

Criminological theories of terrorism



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ORIGIN

Terrorism has occurred throughout history for a variety of reasons. Its causes can be historical, cultural, political, social, psychological, economic, or religious-or any combination of these. Some countries have proven to be particularly susceptible to terrorism at certain times, as Italy and West Germany were during the 1970s. Terrorist violence escalated precipitously in those two countries for a decade before declining equally dramatically. Other countries, such as Canada and The Netherlands, have proven to be more resistant, and have experienced only a few isolated terrorist incidents.

In general, democratic countries have provided more fertile ground for terrorism because of the open nature of their societies. In such societies citizens have fundamental rights, civil liberties are legally protected, and government control and constant surveillance of its citizens and their activities is absent. By the same token, repressive societies, in which the government closely monitors citizens and restricts their speech and movement, have often provided more difficult environments for terrorists. But even police states have not been immune to terrorism, despite limiting civil liberties and forbidding free speech and rights of assembly. Examples include Russia under tsarist rule and the Communist-ruled Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, as well as the People's Republic of China, Myanmar, and Laos. In broad terms the causes that have commonly compelled people to engage in terrorism are grievances borne of political oppression, cultural domination, economic exploitation, ethnic discrimination, and religious persecution. Perceived inequities in the distribution of wealth and political power have led some terrorists to attempt to overthrow democratically

elected governments. To achieve a fairer society, they would replace these governments with socialist or communist regimes. Left-wing terrorist groups of the 1960s and 1970s with such aims included Germany's Baader-Meinhof Gang, Italy's Red Brigades, and the Weather Underground in the United States. Other terrorists have sought to fulfill some mission that they believe to be divinely inspired or millennialist (related to the end of the world). The Japanese religious cult Aum Shinrikyo, responsible for a nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995 that killed 12 people, falls into this category. Still other terrorists have embraced comparatively more defined and comprehensible goals such as the re-establishment of a national homeland (for example, Basque separatists in Spain) or the unification of a divided nation (Irish nationalists in Northern Ireland). Finally, some terrorists are motivated by very specific issues, such as opposition to legalized abortion or nuclear energy, or the championing of environmental concerns and animal rights. They hope to pressure both the public and its representatives in government to enact legislation directly reflecting their particular concern. Militant animal rights activists, for example, have used violence against scientists and laboratory technicians in their campaign to halt medical experimentation involving animals. Radical environmentalists have sabotaged logging operations and the construction of power grids to protest the spoiling of natural wilderness areas. Extremists who oppose legalized abortion in the United States have attacked clinics and murdered doctors and other employees in hopes of denying women the right to abortion.[2]

More than 2,000 years ago the first known acts of what we now call terrorism were perpetrated by a radical offshoot of the Zealots, a Jewish sect

active in Judea during the 1st century ad. The Zealots resisted the Roman Empire's rule of what is today Israel through a determined campaign primarily involving assassination. Zealot fighters used the sica, a primitive dagger, to attack their enemies in broad daylight, often in crowded market places or on feast days-essentially wherever there were people to witness the violence. Thus, like modern terrorists, the Zealots intended their actions to communicate a message to a wider target audience: in this instance, the Roman occupation forces and any Jews who sympathized or collaborated with the invaders. Between 1090 and 1272 an Islamic movement known as the Assassins used similar tactics in their struggle against the Christian Crusaders who had invaded what is today part of Syria. The Assassins embraced the same notions of self-sacrifice and suicidal martyrdom evident in some Islamic terrorist groups today. They regarded violence as a sacramental or divine act that ensured its perpetrators would ascend to a glorious heaven should they perish during the task.[3]

THEORIES OF TERRORISM

THE POLITICAL THEORY OF ANARCHISM AS A THEORY OF TERRORISM

Terrorism is most definitely not a form of governance, but anarchism is. Most anarchists reject terrorism in its vanguard varieties (for nationalist or religious purposes), but in a theoretical sense, anarchism justifies terrorism as a form of criminal action that attacks the values of an organized, complacent society. Anarchism is a theory of governance that rejects any form of central or external authority, preferring instead to replace it with alternative forms of organization such as shaming rituals for deviants, mutual assistance pacts between citizens, syndicalism (any non-

authoritarian organizational structure that gives the greatest freedom to workers), iconoclasm (the destruction of cherished beliefs), libertarianism (a belief in absolute liberty), and plain old rugged individualism. Anarchism is often referred to as the nineteenth century roots of terrorism, the term first being introduced in 1840 by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Anarchism defined is the rejection of the state, of any form of coercive government, of any form of domination and exploitation. It is the notion of free and equal access to all the world's resources to enable positive freedom (freedom to) in place of negative freedom (freedom from, or the basis of most constitutional rights).

THE POLITICAL THEORY OF FASCISM AS A THEORY OF TERRORISM

Fascism is the one form of government with the most disagreement about a definition for it. The word comes from the Latin “ fasces” which means to use power to scare or impress people. It generally refers to the consolidation of all economic and political power into some form of super-patriotism that is devoted to genocide or endless war with one's enemies. Benito Mussolini, who practically invented the term in 1922, said it is the merger of state and corporate power. Mussolini's version of fascism was based on the idea of an indomitable power and an attempt to resurrect imperial Rome. Adolf Hitler said fascism is the clever and constant application of propaganda so that people can be made to see paradise as hell, and the other way around. Hitler's brand of fascism drew upon philosophical reflections by Hegel, Nietzsche, and Spengler, and also drew upon Nordic folk romance from Wagner to Tacitus. Japanese fascism involved racism, fanaticism, historical destiny, and a mixture of Bushido, Zen and Shinto Buddhism, emperor worship, and past samurai legends.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL THEORY OF RELIGION AS A THEORY OF TERRORISM

More than one criminologist has pointed out that the disciplines of theology, religion, and philosophy have had important things to say about terrorism (Stitt 2003; Kraemer 2004). It is also a fact that about a quarter of all terrorist groups and about half of the most dangerous ones on earth are primarily motivated by religious concerns (Hoffman 1993). They believe that God not only approves of their action, but that God demands their action. Their cause is sacred, and consists of a combined sense of hope for the future and vengeance for the past. Of these two components, the backward-looking desire for vengeance may be the more important trigger for terrorism because the forward-looking component (called apocalyptic thinking, or eschatology) produces wild-eyed fanatics who are more a danger to themselves and their own people. The trick to successful use of terrorism in the name of religion rests upon convincing believers or converts that a "neglected duty" exists in the fundamental, mainstream part of the religion. Religious terrorism is therefore, NOT about extremism, fanaticism, sects, or cults, but is instead all about a fundamentalist or militant interpretation of the basic tenets. Evil is often defined as malignant narcissism from a theological point of view, and religion easily serves as moral cover for self-centred terrorists and psychopaths (Stitt 2003). Religion has always absorbed or absolved evil and guilt in what is called theodicy, or the study of how the existence of evil can be reconciled with a good and benevolent God. Most religions theodicyize evil away as either: (1) a test of faith; (2) a product of free will; (3) part of God's plan; or (4) functional to let people learn right from wrong; and terrorists easily make use of these established theodicy or critiques of them (Kraemer 2004).

THE ECONOMICS THEORY OF RATIONAL CHOICE AS A THEORY OF TERRORISM

The discipline of economics has many concepts that are relevant to an understanding of terrorism — supply and demand — costs and benefits, etc. Fully-developed economic or econometric models of terrorism are quite rare, however, and often involve such things as “psychic” costs and benefits (Nyatepe-Coo 2004). More down-to-earth economic theories can be found in the literature on deterrence. Rational choice theory, in particular, has found a place in criminology, and holds that people will engage in crime after weighing the costs and benefits of their actions to arrive at a rational choice about motivation after perceiving that the chances of gain outweigh any possible punishment or loss.

THE GLOBALIZATION THEORY OF TERRORISM

Nassar (2004) has probably written the most interesting piece on globalization theory as it relates to terrorism, and although his ideas are fairly critical of the U. S. for exporting “nightmares” as well as dreams, he does provide a robust introduction to the complex topic of globalization. Globalization contributes to dreams, fantasies, and rising expectations, but at the same time, it leads to dashed hopes, broken dreams, and unfulfilled achievements. Terrorism breeds in the gap between expectations and achievements. The thinking is very similar to strain theory in criminology or the rising expectations theory of prison riots, and about the only thing unique about globalization theory is that it adds a rich-poor dichotomy. Rich people (or nations) are seen as wanting power and wealth, and poor people (or nations) are seen as wanting justice. From this perspective, then, rich

people are part of the causal factor or root cause of terrorism, since they contribute to the conditions which give rise to it. Perpetrators of “terrorism” (always treated as an ill-defined concept in globalization theory) are never seen as born or raised with any specific predispositions toward it. In brief, globalization theory holds that if the oppressed and disgruntled poor people of the world were simply given the chance to find peaceful means for achieving justice, terrorism would not thrive.

SOCIOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES OF TERRORISM

Modern sociological perspectives are primarily concerned with the social construction of fear or panic, and how institutions and processes, especially the media, primary and secondary groups, maintain that expression of fear. Labeling theory in criminology, for example, is a social constructionist viewpoint that, in my opinion, goes about reconnecting consequences with causes in a way that is less systematic than the way functionalists did it a long time ago. Some societies become “softer” targets after terrorism (especially after short-term target hardening), and other societies become stronger in the long term. It depends upon interaction patterns, and stabilities and interpenetrations among the structural subsystems (economy, polity, religion, law).

PSYCHIATRIC THEORIES OF MENTAL ILLNESS AS A THEORY OF TERRORISM

The leading exponent of the terrorist-as-mentally-ill approach is Jerrold Post (1984; 1990), who has gone on record saying that the most dangerous terrorist is likely to be a religious terrorist, and that all terrorists suffer from negative childhood experiences and a damaged sense of self. His analysis of

the terrorist “mindset” (a word that substitutes for terrorist personality, and technically means a fixed mental attitude or inclination) draws upon a view of mental illness that compels, or forces, people to commit horrible acts. It should be noted that we know from criminal justice that this is not the only possible view on mental illness. More “crazy” people come into contact with the law through sheer folly and foolishness than a compulsion their mental illness made them have. Post (1990) makes a somewhat neo-Freudian distinction between terrorists who desire to “destroy the nation, or world, of their fathers” and those who desire to “carry on the mission, or world, of their fathers.”

BIOLOGICAL THEORIES OF TERRORISM

David Hubbard (1983) was one of the first biological researchers of terrorism, and his line of work is similar to the familiar cycle of violence hypothesis in criminal justice. In this view, people who commit repetitive and cyclical acts of violence (which would include wife beaters, rapists, and serial killers) are driven by hormonal or neurochemical fluctuations in their body or brain chemistry. Three compounds, in particular, have been singled out as having abnormal levels among terrorists: norepinephrine, acetylcholine, and endorphins. Of these, norepinephrine is suspected as being the most influential, as it is associated with the so-called flight or fight mechanism in human biology. The theory of “fight or flight” was developed by W. B. Cannon back in 1929, and refers to a state of arousal under stress in which the heart, lungs, and muscle operate more efficiently. As it applies to terrorism (and crime), the behavioral requirements of such activities (fighting exhilaration before an event, and fleeing manipulation of audience

after an event) produce a syndrome of physiological need for arousal at fairly regular intervals. Motives for terrorism appear to be quite stable when the biological viewpoint is taken, and it is possible to link a variety of aspects in the typical terrorist profile with biological factors.

TRADITIONAL CRIMINOLOGICAL THEORIES APPLIED TO TERRORISM

It's not easy applying traditional criminological theories to terrorism. Most of these theories were designed to explain ordinary street crime like robbery or burglary, and have a certain hardness to their perspectives which makes them difficult to extend. Ruggiero (2005) is typical of those who have attempted to apply such theories or suggest various extensions, starting with Durkheim's functionalism by asking whether Durkheim would see terrorism as part of the "normality of crime" or as part of a clearly unacceptable, dysfunctional form of crime. On the one hand, Durkheim said that all crime serves positive functions (of innovation and evolution), but on the other hand, the organic metaphor that Durkheim used seems to suggest that some forms of crime only cause disintegration and are cancerous. The Chicago school of disorganization in criminology would presumably focus on the distinctiveness of different social worlds between terrorists and non-terrorists, analyzing the communication blockages, for example. Strain theorists would likely argue that terrorism is inevitable as a manifestation of the broken promise that everybody can rise from rags to riches, and study the adaptation Merton described as rebellion. Learning theorists would likely emphasize the importance of role models or the "techniques of neutralization" involved along with the drift into a terrorist lifestyle. Labeling theorists would probably say, cynically but truly, that terrorism is "what the

other person does. ” Control theorists would likely focus on terrorists being unattached, unloved, uncommitted to education or business, uninvolved in conventional tasks, and having their hands idle so time becomes the “ devil’s playground” for them. Conflict theorists would probably focus on the presence or absence of associations that provide room for collective action and permanent confrontation, although more radical versions of conflict theory might glamorize terrorism as proto-revolutionary action. Integrated theories would likely focus on the influences of aggressive proneness, provocation, and the support of third parties.

THEORIES UNIQUE TO DOMESTIC TERRORISM

Freilich (2003) does a good job of reviewing the theories in this category, a relatively small area of research which tends to be studied within a field called the sociology of social movements. There are three groups of theories. The first is called economic/social integration theory, and it holds that high concentrations of farming, economic depression, and social disorganization are all related to high levels of domestic terrorist activity, militia movements in particular. In some varieties, it tends to be a kind of “ farm crisis” or “ agrarian reform” theory frequently used by those who study the Latin American context. The second theory is called resource mobilization theory, and it suggests that states which are more prosperous and socially integrated would tend to develop more domestic terrorist activity, on the basis that group competition for power and resources becomes intense. The third group of theories are called cultural theories, and propose that states experiencing greater cultural diversity and female empowerment along with increasing paramilitarism are likely to develop greater levels of domestic

terrorist activity. In terms of research findings, more empirical support seems to exist for the third set of theories (at least according to Freilich 2003), although resource mobilization theory tends to dominate the theoretical literature. Also in general, there is more empirical support for the idea that domestic terrorism more often plagues richer and affluent nations than poor ones.[4]