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Neil J. Smelser: The Faces of Terrorism

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The Paradoxes of Terrorism

TERRORISM as a contemporary phenomenon teems with paradoxes. For at least three decades, many who have studied it have regarded it as the “conflict for our time” (Clutterbuck, 1977, p. 13). Yet the same author who advertised it in those words also regarded it as “rooted in history” (ibid., p. 22), to be found in military, political, and religious annals since classical times. Despite this duality of vision, it is true that terrorism has irregularly emerged as the world’s most salient and worrisome form of combat during the past several decades, and to many it promises to remain so indefinitely into the twenty-first century.

It is also paradoxical that, despite being so conspicuous on the current scene, terrorism has never been defined properly by either scholars or political officials. Nor, with the exception of some political scientists and policy analysts, have behavioral and social scientists studied this critical phenomenon very much or very well. This situation is all the more curious because only a little observation or reflection is needed to conclude that the human sides—the psychological, social, political, economic, and cultural—are universally present dimensions in terrorism and the responses to it.

A third paradox is that observers frequently describe post-cold war or post-9/11 terrorism as something new—the end of war as we knew it, a facet of globalization, an aspect of postmodernity—yet close inspection of the actual goals, ideologies, strategies, and tactics reveals how few of these ingredients are novel. In light of this circumstance, in this book I treat terrorism not as a special thing or creature but as a kind of human behavior that has some distinctive characteristics but that also lends itself to explanation by mobilizing existing theoretical and empirical knowledge in the behavioral and social sciences.

In a single volume added to the increasing cascade of books, articles, and media discussion, I cannot hope to resolve these paradoxes fully, though one of my aims is to cast light on understanding them. I will do so in part by self-consciously shunning cosmic and dramatic depictions—some of which, I argue, are reactions to our ignorance and anxiety about terrorism. Instead, I treat contemporary terrorism as a peculiar combination of ingredients culminating in a specific form of violent behavior.

Although behavioral and social scientists have fallen short in studying and understanding terrorism, some knowledge has accumulated. In addition, we know much about phenomena that are parts of the terrorism package. This knowledge can be brought to bear on understanding it. Among the relevant areas of knowledge are the structural bases—economic, political, social, and cultural—of deprivation, dispossession, and protest; the nature and role of ideologies that accompany extremist behavior; the dynamics of recruitment to social movements, behavior in them, and political reactions to them; the dynamics of small groups and networks; public reactions to uncertain threats and actual disasters; deterrence; and the politics of fear. I will mobilize selected knowledge on these and other topics in the book.

A few words on my credentials—whether they are strengths or liabilities—are in order. I am a sociologist by profession, but prior to my retirement in 2001, I, like almost all my colleagues, was not a student of terrorism. Within sociology I have studied collective behavior, social movements, cultural traumas, organizational responses to uncertainty, and comparative social structure and social change. For better or for worse, my work has almost always been interdisciplinary, and at different times I have had one foot in history, economics, anthropology, and political science. I also mention research that has reached into psychology. As part of this effort, I have undertaken full psychoanalytical training, including some practice. For the study of terrorism I regard interdisciplinarity as a strength, because the topic itself knows no disciplinary boundaries and spreads into all of them.

My direct introduction to terrorism occurred almost immediately after my retirement on September 1, 2001. Shortly after the September 11 attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., the presidents of the National Academies wrote a letter to President George W. Bush

pledging the support and cooperation of scientists in dealing with the national crisis created by those events. The first tangible manifestation of this support was the creation of the Committee on Science and Technology for Countering Terrorism, which, within less than a year, issued a major report on scientific understanding and applications to defending the nation against most types of potential terrorist attack (Committee on Science and Technology for Countering Terrorism, 2002). I was one of two social scientists on that committee, and I drafted the chapter on terrorism and human populations. In addition, I chaired two National Research Council committees, one dealing with the social and psychological dimensions of terrorism generally (Smelser and Mitchell, 2002a) and one on the possibilities and limitations of deterrence theory in dealing with contemporary international terrorism (Smelser and Mitchell, 2002b). Subsequently I have been involved in a diversity of the National Academies' activities relating to research and policies on terrorism. Engaged in these experiences, I was more or less forced to become a scholar of the subject. The experiences with the National Academies, moreover, provided the background for my decision to write a general book on the subject.

This book is mainly academic in emphasis in that it synthesizes behavioral and social science research and seeks general understandings and explanations. To deflect any message of grandiosity that may be inferred from this statement of purpose, I hasten to add that no effort is made to cover all relevant social science materials; rather, I use materials selectively according to my own judgments of relevance and priority. Nor do I pretend that I am simply, automatically, and impersonally applying objective knowledge with no intrusion on my part. Some interpretations are my own, consistent, it is hoped, with our general knowledge of psychological and social processes. Nor, finally, can I avoid topics that are controversial. Terrorism in all its international and domestic ramifications is by now thoroughly politicized, and even statements intended to be objective about it excite partisan reactions. To take only one example, to "objectify" the ideological bases of terrorism and counterterrorism and to attempt to understand them as natural phenomena is to adopt a political distance from these ideologies that is offensive to those who believe in them. And as the shrillness of the American presidential campaign of 2004 amply demonstrated,

almost no facet of our nation's policies toward terrorism escapes partisan tint. All one scholar can do is to strive (but never succeed fully) to overcome partisan implications by bringing the best knowledge available to bear on any issue.

I have supplemented my general analysis in two particular ways. First, in working through all the issues involved in the subject of terrorism, I came to locate a number of snarls in our thinking about it and practical predicaments in our dealing with it. I call these entrapments. Many of them arise because terrorism has foisted them on democratic societies. They are points of confusion and controversy—many touching the fundamentals of our political system—that result in repeated and seemingly irresolvable debates and conflicts. Furthermore, the entrapments do not yield solutions, because discourse seldom moves outside or rises above their own internal dynamics. Examples of entrapments are conflicts over defining terrorism, diagnosing the role of the media, and understanding the tension between security and civil liberties in responding to terrorism. I identify a number of points of entrapment as the work proceeds.

Second, I have taken the occasion to add an autobiographical dimension in the form of boxed material in many of the chapters. These entries are illustrative personal experiences and observations arising from my work on terrorism, including work with other social scientists. They are designed to provide vivid and concrete illustrations of general issues and topics discussed in the text.

I have arranged the chapters in a mainly analytical way. One could argue that issues of definition should come first. However, this item is so nettlesome and so demanding of conceptual throat clearing that I decided to begin straightaway with substance, and discuss definitions in the appendix. Chapter 2 takes up the causes and conditions of terrorism, focusing on its insurgent and international forms but not on state terrorism—historically an equally important and certainly a more lethal form than the first two but the product of a quite different set of determining conditions. This chapter is a complex one, corresponding to the complexity involved in sorting out the multiple causes, their significance at different levels, and their permutations and combinations. Chapter 3 singles out the ideologies that inspire terrorism. Concentrating on them helps elicit their crucial importance in unraveling

and explaining terrorist behavior. In chapter 4 I turn to a combination of topics: the motivation of individual terrorists, their recruitment, the significance of the groups they form, their decline, their audiences, and the roles of the media in terrorism. These topics are often treated separately in the literature. For reasons that will become clear, however, I will argue that all of them—and ideology, too, for that matter—are inseparable parts of the driving motivational complex for terrorists and the commission of terrorist acts.

Chapter 5 turns to the study of target societies and deals with the social psychology of anticipating, experiencing, and coping with the threat of rare but potentially catastrophic events; the social and psychological aspects of educating, preparing, and warning the population about terrorism; and the diversity of responses to terrorist threats and attacks. In chapter 6 I deal with the complexities involved in living with the possibility of terrorist attacks, including defending democratic societies against them. Chapter 7 takes up even more general historical issues involved in dealing with international terrorism and is concerned directly with the contemporary world situation, especially the United States' place in it, as well as domestic and foreign public policies. Chapters 6 and 7 are more reflective and evaluative than the others and include many judgments of my own that seem plausible in light of what we know, but they are in no sense disciplined "applications" of sure knowledge.

I envision that the book will have three audiences—other scholars, public officials concerned with terrorism and responsible for confronting it, and interested general readers. Communicating with the first and third of these audiences is relatively nonproblematical, but I am fully aware of the limitations of academic material for policy makers and policy executors. There are inherent reasons why knowledge produced by academics does not interest—and may even irritate—those in policy arenas. At the most general level, academics and policy makers (and most military officers and journalists) have different and noncomparable priorities. The former are typically interested in general explanations arrived at by objective examination of available evidence (Wieviorka, 1995, p. 605). Many of the explanatory factors they identify, moreover, lie beyond the possibility of political or public intervention. The latter are interested in applied, timely decisions and implementa-

tions intended to have desired effects. In consequence, people on both sides of the academy–policy divide often cannot hear one another, and become impatient as a result.

Terrorism policy reflects this disconnect in an extreme way. By its very nature, terrorism demands focus and urgency, because it is uncertain and because it carries threats of death and destruction. Most policy makers cannot afford to appreciate the nicety, conditionality, and qualifications of academic analysis (Ezekiel and Post, 1991, pp. 118–19). This tension is superimposed on a traditional residue of mutual stereotyping and distrust between “academic” people of thought and “policy” people of action (Merari, 1991, p. 88). Despite these general limitations, some parts of this book may be directly relevant to policy. For example, my analysis produces a critique of the reliance on “gadgets, game theory, and goodness”—that is, the combination of technological solutions, instrumentalism, and moralism—that appears to have dominated our nation’s response to terrorism since September 11, 2001. In addition, the discussions of counterproductive effects of overreacting to terrorist threats, underpreparing and overpreparing populations for danger, and the vulnerabilities of first-responding agencies are surely relevant to planning and policy. Many other points on the political, economic, social, and cultural aspects of terrorism and terrorist groups should be relevant for longer-term policy. One must acknowledge, however, that in democracies facing danger and among politicians sensitive to the media and public opinion and ultimately accountable in the electoral process, short-term reactions and accommodations typically trump longer-term policies and general reflection.