

Can Terrorism Be Defined?**Lisa Stampnitzky, University of Sheffield (Department of Politics)****l.stampnitzky@sheffield.ac.uk****Prepared for conference: "Constructions of Terrorism"****Orfalea Center for Global & International Studies, UCSB, Dec. 3-4, 2015****DRAFT: please do not cite or circulate without permission*****Abstract***

Can "terrorism" be defined? Should it be? This paper will revisit the longstanding "problem of definition" in terrorism studies. It will begin with a brief history of the coalescence of terrorism as a concept, and the extent to which the problem of definition was present from the emergence of the concept in its contemporary form. It will then revisit key turns in the debate over how to define terrorism, and whether or not a settled, agreed-upon definition is even possible. I will argue that although individual scholars have proposed coherent definitions, the persistent role of the state as the key arbiter of what constitutes "terrorism" (and the interest of most states in retaining leeway/ambiguity as to how this concept is applied) leaves little room for non-state actors to intervene decisively in the conceptual arena. Before we try to "fix" the conceptualization of terrorism, we need to come to terms with how the current constructions of terrorism work, and the work that they do, and that we need to focus in particular on how terrorism is defined "in practice."

I've titled this paper, can terrorism be defined? But this is perhaps not the correct way to frame the question, for of course it *can* be defined. The problem is not a surfeit of definition, but rather a *surplus* of definitions. What I want to suggest is that the more apt question, then, is not whether "terrorism" *can* be defined, or even how it *should* be defined, but how it is actually defined in practice. By practice, I refer here to the actions taken (primarily, but not necessarily exclusively, by the state) in response to terrorism, or in the name of counterterrorism. What I want to suggest is that we can derive a definition "in practice" by looking at what is responded to *as part of the "terrorism" problem* (at the moment, this would be primarily those practices that are encompassed in the war on terror). More broadly, what this means is that rather than looking at struggles over "definition", I suggest we look at practices (and struggles over practices), that is actions taken to combat terrorism, and that we can thus derive a definition "in reverse," by identifying those people, actions, sites, and so forth that are subjected to practices of counterterrorism.

I began by referencing the "problem of definition" in terrorism studies, characterized by what I have called a surplus of definitions, and the lack of agreement on any one definition. In fact it goes beyond this, for the definitions circulating are often not just different, but mutually contradictory--- for example, stating that states *can* or *can not* commit terrorism, or that terrorism is *only*, or *not only*, violence against civilians.¹ Examples of these contradictions are easy to find, not just in abstract debates over definition, but also in the application of the label in practice. For example, many will criticize the U.S. for having "double standards," pointing to

¹ This section draws on my book, *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented Terrorism* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), and "Disciplining an Unruly Field: Terrorism Experts and Theories of Scientific/Intellectual Production" (*Qualitative Sociology*, 2011).

U.S. support for "terrorists" (violent insurgents who target civilians) such as the contras in Nicaragua, Renamo in southern Africa, and even Osama bin Laden and his "mujahedeen" fighters in Afghanistan-in the 1980s, while condemning the violence of those it deems enemies. As the saying goes, "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter."

But it goes even deeper than this. It's not just that there is disagreement over how the label should be applied--- there is no settled answer to what terrorism is. Some argue that the term has become so expansive as to be almost meaningless. In fact, even terrorism -experts- can't agree on how "terrorism" should be defined. When I interviewed terrorism experts, and they themselves often lamented this "problem of definition," as they often have as well in print. Brian Jenkins, former head of terrorism research at the think tank, RAND, told me in an interview, "definitional debates are the great Bermuda Triangle of terrorism research. I've seen entire conferences go off into definitional debates, never to be heard from again."

Further, as the quotes just above already suggest, many (though by no means all) terrorism experts are highly disconcerted by this situation, and have sought (however with relatively little success) to "fix" or stabilize the definition of terrorism, sometimes suggesting that until this is accomplished, little progress can be made in the field. As I have discussed in my previous work, the "politicization" of the concept has commonly been pointed to as a key hindrance. So for example, Martha Crenshaw writes that: "(t)he task of definition...necessarily involves transforming 'terrorism' into a useful analytical term rather than a polemical tool."²

² Crenshaw, Martha. 1995. *Terrorism in context*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Furthermore, the “problem of definition” does not just trouble experts. Media coverage of terrorism, as well, is frequently characterized by disputes over definition. Critiques of the conceptualization of “terrorism” in the media tend to highlight inconsistencies in the use of the term--- particularly pointing out seeming double standards where the term is applied to one set of actors, but not another, engaging in similar acts. To give just one example from the critiques that arose this past summer following the massacre of nine churchgoers in Charleston, S.C.: as an article on Salon.com stated:

“As many have pointed out, the media is unsure about what constitutes terrorism only when white people are the perpetrators. White men with guns are “lone wolves” or “mentally ill” or depraved criminals. Brown men with bombs are very obviously “terrorists.” This is a double standard with consequences. “Terrorism” is a word that resonates; it inspires urgency and collective action, both of which are needed if we’re to deal with the underlying problems. If white people can’t, by definition, be terrorists, then the term has no practical meaning; it’s about the actor, not the act. If terrorism is something only brown people do, then we should be honest and admit that. We should say that terrorism is about the color of the criminal, not the intent of the crime.”³

In sum, there *is* significant contestation over the conceptualization of “terrorism,” both among experts and in the media. The debates tend to hinge on concerns that the concept of terrorism is either inherently ambiguous, or is applied inconsistently (i.e., that there are double standards).

Ultimately, many of these criticisms ultimately come down to making the point that the concept needs to be fixed, in two senses of the word. First, that it needs to be repaired, made more coherent, and applied in a more consistent way, and second, that it needs to be

³ We must call him a terrorist: Dylann Roof, Fox News and the truth about why language matters
http://www.salon.com/2015/06/21/we_must_call_him_a_terrorist_dylann_roof_fox_news_and_the_truth_about_why_language_matters/

stabilized, prevented from being continually “politicized” or biased. The media critiques thus echo many of the calls for stabilization coming from the expert sphere. But what I intend to argue here is that these critiques, while valid, are themselves insufficient.

The difficulty, I want to suggest, with this project of “fixing” the concept, and perhaps one reason why it has yet to succeed, is that the “politicization” of (the concept of) terrorism is not primarily a corruption of an otherwise neutral term—in which case the solution would be simply the “purification” of the concept—the separation of the “core” essential bits from the extraneous, pasted on “politicized” pieces which bias it in one direction or another. Instead, “the political” is baked into the concept from the start. What do I mean by this? That the primary constitution of “terrorism” occurs through the actions of the state, in countering (what is treated as) terrorism, as a *practical* problem, via the practices of *counter-terrorism*, and that the (drive to resolve the) problem of definition *follows* from this, rather than from either the existence of a set of “terrorist” acts in the world, *or* the discursive activities of experts and popular meaning-makers. In other words, without counter-terrorism, there is no “terrorism.” And, subsequently, any attempt to “purify” the concept of terrorism, which entails an attempt at tearing the concept away from the practical realm of counter-terrorism, is likely to encounter difficulty once it re-enters any engagement with this practical realm, as the “political” construction of “terrorism” through practice will again act back upon the perhaps momentarily purified concept.

What I want to suggest here is that the core logic of the identification terrorism “in practice” is that it is what is identified as *violence out of place*. The question, then, of course, is

what counts as “out of place”? “The promise of the ‘war on terror’ was that we would kill them ‘over there’ so they would not kill us ‘over here.’”⁴ To a significant extent, this does get at it. Violence out of place is violence that moves beyond where it is “expected” to occur: in a site that is expected to be “peaceful” (i.e. western/civilized, not a war zone); in a place where those considered “representative” live, i.e. not the “inner city”, and further: when it is unexpected, on a site perceived as “innocent”, and disconnected from explicit political causes or actions (thus attacks on an expressly “political” or “partisan” site are, ironically, less likely to be treated as terrorism than “random” or purely generic/civilian sites). The key thing here is the “generalizability” of those attacked- can they be seen as representative of the nation/our way of life, with all of the racial, class, and religious connotations this entails.⁵ And the less that this is seen to be the case, less likely an incident is to be treated as terrorism.

And furthermore, I suggest that this is what leads to the definition of such violence as “illegitimate”: it is not simply that “illegitimate” violence itself is considered terrorism, but rather, the reverse, that those acts labeled terrorism are illegitimate because they are “out of place,” not because of anything inherent to the acts.

How might we test the argument I have put forth here? We can evaluate it by analyzing whether it applies, not just to which incidents are treated, in the end, as terrorism, but also by

⁴ “Violence comes home: an interview with Arun Kundnani” <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arun-kundnani-opendemocracy/violence-comes-home-interview-with-arun-kundnani>

⁵ And thus attacks on the state/ on soldiers can also be included as terrorist attacks, in practice, as long as they fit this general schema.

analyzing which sites/populations/groups/etc. are treated as necessarily subject to practices of counter-terrorism (whether preventive or reactive).

The emergence of the contemporary concept of terrorism, I have argued,⁶ first began to take shape over the course of the 1970s. Over the course of that decade, understandings of political violence, including hijackings, assassinations, and other acts that we now call terrorism, shifted from a discourse of "insurgency", in which violence was generally understood to be rational, purposeful, and even sometimes justifiable, to a discourse dominated by the concept of 'terrorism', in which acts labeled as such were tainted as irrational and fundamentally immoral. Furthermore, the problem of "terrorism" came to be understood as rooted to a terrorist *identity*, rather than as a tactic that any group might adopt, and, this identity came to almost contain its own explanation: "terrorists" are evil, irrational actors whose action is driven not by normal interests or political motives but, instead, by their very nature.

I have argued that crucial turning point dates to the early 1970s, with the rise of a seemingly new sort of political-theatrical violence, exemplified by the media-centric hijackings and hostage takings perpetrated by Palestinian nationalists. While political violence against civilians was, of course, not new, what was new here was that nationalist and anti-colonial violence transgressed geopolitical boundaries in new ways. Whereas such political violence had generally, previously, been relatively locally contained, targeting sites within the territories under contention, this new political-theatrical violence began to target Americans and other

⁶ The discussion here draws on my book *Disciplining Terror* (CUP 2013).

"westerners," both as direct victims, and as the intended media audience, and did so by striking at transnational sites such as international air travel.

The “problem of definition” was present almost from the very start. Throughout the 1970s, attempts to develop and international counter-terrorism response faltered at the UN, in large part due to the inability of states to agree on what constitutes terrorism (with countries from the global south, in particular, arguing that the use of violence in national liberation struggles should be excluded).

But this doesn’t mean that there wasn’t a definition ‘*in practice*’ (or rather, multiple definitions in practice, depending on whose practices we are examining). We could trace from the 1970s, with America’s focus on nationalist groups and attacks on embassies and other official sites, to the 1980s, with the first “war on terror” under Reagan and the linkage of terrorism to the cold war against the Soviet Union, to the 1990s, with the rise of fears of “WMD” terrorism and of religious, particularly, Islamist, terrorist groups, and then after 9/11, with the “war on terror”, that the meaning in practice- in other words, who and what it is applied, to, changes over time.

So what I am proposing is that we need to think about how the category/ meaning/ definition of ‘terrorism’ is constructed through counter-terrorist *practices*. And that we can also discern the definition of terrorism “in practice” *from* the response—in other words, I argue that it is most useful to look at which things are *responded to* as terrorism, rather than first trying to develop a definition of the concept a priori. And this suggests why we can’t just fix the definition of terrorism by making a better definition: we need to both : combat the discourse of

'terrorism' which is an inherently political discourse that cannot be made "neutral" and develop new ways of theorizing and having general discourse about 'terror-violence.' I'm not going to say that we *can't* define terrorism--- of course we can, and do, all the time--- but that one reason for the continual resistance/pushback/re-politicization/whatever you want to call--- is that the practice of counterterrorism operates according to a different sort of logic than that imposed by most of those trying to "repair" the concept. And so, while we do need a way to understand those forms of violence that get lumped under "terrorism" (both in practice and in the expert and popular discourses), I'm not sure that continuing to fight over the definition of "terrorism" is the best way to do it.