

ARTICLE

Why terrorism can, but should not be defined

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This article seeks to turn the debate about the definition of terrorism on its head by arguing: (1) that the definitional debate has served to obscure the substantial scholarly consensus that actually exists on what terrorism is; (2) that this consensus is, however, largely unnecessary and irrelevant to the effective use of the term in the heterogeneous contexts within which it is employed; and (3) that by focusing on the quest for a definition of terrorism, terrorism scholars have largely missed the really interesting question about the word, namely, why it is that, given the heterogeneous purposes and contexts for which the word is used, we nonetheless continue to use a single word for all. In other words, how is it that we continue to know terrorism when we see it?

Keywords: definition; terrorism; Schmid

Introduction

Countless papers exist which attempt to define terrorism (Easson and Schmid 2011). In most of these, the argument unfolds basically as follows:

- (1) We do not have an agreed definition of terrorism.
- (2) This is a problem.
- (3) Here is a proposed definition, or some ideas for how we could get to one.

In other words, the mainstream debate on the definition of terrorism has presumed that terrorism: (1) *hasn't* been defined, (2) *should* be defined, and (3) *can* be defined.

In contrast to this orthodox debate, there also exist two important critical perspectives on the definition of terrorism. The first insists that the concept of terrorism is fundamentally unhelpful and should be abandoned altogether. Terrorism, it is pointed out, is ultimately a social construct. We do not after all *have* to use the word and, given its profoundly pejorative connotations, it is not a helpful analytical concept, but merely a label used by those with power to mobilise opinion against violence of which they disapprove (Jackson 2011; Bryan 2012).

The second perspective, perhaps more typical of “critical terrorism studies” agrees with much of this analysis, but insists that the problem with defining terrorism has more to do with inconsistency and double-standards in the way the word is applied than with its fundamental definitional shortcomings as an analytical category *per se*. While most (though not all) definitions of terrorism insist that it is a tactic that can be used by a variety of actors, states included (for a contrary voice, see Hoffman 2006), the reality is that terrorism studies have, relative to its own definitions, focused disproportionately and

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unfairly on non-state actors (Jackson 2008), thereby feeding the impression that the term is merely an “empty pejorative” (Said, quoted in Progressive.org 2001). So long as the term is applied even-handedly, in this view, it remains analytically useful (Blakeley 2008).

The aim of this article is to critique the orthodox project of defining terrorism, but from a somewhat different angle. The problem with terrorism as a concept, it will argue, is not that it is inadequately defined, nor that it is unevenly applied *per se*, neither that it is commonly understood as inherently pejorative, nor even that it is so broadly applied as to have essentially no meaning (Malik 2000). Rather, the problem is that the reasonably consistent picture of terrorism that can be drawn from the apparently inconclusive debates on its definition does not match up to the also reasonably coherent, but mutually distinct, ways in which it is used in practice.

Hence, the article will argue that terrorism has already been defined, in the sense that the supposed lack of scholarly consensus about the proper definition of the word has been greatly exaggerated, and has been premised on unrealistic assumptions about what level of scholarly agreement can be expected on *any* key social or political concept. This argument will be developed by critically revisiting one of the most notable attempts to arrive at a scholarly “consensus definition” of terrorism, that attempted by Alex P. Schmid (1984, 1988).

However, terrorism *should not be defined*, because the concept of terrorism arrived at by the definitional debate obfuscates rather than clarifies its meaning in the situations in which it is actually put to use. Here the argument will be that the word terrorism is presently applied in a variety of contexts where the basic issues raised by use of the term bear only passing and overlapping resemblances to each other. This does not mean that terrorism refers to just any form of political violence. In each context, the article will examine, “terrorism” is used in a fairly precise way, and stands for an underlying issue that is worthy of some special term. The appearance of a lack of clarity, however, results from the belief that the concept of “terrorism” referred to in one context bears anything more than an incidental resemblance to the “terrorism” referred to in another.

Finally, it will be argued that the real puzzle about terrorism is not to be found in the supposed difficulty of defining the word, but rather in the fact that the word is so readily used, despite the lack of clarity as to what it is supposed to refer to. How is it that we “know terrorism when we see it?” And what might this reveal about the societies by which terrorism is thus “known”? The article will conclude with some brief, tentative thoughts on this question.

Why terrorism has already been defined

To say that terrorism has already been defined is, of course, a truism. It has already been defined hundreds of times. The question is, rather, whether there is any possibility of determining a meaningful consensus among this cacophony of competing definitions. At first glance, the chances of such a consensus seem remote. In addition to countless more or less essayistic attempts to pinpoint the essential features of terrorism (see Teichman 1989; Gibbs 1989; Primoratz, 1990; Ganor, 2002; Sorel 2003; Shanahan 2010; Richards 2014; and many others), there have been several systematic efforts at synthesising a scholarly consensus out of many extant definitions (for example, Schmid, Jongman, and Stohl 1988; Weinberg, Pedahzur, and Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler 2004; Schmid 2004, 2011; Jackson 2011). These efforts have resulted, in turn, in fresh definitions which, however, may not have settled matters any more than those that have preceded them.

This suggests one of two things. One possibility is that there really is no underlying consensus among definitions of terrorism – that they speak wholly at cross-purposes, or can be found to agree only on premises so thin and banal as to be taxonomically irrelevant. The other possibility is that significant commonalities can, after all, be found in many proposed definitions of terrorism, but that these commonalities are somehow obscured, rather than highlighted, by the very scholarly work intended to discover them. In what follows, I shall attempt to demonstrate why this could be the case with regard to the example of one particularly famous attempt to reach a definitional consensus on terrorism.

In 1988, on the basis of extensive research, Alex Schmid proposed the following “academic consensus definition” of terrorism:

Terrorism is an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by (semi-) clandestine individual, group or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal or political reasons, whereby – in contrast to assassination – the direct targets of violence are not the main targets. The immediate human victims of violence are generally chosen randomly (targets of opportunity) or selectively (representative or symbolic targets) from a target population, and serve as message generators. Threat- and violence-based communication processes between terrorist (organisation), (imperilled) victims, and main targets are used to manipulate the main target (audience(s)), turning it into a target of terror, a target of demands, or a target of attention, depending on whether intimidation, coercion, or propaganda is primarily sought. (Schmid and Jongman 1988, 28)

Schmid constructed this definition based on responses to a detailed questionnaire sent to 109 leading terrorism scholars and experts, which he coded to produce a list of 22 “definitional elements”, including those shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Schmid’s original 22 “definitional elements”.

Element	% of responses containing that element
Violence, force	83.5
Political	65
Fear, terror emphasized	51
Threat	47
Psychological effects and (anticipated) reactions	41.5
Victim-target differentiation	37.5
Purposive, planned, systematic, organised action	32
Method of combat	30.5
Extra-normality, in breach of accepted rules, without humanitarian constraints	30
Coercion, extortion, induction of compliance	28
Publicity aspect	21.5
Arbitrariness	21
Civilians, non-combatants, neutrals, outsiders as victims	17.5
Intimidation	17
Innocence of victims emphasised	15.5
Group, movement, organisation as perpetrator	14
Symbolic aspect, demonstration to others	13.5
Incalculability, unpredictability, unexpectedness of occurrence of violence	9
Clandestine, covert nature	9
Repetitiveness, serial or campaign character of violence	7
Criminal	6
Demands made on third parties	4

Source: Schmid and Jongman (1988).

As a statement of “consensus” among his respondents, there are some obvious problems with Schmid’s definition. He appears to believe that merely by including as many elements as possible, a greater level of consensus can be achieved. But this is only true as long as the elements being incorporated do not contradict one another, and as long as the absence of an element from a particular definition is taken to signify the mere absence of that consideration from the definition-writer’s thoughts, as opposed to a positive insistence that it is *not* significant to the definition of terrorism. For example, if a definition insists that terrorism must be politically motivated, and then saying that it can be carried out for “idiosyncratic, criminal or political reasons” amounts to a flat contradiction of the idea that it *must* be political.

Moreover, Schmid appears to treat his elements as if they were atomic units, rather than subjective, qualitative codes. In doing so, he also does not appear to admit the idea that some of these elements may be semantically related to one another, or indeed, that they may be ordered in terms of hierarchies of increasing precision. Fear and terror, for example, are not simply a distinct category from “psychological effects”. They are a type of psychological effect. Similarly, both psychological effects and publicity as putative strategic ends necessarily entail the “victim/target differentiation” that Schmid sees as crucial to the concept. Likewise, the targeting of “civilians” and “innocents” are arguably both examples of “indiscriminate targeting” (at least, if we can be permitted to understand “indiscriminate” in a normative rather than a tactical sense). And since “civilians” and “innocents” are normative categories, targeting them is by definition a form of “extra-normative” behaviour, although they do not exhaust that category.

Approached thus, the semantic relationships between the elements advanced by Schmid might be mapped out something like the version shown in [Figure 1](#).

This diagrammatic representation helps to clarify both the depth and intractability of disagreement among Schmid’s respondents. In some cases, even the highest-level category remains fairly specific and helpful: to posit that violence is a fundamental attribute of terrorism is meaningful, even if we broaden the sense to include threats of violence. In other cases, however, a category is impossibly broad as it stands, but it could be significantly narrowed while still representing a substantial majority of opinion. The category of “motivations”, for example, could be rendered much more precise if, at the cost of total unanimity, we were to specify that the motivations for terrorism must be political, or some broader but still more exclusive category, for example, “ideological”.

In yet other cases, however, any bid for more precision seems un-affordably contentious. The category of “extra-normality”, for example, seems to have two distinct sub-foci: a set of meanings clustering around the issue of inappropriate targeting and, therefore *illegitimacy*; and another set of meanings clustering around the idea of unexpected violence by clandestine actors, which may not be automatically illegitimate, but rather violates “normal” expectations in a different sense, by virtue of its *irregularity*. These two foci are not, it may be noted, inherently contradictory, but they are clearly different, albeit ultimately relatable, sets of concerns. The issue of “victim-target differentiation” by contrast, seems to incorporate mutually incompatible claims about the definitional necessity of certain strategies. If the object of terrorism is (or must be) to gain publicity, then it cannot be (or need not exclusively be) about achieving extortion or coercion.

What such an approach invites us to do is to replace the metaphor (used by Schmid) of the perfectly precise equation with the metaphor of statistical probability. In insisting that terrorism must be political and that it cannot be ordinarily criminal or idiosyncratic, just how much disagreement can we expect? Can we at least accept that violence which is

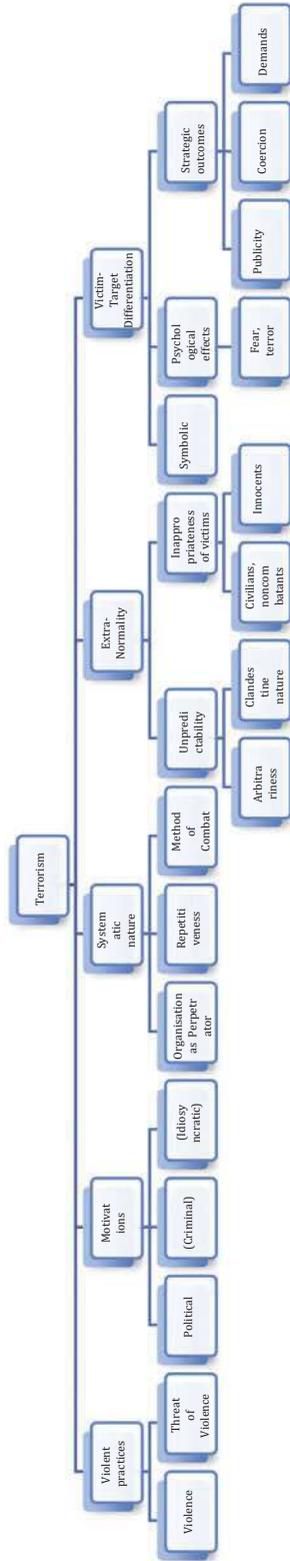


Figure 1. A proposed mapping of the semantic relationships between Schmid's definitional elements.

clearly politically motivated can be classified with more confidence as terrorism, even if there might be exceptions?

Another point about such an approach is that it helps to illustrate how the necessarily dynamic and contentious nature of discussions about terrorism need not be incompatible with the possibility, at least in principle, of coming to robust conclusions about the terroristic nature of certain phenomena. If we accept that in order to classify something as terrorism, we must first have a conversation about whether it is violence, whether it is political, whether it is organised, whether it is (in either possible sense) extra-normal, and whether it appears not to be directly instrumental in its expected effects (i.e., it exhibits victim-target differentiation), then while coming to agreement on any one of these points will necessarily sometimes be difficult, we may nonetheless accept that a phenomenon which *clearly* satisfies all these criteria is also a *clear* example of terrorism – while one that is more ambiguous with regard to some or all, if it is terrorism, is more ambiguously such. As such, the collective practice of defining terrorism, as evidenced by Schmid's responses, can be conceptualised as a process along the lines of [Figure 2](#).

If the metaphor of probability must apply to each individual claim about the attributes that define terrorism, the metaphor of Bayesian probability should apply to any process such as the one above. While it might be that an act of terrorism could be conceived of that did not satisfy some of these stages, and while the question of whether any one individual stage is satisfied will always be a matter of debate, it does seem plausible that any phenomenon deemed by any given group of observers to clearly satisfy all of the above criteria would stand a very good chance of being regarded by those same observers as terrorism.

Schmid's 1988 definition is, of course, far from being the last attempt to produce a systematic consensus. Schmid himself has revisited the question in several significant works since then ([2004a](#), [2011](#)). In 2004, Weinberg, Pedahzur and Hirsch-Hoeffler tested Schmid's list of elements to arrive at a very different "lowest common denominator" definition. Richard Jackson ([2011](#)) has, somewhat similarly, pursued a "minimal foundationalist" definition of terrorism. The purpose of the analysis above, therefore, has not been to provide an exhaustive re-analysis of the entire definitional debate. Rather, what I hope I have shown through this focused analysis of one particular example is how perceptions about terrorism being inadequately defined may be little more than the circular consequence of an apparent belief among terrorism scholars that any discussion of the definition question must culminate by adding a new one to the list, and that this new one must presume to be more authoritative than those that have preceded it. By seeing definition as an ongoing process whereby scholarly discourse on the meaning of the term consistently converges and re-converges on the same set of concerns, rather than as a once and for all culmination of that process, it becomes possible to discern a roughly sketched, but nonetheless fairly clear and consistent outline of the boundaries of terrorism as a concept.

Why terrorism should not be defined

In spite of, or indeed because of, the on-going debate about its meaning, there may then be more agreement about the basic boundaries of the concept of terrorism than is sometimes said to be the case. But is there anything worth having inside these boundaries? Is there an elusive elephant to be grabbed at when we talk about the different issues raised by "terrorism", or have we, in grasping a collection of miscellaneous *bric à brac*, come to believe in the existence of a chimera? In this section, I shall argue that the more we consider

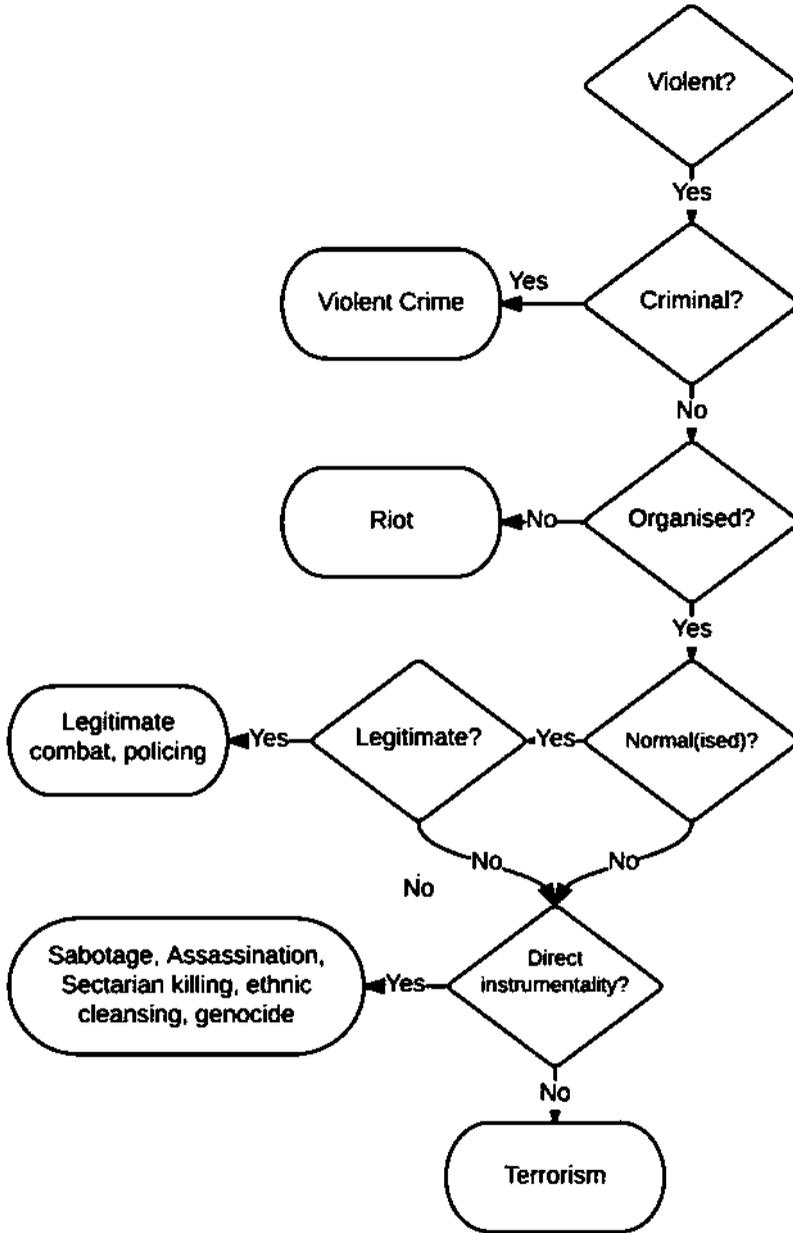


Figure 2. A process for classifying phenomena as terrorism, derivable from Schmid's elements.

the issue areas in which the word terrorism is put to use, the less it seems that there is anything other than an incidental overlap between the concepts and problems that actually seem to be at stake. By implying, therefore, that it is ultimately the same “terrorism” we are concerned with in every case, we risk creating more confusion than clarity.

The terrorist/freedom fighter question

In the literature on defining terrorism, the failure of the United Nations to agree on a definition is legendary. This is, in fact, more of a political matter than a definitional one, however.¹ A draft version of a “comprehensive convention on international terrorism” has now existed since 1998, and a definition of terrorism sneaks into the text of convention for suppression of financing of terrorism.²

The draft United Nations convention would define a terrorist as a person who “by any means, unlawful or intentional, commits an act intended to cause death or serious bodily injury or serious damage to a state or government facility when the purpose of such act is to intimidate a population or to compel a government or an international organisation to do or abstain from doing any act” (James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies 2013).

In attempting to pass a resolution to adopt the convention, the United Nations has remained famously deadlocked on a number of issues. Some of these are essentially technical and relate to how the regime created by convention would fit with pre-existing conventions on terrorism concerned with specific categories of act, or with other areas of international law. The essential bone of contention, however, is the familiar question of “the historical and seemingly everlasting divide over who has the right to use force without being described as a terrorist” (Hmoud 2006): in other words, the question of whether “one person’s freedom fighter is another person’s terrorist”.

It seems highly unlikely that the decision to classify a politically violent actor as a terrorist would, from the point of view of the United Nations, ever really turn on psychological testimony as to whether the objective was to “intimidate”. Indeed, the numerous acts already outlawed by pre-existing conventions on terrorism produce so many conceivable exceptions to the rule that the issue of intimidation can be treated as largely incidental, if not irrelevant, in practice. The notion of attempting to compel a government is clearly more important, insofar as the political nature of terrorism is central to the problematic within which the concept is located in this definitional “arena” (Schmid 2004). But the challenge of defining terrorism as understood in this context is not the challenge of working out when an act is political; the challenge is to work out when it is also universally unacceptable.

The terrorist/“ordinary decent criminal” question

In the UK (and in Australia, which has used the British definition as a template), there is a subsection which, according to Lord Carlile of Berriew (2007):

Has the effect of including within the definition the use or threat of action involving firearms or explosives – subject to political purpose existing, but irrespective of design to influence government etc.

Lord Carlile – in the context of a comprehensive review of fitness for purpose of the UK definition of terrorism – argues that the clause is justified by virtue of the fact that an armed group might, for example, carry out a “hostage taking designed not so much to intimidate as to extract money, or weapons, or material with explosive potential” (Lord Carlile of Berriew 2007).

What Lord Carlile does not explicitly envisage in the report is that the effect of this clause is also to define as terrorism within the UK (“action” in the clause referred to above is understood by the law in question to mean action within the UK) as inclusive of

activities identical to those of anti-government rebels (as in, for example, Syria) who the UK government would not necessarily view as terrorists elsewhere. But while the UK definition of terrorism has been subject to trenchant criticism by human rights agencies (Blick, Choudhury, and Weir 2006), the fact that it includes, within the concept of terrorism, the armed overthrow of the British government by violent but *discriminate* means, seems largely to be absent. For example, in its submission to the British government's Joint Committee on Human Rights, Amnesty International (Publications.parliament.uk 2005) made the following objections regarding excessive breadth in the UK definition of terrorism:

In particular, the organisation continues to be concerned that the definition of "terrorism" includes not only the use but also the threat of action involving serious violence against a person or serious damage to property or designed to seriously interfere with or disrupt an electronic system. The purpose qualifying such an action or threat as terrorist, i.e. advancing a "political, religious or ideological cause", is also very wide and open to subjective interpretation. The definition is vaguely worded and could be used to prosecute supporters of social and political movements, for example, anti-nuclear campaigns. The lack of a clear definition gives cause for concern because the decision to bring a prosecution for such offences leaves scope for political bias in making a decision to bring a prosecution.

Amnesty International reiterates its concern that the definition of "terrorism", and thereby any offence which is based on it, may violate the principle of legality and legal certainty by being too wide and vague and, therefore, by failing to meet the precision and clarity requirements for criminal law. In this regard, Amnesty International continues to be concerned that conduct which may be criminalized pursuant to the definition of "terrorism" provided in the Terrorism Act 2000 may not amount to a "recognizably criminal offence" under international human rights law and standards. In turn, this may lead to a risk that people may be prosecuted for the legitimate, non-violent exercise of rights enshrined in international law, or that criminal conduct that does not constitute "terrorism" may be criminalized as such.

The objections here are of two basic types. The first is that the definition of "violence" is drawn too broadly, so as to potentially include actions that are not really violent. The other is that the definition of "political, religious or ideological motivation" is drawn too broadly, so as to potentially include actions which are not really political.

If we strip away from this debate about a definition of terrorism the actual word "terrorism" and try to refocus on what seems to be fundamentally at issue, it is probably not very surprising that this is so. The British government, like other governments, necessarily considers itself legitimate and asserts an exclusive right to the legitimate use of force (Weber 1946). Governments of other states may disagree as to its legitimacy, and therefore hold that British citizens are justly entitled to take up arms to overthrow it. The British government may, likewise, claim the same thing about the governments of other states. No government of any state, however, is likely (except under highly unusual circumstances) to accept such a claim about itself. Amnesty International might in principle object that a guerrilla army in the UK might not, strictly speaking, be terrorists. But, compared to other more immediately objectionable points in the UK's definition, this is unlikely to be seen as a serious and relevant concern.

What the UK government is really legislating against when it legislates a definition of terrorism, then, would again seem not to be the risk of armed groups specifically "intimidating" the public (as opposed to carrying out violence for other reasons). Nor is it the risk of armed groups attacking civilians (as opposed to police or soldiers on British soil), except in the tautological sense that all police and soldiers are from the government's point of view "non-combatants" unless it declares a state of war. Rather, it is

legislating in relation to the special concerns that (so it claims) are raised by conspiracies to carry out violent acts for motivations that are ultimately not the conventional pecuniary or personal motivations of ordinary criminals. The question of how far such circumstances do indeed raise special concerns, when such circumstances can be said to have arisen, whether special powers are needed to deal with them, and what these special powers ought to be, are all deeply and rightly contentious. But, not one of them has any real bearing (so far as the UK domestic context extends) on the issue of how one tells a “terrorist” from a “freedom fighter”.

It may be noted, hence, that the issue of “terrorism”, as it presents itself with regard to the internal affairs of a single state (in this instance the UK, but the principle would be the same anywhere), is not only fundamentally different from how it presents itself to the international community: *it is actually the precise opposite*. For the United Nations, the issue of working out which forms of political violence are universally unacceptable starts out from the assumption that some *are* acceptable. The presumption is that political motivations can be a mitigating factor in relation to the use of means that would be criminal otherwise; the question is to determine when they aren’t. For the state, the core presumption is that political motivations may be an *aggravating* factor in relation to the use of means that would in all cases still be criminal. The question is, again, to work out when precisely this is the case.

Terrorist groups as a particular type of actor

It is a commonplace that terrorism is a tactic which is not the exclusive preserve of any one type of actor. However, this claim is not always clearly unpacked. Martha Crenshaw, for example, has written (2010, 4):

My view is that the identity of the actor does not matter to the specification of the method. However, in general the vastly greater power and presumed legitimate authority of states as compared to non-states makes it difficult to explain their behaviour in the same terms, since the state has many other means of exercising influence or controlling behaviour. Nevertheless, when states use tactics such as placing explosives on airliners (Libya), death squads at home (Argentina during the “Dirty War”), hit teams to assassinate dissidents abroad (Libya or South Africa under the apartheid regime), or deployment of state agents to organize local cells (Iran in Lebanon) they are not unlike non-states.

Implicit in this idea does indeed seem to be the view that terrorism is to be understood first and foremost in terms of certain sorts of tactics. But, the very nature of the tactic in question also seems to carry with it the implication of a certain type of organisation specifically adapted to this tactical *modus operandi*: that is to say, an organisation that is clandestine, that does not seek to take and hold territory, and that strikes unpredictably. When these sorts of actions are carried out by organs of a state, these actors are referred to as “death squads”, but also as special operations teams, “black ops” teams and so on. When they are carried out by non-state actors, these types of actors are often referred to as terrorist organisations.

If we accept that terrorism is inherently pejorative, then there is indeed a double standard here. But the idea that some special term ought to exist for groups of this kind is not inherently absurd. And indeed, some scholarly conceptualisations of terrorism – significantly perhaps emerging from fields adjoining terrorism studies – do seem to imply that terrorists can, after all, be seen as a special sort of actor.

Donald Horowitz (2001, 482–484), in distinguishing “ethnic terrorism” from ethnic riots, notes that terrorist groups are tighter, more structured entities than riots, and that they focus their violence upwards against political authorities rather than laterally against rival communities. Michel Wieviorka (1993, 3) theorises terrorist groups as arising from the formation of the “social anti-movement” when a splinter of a social movement turns inward and thus begins to conceive of its opponents in radical, zero-sum terms. Donatella della Porta has defined terrorism as:

... the action of clandestine political organisations, of small dimensions, which try to reach political aims through a continuous and almost exclusive use of violent forms of action. (della Porta in Schmid and Jongman 1988, 37)

But do “terrorist organisations” necessarily practice “terrorism”? Martha Crenshaw (2010, 5) admits that it is rare for a group to practice terrorism exclusively. But, in saying this, it is likely that she is thinking of actors, for example, the ‘Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades or the PKK who have mixed clandestine forms of indiscriminate and symbolic violence with more conventional attempts to annex territory and control populations. A more problematic question is whether we could envisage a predominantly clandestine group which nonetheless did not use the kinds of violence normally considered to be terrorism.

Jeff Goodwin (2006) makes this point with a certain acerbic humour when he draws attention to how Louise Richardson’s (2006, 8) definition of terrorism (which happens to focus on the issue of targeting civilians) might map onto the definition of the terrorist group: if a group carries out one operation which kills civilians, and a thousand which do not, is it a “terrorist group” on that account? The question is by no means purely theoretical. As Goodwin also points out, the ANC’s armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe was renowned for having almost entirely avoided attacks on civilians in the context of its armed campaign against the South African government, which was largely restricted to the method of sabotage. Organisationally speaking, Umkhonto we Sizwe looked a lot like a “terrorist organisation”. In terms of its targeting, however, it is a borderline case at best.

Something similar could be done for definitions of terrorism emphasising the issues of communication, symbolism, psychological effects or “victim-target differentiation”. While it might be contingently *likely* that groups of the kind we are concerned with here will find themselves relying on tactics of “propaganda of the deed”, there is no inherent reason why this is all they could ever do. Issue four of *Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s Inspire Magazine* (2010) ran an article on how to blow up buildings, for example, in which readers were advised to do it in such a way as to make it look like an accident. Were a group to actually implement such attacks, the purpose of influencing a third-party audience would be entirely, or almost entirely, absent. Similarly, in the outlandish but often discussed scenario (Jenkins 2008) of a group of militants detonating an atomic bomb in a major city, one might suggest that the communicative dimensions of the act (while no doubt profound) would be overshadowed by its strategic significance. But it is hard to envisage anyone describing such an actor as other than a “terrorist” organisation. When we refer to a “terrorist organisation” it seems it can only cause confusion to assume that the violence done by such a group is terrorism *by definition*.

This point seems to have a significant bearing on some of the intellectual wrangling that resulted from George W. Bush’s declaration of a “war on terror”. In response to this, many were quick to point out the absurdity of declaring war on what was commonly considered to be a tactic, rather than a particular type of actor. It is certainly very far from

the intention of this article to mount an intellectual defence of the “war on terror”, either as abstract doctrine or, still less, in terms of the practices it served to justify. But if one steps away from the presumed meanings of the word “terror” or “terrorism” (as, for example, Philip Bobbitt (2008), tries to do in *Terror and Consent*), the idea is perhaps not quite so incoherent as it seems. The “war on terror” turns out really to be a war on armed, transnational, non-state actors, or at any rate, on one particular example of the genre. Assuming that this is really what is meant by “terrorism” in this specific technical usage, we would presumably be equally justified in deploying the term in the event of, say, a transnational struggle between, for example, a sub-Saharan African state and a multinational private military company – or a Latin American state and a transnational drug cartel with advanced military capabilities. And such possible comparisons might have some bearing on how far the state of exception which the “war on terror” discourse was used to legitimate can really be sustained.

We may, therefore, be justly suspicious of what the word “terrorism” is doing in this context; but it need not automatically follow that there is no coherence or validity to the state of affairs that it is being used, however problematically, to designate. And again, we can note that this is a state of affairs in which the sorts of thing that typically define terrorism as a method are present only *incidentally*. A state could (according to the logic of this discourse) find itself at “war” with a transnational entity that was not in the ordinary sense political, that did not kill civilians, or that did not use violence with any intended audience other than the immediate victims.

Terrorism as a particular type of tactic

If the essence of terrorism is violence as communication, or violence in order to produce fear, then it is a curiously banal notion: the point of almost any act of violence is to communicate in some sense (Riches 1986) – and virtually any act of violence is likely to produce fear. If the essence of terrorism is that it targets civilians, or non-combatants or “the innocent”, or is in some broader sense “extra-normal” or “illegitimate”, then it might seem to be a rather unhelpfully broad category. If the essence of terrorism lies in the combination of these two factors, then why is their combination especially interesting? Is killing civilians in order to frighten civilians so much worse than just killing civilians? Is the kind of fear produced by killing civilians strategically so very different from the kind of fear produced by “shock and awe” tactics that in principle are supposed to avoid killing civilians (Bryan 2012)? Moreover, as Richards (2014) has observed, given that terrorist acts tend to be classified as such without any particularly protracted examination of the psychological intentions of the perpetrators, is there not something of a methodological problem in presuming that we can know for sure that a given act was, from the standpoint of its perpetrators’ intentions, intended for an audience other than its immediate physical victims?

In the micro-level perspective on violence in civil war, dominated by the work of Stathis Kalyvas (2004, 2006 chapters 6 and 9); these problems are avoided by conceptualising terrorism in terms not so much of what it is, as the enigmas presented by what it is not. In essence, terrorism is understood as violence that is neither selective (and therefore conducive to generating compliance among an occupied population), nor comprehensive (as in genocide or ethnic cleansing). It is therefore, *prima facie* surprising, since its randomness means that civilians cannot escape it by submitting to the authority of the attacker, while its lack of comprehensiveness means that it seems likely to produce a population which may well see its interests better served in seeking protection from the opposing side.

For our purposes, what is significant about this conception of “terrorism” is that yet again, while the word is made to stand for something which is theoretically interesting and worthy of empirical study, the thing being referred to seems to overlap only incidentally with other phenomena designated by the same word. For the scholar of “terrorist organisations”, it could in principle make sense to include cases of groups which have not used indiscriminate or symbolic/communicative violence; on the other hand, it is likely that the main focus will be on non-state actors. For anyone taking up Kalyvas’ research agenda, however, the reverse applies: “terrorism” as understood in this context is clearly something that can be practiced by a wide variety of actors, state or non-state. However, the category must necessarily exclude forms of violence such as sabotage or assassination and probably violent spectacles such as hijacking as well.

The hollowness of terrorism

Taken together, these four examples serve to demonstrate the hollowness of terrorism as a concept. While academic discourse seems to centre, broadly speaking, on the issues of extra-normativity targeting, political/ideological motivation, organisation and purposiveness and some form of victim/target differentiation as constituting the main areas of concern with regard to conceptualising terrorism, the terrorisms we seem to meet in actual usage constitute a plurality of distinct objects of inquiry, not one of which incorporates any more than two of these features as a matter of definitional necessity. In each case, defining what is called “terrorism” really seems to turn on two characteristics resembling dependent and independent variables. While the United Nations’ project of defining terrorism builds in the assumption that terrorist violence is political, the crucial point of contention arises not over what it is to be political, but rather over what actions in the pursuit of political aims ought to be universally condemned. Similarly “terrorist organisation studies” also tends to assume that the groups it studies are primarily political in motivation. But the question of whether they are terrorists really turns on whether they exhibit tactical and structural features distinct from those of guerrillas (Crenshaw 1990). In many cases explicit attempts at definition pay some lip service to the idea that terrorism is supposed to be frightening and/or communicative, but this usually seems to be incidental to the actual work of practical definition, since groups whose violence was not primarily intended to terrorise or communicate would usually qualify anyway, if they met the other relevant criteria (Table 2).

Hence, while there do seem (tentatively, at least) to be common denominators to *definitions* of terrorism, there are not obviously any common denominators to terrorism as it is actually used. That is, while different phenomena, each bearing the label “terrorism”, are likely to tend towards an incidental resemblance, they share no essential feature in common.

Table 2. Fundamental and inessential features of terrorism according to different perspectives.

	Indiscriminate violence	Political nature of motives	Underground organisation	Indirect instrumentality
International law	Central	Necessary	Irrelevant	Incidental
Domestic law	Irrelevant	Central	Necessary	Incidental
Terrorist group	Irrelevant	Necessary	Central	Incidental
Strategy	Necessary	Incidental	Irrelevant	Central

To put into context the apparent hollowness of terrorism as a concept, let us consider an ostensibly quite similar one: that of war. Like terrorism, there is no single agreed definition of war (Brzoska 2006). Like terrorism, the term “war” is used for different purposes in different contexts. Like terrorism, the decision to classify a phenomenon as a “war” has an agenda-setting function which means that debates about the meaning of the concept with regard to specific instances are likely to be highly contentious. There is no more agreement about where the boundaries of the concept of war lie than there is over the boundaries of the concept of terrorism. And yet, it is far easier to isolate what seems to be the essence of war, regarding which Clausewitz has famously said:

We shall not enter into any of the abstruse definitions of war used by publicists. We shall keep to the element of the thing itself, to a duel. War is nothing but a duel on an extensive scale. If we would conceive as a unit the countless number of duels which make up a war, we shall do so best by supposing to ourselves two wrestlers. Each strives by physical force to compel the other to submit to his will: his first object is to throw his adversary, and thus to render him incapable of further resistance.

War therefore is an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfil our will.
(Clausewitz 1982)

The notion of “duel on an extensive scale” cuts to the essence of war because it is paradoxical. A duel by definition is bounded and limited to the agency of the individual human. However, within the bounds in which it operates, it is strictly a zero-sum game that can be brought to a conclusion only through force. To ask “what is war?” is to ask “what would a duel look like if it was *unlimited*?”

It is important to note that for Clausewitz, it seems to be the *extensive* and zero-sum nature of war that takes precedence over its violence. War *must* be violent, and it *must* involve an element of uncertainty; but, Clausewitz does contemplate, and then reject, the notion of “war by algebra”. War is necessarily violent, because it involves zero-sum conflict between parties that are not effectively bounded by any higher-level authority. If a duel-like, zero-sum conflict can be fought out by non-violent means (as, for example, in courts of law or through hacking computers on a shared Internet), it implies that it is embedded in some higher-level structure. Similarly, the fact that war must be hazardous is deducible from the fact of its binary nature. Finally, war is necessarily political, not because it takes place within some cultural sphere defined as such, but because it is necessarily the concern of actors at the highest effective level of social organisation – actors which, regardless of whether they started out as drug gangs or tribes or religious sects are, in the act of making war, political actors by definition.

Importantly, the essence of war as a concept seems to be retained even across what appear to be radically different usages of the word. For example, the Correlates of War (CoW) project seeks to operationalize the term for purposes of quantitative research in terms of the observable attributes of “sustained combat operations”, “organised armed forces” and substantial numbers of human casualties (Sarkees 2010). What is precisely meant by these criteria has been the subject of robust and on-going debate (see Vasquez 1993). So too have been the various forms of “irregular” or “asymmetric” war the database includes under categories of “extra-state”, “intra-state” and “non-state” war. But, none of this conflicts with the underlying notion that what remains at stake is the issue of theoretically unrestrained, zero-sum conflict between high-level social entities of

which organised armed forces, sustained combat and significant numbers of human casualties are the necessary, observable manifestations. By contrast, purely formal, legal states of “war” may exist between states without any actual conflict occurring. Such situations overlap not at all in practice with what the CoW would call a war. But, the essence of war is still latent in this shadow form.

It is precisely such an essence that terrorism appears to lack. And yet, despite all this, it seems that we continue to “know terrorism when we see it”. The first results returned, for example, by a Google image search for “terrorist attack” are images of the Taj Mahal Hotel in Mumbai (where the Mumbai attackers in 2008 set off bombs and took hostages at gunpoint), the wreckage of car bombs and the London 7th July bus bomb, the crumbling World Trade Centre, and people crawling on the floor at the Westgate shopping centre in Nairobi. Common sense – that is, the prevailing and pervasive ideology of present-day culture – tells us that whatever else terrorism may be, these are definitely examples of it. Certainly, they are examples that would easily pass the process for identifying terrorist phenomena set out in the first section above.

If the argument up to now has any validity, then this raises three questions. First, if terrorism as a concept does indeed centre on a certain “repertoire” (Tilly 1978) of violent, politically contentious practices such as car bombings, hijackings, hostage takings, and so on, why is it that our attempts to define it so often seem to end up broadening the issue to encompass (or inexplicably exclude) much broader swathes of violent behaviour? Second, why do these sorts of phenomena apparently strike us as belonging so clearly to a common category if we cannot come up with a clear, limited understanding of where the conceptual centre of that category lies? Third, given that these practices, though often intended to be frightening to a wider audience, are not uniquely or even necessarily so, why does the notion of “terror” seem to remain so prominent, at least in popular notions of what these events are fundamentally about, not to mention in the very word that is given to them?

In writing this article’s coda, I do not propose, of course, to offer a definitive answer to any of these questions. However, in suggesting that the real question is how it is that we know terrorism when we see it, it would seem to follow that any approach likely to make progress must in the first instance be phenomenological. When a car suddenly explodes in the middle of a city, or when masked gunmen suddenly start shooting in a shopping mall – or, for that matter, when a hellfire missile suddenly lands on a private house in a tribal area – the observers cannot, in a strict sense, have any direct knowledge of what motivated the people responsible.³ The primary characteristic of events of this type seems simply to be that they are, in some sense, the wrong violence in the wrong place; regardless of tactical intention, they are necessarily, in this sense, perceived as exceptional.

Once an exceptional event has taken place, it cries out for explanation. We may now ask what sorts of explanation of an event of this kind would be plausibly likely to exclude in ordinary discourse from being considered terrorist. In the case of a car bomb, a possible (and conclusive) reason would be accident. Where human agents are obviously involved, the most obviously safe explanation would probably be that the killers were criminally insane. But, even here, it would seem necessary that the insanity should turn out to be unconnected to any sort of systematic rationale or any broader social cause.

We may note that once these two factors are taken together – the subjective judgement of onlookers that an act of violence has radically breached expected conventions, in combination with some subsequent attempt to “explain” the violence in terms of some broader social concern – it seems highly likely that it will be interpreted as an act of terrorism. The point here is that the distinguishing “essence” of the act in this case is wholly negative. It resides not in the presumptive “fact” that the violence was intended to

communicate with a wider audience, or the normative assertion that the people targeted were not legitimate targets (from the perpetrator's point of view, they presumably were!). Rather, it lies in what appear to be two ruptures to the explanatory frameworks available to the witnesses of the action. The action itself is by definition shocking in the sense that it is extraordinary; but, to this shocking action there is subsequently attached (whether by the actor, or by someone else), a rationale which sufficiently explains the action to demonstrate that the actor cannot be classified as mentally deficient (even if it turns out that the actual perpetrator of the action was), but which falls short of rationalising the action in such a way as to make it seem like straightforwardly instrumental behaviour. As such, the action seems to fall into a kind of limbo. Unlike the violence carried out by accepted authorities which comes across as instrumentally purposive even if it is merely symbolic (as, at the time of writing, the UK government's decision to deploy a token number of aircraft to carry out token, but lethal violence against the Islamic State), the instrumentality of this violence is always, in some sense, in doubt. Perhaps it is straightforwardly intended to coerce a population or government into acting in a certain way. Perhaps it is intended to provoke an overreaction. Perhaps it is merely intended to publicise a cause. Importantly, all these and other motives are often attributed to those we call terrorists, and indeed expressed by the "terrorists" themselves (see, for example, Bin Laden 2002). At the same time, however, the violence is clearly not meaningless, because an elaborate discourse is attached to it for the explicit purpose of giving it meaning. In other words, the essential thing that leads to a diagnosis of terrorism arises not from the intentionality of those responsible for the violence, but rather the way that the combination of the violence and the explanation offered for it is read by certain audiences.

Drawing upon the framework suggested by Althusser (2008), this lacuna might be thought of as particularly disturbing because it seems to rend the normally seamless relationship between ideology as embodied practice and ideology as discourse as exemplified by the "ideological state apparatus" of the modern state (Althusser 2014). In this sense, where phenomena are perceived as terrorism, this perception may also cause the acts to seem like a scandalous kind of parody. The state, of course, maintains itself by means – in the final analysis – of its monopoly of violence. The state also makes discursive *claims* about why its violence, unlike that of others, is justified. It is important that these claims not be seen as circular – that the state's legitimate monopoly on violence be seen as resting on something other than the mere fact of the state's existing (and therefore effective) monopoly on violence. By carrying out violence that looks obviously unacceptable from the standpoint of a particular set of witnesses, and then going on to make discursive claims about why it was acceptable after all, two possibilities are opened up: either the terrorist's claims are intrinsically and diabolically wrong (as opposed to the state's, which are for all time intrinsically sensible and right), or all attempts to use language to justify violence must fail, and violence is instead self-justifying.

This is, of course, a rather terrifying proposition. But, it also helps to explain why the rather specific repertoire of acts that are readily and colloquially defined as terrorism so easily bleed into broader discussions of legitimate and illegitimate violence, of limitations and exceptions to the rule of law, of the tactical uses of violence in political insurrection, and of the strategic uses of violence in population control. The intuitive plausibility of the term "terrorism" may arise not from the terror caused by violence in a direct sense, but rather from forms of violence that *par excellence* cause us (i.e., the ones' labelling the violence as terrorism) to talk and think about issues of legitimacy, violence and the terror that lies between them. Terrorism can never be defined then, because the meaning of terrorism lies in the debates which it itself produces regarding its own meaning and significance.

Notes

1. It is important to point out that the debate itself about the definition of terrorism is not politically neutral, and that its intersection with academic debate indicates, as noted by, for example, Jarvis (2009) a concern with “ontological certainty” which reflects a “problem solving” attitude intimately related to particular forms of praxis.
2. The treaty specifies that, in addition to actions covered by previous, more limited treaties on terrorism, terrorism is any “act intended to cause death or serious bodily injury to a civilian, or to any other person not taking an active part in the hostilities in a situation of armed conflict, when the purpose of such act, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population, or to compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act”. (Un.org, 2014).
3. I am indebted to the editor for this latter observation.

Notes on contributor

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