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Sociology of Terrorism

Introduction

Sociologists had until September 11, 2001, shown little interest in terrorism. Although conflict analysis, in one form or another, is a long established approach in the field, researchers have focused mostly on class and labor struggles, race relations, criminalization and other deviance-labeling, and the collective violence of riots and revolutions. Nonetheless, sociological concepts and methods have been fruitfully applied (albeit mostly by nonsociologists) in efforts to understand and counter terrorism. The aim of this review is to note what has been learned in order to suggest agendas for future research on the dynamics through which terrorism becomes a social phenomenon.

The Social Construction of Terrorism

Probably the most significant contribution of sociological thinking to our understanding of terrorism is the realization that it is a social construction (Ben-Yehuda 1993, Turk 2002a). Contrary to the impression fostered by official incidence counts and media reports, terrorism is not a given in the real world but is instead an interpretation of events and their presumed causes. And these interpretations are not unbiased attempts to depict truth but rather conscious efforts to manipulate perceptions to promote certain interests at the expense of others. When people and events come to be regularly described in public as terrorists and terrorism, some governmental or other entity is succeeding in a

war of words in which the opponent is promoting alternative designations such as “martyr” and “liberation struggle.” . . .

The United States has a long history of violence associated with political, labor, racial, religious, and other social and cultural conflicts (Gurr 1989). Assassinations, bombings, massacres, and other secretive deadly attacks have caused many thousands of casualties. Yet, few incidents have been defined as terrorism or the perpetrators as terrorists. Instead, authorities have typically ignored or downplayed the political significance of such violence, opting to portray and treat the violence as apolitical criminal acts by deranged or evil individuals, outlaws or gangsters, or “imported” agitators such as the radical Molly Maguires of Pennsylvania’s coal miners’ struggles. Although violent acts believed to be politically motivated are assigned the highest investigative priority, those accused are rarely charged with terrorism (Smith 1994, p. 7). In official public usage, terrorism is far more likely to refer to incidents associated with agents and supporters of presumably foreign-based terrorist organizations such as al Qaeda than with the violence of home-grown militants acting in the name of such groups as the Animal Liberation Front, Earth First!, or the American Coalition for Life Activists (one of whose founders, Paul Hill, was executed in Florida on September 3, 2003, for murder, not terrorism).

In sum, to study terrorism presupposes investigating the ways in which parties in conflict are trying to stigmatize one another. The construction and selective application of definitions of terrorism are embedded in the dynamics of political conflicts, where ideological warfare to cast the enemy as an evildoer is a dimension of the struggle to win support for one’s own cause.

Terrorism as Political Violence

Differing sociological perspectives encourage contrasting views of political violence. Insofar as functionalism assumes that order and peace are normal, violence is an aberration, a presumably temporary deviation from the normal state of human social life. Even archaic versions of functionalism (e.g., Germanic “combat theories”) arguing that war is necessary to sustain national identity and strength do not imply acceptance of nongovernmental violence, especially assaults on public order and authority, as other than deviant behavior. More liberal and

critical theories tend to posit that violence is an understandable response to oppression and exploitation, the last resort of the deprived and desperate. Whether reflecting anarchist objections to regimentation, communist or socialist critiques of capitalism, or simply liberal objections to excessive "possessive individualism," critical theories presume that political and/or economic inequalities are the sources of collective violence.

While acknowledging that social inequities may be causally involved, particularly in originating conflicts, analytical or "structural" conflict theories (Collins 1975) attend more to the possibility that violence may be a product of strategic and tactical decisions in a process of ongoing conflict. That interests or values may not be reconcilable is accepted, as is the proposition that various forms of violent action may be political options within the perceptual range of parties in conflict.

It is increasingly clear that terrorism is most usefully defined, for empirical research purposes, as the deliberate targeting of more or less randomly selected victims whose deaths and injuries are expected to weaken the opponent's will to persist in a political conflict (Turk 2002b). Terrorist acts are political, rarely involving psychopathology or material deprivation. Indeed, the evidence is mounting that terrorism is associated with relative affluence and social advantage rather than poverty, lack of education, or other indicators of deprivation. The typical terrorist comes from a relatively well-off part of the world, and appears to be motivated by political-ideological resentments rather than economic distress. Suicide bombers, for instance, appear increasingly likely to be respected individuals from advantaged classes, with stable family and community ties. Although their violent deaths may surprise relatives and friends, they are far more likely to be honored than to be condemned or stigmatized as somehow deviant. . . .

Traditional notions about violence are misleading insofar as they lead terrorism researchers to focus on psychopathologies (see, for example, Robins & Post 1997) or material disadvantage instead of the political contexts in which terrorist acts occur. A priority for research is to connect the emergence of terrorism to the political histories of the settings in which people come to see it as an option in their struggles over who will have what life chances. Recognizing that terrorism is the product of a blending of demographic, economic, and political determinants, a panel of the National Research Council (Smelser & Mitchell 2002) observed that regions most likely to generate terrorist threats have a history of colonialist exploitation by Western interests, and more

recently of postcolonial economic and cultural penetration. These facts have facilitated identification of the West as the source of global economic and political disadvantage, military weakness, and cultural malaise, which provides a credible focus for resentment and moral outrage in the recruitment of terrorists and the mobilization of supporters and sympathizers.

Terrorism as Communication

The considerable and growing literature on the role of the media in framing images of criminality readily extends to terrorism (Jenkins 2003). Since the nineteenth century caricatures of anarchists in newspapers (deranged, bearded bombers), the established media have encouraged the belief that political violence in opposition to authority is both criminal and crazy. Assassins are widely portrayed as lone disturbed persons whose murderous acts are attributable to their individual pathologies, the consequences of loveless lives and frustrated ambitions (see Turk 2002a). Suicidal attacks are similarly pictured as the irrational or obviously misguided acts of uninformed people driven by despair or fanaticism.

Even when some recognition is given to the possibility that grievances may arise from real injustices, reportage in mainstream outlets tends to accentuate the theme that grievances never justify violence. The consistent message is that violence expresses hate, which only leads to reciprocal violence in destructive escalations of hostilities. Who is blamed for ongoing terrorist violence depends on which media one examines. For example, Western, especially American, media reports generally blame Palestinians and their supporters for the ongoing violence between Arabs and Israelis, whereas non-Western media reports in outlets such as al Jazeera generally blame Israel and supporters—especially the United States.

Certainly alternative views are more often expressed in outlets independent of the politics and economics of mainstream, especially Western, media competition. Sympathetic comments accepting terrorism as an understandable, perhaps even legitimate, form of defense and protest against oppression and threat are more likely to appear in radical, underground, or non-Western communications.

Whether alternative descriptions and interpretations of terrorists and terrorism should be disseminated is a major issue in debates over

counterterrorism policies. Reminiscent of the idea that collective violence (food riots, strikes, ethnic and racial clashes, etc.) signals authorities that something is amiss, terrorism has been analyzed as a communication through violence that problems exist (Schmid & de Graaf 1982). The usual assumption is that peaceful methods of seeking the redress of grievances have failed, so that violence is left as the only way in which to force attention to the aggrieved.

Governmental and other organizational authorities are predisposed to minimize the risks of either public sympathy for terrorists or public fear of terrorism. Accordingly, the inclination in counterterrorism policymaking is to deny legitimacy to oppositional violence and to discourage the media from granting too public a voice to those who resort to or sympathize with terrorism. A complicating factor is that a satiation effect has been noted as a contributor to terrorism, in that acts of terrorism must be ever more horrendous in order to overcome the tendency for newsmakers and their publics to become inured to "ordinary" violence. . . .

Organizing Terrorism

Most of what is known about terrorist organizations is now outdated. Even distinctions such as "international" and "domestic" terrorism are decreasingly meaningful because technological advances (electronic communications, transportation networks) and corporate globalization facilitate more complex and flexible ways to organize terrorist activities, frequently involving cooperation among various "international" and "domestic" parties.

The classic model of the terrorist organization is a tightly organized hierarchy comprised of small, isolated cells whose members have little if any knowledge of planning and organization above and outside their cell. They are disciplined by a blend of social isolation from all outsiders (especially family and former friends), blackmail after crimes demonstrating their commitment, physical threat, and indoctrination without access to other sources of ideas and information. The aims of such organizations have historically been relatively simple: to overthrow an oppressive regime or system or to drive an alien force from their land. The financial resources needed to sustain terrorist organizations were obtained from donations by sympathizers and sometimes supplemented by criminal acts (e.g., kidnapping for ransom, bank robbery, or protection racketeering).

As the last century ran its course, the motives and organization of terrorism became less simple and local. Nationalist and material concerns receded (though still significant in particular times and places, as in the Balkan conflicts ignited by Serbian ethnic cleansing), while ideological, especially religious, and wider geopolitical concerns were in the ascendant (e.g., the India-Pakistan conflict over Kashmir). Most recently, religious fundamentalism (Juergensmeyer 2000) has propelled the recruitment and organization of multitudes into loose networks of terrorist groups acting more or less on their own with encouragement and logistical assistance from facilitators with resources (on the global level most notably Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda, along with various Middle Eastern entities). Funds are increasingly provided by a wide range of legitimate business operations and donations to "independent" charitable organizations, and channeled through legitimate financial institutions. . . .

Because terrorism is increasingly organized in networks, and in some places committed by lone individuals, conventional organizational analysis offers little promise; models developed through network analyses are obviously needed. Most such work has so far been operational, with little produced beyond descriptive accounts focused on the identification of connections among persons and institutions believed by governmental agencies to be committing or facilitating terrorism, and on the frequency and distribution of terrorist incidents. Explaining as well as tracking the financial and logistical support for terrorism appears to be the most promising focus for social network researchers. Whatever approach is used, to make a contribution sociologists must get past operational to analytical (more clearly generalizable and explanatory) models of the nature and dynamics of the organizing of terrorism.

Socializing Terrorists

High on the research agenda is understanding why and how individuals become terrorists. Although some earlier commentators argued that political criminals were either deranged or lacking proper "moral socialization," it is now well established that opposition to authority or a particular social order is more likely to stem from a reasoned position than from pathology or deficient socialization. As indicated above, reasoning in cosmological, religious terms is increasingly characteristic of the rationales by which terrorists justify their acts to themselves and others.

People learn to accept terrorism as a political option when their experiences lead them to see truth in messages that defending their way and kind cannot be accomplished by nonviolent means. In democratic societies political radicals usually come from relatively advantaged sectors and go through a sequence beginning with conventional political activism (Turk 1982, pp. 81–108). The more educated and affluent their backgrounds, the more impatient they are likely to be with the inevitable disappointments of political life—where one rarely gets all that is envisioned. Socialized to be knowledgeable about the gaps between ideals and realities and to see themselves as significant participants in political struggles, higher class young people (especially from liberal or otherwise contrarian families and communities) are more likely than their less advantaged counterparts to become involved in a process of radicalization moving toward violence. Although social banditry and peasant uprisings may challenge social orders, organized terrorism is by far most likely to originate in the alienation and analytics of higher status younger people. Whether the Weather Underground of Vietnam-era America or the Al Qaeda network of today, initiating and committing terrorist acts is nearly always the work of radicalized younger persons with the intellectual and financial resources, and the ideological drive, to justify (at least to themselves) and enable adopting the violence option.

However, although liberal family and educational backgrounds may encourage an openness to violence as a political option, few even of the most militant radicals become terrorists. Those who do appear to have undergone something of a conversion experience in making the transition from a willingness to “trash” public property and fight riot police, to a readiness to murder specific politically significant persons (e.g., governmental or corporate leaders, police officers, or soldiers), and then to the random targeting of populations including noncombatants as well as combatants.

Exposure to ideologies justifying terrorism appears to be a crucial ingredient in the mix of personal and vicarious learning experiences leading to a commitment to terrorism. Before bombing the Murrah federal office building in Oklahoma City (killing 168 men, women, and children), Timothy McVeigh immersed himself in the writings of William Pierce (author of *Hunter* and *The Turner Diaries*). Pierce detailed his vision of how brave heroes resist the imminent threat to the white race and America posed by Jews, blacks, and other minorities. McVeigh, encouraged by his coterrorist Terry McNichols and probably others,

was so impressed that he visited Elohim City, a white supremacist bastion, and sold or gave away copies of *The Turner Diaries* at gun shows (Hamm 1997). McVeigh's military background, including distinguished service in the Gulf War, undoubtedly played a role in his self-definition as a soldier who had merely inflicted “collateral damage” in performing his duty.

One may hypothesize that self-education to terrorism is less likely in societies where personal mobility and access to intellectual resources are more limited. Islamist fundamentalism, in particular, seems to depend on radicalization through formal education consisting mostly of religious indoctrination. In madrassas throughout the world, potential recruits to organized terrorism are drilled in the most extreme interpretations of Sunni theology, emphasizing the duty to engage in holy war (jihad) against all enemies of the true Islam. The most spectacular product of the madrassas so far is the Taliban (“students of religion”) of Afghanistan, who until overthrown by the United States and allied troops in 2001 provided a base for al Qaeda, and who still threaten all who do not accept their archaic and rigid version of an Islamic society (Kushner 2003, pp. 357–59).

Once underway, campaigns of terrorism and related political violence tend to gain momentum. Inspired by the ideological messages, the charisma of leaders, the potential for material or status gains, or whatever else attracts them, others are likely to join. Particularly in nondemocratic societies, conflicts are likely to proceed along fault lines reflecting class, ethnic, racial, or religious divisions. If such conflicts persist, years of reciprocal violence tend to result in its institutionalization, so that individuals caught up in the conflict may have no real comprehension of why they go on attacking one another—the classic feud. The bloody years-long slaughter of whole villages of “conservatives” by “liberals,” and vice versa, in Colombia's *la violencia* is a chilling historic example (Fals Borda 1969). In such contexts, explaining why people become terrorists is relatively straightforward: They see themselves as having to fight for “us” against “them.”

The key to explaining the socialization of terrorists is understanding how specific individuals are brought to the point where they see themselves as bearers of the responsibility for violent actions. Education, training, socialization—deliberate or not—may encourage the development of a self-concept as one who must fight against the threat to “us.” However, little has been learned so far about how eventual terrorists are selected in the course of their political socialization.

It is woefully unhelpful merely to point to religious schools as “factories” producing terrorists, or to assume that only the foolish or aberrant become terrorists, or to blame terrorists as evil souls or acclaim them as heroic fighters. Researchers have to be much more aware of the impact of media and political-ideological influences on the definition and characterization of terrorists if their life courses are to be understood.

Social Control of Terrorism

Efforts to understand terrorism have generally been incidental or secondary to efforts to control it. By definition, the goal of operational studies is to provide authorities with information needed to prevent terrorist attacks and to neutralize terrorists. Operational research necessarily, then, prioritizes immediately applicable results rather than theoretical knowledge whose applicability is problematic. It follows that debates over the respective merits of counterterrorism options revolve around the weighing of legal against military options, the political risks associated with different options, the levels of threat associated with current and potential enemies, and the ability of control agencies to implement policy decisions. Regardless of specific issues and situations, decisions are heavily influenced by calculations of how control actions may strengthen or weaken the chances of retaining power.

Nationally and internationally, legal systems and procedures have been developed without anticipating the contingencies involved in dealing with modern terrorism. For the first time in history, terrorists are gaining access to weapons of mass destruction. Credible threats of worldwide terrorist campaigns are now regularly documented, attacks and attempts in various countries are frequently reported, and multinational cooperation in countering terrorism is a growing reality. Political pressures to lessen legal restraints on police, and military responses to terrorism have resulted in the, possibly temporary, erosion in the United States and elsewhere of legal protections against intrusive and secret surveillance, arbitrary detention, and hurtful interrogation methods, as well as assassination and extralegal executions.

When President George W. Bush declared a war on terrorism immediately following the catastrophic attack of September 11, 2001, not only most Americans but also governments and millions of people throughout the world agreed that international terrorism had to be stopped. But it has become obvious that “the devil is in the

details.” The extraordinary threat of modern terrorism has been mirrored by extraordinary counter measures. For example, the U.S. government adopted two fateful policies. The first was the decision to dilute or abrogate established legal restraints on governmental power. The second was the decision to invade Iraq without United Nations legitimation. . . .

The decision to launch an essentially unilateral invasion of Iraq was a huge departure from generally and increasingly accepted (outside the United States) international norms for reviewing interstate grievances and providing for a collective (Security Council) decision authorizing military action against a sovereign government. The long effort to subject national sovereignties to international legal restrictions (Jones 2002) has surely been set back by the globalization of terrorist and counterterrorist operations. With a war proclaimed, the military option is being emphasized over the legal option in attempting to control terrorism (Smith et al. 2002, Turk 2002c).

As the world’s superpower, the United States has weighed and accepted the political costs of ignoring the United Nations, many international and American legalists, and other voices questioning the unilateral adoption of the military option. The prevailing assumption is that the threat is beyond the control capacities of established legal systems and procedures. Regard for legalities has been subordinated to concerns with assessing levels of threat and with the demonstrated shortcomings of intelligence agencies in making and responding to such assessments. Numerous other governments have joined the United States in expanding investigative and enforcement powers against terrorism, at the expense of democratic governance and declining investments in public services (Haque 2002). The politically dominant approach is to persuade the general public to accept the necessity of militarizing and delegating the effort to counter terrorism. Post-invasion developments in Afghanistan and Iraq, and continuing attacks in those countries and elsewhere, have led to increasingly acrimonious debates over the effectiveness of investing so disproportionately in the military option. As long as the terrorism war rages, we should expect, given the history of political conflict in wartime and periods of civil turmoil, that the military option will continue to be given priority over the legal option, and that expansion of legal powers will continue at some cost in civil liberties. The citizens of democratic societies are unlikely ever to see again the freedoms from governmental surveillance that existed in earlier times (Marx 1988, Staples 1997). . . .

Theorizing Terrorism

Developing a sociological explanation of terrorism is a politically and intellectually formidable task. Political obstacles abound: Officials are inclined to be wary of outsiders with independent agendas and resources. Policymakers and control agencies prefer operational findings clearly applicable to targeting and neutralizing defined enemies. Funding priorities are affected by rivalries within and among intelligence and enforcement agencies, as well as competition for budgetary influence among politicians, lobbyists, and other interested parties such as grant applicants, whose concerns seldom include basic research. The organizational penchant for keeping records confidential is heightened in agencies charged with controlling terrorism. Such political constraints exacerbate the intellectual problems encountered in terrorism research.

Gurr (1985) is one of the first to have explicated methodological options in studying terrorism and indicated which kinds of research questions are appropriate to each method. Theoretically significant levels of analysis are posited: global, national, group, incident, and individual. Gurr argues cogently for "question first" (i.e., theory-driven) research that treats terrorist groups and incidents, for example, as "independent" rather than "dependent" variables, focusing on their causation rather than their traits and consequences. The crucial need for relevant datasets is emphasized, as is the necessity for their availability to researchers "insulated from direct involvement in policy-making or operations" (Gurr 1985, p. 34).

Regardless of whether official or independent datasets are constructed, transforming information about terrorism into measures of conceptually meaningful variables is clearly a daunting task. . . .

The intellectually ambitious and stimulating research on terrorism from a world systems perspective (Bergesen & Lizardo 2002) begins with the premise that the passage of time makes structural analysis more applicable than participant analysis. As time passes, the appropriate level of analysis moves from (a) the individual to (b) group and social movement, (c) nation and state, (d) the present historical period, (e) a past historical analogy, and finally (f) longer historical cycles. At this ultimate level of analysis, terrorism is to be explained in terms of cyclical rhythms in which waves of terrorist activity are associated with cycles of political-economic deterioration and replacement by new forms of political order. As the previous global order breaks down, semiperipheral areas are drawn into a process of modernization characterized by

conflict in the absence of a unifying hegemonic power (core). Perforce, once peripheral areas are caught up in the dynamics of political (re)organization, "the first signs of strain in the semiperipheral zones are those of terrorism and pan-religious/ethnic ideological movements" (Bergesen & Lizardo 2002, p. 17). Bergesen & Lizardo (2002) raise the question of whether the current wave of terrorism signals the beginning of a global restructuring that will end the hegemony of the United States. . . .

However one approaches the sociological study of terrorism, the distinctive objective is to develop an explanation of its causation, the dynamics of its escalation and de-escalation in relation to other forms of political violence, and its impact on the stability and change of social orders. Turk (2002d) has outlined a scheme for analyzing the social dynamics involved in the progression from coercive, to injurious, to destructive violence—the most extreme of which is terrorism. The main hypothesis is that terrorism is the culmination of a conflict process that predictably, having reached this extreme, ends in either the annihilation of one party or mutual exhaustion. Assuming that they must somehow continue to live in proximity and interdependence, survivors have to begin anew the search for a viable relationship. Whether "cosmic wars" can stop short of the extermination of one or both sides, and be ended by acceptance of the need to recognize one another's right to exist, has still to be determined.

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STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Identify and write a brief summary of each of the seven sociological issues in terrorism.
2. What role do religion and politics play in the creation of terrorism?



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