Terror, Media, and Moral Boundaries

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between terror and its presentation in the media is examined. The process of presenting terror is characterized as a method of challenging, negotiating, and redrawing moral boundaries. On the one hand, examining the terror–media relationship in this fashion enables us to transcend issues involved in taking a stand regarding the contents of specific acts of terror. On the other hand, making a stand regarding the nature of terror requires a moral decision. Any such stand regarding the content of terror, in terms of its explanation and justification, is thus based on a moral agenda that can be deciphered from the way it is presented. I use the case of political assassinations and executions to illustrate this terror–media connection through the conceptualization of negotiating moral boundaries.

Keywords: assassinations, media, moral boundaries, terror, war

Introduction

'One person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter' is a common statement. And, indeed, some famous world leaders were incarcerated or hunted as 'terrorists', only to appear years later as genuine freedom fighters for peace. Israel's Menachem Begin and South Africa's Nelson Mandela are just two illustrations. How can one make such a distinction? And on what grounds? I will argue below that such statements are morally bounded, and that making them requires explicit or implicit invocation of some moral context. To be meaningful, this suggested contextualization must be framed within a historical perspective. Moreover, the decision about whether one is faced with a genuine case of terror or of a fight against cruel oppression or occupation has a strong moral element. It is this moral element that dictates both the type and nature of responses and the presentation of the act or acts.

However, examining terror from a moralistic point of view alone (that is from a 'right' versus 'wrong' perspective) may create myriad points of view, dictated by the different symbolic-moral universes of the examiners. One way of avoiding this kaleidoscopic view is to regress to mere chronologies of events, devoid of social context, focusing on temporal sequencing made to show that earlier events somehow caused later events. Alas, this is a barren and boring

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(London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi)
Vol 46(1–2): 33–53. DOI: 10.1177/0020715205054469

approach, not to mention its questionable validity. Terror needs to be viewed in its social, political, and – most important – moral context. An alternative approach is to transcend specific moral contents and examine the interaction between terror and moral boundaries. Such a discourse can allow us to avoid the dilemma that opened the article and may enable us to cope with it in a more productive way. The rhetoric of moral boundaries gives us a powerful tool to do just that. The central issues become such questions as how terror challenges and molds moral boundaries and how it is processed within moral boundaries. At present, moral boundaries are drawn forcefully by the media and, indeed, terror has become a media 'line' discussed almost everywhere, perhaps the global topic par excellence. In this article I will discuss the moral nature within which terror is presented, illustrate it with assassinations, show how the media process and present news and terror, and point out that we need to understand the unfolding theater of terror in terms of the media-assisted presentation of this terror in a context of creating and negotiating moral boundaries.

Terror

While terror is not a new phenomenon, its characterization and nature may become obfuscated or relativized. Much discussion about terror deals with its nature, the violence involved in it, the politics, the results, the struggle against it, and more. One topic that seems not to star in many of these discussions is the issue of morality. However, some of the moral discussions in the United States about terrorism by Al Qaeda seem to be an exception. To my mind, the moral issue is a subtext in much of the current discourse about terror that should be made explicit. This is necessary not only because of theoretical implications and understanding but because of its practical implications.

Almost by definition, focusing on terror and morality requires that we deal with issues of rhetoric, contexts of justifications and communication. After all, morality and moral boundaries do not constitute empirical entities such as bombs or suicide bombers. And yet, morality is an extremely powerful variable for explaining and understanding terror and reactions to it.

Terror, for those producing it, is aimed at creating goal-oriented feelings of anxiety and fear among its targets. These feelings ease the road of terrorists in reaching their goals. While terror can assume many forms, it is fundamentally the generation of fear either by using direct violence or by making a credible threat to use it. Violence can be either verbal or physical, with intimidation as part and parcel of it.

Terror is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, we have what can be called state-sponsored terror. States may legitimately use coercive power within their territories. Excessive and unjustified use of such power can bring about a situation of state-sponsored terror. Such terror can – and in fact has been – exported by state agencies outside of the state's geographical boundaries. This

category of terror seems to have two basic modes: 1) Terror can refer to the violent means and intimidation used by a dominating group or a country against those under its control. The purpose of this state-sponsored terror is to depress and disable the spirit, morale, and resistance of those subject to it and make them obedient. 2) Terror can also be used as a countermeasure by states to cope with nonstate-initiated terror. One of the hallmarks of state-sponsored terror is its unpredictability. The fact that a state uses terror predictably and legitimately (because it is a state) only makes this type of terror much worse for its victims (typically, citizens of that state). One of the reasons is that such terror may go unnoticed for a very long period of time (as with Nazi Germany and other tyrannical regimes). Also, states typically have the resources not only to resort to terror but to conceal it, by way of, among other things, a creative and carefully crafted rhetoric. Such terror was used in the past by Stalin and the military junta in Argentina, to use only two illustrations. This terror includes such activities as political executions, deportation, making people 'disappear', erecting concentration camps, using torture, and more. In the past, such terror was used by exploitive groups to suppress others. While, historically speaking, such terror tactics were used and justified on pragmatic grounds, moral justification has become more problematic. One problem is that, while it is easy to denounce such terror, it has frequently happened that a suppressed group revolted, and, when it managed to assume power, it used terror against those who previously suppressed it. These terror tactics were justified as a measure of punishment and revenge and as a measure of control.

On the other hand, we have many cases of relatively small groups that resort to tactics of terror against a state or states in what also seem like two basic modes: 1) aiming to initiate a revolution that will eventually cause a change of regimes, and 2) as a measure of resistance to brutal occupation (or to what some groups may define as such, regardless of the validity of this perception). The late 19th-century Russian Narodnaya Volya is a good example of such a group, but others, such as the Tupamaros, the Red Brigades, Baader Meinhof, the Stern gang, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), and the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO) have used terror tactics in what these groups viewed as a struggle for freedom. In more recent times, Al Qaeda is a good illustration of a case in which a group that wants a global revolution and a global dominance of Islam resorts to terror.

Political assassinations have often been employed by these groups, and some have even turned assassinations into their main activity (for example, the Stern gang has retroactively named these 'individual terror'; see Ivianski, 1977), sometimes using the justification that because of their small size and power, assassination is their only way to gain power, publicity, and attention.

Terror's connection with the media has increased in both its intensity and sophistication, precisely because the media have created an arena in which terror is not only presented but justified. Thus, in many important respects, the

media have become another arena in which terrorists are competing for both exposure and time, preferably – of course – to present themselves in a sympathetic and understanding fashion. It is not only Al Qaeda's use of Al Jazeera to disseminate its messages, but the very fact that different media channels give time or space to spokespersons who rationalize and justify some terror activities under the guise of a supposedly neutral 'explanation' as to why some terror has taken place. Any such discussion enables those who resort to terror to use articulate spokespersons who present their moral position, often by using buzzwords and slogans in an attempt to persuade audiences that their cause is worthy and justified. Moreover, these spokespersons often try to persuade their audiences that resorting to terror is a 'no-choice' alternative, implying that the road to paradise must be paved with misery and tortured corpses. The implication of such rhetoric is – evidently – that violence is the only way to resolve conflicts.

Postmodern trends and politically correct influences have complicated the above connection even further, sometimes by further helping to blur demarcations between perpetrator and victim, and by obfuscating the justification for terror or countermeasures. Obviously, those who have been directly threatened or hit by terror will lack sympathy or understanding and will present sharper moral distinctions.

Regardless of past events, the rhetoric used by the media in their presentation of terror has become a central issue. The words chosen, the structure of sentences, and the contextualization of the relevant news reports construct an interpretative scheme within which reports about terror and reactions to it become culturally meaningful. These presentations construct social realities based on subtextual moral and ideological assumptions that need exposure. One interesting issue here relates to how media representations are affected by proximity to, or influence of, relevant terror events. Making distinctions between different types of terror, its goals, and its reasons may actually be used to justify different presentations, hence different moral stands, toward specific terror acts. Evidently, this issue raises another question, and that is in what way we view different terror activities as sharing some significant basic common characteristics and in what way we view them as significantly different. As we shall see in this article, viewing terror from a perspective of asking questions about moral boundaries gives us a powerful tool with which we can transcend this problem altogether.

To illustrate this, let me use the example of assassinations, based on one of my previous works (Ben-Yehuda, 1993).

Killings and Assassinations

The best-known and most dreaded form of terror is unprovoked killing. This killing can be directed at very specific targets, in which case we refer to it as

'assassinations' or 'executions', or it can be directed at a general target (e.g. exploding an airplane in mid-flight; using bombs or suicide bombers to attack restaurants, pubs, and buses; spreading poison gas in an underground train; or demolishing entire buildings) with the aim of killing as many people as possible, people whose only 'crime' is their sharing an ethnic group or a nationality, or their mere presence. However, even here, the term 'killing' may be problematic. To deconstruct this term, let us examine it more closely in a more general context.

'Assassination', and the common elements in its different manifestations, refers to a very particular form of attempt (sometimes successful) to take a person's life against his or her will. This common element has indeed constituted one of the classical subjects for researchers in the sociology of deviance and criminology. The biblical injunction 'Thou shall not murder' could be interpreted to mean that taking another human being's life is a universal crime. It is not. Murder is defined differently in different times and cultures (Ford, 1985; Lester, 1986; Nettler, 1982). It is also defined differently in the same culture. Hence different types of accounts and rhetorical devices (e.g. see Potter and Wetherell, 1987) are used to make such an act culturally meaningful by making it 'explainable' or 'justifiable.' These, in turn, depend on the interpretation of the circumstances. Thus, while the act of taking somebody's life against his or her wish may appear to the layperson as universally forbidden, the interpretation of such acts is culturally dependent and hence relative. Consequently, taking somebody's life is not universally forbidden. Killing other people, in short, is not always interpreted as a negative and stigmatized act – it can certainly be interpreted as a form of positive deviance (judging the results from very particular points of view), or even as a sacred act (e.g. human sacrifice in Aztec and other cultures).

The term used to describe the death of any person will, first of all, depend on whether we view that death as natural. A natural death would usually mean that the person has finished what we may consider his or her natural life span and dies, without any intentional (e.g. suicidal, criminal) or unintentional (e.g. accidental) help from himself or herself or another person. Words such as 'deceased,' 'passed away,' or simply 'died' would typically be employed in this case. When death is not defined as 'natural,' other expressions are invoked.

One basic distinction in this case is whether the potential victim agreed, or even willed and wished, to die. If the answer to this question is positive, then a small pool of nouns becomes available, such as 'suicide' and its variations (e.g. hara-kiri, kamikaze, kaitan), euthanasia (with consent), shahid, shahidat and the like. With some exceptions (e.g. the Ismaili order of the Assassins) this category is not very relevant to political assassinations. The other possibility is that the potential victim does not agree or wish to die. The act of taking the victim's life against his or her wish thus becomes a forceful and violent act. In such a case, another cultural pool of usage becomes available for the construction of a

culturally meaningful and acceptable interpretation of the act of taking another person's life against his or her will.

When a situation is defined as 'war,' taking other humans' lives becomes not only excusable but mandatory for so-called combat soldiers. It is then rewarded by powerful symbols and can even be defined as 'positive deviance.' Under normal combat circumstances, we do not say that a soldier murdered his enemy, or vice versa. Wars, however, do have rules, and some acts of taking other people's lives – even in war – may in fact be regarded as murder (e.g. killing prisoners of war). Such terms as 'infanticide' (e.g. Piers, 1978), 'child homicide' (Fiala and LaFree, 1988), 'self-defense,' or 'blood revenge' in some Middle Eastern (and other) societies (e.g. Boehm, 1984; Daly and Wilson, 1988; Ginat, 1984), as well as 'genocide' (e.g. Kuper, 1982; Walliman and Dobkowski, 1987) and 'lynching' (e.g. Olzak, 1988), may also be used to justify or explain acts of taking other people's lives, as well as such other ritualistic situations defined as vendettas, human sacrifices, and duels.

The term 'homicide' initiates a discourse that may classify this type of killing into criminal and noncriminal. Each of these distinctions is further divided into finer subcategories. 'Criminal homicide' is defined differently in different countries and states. Goode (1984), for example, draws our attention to the legal accounts used in New York State for homicide: murder, voluntary manslaughter, involuntary manslaughter, and criminally negligent homicide. He also draws our attention to two forms of 'noncriminal homicide': 'excusable' (e.g. in specified car accidents) and 'justifiable' (e.g. a policeman shooting what may be defined as a fleeing felon; see, for example, Lester, 1986; Scharf and Binder, 1983). Furthermore, some people view abortion as homicide. Thus, the act of taking another person's life receives different labels when different contexts are invoked and when different terms are used to describe it. These, in turn, are loaded with moral meanings. Goode's (1984: 221) conclusion that 'the taking of human life is tolerated under certain circumstances' clearly summarizes this point. Circumstances, however, are not just 'given' and typically require definitions and interpretations. These are provided by cultures within which a variety of rhetorical devices and vocabularies of motives and accounts (some of which are institutionalized in the law) are constructed and aimed at differentially defining acts of taking other people's lives (Nettler, 1982). Furthermore, murderers tend to develop their own vocabularies for justifying murder (e.g. see Dietz, 1983; Hepworth and Turner, 1974, 1984; Levi, 1981).

There are two sets of variables that help to resolve the problem of the definition. First, the term 'assassination' focuses on the specificity of the act. Unlike the impersonal and indiscriminate acts of terrorism, political assassination is selective, discriminate, and has a very specific target. Second, 'assassination' implies something very different from criminal homicide (Goode, 1984; Wolfgang, 1958). While 'criminal homicide' applies within what is defined as the criminal context and other types of homicide within other contexts, the word

'assassination' seems to be used mostly in political contexts and is closely and explicitly affiliated to power politics and morality. Hence, while the expression 'typical murder' (as a specific subcategory of criminal homicide) refers to something that 'takes place between intimates, not strangers, and is usually unplanned' (Goode, 1984: 222), the term 'political assassination (or execution)' refers to something diametrically opposite: it is planned and typically takes place between strangers. Thus, one important element in the characterization of 'assassination' is what 'assassination' is not: it is not a 'typical' murder (see also Heaps, 1969; Hyams, 1974). 'Political assassination' is a name given to a particular form of taking somebody else's life against his or her wish. 'Political execution' describes a similar activity carried out by countries and states. Stalin's ordered assassination of Leon Trotsky in August 1940 is one illustration (it even won the assassin, Ramon Mercader, the title of 'Hero of the Soviet Union'). The Allies in the Second World War executed the commander in chief of the Japanese navy, Isoruku Yamamoto, in April 1943 (Glines, 1993), and planned to execute Hitler in Operation Foxley (Rigden, 1999). Israeli security services have targeted specific Palestinian leaders of terror groups and executed them (see *Israel's Elimination Policy*, 2002).

Now that we have clarified this, how would the media describe any specific act of political assassination (or of political execution)? Will it be called an act of a madman? Murder? Killing? Elimination? Revenge? Justice? The expression chosen by any particular medium to present an act of killing a person against his or her wish, the context within which it will be described, will construct a specific moral matrix, because this construction contextualizes the act within a more general moral web of culturally accepted meanings. Any such construction creates or reaffirms the moral boundaries within which such acts are justified or explained and within which this justification is made acceptable. Delving more into this issue requires that we pay some attention to how the media construct realities.

Media Representations

The terminology one prefers to use when presenting any case of taking human life is characteristic of more general media processes. Following early work by Lasswell (1948) and others, it appears that mass media function in a few main routes. First is control (or surveillance). In the 1958 comedy *Teacher's Pet*, old-fashioned New York editor James Gannon (played by Clark Gable) explains to college professor Erica Stone (Doris Day) the essential elements of a news report: who, what, when, where, why, and how. This information constructs receivers' social reality and helps to shape their consciousness by weaving meaning into reported facts and infusing sense into what may otherwise appear as chaotic. It instructs the recipients about the nature of the world in which they live. Second is an attempt to show that the different parts of society are

somehow related to each other and function together. In other words, news reporting creates the impression that society is coherent and integrated. This effect is typically achieved by employing an army of commentators, experts, and interpreters whose function is to contextualize and place specific items within a broader cultural mosaic of politics, history, and morality. In this way, discrete events appear to 'make sense' by installing them within a much larger cultural jigsaw puzzle constructed to provide both the background and the meaning for these events. The third effect is embarrassingly obvious – it is the continuous transmission of culture. This is achieved by the first two effects, and by the choice of words, morality framing, and contextualization. Wright (1960, 1985) pointed out that the fourth powerful effect is that of news as entertainment, and McQuail (1994) added a fifth effect, which is that the media can be used to mobilize national and local efforts in various venues, such as politics, emergencies, economics, and the military. It was not difficult to see how this effect of mobilization played out following the terror attack on New York's World Trade Center twin towers. Mass media also produce nonintegrative effects. Among them are (a) increased levels of anxiety resulting from more or less graphic (and often threatening) reports about accidents, wars, and terror; (b) a tendency to encourage atomization, segregation, and even apathy among the audiences for news; (c) a tendency to present complex issues and contextualize (and simplify) them in megahistorical trends. Also, comparison to other cultures in the media may sometimes create or enhance societal tendencies to destabilize those societies (e.g. Goren, 1993).

Focusing on news reporting, Altheide (2002) says the two forces that drive and promote the construction of news are amusing entertainment and emphasis on dramatic, anxiety-producing, events characterized by fear, risk, and danger. Thus, those who become targets for presentation in the news share the same cognitive niche in journalists' minds, a combination of entertainment and fear. For example, because news about deviance tends to rely on press releases from the police, the nature of the fear-and-warning dramaturgy involved in such a source becomes evident. From a police officer's point of view, the world indeed appears quite dangerous.

The media can force their consumers to focus on specific issues (Lang and Lang, 1966). Moreover, while being unable – perhaps – to tell consumers *what* to think, media channels most certainly tell them *on what* to think (Cohen, 1963). Obviously, because of the way news is presented, most people absorbed into this constructed reality become convinced that most, if not all, of it is objectively true.

Reports and presentations in the media are neither neutral nor a simple reflection of some reality; news reporting is a process in which a stand is taken. Media reports suggest – explicitly or implicitly – on what and how to think about a topic, what to know about it, and sometimes even how to feel about it. The very framing of the item suggests that. In this way media reporting molds our

grasp of and helps us construct the social reality in which we live (see Halperin, 1988; Hershkowitz, 2000), and draws boundaries between 'right' and 'wrong,' 'good' and 'bad.' Our media-assisted or mediated grasp of reality is thus one way in which we are helped to weave meaning.

Fast-moving and recent unexpected events, scandals (typically in the social or criminal arenas), and events considered to be 'exciting' and made to 'make sense' to the audiences gain ascendancy. Media representations of terror fall very nicely into these characterizations. Inside information about terror (either from those involved in making it happen or from those reacting to it) is hailed (often ignoring the strictures involved, such as presenting the information in a neutral or even sympathetic and understanding way so as not to risk future information or sources). The above priorities, obviously, may lead reporters and editors to frame and present items that are constructed to be worthwhile 'news' in ways that introduce some bias or distortion. In this sense, a report in the media always presents an interpretation.

Following the early works about representing reality (e.g. Potter, 1996) in the media, the nature of reports in newspapers has been the focus of quite a few discussions. The perception that journalists are objective, and that reporters are required, when reporting news, to stick 'just to facts,' is an old dictum. But, can a reporter be completely objective without involving any feelings or personal views? Clearly, making a distinction between objective and subjective assumes that a distinction *can* be made between views and news. However, and as pointed out above, the choice of words, the tone of the report, can easily be used to infuse a personal bias into the report. The question may then become not one of objective or subjective, but one of degree.

The more modern version of this debate is that since the issue of objectivity is difficult to resolve, a report should be 'fair' and 'balanced,' and, in cases of controversy, each side should have a fair chance and time to present its position (see Limor and Man, 1997). Carried far enough, this policy may blur the line between victim and perpetrator or even raise questions regarding who is the bona fide victim and who is the perpetrator. The way the media reports on terrorism is an excellent illustration of this dilemma. For example, there seems to be a tendency to show sympathy to those perceived as the underdog in a conflict, regardless of how vile the aggression and violence used by that side may be. Likewise, state-sponsored information may be viewed with critical suspicion, even though this information may provide a valid representation. These biases illustrate how in reality moral boundaries may be contextualized by some subtextual assumptions of journalists. These assumptions are not universally or equally applied to all groups or states that use terror and have been applied in different ways to different struggles. Just think of the differential application of these biases to the struggles of such terrorist groups as the IRA, the Zionist Stern Gang and Irgun, Palestine's Hamas, Al Qaeda, Macedonia's IMRO, Algeria's National Liberation Front (FLN) and Secret

Army Organization (OAS), Cyprus's National Organization of Cypriot Fighters (EOKA), Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA), Kenya's Kikuyu Mau Mau, Uruguay's Tupamaros, Italy's Red Brigades, and Germany's Baader Meinhof, to name just a few. Also, one must pay attention to how state-sponsored terrorism was and is presented. Consider the differential legitimacy given to various countries that have used terror on their own citizens, such as Stalin's Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Argentina under the rule of the military junta, Chile under Pinochet, North Korea, Iraq under Saddam Hussein (during some periods), Pol Pot's Kampuchea, Idi Amin's Uganda, or the civil wars accompanied by large-scale atrocities in Guatemala, Kenya, Sudan, and Rwanda. One recent illustration is columnist Tim Lott's piece in the London *Evening Standard* (30 Sept. 2004: 15), which attempts to draw moral boundaries in the context of coping with extreme Islamic terror. Lott wrote, among other things, 'The Left is confused about Islam partly because of its tendency to stick up for the underdog. It is confused because it equates Islam with race, since most Muslims are people of color. But Islam is a belief system, one that tends to reject the scientific and humanistic universe, and is thus politically conservative. Socialists also tend to see the "attack" on Islamic "values" as a form of American cultural imperialism. . . .'

We thus already know that the media do not reflect reality. Rather, they construct reality. The difference between the terms is that while 'reflect' may imply 'objectivity,' 'constructing' implies the involvement of an interpretative subjective process. While Goren (1997) notes that journalists like to state that they maintain, as best they can, objectivity, balance, and openness, Roeh (1994) is quick to point out that there is no 'transparent language,' that the claim about presenting news in an objective, balanced, and open manner is suspect at best, and that reporting is necessarily set in collective and personal memories and in loads of judgment, interpretation, and evaluation. Thus, 'factual cleanness' can not be clean of ideology and rhetoric. Indeed, Gamson noted in 1986 that facts and news as such have no intrinsic meaning, and meaning is given to them by integrating them within cultural, political, historical, or other frames that organize the cognitive world of the reporter and the consumer and together 'make sense' of the facts or news.

In recent years, awareness that representations in the media are biased, and that the 'truth' reported there needs to be taken with care, came to the fore. Still, the media construct realities that are taken by a large number of people as true because the way in which this reality is constructed transmits objectivity and persuasiveness. This is achieved with a number of devices, such as pictures, exposing opposing views, choice of words, and values (see e.g. Berkowitz, 1997; Cohen and Young, 1973; Schudson, 1997; Shoemaker, 1997). Many times, reports in the media attempt to create the impression of being very close to reality by 'letting the facts speak for themselves.' However, what typically takes place is only a rhetoric of objectivity (Caspi and Limor, 1998). Almost any comparison

of news on CNN and FOX will reveal major differences. Moreover, even CNN news can vary depending on the journalist reporting (for example, Aaron Brown or Christianne Amanpour). This construction is a complicated process whose main ingredients are composed of a process of selection. The choice of stating that a specific hostage 'died,' was 'killed,' or was 'murdered' is one illustration. Another is the choice made to characterize any specific group, or a regime, and its activities as 'liberating,' 'terrorist,' 'rebel,' or 'guerilla.' Such judgments are based on subtextual assumptions regarding the moral nature of the group or regime. Using any of these labels creates and maintains specific moral boundaries distinguishing the 'good' from the 'bad,' the 'right' from the 'wrong.' The media, like other social organizations, are engaged in the production, construction, and dissemination of ideologies. The media form a sort of 'social mirror' that sets an agenda by framing some aspects of reality, making some aspects salient, and repressing others. This process simplifies complexities, gives the consumers of the media a sense that there is order in the world in which they live, and that they understand how it works, all at the price of making overgeneralizations and mistakes (see Hall, 1977).

In Tversky and Kahneman's Nobel Prize-winning theory of heuristics, terrorist activity constitutes a salient process by almost all of the media's criteria, and thus the media developed a language of terror in which preprepared frames are used to represent terror. This saliency may create the wrong impression that terror is rampant, while in fact it is not. Crime provides an interesting comparative point. In the United States, for example, more than 90 percent of the population 'have not been and never will be victims of crime' (Potter and Kappeler, 1998: 2). However, media policy emphasizing that 'if it bleeds it leads' (Potter and Kappeler, 1998: 3) leads media consumers into the wrong 'knowledge' about the magnitude and prevalence of crime. Terror is probably experienced by many fewer people (assuming – just for the sake of argument – that it can be distinguished from what we refer to as standard criminal activity) (Oliverio, 1998).

Consequently, a tension is created between 'reality' and 'reporting about reality.' The two do not always overlap and, indeed, need not. Reality is complex and multidimensional, and has depth, sounds, smells, a time dimension, and more. Any report about this complexity, whether in a newspaper, radio, or television, is by definition a translation, reduction, and simplification of a multilevel phenomenon into a compressed form, such as a two-dimensional newspaper or nonvisual radio sounds. It is thus a complex world whose representation is no easy task. To have some sense of a perspective we may need to point out that in this sense, the media are not guilty of anything with which others have troubles. For example, anthropologists translate complex realities to books or papers, courts translate realities to a dry legal language, geographers try to translate complex realities to two-dimensional maps and other means, psychologists try to represent 'personalities,' and of course sociologists try to translate one of

the most complex phenomena – cultures and societies – into scientific representations. We should not, really, complain so much about the disparity of 'reality' and the 'media representation of it.' This problem is almost universal, perhaps because there are so many realities and so many interpretations and representations.

Two excellent works examining the 'theater of terror' in this context are those of Wagner-Pacifici (1986) and Oliverio (1998). When a constructed story or narrative about terror events unfolds in the media, it is not too difficult to see how Oliverio's 1998 observations materialize:

> Examining terrorism as a discursive practice in the art of statecraft reveals the inextricable link between terrorism and the production of power relations via the detailed descriptions, categorizations, and hierarchical organizations of contemporary society. It is a practice that privileges rhetorical language over direct experience. The value of analyzing terrorism as historically and contextually produced political discourse, rather than as essential human expression, is that it has the potential to be replaced by a more heuristic construct . . . (pp. 127–8).
>
> In this light, we can examine the construction of events as multiple competing strategies, practices, and forms all striving to control meaning. (p. 135)

Terror, Media, and Moral Boundaries

The nature and essence of terror is the use of power (or credible threat to use it) for moralistic, ideological reasons. Both small groups of individuals and states have used terror tactics. However, while the use of terror by states was typically not leaked to the media, nonstate groups who use terror to achieve their goal are very interested in media exposure. There are a few reasons for this, but the major reason, obviously, is that it allows even rather small challenge groups to draw worldwide attention and exposure to what they define as their cause, to get air time to present their cause to a very large number of people, to have global exposure, and in this way pressure governments either to negotiate or to yield to some or all of their demands. Such exposure achieves more than the above – it gives these groups a chance to explain and spread the symbolic-moral universe in which they believe and thus challenge and redraw new moral boundaries (as well as attracting potentially new recruits).

Indeed, the goals of any terror (including state-sponsored terror) activity are straightforward. Among these goals one can identify the following: to effect personal changes in the human composition of a regime (e.g. in political assassinations or executions); to change some policies; to introduce changes into political systems; sometimes to attempt a radical change (typically called 'revolutionary'); to help a whole political system collapse; to receive popular or official recognition for the group's cause; to intimidate a population under

occupation; to gain new recruits; to undermine the morale and prestige (sometimes the legitimacy) of governments and provoke governments into using such harsh and desperate measures as anti-terror activities (e.g. curfews, mass arrests, martial law) that popular discontent will help destabilize and eventually replace the government (see Snitch, 1982).

While the use of violence (individual or group) is *the* hallmark of terror (especially indiscriminate killing), users of such vile means cannot be satisfied with killing per se. It is not (only) the rhetoric of justice terrorists are after, but the rhetoric of justification. They desire that their use of lethal power be explained, justified, and accepted as *legitimate* not only by themselves but by sympathetic others. The media enter the equation at exactly this point. In the distant past, with the limited distribution of the media (mostly newspapers), achieving such an effect was much more difficult. With the ubiquity of electronic and printed mass media in the second half of the 20th century, using the media to persuade spectators of the appropriateness of any specific struggle has become part and parcel of the conduct of different (not all) groups who use terror. In fact, some of these groups even use sympathetic graduates of communication programs as advisors.

For media representations of terror to achieve an effect of persuasion, they need to appear as 'morally right.' Legitimization of a struggle of any group (or state) that uses terror requires that moral boundaries be redrawn. Not only do violent means need to be presented as a 'no-choice' tactic by those who try to persuade us that they really 'only seek peace' or 'law and order,' but audiences have to sometimes be educated and accustomed to accepting as legitimate a different set of values or a different interpretation of existing values.

The role of the media in such a process is indispensable. This redrawing of moral boundaries under the dramatic impact of some extremely violent acts is a curious process indeed. One of the interesting phenomena in such a process is the contextualization of the activities of any particular group (or state) in a highly selective historical context, presented by the perpetrators as the 'real' or 'genuine' history. It is thus no coincidence that part of the process of legitimization of terror activities by redrawing moral boundaries is the concoction of 'alternative histories' and the construction of different collective memories. Both processes are part and parcel of sketching moral boundaries by altering historical contexts, sequences, and interpretations. Simply put, the media representation of terror activities, the need to translate complex realities into simplified, time-bounded, and intelligible reports directed at audiences, as well as the policy of fair reporting, may give those resorting to terror an interesting and powerful edge in achieving at least some of their goals. In places where the state exerts a great influence on the media (or even controls it), the edge the state may have in being able to use terror is significantly magnified.

Evidently, hostile and nonsympathetic media may achieve opposite results. When, in October 2004, the British media reported the kidnapping and

beheading of a British hostage in Iraq, the first reports on some TV stations used the term 'was killed' or 'was beheaded'; only later was the term 'murdered' used. In a similar fashion, in the Abu Ghraib event the prisoners were 'abused' rather than 'tortured,' according to some US news media. These terms, of course, do not reflect an innocent choice of words but convey moral meanings and images. It is the reporting itself that establishes moral boundaries.

Using deadly violence in a conflict, whether in what is defined as terror or in war, requires legitimization, or else the users risk being branded as criminals. This justification needs to be persuasive first of all to the members of the group using the violence and second to the external world. Much as in Charles Horton Cooley's 'looking-glass self,' a world mirroring acceptance of and expressing sympathetic understanding to the violence involved in terror strengthens those involved in it with much sought-after legitimacy, support, and positive reinforcement. The communication process used by the media and those using terror, along with the relevant social context, must be characterized as a continuous negotiation process – negotiation about what gets reported, how, what terms are used, who is given authority to interpret the events, and the like. Indeed, violence, and the way this violence is represented, accounted for, and negotiated, constitute an integrated continuous process where questions of legitimacy and hence the drawing of moral boundaries take place.

A Short Comparison to Wars

So that we have some comparative perspective, we may want to think not only about terror as it is popularly defined but also about wars. A convenient war to examine is the Second World War. For those maintaining that 'terror' is a relative term and one person's terrorist is another person's 'freedom fighter,' it is necessary to point out that the Nazis viewed themselves as being in a liberating revolutionary struggle, using terror to rid their mythologized Aryan race from all defects (including Slavs, Gypsies, Jews, the disabled, and more), and to free the world from those whom they defined as subhuman. Were the Nazis 'terrorists' or 'freedom fighters'? To answer this question, one must take a moral stand and draw moral boundaries. Doing so means, certainly for this author, noting that the Nazis not only used nonstate terror on their abusive way to power, but, once in power, continued to establish a terrorist state that murdered huge numbers of non-Germans and German citizens alike. It is interesting to watch how neo-Nazi movements attempt to 'undo' this history by denying that some of the Nazi regime's crimes happened, and so try to gain legitimacy for one of the most murderous and hideous regimes this planet has had to bear.

Another interesting phenomenon is the continuous attempt by some to present the Germans in the Second World War as victims. As part of the aerial bombing of Germany during the war, Dresden was heavily bombed, as were other German cities. The massive air raids on Dresden of 13 February 1945,

together with aerial bombardment of other German cities, have been used to substantiate the claim that the Allies used terror tactics against the German population during the war. Some press reports headlined the bombardment as a 'deliberate terror bombing.' Moreover, years later these bombardments were used in attempts to stigmatize Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris, chief of Bomber Command. In moral terms, considering who started the Second World War in Europe and the atrocities committed by the German military and paramilitary forces during the Second World War, this attempt rings somewhat hollow. However, it is a fact that the Allies in Europe used aerial bombardments of cities to try to shatter German civilian morale, as well as to disrupt German industrial production by attacking German workers in their homes. The United States resorted to similar tactics and logic in its aerial bombardment and decimation of Japanese cities under the command of Major General Curtis E. LeMay. Using nuclear devices on two cities brought Japan to its knees (not that it was not close to it anyway). Needless to add, the German Luftwaffe and German military had no hesitation about terror-bombing cities such as Warsaw and London. How does one characterize or interpret these massive area bombings? Obviously, drawing differences, raising justifications, and leveling condemnations is in fact drawing moral boundaries. In the current European dialogue about the Second World War (e.g. see Müller, 2002), presenting Germans of the war era as victims constitutes a clear attempt to redraw moral boundaries in a way that presents wartime Germans as sufferers and deserving of both compassion and sympathy. A successful process will undoubtedly construct the different combatants of the Second World War as 'equal' morally, not retrospectively but during the war.

To drive this point further, let me note that the invasion of Germany by the Soviet Red Army was accompanied by countless events of looting, vandalism, rape, and more. Likewise, the German Kriegsmarine use of its U-boats in a merciless and cruel unrestricted naval warfare on ships, in a global war, was a pattern also used by American submarines against Japan (with a much more effective result, from the American point of view).

Characterizing these violent activities (including the terror of machine-gunning surviving sailors in the water) in moral terms, in the relevant historical context, is not a simple exercise in drawing moral boundaries regarding content, but it is very easy to determine from a sociological point of view. From this narrow and focused point of view, one need go no further than to use the moral boundary terminology to interpret these violent acts. Can, or should, one remain in such a neutral position? Apparently not. It is unnecessary (perhaps even impossible) to view war, or terror, 'objectively.' But taking the next step and characterizing these events in moral terms requires one to take a moral stand. The ease with which such an intellectual exercise can be accomplished depends on adopting a historical and comparative perspective; that is, viewing such events from a somewhat distanced viewpoint, but also realizing that making

moral judgments requires the adoption of such a perspective. Without these two elements we risk slipping into extreme relativism and being unable to examine some horrible events – so prevalent in the Second World War – that cost the lives of countless innocent civilians.

If we are to respond meaningfully to the question posted in the first text line of this article, we must use a two-stage view. It is necessary that we view terror in the interpretative context of moral boundaries, but it is equally necessary that we continue to the next step, which is that moral stands need to be taken. For example, it is necessary to understand that when a state defines its own citizens as 'enemies' (whether they are Jews in Germany, American Indians in North America, or Japanese-descent Americans in the wartime United States) and treats them as such, the perspective suggested above will help us to decide whether we are dealing with 'genuine cases of terror' or with a 'fight against a cruel oppression.' The above is valid not only for state-sponsored terror but also for terror used by nonstate organizations.

Summary

Terror activities, whether used by individuals, by groups, or by states, raise critical questions regarding the morality and legitimacy of these acts. Using such tactics always requires developing vocabularies of motives that will provide justifications for these acts and help persuade those involved in perpetrating the acts, and external observers, that these acts are – from some point of view – justified. The concept of tyrannicide, perhaps, provides one illustration for this.

Hegemonic states have a much easier time developing, dispersing, and making their populations believe in a rhetoric that justifies activities that can easily be characterized as 'terror' (e.g. see my previous works on the Masada myth: Ben-Yehuda, 1995, 2002). Peripheral groups that become hegemonic will not always evade this process, and once hegemonic they will do their best to make sure that their morality prevails (e.g. Stalin's crystallization of power; Fidel Castro's hegemonic discourse in Cuba; Mao's grip of China). The development of mass media gave rise to a curious interaction between those using violent terror and the media presenting and interpreting these acts of terror.

In terms of content, regardless of whether such violence is committed by states, groups, or individuals, it may become difficult to determine whether any one of these activities can (or should) be referred to as 'terror' or as a bona fide case of a justified 'fight for freedom' without taking a moral stand. Terror activities could be attributed to a large spectrum, from Robin Hood through violent cults, vigilante groups, and underground subversive groups to states using terror. Some may even try to persuade victims that they kill them for their own good (see Cohen and Ben-Yehuda, 1987).

In this sense, attempts to rush to disciplinary generalizations without examining the moral dimension may yield only different historical sequences, or

it may strip the events from their social or moral context and end up with a characterization that is so general and meaningless that it may position the concept of 'terror' on the verge of being virtually useless.

However, if we distance ourselves a bit from the problematic and polemic contents of the violence we discuss, it is not too difficult to realize that the issue of negotiating and drawing moral boundaries is at the heart of the matter. These boundaries are negotiated between those using terror, the media which represent it, and the audiences. It is *this* dialogue and discourse that *creates* the moral boundaries. Differences or comparisons among various terror activities groups and states *are* among the mechanisms that do this boundary work. When specific individuals, groups, or states are characterized as 'terrorists,' we need to examine why other or similar groups were or were not characterized as such. We must be careful not to get trapped in the maze of technical definitions and lose the main issue, that of using violence as a way to resolve conflicts and the attempts to legitimize this use, through, among other things, a discursive and often pretentious dialogue in the media.

We need to remind ourselves that the rhetoric involved in using violence for political ends is as its name implies, political, but a much stronger aspect of it lies with the moral assumptions and challenges on which it is based. The discourse that accompanies the political violence attempts to shape our consciousness and infuse meaning into some questionable situations. Those resorting to these tactics try their best to persuade us that their use of violence is legitimate, justified, and geared to an important and worthy cause. Such discourse and rhetoric are geared not only to do that but also to justify future actions.

In a standard dialogic discourse, one can expect that those on the receiving end of this politically oriented violence will react not only by using violence, too, but by developing their own vocabularies of motives, justifications, and attempts to generate legitimacy. In fact, the dialogues and discourses discussed in this article can easily produce a cycle of violence that may last for a very long time, indeed, especially if a rhetoric of revenge is added to the rhetoric of justification. The result could be a righteous Dresdenization of such a conflict, or even worse. In other words, the answer to the question of what measures are to be used in coping with terror has, or should have, a significant moral element which had better be made explicit. For example, what can be an 'appropriate' or 'proportional' response to an act of mega-terror? Shall it be an invasion of a country? Shall causing collateral damage on a huge scale take place? Will using weapons of mass destruction be an 'appropriate' response? And, if so, in what sense? Should countries be held responsible for terror activities?

It is also interesting to note that some of the problematics involved in both terror and reactions to it in recent years have become influenced by the new discourse of human rights and liberalism, which seems to force both terrorists and those involved in counteractions to use this rhetoric to justify their

actions. Thus, countries may limit the force used by their counterterror forces because they want to appear good in the media. The hypocrisy and double standards presented by both terrorists and those involved in counteractions is evident as clashes over moral boundaries become convoluted, language is distorted, and vile and violent actions are presented as 'justified.' One interesting phenomenon here is that tactics used during the Second World War (typically with sizeable collateral damage and a high degree of callousness toward human life) can not be used these days specifically because the moral boundaries of the Second World War period are not those of today.

In sum, in both terror and reactions to it, the different sides to a violent interaction use the media as a main arena to clash and clarify their moral boundaries. For us, examining these fascinating processes, it is imperative to understand – as per case – how legitimacies are constructed, what kind of arguments are elicited, and how this game of morality is (or should be) played out. This sociological framing of understanding terror within the context of moral boundaries may need to be accompanied by taking a stand on these clashing symbolic-moral universes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

It is a genuine pleasure to acknowledge my intellectual debt to the anonymous reviewers of a previous draft, to Pat Lauderdale, and to Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi. Their useful and fruitful critical comments, suggestions, and directions helped turn this article into a much better product.

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