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When Terror Is Not Terrorism: A Political Psychological Analysis

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Title: When Terror Is Not Terrorism: A Political Psychological Analysis

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Terrorism is supposed to be a tool to achieve an instrumental, usually ideological goal. It entails the use of violence and/or its threat. The secondary target comprises people killed or wounded, infrastructure destroyed or damaged. The primary target comprises the people who learn of it and are psychologically affected. They may change their beliefs, opinions, attitudes, feelings. They may experience fear of being secondary targets in the future. But the point of terrorism is to influence primary targets to act in a manner desired by the terrorist. This behavior will achieve the terrorist's goal—e.g., giving up contested property and territory, changing laws, reallocating resources, modifying what is prescribed, proscribed, found sacred or profane in everyday life. The ideological element is crucial—the various goals are founded on political and/or religious tenets. And, if successful, the external world is changed as desired by the terrorist. The experience of terror in primary targets, the vehicle.

Then, just in the last week, there are shootings by Robert Bowers in Pittsburgh and the mailing of explosive devices by Cesar Sayoc nationwide. These are being labelled as terrorism, but based on incomplete information from ongoing investigations they are not. The world they are trying to change is internal, not external. It is likely that each has had a marginal, material existence by the standards of the majority cultures in which they live. This marginality likely relates to their mental struggles to keep order and minimize pain among conflicting beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and feelings about themselves in the context of other people. Often keeping order and minimizing pain is a losing proposition. So, to turn things around, they and people like them unconsciously and figuratively move the parts of themselves perceived as most uncontrollable and causing the most pain out of themselves and into other people. With Bowers, Jews, with Sayoc those deemed to be against the United States President—all leaders, not just the President, being at risk. If successful, the internal world is desirably changed--the avoidance of terror in the self. Clinical and social psychological terms such as varieties of *acting out*, *projective identification*, *dehumanization* and *demonizing*, *blaming the victim*, and the *fundamental attribution error* can be used to describe the above (1).

But there are complexities. One can concurrently engage in violence and/or its threat to change both the external and internal worlds. Actual terrorists often enough find people like Bowers and Sayoc to be useful agents of terrorist intent and easily reachable through (a) social media, (b) the street theatre of political and religious demonstrations, and (c) direct approach and invitation to engage in violence and/or its threat against desired targets to achieve desired goals. Casting a wide net through the cyber-world often alleviates the need to identify specific people and approach and invite them. Instead Bowers, Sayoc, and their ilk can self-select based on their immersion in a world of cyber-words and cyber-images. As they are not in control of themselves, they can be serendipitously controlled by others they never meet.

In modern history, terrorism is often first ascribed to the reign of terror (*La Terreur*, 1793-94) during the French Revolution (2). Violence was directed against real and imagined, presumed present and future enemies of the Revolution through members of the ironically named Committee of Public Safety. Nowadays, courtesy of our globalized world of telecommunications, committees of one proliferate to avoid the terror within.

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Keywords: Acting Out. Blaming the Victim. Dehumanization. Demonizing. Fundamental Attribution Error. Projective Identification. Terror. Terrorism.

Abstract/Description: This article differentiates violence and its threat through terrorism and through other psychological means and ends.

Disciplines: Other Psychology, Philosophy, Philosophy of Science. Political Science, Other Political Science, Psychology, Defense and Security Studies, International Relations

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