

Abstract

This essay seeks to find an objective definition of terrorism by conducting an analysis of the *Journal of American History* special issue on Terrorism, reviewing the scholarly essays found within, and picking out key points of comparison and contrast between scholars in the field of terrorism studies to compile the research done thus far in the fledgling field and suggest an alternative perspective from which to consider the information gathered thus far. Despite many of the disagreements to be found within the field, this essay suggests that a middle ground can be found which will allow for the progress of study to be both objective and free of political influence.

Defining Terrorism: The Conflict of Politics and Objectivity

Terrorism is an issue that none can deny and all have experienced in one form or another; the very word strikes a chord in my own heart and calls to mind early memories of the attacks of September 11 and the Boston Marathon Bombing to name only a couple of those acts we deem terror which have occurred in my lifetime. The word itself seems natural to use, rolling off the tongue and calling to mind in all Americans the visions of many instances in which they could apply the term and find it fitting; however, the issue remains not in the wider population, but in the definition of the word itself and in its scholarly application. Terrorism is something which is hard to define not only because of the connotation in the citizenry, but also due to its deeply political roots, making the task of defining the term something of a confusing mess of policy and academics.

The Issue

The issue with this lack of proper definition is quite simple; that which is vague and uncertain is that which can be best manipulated to fit the desired interpretations of the user, a trait favored most of all in political language (Orwell, 2002, p. 20). With such loose usage, the term “terrorism” becomes something that can quite easily avoid direct use of unpleasant descriptions and present listeners an overall summary in its simple four syllables. The word itself permits a distancing of one’s self from the true issues at hand while somehow permitting the speaker to profess a point, and this is the true danger found within. George Orwell writes, “the great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting out ink” (p. 20). We now find ourselves in a time when long euphemisms need not be applied where the simple use of the word “terrorism” will do equally well; therefore, the word is often used insincerely by both the politicians and journalists. The danger in this is best summarized again by Orwell’s assertion that “if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. A bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation, even among people who should and do know better” (p. 20). The issue, therefore, is that “terrorism” must be defined not in a political spotlight, as to do so would be to corrupt the language through the corruption of thought, but in an objective and scholarly manner. This, while not the focus of the essays herein referenced, has been attempted by numerous scholars in *The Journal of American History*; therefore, this essay’s purpose is to analyze the evolution of the term “terrorism” throughout time, analyze modern definitions offered by scholars in the field, examine a theory on terrorism,

and finally construct a definition of terrorism that may be applied for the sake of objectivity in the field of history and for the enrichment of the wider population.

Gage asserts that the earliest use of the term “terrorism” is mostly said to be during the French Revolution, defining the term primarily as a sort of “government by intimidation,” in which the point was to strike terror into the population in order to keep one’s control as a ruling power; however, the issue remains that the term itself has evolved significantly since the days of the French Revolution (Gage, 2011, p. 75). In the mid-nineteenth century for example, the use of the term in America was limited primarily to matters we may consider completely irrelevant in the face of more recent instances of terrorism; strikes, boycotts, slavery’s abusive practices, and even the actions of the Civil War were mentioned not as simple events, but instead as acts of terror in their own right (p. 75). Indeed, these events were terrifying and characteristic of a time of much social and political upheaval, but overall fall short of the modern understanding. As time and society changed, of course, the term also evolved; in 1892, terrorism was instead defined, perhaps informally, as a sort of revolutionary tactic used primarily by those working to overthrow the existing government (p. 75). This shift in 1892, however, is one I consider to be of great importance to the term, as until this time “terrorism” seemed something that could be applied foremost to states or the institutions therein; the French Revolutionary usage, for example, directly indicated the government as the perpetrator of terrorism, whereas the mid-nineteenth century usage implied the state was an indirect perpetrator; the institution of slavery and the fact that the Civil War was a conflict between two nations—regardless of whether one nation formally recognized the other or not. While nonstate perpetrators existed prior to and during the 1892 evolution, the term was here willingly adopted by the anarchist movement when Alexander Berkman proclaimed that he had perpetrated “the first terrorist act in America” (p.76). From this declaration onward, terrorism seemed to become the de facto tactic of revolutionaries, “terrorists” their self-assumed label.

This evolution marked the beginning of the shift in public opinion on terrorism and professional study of it that is best summarized by J.B.S Hardman’s 1934 definition in *The Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*: “the method...whereby an organized group or party seeks to achieve its avowed aims chiefly through the systematic use of violence.” Additionally, Gage asserts that Hardman’s definition “set [terrorism] apart from ‘governmental terror,’ suggesting that law enforcement repression, however terrorizing, deserved an analytical category of its own. Terrorism, Hardman concluded, was a clandestine revolutionary tactic designed to destabilize the existing order through well-planned acts of spectacular violence” (p. 76). This definition, fitting for the period, persisted until the 1970s, during which time a new wave of political upheaval and global tension stoked the flames of dissent across the globe; consequently, the field was revived and new studies began. Many scholars held to Hardman’s 1934 evaluation of the term, and of the discussions on terrorism came the primary issue in redefining it for the modern world. Gage underlines the fact that “most specialists agreed that the term terrorism should be restricted to acts committed by nonstate actors—specifically, groups or individuals seeking to challenge existing governments” (p. 78). Adopting this provided both benefits and unfortunate drawbacks, including the point put forward by Noam Chomsky that the stance provided for definitions that required finding “a definition that excludes the terror *we* carry out against *them*, and includes the terror that *they* carry out against *us*” (p. 78). In this climate, one can argue the field and term of study began to evolve to their current state of conflict between politics and objectivity. In the

1970 discussions, J. Bowyer Bell complained that “terrorism... has become a convenient means to identify evil threats rather than to define a special kind of revolutionary violence evolving out of Russian radicalism and European anarchism” (p. 78). The study remains focused today on current events, especially in the wake of 9/11, and the field appears as divided over the task of defining terrorism today as it did in the 1970s; therefore, the best option is to see what definitions have been independently produced by scholars in the hopes of using them to construct a better definition—if one exists at all.

Analysis of Definitions

Gage asserts that she uses a specific method to determine if an event in history can be classified as “terrorism.” Gage explains that she applies “a dual test: first, did Americans [of the time] describe the event as an act of terrorism?; second, did it conform to our basic definitions of what an act of terrorism might be” (p. 84)? The issue with using this process even for the rather narrow field of historical analysis of terrorism is inadequate of course, as Gage admits by saying that “such a strict test may not always be desirable. James Green has pointed out that Americans in 1886 described the Haymarket bombing in terms of anarchism, criminality, and class conflict rather than ‘terrorism’” (p. 84). For this reason, the definition falls short of applicability in a truly retroactive sense, as the evolving use of terrorism itself does not permit the free application of the definition, nor do the ever-changing opinions of American society throughout history.

Ann Larabee defines terrorism in her work as “the use of improvised bombs and other unconventional weapons in covert actions against ruling powers,” using the early Civil War instances of “terrorism” as a sort of guide for her application; however, this definition is perhaps too narrow (Larabee, 2011, p. 106-107). I agree with Larabee’s argument that the narrow definitions may be the best, as “a broad definition of terrorism could suggest that many more groups deserve profiling and punishment,” which would do no service to the initial and primary issue stated at the beginning of this essay—that the current definitions are already too open to interpretation, thus providing to the issue of political language (p. 107). Larabee, in her essay, goes on to underline the modern definitions of terrorism used in law enforcement, referencing the fact that between the State Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation alone there exists a difference; the FBI offers as the core of their definition the idea that an act of terror is an inherently “unlawful act,” whereas the U.S. State Department instead resorts to adopting a sort of political language by determining an act of terrorism to be something which is a “purposeful threat” (p. 107). The issue is that these definitions remain broad and also remain divided over their semantics; moreover, she offers the idea that terrorism is perhaps best viewed as a product of war “which trains and hardens future political actors, introduces irregular tactics through clandestine intelligence activities, disseminates military technologies, establishes networks, and makes mass, anonymous, technological violence against civilians conceivable” (p. 110). This viewpoint begins to blur the previously established agreement in the field that nonstate actors alone are subject to the label of “terrorists,” for if the effect is terrorism and the cause is war, then the cause of war is certainly found in state actors; if this is the case, would state actors not be the primary cause of terrorism itself? Furthermore, Larabee comments that “the wave of massive military violence” is the focus, in which “modern terrorism can be seen as more of an accompanying ripple” (p. 110). It may be best, therefore, to pursue the concept that terrorism is merely a product of war, if not an evolution of it entirely.

D.J. Mulloy asserts that “Richard English, one of the foremost historians of the Irish Republican Army, argues, for example, that terrorism is best understood as a subspecies of war,” and that there is an “overlap and slippage between the terms ‘war,’ ‘terrorism,’ ‘extremism,’ and ‘violence,’ a phenomenon that reveals principal problems involved in marking out a ‘field’ of terrorism studies more broadly” (Mulloy, 2011, p. 111-112). Already, the similarities between the apparent ambiguity of these terms in comparison to one another recalls the initial reference of this essay to George Orwell’s essay; however, the rabbit hole of violence, out of which all of the preceding terms mentioned by Mulloy come, seems to be the greatest point of uncertainty. All terrorism clearly requires violence, regardless of whether or not one agrees on its origins; moreover, it can be also be said that terrorism requires some level of extremism—taking, for example, the similarities between the nearly zealous dedication of the anarchists and the current religious zeal of modern terrorism. The issue remains, however, of how to distinguish between the earliest forms of “terrorism” and their definitions, a point to which all the essays speak, citing often the work of David C. Rapoport.

Rapoport’s response and Wave Theory exist as possible answers to the conundrum that is the ever-evolving term “terrorism,” and Rapoport answers the call as the editor of the journal *Terrorism and Political Violence*. Rapoport’s Wave Theory, as he explains in brief, asserts that “we have experienced four transnational waves [of terrorism]: anarchist, anticolonial, New Left, and religious. Each was driven by a different purpose and tactics. Three have been completed and lasted forty years each; the fourth, which began in 1979, is still in progress” (Rapoport, 2011, p. 116). Already, Rapoport’s Wave Theory presents several points made previously in this essay. First, terrorism is evolutionary and has a clear transition that allows for such a distinction between waves. Second, the tactics are as evolutionary as the term itself, thus making it harder to define. Rapoport later asserts that “those in the first wave emphasized that they were terrorists, not guerillas. They did so to cement their relationship to the French revolutionary government, which publicly proclaimed its terror” (p. 117). In this way, we see a connection between the first wave, Alexander Berkman’s claim to the title of “terrorist,” and the shift from “government by terror” to “terror against government.” Additionally, Rapoport allows a line of comparison to be drawn between “terrorism” and political language when asserting that “Menachem Begin, aware that terrorism over time had accumulated more invidious political consequences, insisted the term referred to a group’s ends and not its means. Thus, the Irgun were ‘freedom fighters’ and the British were terrorists basing their rule on intimidation” (p. 117). This underlines the political nature of words, particularly words as weapon in propaganda, and reiterates the importance of the idea that thought can corrupt language and vice versa.

There remains the issue of domestic terrorism, as these two words combined provide a certain level of uncertainty; one asks what distinction need be made, if any, between international and domestic terrorists. Specifically, what difference is there between a domestic act of terror and a “normal” act of terror? Are both not simply acts of terrorism in their ends? Both cause a needless loss of life with the purpose of making a statement of some sort, but to what end are they defined separately? The earliest acts of so-called “domestic terrorism” could best be placed in the Wave Theory as occurring during the First Wave, carried out mainly by anarchist immigrants from Western Europe such as Johann Most who defined his actions as “propaganda by deed” (Brookhiser, 2013, p. 17). The only apparent distinction between the two terms seems to be found in scale; larger attacks seem more easily branded as “normal” terrorism,

whereas events such as the Boston Marathon bombing and other events since are most often labeled as “domestic terrorism” by the news media. Richard Brookshire perhaps underlines the difference best when he asserts that “the 9/11 attack, a quasi-military operation planned in Afghanistan, created a mistaken impression of the scale of terrorism; bloody acts of violence can be strictly DIY” (p. 18). This is likely in part a result of the idea that terrorism is relatively new, something which persists as a result of the lack of historical study and agreement in the field; therefore, many remain ignorant of the fact that “small-scale” acts of terrorism like the Boston Marathon bombing have been around since the late nineteenth century (p. 17). The bottom line is therefore quite simple; there exists no relevant distinction between “domestic” and “normal” terrorism, it is merely a construct of political language.

Defining Terrorism

Finally, the issue now faced is determining if terrorism can be defined at all, as the reason to define it already exists—to clear the cloudy politics from the topic as best one can; therefore, I will simply review the current information gained from the examinations thus far. I have already established that terrorism is evolutionary, that it must contain violence, and that it has a political end goal in mind. Throughout the course of this essay, I have also concluded that it is best to attempt to agree with the scholars’ decision to keep state and nonstate actors separate, for combining the two will simply make for a definition that is far too broad and far too muddled in a historical sense to be coherent; therefore, state actors must be excluded from the term “terrorism.” For all intents and purposes, the definition I will offer *may* or *may not* be appropriate for studying the history of terrorism, but I digress; I have come to define terrorism as the following: the use of violence by an individual or group with the purpose of striking fear and anxiety into a civilian population with the intent to demoralize them, therefore seeking to coerce through violence the nation’s populace to concede to the desires of the perpetrator; additionally, these acts may also be characterized not by political motivations, but simply as an act of revenge on the behalf of the perpetrator to punish a state for some perceived infringement upon the rights or values of the individual in question or their own nation.

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