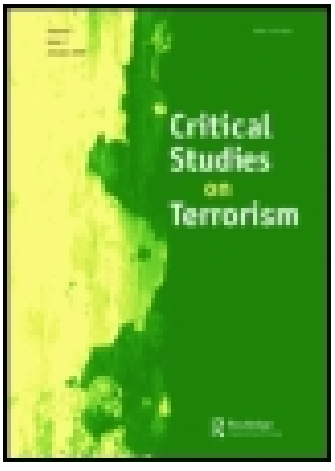

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Terrorism and taboo: an anthropological perspective on political violence against civilians

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SYMPOSIUM

Terrorism and taboo: an anthropological perspective on political violence against civilians

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Keywords: terrorism; anthropology; critical studies; civilians; violence; armed conflict; culture; human rights; taboo; propaganda

Introduction

After three decades of use of and debate over the concept of 'terrorism', in 2006 a working group on Critical Studies on Terrorism (CST) was finally established in the British International Studies Association to provide a network for the many scholars from diverse disciplines who have been critical of the state-dominated discourse on this crucially important topic. Led by Richard Jackson, in 2007 they launched a new journal – *Critical Studies on Terrorism* – and identified the 'core commitments' of the initiative:

> Critical terrorism studies (CTS) is founded firstly on a series of powerful critiques of the current state of orthodox terrorism studies, including: its poor methods and theories, its state centricity, its problem-solving orientation and its institutional and intellectual links to state security projects. Defined broadly by a sceptical attitude towards accepted terrorism 'knowledge', CTS is also characterised by a set of core epistemological, ontological, and ethical commitments, including: an appreciation of the politically constructed nature of terrorism knowledge; an awareness of the inherent ontological instability of the 'terrorism' category; a commitment to critical reflexivity regarding the uses to which research findings are put; a set of well-defined research ethics and a normative commitment to an emancipatory political praxis. (Jackson 2007, p. 244).

This paper demonstrates why this critical perspective is very welcome to, and supported by, anthropologists, who have been among the leading critics of the contemporary discourse on terrorism.

As a political anthropologist, my particular interest over the past 25 years has been armed national liberation movements – that is, 'freedom fighters' – and I am one of only a few social scientists who has actually done first hand research with people defined as 'terrorists' in their natural setting. My research has focused on the conflict in Northern Ireland and I have published an ethnographic study of popular support for the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) in a Catholic–nationalist ghetto in Belfast (Sluka 1989). The IRA and INLA were, of course, defined by the British government, their allies (including most so-called 'terrorism experts'), and most of the media as 'terrorists', but their many thousands of

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supporters in the communities where I have done fieldwork were convinced that they were, in fact, 'freedom fighters' (Sluka 1989, 1995).

The most obvious and fatal failure in the objectivity of pro-state terrorism experts is their refusal to look at the question from the point of view of those defined as 'terrorists' or from the perspective of the people living in communities where 'terrorists' originate and find their popular support. Joseba Zulaika and William Douglass are among those who have recognised this fundamental bias, and they have shown that terrorism discourse is vitiated – that is, debased or morally corrupted – by this lack of multiple, participant, and independent perspectives:

> One characteristic of the work of terrorism experts is the very prohibition upon personal discourse with their subjects. Authors writing about terrorism must abide by this taboo. It is telling that one can claim expertise regarding 'terrorists' without ever having seen or talked to one. This complete lack of contact with the subjects under study is not only usual but is even touted as the inevitable and desirable condition in the field of counterterrorism. One can, of course, know a lot about people one has never met, but it is odd to predicate expertise upon such systematic avoidance. (Zulaika and Douglass 1996, p. 179).

Anthropologists know that terrorism, as a strategy of coercive political intimidation, is at least as old as the state and civilisation and represents one of the original and most fundamental techniques of psychological warfare (Sluka 2000). More than any other social scientists, anthropologists have observed and studied state terrorism and popular resistance at the grass roots level, particularly in the Third World, and they have brought at least three important perspectives to the debate on terrorism. First, anthropologists who have worked in 'high conflict' areas and have studied violence, terror, and resistance have written detailed ethnographies of armed indigenous, ethnonationalist, and religionationalist movements, frequently described as 'terrorists'. These studies have been critical of the characterisation of this violence – which includes most of the armed conflicts in the world today – as 'terrorism'. The contemporary armed popular movements anthropologists have studied have simply not fit the 'terrorism' image presented by states fighting them, their academic supporters, and the mainstream media.

Second, anthropologists are more aware than most of the fact that, historically, all the indigenous peoples and other national groups who have resisted state conquest and oppression have been denounced and vilified by those states as 'savages' and 'terrorists', when objectively, they were not. And third, anthropologists have applied our core concept – culture – to the debate, developing new conceptual models of state terrorism evolving into 'cultures of terror' where fear becomes a 'normal' or everyday part of a peoples' political way of life (Green 1995), and by critical cultural deconstruction of the very idea of 'terrorism' and how it is employed in our society today (Zulaika and Douglass 1996).

There are two main ways scholars have approached this question, which can be summarised as the objective and subjective perspectives, which are roughly analogous to empiricism and relativism. For 'realists' who take the objective perspective, 'seeing is believing'. The *objective* perspective considers terrorism as a constituted reality, seeks to discover the 'facts' and what is 'real' about terrorism, and defines it as '*the use of violence against civilians in order to generate fear as a means of political control and intimidation*'. The subjective perspective considers 'terrorism' as a political or cultural construct, holds that the most important fact is that people do not act on the basis of what is real or true, but rather on the basis of what they *believe* to be real or true, and their definition of terrorism is contextual – summed up in the well-known expression, 'one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter'. For relativists and postmodernists who take the subjective perspective, 'believing is seeing'. Here, I take the classical anthropological perspective of employing a combined objective/subjective (or universal/particular) approach.

While the subjective or relativist perspective is fully elaborated, I assert that we can draw objective conclusions and judgements about 'terrorism' in an emerging global political culture in which the state perspectives and definitions of the US are increasingly hegemonic.

The 'Third World War' – armed conflict in the world today

Anthropologists of war and conflict have observed that during the second half of the 20th century, along with the development of the potential for global thermonuclear warfare, there were two other major changes in the nature of global conflict. First, civilians rather than combatants emerged as by far the major victims of political violence. During the First World War, only around 11% of casualties were civilians; by the Second World War, the proportion had risen to 53%; in the wars of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, it was 52%, 68%, and 76%, respectively; and in current conflicts, the estimate is 90% civilian casualties (Zulaika and Douglass 1996, p. 128). Second, wars within states rather than between them have emerged as by far the most common form of armed conflict.

In an important study published in 1987, political geographer Bernard Nietschmann argued that the Third World War had already started and that the nature and geography of global war had changed. He showed that there were more armed conflicts in the world than ever before, that they were concentrated in the Third World, and that they were mainly internal wars between states and 'nation peoples' – that is, indigenous and other national groups. He observed that this Third World War:

> is now being fought on every continent except Antarctica. It has produced millions of casualties and massive forced dislocations of nation peoples who make up the majority of the world's refugees. *It encompasses most of the peoples and groups who are accused of being terrorists.* Each year it involves new areas, states and nations. (Nietschmann 1987, p. 1, added emphases)

In an article published in 1994, Nietschmann updated his statistics on global armed conflict. He reported that there was more armed conflict in the world than at any time since the Second World War, and that of the 122 wars or 'armed conflicts' going on in the world at that time, 97 or 79.5% were internal conflicts between states and nation peoples within their own boundaries.

Today, I believe there are more than 100 armed national, ethno-national, and religio-national liberation movements, all of which are currently defined and denounced by governments, the pro-state 'terrorism industry' (Herman and O'Sullivan 1989), and the mass media as 'terrorism'. Herman and O'Sullivan argue that the 'terrorism industry' presents the state perspective on terrorism, and:

> comprises government officials and bodies, governmental and quasi-private [right-wing] think tanks and analysts, and private security firms. The 'private sector' of the industry is heavily interlocked with government intelligence, military, and foreign policy agencies and is funded by and serves both governments and corporate establishments. The analysts supplied by the private sector of industry, along with those working in government, constitute the 'experts' who establish and expound the terms and agenda demanded by the state. In accord with the state agenda, these experts invariably see the West as the victim of terrorism, and *most of them also identify national liberation movements, seeking escape from colonial and neo-colonial rule, either as terrorists or as a threat* to the 'democracies' by virtue of their being 'manipulated' by the Soviet Union and its proxies [today, mainly those nation's defined by President Bush as members of what he terms the 'Axis of Evil', including Iran, Syria, North Korea, Cuba, Libya, and, until the US-lead 'war on terrorism' there in 2003, Iraq]. The mass media contribute experts as well, but more important, serve as conduits for government and corporate-sponsored opinion. (Herman and O'Sullivan 1989, p. 8, added emphases)

Nietschmann also highlighted two important characteristics of these wars which are relevant to considering the difference between freedom fighters and terrorists, and which are even more relevant today in the wake of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. First, he observed that the indigenous or nationalist fighters are always misidentified by the states fighting them as 'terrorists':

> When a state is militarily invaded or economically attacked it may declare war, but when the same thing happens to a nation and it resists, it will be accused of declaring terrorism. By state definition, state combatants conduct war, counterinsurgency, and 'police actions' to maintain law and order; nation combatants practice terrorism. *Every nation people that has resisted state invasion has been accused of being terrorists*: Karen (all 5 million), Miskitos, Kurds, Palestinians, Basques, Irish, Oromo, Tamils, and so on. (Nietschmann 1987, p. 15, added emphases)

Second, Nietschmann observed that oppressive states fighting internal wars against indigenous or other nation peoples always refer to this as 'counterinsurgency' (or today, one of its many euphemisms such as 'low-intensity conflict', 'irregular warfare', or 'asymmetrical warfare') or 'counterterrorism', and all try to defeat the nation fighters and crush their civilian support by employing state terrorism or 'dirty war' tactics:

> War against the state is outlawed. No rules limit how state army and security forces may act against nation combatants or insurgents and their civilian supporters. Unshackled, state armies use genocidal tactics to stamp out resistance to state control: destruction of food supplies, eradication of communities, dislocation of populations into state camps or into refugee camps in other states, killing of captured prisoners and wounded combatants, arbitrary and systematic arrest, imprisonment and torture to instil fear and submission, and imposed military rule over entire regions and nations. Regular genocide is often the states' antidote to 'irregular warfare'. (Nietschmann 1987, p. 113)

Today, there are many examples of the abuse of the epithet 'terrorism' by applying it to legitimate armed resistance movements, but just a few prominent contemporary examples include all of the major 'hot spots' of political violence in the world today – such as the Russian government's claim that Chechen rebels are 'terrorists', the Israeli government's claim that the PLO and Hamas are 'terrorists', the Chinese government's claim that Uigher and Tibetan 'separatists' are 'terrorists', the Indonesian government's former claim that FRETILIN rebels in East Timor and their current claim that the Free Papua Movement (OPM) and Free Aceh Movement (GAM) are 'terrorists', the Sri Lanka government's claim that the Tamil Tigers are 'terrorists', the Philippines government's claim that the Moro National Liberation Front and New Peoples Army are 'terrorists', until recently the British government claimed that the IRA and INLA in Northern Ireland were 'terrorists', the Spanish government's claim that the Basque ETA are 'terrorists', the Burmese military junta's claim that the Chin, Karen, Kachin, Mon, Karenni, Shan, Wa, and a half dozen or so other indigenous and ethnic rebels in the highlands are all 'terrorists', the Colombian and US governments' claim that FARC guerrillas are terrorists, and the Indian government's claim that the indigenous rebels in Kashmir are 'terrorists'. This is just the tip of the iceberg. Because in all these cases many well-informed people may be inclined to believe that the causes are just, these governments have tried to convince the world that their opponents are all terrorists, which implies that the solution need not involve political concessions but merely a vicious counter-terrorism (really counterinsurgency) campaign.

Not surprisingly, since the '9/11' terrorist attacks virtually every state confronting a popular insurgency or separatist movement has eagerly jumped on the 'war on terrorism' bandwagon, re-branding their domestic opponents as 'terrorists', and as Whitbeck notes, 'at least implicitly, taking the position that, since no one dares to criticise the US for doing whatever it deems necessary in its "war on terrorism", no one should criticise whatever they now do to suppress their own "terrorists"' (Whitbeck 2001, p. 2).

Rising state terrorism, declining human rights

In his book, *Death by Government*, political scientist R. J. Rummell has calculated that:

> In total, during the first eighty years of this century, almost one hundred and seventy million men, women and children have been shot, beaten, tortured, knifed, burned, starved, frozen, crushed, or worked to death; buried alive, drowned, hung, bombed, or killed in any other of the myriad ways governments have inflicted death on unarmed helpless citizens and foreigners. (Rummell 1994, p. 9)

This is a *conservative* accounting, which does not include the combatants killed in wars (an additional 30–35 million or so). Rummell notes that because governments have been unwilling to admit such monstrous acts, 'the dead could conceivably be nearly three hundred and sixty million people' (Rummell 1994, p. 9). He concludes that no other century has seen a slaughter of such magnitude, and his figures only cover the first 88 years of the last century and do not include the massive death tolls in government-inspired genocides and starvations that have occurred since then in Bosnia, Somalia, Sudan, Rwanda, and other countries.

In the second half of the 20th century, military and other authoritarian and repressive regimes came to power in virtually all of Central and South America, and in many countries in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere. During this period, terrorism practised by authoritarian states resulted in millions of 'disappearances' and other politically motivated murders, dozens of millions of people tortured, scores of millions of political refugees, and hundreds of millions – perhaps billions – of people threatened and intimidated by the threat or use of state-sponsored violence. The massive escalation in terrorism practised by authoritarian states over the last three or four decades is evidenced by the re-emergence of torture as a major world problem, the rising tide of death squad murders, and the use of direct state violence to intimidate large portions of the world's population.

Worldwide, human rights suffered serious setbacks in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, and that doleful trend has not only continued but been exacerbated in the first decade of the 21st century. The UN Commission on Human Rights has been reporting for over forty years that human rights violations around the world have been steadily increasing, particularly in Latin America and Asia. In scores of countries worldwide, the most fundamental human rights are being transgressed by government-condoned terrorism involving the harassment, torture, and murder of political opponents of those in power. In their annual global human rights reports, Amnesty International has extensively documented this steady escalation of state terrorism. In their 2002 report, they recorded that in the previous year there were 151 countries with reported human rights abuses, among which 123 (81%) were guilty of torturing or ill-treating and 71 (47%) of murdering political opponents of those in power (Amnesty International 2002).

At the end of the 1970s, at the same time that Amnesty International and other human rights organisations were first beginning to present alarming reports on the existence of a new global 'epidemic' of state torture and murder (terrorism), the first academic studies also began to emerge about this, led by the pioneering work of Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman. In a series of important books, they reported that the global rise in state terror was concentrated among Third World states in the US 'sphere of influence'. Chomsky and Herman distinguished between the 'wholesale terror' practised by states and 'retail terror' practised by anti-state groups, and in their work they documented the central role of the US and its allies – particularly Britain – in the rise of state terrorism (also McClintock 1985). This perspective is also supported in *Western State Terrorism* (George 1991), which shows that the global rise in state terrorism over the past three or four decades is closely related to US foreign policy. George concluded that:

> The plain and awful truth is that on any reasonable definition of terrorism … the United States and its friends are the major supporters, sponsors, and perpetrators of terrorist incidents in the world today … many, probably most, significant instances of terrorism are supported, if not organised, by the US, its partners, and their client states. (George 1991, pp. 1–2)

Today, Chomsky (1988) argues that the US represents the hegemonic 'culture of terrorism', providing the central role model and leading example emulated by every other government involved in state terror around the world.

The concept of terrorism and its development as a propaganda weapon

> There is no shortage of precise verbal formulations for the diverse acts to which the term 'terrorism' is applied. 'Mass murder', 'assassination', and 'sabotage' are available (to which the phrase 'politically motivated' can be added if appropriate), and such crimes are already on the statue books, rendering specific criminal legislation for 'terrorism' unnecessary. However, such precise formulations do not carry the overwhelming, demonising, and thought-deadening impact of the word 'terrorism', which is precisely the charm of the word for its more cynical and unprincipled users and abusers. If someone commits 'politically motivated mass murder', people might be curious as to the cause or grievances which inspired such a crime, but no cause or grievance can justify (or even explain) 'terrorism', which all right-thinking people agree, is the ultimate evil (Whitbeck 2001, pp. 1–2).

Unfortunately, today the objective definition of terrorism is rarely applied by state authorities, their academic supporters in the 'terrorism industry', or the mass media. Rather, it is much more commonly employed as a propaganda tactic to manipulate public fears for political purposes. The contemporary evolution of the use of the concept of terrorism has been described and devastatingly critiqued by scholars such as Herman in *The* Real *Terror Network: Terrorism in Fact and Propaganda* (1982), Chomsky in *Pirates and Emperors: International Terrorism in the Real World* (1986), Herman and O'Sullivan in *The 'Terrorism' Industry: The Experts and Institutions that Shape Our View of Terror* (1989), George in *Western State Terrorism* (1991), and Said in several important publications (Said 1986, 1988a, 1988b). No one should accept the validity of the concept of terrorism, or use it, who is not familiar with these crucial works.

While the political concept of 'terror' was first articulated with reference to 'the Reign of Terror' practised by the French government after the Revolution of 1789, Herman, O'Sullivan, and Chomsky have argued that contemporary use of the concept is a political myth actively created by the Reagan and Thatcher governments in the 1970s and 1980s, who encouraged the idea of a Soviet-backed international terrorist conspiracy or 'network'. Reagan first established the fight against 'terrorism' as the cornerstone of American foreign policy, and Herman, O'Sullivan, and Chomsky describe how the rhetoric of anti-terrorism evolved as a major ideological weapon of the New Right. They argue that this is basically a new form of the old 'red scare'. They show that both the old 'red scares' of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, and the new 'terrorist scare' which first emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, but which we see only now coming to full fruition, were created to serve conservative political ends.

The use of 'red scares' is a classic method of gaining acquiescence for policies the public would otherwise oppose. Chomsky explains how this method has been reformulated as a 'terrorist scare', in order to 'manufacture consent' for morally dubious policies – for example, to justify military intervention in the Third World:

> If the populace can be led to believe that their lives and welfare are threatened by a terrible enemy, then they may accept programs to which they are opposed, as an unfortunate necessity. To induce

> fear, the propaganda system must be put to work to conjure up whoever happens to be the current Great Satan … since 1917 the Bolshevik threat has been the device most readily at hand. Hence the renewed appeal under Reagan to the threat of an 'Evil Empire' [reformulated by President George W. Bush as an 'Axis of Evil'], advancing to destroy us.… Predictably, then, the Reagan administration came to office declaring that it would dedicate itself to eliminating the plague of international terrorism, as it prepared to launch programs of international terrorism on an unprecedented scale. (Chomsky 1988, p. 185)

More recently, award-winning journalist John Pilger (Pilger 2002a, 2002b) has also advanced the argument that we:

> are being conditioned … to accept a permanent war footing similar to the paranoia that sustained and prolonged the Cold War. The threat of 'terrorism', some of it real, most of it invented, is the new Red Scare. The parallels are striking. In America in the 1950s, the Red Scare was used to justify the growth of war industries, the suspension of democratic rights, and the silencing of dissidents. That is happening now. (Pilger 2002a)

To the credit of our discipline, Sir Edmund Leach was among the first anthropologists brave enough to criticise the abuse of the label 'terrorist'. In a lecture published in 1977, he observed that dehumanisation of other people who do not conform to our values is a tragic but common occurrence, and warned that this is often one of the elements involved in labelling people as 'terrorists'. Leach was sensitive to the political opportunism that often goes along with such exercises in dehumanisation, and he made the essentially mimetic argument – which Taussig (1984, 1987, 1992) has also applied to the historical labelling of native peoples as 'savages' – that if those labelled 'terrorist' are defined as less than human, then every form of terrorism attributed to them becomes permissible for oneself.

Edward Said was also among the first to criticise the concept of terrorism. He noted that use of terrorism as a 'totalising concept' was pioneered by Israel, which followed the path taken by other regimes of colonial occupation – the French in Algeria, the Americans in Vietnam, and elsewhere. He scathingly observed that:

> with few exceptions the discourse of terrorism is constituted by an author whose main client is the government of a powerful state opposed to terrorism, but also anxious to shield itself from arguments about its own (quite routinely barbaric and violent) behaviour. (Said 1988a, p. 51)

Said referred to what he called the 'terrorism scam' (Said 1988b, p. 157) and concluded:

> the entire arsenal of words and phrases that derive from the concept of terrorism [is] both inadequate and shameful. There are few ways of talking about terrorism now that are not corrupted by the propaganda war even of the past decade, ways that have become, in my opinion, disqualified as instruments of conducting rational, secular inquiry into the causes of human violence. (Said 1988a, p. 53)

This emerging counterinsurgency, psychological warfare, and propaganda application of the concept of terrorism was not confined to Israel and the US, of course. During the 1970s and 1980s, every other government in the world fighting counterinsurgency wars also developed their propaganda use of the term 'terrorism' – for example, Great Britain in their war with the IRA and INLA in Northern Ireland, and Spain in their war against the Basque ETA.

For propaganda purposes, labelling political opponents as 'terrorists' does at least three things:

- It officially and publicly defines them as immoral and evokes fear and moral disgust against them.
- It denies that they have any serious political context or legitimacy – that is, that they have any political basis or grievances worth taking seriously. By defining opponents as pathologically anti-social, one can then justify treating their demands as of no political consequence.
- It dehumanises and demonises them, and is used to morally legitimise and justify state violence against them – including torture, mutilation, and cold-blooded 'extrajudicial' murder.

One result of the 'propagandisation' of the concept of terrorism is that today there is still no generally accepted definition of 'terrorism'. The main problem in reaching an agreed definition has not been the failure of academics to understand its fundamental characteristics, but rather the interference of political motives in the debate.

Relativity, subjectivity, and ethnocentrism in perspectives on political violence

Anthropologists stress the crucial role of context and relativity or subjectivity in making judgements about whether militants are terrorists or freedom fighters. In 1914, Gavrilo Princip, the young Serbian nationalist who sparked off the First World War by assassinating the Archduke Francis Ferdinand, was called a Serbian 'terrorist' by the Hapsburg government in Vienna. But today, if you visit Sarajevo, the city where the Archduke was killed, you find that Gavrilo Princip the 'terrorist' is no more; in his place is Gavrilo Princip the great Serbian Patriot and there is a commemorative display in the local museum honouring him as a 'freedom fighter' in the battle against the expansionist Austro-Hungarian Empire. Ellwood (1986, p. 4) introduces an issue of *New Internationalist* magazine devoted to 'The Roots of Terrorism' with this example, which both illustrates and warns us about the notorious subjectivity of the term 'terrorist', summed up in the now familiar cliché that 'one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter'.

Depending on the perspective taken, terrorists have been characterised as heroes, patriots, martyrs, villains, criminals, fanatics, and crazies. For many, the definition depends on their point of view. To the English, William Wallace ('Braveheart') was a terrorist, and so were George Washington, the Minute Men, and the American patriots involved in the Boston Tea Party; Spartacus and Jesus would have been terrorists to the Romans; Alexander the Great to half of Europe; Custer to the Sioux and Cheyenne; Geronimo and Red Cloud to American settlers; Abraham Lincoln and General Sherman to the Confederate States of America; Lawrence of Arabia to the Turks; Churchill to the people of Dresden; the Japanese to the residents of Nanking; Truman to the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; and French, Russian, Yugoslavian, and Polish partisans to the Nazis. Virtually everyone ever defined by anyone as a 'freedom fighter' was simultaneously defined as a 'terrorist' or its equivalent by the oppressors they struggled against – including Nat Turner, Nelson Mandela, and Mahatma Ghandi, among thousands of others, whether they employed violence or not. In the 1970s, the FBI even coined the oxymoronic expression 'pacifist terrorists'.

We would like to say that political violence against civilians can never be justified. For example, in a statement concerning the tragedy and aftermath of September 11, 2001, the Committee for Human Rights of the American Anthropological Association condemned the

terrorist attacks and asserted: 'Terrorism constitutes a gross violation of human rights. It is a crime against all of humanity for which there can be no justification' (Committee for Human Rights 2001). Unfortunately, if we mean by terrorism the purposive killing of innocent civilians as a political means, then the bombing of German and Japanese cities during the Second World War, a 'total war' against totalitarianism, and most of the wars fought by Native Americans and other indigenous peoples in self-defence against ethnocide and genocide, would be defined as terrorism and considered both unjustified and crimes against humanity. It is objectively clear that terrorism is always *subjectively justified* in the eyes of the perpetrators, and that it is something like a cultural universal that terrorism is considered justified in extreme, desperate, or what might be termed the 'apocalyptic' circumstances of self-defence against genocide and ethnocide.

Thus, while the claim that killing innocent civilians can never be justified is a laudable and humane assertion of a universal ideal or value to which we should aspire, it does not conform to the observed reality of terrorism. Judgements about justification for killing civilians are highly relative, and the perpetrators are invariably convinced that it is justified in their circumstances. The first thing anyone who wants to understand the causes of any terrorist act should ask, is how and why do the terrorists believe that such extreme means are justified?

An example of cultural relativity in such judgements is provided by Rex Smith's observation that when Native Americans indiscriminately killed women and children their behaviour can be excused because in the Sioux code of war, which is similar to that of most other tribal peoples, it was perfectly honourable to kill enemy civilians:

> It was a harsh code. In war the Sioux expected neither to give mercy nor to receive it. There was no dishonour in killing the enemy, regardless of how or of whether they were warriors, women, children, or aged. The only dishonour lay in showing cowardice before the enemy. This was how the Sioux were taught; this is how it had always been. Consequently, from their point of view, fighting in this manner was both moral and just. (Smith 1975, p. 43)

Philosophy professor Michael Newman has made the clearest recent statement of these points concerning relativity and the universal justification of terrorism in self-defence, by drawing parallels between Palestinian and Native American fighters:

> It is necessary to ask the question more sharply to exclude weasely answers. The Indians sometimes murdered innocent civilians, including children. These acts were right, wrong, or morally indifferent. Which were they? They certainly weren't morally indifferent, but were they wrong, because they involved murdering children? I suggest not. I suggest the acts were terrible, cruel, and ultimately *justified*. My reasons are familiar to everyone. The Indians' very existence as a people was threatened. More than threatened; their society was doomed without resistance. They had no alternative. Moreover, every single white person, down to the children, was an enemy, a being which, if allowed to live, would contribute to the destruction of the Indians' collective existence. The Indians had no chance of defeating the whites by conventional military means. So their only resort was to hit soft targets and do the maximum damage. That wasn't just the right thing to do from their point of view. It was the right thing to do, period, because the whites had no business whatever in coming thousands of miles to destroy the Indian people. The comparison with the situation of the Palestinians are beyond obvious … like anyone, they will kill children to prevent the destruction of their society. If peoples have any right of self-preservation, this is justified too. No people would do anything less to see they did not vanish from the face of the earth. (Newman 2002, added emphasis).

Since the rise and spread of the first states some 5000–7000 years ago, thousands of native peoples or 'first nations' (as they generally prefer) have experienced violent invasion, conquest, loss of their freedom, and dispossession of their land, and they have resisted genocide and ethnocide with every means at their disposal (Bodley 1999, Churchill 1998, Lindqvist 1996).

Soldiers and others attacked and burned their villages, slaughtered their women, children, and elders, and destroyed their crops and other sources of livelihood. When, as they frequently did, they responded by 'massacring' settlers and soldiers in return, they were invariably denounced as 'savages'. But what they were doing is, as Professor Newman suggests, only what virtually *any* people, including ourselves, would do when facing genocide and ethnocide; they responded in kind. And their violence, as the work of the great social psychologist of colonialism Franz Fanon so ably demonstrated in his classic study of Third World politics – *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) – was *counter violence*, motivated by desperate self-defence for physical or cultural survival. If any book needs to be resurrected in the wake of '9/11' and the emergence of the current 'war on terrorism', it is that one, which provides more answers and insights than all the work of those involved in the pro-state 'terrorism industry' combined.

Thus, it appears that it may be a cultural universal that nation peoples fighting for what they define as their survival, do not consider it wrong to kill enemy civilians or non-combatants purposely. It also appears that they are prepared to do this not only in physical self-defence against genocide, but in cultural self-defence against ethnocide. That is, they are ethnocentric enough to believe that defending their 'way of life' is as imperative as defending their physical existence. If we ask the question, under what conditions are human beings likely to come to believe that violence against civilians – terrorism – is justified, the short answer is when they define it as necessary in order to defend themselves against a direct and immediate threat to their physical and cultural survival. It appears to be something like a cultural universal that when a nation people are faced by a powerful and implacable enemy bent on their total destruction (e.g. colonising settlers), when they come to believe they are fighting for the very survival of their people and 'way of life', and when an enemy has wantonly slaughtered their civilians, that killing enemy civilians is not only acceptable but considered laudatory. For example, just as Sioux warriors were not reviled for killing enemy civilians, the pilots who flew the Enola Gay and dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima are not reviled, they are considered heroes of the Second World War; similarly the pilots in Europe who bombed German cities such as Dresden, or the B-52 pilots who bombed Hanoi during the Vietnam War. In the Second World War and the Vietnam War, the bombing of enemy cities was recognised as horrible but supposedly necessary and justified in order to 'defend freedom from tyranny'. During the Vietnam War, however, many anti-war protestors did revile the B-52 pilots as 'baby killers', and the like. That is, those who did not believe that the war was 'just' did not excuse the military for abusing and killing civilians such as the My Lai massacre.

Even in the absence of an apocalyptic threat, from many people's perspective, in *any* conflict where an enemy wantonly slaughters our own innocents, it is justified to respond in kind as a 'deterrent'. Anyone who doubts that need only remember the Cold War nuclear terror strategy referred to as MAD (mutually assured destruction) or that this was specifically identified by Osama bin Laden as a justification for the '9/11' terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon which killed over 2800 innocent civilians.

A 'just war', or just a war?

Another example of relativity is our own political culture, in which terrorism – killing innocent civilians – is considered justified in pursuit of particular ends or values, for example, in wars of 'self-defence', to 'defend and preserve the American way of life', to 'save the free world', or to 'liberate oppressed nations'. For example, consider again the bombings of Dresden, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Hanoi, and add the bombing of Panama during the removal of General Noriega (between 3000 and 6000 civilians killed), and most recently, the ongoing US-lead 'wars on terrorism' in Afghanistan and Iraq during which hundreds of thousands of civilians have been

killed. In our own political culture, we too believe that terrorism is justified in both physical and cultural self-defence.

When the philosophers of the ancient Greek city-states first began to debate *casus belli* (grounds for war), *jus ad bello* (when war is justified), and *jus en bellum* (which means are justified in war), they established 'just war theory' as part of the cultural foundations of 'Western civilisation'. Current US criteria for judging when a war can be considered 'just' are based on this theory, and as revealed by recent debate about the war against Saddam Hussein and Iraq (e.g. Carter 2003), appear to be that:

- The cause must be just, and self-defence against armed attack is considered always justified.
- It must be waged as a last resort, only after all non-violent options have first been exhausted.
- The government or leaders who decide on war must have legitimate authority sanctioned by the society they profess to represent.
- The war must be pursued within the bounds of law and international conventions on the rules and conduct of war.
- The only permissible objects are to redress injury and re-establish peace.
- The use of arms must be proportionate to the injury suffered, and not produce evils greater than the wrong to be eliminated.
- The situation which results must be a clear improvement over what exists.

In addition, there are two other more equivocal criteria:

- The war must have a reasonable chance of success.
- Civilians are never legitimate targets, or the violence must be discriminate between combatants and non-combatants.

Because the first of these final two is the most subjective criteria, and the second is the most violated, they generate the most debate. The first fails to recognise the all-too-common and tragic reality that oppressed people driven to despair are likely to resort to (frequently suicidal) violence even when there is no reasonable chance of victory or success. And the second is meant more as a statement of an ideal than as a necessary component, since it is so widely – indeed near universally – violated in contemporary armed conflicts. In actual practice, this criterion is highly equivocal, and might be better restated as 'civilians are legitimate targets only when necessary and unavoidable'. There is wide public and political debate about what is and is not 'necessary' and 'unavoidable' in times of war, and as noted earlier, about the meaning and application of terms like 'combatant' and 'non-combatant' and about which civilians are considered 'innocent' and which are not.

Like other cultures, in American political culture extreme ethnocentrism also justifies and rationalises terrorism in cultural self-defence. In the 1980s, when the Cold War was still on, Donna Brasset interviewed senior officers at the highest levels of the US military. One of the things she discussed with them was their preparedness to engage in full-scale thermonuclear war, with the potential of destroying not only America's enemies but the entire human species. She found that they generally agreed with the following comment made by one participant: 'If it came down to a choice between ourselves as a nation, versus the survival of the species, we as a nation would have to look out for ourselves first and the species second' (Brasset 1988, p. 86). As one three-star general told her, 'I am not uncomfortable with our nuclear war-fighting strategy … a life *worth living* is what we are fighting for' (Brasset 1988, p. 84, original emphasis).

These generals were, and their replacements today are, prepared to use 'whatever means necessary', including genocide and the purposeful mass slaughter of women, children, and the elderly – that is, terrorism – as a means of defending 'the American way of life'. While Brasset argued that this type of thinking was outmoded and dangerous in the nuclear era, it seems to be the expression of a near-universal ethnocentric cultural value, which holds that the survival of a nation people's culture or 'way of life' can be as important to them as their physical survival.

Terrorism and taboo

The most outstanding contemporary anthropological study of terrorism is Zulaika and Douglass' superb critical deconstruction of the 'terrorism myth' in their *Terror and Taboo: The Follies, Fables, and Faces of Terrorism* (1996). This is the first modern *cultural* analysis of the idea of terrorism itself, and how it is employed in American society. Zulaika and Douglass show that the idea of 'terrorism' is a cultural construct rather than an objective concept, and that it is fuelled by vested interests – including academics, the media, film-makers and novel writers, but mainly a plethora of government agencies, right-wing think tanks, and the multi-billion dollar security industry – that is, what Herman and O'Sullivan (1989) describe as the 'terrorism industry' – for their own purposes. They began by observing that:

> We are baffled by the use and abuse of terrorism discourse; we voice our scepticism. After many years of writing on the issues of political violence, our misgivings about the intellectual and moral values of the concept of terrorism have only increased.… It is the reality-making power of the discourse itself that most concerns us – its capacity to blend the media's sensational stories, old mythical stereotypes, and a burning sense of moral wrath. Once something that is called 'terrorism' – no matter how loosely it is defined – becomes established in the public mind, 'counterterrorism' is seemingly the prudent course of action. Indeed, at present there is a veritable counterterrorism industry that encompasses the media, the arts, academia, and, to be sure, the policy makers of most of the world's governments. There is now, in fact, an 'official' line acknowledging that terrorism poses a global threat to world security, which in turn justifies the expenditure of billions of dollars on counterterrorism measures. (Herman and O'Sullivan 1989, p. iv)

Zulaika and Douglass argue that terrorism as presented by authorities and the media is, in effect, a fiction, and they direct their study into an examination of how we think, talk about, and use the idea of terrorism. They argue that 'regarding terrorism, the brandishing of stark facts goes hand in hand with great leaps in discursive fantasy' (Zulaika and Douglass 1996, p. 4). It is not just coincidental that this is the fundamental characteristic of propaganda, and they conclude that the hype about terrorism is essentially a political myth with enormous consequences.

Just as Said did, Zulaika and Douglass conclude that the concept of terrorism is analytically more of a hindrance than an aid to understanding political violence: 'It is not simply that, like "communist" or "fascist", the word "terrorist" is being abused; rather the word is itself an abuse, a banality that disguises reality while impoverishing language and thought by obliterating distinctions' (Zulaika and Douglass 1996, p. 98). They ask a sceptical question:

> If all sorts of murders, kidnappings, threats, civil wars, government crimes, killings by secret or underground organisations, paramilitary executions, and so on, were simply called by those names without ever using the word 'terrorism', would there be something missing in the description of the real world? (Zulaika and Douglass 1996, pp. 102–103)

Finally, they suggest that while there is a great deal of armed conflict and political violence in the world, the:

> real issue concerns the wisdom of describing all (or many) of such events as the work of 'terrorism'. Does this concept better clarify the facts, or is it, as with so many other historical constructs, a hypostatised creation of learned and lay people alike that is a certain path to self-deception? (Zulaika and Douglass 1996, p. 100)

In their analyses, Zulaika and Douglass argue that the concept of 'terrorism' is a cultural construction of a pervasive social phenomenon that on closer inspection is revealed to be a social myth – an imaginary construct now, particularly since '9/11', deeply embedded in the culture of our times. They postulate that the terrorism myth is an example of 'collective enchantment' comparable with other social myths that have generated extraordinary historical stereotypes which still haunt us, such as the Jewish conspiracy, the witch craze, and the Red Scare. 'Each, like "terrorism", resulted in a chimerical construction so steeped in imaginary fear and terror as to blur the distinction between fiction and reality' (Zulaika and Douglass 1996, p. 183). In particular, Zulaika and Douglass equate 'terrorism' with 'taboo'. Taboo regards the unspeakable, and today 'the unspeakable act of terrorism' has emerged as 'the quintessential taboo in contemporary political discourse' (Zulaika and Douglass 1996, p. 149). They argue in this regard that 'terrorism' represents the latest embodiment of an old theme – civilisation locked in deadly struggle with wildness or savagery – and they apply the mimetic argument made by Taussig (1984) that the putative savagery attributed to natives by European colonists was a myth which served to justify the colonists' own massive violence against the natives. Like the ideas held about witchcraft during the Middle Ages, they argue that the myth of 'terrorism' is similarly an unreal cultural construct with very real consequences.

Zulaika and Douglass' conclusion, written five years before the '9/11' terrorist attacks in the US, looks, with hindsight, to have been prophetic:

> We have argued that the American quest for 'terrorism' has had a lot to do with a Beckettian theatre of the absurd as well as with the political manipulations of collective fantasies of … savagery. It doesn't take an uncommon sagacity to perceive that the journalistic and academic fashionings of the 'thing' itself are flawed and self-deceptive. But, even if we have concentrated on showing the discursive basis of the culture of terrorism, there is a point in which the thing itself, no matter how reified or distorted or banal, becomes a structural reality and a historical force. It appears that 'terrorism' is fast becoming a dominant medium through which American society and domestic politics need to be interpreted. … Terrorism is now becoming a functional reality of American politics, an autonomous prime mover of enormous consequence affecting national policy and legislation. This is no longer mere phantasmagoria but rather an irreducible dimension of a political ideology that profoundly affects the material reality of American society. Terrorism has been 'naturalized' into a constant risk that is omnipresent out there, a sort of chaotic principle always ready to strike and create havoc, and against which society must now marshal all its resources in an unending struggle. Now that it has become a prime *raison d'état*, its perpetuation seems guaranteed. (Zulaika and Douglass 1996, p. 238)

Human rights and terrorism

Terrorism is intimately related to power, inequality, and human rights. Those who have studied political violence understand that nearly all anti-state armed struggles and terrorism is fuelled or caused by serious underlying human rights violations – that is, that there is a positive or causal correlation between state abuses of human rights and the resort to political violence. As noted, Amnesty International has extensively documented the fact that global human rights suffered serious setbacks and state terrorism massively escalated during the 1970s and 1980s, and that this trend continued through the 1990s and into the new century after the '9/11' terrorist attacks, which stimulated a major new global surge in state human rights abuses justified as 'counter-terrorism' measures. The most fundamental correlation with the growth of terrorism worldwide

has been the massive growth of state terrorism and a decline in respect for human rights. The increase in global inequality and state terror over the past forty years has resulted in a massive decline in human rights, and this has been the fundamental cause of the political violence or resistance now termed 'terrorism'.

Since '9/11', human rights organisations have expressed growing concern that the masses of new anti-terrorism legislation enacted by governments around the world has produced a rapid rolling back of civil liberties, and both Irene Khan, the Secretary General of Amnesty International, and Mary Robinson, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, issued strong condemnations of and warnings about this development. In her forward to the 2002 Amnesty International Report, Khan observed that:

> Undoubtedly, the environment for human rights activism changed sharply after 11 September in some parts of the world, setting back the gains of many years. … As the 'war against terrorism' dominated world news, governments increasingly portrayed human rights as an obstacle to security, and human rights activists as romantic idealists at best, 'defenders of terrorists' at worst. But precisely because of these pressures, the role of human rights activists, far from diminishing, gained new urgency and importance. … The readiness of governments to trade human rights in the interest of security is nothing new. The doctrine of national security has been used frequently in the past to deny human rights. The difference this time lay in the uneasy realization that it was not autocratic regimes but established democracies that took the lead in introducing draconian laws to restrict civil liberties in the name of public security. … The dichotomy between security and human rights is false. (Khan 2002, p. 5)

She went on to argue that:

> We must turn the debate about security and human rights on its head – human rights are not an obstacle to security and prosperity, they are the key to achieving these goals. Human security comes only with human rights and the rule of law.… The past year has shown more clearly than ever that if human rights are sacrificed in the search for peace and security, there will be no peace and no security. The challenge to states therefore is not security versus human rights, bur rather to ensure respect for the full range of human rights. (Khan 2002, p. 6)

Similarly, Robinson ended her term in September 2002 with a bleak assessment of the state of human rights around the world and strong condemnation of governments for using terrorism as an excuse to trample human rights. She accused governments of rushing through laws giving themselves emergency powers with little regard for human rights, and echoed the warning issued by Amnesty International, saying that the US-led 'war on terrorism' was threatening civil liberties and human rights around the world: 'There has been a tendency to ride roughshod over or at least to set on one side established principles of international human rights and humanitarian law.' She singled out the US, explaining that it was necessary to criticise Washington's policies first and foremost, because when she censured other countries for their human rights records, 'they say, look at what is happening in the United States' (South–North Development Monitor (SUNS) 2002).

Conclusion

Richard Jackson describes Critical Terrorism Studies as:

> terrorism-related research that self-consciously adopts a sceptical attitude towards state-centric understandings of terrorism and which does not take existing terrorism knowledge for granted but is willing to challenge widely held assumptions and beliefs. (Jackson 2007, p. 247)

As we have seen, anthropological perspectives on terrorism are completely in line with this critical approach.

From an anthropological perspective, 'terrorism' is both an objective reality and a cultural construct; it is a reality we are all bound up with, but also a myth constituted by 'power élites' (Mills 1959) and governments, and supported by a 'terrorism industry' of pro-state academics and the corporate mass media. As relativists or postmodernists stress, people act on the basis of what they *believe* to be true, rather than what is true 'in reality'. Thus, their beliefs – even those that are fantastical – have real effects or consequences. Two salutary examples are the various 'witchcraft hysterias' in the history of early Western Europe and America, and the belief in human 'races'. Just as Montagu (1997) has demonstrated that the reality of human biological diversity is mythologised as 'race', similarly, the reality of a world marked by ever increasing political violence and declining human rights, is now being mythologised and dichotomised as either 'terrorism' or 'anti-terrorism' (President George W. Bush's 'for us or against us'). Just as 'races' do not exist in reality, but classifications of humankind do, so too terrorism, at least as presented by states, governments, and the 'terrorism industry' is unreal, but the classification of this violence as 'terrorism' has real and fateful results.

The propagandistic use of the label 'terrorism' manipulates public fears for political purposes – it removes the 'political' from political violence, excludes consideration of underlying political causes, and reduces it to mindlessness or 'evil' which cannot be explained, understood, or justified. As international lawyer John Whitbeck has observed:

> The greatest threat to world peace today is clearly 'terrorism' – not the behaviour to which the word is applied but the word itself. For years, people have recited the truisms that 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter' and that 'terrorism, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder'. However, with the world's sole superpower declaring an open-ended, worldwide 'war on terrorism', the notorious subjectivity of this word is no longer a joke. It is no accident there is no agreed definition of 'terrorism', since the word is so subjective as to be devoid of meaning. At the same time the word is extremely dangerous, because people tend to believe that it does have meaning and to use and abuse the world by applying it to whatever they hate as a way of avoiding rational thought and discussion and, frequently, excusing their own illegal and immoral behaviour. (Whitbeck 2001)

While we may not have a 'world war' today, we do have more wars – that is, armed conflicts – than ever before, and these are all being cynically and purposely misdefined as 'terrorism' in a concerted propaganda strategy aimed at creating a paranoid public fear of an exaggerated threat or conspiracy of 'global terrorism' which can then be manipulated by governments – primarily the US and British ones – for political purposes. Thus, it seems to me that 'terrorism' is rapidly emerging as humankind's most dangerous contemporary political myth.

Anthropologists who have studied armed resistance movements are over-represented among those who have dared to actually do first hand research with militants defined by their state enemies as 'terrorists'. We have broken the taboo of 'never talking to terrorists', and by presenting their perspectives and experiences have tended strongly to humanise rather than dehumanise them. In anti-terrorism propaganda, 'terrorists' are presented as evil cowards motivated by hatred, but the research we have done with militants refutes this. Thus, anthropologists have made, and continue to make, a major contribution by exposing the concept of terrorism to critical scrutiny and by demonstrating the many political, social, and cultural complexities underlying what is often simply telescoped by state authorities and the media into faceless, evil, irrational 'terrorism'. As Mahmood aptly warns:

> Until it becomes fully normal for scholars to study violence by talking with and being with people who engage in it, the dark myth of evil and irrational terrorists will continue to overwhelm more pragmatic attempts to lucidly grapple with the problem of conflict. Hysterical calls to condemn terrorism from a distance, to find better ways of technologically defeating terrorists as we find ourselves less and less capable of politically defeating them, are a piece with the failure of imagination that considers freedom fighters as nothing more than serial murderers. In the current world situation, in which even nuclear weapons are not out of the range of possibly insurgent groups, nothing, I suggest, could be more dangerous. (Mahmood 1995, pp. 272–273)

We live in a world full of political violence, and people everywhere are experiencing heightened levels of fear as a consequence. But if we seek an objective understanding of this violence and its causes, which we must do if we hope to reduce our fears and find effective means of building a safer and more peaceful world, academics must apply a critical perspective to the way in which élites, governments, the media, and other academics employ the concept of terrorism, must energetically criticise those who subvert it for propaganda purposes, and must ensure that we are empirical (that we base our findings on first-hand research), objective (that we make sure that the facts lead to the conclusions), and honest in our own use of the concept. While there continue to be political problems with the state co-option of the concept of terrorism as an ideological or propaganda weapon, we should not forget that, as well as being a political and cultural construct, terrorism is also an objective reality. As an objective reality, it is fundamentally about how fear is created and applied for political purposes. Thus, objective analysis of terrorism must concentrate on the referential base of the concept – terror or fear – and how it is created and used, whether by state or anti-state actors, as a means of political intimidation or control.

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