

Defining "Terrorism": Moving Towards a More Integrated and Interdisciplinary Understanding of Political Violence

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Defining “Terrorism”: Moving Towards a More Integrated and Interdisciplinary

Understanding of Political Violence

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Defining “Terrorism”: Moving Towards a More Integrated and Interdisciplinary

Understanding of Political Violence

The definitional problem of “what is terrorism?” has long vexed those interested in exploring the diverse phenomenon of political violence. Provizer (1997, p. 3) notes that “[al]though the subject has moved out of the shadows onto the center stage of global interest, it continues to lead a penumbra-like existence, definitionally speaking”; while others suggest that it is not a lack of definitions that is the problem but the abundance of competing ones. In their

seminal work *Political Terrorism*, Schmid and Jongman (1988) asked some 200 academics “whose definition of ‘terrorism’ do you utilize?” Fifty-eight percent of those who replied said their own. Thus, it not surprising that after some 35 years, Parry’s (1976, p. 11) observation still holds much truth: “there is no satisfactory political definition extant or forthcoming...no common academic consensus as to the essence of terror and no common language with which to shape a model acceptable to political scientists or social psychologists”. The same sentiments are still expressed today.

This special issue seeks to contribute to this continuing debate by presenting a number of papers originally given at the 3rd CICA-STR (Coloquios Internacionales Sobre Cerebro y Agresión & Society for Terrorism Research) International Conference on Political Violence and Collective Aggression: Considering the Past, Imagining the Future, which was held at the University of Ulster, Northern Ireland in September 2009. The conference brought together more than 80 academics, research students and practitioners from 16 countries to discuss past, present and future manifestations of terrorism and political violence.

Given Northern Ireland’s recent history, the province has long been synonymous with terrorism and political violence. Indeed, the conflict’s disputed nature meant that the phrase “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter” was an apt description with groups like the Provisional IRA and Irish National Liberation Army being viewed as both depending upon who was applying the label. The British state was also viewed by some as being engaged in terrorism with alleged ‘shoot to kill’ policies and collusion with loyalist paramilitaries. Indeed, the language used to talk about those groups which had utilized political violence during the course of the ‘Troubles’ has changed over the years. They are no longer referred to predominantly as ‘terrorists’, but instead as ‘paramilitaries’, and those group members who were imprisoned for

their actions are referred to as ‘politically motivated former prisoners’, ‘politically motivated ex-prisoners’ or ‘ex-combatants’. Thus, echoing Rubenstein’s (1987, p. 16) observation that “nobody wants to be called a terrorist”, in the Northern Ireland context there is a reluctance by many, including the local government, community groups and the media, to label those groups who have engaged in the peace process as ‘terrorists’.

The papers that follow cover a broad range of concerns and observations associated with the conceptual nature of terrorism. The papers by Jackson, ‘In Defense of ‘Terrorism’: Finding a Way through a Forest of Misconception’, and Bryan, Kelly and Templer, ‘The Failed Paradigm of Terrorism’, argue for and against the retention and employment of the concept. Jackson acknowledges and outlines the various arguments for rejecting the term; a term which he argues has been “greatly misused” before presenting the reader with a re-definition and description of the key components of the phenomenon. In contrast, Bryan, Kelly and Templer posit that academics studying political violence must “abandon” their usage of the term in light of its indefinability and that some of the so-called common characteristics of the phenomenon are “unconvincing”. The paper additionally explores the substantial implications of the label’s use and calls for academics to engage more responsibly in discussions of such violence. Thus the reader is provided with competing positions on the merits of defining terrorism.

The effect of words and language, especially in relation to suicide terrorism, is explored by Güss in his paper ‘Suicide Terrorism: Exploring Western Perceptions of Terms, Context, and Causes’. His research of undergraduate university students in the southeastern part of the United States provides an interesting insight into the relationship between the labeling of similar acts with different terms and subsequent negative/positive associations. Güss’ work echoes some of the issues raised by Bryan, Kelly and Templer in their discussion of the implications of labeling

acts in certain ways and suggests the employment of “the most neutral terms possible to describe ‘loaded concepts’” with particular reference to Islamic martyrdom.

The papers by Hartwell and Barkley ‘Terrorism, the US Army perspective in Iraq’ and Blackburn ‘The Evolving Definition of Terrorism in UK Law’ are more country specific. We must not forget that the meaning of terrorism is not confined to mere academic debate but is also of concern for those engaged in responding and countering such political violence, be it by military interventions or legislative measures. Hartwell and Barkley chart the US Army’s experiences in Iraq in 2009 and early 2010 and outline to the reader the differences between insurgency and terrorism before concluding that terrorism is a tool of insurgents.

In contrast, Blackburn maps the evolution of the British definition of terrorism over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries providing a comprehensive examination of not only legislation but also parliamentary debates and government commissioned papers and reports. Thus, she argues that such an empirical and interdisciplinary approach can help transcend some of the philosophical questions characteristic of academic debates surrounding the meaning of terrorism.

The use of terrorism by political actors is unfortunately a continuing aspect of our past, present and probable future. It is hoped that the papers in this special issue will encourage future research and debate about the meaning of terrorism and the language we use to describe it. Without such research and debate, the field will remain fractured and progress towards ameliorating this category of violence will remain limited.

We would like to especially thank all those authors who originally participated in a very lively debate on a September day in Northern Ireland, and who subsequently contributed papers to this special issue. We would also like to extend our gratitude and appreciation to the reviewers

and participants at the conference who provided feedback and comments. It is these people who have made this special issue possible.

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