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# The Terror of Terrorism: The Limits of Epistemology

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Abstract. The purpose of this article is to identify elements of the psychological terror wrought through terrorism.

Death, injury, and destruction. The fear of their occurrence--that they may occur and that they have occurred--often is identified as the foundation of psychological terror and the political power generated through terrorism (even as it also must be recognized that psychological terror is not necessary for terrorism to be effective.) This identification can be supported by content analyses of the words of terrorism's survivors, of members of populations targeted by terrorists, and both of people who advocate terrorism's immoral and unethical status and those who advocate terrorism's righteousness in engaging evil.

Yet there are times when death, injury, and destruction are not feared but even desired or sought out both for egoistic and possibly altruistic reasons. Thus, terrorism as a low-frequency event of high-psychological impact would be a problematic enterprise, if it were dependent on such fears. And terrorism as a high-frequency event might lose its high impact. The question then remains: from whence comes other sources of terrorism's psychological terror?

The answer may be found in close analysis of the verbal responses of survivors, supporters, and opponents of terrorism. There are assertions that the terrorists are mad (possessed by and exhibiting psychopathology) when the preponderance of competent academic researchers, journalists, intelligence analysts, policymakers, and terrorists and those who seek to counter them profess, not terrorist madness, but anything but. (A few of these competent groups equate terrorist acts with anti-social personality, psychopathy, or sociopathy, but such Axis II diagnoses may be hopelessly conflated with the false consciousness of psychodiagnosticians and, ultimately, overt and covert power relations of a specific society or culture.)

There are assertions that the acts of terrorists are but examples of meaningless violence, when the acts too easily and readily impart meaning to the least sophisticated engager of public discourse embracing the word and the deed.

There are assertions that terrorists will not and cannot achieve their ends through terrorism, when the appearance and resilience of terrorism throughout history is based on intermittent positive and negative reinforcement related to the achievement of ends.

All three examples and counter-examples to them suggest that the very epistemological underpinnings of reality are under assault from terrorism. The terror achieved is not through an explosion of fear of death, injury, and destruction from without but through an implosion of fear of death, injury, and destruction from within--i.e., the salient elements of the mind. The threat from without is on the other side of a psychological boundary. The threat from within is within the self with no escape save becoming a psychological casualty through dissociation. The latter as terror may be the basis of experiencing evil as well. (See Herbert, B. (March 28, 2002). Betraying humanity. *The New York Times*, p. A27; Levine,

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M.P. (2000). See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil: Psychiatry, psychoanalysis and evil. *Psychoanalytic Studies*, 2, 265-276; Richman, J., Mercer, D., & Mason, T. (1999). The social construction of evil in a forensic setting. *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry*, 10, 300-308; Wellman, D. (2000). From evil to illness: Medicalizing racism. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 70, 28-32; Winer, R. (2001). Evil in the mind of the therapist. *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 37, 613-622.) (Keywords: Epistemology, Terrorism.)