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Why Terrorism? Whose Terror?

Editor

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Abstract: The author considers terrorism as a competitor for the legally constituted authority and power of governments.

Terrorism has gotten the attention of the world in a way cancer, highway accidents, and murder-for-profit and in-the-heat-of-passion have not. This cannot be because of the sheer number of people killed or injured through terrorism. Nor of the number of things destroyed and damaged. There seems to be nothing unique about the objective features of death, injury, destruction, and damage caused by terrorism whether through biology, chemistry, applied physics, or applied psychology. And there is nothing unique about the degree of fate, chance, and predictability of terrorism. One might argue that telecommunications-mediated propaganda has been applied more intensively and sophisticatedly to the threat of terrorism as opposed to disease, accident, and homicide. However, why this is so still remains to be identified.

How about that the direct human victims of terrorism are innocent? From some terrorist perspectives and from some of those who support and love them, no one is innocent, including all of us believed to be touched with original sin, to pay taxes supporting counterterrorism authorities, and to someday grow up to be taxpayers, counterterrorism authorities, and even a member of a multi-gendered cadre of counterterrorism foot soldiers. And even if one believes that the direct victims are innocent, so are many who succumb to disease, accident, and homicide.

But one unique feature of terrorism is that its direct human victims and its indirect but more important survivors and second-hand observers are targeted by ideologies of politics, economics, society, culture, and religion. This unique feature makes terrorists a competitor with legally constituted authority—viz., government. Many of us believe that only the latter should engage in such violence.

This last assertion is especially the case, if one believes in at least one of the common variants of social-contract theories from The Mahabharata, Plato's Crito, Hobbes's Leviathan, Locke's Second Treatise of Government, Rousseau's The Social Contract, to Rawls's A Theory of Justice and their contemporaries and successors. Even if one is as skeptical of social-contact theories as David Hume in "Of the Original Contract" or as skeptical of government as Murray Rothbard in "Society without a State," the terror perpetrated by terrorists is a terror within those who already have done, can do, and, if possible, will do what the terrorists are doing.

In the history of seeking the why of terrorism, candidates have appeared as diverse as individual psychopathology, the maintenance of sanity within insane situations, group dynamics, deviant and normal socialization, real and perceived economic disparities, physical and socio-cultural penetration and occupation from an alien other, and the historical moment. This gamut of the why, however, is the same for any human behavior, certainly any that threatens the governmental purported right to have sole authority to engage in like actions.

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It is for this reason that a recent article in Terrorism (2009, 32(9), 811-830) by Sam Mullins from Australia's University of Wollongong entitled "Parallels between Crime and Terrorism: A Social Psychological Perspective" merits reading for those who seek more understanding on terrorism motivation and counterterrorism proaction and response. Also, a recent review published in The Nation (March 22, 2010, 25-34) by Diego Gambetta from Oxford University of Stefan Aust's Baader-Meinhof: The Inside Story of the RAF provides many examples of the common and evitable factors leading to terrorism-related homicides and suicides.

Finally, one might want to speculate on the future of terrorism, if (1) Jean-Francois Lyotard's self-contradictory meta-narrative that meta-narratives are becoming increasingly inadequate in guiding and controlling us (cf. The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (1979) and (2) Louis Althusser's ideological state apparatuses also proved much less controlling (cf. Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (1970). Perhaps, there'd be nothing to impel terrorism, nothing to fight over between governments and terrorists, and government-sponsored terrorism would truly be a non-sequitur. Yet there's much to suggest that ideologies controlling us all in quests for control and power are alive and well.

In conclusion, the terrorist may be terrifying as our own image constituted by a government seeking to be we the people. As with Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray, through the exceptionalization of terrorism we seek to expunge the self-recognition of guilt by plunging the knife into the portrait of ourselves. And like Dorian Gray, we will be successful only if we die. So both terrorists and terrorism researchers can rest easy. Quoting from Martin Scorsese's Mean Streets (1973), "Now's the time!" [Comments may be sent to bloomr@erau.edu]

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