the other hand.

Over two millennia ago, Cicero asked: “What can be done against force, without force?” The answer is “maybe a great deal, maybe very little; it depends on the situation”. But to assume that the only, or best, “realistic” response to the use of deadly force, and/or terror, is to reply either “in kind” or with even greater force, is virtually to guarantee that our common future will be even more terrifying than has been our collective history. Is this the future we wish our descendants to have?

NOTES

1 See my book with David Barash, Peace and Conflict Studies (Sage Publications, 2002), pp. 80-83, for a fuller discussion of the semantics and history of “terrorism”.

REFERENCES

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