

TERRORISM AND MORALITY

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I

Any analysis of the relationship between terrorism and morality must start with careful consideration of what is meant by 'terrorism'. Integrity in the use of language has moral value in its own right and, as we shall see, uncertainty in deployment of the concept of terrorism has exposed those who use it to allegations of hypocrisy and double standards. What the idea most obviously and uncontroversially connotes in its contemporary usage is the deliberate or reckless killing of civilians, or the doing of extensive damage to their property, with the intention of thereby communicating a political message of some sort to a third party, usually but not necessarily a government. Such violence is used as an alternative to more orthodox direct or political action, and is seen by those responsible for it as primarily a mode of expression. The protagonists of political terror are engaged in seeking to achieve some goal or other which is broadly political in the sense that it is separate from their own personal circumstances and/or their own private avarice.

It follows that the drunken father who beats up his wife to show who is boss within the home may be engaged in terrorising a victim to communicate a message but this is not political terror. Likewise, the bank robber who shoots a hostage in the vault to ensure that the rest of his captives stay silent is the purveyor of a different kind of terror. The deployer of terror for a political end is therefore, and it might be thought perversely, to be distinguished by his or her unselfishness; as one of the relevant legislative definition in the United States puts it, the violence is designed to achieve something other than 'mere personal monetary gain'. These are not 'merely' capitalists with a peculiarly minimalist approach (even by the standard of capitalists) to the protective obligations of the state. We are dealing here with political actors, albeit (it might be thought) of a particular brutal (or as some might say, determined) sort.

I have little doubt in my own mind that sub-State actors whose only deployment of violence is of a terrorist kind fitting the core definition given above are invariably involved in conduct that can rightly and confidently be described as immoral. Groups whose only engagement

across the politico-military spectrum is the killing of civilians have nothing of any interest to say; if as Walter Laqueur so eloquently put it terrorism is 'the weapon of the weak', then I would add that terrorism of this sort is the weapon of the weak bully, lashing out at the defenceless so that all might see his (or her) pain. Subversive terrorism of this kind is also, I would say, always ineffective, for three reasons. First, with this kind of terrorism the medium becomes the message so completely that no one hears what else the terrorist claims he or she is trying to say. Who cares about all that oppression when we see the dead bodies of those decent non-combatants thrown from the aircraft or gunned down on the street or at the airport check-in or wherever? The brutality has gained the world's attention as it was intended to do, but the world then never sees past that brutality. Second, subversive attacks on civilians by terrorists who do nothing else are frequently counter-productive viewed even in their own terms because their effect is to provoke such massive state reaction that the groups themselves are destroyed. This was the experience of the South American 'urban guerrillas' of the 1960s and seems also to be the case with the perpetrators of the events of 11 September. Thirdly, such violence often destroys its own goals as well as those who deploy it, by making modest, peaceful agitation for the same ends almost impossible: witness the difficulties the IRA campaign caused the SDLP in Northern Ireland before an essential constitutional solution was eventually achieved in the Good Friday Agreement, and observe also the problems being encountered at the present time by radical elements in Islamic societies with governments unsympathetic to fundamentalism. Each of these objections to subversive terrorism isolated from other kinds of military action is in my view sufficient to warrant the rejection of such violence; there can be few if any groups engaged in terrorist violence of this sort as their primary activity about which one or more of these points cannot be made.

It is important to note here that I am not judging terrorism to be morally wrong merely because I am calling it terrorism; I am providing reasons why the conduct I have described as terrorism is also rightly to be viewed as perhaps immoral but certainly inefficacious: the label itself does not do this work by itself. So far I have been talking entirely of subversive groups because this is the dominant discourse so far as terrorism is concerned. But if it is right to view 'political terror' in the way described above, as the intentional or reckless killing of civilians or damage to their property so as to communicate a political message, then it follows that 'terrorism' should be the noun that describes what those involved in 'political terror' do. A 'terrorist' is on this basis one who practices the technique of political terror, or 'terrorism'. Of course the 'terrorists' we have been discussing and judging in reprehensible terms have been practitioners of political terror of this sort. But there are other purveyors of political terror around as well. Terrorism is a type of violence, not a type of person – a

methodology not a group classification. It follows that it is a technique in international relations and/or domestic politics which is capable of being used by *any* player on the political or the international scene. It describes what people do, not what people are. Viewed from this perspective, terror as a tactic and terrorism as a description of that tactic is rightly to be seen as something that is available *both* to governments *and* to subversive groups. Political terror may be practised right across the political spectrum, from right to left, from the isolated revolutionary, through the guerrilla group and the secessionist to the forces of a state. In contrast to the terrorists we have been discussing, where political terror is practised by states and guerrilla movements, it will be one method of attack among a variety available to be used.

Historically it has been states that have been most extreme in their deployment of political terror, the greatest because bloodiest exponents of terrorism.

Clear examples from the past include not only the excesses of Stalin and Hitler but also the use of violence by central American governments in the 1980s and – perhaps most dramatically of all – the dropping of the two Atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The latter in particular was a pure act of political terror: ‘look what we can do, now listen to us’. The same could be said of the United Kingdom’s decision to attack German cities from the air during the latter part of the second world war. Manifestly it is frequently political terror that the Israelis have been engaged in on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, just as it is what they often did in Lebanon in 1982 and on countless other occasions before and after. Civilians are attacked, deliberately or as a result of a reckless disregard for their safety in order to say something to your adversaries that you judge cannot be communicated in any other way. I repeat that this is merely to describe these events, not to judge them; it is not impossible to envisage circumstances in which terror in a large and desperate conflict may not be by definition morally reprehensible, and it may be felt that some of the actions just described are justifiable on this basis. For present purposes that is neither here nor there: right or wrong, government terror is generally much more effective than subversive terror because states generally have better means of achieving their terror goals: tanks, airplanes, heavily armed troops and so on. A suicide bomber is also a terrorist on this analysis but all they have is themselves, a few bombs and a willingness to die: strengths certainly but nothing to compared to being funded by the US Congress and equipped by the Pentagon. (This may explain why contemporary governments engaged in political terror themselves are so anxious to talk up the mass destructive powers of their terrorist opponents; it is almost as though the asymmetry of the capacity for terror as between the two sides embarrasses them, and they want – if only in their propaganda - to level the playing field.)

Now as I said earlier the notion of terrorism nowadays has a strong connotation of the subversive about it, and as a result it appears not easily to fit the kind of violence I have just been describing. The old dictionaries understood very well this simple idea of terrorism as a technique of violence available to all combatants engaged in war and war-like struggle. The 1951 concise Oxford described the 'terrorist' as 'one who favours or uses terror-inspiring methods of governing or of coercing government or community, esp. (1) Jacobin under reign of Terror, (2) Russian revolutionary.' (Emphasis added.) Indeed it was from the Jacobins that we derived our modern phrase. But the language has moved on since the 1790s. Viewed from the contemporary perspective, several changes have occurred, all debilitating in their effect, and subversive of any attempt to achieve a coherent connection between terrorism and morality.

The first point to note is that the term terrorist now describes a category of person rather than a technique of violence. The 'terrorist' is no longer (merely and relatively neutrally) the deployer of political terror, whether as government leader, guerrilla hero or ambitious revolutionary, and maybe as part of a wider military campaign, maybe not. The terrorist is always now a subversive, someone who opposes the established order either in his or her nation ('the domestic terrorist') or internationally (the 'international terrorist'). Secondly, the subversive today is landed with this 'terrorist' label even if he or she has never engaged in political terror as such, in the central sense of attacking civilians in order to communicate a political message. These latter day 'terrorists' may be merely challenging the power of the ruling elite, as are Mr Mugabe's 'terrorists' in Zimbabwe. Or they may be engaged in quasi-military operations against politico-military targets which are anything but indiscriminate. They may be no more than particularly robust eco-agitators or animal rights' activists. Even if they are fighters engaged in a restrained military campaign against an undemocratic, racist or genocidally-inclined regime, in today's language they are still 'terrorists', with the government forces that oppose them being the 'counter-terrorists'.

For thirdly, in contrast to but following from these first two points, the forces of the established order are nowadays never themselves any longer categorised as terrorist: instead they are always now 'counter-terrorist', regardless of how violent they themselves are or how much more brutal and terror-inducing they are than those they oppose. This is because fourthly and finally, a moral judgment has insinuated itself into the language of terrorism. What the terrorist does is always wrong, what the 'counter-terrorist' has to do to defeat them is therefore invariably, necessarily right. The nature of the regime, the kind of action that is possible against it, the moral situation in which the violence occurs, none of

these complicating elements matter a jot against the contemporary power of the terrorist label.

In its modern form, therefore, the language of terrorism has become the rhetorical servant of the established order, wherever it might be, and however heinous its own activities are. Talking of 'terrorism' in this way flattens the world of international relations, removing all the subtle peaks and valleys that make up the real life of nations, and reducing the diplomatic map to a dull, lifeless plain on which are arrayed the huge army of sovereign nations on one side (the 'counter-terrorists'), and those who seek change – for whatever reason – on the other ('the terrorists'). It is obvious that this is a crassly ahistorical account of the world, ignoring how the various governments and regimes that deploy the language of terrorism in this way themselves secured power: there is a Cromwell, a Washington, a Mandela or a Mugabe behind most of today's political power structures. It is in the inconsistency of its approach to the use of force for political ends that the language of terrorism most exposes itself to moral disapprobation.

II

How did such a fantastic transformation in the meaning of the word come about? The answer is to be found in the Middle-East, but the origins of the transformation begin elsewhere. The idea of the 'terrorist' as a type of person rather than a technique of violence grew out of the concept of the 'urban guerrilla' which in turn was a kind of revolutionary – mainly based in South America – who sought in the 1960s to bring Castro's and Che Guevara's insights about rural guerrilla subversion to the cities. Wandering around the forest looking for the state's army to attack was fine in certain circumstances but not a sure fire recipe for revolutionary success in country's with large urban populations. The problem the 'urban guerrilla' soon encountered was that it was hard to attack the army in the city, it was usually well guarded and went about the place cautiously. The police were easier to kill initially, but of course they also began to take precautions. So the 'urban guerrilla', in order to do something, to justify his or her existence, had to expand the notion of the legitimate target: the retired police officer, the bank manager, the industrialist came within his or her sights, and carried with them the inevitable consequence of what we would call today 'collateral damage', i.e. death or injury to persons who were not culpable even on the urban guerrilla's broad estimation of moral blame.

In Europe, a few dilettantish groups sought to copy the urban guerrillas they had read about before they dropped out of university: in Italy the Red Brigades, in the United Kingdom the

Angry Brigade, in Germany the Baader/Meinhof gang (afterwards the Red Army Faction). Even the US had its Weathermen (then Weather Underground after complaints from feminist revolutionaries). Needless to say, these groups were not very popular. Western states and their citizens found their apparently indiscriminating violence to be as repugnant as it was mystifying. But at the time, between 1968 and 1972, the violence had quite an effect on the collective psyche of the West, provoking an anxiety out of all proportion to the harm actually done. More substantive in its effect was the secessionist violence that was also getting under way in the Basque areas of Spain, in the north of Ireland and (to a lesser extent) in Corsica and (across the Atlantic) Quebec. Here was more political terror, and a different kind of 'terrorism', one with broader support and a greater capacity to harm, but rooted – like the urban guerrillas – in a very wide sense of culpability and therefore of legitimate targeting.

Now consider where the Palestinian question and the PLO leader Yassir Arafat fit in all of this. The first attempts to force Israel to allow a Palestinian state were entirely conventional, a model of how to conduct warfare on gentlemanly, Western-approved terms: the events of 1948 and 1967 are of course hotly disputed, but what is clear at least in 1967 is that various state armies from neighbouring Arab states attacked their Israeli neighbour, engaged with the enemy and sought to expel it from the region. No doubt there was some terror practised on both sides, just as there is in most warfare. The campaign was hugely counter-productive for the nations opposed to Israel, and lost Jordan and Egypt vast swathes of land to occupation. After the preferred option of straightforward war became unavailable, Arafat sought initially to establish a guerrilla operation in the occupied territories, to be the Michael Collins or Che Guevara of the region. Had it worked this too would probably have involved political terror from time to time, albeit as part of a wider campaign. The guerrilla initiative was however speedily ground down by the unrelenting nature of Israeli military might. It was only after these two failed manoeuvres that the Palestinian nationalists turned to isolated acts of political violence, as a kind of consolation prize only to be accepted because it was all that was available. It is in this sense that it is right to say that Arafat was a 'reluctant terrorist' and in this sense is it also absolutely right to describe terrorism as 'the weapon of the weak'.

This 'terrorism' by 'terrorists' also had little impact until – by an inexorable but dismal process of logic – it killed enough of the right people in the right places to command attention. This did not mean police officers in Israel or soldiers in the West Bank. It meant foreigners (especially Americans) anywhere and Israeli/Jewish people anywhere outside Israel. So we had hijacked aircraft, gun assaults in airports, and famously the attack at the Munich Olympics in 1972. Of course the Israelis were responding in kind, attacking Palestinian areas, bombarding communities, shelling civilians, causing hugely

disproportionate numbers of casualties, but they very cleverly managed to link the violence of their Palestinian opponents with that of the urban guerrillas and the quasi-colonial insurgents of the West under the general rubric of 'terrorism'. All this violence was all the same, 'terrorist' violence, which needed to be countered by the forces of civilization, which might in one place be the British bobby on the beat, in another the Israeli army in full battle cry. As Palestinian-related violence of this sort continued through the 1970s, conferences were held, academic treatises written, journals on terrorism studies quickly established. The future Israeli prime minister and 'terrorist expert' Benjamin Netanyahu summed it up with the title to one of his many books on the subject, 'Terrorism: how the west can win'.

Even a cursory glance at the current situation in the Middle-East quickly shows that there is indiscriminate terror against civilians on both sides, but especially (because they are better equipped for it) the Israeli side. Regarding subversive violence as the only kind of terrorism in the region leads inevitably to moral condemnation only of the Palestinian actions. This trick with the truth is only possible because of the way in which the idea of the terrorist has come to be seen as a category of person rather than the purveyor of a type of conduct. We have stopped looking at what happens, and look instead at who is doing it. If the killer has a uniform on he or she is a 'counter-terrorist', a brave moral soul. If the victim has no army or government, then he or she must be an indiscriminate killer for political ends, a 'terrorist'.

III

The hegemonic potential of the language of terrorism, now given even greater force by the events of 11 September 2001, has ominous implications for domestic politics, both in western states and further afield. The democratic breakthrough of the twentieth century was to make the secret vote of the people the sine qua non for the exercise of political power. But having the vote merely makes possible the struggle for a democratic culture, it does not guarantee such a culture. The imperatives of 'counter-terrorism' now matter more in places like Egypt, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia than any latent pressurise to democratise that might otherwise have risen to the surface. Countries like Pakistan and Turkey rush to assist in the new American war, calculating correctly that their own 'counter-terrorist' actions will be strengthened and freed from scrutiny as a result. In the West, the events of 11 September 2001 have made possible a transformation in the atmosphere of democratic states, in the direction of an acceptance of an almost casual authoritarianism that would never before have been countenanced or permitted. The vote, already little used and cynically regarded, faces a challenge to its very rationale by the erection of a new and secret counter-terrorist super-structure, accountable to no one and with wide and uncertain powers.

Basic human rights, which prior to September last year were considered sacrosanct, have found themselves contested, and at risk of being mown down by the counter-terrorist juggernaut. There has been a frightening debate in the United States, in which members of the liberal elite have joined, about the appropriate use of torture – with safeguards and plenty of due process of course, perhaps even with a judicial warrant – but torture nonetheless. In Europe to our credit, and constrained in this instance by the European Court of Human Rights, we have refused both to torture our suspects or to pass them into the hands of our less scrupulous friends (as it is said the US authorities frequently do). But in the United Kingdom this has meant indefinite detention without trial for those whom we might otherwise have expelled, not torture certainly, but savage nevertheless when we remind ourselves that we are dealing here with people against whom sufficient admissible evidence cannot be found to bring criminal charges. (The United States produced no evidence to justify its demand for the extradition of a British-based man accused in a panoply of publicity last year of having trained the pilots who took part in the 11th September killings. The man spent five months in custody in prison before being eventually granted bail. All charges against him were finally dropped when the one American minor offence he was accused of by the US authorities was reportedly exposed as never having occurred.)

The fight for human rights and democracy in the face of the challenges thrown up by this new age of counter-terrorism must involve traditional forms of popular protest and agitation. But it is also a struggle for integrity in the use of the language. The spuriously deployed notion of the ‘terrorist’ is the cornerstone of the counter-terrorist enterprise; if it can be dislodged, then it will be a small victory for many of the things that we hold valuable and which collectively help to civilise us: integrity in our use of language; honesty in our moral judgments; consistency in our approach to international affairs, respect for the human rights of all and not just those we know. At very least, the political air would be easier to breathe if this vacuous fog of dangerous linguistic vacuity could somehow be lifted. And further victories for human rights, civil liberties and democracy might follow.