

Understanding terrorism

PSYCHOSOCIAL ROOTS,

CONSEQUENCES,

AND INTERVENTIONS

EDITED BY

FATHALI M. MOGHADDAM

AND ANTHONY J. MARSELLA

AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, WASHINGTON, DC

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DISHONEST CRIMES, DISHONEST LANGUAGE: AN ARGUMENT ABOUT TERRORISM

BRIEN HALLETT

The most salient fact about the word *terrorism* is that it establishes a superfluous, redundant, unnecessary category. Every terrorist incident, after all, is essentially a common crime—the crime of arson, kidnapping, murder, or the like. As a result, no need exists to establish a new category, a new type. Any terrorist incident can be fully prosecuted under one or another of the existing criminal statutes. Just to muddy the waters further, every victim of the common crimes of arson, kidnapping, murder, or the like has been terrorized, whether the perpetrator claims to be a terrorist or not. Furthermore, the terror felt by the direct victims radiates out to the larger community and influences others and affects their sense of security as well as social and political policies. Hence, logically, no distinction exists between common criminal incidents and so-called terrorist incidents. A murder by the local mafia gang is essentially the same as a murder by the local terrorist cell. Murder, in the final analysis, is murder.

However, if “terrorism” is little more than a difference searching for a distinction, an ordinary crime by another name, the terrorists do not see it that way. They do not think they are criminals committing crimes. Rather,

adopting the language of war, they see themselves as "freedom fighters," "soldiers" on the front lines of some "war" against oppression and injustice. Yet again, whatever the terrorists' self-understanding, in reality, their language is dishonest. They possess none of the characteristics of soldiers but all of the characteristics of common criminals. According to the Geneva Convention, a "soldier" is one who meets the following four conditions: "(a) that of being commanded by a person responsible for his subordinates; (b) that of having a fixed distinctive sign recognizable at a distance; (c) that of carrying arms openly; (d) that of conducting their operations in accordance with the laws and customs of war" (Geneva Convention (I) for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field (1949), Article 13 (2)). As is true in any criminal organization, a terrorist might be "commanded by a person responsible for his subordinates," but terrorists fail to meet the other conditions. More important terrorists do resemble common criminals both in the crimes they commit and in the secret, clandestine nature of their lives.

However, terrorists do differ from common criminals in two respects: First, with few exceptions, terrorists' crimes are much more spectacular than ordinary crimes of the same type. Second, terrorists say that their crimes are not motivated by any self-interests but, rather, are committed solely in the interests of others, the oppressed. Thus, what distinguishes terrorist incidents from common criminal incidents is, first, the public relations or theatrical aspect of the crime and, second, the presumption on the part of the perpetrators of a self-sacrificing motivation. To say the same thing in different words, the terror generated by common crimes is largely an unintended consequence of those crimes, which are committed for other self-serving reasons. Terrorists reverse the equation. They commit their crimes specifically for the terror they generate. Moreover, because their crimes are not self-interested, only the most theatrical setting and effects serve the terrorists' public relations aim.

What all this head-spinning dissonance adds up to, I would suggest, is the inexplicable character of terrorist crimes. To be sure, no crime can be justified. By definition, arson, kidnapping, murder, and the like are ethically repugnant. Although not justified, common crimes are easily understood and explained. The explanation in every case is instrumental. The crime serves the perceived self-interest of the perpetrator, whose greed or lust or vengeance is thus satisfied. Whenever a crime does not serve the perpetrator's perceived self-interest, it becomes, literally, inexplicable.

Terrorism is just such an inexplicable crime. Both the exaggerated, theatrical character of the crime itself and the terrorists' claim that they have committed the crime for the benefit of others create a mystifying confusion between self-interested crime and self-sacrificing love: One of the characteristics of love is a willingness on the part of the lover to sacrifice his or her interests for those of the beloved. Terrorists see themselves in this self-sacri-

ficing role. Yet, is there any other word besides *perverse* to describe a lover who commits not just crimes but spectacularly theatrical crimes for his beloved? Is this not the language of the abuser? "I hit you because I love you." "I kidnap, murder, and destroy buildings because I love you." Like all abusers, terrorists wish people to believe that their crimes are acts of self-sacrificing love, when, in reality, they are unjustified perversions, the delusional self-interest of the terrorists masquerading as self-sacrifice.

Put simply, whenever criminals portray themselves as self-sacrificing martyrs for a cause, confusion and cognitive dissonance are the only possible results. Significantly, the September 11 terrorists left no note explaining why they hijacked the planes, turned them into bombs, and murdered thousands. What, after all, could they have written to explain such horrors? Would anything they could have said make us understand their crimes?

In a most curious way, therefore, common criminals are basically honest, whereas terrorists are basically dishonest. Common criminals honestly acknowledge that they are motivated by simple greed. They also honestly understand that what they are doing is wrong. This self-understanding means that they attempt to accomplish their crimes as surreptitiously as possible, so as to avoid detection and arrest. The publicity generated by spectacularly theatrical crimes, they understand, is not in their best interests. When caught, their self-understanding also leads them to deny that they perpetrated the crime, which they honestly acknowledge was heinous. The unity and simplicity of their self-serving, self-interested motivation and self-understanding is reflected in the unity and simplicity of people's reaction to them: They are crooks; lock them up and throw away the key.

Terrorists, in contrast, are dishonest about their motives, which are mixed. In their public manifestos, they claim that they are motivated by the need to remedy some great political or social injustice. In private conversations, however, they reveal that they are really socially isolated "true believers,"¹¹ lashing out against an irredeemably corrupt world that can be saved only by destroying it. On account of their mixed motivations, terrorists do not admit that their crimes are wrong; indeed, they think that their crimes are not crimes but, instead, are fully justified by the absolute corruption of the world, on the one hand, and the absolute purity of their own motivation, on the other hand. This mixed motivation produces a bizarre situation: In the first place, when arrested, their confused self-understanding leads them either to proudly plead guilty to their crimes, because they are not crimes in their eyes, or to praise the crimes as righteous blows against oppression but to plead that they did not take part in the incidents with which they are charged. In the second place, the crimes themselves are perpetrated in the most spectacular and theatrical manner possible, so as to

¹¹Eric Hoffer's (1951) *The True Believer* is still the best book on this topic.

produce maximum publicity for the cause espoused in their public manifestos. The desire for maximum publicity, however, only illustrates the confusion under which these dishonest criminals labor: The publicity is, the terrorists believe, good for their publicly espoused cause; it is, however, not good for the terrorists themselves, as any honest criminal would tell them, because it draws attention to them and pressures authorities to arrest and prosecute them.

In fine, the simple, honest, self-serving, self-interested greed that normally explains criminal behavior does not explain terrorists' behavior. Rather, the mixed motivation and self-understanding of terrorists produces cognitive dissonance both in their own minds and in the minds of all who observe them. Being inexplicable, the void is filled by a venerable, Machiavellian theory for gaining political power: The terrorists, so the theory goes, seize the "weapon of the weak" to wage an "asymmetric war" against the oppression and injustices of the powerful. The terrorists, the theory continues, do not commit crimes; rather, their spectacularly theatrical "operations" give a "voice to the voiceless." Indeed, the rhetoric of the theory of terrorism is seductive. However, what this theory really does is to create a false impression through a dishonest language. It leverages the mixed motivation and confused self-understanding of the terrorists so as to shift the locus of their self-interest from the individual criminal to an imagined collective, "the oppressed."

Willfully blinded and confused by this shift, the terrorists are unable to see the self-defeating nature of their tactics. From the perspective of nonterrorists, the primary ethical and political error made by terrorists is that they have chosen the least effective means for conducting their conflict and achieving their publicly espoused goal.

ETHICS OF TERRORISM: EVALUATING ENDS AND MEANS

Gandhi characterized his struggles for justice with the Sanskrit word *satyagraha*, which translates as an insistence upon, searching, or struggling for truth. By extension, the person who engages in *satyagraha* by insisting upon truth is a *satyagrahi*. The two Sanskrit terms are useful because they provide terms that contrast directly with terrorism and terrorist.

Building upon this terminological contrast, the initial difference between a *satyagrahi* and a terrorist is that the *satyagrahi* engages his opponent both openly and directly; the terrorist, secretly and indirectly. The *satyagrahi*, therefore, is much more like a soldier than is a terrorist. Indeed, the *satyagrahi* meets all but one of the conditions of the Geneva Conventions for a soldier. The *satyagrahi* does not carry any arms, openly or otherwise. More specifically, the *satyagrahi* begins by engaging the opponent in direct negotiations over a well-articulated grievance. When these fail, the *satyagrahi*, then and only then, engages the opponent in direct action—a march, a boycott, a sit-

in, or the like²—the purpose of which is to rekindle the failed negotiations so as to achieve a settlement of the grievance. Crucially, any casualties that may result from the direct action are from among the *satyagrahi* and not from among their opponents. In contrast, terrorists denigrate negotiations and, instead, issue manifestos, which they follow up with attacks involving the destruction of property, people, or both. Such attacks, however, are not for the purpose of rekindling negotiation so as to resolve some grievance; rather, they are for the purpose of gaining media attention for their "cause," giving a "voice to the voiceless," as the cliché has it. Crucially, any casualties that may result from the attacks are usually not from among the terrorists, but rather from among people whom nonterrorists consider to be innocent bystanders. Should any terrorists become casualties, their death or injury most frequently results either from a mistake—the bomb they are carrying explodes too early—or from a breach in their secrecy that has allowed the police to discover their plot.

The only exception to this is an incident involving a suicide bomber. This horrible exception only exacerbates the cognitive dissonance, however. On the one hand, a suicide bombing is simply an act of murder, usually multiple murders. Yet, on the other hand, it is even more inexplicable than other types of terrorist incidents precisely because of the accompanying and accomplishing suicide. The self-understanding of the terrorist as being motivated by a self-sacrificing love for the oppressed is seemingly reinforced and confirmed by a very real self-sacrifice. In consequence, the terrorist is now labeled by his sympathizers as a *martyr*. However, true martyrs are not criminals. Martyrs die for their beliefs at the hands of others. They do not murder others for their beliefs. Again, like *satyagrahi*, the only blood on the hands of martyrs is their own. Suicide bombers must also account for the blood of the multiple victims of their murderous death, a death that greatly increases the theatrical quality of their dishonest crime.

The second difference between the *satyagrahi* and the terrorist is that terrorists fight on one front only, whereas the *satyagrahi* fights on two fronts simultaneously. That is, both terrorists and Gandhi and his spiritual heirs fight against some specific injustice: colonial or dictatorial rule, racial segregation, foreign domination and oppression, and the like. These are the mediagenic battles, the ones that one reads about in newspapers and sees on television. For terrorists, this is the one and only battle. As soon as they have made headlines, their battle is over. They recede into the shadows to plot their next headline-grabbing event. In contrast, for Gandhi and his heirs, this is a secondary, less important, front. More important, if hidden from the media, are the battles where they fought against their own supporters, who,

²In his classic study of strategic nonviolence, Gene Sharp (1973) analyzed nearly 200 protest techniques. For an overview of the 20th century history of nonviolence, see Ackerman and Knueger (1994).

either in their enthusiasm or their frustration, cried out for more justice faster. Justice is not a quantity, however; it is a quality. It cannot come faster or slower; it can come only when opponents join together in a more perfect community. Thus, the *saryagrāhi*, unlike the terrorist, knows that whatever the passions and conflicts of the moment might be, both sides to the dispute ultimately must live in harmony with each other. And so, whenever emotions of revenge, retaliation, or retribution arose among their followers, Gandhi and his spiritual heirs swung into action, closed down the protest that had allowed emotion to outpace common sense, and began the process of retraining and indoctrinating their followers, unlike terrorists who feed precisely upon these raw emotions.³

The third difference between the *saryagrāhi* and the terrorist grows out of the second. For, the *saryagrāhi*'s knowledge that they and their opponents must live together in harmony after their conflict has ended, as all conflicts must, means that the *saryagrāhi* cares as much for the means used as for the end sought. In contrast, the terrorists, not caring for future harmony but only the cause of the moment, believe that their end justifies their means. This observation brings one to the heart of the ethics of terrorism. The ethics of terrorism turn upon an evaluation of the ends sought and the means employed. For terrorists, the absolute value of the end—the justice of the cause found in their public manifestos and for which they say they are murdering—fully justifies any means whatsoever. For the *saryagrāhi*, the overarching value of their end—that they and their opponents will live together in peace after the grievance has been resolved—justifies only a limited number of means.⁴

More formally, the evaluation of ends and means is framed by two reciprocal, contingent propositions:

1. When the end sought truly justifies the means chosen, the act is just and, therefore, by definition, not terrorism.
2. When the end sought does not justify the means chosen, the act is unjust and, therefore, by definition, an act of terrorism.

For example, consider two contrasting cases: If voting is a right guaranteed by the Constitution to all adult Americans and if registration is a justifiable prerequisite for voting, then is walking to the place of registration—either singly or in a group—either illegal or unjust? In contrast, if a small subset of the Basque people, appealing to the right of self-determination, wish to establish an independent Basque nation-state, then are assassination, car bombings, bank robberies, and extortion either legal or just means to achieve this

³The classic example of shutting down a campaign at the moment of its greatest success is Gandhi's 1930 Salt March. (see Weber, 1997).

⁴For the mature expression of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s (1967) thinking, see his *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* For Gandhi, the best source is still the *Bhagavad Gita*, especially chapter 11. For a secular or "strategic" view, see Burrows (1996).

independence? Under Franco's dictatorship? Under the post-Franco Spanish democracy? Those who answer "no" to both cases will not characterize a voter registration march as terrorism, but they will characterize the *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (Fatherland and Liberty; ETA) campaign as terrorism. The opposite is of course also true; those who answer "yes" to both cases will characterize a voter registration march as terrorism or, at least, as illegal, and ETA's campaign as just, if not legal.

EVALUATING ENDS AND MEANS: EXPLANATION VS. JUSTIFICATION

As with any moral judgment, the myriad factors and circumstances of the two categories render the analysis extremely complex and difficult. Fortunately, though, resolving the extreme complexity of these or any other specific cases is very much beyond the scope of this chapter. What is within the scope, however, is the oft-neglected distinction between justification and explanation, an important distinction already noted above which, not incidentally, allows one to explore further the relationship between ends and means.

If the quicksands of fanatical extremism explain how terrorists and their enabling sympathizers can both explain and justify terrorism to themselves, it does not do the same for third-party observers. For, unlike "true believers," third-party observers usually possess a relatively high tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity in their world. Recognizing the existence of uncertainty, non-"true believers" have a perspective that rejects any and all horrors in the means used to attain their desired ends. They draw the line when the horror is too horrible. They are, therefore, able to understand, first, that the end (always) justifies the means only in a trivial and formal manner. Cognizant of this formal trap, they are, then, able to establish criteria for evaluating the moral acceptability of the means used with respect to the ends sought. That is, they understand that the end never justifies all the means, only some means—it justifies only those means that are (a) proportional, (b) discriminating, and (c) well-intentioned. However, because acts of terror are, by definition, neither proportional, discriminating, nor well-intentioned, the public "justifications" for acts of terror neither explain nor justify such acts for non-"true believers."

In fine, the twisted logic of terrorists and other "true believers," based, as it is, on tortured tautologies, leads inevitably to immorality, if not to terrorism. Convinced of the absolute truth of their cause, "true believers" cannot imagine that the most horrible means are not fully justified. They cannot imagine that they too could follow the examples of Gandhi, King, Aquino, the East Europeans, Mandela, and others. These *saryagrāhi* all understand that justice is elusive and, hence, that only well-intentioned, discriminate,

and proportional protests can draw it out of their opponents. Terrorists, lacking this understanding, are unable to imagine the alternative to their theatrical crimes. This is the terrorists' ultimate sin, a lack of imagination.

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE OF TERRORISM SCHOLARSHIP

When one turns from terrorists to those who study terrorists, the sources of the cognitive dissonance change. For terrorists, it is the incongruence between their public explanation and their private explanation as "true believers" that generates extreme dissonance in their minds and ours. For those who study terrorism, it is the misclassification of the phenomenon. Instead of classifying terrorism as a species of crime, they have too often classified it as a species of "war," which is to be located under the genus of "political violence." For example, one of the leading journals in the field is entitled *Journal of Terrorism and Political Violence*. This error is natural enough for anyone who spends much time reading what terrorists write. That is, the misclassification has, no doubt, arisen because in their public manifestos, terrorists always allege that they are "soldiers" "waging war" in the service of some higher political or social cause. Although this portrayal is flattering to the terrorists, cognitive dissonance, not clarity and coherence, is the only result that one can expect from privileging the terrorists' self-understanding and dishonest language.

The problem is that terrorists are not waging a "war"; they are committing crimes. Thus, the true genus for their activities is "crime," which, in turn, needs to be broken down into the species of "arson," "kidnapping," "murder," and the like, before identifying the subspecies of "theatrical arson," "theatrical kidnapping," "theatrical murder," and the like, should one so desire this further division of the phenomenon. Be this as it may, having misclassified terrorism as "war," terrorism experts have had to acknowledge that terrorism is not really "war"; rather, it is somewhat like a photographic negative of "war." That is, under the genus of "political violence," terrorism experts have discovered at least two species: "real" or "positive" war, which is "positive" in the sense that it is the legitimate or lawful exercise of "political violence," and "unreal" or "negative" war, which is the photographic "negative" of "real" war in the sense that it is the illegitimate or unlawful use of "political violence." In summary, if "war" is the positive image of "political violence," then terrorism is its negative image.

Take, for example, a 1985 pamphlet from RAND by Brian M. Jenkins, a well-known expert on terrorism. Entitled *International Terrorism: The Other World War*, it illustrates both how old the association of terrorism with war is and how dissonance naturally arises whenever the self-image of the terrorists is taken at face value. Jenkins began with the testimony of terrorists and others:

"The Third World War has started," the notorious terrorist Carlos told his hostages in Vienna in 1975. A French soldier in Beirut, a survivor of the suicide terrorist bombing that killed 58 of his comrades, made a similar observation: "Our 58 comrades are perhaps the first, deaths of the Third World War." Unlike the wars of the past, this war did not begin with one identifiable event. Indeed, no one can say for certain when or where it began. (1985, p. 1)

Terrorists claim to be not criminals, but soldiers at war who are therefore privileged to break ordinary laws. (1985, p. 3)

A page later, however, Jenkins correctly refuted the terrorists' claim to be soldiers waging a war:

All terrorist acts are crimes. . . . The purpose is political. . . . Terrorism differs from ordinary crime in its political purpose and in its primary objective. . . . Terrorism is not synonymous with guerrilla warfare or any other kind of war . . . (1985, p. 4)

Terrorists, it appears, are not "soldiers" after all; in reality, they are criminals, albeit criminals with a "political purpose." Because this "political purpose" is based upon a claim made by the terrorists themselves, its validity is suspect. For the moment, I pass over these suspicions to evaluate further why terrorism is not "war," not even "guerrilla war." Although "not synonymous with guerrilla warfare," according to Jenkins, modern terrorism yet derives from modern theories of guerrilla warfare:

Present-day terrorism derives largely from twentieth century theories of guerrilla warfare, for which Mao Zedong deserves the most credit, although his paramount concern for winning the support of the masses would probably have made him reject the tactics of contemporary terrorism. . . .

Mao suggested that guerrillas must aim for and depend upon the political mobilization of people who are mere bystanders in a conventional military conflict. Mao thus introduced a relationship between military action and the attitude and response of the audience. This added a new dimension to armed conflict: Instead of gauging success primarily in terms of the physical effect that military action had on the enemy, strategists could now say that the effect a violent action has on the people watching may be independent of, and may equal or even exceed in importance the actual physical damage inflicted on the foe. Terrorism is that proposition pursued to its most violent extreme, though terrorists have not been very good at explaining it. (1985, p. 8)

What is most peculiar about the passage is not its claim for a Maoist origin for modern terrorism but rather the last clause. That is, although terrorists

³The final clause is important. Although Jenkins did not explain which excesses of contemporary terrorism Mao would reject, his point is that "political violence" has its limits. At some point, the means (tactics) chosen become so disproportionate, indiscriminate, and ill-intentioned that they revolt the oppressed masses and turn them against the terrorists.

can recite supposedly explanatory theories of terror, according to Jenkins, they have yet to justify their acts of terror; most especially, they have yet to either explain or justify how their terrorism will achieve their publicly declared goals:

In recent years, terrorists have turned out thousands of pages of manifestos, manuals, assessments, directives, claims, communiqués, commentaries, critiques, and self-criticism, but they have yet to articulate a clear and convincing theory to explain just how laying a bomb here or pulling a trigger there relates to the achievement of their objectives. (1985, p. 8)

In other words, terrorists have a well developed theory for the Machiavellian or instrumental use of terror, but they lack even the rudiments of a theory for the effective achievement of political and social goals.⁶ In contrast, Gandhi and his followers possess a proven theory for the effective achievement of political and social goals, precisely because they do not possess (indeed, they reject) all Machiavellian and instrumental theories of terror. But I digress.

The suspicion creeps in that the experts have spent too much time reading the “thousands of pages of manifestos, manuals, assessments, directives, claims, communiqués, commentaries, critiques, and self-criticism” and not enough time reflecting upon the fact that terrorists are simply criminals, who, as “true believers” possess a more grandiose self-justification than most criminals.

The cognitive dissonance in expert analyses of terrorism becomes more acute when the experts attempt to define terrorism. For example, Jenkins cannot decide whether “Terrorism is the use of criminal violence to force a government to change its course of action” (1985, p. v, also p. 2) or whether “Terrorism is theater [it is aimed at the people watching]” (1985, p. 9). In terms of simple logic, no need exists to define terrorism at all. All acts of terror are already crimes, as both Jenkins and I have already noted above. The dissonance is not reduced by reference to more official definitions of terrorism. For example, the FBI’s definition reads, “Terrorism: ‘The Unlawful Use of Force against Persons or Property to Intimidate or Coerce a Government, the Civilian Population, or Segment Thereof, in the Furtherance of Political or Social Objectives’” (28 C.F.R. section 0.85), whereas the congressional definition, found in the law establishing the State Department’s Annual Country Reports on Terrorism, is, “The term ‘terrorism’ means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant

⁶One of the better books on the continual failure of terrorists to reach their publicly stated goals is Calib Carr (2002), *The Lessons of Terror: A History of Warfare Against Civilians, Why It Has Always Failed and Why It Will Fail Again*.

targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents” (Title 22 USC, Chapter 38, Sec. 2656f (d) (2)).⁷

Of the three, the FBI definition is the more narrowly drawn, because it limits terrorism to “the unlawful use of force,” whereas the “politically motivated violence” of the congressional definition could encompass almost anything. Strangely, however, neither definition is based upon the rock hard fact that “All terrorist acts are crimes.” Instead, both are based on an effort to distinguish terrorism from war, terrorism being viewed as an antiwar or as a nonwar or, in some sense, as the photographic negative of war. That is, in order to transform both definitions into definitions of war, all that has to be done is to change one negative in the definition to a positive. Hence, the FBI’s definition is almost a paraphrase of a definition of war, “War: The Lawful Use of Force against Persons or Property to Intimidate or Coerce a Government, the Civilian Population, or Segment Thereof, in the Furtherance of Political or Social Objectives,” whereas the congressional definition is virtually a paraphrase of a definition of international war, “The term ‘international war’ means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against combatant targets by national groups or clandestine agents.” The same inversion is possible with the first of Jenkins’s definitions, “War is the use of non-criminal (lawful) violence to force a government to change its course of action.”

Terrorism is not an illegitimate war, however. Jenkins is surely right on three crucial points: (a) that terrorism is theatre, (b) that it not “synonymous with guerrilla warfare or any other kind of war,” and (c) that “all terrorist acts are crimes.” This being the case, then terrorism has nothing to do with war and everything to do with crime and theatre. Or, to cite Jenkins summarizing Mao again, war gauges “success primarily in terms of the physical effect that military action had on the enemy,” whereas terrorists gauge success by “the effect a violent action has on the people watching. . . .” War deals with physical facts on the ground; terrorism deals with theatrical displays in the media.

Thus, instead of regarding terrorists as having political purposes and engaging in “political violence,” a more factual and realistic conception is that they are criminals engaged in theatrical crimes. What distinguishes terrorists from other, more easily understood criminals, as Jenkins argued, is the theatrical quality of their crimes. Instead of seeking to hide their crimes from detection, terrorists actively seek to commit the crimes that bring them the most publicity, precisely because they are self-regarding, self-deluding, “true believers” turned criminals. Hence, a better definition of terrorism is that it

⁷No internationally recognized definition of terrorism exists. The United Nations is currently trying to develop one, in the wake of the attacks on New York City and Washington, DC, of September 11. Instead of a single definition, the international community has negotiated a number of conventions, each of which deals with a specific crime: hijacking airliners, attacking diplomats, and so on (located at <http://untreaty.un.org/English/Terrorism.asp>).

is a theatrical crime against persons or property. Developing the conception further, a terrorist is one who places greater value on affect than on effect, one who wishes to affect a real or imagined problem at the expense of effecting it so as to resolve it. Hence, again, the theatricality of terrorism and the polar contrast with Gandhi and his many followers.

THINKING ABOUT THEATRICAL CRIMES

Theatrical crimes confront one with three great, perplexing problems: (a) trying to understand the pain and trauma of the victims, (b) trying to understand the motivations of the theatrical criminals, and (c) trying to understand the relationship between terrorists, terrorism, and their social milieu: What conditions enable terrorism and terrorists more than others? The relationship between terrorists and their environment is critical, most especially for combating this type of crime. Because of its importance, I shall devote the next section, "Enabling Terrorism: The Social Milieu," to analyzing this relationship.

With respect to the first problem cited above, one simply cannot understand the pain and trauma of the victims. As with any crime, the victims are innocent; they are people who are truly caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. The word that describes their situation is tragedy. Furthermore, theirs is a wrenching tragedy over which one can only grieve, passing through the stages of shock, denial, anger, bargaining, guilt, depression, loneliness, acceptance, and (finally, one prays) hope. Arresting the perpetrators and bringing them to trial is all well and good; it should be done. But it does little to ease and nothing to erase the grief and suffering for the victims.

With respect to the second problem, the terrorists' motivations, the terrorists' press releases say that their terror is motivated by some palpable injustice, by oppression. But can one accept the self-justification of criminals? After all, crimes committed with the greatest sincerity are still crimes. Sincerity does little to reduce individual responsibility and culpability for a crime. Indeed, as argued above, the palpable injustice alleged cannot justify the terrorists because the means chosen were disproportionate, indiscriminate, and ill-intentioned. One can go further, however. The oppression alleged also cannot explain the terrorists' acts because neither the injustice nor the oppression "caused," "created," or was their "source." The simple truth is that terrorists, and terrorists alone, "cause" or "create" terrorism. They, and not their environment, are the "source" of their terrorism.

That no causal relation exists between oppression and terrorism is demonstrated by the simple fact that every day, hundreds of millions of people all around the world suffer from unimaginable oppression and injustice. Yet, terrorists number in the hundreds, perhaps, the thousands, only. If political

and social injustices "caused" or "created" terrorism, if they were the "source" of terrorism, then this "cause" would "create" millions, not hundreds, of terrorists. A "cause" that produces such a small effect is clearly not a "cause" at all. To make the same argument in a different way, many say that oppression, by blocking other avenues of expression, leads to "political violence." However, this was not true for Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., or the leaders of the Eastern European overthrow of Soviet rule in 1988-1989. In too many cases to count, people have effected permanent change in their countries without turning to crime and terrorism. To say that there is "no alternative" to "political violence" is only to acknowledge an immense lack of political imagination. With patience and imagination, another way always exists. Patience stretching to decades is the key, as Lech Walesa, Václav Havel, and the other leaders of the "Velvet Revolutions" in Eastern Europe during the 1980s have well demonstrated.

However, this is to look at the issue from a purely negative perspective. Turn the question around and ask why more of the oppressed of the world do not turn to theatrical crimes of terror. The simplest answer is that most people do the right thing most of the time. Even in the face of the greatest oppression and injustices, the vast, overwhelming majority of people continue to follow the simple dictates of the golden rule. They continue to respect the sanctity of life and dignity of all, even that of their oppressors. In a word, most people value their integrity more than terrorists do. Surprisingly, perhaps, this includes the vast majority of common criminals, who almost never think of participating in the senseless atrocities of terrorism. To do so would seldom serve their own selfish interests. Consequently, only a small fraction of mankind is ever tempted to become terrorists. With these thoughts in mind, a more detailed analysis of terror, terrorism, the agents of terror, and terrorists is needed.

Terror

Psychologically, *terror* is a state of intense fear. As such, terror may arise anywhere at anytime from anything. Small children are terrified of the dark, even shadows. In a criminal sense, however *terror* is the fear generated by the use of unjustified physical or psychological means. The gap between psychological and criminal terror means that not all terror is criminal. For example, when the physical or psychological means used are justified because they are (a) proportionate, (b) discriminate, and (c) well-intentioned, then any feelings of terror are not criminal, but psychological alone. Hence, dentists and surgeons use means that frighten many, but any "terror" induced in their patients is proportionate, discriminate, and well-intentioned. In addition, their "acts of terror" are for the benefit of the patients, and not solely for their own benefit. Dentists and surgeons therefore are not "terrorists."

Terrorism

Terrorism, as defined in the introduction to this chapter, is a theatrical crime against persons or property. Crucially, this theatrical crime provides no tangible, instrumental benefit to the perpetrators, only symbolic or "psychological" satisfaction. More fully, terrorism is a particularly brutal and senseless type of theatre or cinema because the actual victims are not the target; rather, they are theatrical props sacrificed so as to produce the maximum horror and fear among the audience, among the target population. As Osama bin Laden has explained, "The September 11 attacks were not [directed] at women and children. The real targets were America's icons of military and economic power" (Mir, 2001, p. 3). Thus, the object of the attack is to influence those who witness it, either firsthand or in the media; the object is not to influence, or even punish, those directly attacked. As a secondary matter, the attack is also designed to produce a sense of awe at the power and cleverness of the terrorists among the terrorists themselves and their enabling group.

Because the primary purpose of the attack is to garner the maximum media coverage possible, these theatrical criminals strive to create the most striking visual effects possible. When compared to guns, knives, or poisons, the most striking visual effects are produced by explosives. The explosion itself is very striking, and the ruins created by the explosion are equally effective. News photographs of both the initial explosion and of the ruins are a permanent record, a constant reminder, of the horror for the target population. Indeed, the ruins alone intimidate all who see them or view photographs of them. The superior cinematographic effect of explosions, therefore, explains why more than 80% of terrorist acts involve explosions (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1999, p. 41).

Mapping the Agents of Terror

I say "agents of terror" because not all those who both use terror and are criminals should qualify as terrorists, both "terror" and "agents of terror" being a larger set than the set of terrorists. The agents of terror, then, may be classified by their motivation. Their motivation is mixed, to be sure, but it ranges from the purely theatrical to the fully instrumental. More concretely, the most theatrical terrorists are apocalyptic or messianic terrorists who are motivated by a desire "to save the world by destroying it." At the other extreme, the most instrumental terrorists are simple honest criminals who have no greater pretensions than self-interested greed. Somewhere in the middle are those terrorists who do possess some political motive, or at least say they do. When laid out on an axis, this schema produces six different types, as is depicted in Figure 2.1.

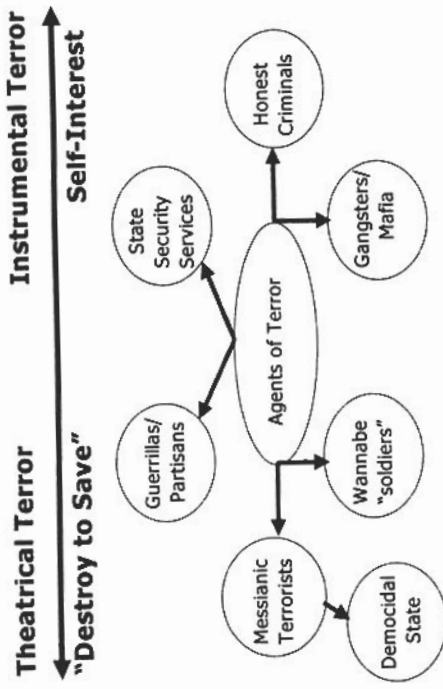


Figure 2.1. Six agents of terror.

1. Messianic terrorists usually cloak their true motivation under some social, religious, or political grievance or injustice, but their true motive is the apocalyptic belief that the world is so corrupt that they must destroy it to save it. Messianic terrorists come in all sizes, shapes, and apocalyptic forms. Examples are Aum Shinrikyo, Timothy McVeigh, Ted Kaczynski, and most recently Osama bin Laden. They may also become democidal⁸ if they can gain control of a State, as was the case with Hitler, Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge, the Hutu Rwandans, and the like.
2. Wannabe "soldiers" (a.k.a. "freedom fighters") are usually not messianic. Instead, they use terror for some specific absolutized political goal (e.g., independence). Although they never engage in open combat, only in secret operations, they assert they are "soldiers" fighting for some political cause or injustice. Again, unlike real soldiers, they feel "authorized" to violate all laws to support themselves through common crime (drugs, extortion, kidnapping, bank robbery, etc.) Examples of wannabe "soldiers" are the Irish Republican Army, Ulster Defense Force, ETA, and Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia.

⁸Democide is a term developed by R. J. Rummel (1992) to aggregate genocide and mass murder committed by governments against their own people. The term is needed to cover cases such as the Cambodian killing fields, which was not a case of genocide. It is further needed to dramatize the fact that several times the number of people have died during the 20th century at the hands of their own governments than in all the wars of a very bloody century.

3. Gangsters and the mafia use terror to maintain control of their businesses or turf. Sometimes gangs or a mafia invoke a political cover for their criminal activities. More often, gangs and mafia are just in it for the loot. Examples of this "political" type of gang are Foday Sanko's Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone, Charles Taylor's forces in Liberia, or Khun Sa's old Shan Liberation Army in Burma.
4. Honest criminals produce terror as an "unintended" consequence of their crimes. They are self-interested and are not motivated by politics or a sense of injustice.
5. State security services can be either messianic or brutally instrumental depending on their circumstances. If they are messianic, then, like messianic terrorists, they are very likely to become democidal, as happened in Nazi Germany and Pol Pot's Cambodia. If they are instrumental, then they are simply brutal. That is, they use terror and torture to maintain state power, as in the Argentine and Chilean "Dirty Wars."
6. Guerrillas and partisans are not usually messianic, although Mao's Chinese People's Army is one exception. They are, instead, political and use terror for some specific absolutized political goal (e.g., independence). With respect to terrorism, the situation is complex. Those guerrillas who do engage in open combat are clearly soldiers under the Geneva Convention (1), cited above. However, those who do not engage in open combat, but, instead, engage in Agit-Prop and other forms of terror are not soldiers, but terrorists. Because an individual can be reassigned from a combat unit to an Agit-Prop unit and back, it can be confusing to determine who is a terrorist and who is not. In addition, sabotage may be considered an act of terrorism by the enemy, although it may on occasion be a legitimate military activity. Examples include the French Maquis and Soviet and Yugoslav partisans in World War II and the Viet Cong.

Terrorists

The criminal character of gangsters, the mafia, and honest criminals is undisputed. State security services are better characterized as torturers or assassins, not as terrorists. Their acts of terror usually lack the mediagenic attractiveness of true terrorism. Putting these agents of terror aside, despite vast areas of ambiguity, the label *terrorist* is best reserved for one of three general types: (a) guerrillas and partisans, (b) wannabe "soldiers" (or "freedom fighters"), and (c) messianic terrorists. Generally, terrorists are "true believers" whose acts of terror are, first, crimes and, second, theater (i.e., committed for

their media value and not for any substantive instrumental value). Accordingly, a terrorist is an alienated, socially isolated, but often charismatic, criminal engaged in theatrical crimes.

ENABLING TERRORISM: THE SOCIAL MILIEU

Although theatrical criminals or terrorists are extremely few in number and socially isolated, they do not operate in a vacuum. Like other criminals, they are enabled or disabled by the social and political conditions around them. Or, to begin on a more positive note, humans are social animals. As a result, everything they do is influenced by their social environment. Humans are also self-conscious individuals, and, as such, they are autonomous moral agents. As a result, they must take responsibility for their decisions and actions. Out of the dynamic interaction of the social milieu with its individual members and of the individual members with their social milieu comes the decisions and actions that produce mankind's collective history and each individual's biography. As a result of this dynamic interaction, one cannot say that the terrorists' social milieu "creates" him. To do so is to deny the terrorist his individuality, his moral agency. Like all criminals, only terrorists can "create" terrorists. Terrorists do this through the personal decisions that they make and action that they take. That said, one must immediately recognize that some social milieus are more favorable to the creation of terrorists than others. In the paragraph that follows, I identify these social factors as (a) enabling leadership, (b) enabling history, and (c) enabling sympathizers. For now, however, I simply note that three general conditions also appear to be influential: (a) a youth bulge, (b) poverty and gross injustice, and (c) a culture of disrespect and intolerance.

Not to belabor the obvious, societies or groups with relative prosperity and a culture of respect and tolerance tend to have low rates of crime, in general, and to disable terrorists, in particular. In contrast, societies or groups with high levels of poverty, injustice, and a culture of disrespect toward "outsiders" (however defined by the society or group), intolerance, and hatred tend to have high rates of crime, in general, and to enable terrorists, in particular. For example, the last 40 years or so of terrorism in Northern Ireland was all but guaranteed by the palpable discrimination against Catholics by the Protestants in Northern Ireland. Fueled by poverty and a long-cultivated sense of disrespect and hatred in both communities for the other, the Irish Republican Army, on the one side, and the Ulster Defense forces, on the other side, soon hijacked the Gandhian civil rights movement of the 1960's, turning peaceful protests into a campaign of assassination, bombings, bank robberies, and a scramble to monopolize the drug trade. Economic development and social justice are essential tonics for both crime and terrorism. Still, societies with high levels of prosperity, tolerance, and a respect for hu-

man dignity harbor terrorists and are not immune from terrorism. The United States, Timothy McVeigh, and Ted Kaczynski come to mind. Likewise, other societies with great intolerance and little respect for human dignity escape terrorist incidents. Eastern Europe during the 1980s as it threw off the Soviet yoke comes to mind.

A third general condition enabling crime, including terrorism, occurs whenever a population is experiencing a youth bulge. A *youth bulge* is a demographic phenomenon that occurs whenever the 15–24-year-old age cohort reaches or exceeds 20% of a population, thereby throwing off the symmetry of a normal age pyramid (Fuller & Pitsis, 1990). Unless some means can be found to dissipate the youth bulge and return the population to a more normal age distribution, all indicators of social tension, including crime, will predictably rise significantly. Mexico has succeeded in managing its youth bulge through illegal immigration to the United States. The United States was somewhat less successful in managing its last youth bulge during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The current upsurge in social turmoil, including terrorism, in Islamic countries is not surprising in light of the large youth bulges that these countries are experiencing now.⁹ In general, then, societies experiencing youth bulges predictably experience significant increases in social tension, including increased rates of crime and terrorism.

In addition to these three general conditions that enable terrorism, three more specific factors greatly facilitate or inhibit an individual in choosing to become a terrorist: history, leadership, and presence or absence of sympathizers. An enabling history teaches that “power grows out of the barrel of a gun” and that a resort to terror is “honorable.” This is especially true in cultures of vengeance. A dis-enabling history does the opposite. One of the sadder examples of an enabling history is W. B. Yeats’s (1983) poem, *Easter, 1916*, commemorating the fallen “heroes” of the Easter Rebellion in Ireland:

For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said.
We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
I write it out in verse—
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born. (p. 182)

An enabling leadership promotes intolerance and hatred in pursuit of some absolutized goal, either the messianic goal of “saving the world by destroying it” or some political end, such as independence, that is said to justify all means. A dis-enabling leadership does the opposite, as Gandhi and King illustrate. Enabling sympathizers accept, even if they do not encourage, both the acts of terror and the theatrical criminals who commit them as in some sense justified. Minimally, enabling sympathizers are silent and do nothing either to condemn or thwart the terrorists. Dis-enabling sympathizers do the opposite. To paraphrase Mao, enabling sympathizers are the water in which the terrorists swim. A small subgroup of youth within the enabling sympathizers, what might be called “wannabe” terrorists, form the pool from which terrorists can be recruited easily.

In terms of the social milieu that enables terrorists, the obvious strategy is to turn the sympathizers from enabling into dis-enabling, to drain away the social water in which the terrorists swim. This goal cannot be accomplished by arresting or otherwise removing enabling sympathizers. Indeed, arresting or displacing enabling sympathizers, experience shows, only increases their sympathy for the terrorists, fear of false arrest or removal to concentration camps now being added to the list of their grievances. However, if enabling sympathizers cannot be arrested, what is to be done to turn them into dis-enabling sympathizers? This is the point at which politics and social policy often become crucial to ending episodes of terrorism. The grievances that cause them to sympathize and accept the theatrical criminals must be identified and remedied. These grievances are often, but not always, some injustice.

Ideally, one would live in a society without either terrorists or terrorism. Such a society would possess (a) a dis-enabling leadership, (b) a dis-enabling history, and (c) an absence of sympathizers as well as grievances. Such an ideal society would also be characterized by a normal age profile, relative prosperity and justice, and a culture of respect and tolerance. More realistically, in a society with terrorists and terrorism, the first line of defense is good police work. As a second line of defense, however, one must dis-enable both the general and the more specific social factors that enable terrorists.

⁹A convenient source is the United Nations Population Division’s World Population Prospects, Population Database. Either “Panel 2” (<http://esa.un.org/unpp/index.asp?panel=2>) or the “Country profile” (<http://esa.un.org/unpp/index.asp?panel=3>) will provide the percentage of population between