

The Political Necessity of Terrorism

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Abstract

The concept of terrorism is produced through discursive processes of labelling, measuring and categorising; it is not a free-standing phenomenon and has no clear ontological status. Despite its insecure ontological status, its negative cultural-political baggage and its misuse by political and academic actors for ideological gain, there are a number of important political and normative reasons for retaining the term as a focus for research, not least because the term retains genuine political and academic currency. Moreover, despite the impossibility of a clear and accepted definition, it is possible to identify a set of distinguishing criteria for terrorism which could form the basis of a consensus on the concept. Because the term functions to delegitimise certain forms of instrumental violence, it can also serve a useful function within a broader emancipatory project and contribute to human security and progressive politics. However, in order to realise this potential, scholars within the field need to adhere to a specific set of ontological and normative commitments.

Introduction

It has become something of a cliché to note that there are over 200 definitions of terrorism in existence within the broader terrorism studies literature; that many terrorism scholars have given up on the definitional debate and use the term unreflectively; and that such a state of affairs hampers theoretical progress and skews terrorism research in unhelpful ways. However, the significance and consequences of the definitional debate go far beyond such narrow academic confines, important as they are to the field. Rather, it is central to the ideology and practices of the global war on terror, the constitution of terrorism as a legal subject in domestic counter-terrorism and the construction of knowledge and commonsense about what has been designated one of the defining security issues of our time. Furthermore, it has substantial indirect consequences for individuals and groups labelled as terrorists, who may then be legally subject to torture, rendition and internment without trial, and for the 'suspect communities' they belong to.

In this paper, I attempt to argue that despite a number of serious political and ontological obstacles to the definition of terrorism, it should be possible to agree on a clear set of criteria that can be employed to distinguish and conceptualise terrorism as a unique form of political violence. There are a great many advantages to adopting these definitional criteria. More importantly, I want to argue that, in addition to the conceptual benefits, there are important political-normative imperatives for retaining terrorism as a central organising concept for the field. I begin the paper by discussing some of the main challenges in defining terrorism and the kinds of knowledge practices this has resulted in to date. In the second section, I outline a set of criteria that analysts can employ to distinguish terrorism from other forms of political

violence. The final section of the paper attempts to demonstrate how this approach to terrorism can play a role in progressive politics and an emancipatory project.

The Constitution of Terrorism

I have already noted that the definitional debate in terrorism studies has reached something of a stalemate. Not only is there no agreed definition among scholars, but an analysis of 490 articles published in the leading terrorism studies journals between 1990 and 1999 revealed that only eight or 1.6 percent of them could be regarded as conceptually-oriented papers.¹ This suggests that many scholars have largely given up on the challenging theoretical debates surrounding the central concept of the field. An examination of the broader terrorism studies literature suggests four main approaches and practices towards the definition and conceptualisation of terrorism.² Arguably, the most frequent practice, particularly amongst scholars who are newly arrived to the subject, is to simply use the term without defining it, on the misguided assumption that it is widely understood and accepted. Such an approach is problematic for a number of very obvious reasons, not least because terrorism is a highly emotive and divisive concept which different scholars and societies have often understood in very different ways.

A second approach, confined mainly to political leaders and security officials, but also to a surprising number of researchers and media pundits, is to define terrorism as an ideology or movement. Although groups specializing solely in terror do sometimes form, they are extremely rare and typically they remain highly unstable and ephemeral. There are very few such groups operating today. In reality, most terrorism occurs in the context of wider political struggles in which the use of terror is one strategy among other more routine forms of contentious action.³ As Charles Tilly puts it, 'Properly understood, terror is a strategy, not a creed. Terrorists range across a wide spectrum of organizations, circumstances, and beliefs.'⁴

Third, it is not uncommon to see researchers adopt an actor-based definition in the literature, whereby terrorism is defined as a particular form of political violence committed by non-state actors who attack civilians. Bruce Hoffman, for example, argues that terrorism involves violence 'perpetrated by a *subnational group* or *non-state entity*.'⁵ This is in keeping with the U.S. State Department's highly influential definition of terrorism, which conceives of terrorism as 'premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetuated against noncombatant targets by *subnational groups* or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.'⁶ For scholars who adopt this definition, terrorism is largely indistinguishable from insurgency, militancy, guerrilla warfare and the like. More importantly, inherent to this approach is an

¹ Silke, A. (2004) 'The Road Less Travelled: Recent Trends in Terrorism Research', in A. Silke, (ed), *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements and Failures*. London: Frank Cass, p. 207.

² For an excellent overview of the main definitional approaches in the field, see Raphael, S. (2007) 'Putting the State Back In: The Orthodox Definition of Terrorism and the Critical Need to Address State Terrorism', Paper Prepared for British International Studies Association (BISA) Annual Conference, 17-19 December, 2007, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom, available online at: <http://www.bisa.ac.uk/2007/tuesday.htm>.

³ Tilly, C. (2004) 'Terror, Terrorism, Terrorists', *Sociological Theory*, vol. 22, no. 1, p. 6; Schmid, A. (2004) 'Frameworks for Conceptualising Terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 16, no. 2, p. 199.

⁴ Tilly, 'Terror, Terrorism, Terrorists', p. 5.

⁵ Hoffman, B. (1998) *Inside Terrorism*, New York: Columbia University Press, p.43.

⁶ Emphasis added. Quoted in Martin, G. (2003) *Understanding Terrorism: Challenges, Perspectives, and Issues*, Thousand Oaks: Sage, p. 33.

assumption that while states may commit atrocities, engage in political repression or torture opponents, this nonetheless does not constitute terrorism, in large part because states have the sovereign right to use force.⁷ From this perspective, definitions of terrorism hinge on questions of legitimacy and sovereignty and the nature of the actor who employs the violence. As I will argue below, actor-based approaches to the definition of terrorism are both analytically untenable and politically suspect.

Lastly, and most commonly among the leading scholars in the field, terrorism is defined as a violent strategy or tactic that actors employ in pursuit of particular political goals. That is, terrorism is defined and understood by the nature and characteristics of the act itself, rather than the nature of actor, and is conceived as a particular kind of political action directed towards certain strategic goals rather than as a broad ideology or movement. Louise Richardson for example, defines terrorism as ‘politically motivated violence directed against non combatants or symbolic targets which is designed to communicate a message to a broader audience.’⁸ Crucially, such a definitional approach accepts that states are also actors who can and frequently do adopt strategies of terrorism and commit terrorist acts. This is a useful formulation that provides the basis for the identifying criteria I present below.

In part due to these definitional approaches, research on terrorism in the broader field has been characterised by a number of unfortunate tendencies. An initial tendency widely noted by some critics of the field is the selection bias of much terrorism research whereby the terrorism label is applied almost solely to non-state groups opposed to Western interests and not to those groups supported by Western states – even when they commit identical acts of civilian-directed violence such as hijackings, bombings, kidnappings and assassinations.⁹ Thus, while left-wing groups have always received an inordinate amount of attention in the terrorism studies literature, right-wing groups like the Contras, anti-Castro groups, UNITA, RENAMO, various Afghan factions, numerous Latin American death squads, and today a number of Iraqi death squads today have remained scandalously understudied. Although this is in part the result of the definitional practices noted above, it is also the result of an understandable but avoidable ideological bias amongst many Western scholars who adopt the interests of their own governments.

Another more serious feature is that the field has been widely criticised for its failure to provide sustained analysis (and moral condemnation) of state terrorism specifically. Indicative of the almost exclusive focus on ‘terrorism from below’ as opposed to ‘terrorism from above’ is the finding that only 12 or less than two percent of articles from 1990 to 1999 in the core terrorism studies journals focused on state terrorism,¹⁰ and that only 12 of the 768 pages in the *Encyclopaedia of World Terrorism* (1997) examined state terrorism in any form.¹¹ In part, this is due to the not infrequent practice noted above of defining terrorism exclusively as a form of non-state violence. However, there are also a great many prominent scholars who accept that objectively terrorism is a strategy of political violence which any actor can employ, including states, but then simply refuse to examine cases of state terrorism in

⁷ See Raphael, ‘Putting the State Back In’.

⁸ Richardson, L., quoted in Taylor, M. And Horgan, J. (eds) (2000) *The Future of Terrorism* London: Frank Cass.

⁹ I explore this problem in Jackson, R. (2007) ‘Critical Reflection on Counter-sanctuary Discourse’, in Michael Innes, (ed), *Denial of Sanctuary: Understanding Terrorist Safe Havens*, Westport, CT: Praeger Security International.

¹⁰ Silke, ‘The Road Less Travelled’, p. 206.

¹¹ Quoted in Goodin, R. (2006) *What’s Wrong with Terrorism?* Cambridge: Polity Press 2006, p. 55.

their research. Walter Laqueur, arguably one of the founders of terrorism studies, is emblematic of this practice: he openly accepts that states have killed many more people and caused far more material and social destruction than ‘terrorism from below’, but then argues that this is simply not the terrorism he wishes to examine.¹² It is perfectly understandable that scholars would wish to focus on particular subjects, but when an entire field neglects what is a very important dimension of the phenomenon, it raises troubling questions about the ideological orientation and political objectivity of the overall field.

Clearly, there are reasons for concern over this state of affairs. From a political-normative perspective it makes the field appear biased towards Western state interests and complicit in the terroristic practices Western states have regularly employed over the past two hundred years.¹³ That is, the failure to analyse state terrorism or to condemn it in the same morally assured terms as non-state terrorism – particularly the well-documented use of political terror by Western states during the colonial period, the ‘terror bombing’ during World War II and other conflicts, cold war counter-insurgency and pro-insurgency campaigns, the active sponsorship of right-wing non-state terrorist groups and the widespread use of torture during certain counter-terrorism campaigns, among others – appears to many observers as pro-Western bias and a toleration of certain forms of state-practiced terrorism.¹⁴

In addition, it represents a breakdown of scholarly procedure and a self-imposed intellectual blindness. It is intellectually unsustainable to argue that states cannot practice terrorism against their own people and against other states – that a car bomb detonated on a city street by clandestine state agents is not an act of terrorism, but an identical attack by non-state actors is, for example. Or that the kidnap, torture and murder of a civilian by agents of the state is not terrorism, but the same act by a non-state group is terrorism. Moreover, accepting that terrorism can only really be described according to the nature and quality of the particular act of violence – rather than the purported legitimacy of the actor who commits it (states who employ terror as a mode of governance arguably lack legitimacy, in any case) – has a number of serious consequences and implications.

In the first place, it raises serious questions about the broader focus of the field and the empirical foundations it is based on. That is, while non-state terrorists have killed tens of thousands and caused significant damage during the past century and a half, the acceptance that ‘states can be terrorists, too’¹⁵ reveals that some individual states have been responsible for more terrorism than all non-state terrorist groups put together. A conservative estimate of state-instigated mass murder, forcible starvations and genocide against civilians for example, suggests that governments have been responsible for 170-200 millions deaths in the twentieth century alone.¹⁶ Even if only a small proportion of these deaths can be strictly defined as state terrorism, the few hundred deaths caused every year by non-state terrorists pales beside the massive death, destruction and de-stabilisation caused by states. Moreover, a great many states continue to employ terrorism on a massive scale against their people today in places

¹² Laqueur, W. (1977), *Terrorism*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, p. 6.

¹³ Western state terrorism is discussed in more detail in Jackson, ‘Critical Reflection on Counter-sanctuary Discourse’.

¹⁴ See for example, George, A. (1991), *Western State Terrorism*, Cambridge: Polity Press; Herman, E. (1982) *The Real Terror Network: Terrorism in Fact and Propaganda*, South End Press.

¹⁵ Goodin, *What’s Wrong With Terrorism?*, pp. 50-77

¹⁶ See Rummel, R. (1994) *Death by Government*. Somerset, NJ: Transaction Books; see also Goodin, *What’s Wrong With Terrorism?*, p. 67).

like Colombia, Haiti, Algeria, Zimbabwe, Myanmar, Uzbekistan,¹⁷ Kashmir, Palestine, Chechnya, Tibet, North Korea, Indonesia, the Philippines and elsewhere. And yet, the broader terrorism studies field does not include statistics on state terrorism in any of its recognised data bases, nor does it expend any real effort trying to understand the nature, causes, strategies and outcomes of state terrorism.¹⁸ It is a serious analytical failure when an entire field largely fails to examine what is arguably the most serious aspect of the subject. It would be comparable to an imaginary situation in which criminologists focused most of their research on anti-social behaviour and burglaries, and failed to study in any systematic way the extent and causes of domestic violence, rape, murder, sexual abuse or other serious crimes.

Another important consequence of the acceptance of the reality of state terrorism is the need to re-conceptualise some of the accepted truisms regarding the nature of terrorism. It is not the case for example, that terrorism is solely the 'weapon of the weak'; it can also be true that 'the stronger the state, the stronger the temptation to rule through a regime of terror'.¹⁹ In fact, the history of terrorism would suggest that strong actors use terror far more frequently than weak ones. Moreover, it is clear that in contradistinction to popular beliefs, terrorism can be employed during war as well as during peace, when for example, states bomb civilian targets of no military value for the sole purpose of terrorising a population into surrender – a case of frightening one group of people in order to produce a political change in another.²⁰ Similarly, counter-terrorism itself can become terrorism when it fails to distinguish between the innocent and the guilty, it is highly disproportionate, it aims to terrify or intimidate the wider population or a particular community into submission and when it is co-opted to serve a political agenda.²¹

In the end, there are important ethical-normative implications for the notion that states can be terrorists too, particularly in the current climate where virtually every state and international organisation has adopted new anti-terrorist legislation and where military force – including 'strategic bombing' – is being used as counter-

¹⁷ The former British ambassador to Uzbekistan reveals the nature and extent of Uzbek state terror and Western complicity in Craig Murray, *Murder in Samarkland: A British Ambassador's Controversial Defiance of Tyranny in the War on Terror* (Mainstream Publishing, 2006).

¹⁸ This is not to say that there are no scholars who examine state terrorism, simply that they are few and far between and tend to exist on the margins of or even outside of the main field. There has been some outstanding research on state terrorism, including: Sluka, J. (ed.), (2000), *Death Squad: An Anthropology of State Terror* (Penn: University of Pennsylvania Press); Stohl, M. and Lopez, G. (eds.) (1986), *Government Violence and Repression: An Agenda for Research*, ed. Bernard Johnpoll, Contributions in Political Science, New York: Greenwood; Gareau, F. (2004), *State Terrorism and the United States. From Counterinsurgency to the War on Terrorism*, London: Zed Books; and Grosscup, B. (2006) *Strategic Terror: The Politics and Ethics of Aerial Bombardment*. London: Zed Books.

¹⁹ Goodin, *What's Wrong With Terrorism?* p. 52

²⁰ On the issue of terrorism during war, an excellent example is Grosscup, B. (2006) *Strategic Terror: The Politics and Ethics of Aerial Bombardment*. London: Zed Books. Grosscup provides a thoroughly convincing and eloquent argument about why the doctrine and practice of strategic bombing constitutes a form of state terrorism – not least because its original formulation was as 'terror bombing' aimed at civilians and intended 'to create such terror, destruction and misery as to undermine civilians' morale and in swift order break their fragile will to resist' (p. 24). He goes on to document the use of 'terror bombing' against civilian populations in numerous European colonies, in the Spanish Civil War and during World War II, and then in its new formulation as 'strategic bombing' in numerous conflicts since such as Korea, Cambodia, Vietnam, Lebanon, Chechnya, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq. Furthermore, Grosscup demonstrates that the two most common justifications for strategic bombing – that unlike non-state terrorism it does not deliberately target civilians and that when large numbers of civilians are killed it is not intentional – are in fact, highly specious (p. 179).

²¹ Goodin, *What's Wrong With Terrorism?* pp. 69-73.

terrorism tool in the so-called war on terror. At the very least, scholars should be highly suspicious of any and all attempts by states to define terrorism in ways that conveniently mean that no matter what they or their agents do, it cannot be considered terrorism. They should refuse to accede to the common practice of exempting state officials from charges of terrorism, if no other reason than that:

There is something morally suspicious, however, about people making laws that apply to everyone else except themselves. The sheer fact that politicians have entered into a mutual-protection pact not to prosecute one another as ‘terrorists’ cannot change any logical or deontological facts of the matter. If what they do is otherwise indistinguishable from what is done by non-state actors that we would deem to be terroristic, then the acts of the state officials doing the same thing would be morally wrong for just the same reasons.²²

It is not as if there are no understandable reasons for the continuing failure to agree a definition of the field’s central concept. In the first place, some of the key concepts at the heart of the definition of terrorism are extremely subjective and difficult to determine objectively. Most definitions of terrorism by leading scholars for example, describe it as a form of *illegitimate* violence directed towards *innocent* civilians that is *intended* to intimidate or terrify an audience for *political* purposes. The question of what makes an act of violence legitimate or not, who counts as a civilian, how innocence can be measured, what the real intentions of often clandestine actors might be and what counts as a political aim, are all highly contested and subject to competing claims. As a consequence, in practice it is often the politically and culturally determined legitimacy of the particular group under scrutiny that determines whether its actions are labelled as ‘terrorism’ and not necessarily the characteristics inherent to the violence itself.

Much more significantly however, terrorism is not a causally coherent, free-standing phenomenon which can be defined in terms of characteristics inherent to the violence itself. It lacks a clear ontological status – which actually makes an objective definition impossible. As two leading figures in the field put it, ‘The nature of terrorism is not inherent in the violent act itself. One and the same act... can be terrorist or not, depending on intention and circumstance’.²³ The bombing of civilians for example, is not always or inherently a terrorist act; it may be the unintentional consequence of a military operation during war, for example.

The reality is that terrorism is a social fact rather than a brute fact. Although acts of violence are experienced as brute facts, the wider cultural-political meaning of those acts as ‘terrorism’ for example, is decided through symbolic labelling, social agreement and a range of inter-subjective practices. That is, as a phenomenon, terrorism is constituted by the discursive practices which make it ‘real’, including among others: the labelling of certain acts and groups by authoritative actors, such as the annual State Department reports; the legal definitions contained within criminal and international law; the compiling of statistics on terrorism by the CIA, RAND, and various academics and think-tanks; the ascriptions of different groups and acts as ‘terrorist’ in the media; and the like. Actions and actors are constituted and reconstituted as terrorism in a continuous flow of social and political discourse. Moreover, analyses of these discourses reveal significant variation and instabilities

²² Ibid., p. 56.

²³ Schmid, A. and A. Jongman, (1988) *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Databases, Theories and Literature*, Oxford: North Holland, p. 101.

between and within institutions, as well as shifts over time in the way terrorism is discursively constructed and delineated.²⁴ For example, before the late 1960s, there was virtually no ‘terrorism’ spoken of by politicians, the media or academics; there were instead numerous references to ‘bombings’, ‘kidnappings’, ‘assassinations’, ‘hijackings’ and the like.²⁵ The current discourse of terrorism used by scholars, politicians and the media is in fact, a very recent invention. Similarly, in the 1980s, the Afghan Mujahidin were described as ‘freedom fighters’²⁶ before they were later reconstructed as ‘Islamic terrorists’. Numerous other groups and states have experienced the same kind of discursive transformation from ‘terrorist’ or ‘state-sponsor of terrorism’ to ‘freedom fighter’, ‘political leader’ or ‘ally in the war on terror’.

In an important sense then, terrorism does not exist outside of the definitions and practices which seek to enclose it. Just as ‘races’ do not exist objectively ‘out there’, but classifications of humankind does, so too ‘terrorism’ does not exist but classifications of different forms of political violence does.²⁷ A pertinent illustration of the ontological instability of the terrorism label is the observation that there are no less than four recognised ‘terrorists’ who have gone on to win the Nobel Peace Prize: Menachim Begin, Sean McBride, Nelson Mandela and Yassir Arafat.²⁸ Clearly, even within the confines of contemporary terrorism discourse ‘once a terrorist, is not always a terrorist’.²⁹ It depends upon the current political context and the dominant discourses which determine and constitute it.

It is for this reason, among others, that some scholars argue that the term should be avoided or eschewed altogether in academic research. These scholars suggest that the appropriate focus of study is not the terrorism that exists out there ‘in reality’, but the discourses of terrorism and the discursive practices that construct terrorism as a political and cultural subject.³⁰ Another set of scholars argue more prosaically that terrorism is a political-cultural label, an act of de-legitimation and no group ever accepts its designation as ‘terrorist’; that it has been abused by political interests and that it has too many negative cultural and political connotations to retain any real analytical value. While these are cogent and challenging arguments, as I will argue below, I don’t believe that this means we should abandon the attempt to carefully and consistently determine which acts should be considered terrorist, or that we cannot agree on a set of fairly clear identifying criteria which can be employed for research purposes.

²⁴ See Zulaika, J. and W. Douglass, (1996) *Terror and Taboo: The Follies, Fables, and Faces of Terrorism*, London: Routledge; Jackson, R. (2005). *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counterterrorism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press; Jackson, R. (2007) ‘Constructing Enemies: “Islamic Terrorism” in Political and Academic Discourse’, *Government & Opposition*, vol. 42, no. 3, pp. 394-426; Winkler, C. (2006) *In the Name of Terrorism: Presidents on Political Violence in the Post-World War II Era*, Albany, NY, State University of New York Press; Collins, J. and Glover, R. (eds.) (2002) *Collateral Language: A User’s Guide to America’s New War* (New York University Press, 2002); and Croft, S. (2006) *Culture, Crisis and America’s War on Terror*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

²⁵ See Zulaika and Douglass, *Terror and Taboo*.

²⁶ Livingston, S. (1994) *The Terrorism Spectacle*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

²⁷ Sluka, J. (2002) ‘Comment: What Anthropologists should know about the Concept of “Terrorism”’, *Anthropology Today*, vol. 18, no. 2, p. 23.

²⁸ Zulaika and Douglass, *Terror and Taboo*, p. x.

²⁹ Schmid, A. (2004) ‘Frameworks for Conceptualising Terrorism’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 16, no. 2, p. 205.

³⁰ See Zulaika and Douglass, *Terror and Taboo*.

An Argument for Terrorism

It is my argument here that in spite of its insecure ontological status, its negative cultural-political baggage and its frequent misuse by political and academic actors, there are a number of important political and normative reasons for retaining the term 'terrorism' as an organising concept for the field. I want to further suggest that the term can serve a useful function within a broader emancipatory project – that it can inform and strengthen a progressive politics. However, in order to achieve these lofty goals, scholars need to adopt the aims and commitments of a more 'critical' approach to terrorism.

Politically, there are a number of reasons why we should retain the term terrorism and engage in sustained and rigorous discursive struggle over its constitution and knowledge production. Most obviously, the term now has widespread political and cultural currency. It is the organising concept for a vast array of powerful political institutions, processes and practices in contemporary society, and scholars who refuse to employ or engage with it risk marginalising their views and their access to power. The term also clearly retains a great deal of academic currency. There is now a whole field of research, teaching and advocacy surrounding the concept of terrorism, with numerous journals, conferences, teaching programmes, think-tanks, research centres, funding opportunities and advisory posts in existence. To refuse to employ the term or engage in debates about its definition and application in research is again, to risk marginalisation and irrelevance within this broader scholarly context.

Most importantly however, there is a compelling normative imperative to retain a term that de-legitimises particular kinds of violence directed against civilians and which instrumentalises human suffering for the purposes of influencing an audience.³¹ Of course, the normative power of the terrorism label is highly dependent upon its consistent application to all qualifying cases, even when committed by Western states or their allies; the selectivity and bias of terrorism scholars and political leaders in the past has seriously undermined this project by making it appear that the term is reserved for the enemies of the West. However, I would argue that this provides a reason for critical engagement rather than withdrawal and capitulation in the discursive struggle.

Although terrorism can never be adequately defined due to its unstable ontological status, I want to argue that it can, and should, be described according to a set of identifiable and unique characteristics which delineate it from other forms of political violence. Furthermore, a review of the broader terrorism studies literature would suggest that the following conception of terrorism has broad support from many leading scholars in the field and could form the basis of a consensus over how to conceptualise it. Such an approach moreover, has several advantages over most of the existing approaches I outlined above. I suggest that as a form of political violence, terrorism can be described according to four main characteristics.

First, terrorism is an intentional and pre-determined strategy of political violence. This suggests its rational and instrumental basis. It also implies that any actor (states, groups or individuals) can employ it in pursuit of strategic goals and that once a terrorist is not always a terrorist – it does not imply a kind of essential identity. Importantly, it also implies political motivations, as a way of distinguishing terrorism from other forms of violence designed to terrify, such as the intimidation of communities by organised criminals seeking to obtain financial reward, the terror caused by a serial killer, or the fear caused by a one-off mass killing. Lastly, it implies

³¹ This point was made to me in conversation with Ken Booth, Aberystwyth University.

forethought and intentionality, as opposed to the terror induced by rioting or communal disturbances, for example.

Second, the targets of terrorist violence are not necessarily the victims of the violence, but rather the audiences to the violence. From this perspective, terrorism is a form of political communication rather than direct military action. An important distinction here is that terrorism instrumentalises its victims; unlike the actions of soldiers in war who seek to directly degrade the material ability of the enemy to continue fighting, the victims of terrorism are chosen instead for symbolic reasons. An important point here is that states which try to hide their involvement in civilian-directed violence may still be sending a powerful message to the society or social groups they wish to intimidate. The use of disappearances as a strategy of terrorism for example, sends a message that the state is omnipotent, omnipresent and ruthless in rooting out opponents,³² as does kidnap and torture. In other cases, state terrorism may be both instrumental and direct: killing a union organiser for example, both weakens the union and sends a message to potential union leaders and the society they come from.

Third, and related to the previous point, terrorism is intended to cause fear and intimidate. This is the central purpose of the violence and not just the unintended consequence, although it can be argued that there is a certain kind of intentionality when actors engage in actions they can be sure will cause terror and intimidate, such as using airpower to bomb civilian areas. Moreover, the intention to cause fear can be usually be deduced from the targets, context and foreseen consequences of the violence. Bombs in public places or the widespread use of torture against regime opponents for example, are clearly intended to terrify the wider society.

Lastly, terrorism is aimed primarily but not solely at civilians. Here I differ with some scholars in that I argue that it is often unhelpful to try and maintain civilian-military or combatant-non-combatant distinctions in conceptualising terrorism. I agree with Goodin in this regard that such distinctions can in fact, be counter-productive, as they provide actors with legitimation for other forms of equally abhorrent forms of violence.³³ A violent campaign aimed at police officers or off-duty military personnel which was intended to cause fear and intimidate the wider society or a certain section of society for example, would still constitute terrorism even though it avoided targeting civilians. Similarly, certain actions during war which were aimed solely at terrorising enemy soldiers and their civilian audience, rather than for military-strategic reasons – such as the use of certain militarily ineffective but demoralising chemical weapons or the bombing of civilian areas which possessed no strategic targets, for example – could also be considered terrorism.

There are a number of clear advantages to employing such a conception of terrorism. In the first instance, it does not artificially and illogically limit the phenomenon by the nature of the actor (as some definitions do), but includes state terrorism, gender-based terrorism,³⁴ and non-state terrorism. Second, it does not limit the analysis to peace but also includes the behaviour of actors in war, the site of a great deal of concentrated political violence. Lastly, as mentioned, it can be argued that there is already a consensus on these criteria among the leading terrorism scholars, as their definitions tend to incorporate all these elements. From this

³² See Sluka, 'Introduction'.

³³ Goodin, *What's Wrong With Terrorism?* p. 15.

³⁴ See Sharlach, L. (forthcoming) 'Veil and Four Walls: A State of Terror in Pakistan', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, vol. 1, no. 1.

perspective, the main issue is not that we do not know what terrorism is or that we cannot clearly identify it; it is rather that the application of the definition is too often restricted – for whatever reason – to a narrow set of actors that happens to coincide with the current strategic interests of Western powers. During the cold war, most terrorism research focused on left-wing non-state groups; today, most terrorism research focuses on so-called ‘Islamic terrorism’. This inconsistent application both distorts the focus of the field and undermines the emancipatory project.

Terrorism and Emancipation

As I have conceived it above, in addition to its analytical advantages, the terrorism label could be employed as means to advancing an emancipatory project and progressive politics in a number of respects. At the most basic level, employing the above criteria effects to de-legitimise forms of violence that instrumentalise human beings for the purposes of political communication, whether they are civilians or combatants. Related to this, it further de-legitimises all forms of civilian-directed violence, including the direct targeting of civilians during war.

Most importantly, however, this approach to terrorism brings back states as a subject for analysis and holds them accountable for actions that many recognise as terrorism but which is rarely acknowledged as terrorism, even by terrorism scholars. This is a critical task, given that state terrorism is objectively far more serious and far more entrenched in political institutions and forms of governance than non-state terrorism. In this sense, the identifying criteria set out above functions to set the limits of legitimate state violence, despite the frequent attempt to justify terroristic forms of violence by reference to doctrines of state sovereignty and the legitimate use of political violence. The criteria can also be used to scrutinise state practices during counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency which more often than not morphs into terrorism when it fails to distinguish between the innocent and the guilty, is highly disproportionate, or aims to terrify and intimidate the wider population or a particular community into submission. Similarly, it can be used to evaluate state practices during times of war, identifying those occasions when military actions go beyond strategic necessity to the use of force for the purpose of intimidating and demoralising civilians.

In short, these criteria provide a strict set of criteria for the evaluation of actions by any and all actors who are in conflict. As such, they have the potential to strengthen the norms relating to the limits of political violence, thereby improving human security and progressive politics. Importantly, the broad social and academic consensus, as well as the relevant legal precepts, is already in place for proscribing and de-legitimising actions that fall within the categories of illegitimate, terrorist violence outlined above.

However, in order to make this work in everyday scholarly practice, I would argue that terrorism scholars in particular would need to adhere to a set of core ontological, methodological and normative commitments. These have been outlined in detail elsewhere,³⁵ but would include, among others: an acute sensitivity to the politics of labelling in the terrorism field and an acceptance of the insecure ontological status of the term; transparency about their own values and political standpoints, particularly as they relate to the geo-political interests of Western states; a willingness to expand their focus of research to include the use of terrorism by

³⁵ See Jackson, R. (2007) ‘The Core Commitments of Critical Terrorism Studies’, *European Political Science*, 6(3), 244-51.

states; adherence to a set of responsible research ethics; and a commitment to normative values and a broadly defined notion of emancipation. In particular, terrorism scholars must recognise the cultural-political biases they hold and aim for consistency of application of the criteria set out. Specifically, they must demonstrate a willingness to scrutinise and condemn the actions and intentions of their own states when they cross the line into terrorism. This is in fact, the biggest problem facing the field in this area. It is not that terrorism scholars do not recognise the use of terrorism by states; it is rather that they limit the focus of their research largely to non-state groups that are opposed to Western interests and fail to acknowledge the long history of involvement of their own states or allied states in terrorism.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to demonstrate that even though terrorism is impossible to define and the study of terrorism is beset by some unhelpful biases and knowledge practices, it is both possible and necessary to retain the terrorism term as a focus for research. I have further suggested that as an analytical term, terrorism can potentially play an important normative function. However, in order to realise this potential, terrorism scholars need to acknowledge and accept the ethico-political content of their subject and commit themselves to a number of transparent principles. The consequences of failing to do so are that the field remains unbalanced, politically biased and highly limited in its focus. More importantly, unless these imbalances are addressed the field is in danger of providing academic legitimacy to the current efforts of certain Western governments in the ongoing war on terror. That is, scholars risk reinforcing the view that terrorism is solely a problem of non-state groups and individuals, and that states are immune from condemnation or sustained scholarly analysis. Considering some of the morally questionable and counter-productive policies at the heart of this global campaign – such as extraordinary rendition, the widespread use of torture, internment at Guantanamo Bay, pre-emptive war, extra-judicial killing of terrorist suspects, shoot-to-kill policies, intrusive surveillance, aid and support for authoritarian regimes and the like – this should sound a clarion call for concerted action to scholars in the field.