

The Science of Terror

Scientific American Mind

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Theme: [Science and Medicine](#), [Terrorism](#)

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Sometimes the science community, hiding behind the guise of empirical research, cannot see its own bias even while correctly analyzing a situation. The latter statement may seem contradictory, but given the manner in which it studies 'terror' and then applies those findings and definitions only to some 'other' group, it ignores the reality of terror at home and the reality of terror perpetrated by the 'homeland'. Not 'home grown terror' such as the Timothy McVeighs of the world, nor the terror inflicted on the people by the very infrequent acts of foreigners acting on the homeland, but the terror of the country itself, the acts of the people in government, in the military, in politics, in religion, who either spread terror themselves or spread the fear of terror in order to control not only the domestic audience but foreign audiences as well.

This has been presented before with the National Geographic magazine's "World of Terror"[1] article that dutifully recorded acts of terror throughout the world without recognizing the United States' historical and current acts of terror in the homeland and abroad. From that geographical perspective, one man's terror is another man's "civilizing mission", bringing the benefits of superior technology and enlightened wisdom to the masses of the world who are otherwise disenfranchised "others" with little value until they embrace the "freedom" of the market place and their rightful place in it.

Terror at Penn State

Terror is a very tenuous and subjective term to define. The Penn State International Center for the Study of Terrorism[2] attempts to draw parameters around the word, parameters that do not identify the true perpetrators of any specific terror or terror in general:

a particular kind of political violence that is usually associated with the use, or threat of use of violent behavior to achieve political ends. Although terrorism can be, and often is, perpetrated by States, the term is most frequently associated with non-state entities seeking to overthrow or effectively destabilize a regime.

'Political violence' in itself is a highly undefined and ambiguous term, a nice socio-psychological term that has real little meaning. The qualification and implication that terrorism is not perpetrated by states as much as by non-state entities seems highly disingenuous. My readings over the past several years would indicate the contrary, that the most significant acts of terrorism are state sponsored and activated, whether it is civil terror as within Stalinist Russia, or foreign terror as with the many U.S. incursions into Latin America, Vietnam, and other areas of economic/political interest throughout the world. To ignore state terrorism disguises the main source of terror in our world today.

The Penn State definition does pronounce one 'undeniability':

an undeniable defining characteristic of terrorism is that it often involves the deliberate targeting of civilians as the immediate means towards the ultimate objectives of the terrorist movement.

That allows of course, that the terrorism could be individualistic, could be state sponsored, including also from the historical record the mass carpet bombings of the cities of Great Britain and Germany, or the applied and threatened nuclear annihilation of masses of populations. Individuals do not have the resources, and are unlikely to achieve them, to promote the degree of terrorism that state actors can. In state terrorism, terror also involves the propaganda that is broadcast by the corporate owners of the state as well. This is identified at Penn State with "a key feature of terrorism is that it is a form of psychological warfare."

They further this aspect of the definition with:

a common strategy of terrorists is to provoke an over-reaction (frequently involving excessive measures by governments challenged by terrorists) from the end target in an attempt to undermine its morality and legitimacy while simultaneously increasing support for terrorists among their sympathizers.

This sounds very similar to CIA/FBI interventions that are recorded and noted by many authors having access to archival material in the United States. It is a methodology utilized by state actors as much if not more than non-state actors.

Science of Terror

So why am I picking on Penn State so much, when I started with a scientific look at terror? It is that one of their associates, psychologist John Horgan, is a side bar feature in a recent Scientific American report, "Inside the Terrorist Mind." [3]

To start with there is a problem with the use of the word "terrorist." In Bush's own words, anyone not with 'us' is against 'us' and thus in contemporary American law and jargon could be classified as a terrorist. Evidence in Iraq and Afghanistan would indicate that while there are foreign nationals in the country (other than the Americans of course) who are fighting against the occupation, they are relatively few and far between. A recent series of articles on Canadian forces in Afghanistan, (currently stationed in Kandahar) [4] found no foreign fighters within the region. All the others then, would properly be considered insurgents or guerillas as their main motive is to rid the country of foreign occupation.

Terror - a rather loose term that includes many actors that should properly be considered insurgents, guerillas, or freedom fighters as in Palestine and Iraq - sooner or later becomes identified with suicide bombers, and it is this aspect that receives much psychological wonderment and is the target of the Scientific American article. 'Terrorists,' as have been analyzed more and more frequently, are not the rabid raving lunatics on the religious fringe, not the "islamofascists" of the deluded neocon mind, those who wish to destroy "us", the "west", because of our freedoms and rights. Instead, as most truly scientific studies have shown, 'terrorists' of the suicidal kind (and even of the non-suicidal kind) do not arise from the masses of poor, starving wretches of the third world who are too busy trying to feed themselves and surviving without the time and energy for greater philosophical thoughts

about who might be oppressing them.

The majority of suicide 'terrorists' are generally well educated, frequently considered to be well off in comparison to the overall population - people who have the time and philosophical training to think about the injustices of the world, and - most importantly - are battling an occupying force that is of a different religious or sectarian belief [5]. It should be noted that the longer an occupation lasts, the more there will be insurgents classified as terrorists as the "collateral damage" continues and as their means of fighting back are hugely asymmetrical and by necessity increasingly desperate.

The bias in this article is all too familiar, the implication by omission that terror is not something that the United States practices at home or abroad. The article purportedly probes "the psyches of terrorists to reveal what motivates their monstrous acts," concluding accurately that they are "gunning for a greater good - as they see it." As they see it of course does not refer to the media blindness to American acts of terror.

All the reasons posited as to why individuals become 'terrorists' can be applied to state terror, as well. One phrase that applies is that "The social milieu in which a person grew up and the internal structure of the radical groups themselves exert a tremendous influence." Nothing surprising there, the ideas and the social milieu of the neocons and many politicians is tangled up in the web of cronyism, lobbyists, corporations, and military welfare that feeds much of the economy. The article talks about religion, peer pressure, and other accoutrements of the functioning of any society as reasons for becoming terrorists, all ideas that also help define the American political-military establishment.

Orientalist Terror

Another disarming and misleading statement, one that is familiar from other contexts as well, is the Orientalist view, that "In Middle Eastern cultures, extremist political goals frequently are inculcated into young people very early in life." The study cited[6] indicated, "adults routinely teach children to hate the enemy," in this case Israel. The children were taught "how the enemy effectively evicted Palestinians from Palestine."

Two main arguments counter this. First - apart from the small size of the articles study group - if one really examines American culture, the children are also inculcated into the mores and beliefs of their society, within the educational system, within the overbearing reach of media from birth, within their religious constructs, within their peer groups. It may be a softer gentler inculcation, but "very early in life" Americans learn who the enemy is, who the bad guys are, who the evil ones are. The inculcation does not seem extreme because it is a repetitive everyday occurrence, fitting within known and comfortable structures of society - television, church, magazines, scouts, school. The same applies to Israeli society as well.

The second counter to this argument about the Palestinians, is, well, yes, that is what happened, the Palestinians were evicted from their lands by the Israelis. So what is the point with that, other than to imply that it is not true and to continue the western bias, in particular the American bias, that supports Israel without condition? There is no mention of Israeli state terror, the killings, extra judicial assassinations, the theft of property and many other "heinous" actions that are fully in contradiction of international law derived from treaties and the international courts.

Another argument concerning Hezbollah and Hamas, is the religious context in which “religiously motivated Islamist terrorists were more committed to self-sacrifice than were less religious perpetrators.” While that may be true for this particular study, it is not supported by other studies of terrorists in general [see note 4 again]. Further, there is no recognition of Hezbollah and Hamas as being civil organizations that function as a societal structure for the populations of their respective areas because of the acts of terrorism that necessitated them in the first place – the occupation of their territory and its expropriation and annexation through military force. Both organizations are complex and more than the band of evil rogue terrorists the media and politicians, and now the science community, wishes to make of them.

Terror of the mind

Both John Horgan and the article’s author Annette Schaefer write with a strong bias that ignores the fundamental nature of American actions within their own country and with other areas of the world. The article ends with the statement that terror is “not just about violence” but “it is also about fear.” The psychological distress experienced by the United States after 9/11 is fully understandable, as most Americans were (and remain) ignorant of American overseas atrocities other than as presented in the good light of anti-communism and freedom and democracy, and rogue states or the axis of evil, and thus incapable of understanding how 9/11 could occur other than through some imagined evil other. This state of historical amnesia is highly aided by the mainstream media (as even now, actions in Iraq are more and more off the screen, off the wire) who themselves are corporate partners within the overall framework of state/government.

The political and military leaders take full advantage of this ignorance of their long record of subversive acts and use their knowledge of manipulation and propaganda to extend their actions into rationalizing more overt and direct forms of terror – occupation, threats to use nuclear weapons with first strike a confirmed strategy, and changes to homeland laws that greatly reduce the very freedoms and liberties of persons within their own country, and greatly limit the power of Congress. While it may be useful to understand and study the minds and motives of individual ‘terrorists’ and their social milieu (where one would probably find the underlying theme is “yankee go home”), the same concepts need to be applied at home, when the rhetoric and apologetics of good intentions, of American exceptionalism and universality, hide the terror that acts from within the military and political bodies of the United States, and the men and women, caught up in their own acts of “gunning for the greater good – as they see it.”

I could understand a political journal citing these studies as is done with “Inside the Terrorist Mind”, but the political bias presented in a supposedly scientific article about the mind of the terrorist greatly reduces its validity. It serves again as more propaganda to support the establishment with ideas that are much more subjective than scientifically objective. To study ‘terror’ one needs not only to examine the insurgents in occupied countries, but also the terrorists at home, the ones who hide behind the jingoism and rhetoric of western goodness while occupying countries and killing those that get in the way of their military, political, and economic goals. The neocon mind would be a great place to start. The mind – neocon or not – is a difficult thing to study. The mind of terrorism is equally complex and for it to have any validity it needs to begin at home where much of the global terror begins.

[1] www.jim.secretcove.ca/index.Geography.Terror.html

[2] <http://www.icst.psu.edu/whatisterrorism.html>

[3] Schaefer, Annette. "Inside the Terrorist Mind," Scientific American MIND. December 2007/January 2008. pp. 72-79.

[5] Pape, Robert. Dying to Win - The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism. Random House, New York. 2005.

[4] "No foreigners or non-Pashtuns were encountered during the survey, supporting the impression that such fighters are extremely rare." Graeme Smith, "Portrait of the enemy as young men," The Globe and Mail, Toronto, Saturday, March 22, 2008. p.A14.

[6] Posted on eJournal USA by Jerrold Post, Professor of Psychiatry, Political Psychology and International Affairs and Director of the Political Psychology Program at The George Washington University. He had a 21-year career with the CIA,

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