Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy

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To cite this Article Meisels, Tamar(2009) 'Defining terrorism - a typology', Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy, 12: 3, 331 — 351

To link to this Article DOI: 10.1080/13698230903127853

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13698230903127853

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Defining terrorism – a typology

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This paper argues that philosophers require a strict canonical definition of terrorism if they are to be of any use in morally evaluating the changing character war. This definition ought to be a narrow, critical one, articulating precisely what is wrong with terrorism and strictly specifying which incidents fall into this derogatory category and which do not. I argue against those who avoid definitions or adopt wide and apologetic ones. The latter claim neutrality for themselves and accuse those who define terrorism strictly of political bias. The apologetics of terrorism often allege that stringent, critical, definitions of terrorism beg important questions of justification, rendering terrorism unjustifiable by definition. The apologetics of terrorism however, have an obvious political agenda. Those who deliberately blur the distinctions between terrorism and other forms of violence cannot claim academic ‘neutrality’ or ‘objectivity’ for their wide, defensive definitions, which are in fact deliberately designed to advance particular political views.

Keywords: terror; terrorism; Israel

As the leaders of Western democracies and their security forces increasingly struggle with terrorism, their lawyers and philosophers continue to struggle with its definition. Several recent studies point at the inconsistencies and inadequacies of existing legal definitions, as well as to the contradictions between them. Coady suggests that there are more than 100 modern definitions of ‘terrorism’ (2004a, p. 4). Fletcher (2004, p. 2) mentions only dozens, concluding that no one of them is definitive. Consequently, there is no globally agreed, unambiguous definition or description of terrorism – popular, academic, or legislative. Igor Primoratz (2004, p. xi) complains that ‘Current ordinary usage of the word displays wide variety and considerable confusion; as a result, discussing terrorism and the array of moral, political and legal questions it raises is difficult and often frustrating.’ Wilkins (1992, p. 2) does not altogether exaggerate when he writes that the number of definitions of terrorism equals the number of works dedicated to the subject. By 1984, Alex Schmid (1984, pp. 119–158) had collected 109 different definitions of terrorism. Later, he states that, he himself ‘cannot offer a true or correct definition of terrorism’ and that ‘[t]errorism is an abstract

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phenomenon of which there can be no essence which can be discovered or described’, commenting that: ‘authors have spilt almost as much ink as the actors of terrorism have spilled blood’. (Schmid and Jongman 1988, p. xiii). Indeed to date, academic standpoints remain wholly diversified. When it comes to defining terrorism some, like Walter Laqueur (1987, p. 145), seem to forgo analysis in favor of platitudes, in the belief that: ‘all specific definitions of terrorism have their shortcomings simply because reality is always richer (or more complicated) than any generalization’.

At least one reason for the disparity of definitions stems from the variety of objectives we have in defining terrorism. Lawyers desperately require definitions in order to prosecute and sanction ‘terrorists’. They must distinguish terrorism in precise legal terms from other forms of crime. Social scientists aim to describe this phenomenon in a way which will better our sociological and psychological understanding of it and enable us to face this modern challenge more successfully (Waldron 2004, p. 6). Heads of state and politicians often adopt definitions that serve their national, political or ideological agendas. Naturally, they usually define terrorism as a form of violence which is carried out exclusively by non-state groups. As Primoratz (2004, p. xi) puts this: ‘Nobody applies the word to oneself or one’s actions, nor to those one has sympathy with or whose activities one supports.’

Recently, both George Fletcher and Jeremy Waldron have questioned whether we should spend time worrying about definitional issues at all. Both suggest essentially that ‘when it comes to terrorism, we know it when we see it – as Justice Stewart famously said about pornography’ (Fletcher 2004, p. 2; Waldron 2004, p. 6). In his Romantics at war, Fletcher invites us to examine the language we use when contemplating modern warfare. One word, he points out, is on everybody’s lips – ‘Terrorism’ but what, he asks, does it mean? ‘Were the American revolutionaries not terrorists? Did they not fight without wearing uniforms? Did they not conduct unorthodox raids against English regulars marching in uniform? Were we engaged in an act of terror when we dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima?’ There are, he concludes, ‘too many questions and too few easy answers’ (Fletcher 2002, p. 2). He supplies none of his own.

According to Fletcher (2004 p. 3; 2006, pp. 16, 18), while people have strong intuitions about what is and what is not terrorism, no definition of terrorism can be filtered out from a specification of necessary and sufficient conditions. Specific forms of conduct, he claims, cannot be identified as terrorism by simply running a relevant test on them. Instead, he probes the relevance of eight variables on the contours of terrorism: violence, intention, the victims, the wrongdoers, just cause, organization, theater and what he calls ‘no guilt, no regrets’ of the perpetrators (Fletcher 2006, pp. 8–16). Drawing on Wittgenstein’s ‘relationships of family resemblance’, Fletcher argues that terrorist acts do not presuppose necessary and sufficient conditions. Instead, a given terrorist act may resemble a second terrorist act in some respect, and
a third terrorist act in another. The features of the second and third terrorist acts that resemble one another may be different as well. There is, however, no common denominator for all acts of terrorism, apart, perhaps, from their theatrical nature (Fletcher 2006, p. 18).

In his ‘Terrorism and the uses of terror’, Waldron pursues some interesting distinctions, such as between ‘terror’, ‘terrorism’ and ‘terrorization’, and reveals some psychological insights into the fearful elements of terror, but he concludes that no canonical definition emerges from these observations (Waldron 2004, pp. 8–9, 11–12, 33). In one such invaluable insight, Waldron (2004, pp. 11–12) ascribes the term ‘terrorization’ to the type of action that induces desperate panic and overwhelms a person’s rational decision-making capability, and distinguishes it from coercion, which concerns actions that leave room for rational deliberation on the part of the victim. Nonetheless, he argues ultimately that defining ‘terrorism’ is difficult and not an enterprise worth undertaking, except for specific legal purposes (Waldron 2004, p. 33). While Fletcher and Waldron both expend the necessary efforts in investigating this definitional question, they essentially concur that in the end ‘The quest for a canonical definition of terrorism is probably a waste of time’ (Waldron 2004, p. 5). This essay argues, to the contrary, that a quest for a consistent definition of ‘terrorism’ ought to be pursued in order to evaluate its legitimacy as a form of modern warfare.

In his recent and provocative What’s wrong with terrorism? Robert Goodin humorously accuses political theorists (myself included) of having ‘a limited range of tools in their intellectual toolkits. Presented with real world events, they rummage around to see what among their standard equipment best fits this occasion, rather than necessarily doing any first order philosophy on the situation at hand’ (Goodin 2006, p. 170). Goodin is probably right and it is not surprising then that we have in recent years witnessed a veritable slew of academic writing on the definition of terrorism. Political philosophers are rather fond of framing classifications and typologies, and categorizing and defining. Contra Waldron and Fletcher, however, I do not consider this a waste of time. If we are to fruitfully pursue the further moral issues regarding the changing character of modern war, we must first settle on a definition of terrorism. As Coady (2004a, p. 3) observes: ‘There are two central philosophical questions about terrorism: What is it? And what, if anything, is wrong with it? Here I propose to deal with the first question, but I do so because of the importance of the second.’

I have one final piece of old equipment in my toolbox that I believe meets the occasion. Aristotle observed long ago that our definitional powers are essentially linked to our ability to distinguish good from evil. The gift of speech, Aristotle tells us (1976, Book VIII, pp. 75–76), goes beyond the physical capacity to utter sounds and even the sheer ability to recognize and name objects in the physical world. The essential attribute of human speech is captured by the ability to differentiate, categorize and define a variety of
incidents as belonging to a common genus while excluding others. It is the capacity to distinguish and define which enables us to make ethical judgments. To bring this observation into the present, the twenty-first century philosopher’s objective must be to define terrorism in order to identify its morally crucial features.

Why are Western theorists having such a hard time agreeing on a definition of terrorism? Israeli legal theorist Alon Harel (2004) suggests that the various conflicting definitions fall roughly into two categories, each with a distinct political agenda. One large group of contemporary definitions seeks to highlight a specific aspect of terrorism that is said to single it out as a particularly fiendish and condemnable practice. In contrast, a second group of definitions aims to blur the distinction between terrorism and other violent acts, suggesting that terrorism is no worse than many forms of state-employed violence. While Harel never names particular scholars in each of his categories, most authors on terrorism do indeed fall distinctly into one of the two groups.

In what follows I pursue this distinction between two broad categories of definitions based loosely on their respective goals. I refer to them as the ‘defensive’ and the ‘critical’ definitions respectively. In the next section, after pursuing several paradigmatic definitions of the defensive category, I criticize this type of definition, suggesting that it is entirely politically motivated, misguided and normatively unhelpful in understanding the modern phenomenon that is terrorism. While authors of these wide, defensive, definitions, accuse their opponents of begging important moral questions – allegedly defining terrorism as unjustified – they themselves advance their political agenda by shaping definitions that suit them. In the following section, I argue that a satisfactory definition of terrorism must specify its uniqueness and distinguish it from other types of human activity, specifically from other types of violent action. If terminology is to contribute to ethical judgment, the definition itself ought to highlight the characteristic normative aspect of the category in question. The term ‘terrorism’ is derogatory, at least in ordinary usage. That’s why no one applies it to himself or herself and practically everyone nowadays attempts to apply it to his or her enemies. Therefore, the characterizing features we are looking for are bound to be at least objectionable if they are to bear any connection with ordinary speech. Finally, I side with what has been dubbed a ‘tactical definition’ of terrorism, tactical in that it focuses on the specific problematic tactic of terrorism as an action category (Coady 2004a, pp. 3, 7; 2004b, p. 80). I do so without reference to the nature of the perpetrators of such a tactic or the justness of their goal and without rendering it morally and politically unjustifiable by definition.

Defensive definitions
The Oxford Student’s Dictionary describes terrorism as merely the ‘use of violence and intimidation, especially for political purposes’ (Hornby 1991).
Interestingly, this was also Leon Trotsky’s understanding of terrorism: as violence intended to intimidate and thereby achieve political objectives (Primoratz 2004, pp. 31–43). Quite obviously, many acts of conventional warfare can equally be described as violent and intimidating for political purposes. Several modern-day theorists adopt a variety of wide definitions of terrorism that blur, or deconstruct, the distinction between terrorism and other forms of political violence. This type of definition aims to obliterate the distinction between terrorism and other violent acts, with the clear implication that terrorism is, in and of itself, no worse than many other practiced forms of violence that are internationally sanctioned.

Ted Honderich and Jacque Derrida’s post-9/11 thoughts on terrorism offer two distinct examples of this defensive approach. Honderich (2002, pp. 98–99) deliberately refrains from defining ‘terrorism’ independently of political violence in general. He speaks of either terrorism or political violence as: ‘Violence with a political and social intention, whether or not intended to put people in general in fear, and raising a question of its moral justification – either illegal violence within a society or smaller-scale violence than war between states or societies and not according to international war.’

While acknowledging the distinction between violence which is intended to create fear or outright ‘terror’ amongst a civilian population and forms of ‘violence directed specifically at a head of state, or politicians, soldiers or policemen’, Honderich (2002, pp. 98–99) disregards this in defining terrorism. The common notion that certain forms of political violence are directed specifically at innocent people and that this ought to be viewed as one reason why they are particularly condemned as ‘terrorism’ is also raised in passing and similarly dismissed out of hand (pp. 95, 103). This wide definition of terrorism, which deliberately disregards the element of fear – the literal terrorization of a civilian population – along with the element of targeting innocent non-combatants, ‘does not by itself morally condemn in a final way anything that falls under it’ (p. 99). It does, however, plow towards what appears to form Honderich’s hidden (though not well enough) agenda. It paves the way towards arguing that Palestinian terror against Israeli civilians is in fact justified. As Honderich (p. 151) puts this: ‘I myself have no doubt, to take the outstanding case, that the Palestinians have exercised a moral right in their terrorism against the Israelis … and those who have killed themselves in the cause of their people have indeed sanctified themselves.’

As opposed to Palestinian terrorism aimed at Israeli civilians, Honderich (2002, p. 118) regards the events of 11 September as wrong, but only because they involved the use of violence without any reasonable hope of achieving its justifiable goals, understood as fighting off the effects of the United States’ bad policies. Honderich’s overall political argument developed throughout several publications such as his Terrorism for humanity (Honderich 2003), is that political violence, including terrorism, is justifiable in response to the wrongs done to individuals in the third and Arab world, by the immoral
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omissions or direct commissions particularly of the US associated with globalization, oil, and other capitalist interests and support of Israel. Future attacks on American civilians carried out explicitly in order to combat globalization and US exploitation, with reasonable hope of achieving this end, would be justified, perhaps even mandated, by Honderich’s ‘humanitarian’ principles, which recommend the killing of Israeli civilians by Palestinian suicide bombers (Honderich 2002, pp. 150–151).

In an engaging dialogue with Giovanna Borradori (2003, pp. 85–136), the late Jacques Derrida presents a more subtle though nonetheless strikingly similar evaluation of terrorism, as well as of the particular events of the morning of 11 September. While Derrida is less explicit than Honderich, his discussion throughout echoes precisely the same understanding of terrorism. Like Honderich, Derrida discredits the commonly attempted distinctions between terrorism and other types of violence, such as war, pointing to the indisputable fact that states have also employed terror tactics against civilians in wartime as well as against their own civilians internally (Derrida, in Borradori 2003, pp. 85–172, 102–107, 152). Partly in view of this ‘state terror’, Derrida’s discussion implies that the civilian–military distinction between wartime killing and terrorism is misplaced, although, like Honderich, he pays little attention to this distinction, remarking only in passing, and in a somewhat offhand tone, that ‘the victims of terrorism are assumed to be civilians’ (p. 103). 

Aside from the terrorist excesses of states during wartime and otherwise, Derrida (Derrida, in Borradori 2003, pp. 102–103) suggests that causing fear, anxiety, panic, and even outright terror among the citizenries of a state, far from being unique to any specific type of political violence, actually characterizes the very authority of law and the exercise of state sovereignty. He also reminds us of the undeniable fact that the predominant powers often use, and abuse, terminology and definitions opportunistically in order to suit their own partisan political interests, and he attempts to move from this to the disputable claim that terrorism therefore cannot be strictly defined (pp. 105, 110, 153).

Having ‘deconstructed’ the notion of terrorism, Derrida uses terminology that is also deliberately inclusive. As he puts it, he refers only to ‘violence’ in a deliberately general fashion ‘so as to avoid the equivocal and confused words “war” and “terrorism”’ (Derrida, in Borradori 2003, pp. 127, 161). While Derrida’s political conclusions are somewhat more illusively stated than Honderich’s – he refrains from explicitly equating Israeli and American policies with the terrorism they purport to combat – the two views are more than reminiscent of each other. Ultimately, the normative evaluation of terrorism hinges on the prospects of terrorism succeeding (p. 113).

Other theorists (e.g. Held 2004, p. 66) believe that the very concept of terrorism, or at least its current usage, has been sinisterly molded in order to serve the political interests of the stronger powers within the international community, specifically those of the United States. Hence, it is argued, the United States’ labeling of particular individuals, groups, states and organizations as
‘terrorists’ is totally biased and unjust. There is nothing distinct about this type of violence that has not already been employed far more extensively by the United States itself and some of its closest allies. Noam Chomsky (2001), for example, clearly holds this view. If so, perhaps the moral appraisal of any specific use of force relies ultimately on the justness of its cause rather than on the means employed in its pursuit (Harel 2004; Honderich 2002, esp. pp. 91–97; Derrida in Borradori 2003, pp. 85–136).

In his ‘Political terrorism as a weapon of the politically powerless’, Robert Young (2004, pp. 55–64) attempts to justify what he describes as terrorism in terms of just cause. While he recognizes that states as well as groups use terror tactics, he concentrates on the latter, arguing that ‘the most promising way, morally, to defend terrorism not carried out by states is as a weapon which those who lack conventional political power can use to fight the just causes they are otherwise prevented from promoting’ (pp. 55–56). He admits in advance that killing or injuring the innocent, as well as random or indiscriminate attacks – which are the features most commonly associated with ‘terrorism’ – are rarely, if ever, justifiable (p. 57). Young’s self-professed political agenda – that of justifying terrorism by the politically powerless – is then squared with his difficulty in justifying the killing of the innocents and random indiscriminate violence, by attempting to evade, and subsequently obscuring, the definitional question, which he claims to avoid (p. 55). Instead, he lists those features which he believes provide a clear, non-question-begging description of terrorism. These include causing fear, usually by non-state actors, and a broad range of political goals (pp. 56–57). Finally, he rejects those definitions which associate terrorism with random indiscriminate violence as well as with the targeting of non-combatants as ‘moralized’. Recognizing that ‘many believe terrorism involves threatening to harm, or harming, non-combatants (which is code for ‘innocents’)’ (p. 57), thus violating the classic just war theory principle of discrimination, Young points out, unoriginally, that civilian victims needn’t be ‘innocent’ in the moral sense – they may be state officials, supporters of the government, or even heads of state, whose targeting is regarded by others as political assassination rather than terror.

Young’s argument here is somewhat circular, as well as fraught with error. For one thing, the term ‘non-combatant’ as it functions within the just war theory principle of discrimination is not code for ‘innocent’ in any ordinary moral sense. On the contrary, talk of targeting the innocent is shorthand, or code, for ‘non-combatant’, i.e. non-threatening, unarmed, personnel. The terminology of just war theory does not refer to the normal moral or judicial sense of innocence as opposed to blameworthiness, but rather to ‘innocents’ in terms of defenseless, or not immediately threatening, individuals as opposed to armed combatants. There is therefore nothing novel in Young’s suggestion that non-combatants may be implicated in the terrorist’s grievance. This is a well-known fact, and when they are highly implicated (as in
the case of politicians) many regard their murder as an act of assassination rather than random terror. Thus, Young’s argument is also somewhat circular, as he defines assassination as a form of terror and then continues to argue that ‘terror’ – though perhaps only against the guilty – can be justified.

Young continues to argue that not only does a definition which takes targeting the innocent as a defining characteristic of terrorism ‘beg the question of its moral justifiability, it is also unwarrantedly prescriptive about which acts of political violence may be considered acts of terrorism.’ (Young 2004, p. 57). This objection is curious. Definitions are intended precisely to determine what does, and what does not, fall into a particular category, and they would be of little use if they did not do so. Specifically as regards terrorism, Igor Primoratz points out ‘a conception of terrorism that lumps together the assassination of Reinhardt Heydrich, the Reichsprotektor of Bohemia, and the killing or wounding of a group of civilians traveling on an inter city bus can be of no use in moral thinking’ (Primoratz 2004, p. 15). Prescribing which acts of violence fall under the term ‘terrorism’ and which do not is precisely what is warranted by any adequate definition. Instead, Young himself inclusively lumps together, under the joint heading of terrorism, sabotage, political assassination, and insurgent attacks on combatants alongside randomly targeting the innocent.

Nothing else Young has to say substantiates the claim that defining terrorism in terms of the just war theory injunction against targeting non-combatants is unwarranted. His assertion that the common understanding of terrorism in terms of failing to uphold the distinction between combatants and non-combatants is ‘moralized’ and question-begging is simply fallacious. As Coady (2004a, p. 8) points out, tying the widespread moral revulsion against terrorism to the fundamental moral prohibition in just war theory against violating the rights of non-combatants actually avoids the pitfall of making terrorism immoral by definition, since its immorality needs to be established by argument for the acceptability of the principle of discrimination itself. Young might do better, then, to confront the principle of discrimination directly rather than tamper with the definition of terrorism in a confusing and linguistically manipulating inclusive manner. The inclusive definition enables Young to argue that ‘terrorism’, as he describes it, is often justified when employed by the politically powerless in a just cause, while at one and the same time admitting that killing innocents, which is usually associated with terrorism, is seldom justifiable.

Why is it so important to Young to define terrorism in a way that obscures its most commonly objectionable features and more easily enables talk of justified terrorism? Perhaps the end of his essay is more telling than his thesis. Its last paragraph clearly takes on the Honderich–Chomsky anti-American and anti-Israeli political line which nearly always follows inclusionist definitions. Young, unlike Honderich, remains hard-pressed to defend direct attacks against civilians. However, his wide definition of ‘terrorism’, which obscures
this objectionable feature and includes political assassination as well as guerrilla attacks on soldiers, enables him to imply that terrorism is justified in terms of its cause, e.g. when it is directed against certain US economic policies, as well as US support for ‘brutal’ regimes in the Middle East, most notably (though not exclusively) Israel.

In his aforementioned thought-provoking ‘What’s wrong with terrorism?’ Robert Goodin offers a particularly wide definition thereof. Goodin (2006, pp. 6–30), unlike Young, carefully criticizes classic just war theory and argues against the common inclination to equate terrorism with unjust war and the killing of innocent civilians. Essentially, he takes the somewhat technical line of argument whereby just war theory applies only to states as the only agents entitled to wage wars, and therefore cannot serve to define the objectionable character of terrorism which is usually (though not exclusively) ascribed to non-state actors (pp. 6–30). Goodin argues instead that terrorism’s defining objectionable feature is ‘acting with the intention of instilling fear of violence for socio-political objectives.’ (pp. 63, 99, 105). This enables him to suggest throughout that George W. Bush and Tony Blair are guilty of terrorism (though admittedly to a lesser degree than Bin Laden), for intentionally frightening their publics by exaggerating the dangers of group terrorism in order to gain political advantages for themselves. Once again it appears that, while defining terrorism in terms of targeting the ‘innocent’ has been accused of being question-begging (Goodin 2006, p. 6), those offering wider, inclusive, definitions, have their own clear political agenda in mind.

Virginia Held, to take one final example (though there are undoubtedly countless others), persistently accuses strict definitions of terrorism of begging the question of its justification. Subsequently, she deliberately steers away from defining the factors that turn political violence into terrorism, commenting only that ‘perhaps when either the intention to spread fear or the intention to harm non-combatants is primary, this is sufficient’ (Held 2004, p. 65). She argues that popular as well as academic speech has ‘frequently built a judgment of immorality, or non-justifiability into the definition of terrorism, making it impossible even to question whether given acts of terrorism might be justified’ (p. 65). And she holds up former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu alongside philosopher Burton Leiser and Michael Walzer as paradigmatic culprits (pp. 65–66). While she cites comments condemning terrorism and terrorists from each of the three authors to substantiate her claim, none of them in fact builds unjustifiability into an actual definition, as she accuses them of doing. Walzer is cited by Held as proclaiming that ‘every act of terrorism is a wrongful act’ (Held 2004, p. 66), but his classic definition is neutral enough to enable him to consider whether various aerial bombings of civilians during World War II were justified, though they fall clearly within his definition of terrorism. (Walzer 1977, pp. 197–203). More recently, Walzer (2002) reiterates his definition, stressing once again that it can account for ‘state terrorism’ as well.
As for Netanyahu, who certainly denounces terrorism, his theoretical understanding of it as a definable phenomenon essentially follows Walzer, whose *Just and unjust wars* he cites on various occasions (Netanyahu 1986, p. 132). Leiser (1986, 2004), for his part, admittedly describes terrorism in exceptionally unflattering terms, equating it (as Netanyahu does) with piracy, referring to terrorists in several publications as ‘enemies of mankind’, but he doesn’t actually define the phenomenon in such terms at all. His actual definition, distinguishing terrorism from other acts of violence, in fact addresses the very two elements mentioned by Held herself – spreading fear and causing harm to civilians (Leiser 1986, p. 155).

Following these inaccurate accusations, Held proceeds to argue that terrorism, undefined by her, can be justified, once again in terms of just cause. Terrorism can be justified when it is employed as the only resort to safeguarding the human rights of those whose rights are being disregarded (Held 2004, p. 75). While recognizing that terrorism itself violates rights, she suggests that it is justified, perhaps even called for, when it is aimed at members of a group that is violating the rights of others. If there are to be right violations, she argues, justice requires that they be more equitably distributed among groups (pp. 74–75). The Israeli–Palestinian example is not far behind, suggesting that Palestinian terrorism against Israel is in fact justified in so far as it moves towards a more equitable distribution of rights violations between Israelis and Palestinians (p. 76).

In what follows we shall look at some strict, or critical, definitions of terrorism. Following C.A. Coady, I refer to them as ‘tactical’ in that they define terrorism in terms of the specific tactic employed, rather than with reference to the nature of their perpetrator or the justness of their cause. I suggest that, whatever the personal politics of their authors, such definitions are in fact far less question-begging and agenda-based than their inclusionist counterparts. Perhaps more importantly, only a definition that aspires to isolate terrorism from other forms of violence and identify its objectionable features can be normatively illuminating. As in all other spheres of life, the object of definitions is to distinguish the particular from seemingly similar phenomena. We do not helpfully define trees (to borrow from Aristotle’s examples) by equating them with bushes or shrubbery, and those philosophers who followed Aristotle in seeking the defining characteristic of humanity did so with reference to those features (such as speech or the supposedly related capacity for moral judgment) which characterize humans as opposed to (other) animals. This is no more than stating the obvious.

Approaching the topic at hand, we cannot reach an adequate definition of murder by obscuring the difference between it and manslaughter or negligence, nor do we beg any important questions of justification by defining it in terms of what is wrong about it – intentionally killing another human being – though I assume we all take that feature of murder to be negative. On the contrary, any adequate definition must specify precisely the wrong involved
in it. Whether or not we then regard murder as justifiable under certain circumstances is entirely beside the point. The same goes for other morally dubious practices, such as torture. Any morally useful definition must isolate the phenomenon of torture, properly so called, from related painful practices – such as unpleasant medical procedures – and associate the former with at least prima facie evil doing. Any definition that refrains from doing so is totally unhelpful and in fact makes a mockery of common language. This, however, need not, or should not, beg any questions of justification. One may still regard torture, or murder, as justifiable under certain circumstances (say, in self-defense, on the utilitarian grounds of avoiding greater pain for the many).

The same obviously goes for terrorism. Terrorism is undoubtedly a derogatory term and we needn’t set out with a neutral, or ‘objective’, attitude towards it in order to avoid bias. An adequate definition of murder, or theft, or torture, ought to highlight these particular wrongdoings, and needn’t assume an attitude of moral neutrality towards their practice. Wrongdoings, however, can at times be justified, or excused, and such possibilities ought not to be excluded terminologically, thus entirely precluding further moral reflection. An adequate definition of terrorism, if it is to have any connection with common usage, must describe at least a prima facie wrong and seek to further our understanding of this term by bringing out what it is that makes terrorism morally repugnant to most of us. It ought not to, however, as the apologetics of terrorism argue, beg the further moral question of its possible justification.

The apologetics of terrorism have at least one more point in their favor, as most theorists would concede. Definitions ought not specify the nature of the terrorist perpetrator. Non-state terrorism is probably no worse than certain forms of state-employed violence which may themselves be regarded as terrorism, or something perhaps worse than terrorism (e.g. genocide, mass murder, deportations, ethnic cleansing). Considering the possibility that states commit acts of terror against civilians ought not to be precluded by definition. However, one can condemn terrorism – by groups and states alike – while conceding this point, as Michael Walzer (1977, pp. 106–109, 255–268; 2002) for example, clearly does. Quite aside from avoiding political bias in favor of states, the definition of terrorism, if it is to be helpful in assessing a contemporary moral (at least prima facie) wrong, and hopefully contribute to avoiding it, ought to describe an action category rather than narrowing the linguistic possibility of applying it to certain actors, i.e. states.

Critical definitions

What is terrorism, strictly defined as an action category, or a specific violent tactic? No doubt, as Ted Honderich (2002, pp. 98–99) suggests, it is a subset of politically motivated violence which falls short of conventional
war and is internationally illegal and (to say the least) morally questionable. We cannot, however, leave things at that, as he does, and ‘give up on the strict and careful idea of terrorism, and go on …in our inquiry, with a more general idea of it’ (p. 98). Here, more than anywhere, the devil is literally in the details.

Walzer’s understanding of terrorism in *Just and unjust wars* forms the classic example of the stringent definition and has become the term of reference for practically every discussion of terrorism. According to Walzer (1977, pp. 197, 203), ‘terrorism’ (as distinct from guerrilla warfare and political assassination), is a particular form of political violence: it is the intentional random murder of defenseless non-combatants, many of whom are innocent even by the assailants’ own standards (e.g. infants, children, the elderly and infirm, and foreign nationals), with the intent of spreading fear of mortal danger amidst a civilian population as a strategy designed to advance political ends.

Walzer’s understanding of terrorism as distinguished from other forms of violence, described derogatively as the ideologically motivated random targeting of non-combatants, is echoed in many modern works. Paul Berman’s *Terror and liberalism* (2003, pp. 35–36) describes contemporary terrorism as opposed to other forms of political violence in terms strikingly similar to Walzer’s. The clear distinction of terrorism from all other military and paramilitary activity along with the negative normative implications that attach to this singular category have recently been restated by Jorgen Habermas in his post-9/11 reflections on terror (Habermas, in Borradori 2003, pp. 33, 56). According to Habermas, indiscriminate guerrilla warfare, epitomized by Palestinian terrorism, as opposed to other forms of guerrilla tactics ‘revolves around murder, around the indiscriminate annihilation of enemies, women and children – life against life’ and can never be legitimized. Not surprisingly, this is the common Israeli approach to terrorism amongst politicians and academics (left and right) alike. It was no coincidence on Held’s part to mention Michael Walzer and Benjamin Netanyahu in the same breath in this connection. Like Walzer, Netanyahu (1986, p. 9; 2001, pp. xxi, 8) defines terrorism as the ‘the deliberate and systematic assault on civilians to inspire fear for political ends’. And he regards the essence of terrorism as ‘the purposeful attack on the innocent, those who are hors de combat, outside the field of legitimate conflict’ (2001, p. 8).

Like Walzer, Berman, Habermas, Netanyahu and Leiser, Primoratz (2004, pp. xii, 15–30) also regards ‘violence against non-combatants, civilians, the innocent, as the central defining trait of terrorism’, and Saul Smilansky (2004, p. 790, following Coady 2001, p. 1697; 2004a, pp. 3–14) describes the ethically significant feature of terrorism as the intentional targeting of non-combatants. I have already suggested that terrorism must be distinguished from other forms of political violence if this term is to be of use in any moral context. It remains to be seen whether this particular line of definitions is
sufficiently descriptive. As we saw in the previous section, the strict definition of terrorism as the random targeting of ‘innocents’ is widely resisted. Walzer’s definition in particular is often criticized on several grounds relating to the randomness of victims and their alleged innocence. I will argue briefly that such accusations are unfounded.

First, Walzer has been criticized for arguing that terrorists choose their victims at random, or indiscriminately. He places great importance on this feature, stating with regard to terrorism that,

its method is the random murder of innocent people. Randomness is the crucial feature of terrorist activity. If one wishes fear to spread and intensify over time, it is not desirable to kill specific people identified in some particular way with a regime, a party, or a policy. Death must come by chance to individual Frenchmen, Germans, to Irish Protestants or Jews, simply because they are Frenchmen or Germans, Protestants of Jews, until they feel themselves fatally exposed and demand that their governments negotiate for their safety. (Walzer 1977, p. 197)

It has been pointed out more than once, both by opponents of this definition and by its defenders, that terrorists do not choose their victims totally at random, striking altogether blindly and pointlessly, but rather choose their target carefully in view of their objectives (Primoratz 2004, p. 17). George Fletcher (2004, p. 2; 2006, p. 8) argues, against Walzer, that describing terrorism as random contradicts its definition as politically purposeful. The key to understanding terrorism, he argues, cannot be that it is both random and intentional at one and the same time.

Terrorists are not indiscriminate in their choice of victim in the sense of acting irrationally or in a totally random manner (Coady 2004a, p. 7). Clearly, they put much thought into the choice of their target. The eleventh of September is a case in point. The twin towers were not chosen at random, out of a hat, as it were; this was no ‘shot in the dark’. The target was chosen intentionally as a symbol of American financial might.

Objections to Walzer’s definition, which emphasizes the random, or indiscriminate, choice of victims on the grounds that terrorists choose their targets rationally, build a straw man only to be knocked down by this artificial objection. Clearly, as both Primoratz and Coady explain almost unnecessarily, ‘random’ or ‘indiscriminate’ in this type of definition, does not stand for ‘irrational’ or totally arbitrary. Instead, these terms refer to a particular lack of discrimination, that between combatants and civilians, enshrined in just war theory, alongside a disregard for the particular identity of the victim (Coady 2004a, p. 7; Primoratz 2004, p. 18). Bin Laden clearly chose his target with care, but he did so with total disregard for the rules of war, alongside his indifference to the personal identities of those who showed up for work in the twin towers on that fateful morning. The first point is captured in Netanyahu’s reference to the purposeful attack on those who are ‘hors de
combat, outside the field of legitimate conflict’ (2001, p. 8). The second is depicted perfectly in Paul Berman’s retelling of a previous terrorist incident in New York. In 1920, a member of the Luigi Galleani anarchist group planted a bomb on Wall Street. In general, the group opposed the injustice of capitalism and exploitation. More particularly, the bomb was intended to avenge the arrest of Sacco and Vanzetti. ‘The bomb killed a random crowd of thirty-three people. …Why detonate an explosive on Wall Street? For symbolic reasons, of course. And why kill those thirty-three people in particular? For no reason. Because they happened to be walking by’ (Berman 2003, pp. 35–36).

Randomness in this double sense, as Walzer clearly intended it, is indeed descriptive of terrorism. It disregards the principle of discrimination (which can admittedly be questioned) and it is blind to the particular identities of its victims. For Walzer, this is a crucial point about terrorism: it is not aimed at particular people. Furthermore, as Primoratz points out, terrorism is indiscriminate in the further sense that it is difficult to avoid. This is a defining factor of this tactic, as it is what makes it so fearful and effective. ‘One can never count on keeping clear of the terrorist by not doing the things the terrorist objects to, by not joining the army or the police, or by avoiding political office. One can never know whether, at any time and in any place, one will become a target of a terrorist attack’ (Primoratz 2004, p. 19). This is precisely because the terrorist strikes at random, in the sense specified. In fact, as Netanyahu (2001, p. 8), points out, ‘the more removed the target of the attack from any connection to the grievance enunciated by the terrorists, the greater the terror’.

Do terrorists target the innocent in particular? This close relative of the non-random objection is a further source of criticism aimed at the Walzer-type definition. Victims of terrorism are not, it has been argued, necessarily innocent. Perhaps terrorists don’t aim to target the innocent at all, as Walzer and others accuse them of doing by definition. Honderich, for example, more than implies that adult Israelis at large, as well as Americans, most notably those associated with Manhattan’s center of finance, are not innocent of complicity in the grievances confronted by Islamic terrorists. Alternatively, it has been suggested that, if terrorism targets the innocent specifically, it is not so indiscriminate and random after all.

First, it must be restated that ‘innocent’ in this context stands for civilians or non-combatants. Terrorism, is, on this account, the indiscriminate targeting of those who on classic just war theory ought to be immune from attack. This still leaves ample room to argue about the normative distinction drawn by such theory between civilians and soldiers as well as its applicability to modern conflicts and revolutionary warfare in which the line between civilians and combatants is far less obvious than it was on the medieval battlefield (Coady 2004a, p. 9). Classifying terrorism in this way – as essentially harming non-combatants – thus remains neutral in that it leaves open the question
of justification, which in turn hinges largely on the moral validity of the debatable principle of discrimination.\footnote{7}

There is also room to argue over who are and who are not properly defined as ‘non-combatants’ within specific contemporary conflicts. The boundaries in this case, however, are less fuzzy than is sometimes assumed. It is quite clear, for example, that 3,000 inhabitants of commercial office buildings are ‘non-combatants’, whatever the extent of moral blameworthiness attributed to them by the terrorists for compliance with American capitalism. On the other hand, talk of terrorism as random violence against non-combatants clearly excludes the deliberate targeting of particular agents of state as well as of particular terrorists themselves (Walzer 1977, pp. 197–203).

Second, and obviously, while terrorism is defined here as the deliberate targeting of non-combatants, terrorists have no qualms about harming combatants and non-combatants within a single operation. As Primoratz (2004, p. 20) observes, when terrorists bomb a civilian commuter bus, ‘if a couple of soldiers get on … they will not see that as a fly in the ointment’ but rather as an added bonus. Terrorism is indiscriminate in this sense as well. However, for an act to be regarded as terrorism, its primary target must be civilian rather than military. ‘The defining feature of terrorism, and the reason many of us find it extremely morally repugnant, is its failure to discriminate between the innocent and the guilty, and its consequent failure to respect the immunity of the former and to concentrate exclusively on the latter’ (Primoratz 2004, p. 20).

In his After the terror, Honderich attempts an appeal to the doctrine of double effect, arguing in essence that terrorists do not aim at the innocent but rather incur innocent casualties in the course of pursuing legitimate objectives, just as regular armies do in the course of just wars. He suggests that the common Western excuse as regards civilian casualties incurred in war applies equally to terrorists such as the killers of 11 September. In both cases, he claims, ‘their deaths were not the first intention of their killers, but necessary in the carrying out of another intention, a justified one’. (Honderich 2002, p. 103). This point of similarity, however, even if conceded, has limited implications. Perhaps Bin Laden’s first intention was not to kill Americans, and perhaps the first intention of Palestinian suicide bombers and their organizations is not to kill Israelis (though this is by no means a foregone conclusion).\footnote{8} Their very first intention may indeed be, as Honderich suggests, achieving their political ends. If this is true, it is admittedly a feature of their action which they share with the unintentional killers of innocent non-combatants in war. It is not, however, the only, or primarily relevant, feature of their action. It remains the case that some forms of political violence are characterized by the intentional and deliberate slaying of non-combatants, rather than the accidental, or even negligent, killing of innocents which occurs in all wars.
Terrorism is essentially about targeting civilians, or non-combatants, often dubbed ‘innocent’. In fact, as Walzer points out, targeted civilians will often be innocent, even on the terrorists’ own account, though they need not be in order for the act to count as terrorist. The essential point about terrorism, described well by Primoraz, is that: ‘Terrorists do not take on the army or the police, nor do they attempt to kill a political official, but choose, say to plant a bomb in a city bus, either because that is so much easier or, perhaps, that will better serve their cause’ (Primoratz 2004, p. 20). Others argue that in some cases such tactics may be a last resort, a sole option for the representatives of an oppressed group, or an emergency measure. I deliberately leave all questions of justification open here. Be that as it may, I strongly suggest that targeting civilians is the essential trait of terrorism (Walzer 1977, pp. 197, 203; Primoratz 2004, p. 20), whether ultimately justifiable or not. For all the voluminous academic literature, a sampling of which we saw in the previous section, aimed at discrediting the significance of this defining feature, I think we can get a pretty good idea of what terrorism is. Of course, as Michael Walzer points out, ‘the use of the term is contested; that’s true of many political terms. The use of “democracy” is contested, but we still have, I think, a pretty good idea of what democracy is…The case is the same with terrorism’ (Walzer 2002).

What else, if anything, is definitive of terrorism? It seems obvious to suggest, as Walzer does, that fear is a key element as it is tied at the most basic philological level to the term itself, as well as describing a seemingly basic feature of the phenomenon — its frightening intention and result. Consequently, most authors include this feature — literal terrorization — within their definition or description. This element appears to cut across political lines and is included in the widest variety of discussions on terrorism. A minority, however, argue that fear is not an essential element of terrorism. Naturally, those who refrain from defining terrorism at all, or at least from distinguishing it strictly from other forms of violence, point out that fear is not unique to any particular type of violent political act. More interesting is the fact that Coady, who supplies a strict and critical definition of terrorism, makes a similar argument for excluding the element of fear. His tactical approach, defended here throughout, defines terrorism as: ‘The tactic of intentionally directing violent attacks at non-combatants with lethal or severe violence for political purposes’ (Coady 2004a, p. 7). As for omitting the element of fear, he argues that, while it describes a frequent sociological effect of terrorism, it is not definitive of it since all uses of political violence generate some degree of fear. Primoratz (2004, p. 22), following Walzer, argues to the contrary that coercion through intimidation plays a central role in terrorism and that this deliberate intimidation is an additional ground, alongside targeting the innocent, for the moral condemnation of terrorism. It would seem, leaving linguistics aside, that fear plays a rather essential role in what we normally take for terrorism. Fear is, if not the ultimate end of terrorism, at least
an interim objective of this tactic, a means deliberately used, in order to achieve some ultimate political goal. Fear would appear to be part of the very tactic that is terrorism.

As for political goals, there is little dispute, if any, that terrorism, whatever else it is, is violence carried out for political purposes, with ‘political’ taken here in the widest possible sense of the term to include religious, social and economic ends, as well as political goals in the narrow sense. In the margins of the definitional dispute we find questions such as whether targeting civilian property ought or ought not to be regarded as terrorism properly so called, and whether a threat of terrorist violence, without a resulting action, should in itself count as an instance of terrorism.

To summarize, I set out by arguing that terrorism ought to be defined rather than obscured. The previous section argued that wide and indeterminate definitions are insufficient and, moreover, that they are politically biased and agenda-based, aimed at excusing some forms of terrorism. This section looked at, and defended, the central attempts to define terrorism restrictively and critically, as distinct from other forms of political violence. I refuted some basic critiques and pointed at minor differences amongst the variety of such strict and critical definitions. Essentially, they all define terrorism as the deliberate violent targeting of non-combatants and civilian objectives, ignoring civilian immunity and the just war theory principle of discrimination, with the intent of achieving some form of ‘political’ objectives. Most agree that this tactic necessarily involves instilling widespread fear amongst a civilian population in order to achieve the desired ends. Such definitions are tactical, in that they isolate a particular action category – the violent strategy we call terrorism – with no reference to its agent or cause. Critical definitions single out the objectionable traits which characterize terrorism. It is their strength, rather than weakness, that they do so, as terrorism (like murder or theft) is a derogatory term. They do not, however, settle, by definition, the question of justifiability. Tactical definitions, while critical, are thus far less question-begging than the allegedly neutral and objective wider definitions discussed in the previous section.

The strict and more critical definition of terrorism, in its various versions, relies on the just war theory principle of discrimination and its applicability to modern warfare. Thus, the negative normative weight imparted to terrorism by these definitions hinges ultimately on the validity of this principle, which is not itself immune from attack. Furthermore, even if the principle is upheld as valid and applicable, there still remain a variety of justificatory arguments available to those who would, and do, defend terrorism. Even if terrorism is criticized as such and judged prima facie wrong, it may still be justified under certain circumstances (Primoratz 2004, p. 24). Terrorism, strictly and critically defined, may still be defended as the only means to gain political power for those who lack it, as Young (2004) would have us believe, or to more justly redistribute rights violations, as Held (2004) would have it.
Terrorism can be argued for in terms of last resort or extreme emergency, or as a morally problematic means towards achieving a worthy end. Honderich (2002) argues that it is justified as a means to attain better lives for more people. And it may be argued for as a reaction to state terrorism. Terrorism may be justified on purely utilitarian grounds – achieving a greater good for a greater number. Personally, I reject all these arguments for a variety of reasons (Meisels 2006, pp. 465–483). But the point is that they are not settled, or begged, by defining terrorism stringently and even derogatively. An analytical distinguishing definition is required in order even to approach the justificatory question appropriately.

**Concluding remarks**

Terrorism ought to be strictly defined. It is too central a concept to the moral understanding of our contemporary world to remain obscure. Attempts to avoid its definition in terms of targeting non-combatants are terminologically evasive and unhelpful in understanding the phenomenon, and they quickly lose touch with common usage and intuitions. Terrorism is, roughly, the intentional random murder of defenseless non-combatants, with the intent of instilling fear of mortal danger amidst a civilian population as a strategy designed to advance political ends. This basic understanding (which admittedly allows for some variation and has some fuzzy edges) cannot be ‘deconstructed’, nor can it be obscured. Those who adopt wide and inclusive definitions claim neutrality for themselves, and accuse those who define terrorism strictly of political bias. The inclusionists, however, have their own obvious political agenda, but they also have some valid points. Terrorism ought not to be defined in terms of its agent or presuppose the unjustifiability of its practice under all circumstances. The question of possible justification ought to be left out of the definitional question and remain unsettled by it.

**Notes**

1. Noam Chomsky (2001, pp. 23, 40–54, 57, 73–74, 90–91) repeatedly makes similar points concerning the inconsistent and self-serving use of the term ‘terrorism’ on the part of the United States, which he regards as a terrorist state.
2. Emphasis added.
3. For Walzer’s discussion of the World War II terror bombings, see Walzer (1977), Chap. 7, pp. 106–109; Chap. 16, pp. 255–268. Coady accuses Walzer of building a pro-state bias into his analysis of ‘supreme emergency’ which would exclude the possibility of its use by sub state terrorists, thus rendering group terrorism unjustifiable and inexcusable in all cases (Coady 2004b, pp. 88–91). This may indeed be Walzer’s view, as expressed in some of his comments. Both Held (2004) and Coady (2004b) refer to Walzer (1988). My point is that the unjustifiability of terrorism is not built into Walzer’s definition of terrorism.
4. Netanyahu defines terrorism as the ‘deliberate and systematic assault on civilians to inspire fear for political ends’ (Netanyahu 2001, pp. xxi, 8; Netanyahu 1986, p. 9).
5. Throughout *After the terror*, Honderich (2002, e.g. p. 151) places a great deal of blame on ordinary citizens of western democracies, particularly the United States and the UK, for the ills of third world nations. Aside from which he specifically holds Israeli civilians responsible for their government’s actions vis-à-vis the Palestinians.

6. Primoratz (2004, pp. 19–20), cites Walter Laqueur claiming that: “if it is claimed that terrorist violence is random, then it cannot also be claimed that it is directed solely against the innocent.” This is clearly not what is claimed by such definitions, as Primoratz makes clear. Rather it is claimed that terrorists fail to distinguish between the innocent and the guilty, exhibiting a disregard for innocent life.

7. Arguing for the rights of insurrectionists, Palestinian historian Karma Nabulsi (1999), for instance, rejects the stark distinctions drawn by modern laws of war between civilians and combatants.

8. Paul Berman (2003, pp. 132–133) argues persuasively that in both these cases death is in fact the primary goal.

9. For descriptions that include fear, or intimidation, see, all along the political spectrum: Walzer, Waldron, Fletcher, Primoratz, Goodin, Netanyahu, Held, Trotsky and many others such as Wellman (1979, pp. 250–252).

10. E.g. Waldron (2004, esp. pp. 8–9, 11–12, 33), who discusses fear but refrains from defining terrorism, as do Fletcher (2004), Honderich, (2002, pp. 98–99) and Derrida (in Borradori 2003, pp. 102–103), who define terrorism only inclusively together with other forms of violence including those employed by the state.

11. Elsewhere, Coady’s definition appears as the ‘organized use of violence to attack non-combatants (‘innocents’ in a special sense) or their property for political purposes’ (Coady 2004b).

12. Coady (2004a, p. 7) holds that harming essential civilian property ought to count as terrorism. Primoratz (2004, p. 21) agrees only so long as the property in question is vital to the actual survival, or livelihood, of non-combatants. Otherwise, he argues, it is unlikely to cause the type of fear, or even fury, that characterizes terrorism. Coady (2004b) himself admits that harm to property of innocents is less severe and also different in kind than bodily harming the innocent, and that the former is at times justifiable.

13. Coady (2004a, p. 5) is inclined to think that it should not, arguing plausibly that in general a threat to do X does not amount to the crime of doing X.

**Note on contributor**

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