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## Definitional Problems of Terrorism in a World of Terrorism: An English Example

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Title: Definitional Problems of Terrorism in a World of Terrorism: An English Example

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**Abstract.** This article describes definitional problems with the construct of terrorism as employed by antiterrorism and counterterrorism experts, terrorist targets and victims, as well as members of general publics throughout the world.

A two-year-old legislative act on terrorism in the United Kingdom defines terrorism as employing menace intended to influence the government or intimidation against the public to further a cause--e.g., political, religious, or ideological. This very broad definition could include many groups abhorring force and/or violence--lethal or otherwise--who could constitute the vast majority of a representative democracy. These groups might comprise a myriad of special interest groups and large segments of a political opposition to a party in power. Moreover, one might also note that a member of the public engaging in any activity towards or against other members of that public may have necessarily effected a change in that there is no longer a public for a government to employ as a victim to protect. As well, one might note that the construct of public is but a hypostatization. In fact, there are many ever-shifting publics involving the same individuals with ever-shifting social roles and identities.

The definition from the United Kingdom is not an anomaly, because there are significant problems with most common definitions of terrorism. Probably the largest problem is the notion that terrorists kill the innocent--that only uniformed military personnel might be said to be targets who are not innocent. But uniformed military personnel may be innocent as well in that they might not have perpetrated anything worthy of being attacked in a particular situation or that they may be off-duty or engaged purely in humanitarian pursuits. On the other hand, all people may be guilty--including uniformed military personnel; civilian men, women, and children; the old and the young--in that all people not complicit with a group labeled terrorist. are thereby ineluctably complicit with antiterrorist and counterterrorist initiatives. This complicity may involve paying taxes, providing emotional support to counterterrorists, serving as convenient political vehicles for counterterrorist rationale, or just being anything but a supporter of terrorism.

Then there's the notion that terrorism is beyond the pale of what is acceptable in civilized society. However, the plain fact is that in a world in which menace, intimidation, and violence are common and often enough acceptable as social interventions, terrorism may be nothing more than business as usual. Such a conclusion may seem unfeeling and even amoral in the face of people who are considered victims of terrorism. But such a conclusion points to a truth about the world that can be unfeeling and amoral. One might even posit that terrorism as a construct is a convenient object to divert the terror engendered by socially sanctioned authorities and the social beings influenced by them. That we all are or can be like those whom we label as terrorists may mitigate the horror of what they do or maximize the horror of what we can become.

Social fact may support the equivalence of behaviors used to denote the terrorism construct with other behaviors engaged in by government and yet other political actors. Government behaviors can be and are labeled as terrorist. Violent behavior at the hands of non-governmental political actors can be construed as legitimate strivings for self- and other-liberation. Terrorizing through violence and its

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threat can characterize multinational corporations towards large segments of the world and single abusive individuals towards acquaintances, spouses, and other family members. And menace and intimidation can be applied to members of publics who bring such equivalences to the attention of governmental antiterrorist and counterterrorist authorities. Perhaps, some desire the commonality and omnipresence of terrorism to remain a dirty little secret even as it is like an emperor with no clothes.

(See Cooper, H.H.A. (2001). Terrorism: The problem of definition revisited. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 44, 881-893; Gibbs, J.P. (1989). Conceptualization of terrorism. *American Sociological Review*, 54, 329-340; Groebel, J. (1989). The problems and challenges of research on terrorism. In J. Groebel & J.H. Goldstein (Eds). *Terrorism: Psychological Perspectives*. (pp. 15-38). Publicaciones de la Universidad de Sevilla; Hoge, W. (January 15, 2003). Terror arrests in England. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Hutchinson, M.C. (1972). The concept of revolutionary terrorism. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 16, 383-396; Mahmood, C.K. (2001). Terrorism, myth, and the power of ethnographic praxis. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 30, 520-545; Shamir, J., & Shikaki, K. (2002). Self-serving perceptions of terrorism among Israelis and Palestinians. *Political Psychology*, 23, 537-557.) (Keywords: Terrorism.)