Article:

Keywords

Terrorism

There are few terms more politically significant than **terrorism** in its variable contemporary usage. It derives from Latin terror - a person, thing or quality that causes dread or absolute fear (*terrēre* – 'to frighten', hence 'terrifying', 'terrible') and appears in English, by way of French, from the late medieval period, often in theological discourse. 'Terror' retains its radical sense of extreme fear (with the exception of the ironic 'holy terror', or 'little terror') throughout its history. Perhaps the most important development of the term, however, was the late eighteenth century coinage, 'The Terror', to refer to the period during the French Revolution (early 1793- mid 1794) in which the revolutionary State enacted repressive violence against its political opponents. The use of the term as a mass noun, to mean organised repression and violent intimidation, dates from this point and leads to a series of phrasal derivatives (almost all of which were American coinages): 'terror act' (1921); 'terror attack' (1929); 'terror bombing' (1933); 'terror campaign' (1909); 'terror group' (1919); 'terror organisation' (1886); 'terror plot' (1905); 'terror raid' (1917); 'terror suspect' (1934); 'terror tactics' (1913); 'terror threat' (1917).

'The Terror' is the immediate precursor to **terrorism**, coined in English in 1795 by Thomas Paine (imprisoned under the 'reign of terrorism'), from French 'terrorisme'. Importantly, in its early uses **terrorism** unambiguously refers to violence carried out by the state for political purposes: 'government by intimidation as directed and carried out by the party in power in France during the Revolution of 1789–94' (OED). Almost immediately after it was coined, however, another sense developed that was less clear. Again the OED definition is significant: 'the unofficial or unauthorized use of violence and intimidation in the pursuit of political aims; (originally) such practices used by a government or ruling group (freq. through

paramilitary or informal armed groups) in order to maintain its control over a population'. The definition is revealingly indeterminate: its first phrase could describe the activities of the Irish Republican Army in its war against the British State in the recent conflict in Northern Ireland; the second phrase could refer to the British State's running of Loyalist paramilitaries in its campaign against the Irish Republican Army in the same war.

The difficulties are not simply matters of semantic clarification since **terrorism**, either implicitly or explicitly, is usually used evaluatively. In 1941, for example, Winston Churchill asserted that 'in German-occupied Poland the most hideous form of terrorism prevails'; while in 1979 an article in The Spectator refers to an author's 'war-time exploits as a terrorist in the Resistance'. In the first example, **terrorism**, perpetrated by the State, is evidently pejorative, whereas in the second, the **terrorism** that the non-State agent carries out is validated. One popular response to this evaluative openness is to treat it as a matter of personal political preference ('one person's "terrorist" is another person's "freedom-fighter"') but the issue is deeper and more difficult than this.

What is at stake in the use of **terrorism** is the crucial question of the legitimacy-claims made for the use of violence for political purposes. And yet, strikingly, most contemporary uses of the term function precisely to elide the issue of legitimacy by taking it as simply given that the use of violence is the sole preserve of the State. This is usually based on a loose understanding of the Hobbesian social contract between the sovereign State and its subjects, exemplified in the liberal democracies, under which the right to resort to violence is given up in exchange for basic securities and freedoms. But this arrangement, whose status was always, even in Hobbes, conditional and therefore contingent, is normatively presented as given and irrevocable. As a consequence, all violence carried out by non-State actors must be illegitimate and therefore **terrorism** (as opposed to the legitimate use of terror and violence on which the State is predicated). So rigid is this linkage between State, legitimacy and violence, that the

recent coinage 'State terrorism' appears oxymoronic, while 'State-sponsored terrorism' simply reinforces the notion that although States may finance **terrorism**, they are not perpetrators of it. Yet while hegemonic, it is important to recall that this conceit has been established only relatively recently. For as the history of the term **terrorism** indicates from its very inception, the question of the legitimacy of the use of violence by the State has been a central concern.

Terrorism cannot be defined as a particular mode of violence; it matters little in terms of effect whether a bomb is launched from an unmanned drone flying at 33,000 feet or left in a bag in a bar. Nor can **terrorism** be identified on the basis of those who perpetrate it; as noted above, despite its now usual association with non-State actors, **terrorism** has been linked to the State since its first use. Nor can **terrorism** be determined simply in relation to the victims of violence; despite the proper distinction made between intended and unintended targets, the power of modern armaments entails the inevitability of civilian casualties (notwithstanding the mythology of bombs so 'smart' that they knock politely on the door to make sure there are no children present before blowing a building to smithereens). But if **terrorism** cannot be defined in these terms, what sense can be made of this troubling word?

It is crucial to note that the dominant use of **terrorism** is obfuscatory and it is important therefore to recall the issues that it is designed to elide. This means, in relation to the use of violence for political aims, a series of pressing questions: who is using it? Why and how is it being deployed? What are the legitimacy-claims attached to it? What is its purpose? What is a proper response to it? Needless to say, identifying such questions is but the first step to proper analysis. But even to get that far it is necessary to identify and challenge the reductive and simplistic ways in which **terrorism** is used in contemporary media and political discourse.