

The Morality of Terrorism

Throwing a bomb is bad,
 Dropping a bomb is good;
 Terror, no need to add,
 Depends on who's wearing the hood.
 Roger Woddis¹

Terrorism intrigues and disturbs policy makers, the media, and the public even more in the infancy of the new millennium than it did in the last quarter of the twentieth century. And although this fact no doubt delights terrorists themselves, and consoles them for the apparent ineffectiveness of much terrorist activity in achieving ultimate political goals, it is nonetheless surprising that the phenomenon has commanded such attention. Prior to September 11, 2001, the death and damage done by what are commonly called terrorist attacks in any single year had been mostly insignificant compared to the annual road toll in the United States, or to the “collateral” death and damage caused by the NATO bombing of Serbia in just one month of 1999. Even the September 11 attacks were small-scale compared to the destruction wrought by other dramatic attacks, such the bombing of Dresden and the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II. These might well qualify themselves as terrorist acts, and indeed I shall argue that they should, but most of the contemporary anxiety about terrorism is focused on the activities of substate agents whose successes have been nowhere as spectacular. The explanation of what can seem a disproportionate concern with substate terrorism is sometimes said to lie in the random and unexpected nature of the attacks, but this cannot be the whole story, since most road deaths are, if anything, even more random and unexpected, though of course they are not usually “attacks.”

¹ Roger Woddis, “Ethics for Everyman,” in Kingsley Amis (ed.), *The New Oxford Book of Light Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 292.

Part of the explanation has, I suspect, religious roots, especially in the United States, where the anxiety about terrorism probably runs strongest (and did so even before September 11) and where religion and its sinister (often unwanted) bedfellows of superstition and religiosity are more influential than anywhere else in the industrialised world. In the United States, the level of religious profession and observance is high, religious cults and sects are thick upon the ground, and an amazing number of people think that they have been abducted or contacted by alien beings from outer space. Against this background, the terrorist stands out as a satanic figure or at least a representative of an evil religion, the religion of terrorism. As such, the relatively insignificant impact of substate terrorist activities tends to fade into the background while the demonic creed and its hidden powers occupy our attention in the foreground. Naturally, this picture is given added colour and emphasis when the terrorists can be linked, as they sometimes can – for example, in Northern Ireland and the Middle East – to an explicitly religious cause.

I want to argue that we get off on the wrong foot by treating terrorism in anything like this fashion. The religious element reinforces a strong tendency commonly present in the scholarly and subscholarly literature on terrorism to treat it as something like an ideology or a comprehensive, belief-driven outlook. There is an equally strong tendency to treat it as always immoral. These tendencies were clearly evident in the aftermath of September 11, where the good-versus-evil divide was massively invoked in the rhetoric of “the war on terror,” and Biblical and Koranic analogies were freely deployed in different quarters. Such tendencies go hand in hand with a considerable degree of muddle about the meaning of the term “terrorism.” Indeed, it has been estimated that there are well over a hundred different definitions of terrorism, many of them contradictory, in the scholarly literature.² This disarray reflects the highly polemical contexts in which the term is used, so that the act of defining can become a move in a campaign rather than an aid to thought. I shall try to dispel this unclarity, and, against the first tendency, I shall argue for a more definite and, I think, more persuasive analysis of terrorism that will show the way in which the second tendency raises issues of inconsistency, and even hypocrisy.

The tendency to think of terrorism as an ideology is no doubt encouraged by superficial verbal resemblances – so many expressions ending in “-ism” are words for ideologies, religions, or systems of belief – but reflection indicates that the “-ism” here may refer to no more than the relatively systematic nature of a method or a tactic. This, in any case, seems to me the healthiest and most realistic way to conceptualise terrorism. If we do this, we can dispel

² Alex Peter Schmid, *Political Terrorism: A Research Guide to Concepts, Theories, Data Bases and Literature* (Amsterdam: Transaction Books, 1983), pp. 119–58, as cited in Walter Laqueur, *The Age of Terrorism* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987).

the illusion that the terrorist is a special sort of representative of an alien religion or ideology, and instead see him or her as a representative of this or that political, or politico-religious, grievance or program, with a range of tactics at his or her disposal, just like the rest of us, and, just like the rest of us, resorting from time to time to morally dubious or outrageous tactics. This gestalt shift would also have the advantage of sidelining the dubious academic industry of psychological investigation of the terrorist personality, the fruits of which have been pretty unappetizing. But these are promissory notes. Let us start, unlike so much of the literature on terrorism, with some statements from terrorists themselves, or at any rate from those who would commonly be regarded as terrorists.

In Their Own Words

(1) Carlos Marighela, the Brazilian revolutionary who had such a strong influence on the development of urban guerrilla warfare in South America, devotes only two paragraphs to what he calls “terrorism” in his *Handbook of Urban Guerrilla Warfare* published in 1969, the year of his death. His definition is rather restrictive. “By terrorism,” he writes, “I mean the use of bomb attacks.”³ Although distinctly narrow, the definition picks out a central terrorist technique and makes it clear that it is a means to political objectives. Elsewhere, when discussing other techniques such as kidnapping and execution of informers (which would probably be called “terrorist” by others, certainly by the media), Marighela makes it clear that such acts are meant to serve the wider political objectives of the revolution. It is a weakness of his and other such writings that they do little to show that the various paramilitary techniques will actually promote these wider objectives, but that is another matter; it is clear that Marighela believes that they will. Talking of executions, for instance, he says: “We should use the death penalty for such people as American spies, agents of the dictatorship, torturers, fascists in the government who have committed crimes against patriots or tried to capture them, police informers.”⁴ It is apparent from this quotation that the killing of these categories of person is viewed by Marighela as a kind of judicial punishment to be justified in whatever way such punishments are justified, especially in times of war.

(2) Another important theorist and spokesman for South American revolutionary movements, Régis Debray, wrote of what he called “city terrorism” in his book *Revolution in the Revolution?* as follows:

³ Carlos Marighela, *Handbook of Urban Guerrilla Warfare*, collected in Carlos Marighela, *For the Liberation of Brazil*, trans. John Butt and Rosemary Sheed (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 89.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

Of course city terrorism cannot assume any decisive role and it entails certain dangers of a political order. But if it is subordinate to the fundamental struggle, the struggle in the countryside, it has, from the military point of view, a strategic value; it immobilizes thousands of enemy soldiers, it ties up most of the repressive mechanism in unrewarding tasks of protection. . . . the government must, since it is the government, protect everywhere the interests of property owners; the *guerrilleros* don't have to protect anything anywhere.⁵

We can see from these extracts that far from being an ideology, or a long-range goal of action, terrorism, or what many people would regard as terrorism, is treated as a technique in the service of such a goal. This is hardly surprising, for terror is a form of violence, and violence is primarily a means. It must of course be conceded that just as there are those who treat the violence of warfare generally as *almost* an end in itself, so there are those who do the same with terrorism. Our earlier discussion of romantic militarism in Chapter 3 indicates as much. Some of the responses in Great Britain to the outbreak of World War I present this welcoming face to violence. Consider, for instance, the English poet Julian Grenfell, whose much-anthologized poem "Into Battle" expressed so well the intoxication with war that so many of his generation seem to have had. Grenfell, a sensitive and intelligent man, wrote to his mother from the front saying, "I *adore* war. It is like a big picnic without the objectlessness of a picnic. I've never been so well or so happy."⁶ Grenfell was awarded the DSO for crawling into no-man's-land and almost into enemy trenches in order to snipe at Germans. It was his own idea, and he killed three Germans. Afterwards, he made two entries in his game book; they come after an entry for October 1914 of "105 partridges" and read: "November 16th: 1 Pomeranian; – November 17th: 2 Pomeranians."⁷ Similarly, with some terrorist operations it may be that the terror itself has assumed something like the status of an end, so that terrorism has become a sort of ideology, the wreaking of havoc itself a value that needs little or no justifying purpose beyond it.

I shall acknowledge, then, that there are warriors who treat war as self-justifying and terrorists who treat terror as self-justifying, but I shall ignore them as aberrational. It may be possible to argue that those who begin by treating war or terror as means inevitably finish up treating them as ends; this is an important line of moral criticism, but it contains the implicit concession that the activities can seem justifiable as means, and since this is how they are usually defended, this is how they should, in the first instance, be examined.

⁵ Régis Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution?*, trans. Bobbye Ortiz (London: Monthly Review Press, 1967), p. 75.

⁶ Quoted in Nicholas Mosley, *Julian Grenfell: His Life and the Times of His Death* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976), p. 239.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

This usefully helps locate our concern for terrorism within the framework of just war theory outlined earlier.

The Tactical Definition

Our definitional search has initially located terrorism as a method, but what method? It is clear from the earlier references to Marighela's views that the term "terrorism" (or just "terror") can be used more or less narrowly, and it is unlikely that the term in ordinary political parlance has any particularly definite sense, since it has arisen and continues to be employed in contexts of a highly emotional, partisan, even hysterical nature. The semantic confusion generated by such contexts seems about equally distributed between supporters and opponents of terrorism, but it is possible to discern in the welter of accusation, complaint, and exposition an outline on which the different concerns and anxieties converge. I shall attempt to bring this outline into focus by defining the concept in terms which capture much of what seems to exercise people in their worries about terrorism and which allow me to continue my exploration of analogies between warfare and other forms of political violence. I think that this approach also does justice to the historical evolution of the term as it has been well summarized, for instance, by Laqueur and Lineberry.⁸ The definition used by Jan Schreiber in his book *The Ultimate Weapon: Terrorists and World Order* will be my starting point.

Schreiber defines terrorism as "a political act, ordinarily committed by an organized group, involving death or the threat of death to non-combatants."⁹ Although on the right path, this needs amending in certain obvious directions: as it stands, it is misleadingly unspecific about the kind of causal nexus indicated by the word "involving." It should at least be made clear that the political act *intentionally* produces death or the threat of death to noncombatants, otherwise loud applause at a political rally which distracted a passing (civilian) motorist, causing him to crash into a pole and die, would count as an act of terrorism. As indicated in Chapters 6 and 7, I use the term "intentional" in such a way that it is possible for there to be foreseen consequences of one's acts that are not intentional. The designer of a freeway, for instance, may have good statistical reason to expect that some people will be killed in consequence of its being built, but he does not intentionally bring about their deaths. I take it to be in the spirit of Schreiber's discussion to treat the "involving" as of the (directly) intentional kind.

The other modification to Schreiber's definition is to widen it a little, since a terrorist act can be aimed at severe injuries other than death. Torture

⁸ Walter Laqueur, *Terrorism* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977); R. C. Lineberry, *The Struggle against Terrorism* (New York: Wilson, 1977).

⁹ Jan Schreiber, *The Ultimate Weapon: Terrorists and World Order* (New York: Morrow, 1978), p. 20.

or the threat of torture would surely do the trick, and so would lesser but still severe injury. By the same token, certain types of severe attacks upon property would probably count, for most people, as terrorist – for example, the destruction of homes or of civil airplanes – even without any danger to human life. As amended, then, the definition of a terrorist act would go as follows: “A political act, ordinarily committed by an organized group, which involves the intentional killing or other severe harming of noncombatants or the threat of the same or intentional severe damage to the property of noncombatants or the threat of the same.”¹⁰ The term “terrorism” can then be defined as “the tactic or policy of engaging in terrorist acts.” I shall call this the “tactical” definition.

As so defined, terrorism stands condemned under the moral principle of discrimination enunciated as part of the JIB. Note that my definition does not smuggle such condemnation into the terms of the definition. If one rejects the principle of discrimination, then there is room for accepting terrorism. It all depends on your attitude toward just war theory. We have already examined some of the problems with this principle in Chapter 6 and shall explore more of those that are specific to revolutionary violence later in this chapter.

One critic who takes a dim view of just war theory generally, and who particularly objects to its employment in connection with terrorism, is Robert Goodin. Goodin has recently attacked tactical definitions, and one of his complaints is that on such definitions terrorists “have done nothing worse than ordinary murder” and that terrorism “seems worse than that, somehow.”¹¹ But on my account, terrorism is not “ordinary” murder, since it is a form of murder committed for political purposes by (normally) an organised group. Goodin thinks that the tactical definition makes the terrorist no different from “a common or garden lunatic gone on a (highly successful) killing spree,” but terrorism as defined here clearly has ramifications that naturally give rise to a very different sort of concern for terrorist murders.¹² Goodin’s appeal to our intuitions here sits uneasily with his highly counter-intuitive definition of terrorism as “acting with the intention of frightening

¹⁰ The definition treats threats as essentially intentional so that the specification “intentional threat” would be pleonastic. If the reader believes that there can be unintentional threats, then he or she should read the relevant part of the definition as referring to intentional threats. There is an argument that threats should not be included in the definition, since it is better to focus on the actual delivery of violence rather than the offer of it, and the threat to do X is generally not a case of doing X, except in special cases like the threat to threaten. I was tempted by this argument in another place. See C. A. J. Coady, “Defining Terrorism,” in Igor Primoratz (ed.), *Terrorism: The Philosophical Issues* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 3–14. But, on balance, I think the inclusion of threats of violence to noncombatants in the definition better squares with common intuitions.

¹¹ Robert Goodin, *What’s Wrong with Terrorism?* (Cambridge, UK, and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2006), p. 10.

¹² *Ibid.*

people for political advantage,” a definition that has *no* reference to violent means of any sort and makes terrorists of Green politicians who frighten people (rightly) with talk about global warming in order to get elected and try to prevent ecological disaster!¹³

Other critics have objected to the inclusion of property damage in the definition. It seems to me clear that destruction of noncombatant property strikes most people as terrorist and also falls under the principle of discrimination, since noncombatant homes and belongings are not legitimate targets.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the sort of condemnation appropriate to killing usually differs strikingly from that appropriate to property damage. So there will be some terrorist offences that are not as grave as others. Indeed, minor property offences may even be justifiable in certain circumstances, attacks upon noncombatants lives are not. This relates to the issues concerning stringency explored in Chapter 14.

A further point about the terms of the definition concerns the reading that should be given to the intention specified in it. Terrorists must intend to harm noncombatants, but of course some terrorists do not believe that their targets are genuinely noncombatants or innocents. Does this belief matter for the characterisation of their acts as terrorist? In philosophical jargon, this is the question whether in such sentences as “The IRA intended to kill those innocent people” the context governed by the verb “intended” is to be read as opaque or transparent. More colloquially, does terrorist status turn on the objective facts about the nature of the target or on the attacker’s subjective belief? Where an attacker mistakenly believes his targets to be somehow combatants, does this mean he or she is not a terrorist? (This is not the same as asking whether the attack is justified or excusable, though there are connections between the two questions.) Here, as elsewhere in discussions of intention, the nature of the mistake is important. In short, I would hold that if the mistake is factual then the attack is not terrorism, but if it is conceptual then the attack is. If a soldier shoots an innocent civilian who has been forcibly dressed in an enemy uniform and shoved into the line of fire as a decoy, the soldier’s action should not be called terrorist; but someone who shoots babies because he regards all the enemy as collectively guilty is palpably a terrorist. In the former case, the agent’s action involves an ordinary (if tragic) factual mistake; in the latter case, the agent (if sincere) is conceptually confused, and the confusion should not be allowed to infect our characterization of the type of action. There will of course be grey areas in the application of the factual/conceptual distinction, but it provides sufficient guidance for clarifying the tactical definition on this point.

¹³ Ibid., p. 156. Goodin’s other complaints about just war theory are similar to those discussed elsewhere in this book.

¹⁴ One critic who complains about the property inclusion is Jenny Teichman. See *Pacifism and the Just War: A Study in Applied Philosophy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 91–92.

Another issue connected with intention has to do with whether attacks that are not intended to kill or injure noncombatants or their property but are negligent, reckless, or insufficiently concerned about damage to noncombatants should be classified as terrorist. This issue is linked to the discussion of collateral damage in Chapter 7, and my view (as elaborated there) is that such attacks deserve moral condemnation, but I think that the tactical definition rightly rules them out as terrorist. My reasons are similar to those used in Chapter 2 to oppose attempts to widen the definition of violence. Though the motives for such definitional expansion are understandable, the outcome is likely to be both confusing and practically counterproductive. What is true is that attacks that cause unacceptable collateral damage share something of the spirit of terrorist attacks, but their form and effects are very different. To capture what is similar, we might refer to them as neo-terrorist.

With these initial clarifications noted, we must turn to certain other consequences of the tactical definition.

Effects, State Terrorism, and Other Definitional Matters

My definition makes no explicit reference to some features of terrorist activity that commentators have regarded as important – for instance, the sort of wider effects it typically aims to produce, such as publicizing a forgotten cause, provoking an overreaction from the enemy, intimidating some group that may or may not be the group under direct attack, and so on. These features are important, but I do not propose to treat such specific political objectives as part of the definition. The more general reference to a “political act” is here advantageously vague because it does not restrict the political uses to which the terrorist tactic may be turned, and it rightly allows for empirical investigation to determine what various groups use terrorism for. We can illustrate this by taking the motivation of publicity, which has seemed sufficiently compelling to many commentators to build it into the understanding of terrorism as a necessary component. Such commentators are impressed by terrorism as communication, theatre, or symbolic act. But recent developments in the phenomenology of terrorism have made it plausible that the publicising of a forgotten or neglected cause is not as central to the analysis of terrorism as it once seemed.

The emergence of what was often called “silent terrorism” in the 1990s presented the curious phenomenon of terrorists who would not claim responsibility for their deeds. When terrorists make no effort to claim their deeds, it is hard to see publicity for their cause as part of the motivation for their acts. That being the case, we are wise to make it no part of the definition. Of course, it remains puzzling that silent terrorists avoid this sort of publicity, simply because of the opacity of motivation this seems to engender. But this very fact provides a challenge for investigation, a challenge that would have been precluded by a definition incorporating the publicity motivation. I will

not conduct such an investigation here (especially since silent terrorism has not been so prominent in the new millennium) beyond suggesting that the failure to claim personal or group responsibility may be aimed at adding to the target's country's nervousness by creating some uncertainty about which of their enemies is responsible, with the additional bonus that retaliatory responses by the target country will be enmeshed in problems created by that uncertainty. Deniability may also help your relations with your host nation when you belong to an organisation that is domiciled in a foreign country. As to publicity, you get publicity for your cause anyway, because your group will probably be one of "the usual suspects." Another possibility is that silent terrorists are interested not in publicity, but in demoralising their opponent and causing the opponent to engage in counterproductive retaliation that tarnishes the opponent's image.

It might, however, be claimed that there is one very general effect of terror tactics that deserves to be written into the definition, namely, the intended effect of fear.¹⁵ The distinctive point of terrorism as a tactic, it will be said, is that it aims to terrorize, to spread fear and so destabilize social relations. This is as true of silent terrorism as of acknowledged terrorism. This fear emphasis contains an important insight into the sociology of terrorism, but I do not think it should be made a matter of definition.¹⁶ My reasons are twofold. In the first place, stress upon this intended effect tends to preclude any serious concern with the more intrinsic issue of the type of method used (as it may be) to generate the fear. This tendency is clearly at work in Martin Hughes's treatment of the topic, and more recently in Robert Goodin's.¹⁷ Second, as already mentioned, we are prejudging an empirical investigation into the specific motives of those who choose to attack noncombatants. Indeed, it is surely plausible that some terrorist attacks are aimed at creating anger rather than fear, since anger may lead to the sort of escalated response that can help to alienate neutral groups caught up in the conflict and drive them into the terrorist camp, as well as to enlist international support in the face of such escalation.

I do not, of course, deny that the tactic of deliberate attacks upon non-combatants is commonly perceived as being aimed at the creation of the sort of fear that produces panic, demoralization, or misjudged retaliation, and, moreover, it can be admitted that the perception is often correct. The

¹⁵ Inclusion of the fear effect is only plausible as an intended effect. If we defined terrorism as a tactic which actually had that effect, then terrorist attacks which gave rise, not to the spread of fear and demoralization, but to defiance and a strengthening of resolve would not be terrorist, even if they deliberately killed scores of children!

¹⁶ Here I side with Paskins and Dockrill against Martin Hughes. See Barry Paskins and Michael Dockrill, *The Ethics of War* (London: Duckworth, 1979), p. 90; and Martin Hughes, "Terrorism and National Security," *Philosophy* 57 (January 1982), p. 5. My agreement with Paskins and Dockrill is only partial, however, since they want to restrict the application of "terrorism" to contexts of evasive warfare and not apply it to full-scale interstate wars.

¹⁷ Goodin, *What's Wrong with Terrorism?*

tactic is, after all, called “terrorism.” Yet, for the reasons given, I would prefer to make no reference to such motivation in the definition. The philosophy of language has made us familiar with situations in which the referent or extension of a term may be fixed by a predicate which does not determine the nature of the reality so indicated and which, if true at all of it, is so contingently. It seems to me that something similar holds of the link between terrorism and the motivation of creating fear. Yet there is here some genuine ground for definitional dispute, and I do not want to be dogmatic on a point that inevitably involves a degree of stipulation. Those readers who agree with me that the attack upon noncombatants is the crucial definitional feature but are more impressed by the fear-creation motive than I am could amend the definition to include a subsidiary reference to the common presence of such motivation. The phrase “and commonly involving the intention to create or maintain widespread fear” could then be inserted after the phrase “an organized group.” Such a guarded and secondary reference to the fear effect would not materially affect the course of our discussion. I shall further discuss some of the issues raised by the relationship between fear and terrorism at the end of this chapter.

As defined, terrorism is not a tactic restricted to revolutionaries and other nongovernmental groups. Doubtless many people would be surprised at the idea that governments and authorized governmental agencies do or can use terrorist methods for their political purposes, but such surprise is quite often the product of naiveté or prejudice. If we see terrorism as a particular kind of employment of political violence (and this seems a central strand in all the varied and often confused uses of the expression), then we should surely be impressed by analogies and identities among the methods used rather than by dissimilarities among the powers and standings of the agents using them. Otherwise we run the risk of treating the term “terrorism” the way some people treat the term “obstinacy,” as a state into which only others can lapse, the parallel state in their own case being described as “strength of purpose.” It is worthy of comment in this connection that Winston Churchill himself used language appropriate to the characterisation of terrorist policies when expressing belated doubts about the Allied policy of city bombing late in World War II. Writing to Sir Charles Portal after the British firestorm destruction of Dresden on February 13, 1945, in which estimates of casualties vary from a conservative 35,000 deaths to a radical 200,000, Churchill wrote:

It seems to me that the moment has come when the question of bombing of German cities simply for the sake of increasing the terror, though under other pretexts, should be reviewed. . . . I feel the need for more precise concentration upon military objectives such as oil and communications behind the immediate battle zone, rather than on mere acts of terror and wanton destruction. However impressive.¹⁸

¹⁸ Quoted in Noble Frankland and Charles Websater, *The Strategic Air Offensive against Germany 1939–1945*, vol. 3 (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1961), p. 112.

It is interesting that in 1940 Churchill's predecessor, Neville Chamberlain, had denounced such "blackguardly" bombing proposals as "mere terrorism."¹⁹

Some would defend their restriction of the use of the term "terrorism" to nonstate agents by locating terrorism as a phenomenon, or as an object of concern, in the arena of civic order and presenting terrorism as a threat to the civic order maintained by states.²⁰ Some of the definitions in the literature point in this direction, and when they do, they tend to invoke the idea of legality or legitimacy and its violation. So the FBI defines terrorism in this spirit when it declares: "Terrorism is the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives."²¹ Although not explicit about restricting terrorism to nonstate agents, the implication of the definition is clearly in that direction. More explicit, and even more restrictive, is Walter Laqueur's statement: "Terrorism is an attempt to destabilize democratic societies and to show that their governments are impotent."²² Laqueur does not intend this as a definition, since he thinks a definition is impossible, and certainly unnecessary, but he later endorses the restriction his statement announces by denying that any form of oppression by the state can count as political terrorism.²³ What we have at work here, and in other places that could be cited, is what could be called a political status definition rather than a tactical definition. It should be clear that I find this conceptual locution less satisfactory than the one I have provided. It has a strong tendency to collapse the possibility of a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violent threats to civic order, between just and unjust revolutionary violence.²⁴ It does this because no state will countenance the idea that there could be legitimate acts of violence against its legally established order. It also renders illegitimate certain obvious complaints that revolutionaries (or, for that matter, innocent third parties themselves) can make in the vocabulary of terrorism against certain violent activities of state authorities. It is natural to speak of state terrorism when the state attempts to stamp out revolutionary activity by threatening, harming, or killing those peasants, intellectuals, workers, or villagers who are not themselves engaged in violence. They may be perceived as sympathetic to those who are, or as simply insufficiently sympathetic to the government.

¹⁹ See J. F. C. Fuller, *The Conduct of War, 1789–1961* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972), p. 280.

²⁰ See Laqueur, *The Age of Terrorism*.

²¹ Quoted by the Terrorism Research Center Inc., viewed June 17, 2002, at <<http://www.terrorism.com/terrorism/def.shtml>>.

²² Walter Laqueur, "Reflections on Terrorism," *Foreign Affairs* 65, no. 1 (1986), p. 87.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

²⁴ Some proponents of political status definitions, or outlooks, would allow for just revolutions against oppressive nondemocratic regimes, but never against democracies. This seems to be Laqueur's position, and Paul Wilkinson's in his *Political Terrorism* (London: Macmillan; New York: Halsted Press, 1974).

There is, of course, no need to deny that the use of terror by nonstate groups rather than by the state raises special theoretical issues, and I shall have something to say about this later.

Following Schreiber, I have used the term “noncombatant” where some may think the term “innocent” more appropriate. Each term has its advantages and disadvantages, as discussed in Chapter 6. I prefer the term “non-combatant” at this point for reasons of convenience in exposition, since the term “innocent” may be even more likely to mislead, but “innocent” will do as well if we keep in mind the distinctions discussed in Chapter 6.

I have made no use of the notion of indiscriminate violence that often figures in definitions or discussions of terrorism. I have avoided this because I think that it is confusing. There is a sense in which I agree with the idea that terrorism involves indiscriminate violence; namely, the sense in which it fails to discriminate between combatant and noncombatant targets. This is all that Paskins and Dockrill, for instance, mean by “indiscriminate.”²⁵ On the other hand, many writers use “indiscriminate” to convey the idea that terrorism is quite irrational in that the terrorist weapon is used in an indiscriminating way, as it were, wildly and pointlessly. This need not be true at all of attacks upon noncombatants or their property, and there is sometimes a good deal of thought and selection going into the terrorist technique employed.

Talk of “indiscriminate violence” does, however, raise another issue. Some readers who agree with me on the importance of the combatant/noncombatant distinction and its relevance to the definition of terrorism may nonetheless prefer to define terrorism more widely as any violation of the *jus in bello*.²⁶ In other words, any use of political violence that stands under moral condemnation because of the type of violence used rather than its relation to the political goals of the users would then count as terrorist. I suspect that there is some linguistic warrant for this wider usage, but on the whole, I think we do more justice to the concerns usually articulated by the term “terrorist” if we operate with the narrower definition I have proposed. If a revolutionary group adopted the immoral but not uncommon military policy of taking no prisoners (“yielding no quarter”) or even of killing their prisoners after interrogation, then although the behaviour deserves moral condemnation, it does seem to require somewhat different treatment than a direct attack upon the uninvolved. This is so even if the condemnation in both cases goes beyond utilitarian considerations. In any case, employing the wider concept of terrorism will not greatly affect the broad purposes of my discussion.

A final definitional clarification concerns the phrase “for political purposes.” To this it has been objected that some terrorism is conducted for religious or ideological rather than political purposes. Here I should say that

²⁵ Paskins and Dockrill, *The Ethics of War*, p. 89.

²⁶ I am indebted to Michael Stocker for drawing my attention to this possibility.

the reference to the political is aimed at demarcating the scope of terrorism so that it does not encompass areas such as ordinary criminal violence, no matter how reprehensible and no matter how damaging to innocent people. Such a distinction seems plausible as an extrapolation from ordinary talk about terrorism. But my reference to political motivations is not meant to be so narrow as to include only secular or pragmatic outlooks. When religion or ideology employs violent means to undermine, reconstitute, or maintain political structures for the further transcendent ends of the religion or ideology, then that counts as “political purposes.” War is a paradigm political activity, despite its ugliness, and it would be strange to say that the medieval crusaders, for example, were not involved in politics when they invaded the Holy Lands. Modern counterparts of the crusaders and their enemies struggle for political supremacy even when their motives involve religious or idealistic commitments to theocracy or Islamic fundamentalism, on the one hand, and democracy, free markets, or Christian fundamentalism on the other. It should be added that the borders of the merely criminal and the fully political constitute a broad and fuzzy area. Criminal activities can become involved with the political, even in the matter of violence, as happened with the criminal drug lords in Colombia some years ago; and groups whose rationale is basically political may indulge in ordinary criminal activities, such as bank robbery, to finance their operations. Still, the broad distinction is clear enough.

Terrorism, Revolutionary Violence, and Consistency

Many condemnations of terrorism are subject to the charge of inconsistency, if not hypocrisy, because they insist on applying one kind of morality to the state’s use of violence in war (international or civil or anti-insurgency) and another kind altogether to the use of violence by the nonstate agent (e.g., the revolutionary or insurgent). For one’s own state, a utilitarian or consequentialist standard is adopted which morally legitimates the intentional killing of noncombatants, so that such acts of state terrorism as the bombing of Dresden are deemed to be morally sanctioned by the good ends they supposedly serve. The same people, however, make the move to higher ground when considering the activities of rebels or revolutionaries and judge their killing of noncombatants by the intrinsic standard. In the case of the revolutionary or insurgent, the thought is that even if the cause is just and the revolution legitimate, the methods are morally wrong because of what they are or involve. In the case of the state and its instrumentalities, this thought is quietly abandoned and replaced by those utilitarian considerations which are denied to the revolutionaries.

Consistency may be achieved in one of two ways: by adopting either the outcome response to both kinds of case or the intrinsic response to both kinds of case. I would myself urge the second type of consistency and object

to the technique of terrorism as immoral wherever and whenever it is used or proposed.²⁷ But this presupposes that we can in both contexts make a distinction between combatants and noncombatants. I have defended this supposition at some length in Chapter 6 and will not repeat the argument here. I want instead to examine the specific difficulties that arise for the distinction in the context of revolutionary violence. It is worth noting again, however, an ironic consequence of the attempt by supporters of state violence to undermine the combatant/noncombatant distinction. This is that some supporters of revolutionary violence have learned from them and argue, equally speciously, that in revolutionary struggle it is impossible to distinguish between combatants and noncombatants amongst the “enemy.”²⁸ (Recall the comments of Osama bin Laden cited in Chapter 6.) Those who say that the distinction is useless in war should be more sympathetic to at least the form of the revolutionaries’ theoretical position than they are. Nonetheless, there are interesting and rather tricky questions raised by transferring the notions of combatant and noncombatant from the context of formal international war to that of conflict within the state. Before looking more fully at this, however, there is one further point that should be briefly discussed.

It may be urged against much of what I have said that it assumes – especially in its parallels between war and revolution – that a revolution can be morally justified. It is this assumption that is highly debatable, for it may be said that citizens can never be morally justified in bringing violence to bear against their rulers. In reply, I would urge that *if* it is possible for some wars to be morally justified, then it is hard to resist the extension of the justificatory patterns to the case of revolution. Certainly, some regimes seem to have committed such wrongs against their own populations or against subgroups within those populations as to create at least a *prima facie* case for violent redress. Nazi Germany and Uganda, under Amin, seem to present such cases; moreover, armed underground resistance to Nazi occupation forces in countries like France, whose leaders signed a formal surrender treaty, seem to bring us close to the revolutionary pattern, and this was

²⁷ As noted in Chapter 6, it seems possible to espouse a less absolute form of intrinsicism in which some actions can be seen as wrong from an intrinsicist perspective but, regrettably, have to be done, at least in part because of the awful consequences of not doing them. Many contemporary philosophers, including Michael Walzer, are attracted to such a view. This issue is discussed in Chapter 14.

²⁸ The tenor of Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* seems to commit him to this position, and Sartre’s Preface to the volume is more explicit still, though written in a highly rhetorical way. Speaking of French “believers in nonviolence” who are not themselves direct combatants, Sartre says: “But if the whole regime, even your non-violent ideas, are conditioned by a thousand-year-old oppression, your passivity serves only to place you in the ranks of the oppressors.” *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), Preface, p. 25.

generally approved of by many people who are opposed to revolutionary violence in other contexts. It may be said that a moral case for revolution against a dictatorship can exist, but never against a democracy. As a convinced democrat, I am sensitive to the force of this rejoinder but find its force blunted by two considerations. The first is that many basically non-democratic political societies have democratic trappings. South Africa in the apartheid era, for instance, was frequently classed as a democracy because it had democratic forms for a portion of its population, but the restricted franchise surely disqualified it from the protection of any argument against revolution based upon politically relevant properties of democracies. The second is that, ever since Tocqueville, political theorists have been aware of the problems posed by majority tyranny over minorities and by the deep and serious injustices that democratic legal machinery can countenance – the historic background to the struggle in Northern Ireland is not irrelevant here. In any event, a good deal of revolutionary activity has taken place in countries, like several of those in South America in the not-so-distant past, that made small pretence of being democratic, or whose democratic practices tolerated extensive human rights abuses.

The general theory of the just revolution needs more development, but first I want to press the issue of how such revolutions should be conducted and, in particular, who the combatants and noncombatants are. Let me begin with the point that revolutionaries themselves do not always have trouble distinguishing broadly between combatants and noncombatants, though, of course, there are grey areas. To take an example used by Michael Walzer: Albert Camus' play *The Just Assassins* is based upon an actual episode in Russia early this century, in which a group of revolutionaries decided to assassinate a tsarist official, the Grand Duke Sergei, a man personally involved in the suppression of radical activity. The man chosen to do the killing hid a bomb under his coat and approached the victim's carriage, but when he got close he realized that the grand duke had two small children on his lap, so he abandoned the attempt. Camus has one of the man's comrades say, in accepting the decision, "Even in destruction, there's a right way and a wrong way – and there are limits."²⁹

Similarly, if one reads Guevara's *Bolivian Diary*, one is struck by the care with which targets are discriminated, even to the point where captured government soldiers and agents are given a political lecture and then released (the guerrillas not having the facilities to imprison captives).³⁰ Again, in Régis Debray's *Revolution in the Revolution?* the only reference to terrorism is incidental and mostly critical; insofar as it is approved of, it is doubtful

²⁹ Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, third edition (New York: Basic Books, 2000), p. 199.

³⁰ Che Guevara, *Bolivian Diary*, trans. Carlos P. Hansen and Andrew Sinclair (London: Jonathan Cape/Lorrimer, 1968). For a few such incidents, see pp. 67, 77, and 92.

whether all that Debray calls terrorism would qualify on my definition. For instance, he approves of the role of city terrorism in that “it immobilizes thousands of enemy soldiers, it ties up most of the repressive mechanism in unrewarding tasks of protection: factories, bridges, electric generators, public buildings, highways, oil pipe-lines – these can keep busy as much as three-quarters of the army.”³¹ Certainly, he does not seem to have in mind any sort of killing but rather sabotage of property, which may or may not be noncombatant property and may or may not involve the risk of civilian deaths. The Cypriot revolutionary General George Grivas showed his sensitivity to the distinction in his memoirs when he wrote of the EOKA campaign: “We did not strike, like the bomber, at random. We shot only British servicemen who would have killed us if they could have fired first, and civilians who were traitors or intelligence agents.”³² Whether Grivas accurately described EOKA practice is less important for our discussion than his acknowledgment of the possibility and desirability of directing revolutionary violence at morally legitimate targets. A similar acknowledgement was made more recently in Yasser Arafat’s condemnation of terrorism when he said that “no degree of oppression and no level of desperation can ever justify the killing of innocent civilians. I condemn terrorism, I condemn the killing of innocent civilians, whether they are Israeli, American or Palestinian. . . .”³³ Again, we may question the sincerity of Arafat’s condemnation while recognizing the tribute it pays to the moral requirement of distinguishing combatants from noncombatants.

In a just revolution, then, who are the combatants from a revolutionary’s point of view? To begin with, there are those who directly employ violence to perpetrate the injustices against which the revolution is aimed: the army or elements of it; the police or elements of it;³⁴ the secret police; foreigners directly involved in assisting the government forces in prosecuting the injustices; informers; and the politicians who are directing the “oppression” complained of. This list is consistent with my argument in Chapter 6 that the category of noncombatant is not equivalent to that of civilian. Let us suppose the IRA’s revolutionary activity in Northern Ireland to have been justified. Its use of bombs on railways and in pubs would clearly be illegitimate and would count as terrorism, since such attacks necessarily fail to discriminate between combatants and noncombatants. Similarly with the killing of Mountbatten and the others on his boat, since not only were they innocent, but so surely was Mountbatten. Some years ago a visiting scholar at Melbourne

³¹ Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution?*, p. 75.

³² Quoted in Robert Taber, *The War of the Flea* (London: Paladin, 1972), p. 106.

³³ Yasser Arafat, “The Palestinian Vision of Peace,” *New York Times*, February 3, 2002, p. 15

³⁴ The importance of discrimination here is illustrated by the example of the Jewish revolutionaries who assassinated Lord Moyne in Cairo in 1944 but refused to kill an Egyptian policeman whom they did not regard as an agent of British imperialism in Palestine, even though this refusal led to their capture. See Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, p. 199.

University tried to include Mountbatten as a legitimate target by pointing out the amount of “Irish land” that he owned, but this seems to be a case in which an insufficient connection with a chain of agency has been established. By contrast, there is at least the beginning of a case for the assassination of the Conservative spokesman on Northern Ireland, Airey Neave – not, I think, sufficient but at least addressed to considerations which have some relevance. A more clear-cut case is provided by the kidnap-killing of the American public safety adviser Don Mitrione in Uruguay in 1970. Mitrione had been sent to Uruguay to assist in the suppression of the Tupamaros insurgency. There is considerable evidence that he had an important role in the torture campaign waged against Uruguay’s political prisoners. It would be absurd to regard his position as that of an uninvolved civilian diplomat, though this was how he was initially portrayed in the Western media at the time of his death.³⁵

Distinctions of this kind between targets of revolutionary violence are important not only for the revolutionaries from the point of view of how they should behave, but also for observers concerned with describing their behaviour. The fact is, of course, that most observers, and especially the media, tend to describe any revolutionary as a terrorist and virtually any revolutionary use of violence as terrorism, including even the killing of soldiers. At least this is so throughout most of the Western media with respect to revolutionary violence directed against established governments in what used to be called “the free world.” The revolutionaries against Soviet occupation in Afghanistan, on the other hand, were seldom if ever referred to as terrorist in the Western press, though their tactics displayed hardly more concern for moral scruple than those employed in Belfast or El Salvador. The assumption underlying this linguistic habit is that revolutions against “our” ideological enemies are invariably justified, an assumption that is fortified when, as with the Mujahideen in Afghanistan, Western powers actively support and arm the insurgents. During the Cold War, a parallel assumption, with suitably adjusted referents for the indexical elements, guided the reporting of the Soviet bloc press.

Whatever the naiveté or cynicism of this assumption, it does raise interesting theoretical issues, since if we assume that some given revolutionary campaign is unjustified, then we would seem to have some reason to make light of any distinction between the targets selected by the rebels. After all, if a revolution or rebellion is unjustified, then its infliction of injury and death is unjustified, whether upon combatants or noncombatants. This point has already been dealt with in Chapter 6 in connection with unjustified war, and the discussion there applies directly to the present case. Our conclusion should be that there remain important moral and pragmatic

³⁵ For a sober assessment of allegations about Mitrione’s role, see A. J. Langguth, *Hidden Terrors* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), especially pp. 250–254.

reasons for distinguishing between attacks upon combatants and attacks on noncombatants, even where both are in reality unjustified. Were Basque separatists to blow up a kindergarten, it would make plain sense to call what they did “terrorist” in ways that it wouldn’t were they to defend themselves against Spanish troops or even attack them. This distinction is worth making whether the Basque cause is just or unjust. Hence we should continue to make a distinction between two broad types of revolutionary (or substate) violence: that which is directed at what would be legitimate targets if the revolution were justified, and that which is directed at noncombatants. We should reserve the term “terrorism” only for the latter, and it can be unequivocally condemned. Violence of the former kind stands or falls morally by the judgement of the overall legitimacy of the revolutionary activity.

Revolution and Legitimate Authority

Does this open the way to condoning far too many acts of political violence that understandably cause such widespread shock and distress? It all depends. If you think that violent revolutionary struggle is readily justifiable – an easy moral option – then you should be prepared for the consequences and have a realistic appreciation of what you are supporting. If, on the other hand, you think that violent revolution is sometimes, but only seldom, justifiable, then the killing you condone will be far more restricted. (You can vehemently condemn the killing of Aldo Moro without regarding it as terrorist.) My own view is that violent revolution, like war, is only rarely justifiable, though one’s sympathies may often be more with the rebels because of their genuine and unlikely-to-be-remedied grievances. Those contemplating revolutionary or insurrectional violence need to be aware of the great evils that efforts at violent disruption of state order commonly unleash, even when the order is repressive and unjust. This is, of course, a central insight of Hobbes, who ruled out revolution in any circumstances. But, against Hobbes, the evils of rebellion may sometimes be outweighed by those inflicted by the repression, humiliation, and persecution that malignant state power can inflict. But a just revolution must also heed the other conditions of the JAB, especially those of reasonable prospect of success and last resort. Of course, this demand acutely poses the question: who should attend to these requirements? The short answer is: anyone contemplating initiating or participating in a revolution. This parallels the answer we have endorsed in the case of interstate war. But a longer answer must address what is probably the most difficult issue for the just revolution, namely, that of legitimate authority.

In the case of states, there is at least a preliminary answer ready to hand, since there will be an incumbent government with some presumptive authority. For revolution, this is much murkier because of the splintered form of so much revolutionary activity. But against this it must be said that “legitimate

authority” itself is a murky notion. Not only are theories of political legitimacy deeply contentious, we must also be wary of setting the standards for legitimacy, especially in the context of the resort to political violence, too high. There is a case for making democratic procedures and an associated respect for human rights conditions of political legitimacy, but perhaps this should be seen as representing an ideal of legitimacy rather than strict conditions for its existence, otherwise very few societies in history will have had legitimate governments. Even if we are prepared to swallow this, it cannot capture the sense of legitimate authority embodied in just war theory, since even tyrannical regimes are presumably capable of fighting a just war in defence of their peoples, as Stalin’s government did against the Nazi invaders. This also suggests that the legitimacy in question need not be particularly stable. It may be called forth by the particular circumstances of political emergency or grievance. In certain of those circumstances, revolutionary leaders may have more endorsement from and solidarity with their people, or a significant section of them, than an incumbent government. The JAB emphasis on legitimate authority is primarily aimed at ruling out what the medievals called “private war” – of which feuding and brigandage are good examples – rather than at endorsing violence between states as the only candidates for just war.

It is perhaps this issue of legitimate authority, and doubts about the capacity of revolutionaries to satisfy its requirements, that leads many political theorists and (often enough) ordinary people to operate with that different understanding of terrorism that I characterised earlier as a political status definition. Some might defend any apparent inconsistency over state terrorism by rejecting the tactical definition in favour of the political status definition. I have already discussed the defects of the political definition, but it is worth noting here that, like the tactical definition, it gains much of its appeal from its ready connection to themes in just war theory. Where the tactical definition links with the discussion of illegitimate targeting under the JIB, the political status definition links with the question of legitimate authority under the JAB. Anthony Coates’s discussion of terrorism, for example, seems primarily concerned to analyze terrorism in terms of unauthorised violence in a political cause.³⁶ He believes that terrorists are being conceded too much by those (like me) who think that their activities should be defined and subsequently condemned in terms of the just war principle of discrimination. His position makes it difficult for him to treat revolutionary or secessionist violence as anything but terrorism, since the primary paradigm of “legitimate authority” is a certain sort of state authority. Nonetheless, Coates recoils from categorizing all revolutionary violence as terrorist. Even so, defining terrorism in terms of the resort to political

³⁶ A.J. Coates, *The Ethics of War* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 123–128.

violence without “legitimate authority” surely stacks the odds too greatly against the possibility of a justified revolution. Coates wants to allow that just war thinking can apply to revolutions, and that there can therefore be a just revolution, but he has great difficulty specifying a sense of “legitimate authority” that can apply to units other than states. He is justifiably sceptical of romantic attitudes towards revolutionary violence, but his approach to terrorism takes him too close to the problems of the political status definition. In any case, if terrorism is defined in terms of the lack of “legitimate authority” alone, then those revolutions that do have legitimate authority cannot, by definition, employ terrorism. This is both counterintuitive and theoretically unsatisfactory. For we surely want to leave room for discussing the question whether a properly authorised revolution is nonetheless using terrorist tactics.³⁷

Some Final Clarifications

My discussion of terrorism turns upon viewing it as a tactic, but it may be urged that the means/end model upon which I rely is not always appropriate to the realities. Sometimes revolutionary terrorism and, for that matter, governmental terrorism is employed not to achieve some definite end, nor as an aberrational end in itself, but as a piece of powerful symbolism, an act of self-assertion. Paskins and Dockrill seem to take this view of both war and revolutionary violence:

It is . . . often difficult to answer the question whether war is useful or not. To look at the Allied bombing campaign as though it were a priori obvious that it was engaged in as means thought to be useful in the pursuit of some well-defined goal is, we argued, a very dubious proceeding. Many other explanations of the campaign are possible. The same is true of terrorism. One is apt to think of the terrorist as, however sympathetic, a ruthless figure prepared to use indiscriminate violence in pursuit of a well-defined goal. But there appears to us to be good theoretical reason to doubt all such stereotypes. Often, states wage war because they believe that they have no alternative; similarly with the terrorist. . . . To wage war because one thinks one has no alternative, or because one believes that war is the only way to show that one is in earnest is not necessarily to do something which one assumes is understandable, or justifiable, as means to some end.³⁸

Although I think that some of this is confused, there is no doubt that the passage identifies a real motivation. The first thing to note about it, however, is that, although it provides us with a salutary warning against too crude a construal of the goals terrorism may serve, it does not invalidate the means/end model. Indeed, the talk of “having no alternative” needs to be construed in terms of certain goals and purposes in order to have sense made of it, since

³⁷ Ibid., Chapter 5.

³⁸ Paskins and Dockrill, *The Ethics of War*, p. 94.

there are usually other “alternatives” that are, however, inconsistent with certain values or ends it is believed that war or terrorism will promote or embody. Finland’s war against overwhelming odds with the Soviet Union had alternatives, but none of them promoted or exhibited the values the Finns saw themselves as emphatically defending by their hopeless war. If such ends are thought to be too internal or constitutive for the usual means/end model, then I do not need to quarrel with the objector. The Finns were not engaging in war for its own sake but as a way to show their earnestness about their independence (on one possible account of their motives). Similarly with the parallel case of revolutionary violence, especially terrorism. We can understand how a community may become so downtrodden in its conditions of life and so threatened in its identity as to believe that the only really emphatic and appropriate way of asserting whatever dignity remains is to commit an act of terrorism. I do not think that in its pure form this is the typical case, but it is a possible case, and ingredients related to it may figure in the more common cases. We may admit that many terrorist attacks are expressive and symbolic, involving the affirmation of the attitude, “We are still here – take notice of us.” Yet the expressive need not exclude the purposive. So terrorist acts can be, and usually are, both expressive and politically purposive. It is a further question whether these purposes are particularly realistic. The idea that terrorist acts are merely expressive is partly sustained by the belief that when viewed as purposive the acts are basically futile. The futility is often real enough, but purposive acts that are in fact futile abound.

This may be the point at which to discuss some related claims made by those concerned with a specific “terrorist psychology” who argue that we go wrong in thinking of terrorists as rationally concerned to achieve certain ends by violent means. They contend that the terrorist uses a very specific sort of “psycho-logic” rather than the logic used by the rest of us. Jerrold M. Post, for instance, in a discussion entitled “Terrorist Psycho-Logic: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Psychological Forces,” objects to the idea that “terrorists resort to violence as a *wilful* choice selected from a range of perceived alternatives. . . . [Rather,] *political terrorists are driven to commit acts of violence as a consequence of psychological forces*, and . . . their special psycho-logic is constructed to rationalize *acts they are psychologically compelled to commit*.”³⁹ One problem with this theory is that Post himself agrees with Martha Crenshaw that “the outstanding common characteristic of terrorists is their normality” and further admits that his own empirical research “does not reveal any major psycho-pathology” amongst terrorists.⁴⁰ This makes it somewhat

³⁹ Walter Reich (ed.), *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 25.

⁴⁰ Jerrold M. Post, “Terrorist Psycho-Logic: Terrorist Behaviour as a Product of Psychological Forces,” in Reich (ed.), *Origins of Terrorism*, p. 26; and Martha Crenshaw, “The Causes of Terrorism,” *Comparative Politics* 13 (1981), pp. 379–399.

puzzling that they suffer from these compulsive drives, but in fact the psychology that Post goes on to describe is by no means as peculiar as his italicised excitement might suggest. Indeed, much of what he ascribes uniquely to terrorists is common to all sorts of other groups, including the politically committed wherever they are found. He cites, for instance, several authors who have apparently “discovered” that terrorists are “action-oriented, aggressive people who are stimulus-hungry and seek excitement.”⁴¹ Again, they “need an outside enemy to blame” – a need one might think common to many nonterrorists, including the governments of powerful states. Another such feature is an “extreme pressure to conform,”⁴² which is surely as unsurprising in terrorist groups as it is in academic and military institutions. As Grossman says of ordinary soldiers: “Numerous studies have concluded that men in combat are usually motivated to fight *not* by ideology or hate or fear, but by group pressures and processes.”⁴³ In short, there may be psychological causes for terrorist behaviour other than the operation of a strict means-end logic, just as there are in every walk of life (and death), but this is no reason to deny any significance to the idea that terrorism is at least a tactic for the achieving of certain goals. Here, as elsewhere in seeking to explain human behaviour, we need to avoid the twin fallacies of excessive rationalism and excessive psychologism. People do not always act rationally, nor when they act rationally do they always act according to the dictates of game theory; but neither does the discovery of other psychological pressures show that rationality has no place in what they do.

Finally, let me return, as promised, to the connection between terrorism and fear. Earlier, I questioned the suggestion that terrorism should be defined wholly or partly in terms of the creation or spread of fear, but there is no doubt that *one* of the reasons why people are so disturbed by terrorist activities is that they find such activities deeply undermining of social realities with which their lives are enmeshed and which provide a background of normalcy against which they can go about their ordinary living. (No doubt this is less important when their “ordinary” lives are already dominated by fear and oppression.) From my perspective, there is no reason to deny any of this. Indeed, my account of terrorism goes far towards explaining why this should be so, since the method of terror is to attack those who have reason to think of themselves as uninvolved. It is also true, however, that any form of covert warfare, no matter how discriminating, will tend to break down the conditions of normalcy, though not so dramatically as terrorism will. Any form of low-intensity warfare (to use the jargon) will make familiar figures such as policemen, soldiers, and politicians into targets; it will lead to the

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 27.

⁴² Ibid., p. 33.

⁴³ Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995), p. 89.

killing of apparently innocent people who are, in reality, informers, secret police, or foreign political advisers; it will result in some mistaken, accidental, or incidental killing or injuring of genuine noncombatants and itself create an atmosphere of suspicion. Here we have another potent source of the confusion between terrorism and other forms of revolutionary violence; but confusion it remains, however understandable, for the terrorist seeks to gain his ends by deliberately attacking those who are not morally legitimate targets.

This collapse of the categories of clandestine warfare and terrorism has been given renewed currency by Martin Hughes. Hughes simply defines terrorism as “a war in which a secret army spreads fear,” and he claims that secret armies “must threaten everybody but their active supporters – and surely both lurking enemies and ambiguous, suspicious friends are quite frightening.”⁴⁴ Hughes seems to think that clandestine warfare not only commonly creates the sort of fear discussed earlier but inevitably involves a policy of attacks upon noncombatants, so that there is no need for a distinct definition of terrorism in terms of such a policy. In this he is surely mistaken. Guerrilla wars which make little or no use of terrorist tactics are not only possible but seem to have occurred, though – notoriously – the facts are often hard to establish, in part because the reports and commentaries embody the sorts of confusions I am trying to dispel. One such “clean” revolution appears to have been Castro’s insurrection against Batista; another (perhaps more contentious) was the EOKA campaign against the British in Cyprus. Hughes argues that it is too much to ask of resisters and revolutionaries that they attack only military forces as “great armies” are impregnable to such attacks. But in the first place, this greatly exaggerates the immunity of regular forces from attack by irregular resistance groups, as Cuba and Ireland and, more recently, Iraq have demonstrated; and second, it ignores the fact that orthodox military victory is not the usual aim of guerrilla attacks upon the enemy’s armed forces; such attacks are intended primarily to produce political effects. In Vietnam, the Americans won the military victory in the Tet offensive, but it was nonetheless a political victory for the Vietcong and decided the destiny of Vietnam. One significant success of Palestinian resisters against Israel came when Hezbollah attacks on soldiers forced the Israeli army to leave southern Lebanon. Moreover, Hughes’s argument at this point skates over the fact that the legitimate targets for a just revolution can go beyond men in uniform with guns.

Hughes does offer some concrete evidence for his view that covert wars must treat everyone but active supporters as the enemy, and it consists in the famous fate of Mrs. Lindsay. This, he says, “illustrates powerfully how necessary it is for revolutionaries to sap the courage of their civilian opponents. It seems hard to imagine how they could use any but very severe threats

⁴⁴ Hughes, “Terrorism and National Security,” p. 5.

for this purpose.”⁴⁵ Curiously, Hughes merely cites Mrs. Lindsay’s case and speaks of her “convictions and courage” without giving any details.

The facts are that she was an elderly woman who supplied information to the British forces in January 1921, which resulted in their surprising an ambush and killing two IRA men and capturing ten others, five of whom were later executed. She was subsequently kidnapped and shot by the IRA, who gave as their reason “the stern necessity to protect our forces.” These details (provided by Townshend, on whom Hughes relies)⁴⁶ show that Mrs. Lindsay’s fate was not that of a mere “civilian opponent” in the sense of one who disagreed with the IRA’s aims and programme, but rather that of an informer, one who could plausibly be viewed as taking an active part in the war. The IRA may well have been wrong to kill her; they may have even been wrong to view her as an informer, for she may have acted to save British lives without realizing that she was condemning Irishmen; but whatever we decide about that, her fate does not illustrate the thesis that secret warfare must make targets of everyone but active supporters, that low-intensity warfare must be, in my sense, terrorist. Indeed, Townshend is able to report, shortly before discussing Mrs. Lindsay’s death, that the IRA “did not show symptoms of the desperate terrorism which often marks guerrilla movements in decline. It continued to wage urban and rural war on roughly the same lines without resorting to indiscriminate attacks.”⁴⁷ Townshend’s source for the story of Mrs. Lindsay, incidently, is H. C. Wylly’s *History of the Manchester Regiment*. This makes for very interesting reading. Wylly describes Mrs. Lindsay as “a brave loyalist woman” who has shown “a great example of courage and devotion to the Empire.”⁴⁸ After her disappearance, Lloyd George, during negotiations with de Valera, caused inquiries to be made amongst the rebels as to her fate. According to the rebel Parliament’s minister of defence, she had been executed only after the British commander, General Strickland, ignored a letter from her pointing out that she would be killed if the British went ahead with the execution of five of the captured Irishmen. Five days after they were killed, so was she. Wylly makes no mention of the fate of her butler-chauffeur, Joseph Clarke, who was kidnapped along with her, but the absence of comment strongly implies that his captors regarded Clarke as basically a noncombatant and released him.

There is much more that could be said about terrorism, and of course about a related topic of some current importance, counterterrorism. Amongst these issues are questions about the supposed novelty of contemporary transnational terrorism and about the sort of legal status that should

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

⁴⁶ Charles Townshend, *The British Campaign in Ireland 1919–1921* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 153.

⁴⁷ Townshend, *The British Campaign in Ireland*, p. 152.

⁴⁸ H. C. Wylly, *History of the Manchester Regiment*, vol. 2 (London: Forster Groom, 1925), p. 210.

be accorded captured terrorists. I have addressed the former question elsewhere, and have views about the latter that I cannot now spell out, except to say that I favour giving them much the same status as other prisoners of war.⁴⁹ The category “illegal combatants” or “enemy combatants,” much beloved of the Bush administration, largely obfuscates important moral and legal principles, and I shall defer discussion of the issues connected with this until the [next chapter](#).

⁴⁹ For the novelty issue, see C. A. J. Coady, “How New Is the ‘New Terror’?,” *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (January 2006), pp. 49–65.

Morality and Political Violence

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