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The Terror of Terrorism: Implications for Government Policy

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Abstract. This article critiques common definitions of terrorism and suggests that such definitions support the power of the powerful against the power of the powerless.

Common definitions of terrorism focus on a type of act, target, emotional element, and objective. The act is some combination of violence and the threat of violence. The target is something or someone somehow innocent. The emotional element is fear. The objective is to effect political influence. The act against a target leads to fear that effects political influence. The act may be directly against one target, the fear may be engendered in another, and the political influence effected by yet another.

Yet violence and its threat are effected in many human domains and are not unique to that labeled as terrorist. Innocence may be something ontologically nonexistent, as women can beget adversaries, children can grow up to be adversaries, various people can even involuntarily provide support to adversaries, and any inanimate object may have support potential for an adversary. The emotional element of fear is neither necessary nor sufficient in the linkage between act and an achieved objective. Political objective may accurately describe all human motivation if political can denote navigating a world characterized by infinite need and finite resources to meet that need-the resulting grand human motive being to managing this disparity.

If the main components of common definitions of terrorism seem both problematic and so common to so many human domains, why the linguistic construction-a construction that has a long history? One can argue that the terrorism construct has been most often ascribed to the more wretched of the earth-those who often have less in the political world than those who ascribe terrorism t them. In fact, those who are commonly called terrorists are engaging in isomorphically parallel acts and impelled by identical motives to those who are not-whether the latter are ascribers or not.

One might assume that the very ascription of terrorism by the powerful to the powerless is terrorist in nature. The ascription leads to greater legitimization of the more powerful to use violence and its threat against the powerless in order to protect, maintain, and increase the political inequality between the two. A further terror of the terrorism rubric is that the powerful and the powerless-even those called terrorists-are victims of what is a truly subjugating discourse. (See Byman, D. (1998). The logic of ethnic terrorism. Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, 21, 149-169; Narveson, J. (1991). Terrorism and morality. In R.G. Frey & C. W. Morris (Ed.). Violence, terrorism, and justice. NY: Cambridge University Press; Reich, W. (1990). Origins of terrorism: Psychologies, ideologies, theologies, states of mind. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars; Saper, B. (1988). On learning terrorism. Terrorism, 11, 13-27; Wapnick, K. (1985). Healing the terrorized patient as a model for healing a terrorized world. Psychotherapy Patient, 1, 61-73.) (Keywords: Political Violence, Terrorism.)