

TERRORIST MENTALITY

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When I now read descriptions of troubled parts of the world, in which violence appears primordial and inevitable, a fate to which masses of people are largely resigned, I find myself asking: Is that all there was to it? Or is it possible that the authors of these descriptions failed to find a form -- or a style or a voice or a plot -- that could accommodate both violence and the civilized willed response to it? Amitav Ghosh, *The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi*,

Prefatory Note

This paper does not profess to define *the terrorist* mentality; rather, it is a discussion of the varied and multiple psychosocial forces influencing the terrorist mentality. I have chosen a contextual approach to examining these influences relative to recent episodes (1993-1995) in the United States and globally.

Terrorists personify the full range of every character type from the self-doubting wretch, the cunning and the brilliant, the suicidal, the political zealot, the religious fanatic, as well as those individuals haunted by demons indescribable. These individuals, whether wrapped in some cloak of their perceived destiny, ultimate truth, or final nihilistic ecstasy, suddenly choose to seize and inflict the moment of terrorism on us all.

Cybernetic-Journalist Jon Katz, writing in the September 1995 issue of *Wired* magazine, cites the unprecedented rate of changing social, territorial, and cultural reproduction of group identity worldwide, including the emergence of what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai calls new community ethnoscaapes. The ecology of these new ethnoscaapes is having a far reaching impact: with mobility, diversity, and media exposure profoundly altering group expectations, generating instability, cementing differences, and exacerbating conflict. These forces predominate in the profiling of the 21st century terrorist mentality.

Modern day terrorists, equipped as never before with the technology and capabilities for mass destruction, can now bask in the immediate and worldwide media attention given to their terrorist violence. This phenomenon alone is provoking a spiraling drive to constantly exceed the scale and magnitude of terror. Terrorism will be “the crime” of the Third Millennium.

Terrorism as Social Product

Current research generally views terrorism as either a social product or more directly as a consequence of the actions and the actors involved in committing social violence and terrorist acts. From this perspective, terrorism is seen as a social product. Therefore, terrorism constitutes “an image,” a psychological representation, or social conception (Crenshaw, 1995).

This approach concentrates on contextual studies made of the social, cultural, economic, religious, and intellectual factors related to violence. The effects of terrorism are seen as “perverse” and unforeseeable because of the distance separating the social perception, image, or representation of the terrorist threat from its social reality. From an etiological and behavioral analysis of terrorists, the processes that lead people to violent groups and actions emerge. Crenshaw (1995), cautions that inherent ethnocentricity and ideology obfuscate insights in examining both aspects of the terrorist pathology.

Equally significant but rarely noted is the response to terrorist acts is the all too easy response of presenting terrorist violence as apocalyptic, while the responses to it may easily be viewed as absurd or apathetic. As Ghosh, (1995) points out: It is worth asking if the very obviousness of this subject arises out of modern conventions of representation within the dominant aesthetic of our times, the aesthetic of indifference. This limiting perspective eliminates any consideration of wider dimensions to the responses to terrorism. Terrorist insurgencies are rarely isolated phenomena. They tend to reflect diffuse sympathies, desires and aspirations of larger segments of society. And, rather than the primary or sole means of political protest, this terrorism emerges in a milieu of political culture or aggrieved communities.

Terrorism is always a tool wielded for some purpose, but it can also be as an end in itself. A terrorist who willfully dies in an attempt to blow up a government building, for instance, sees his or her role as one aspect of a group's destiny toward achieving some long-range goal. This enemy is seen as an evil thing, a devil, savage or beast, that prevents a person or group from consummating its mission, and provides another component for analysis in understanding the complexities of "pure terrorism" in which ends and means are mixed-up, where violence has no limits and the reference to a people, class, or nation is factitious (Crenshaw, 1995).

Freud's thesis about how culpability of violence applies to an entire society suggests that not even members of a mob will be permitted to escape into collective anonymity. They simply regress together. Freud writes concerning the First World War. "Think of the colossal brutality, cruelty and mendacity which are now allowed to spread itself over the civilized world. Do you really believe that a handful of unprincipled place hunters and corrupters of men would have succeeded in letting loose all this latent evil, if the millions of their followers were not also guilty?" (Freud 1960).

Inherent Bias and Values

The lack of a clear-cut definition as to what is and what is not terrorism is an ongoing problem as evidenced by the language employed by the media, the public and political analysts. The emphasis, nonetheless, is on the "message of the terrorism" and not semantic understanding. The poisonous gas attacks in the Tokyo subway system, terrorists bombings in London, Belfast, and Paris; in Spain, Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Algeria demonstrate dramatically how a "technology of terrorism" is shaping public life in the 21st century. Current strategies toward warding off future terrorism attacks include: government and private sector buildings designed with built-in security and access control barriers; transportation security and communication controls, surveillance systems incorporated at airports, railroad and bus stations, and network points of highway systems.

Terrorism frequently mixes-up so many different meanings, issues and causes that the mixture is necessarily explosive. Terrorism that results from strategic contradictions is likely the most dangerous. Additionally, although it is naïve to reduce terrorism to the manipulation of violent actors by foreign powers or secret services, it would be shortsighted to refuse to investigate this sort of hypothesis when there is plausible evidence of external involvement in terrorism. How are personal or psychological problems related to political tensions or crises within a group?

Psychological/Motivational Factors

Bassiouni (1975) developed a normative notion of terrorism to carve out of political violence specific behaviors and acts, which he believed, should be labeled as terroristic. This normative approach suggests that terrorism is a means of communication. Its utility is found in the mentality of "the spectacular." In this context, the copycat syndrome of the terrorist pathology finds fertile turf for developing "terrorist deterministic acts" of historical destiny. If heroes are made and not born, so be it with the demons of terrorism.

The dominant emphasis of these perspectives is on the psychological states of those who are attracted to and participate in anti-social movements. Although macro social factors (e.g., rapid social change, structural discontinuities, culture conflict) continue to be considered crucial as the underlying cause of an individual's discontents (Gurr, 1971; Jenkins, 1980; Kelly, 1986; Kittrie, 1975). The growing trend towards demonizing of dissident groups as merely disgruntled persons is not only undemocratic but also indirectly contributing to terrorist activities (Talhami, 1995).

Albert Bandura (1990) explores this notion relative to understanding a terrorist mindset and finds that social discontent and alienation significantly influence why persons become members of a terrorist group. He states that the conversion of socialized people into dedicated combatants is not achieved by altering their personality structures, aggressive drives, or moral standards. Rather, it is accomplished by cognitive restructuring and accommodating the moral values of killing, so that the killing can be done free from self-censuring restraints (Bandura, 1990). The motivational approach focuses on recruitment and its psycho-functional appeal and predispositions.

Kelly (1995) describes the motivational model of terrorism as a communication method suggesting a three-stage sequence in any social movement affiliation: (1) pre-disposing conditions, such as needs and motives, of the individuals (sometimes supplemented with discussion of societal conditions); (2) an exposure to the new beliefs which appeal to those pre-disposing needs or motives, and occasionally its relation to broader social contexts; and, (3) resulting behavior as a committed member of a group.

Terrorist organizations constitute structures through which discontent can be distilled and expressed. Some of these organizational structures are that:

1. Individuals' motivations remain constant throughout their careers in social movements thus ignoring the requisites of the social movement organization. Individuals' alienation or discontent may be created or intensified by participation in the movement.
2. Individuals in terrorist groups exhibit high levels of alienation, discontent, or tensions. It is at this point that it becomes relatively easy to gravitate toward a pathology orientation to the terroristic *modus operandi*.
3. Correspondingly, terrorist groups work to mobilize whatever discontents do exist to ensure group survival even, if need be, at the expense of individual members.
4. Social movements are formed to produce social change and yet there is little emphasis on how this is accomplished organizationally when a motivational model is adopted.
5. Interaction between the terrorist group and the larger society is de-emphasized.

The Role of Ideology

Ideologically inspired political violence programs are inherent in movements that have been labeled "terrorist." A major feature of ideology is the historical consciousness it breeds among those who embrace it. Even if the reference to a cause is fictitious, terrorist actors always act in the name of the people, or for the sake of a historical project. The future, the nature of change, and the limits and possibilities of control become ideological questions of overwhelming importance

A method of interpretation of ideologies must possess some logic – it cannot violate the basic canon of common sense. The establishment of a common sense frame of reference qualifies documents and writings as legitimate sources that forecast significant social change. The key "sacred" texts of so many terrorist organizations are rooted in the romantic past. Modern political activists may be involved in the strenuous art of intellectual invention when old social blueprints need to be "adjusted and refined" to suit modern political and socio-economic realities. (The one thing perhaps that terrorists share with religious fundamentalist is their tenacious adherence to the inseminating authority of the past.) The notion that certain classes are galvanized into terrorism and extremism out of a sense of loss is also noteworthy.

The Serbs want to reclaim what was lost in the battle of Kosovo Field in 1389. The Irish want to regain what was lost after Cromwell's invasion in the year 1650. In America, White Supremacists, Christian Fundamentalists, and archconservatives seek a separate Caucasian state. In Mexico, the Zapatistas want to regain farm holdings lost to international agri-business. As the Luddites, the precursors to the British Labor Party, went about destroying machinery in reaction to the Industrial Revolution, there is fertile historical genre to any cause. Ideologies may also be indirectly, but no less powerfully, disseminated through romantically shaped accounts of a cultural hero's life. Such life stories become models for action and, more importantly, pedagogical tools in the hands of deft agitators. This type of fundamental link distinguishes them from mere propaganda and establishes connection with the ethos of a radical group (Kelly, 1995). Ideologies would appear to play a pivotal role in the formation of politically motivated violence.

Terrorism in the United States

Terrorism has become an enduring fact of life in the United States. It has found expression in the bombings of abortion clinics; the re-activated twenty-year career of the "Unabomber;" the 1993 terrorist bombing of the World Trade Center; and in the 1994 bombing of the federal office building in Oklahoma City. These phenomena are not new. Since 1900, two of America's presidents and two of its presidential candidates have been assassinated, while one president and two presidential candidates have been wounded. Social and civil rights leaders have been murdered and the scars of violent protests and bombings of university laboratories and other government symbols of the Vietnam War remain as national psychic wounds.

Despite this chronicle of violence, The American press appear naïve in their shock over the Oklahoma City bombing and their surprise “that it could happen in America’s heartland.” Soul searching and blame abounds from every angle within the media about these events. Audiences filled with wild-eyed rumors of fusion-theory paranoia besiege TV and radio talk show hosts of claims of insurrection perpetrated by individuals, home militias, or armed tax revolt groups. The commentary also emphasizes the weak laws governing explosives and weapons, the perceived inadequate public security measures; and, most importantly, the burgeoning disenchantment with the federal government.

Americans are now confronted with the most chilling fact: that an American could have carried out an act of such spectacular and destructive magnitude. That two sociopathic drifters, whom the indictments identified as having crossed over the edge from vengeful rhetoric to violence, committed a domestic terrorist act defied the American view of a terrorist. Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols and the growing fraternity of domestic terrorists are homemade products and their involvement in terrorist acts raised troubling questions about the changing of traditional family values and the social fabric there. General impressions about the terrorist mentality and terrorism tend to flourish because Americans rely on immediacy journalism, such as that provided by CNN, and because events such as the Oklahoma City bombing divert attention from critical reflection of wider government and social problems.

The fact, too, that terrorism and violence are embedded in America’s history belies the assumption that recent incidents are unique and incomprehensible. The press reinforces this view, however, by virtually avoiding thoughtful analysis about the alienation, anger, frustration and insanity rooted in terrorist history that would go beyond the two-metric sound bite.

Psycho-historical Perspective:

Forty years ago, Frantz Fanon (1963) in *The Wretched of the Earth* postulated a psychology of terrorism and why such acts reinforce the terrorist’s self-affirmation. Membership in terrorist communities rescues many of its participants from negative self-images, sexual impotence, and self-destructive behaviors. Many politically or religiously centered terrorist groups provide a catharsis to their members by offering them an opportunity to experience the highest good, the *sumum bonum* of consecrated and fervent solidarity in some cataclysmic encounter. Nothing is more chilling than a spectacle of unremitting self-sacrifice.

A terrorist who witnesses such desperate acts executed by like-minded persons derives a powerful psychological high, finding such acts orgasmically satisfying and confirming their own violent – and frequently suicidal – aspirations. The terrorist revel in striving for 15 minutes of fame and media directly or indirectly encourages this deviant psychology. We have reached a point where fact and fiction blur (Kelly, 1985). TV-infotainment now present violence on prime-time crime shows formats that are barely distinguishable from the evening news programs.

Generational Biographies

Karl Mannheim (1940) believed that fundamental social and cultural changes have had an enormous impact on traditional social institutions for the transmission of culture from one generation to another. These social institutions are also breaking down from sheer demographic overload. A vast new youth culture has been in the making for several decades. This situation is altering the traditional relations between generations. Increasingly, the country's youth are turning to one another for guidance. Their culture has emerged as a major socializing force, taking over a process traditionally performed by parents, teachers, clergymen, and other role-model adults.

In the United States, the disappearance of the family as a unit of production has radically altered the institutional settings in which young people live their lives. Instead of being part of a multi-generational family unit, youngsters spend almost all their time in segregated settings, having contact only with members of their own age group (Straus and Howe, 1991). They derive their values, tastes, and life styles predominantly from their peer group rather than from their elders.

The ordinary relationship between child and parents is reversed, with the child developing a sense of superiority to the parent and unwillingness to take guidance from people so obviously out of tune with their surroundings. Accelerated technological change during the past several decades has substantially assisted in eroding enculturation learned within the family and other institutions of society. It is not simply that ordinary people increasingly question the legitimacy of rules and customs they once considered sacred, but it seems that those who make or administer the rules have lost faith in their own legitimacy.

One consequence has been a general failure to relate means to ends. James B. Jacobs (1983), the American sociologist and penologist, describes the formal efforts during the past two decades of various groups to establish their own social legitimacy. Starting with the black civil rights movement in America in the mid-1950s, one marginal group after another (blacks, mental patients, women, children, aliens, homosexuals, the handicapped and prisoners) has pressed for admission in the social mainstream. The social foment concomitant to this quest for full participation has also created its share of malcontents. This is a phenomenon that is increasingly becoming a matter of great interest to social psychologist and political scientists. For instance, in the current characterization of the Oklahoma City bombing it was reported:

Psychologists have warned for years that young people like McVeigh born in the late 1960s, whose families fractured in record numbers, whose economic frustrations far exceed those of their parents, are unusually alienated and vulnerable to fringe movements. In this view, the social and economic upheavals of the last 20 years have planted a virus in American society with still unrealized capacity for damage (Russakoff and Kovaleski, 1995).

Some maintain that the premium placed on winning in the United States also encourages people to violate rules that get in their way, and to feel justified in doing so. If the current incarceration rate of American prisons is any indicator for this trend, the facts confirm this theory. At the end of 1994, the United States had 1,053,738 people in state and federal prisons. The American imprisonment rate of 387 for every 100,000 residents is five to eight times that of European countries. Add about half a million people in local jails and 3.5 million convicts on probation and parole, and the United States currently has over 5 million Americans caught up in the criminal justice system. Conceivably, these incarceration rates may soon outpace the national rate of 6 million full-time American university and college students. There is a growing despair over this national dilemma.

Indiscriminate political violence has moved to center stage in the American socio-political arena. Incidents of American-based terrorism, right-wing racism, and religious fundamentalists are having a direct influence on the difficult and delicate task of maintaining social order in the face of growing demands of the underclass. Expressions of concern over a growing sense of insecurity, along with an increased demand for public safety and a surge of conservative ideology, dominate current issues and public debate.

Moreover, this virulent outbreak of paranoia in the American psyche can be attributed to the propaganda of the last four decades of the Cold War. A plethora of "state militias" operating through a curious mixture of anti-government bluster and revisionist history have become prevalent in the past decade. Among other things, many of these groups believe there is a conspiracy to set up a one-world government. They foresee a day when the United Nations runs everything. As unusual as that agenda might seem, it has many supporters among the gun-toting paramilitaries of the Far Right. This world conspiracy theory is epitomized in two of the most popular far-right radical writings in the United States.

In an obscure American novel titled, *The Turner Diaries*, by William Pierce (1978) an ammonium nitrite bomb is used to destroy the FBI Washington Headquarters. It has generally gone unnoticed that *The Turner Diaries* is Pierce's first novel. There is a second novel, *Hunter*, published in 1989. *Hunter* reads as a prequel to the *Turner Diaries* in that it demonstrates why contemporary events could plausibly lead to the creation of the "organization" and its revolution. These novels serve as a quantifiable bible for far right extremists.

Shifting Political Paradigms:

From a historical perspective, both the Left and Right have adopted populism in the United States. Each employs the same rhetoric -- but both tend to be racist. The character and *exceptionalism* of these dominant political ideologies is often confusing to Europeans in their examination of American society. For example, American liberal tradition has now become the ideology of the Right, while State-ism, the traditional ideology of the *European* Right, has been embraced by the Left. That there is a linguistic tilt evidenced in today's socio-political arena of Orwellian prophecy gives one pause. Cybernetics and related advancements in communications technology coupled with the efficiency of investments and trading in the world financial markets, continues to confound the interactions of these previous dynamics. Vivid signs of the impact of a "shrinking globe" syndrome are manifest in all societies. All over the planet, definitions of what nations are and mean are changing. We have moved into a new kind of social space.

Third Millennium Terrorist Mentality

The next century may well be the age of superterrorism with nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. Before the 1990s are over, we will be forced to recognize that it is the method, not the motive that makes a terrorist. Predictions of improvised nuclear, biological, or chemical attacks on the United States are now commonplace. These weapons will be used because the public pays attention only to the spectacular. For instance, a year after the World Trade Center bombing, the blast was little more than a dim memory. Future terrorists will find that they need ever more spectacular horrors to overcome people's capacity to absorb and forget what previously would have seemed intolerable.

The lesson to be learned is in the developing responses to these unpredictable acts. Within the context of the ongoing concerns for developing predictive profiles of the "terrorist mentality," these responses can only be promulgated in tactical and proactive modes. However, in a constitutional democracy, they must also be juxtaposed with the responsibility of protecting civil liberties of citizens and with the fiat of maintaining an open society (See Addendum).

Conclusion

There are as many terrorist mentalities as there are terrorists (Jenkins 1983, Maghan and Kelly 1989). Again we are caught in the web of personal, psychological, political and other meanings. Is it the innocuous residue of a broken and split personality, berated by the phantoms of psychic-pain beyond normal being that defines and drives the mind of the modern terrorist? The highly complex nature of this phenomenon will continue to haunt and confound us.

Criminologist can easily construct character profiles. Religious fundamentalism, nationalism, ethno-violence, and racism continue to percolate as necessary ingredients of terrorism. These forces, coupled with migration and demographic pressures and the widening socio-economic separation of peoples bring a deeper complexity to the characterization of the terrorist mentality. Perhaps psycho-historical theory and the 21st century development of contextual psychology will bring us closer to an answer to this phenomenon.

The British historian, Eric Hobsbawm, in his prize-winning work, *The Age of Extremes* (1994), describes 20th century wars as "total wars against combatants and civilians alike," with casualties measured in the tens of millions. All previous wars were alley fights in comparison. As Hobsbawm concludes, "Since the middle of the 20th century, the old civilization has begun to crack and break. The old maps and charts which guided human beings singly and collectively through life no longer represent the landscape through which we move, the sea on which we sail. We do not know where our journey is taking us, nor even ought to take us....Let us hope it will be a better, more just and more viable world."

Regrettably, a terrorist Zeitgeist is now informing our mutual global journey. Life in the Third Millennium will be defined significantly by terrorist mentalities and by a collective means to prevent and avoid their mastery over our own fate. (jlm – 14 December 1994)

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ADDENDUM: Current American Response Strategies (1995)

Kime (1995) cites counter-terrorism measures sought by President Clinton in the aftermath of the

Oklahoma City bombing inter alia:

- hire approximately 1,000 new FBI agents, prosecutors and other federal enforcement and support personnel;
- require that, within a year, microscopic particles or taggants be placed in the standard explosive device raw materials to permit tracking of the materials post-explosion;
- Have Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms study whether common chemicals can be rendered inert for use in explosives and whether controls can be imposed on certain precursor chemicals used to manufacture explosives;
- Allow the armed forces to be involved in crime fighting where chemical or biological weapons are used;
- allow court approval to authorize wiretapping or other electronic surveillance to fight terrorism;
- make it a federal crime to use any chemical weapons (under existing law, gaseous chemical weapons are covered, but those in either liquid or solid form are not);
- extend the statute of limitations on National Firearms Act from three to five years; and,
- provide a mandatory 10-year penalty for anyone convicted of transferring a firearm or explosive, knowing that it will be used to commit a crime of violence or drug trafficking.