

“Can Terrorism Be Defined?” Forthcoming in *Constructions of Terrorism* (edited by M. Stohl, S. Englund, and R. Burchill; Berkeley: University of California Press)

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Abstract

Can "terrorism" be defined? Should it be? This chapter revisits the longstanding "problem of definition" in terrorism studies. It begins with a brief history of the coalescence of terrorism as a concept, revisiting key turns in the debate over how to define terrorism, and whether or not a settled definition is even possible. I argue that, rather than asking how terrorism should be defined, we instead analyze how debates over 'terrorism' define other central aspects of political and cultural life.

I've titled this chapter with a question: "can terrorism be defined?" But of course terrorism *can* be defined; the true problem is not a surfeit, but rather a *surplus* of definitions. Yet neither experts, nor politicians, nor the lay public, have been able to come to an agreement as to which of the many definitions circulating is correct, and the so-called "problem of definition" has been a central and enduring aspect of both public and expert debate on terrorism. In practice, this most often takes the form of debates over how to differentiate "terrorism" from "not terrorism," and whether or not a particular act qualifies as such.

This chapter does not presume to resolve this dilemma. Rather, I suggest that this single-minded focus on defining terrorism has obscured a perhaps more interesting question, which is, what does terrorism define? I argue in this chapter that if the problem of definition has not been resolved, this may be because struggles over its definition contain within them three questions even more central to contemporary politics. These are:

1. Who is the enemy?
2. When is violence legitimate?
3. What is political?

Rather than presuming that we can resolve the problem of definition, I suggest instead that attempts to define terrorism, whether by the state, or in the realm of public discourse, be understood as struggles over the answers to these questions. I begin this chapter with a brief overview of the emergence of the contemporary concept of terrorism, establishing that the problem of definition was a central feature of the discourse from the start. I then discuss each of the three questions above: what is politics?, who is the enemy?, and what is legitimate violence? I explicate what each of these means, why it is significant, and how its meaning can be read from

the way terrorism is defined. I suggest that the answer to the question: “what is terrorism?” then tells us (and depends upon) the answer to these questions.

The concept of terrorism first began to take shape in its contemporary form in the early 1970s. Before that time, acts of political violence, including hijackings, assassinations, and other acts that we now consider terrorism, were instead most often understood through a discourse of insurgency.¹ Within this framework of insurgency, violence was generally understood to be rational, purposeful, sometimes even justifiable. With the emergence of a discourse dominated by the concept of terrorism, however, in which acts labeled as such came to be understood as fundamentally immoral, "terrorism" came to be understood as rooted to a terrorist *identity*, rather than as a tactic that any group might adopt. With these changes, the search for explanations of both “terrorism” as an act, and the “terrorist” as a type of person, took off, leading to the emergence of a new field of terrorism studies.² Since the discourse of terrorism has taken hold, with each new and subsequent incident, the key question has become: “is this an act of terrorism?”—with the answer guiding both the further questions to be asked, and the answers needed to respond.

The problem of definition was thus present almost from the very start. Even terrorism experts have been unable to agree on how "terrorism" should be defined, and when I interviewed terrorism experts, they themselves often lamented this problem of definition. As Brian Jenkins, former head of terrorism research at the think tank, RAND, told me in an interview, “definitional debates are the great Bermuda Triangle of terrorism research. I’ve seen entire conferences go off into definitional debates, never to be heard from again.”³ Indicating that this is not a recent phenomenon, we can observe that a 1988 survey of the literature found over 100 different definitions in use among terrorism researchers, an observer at a mid-1980s Department of

Defense symposium reported that there were “almost as many definitions as there were speakers,” and a 2001 article described a “perverse situation where a great number of scholars are studying a phenomenon, the essence of which they have (by now) simply agreed to disagree upon.”⁴ At the international level, attempts to develop an international counter-terrorism response at the UN faltered throughout the 1970s, in large part due to the inability of states to agree on what constitutes terrorism (with countries from the global south, in particular, arguing that the use of violence in national liberation struggles should be excluded).

I began by referencing the “problem of definition” in terrorism studies, characterized by a surplus of definitions, and the lack of agreement on any one definition. In fact, the definitions circulating are often not just different, but mutually contradictory. Competing definitions commonly suggest that states *can* or *cannot* commit terrorism, or that terrorism is *only*, or *not only*, violence against civilians.⁵ Examples of these contradictions are easy to find, not just in abstract debates over definition, but also in applications of the label in practice. For example, many will criticize the U.S. for having “double standards,” pointing to U.S. support for “terrorists” (violent insurgents who target civilians) such as the contras in Nicaragua, Renamo in southern Africa, and even Osama bin Laden and his “mujahedeen” fighters in Afghanistan—in the 1980s, while condemning the violence of those it deems enemies. As the saying goes, “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.”

Given this essential contestation at the heart of defining terrorism, how have experts and others tried to resolve the problem of definition? Many (though by no means all) terrorism experts are highly disconcerted by this situation, and have sought (however with relatively little success) to “fix” or stabilize the definition of terrorism, sometimes suggesting that until this is accomplished, little progress can be made in the field, with the “politicization” of the concept has

commonly been pointed to as a key hindrance.⁶ For example, Martha Crenshaw writes that: “(t)he task of definition...necessarily involves transforming ‘terrorism’ into a useful analytical term rather than a polemical tool.”⁷ Similarly, Schmid and Jongman, in their omnibus reference, *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories, and Literatures*, suggest there is a need for a neutral, stable, and universally accepted definition as a basis for scholarly progress:

The search for a universalist definition of terrorism is one which scientists cannot give up. Without some solution to the definitional problem, without isolating terrorism from other forms of (political) violence, there can be no uniform data collection and no responsible theory building. . . The search for an adequate definition of terrorism is still on. . . many authors seem fatigued about the need to still consider basic conceptual questions. This is a dangerous attitude as it plays in to the hands of those experts from the operational antiterrorist camp who have a ‘we-know-it-when-we-see-it’ attitude that easily leads to double standards which produce bad science and also, arguably, bad policies.⁸

What I refer to here as stabilization thus includes calls for the depoliticization of definitions of “terrorism,” for politically “neutral” definitions, and, often, for definitions which are agnostic with regard to moral judgment.

Furthermore, the problem of definition does not just trouble experts. Media coverage of terrorism, as well, has frequently been characterized by disputes over definition. Critiques of the conceptualization of “terrorism” in the media tend to highlight inconsistencies in the use of the term--- particularly pointing out seeming double standards where the term is applied to one set of

actors, but not another, engaging in similar acts. For example, Glenn Greenwald, of *The Intercept*, has repeatedly compared coverage of different incidents to argue that the misconceptualization and misapplication of “terrorism” is an ongoing problem. Referring to an incident in 2010, when a white American flew a small plane into an IRS building, he writes:

The attack had all of the elements of iconic terrorism, a model for how it’s most commonly understood: down to flying a plane into the side of a building. But Stack was white and non-Muslim. As a result, not only was the word “terrorism” not applied to Stack, but it was explicitly declared inapplicable by media outlets and government officials alike.⁹

We can find similar examples of this form of critique in commentary upon media coverage of the massacre of nine churchgoers in Charleston, S.C. in June 2015. For example, as an article on Salon.com stated:

As many have pointed out, the media is unsure about what constitutes terrorism only when white people are the perpetrators. White men with guns are “lone wolves” or “mentally ill” or depraved criminals. Brown men with bombs are very obviously “terrorists.” This is a double standard with consequences. “Terrorism” is a word that resonates; it inspires urgency and collective action, both of which are needed if we’re to deal with the underlying problems. If white people can’t, by definition, be terrorists, then the term has no practical meaning; it’s about the actor, not the act. If terrorism is something only brown people do, then we should be honest and admit that. We should say that terrorism is about the color of the criminal, not the intent of the crime.¹⁰

Meanwhile, a piece in the Washington Post declared:

But listen to major media outlets, and you won't hear the word "terrorism" used in coverage of Wednesday's shooting. You haven't heard the white, male suspect, 21-year-old Dylann Roof, described as "a possible terrorist" by mainstream news organizations (though some, including The Washington Post, have covered the growing debate about this discrepancy). And if coverage of other recent shootings by white men is any indication, he never will be. Instead, the go-to explanation for his alleged actions will be mental illness. He will be humanized and called sick, a victim of mistreatment or inadequate mental health resources.¹¹

Each of these examples focuses upon forms of bias in the application of the "terrorism" label to events, illustrated by repeated inconsistencies in the use of the concept. In sum, there is significant contestation over the conceptualization of "terrorism," both among experts and in the media. The debates tend to hinge on calls for stabilization of the concept, rooted in concerns it is either inherently ambiguous, or is applied inconsistently (i.e., that there are double standards). For media critics, such stabilization would require making the concept fairer in its application, removing bias, whether with regard to friend / enemy, state/non-state, or race, religion, and ethnicity, and applying definitions and moral judgments evenly to all perpetrators. Ultimately, many of these criticisms come down to making the point that the concept needs to be fixed, in two senses of the word: first, that it needs to be repaired, made more coherent, and applied in a more consistent way, and second, that it needs to be stabilized, prevented from being continually politicized or biased. These sorts of media critiques thus echo many of the calls for stabilization coming from the expert sphere.

If terrorism has not, and perhaps cannot, be pinned down to a fixed definition, then how should we comprehend its continued centrality in political discourse? What I want to suggest is

that rather than asking how terrorism should be defined, we instead ask, what is it that terrorism defines? I have argued that (debates over) definitions of terrorism tend to center around three central concerns: that it is illegitimate violence, perpetrated by enemies, with a political character. What the ongoing salience of the problem of definition suggests, however, is that none of these are self-evident, and, indeed, these indicate three of the most significant questions in contemporary political life. Who is the enemy? When is violence legitimate, and when is it illegitimate? (And relatedly, when is violence “out of place,” and when is it expected, or even normal?) And which questions and concerns count as properly political? Where is the boundary between the “political” and the “nonpolitical”? What I argue here, then, is that struggles over the definition of terrorism are struggles over the correct (meaning culturally agreed upon/ politically hegemonic) answers to these questions.

It is a commonplace in political science, most often attributed to Max Weber, that a key feature of the modern state is that it is the sole arbiter of legitimate violence. Terrorism, on the other hand, is most commonly understood as *illegitimate* violence. What my argument suggests, then, is that which is designated as terrorism, is defined as illegitimate violence. Violence that is seen as legitimate, or as potentially justifiable, will face resistance in being labeled as terrorism. The most apt example here might be the question of “state terrorism” itself, and the struggle over whether or not this can even be a possibility. When critics attempt to apply the label to the state, they are likely to face pushback.¹² Similarly, we can look at the attempts of movements such as Black Lives Matter to label police violence as terror, and the strong responses that these claims can engender.

But of course not all illegitimate violence is designated as terrorism. What I want to suggest here is that the core logic of the identification of terrorism “in practice” is that it is what

is identified as *violence out of place*. The question, then, of course, is what counts as “out of place”? As one commentator has declared, “The promise of the ‘war on terror’ was that we would kill them ‘over there’ so they would not kill us ‘over here.’”¹³ Violence out of place is violence that moves beyond where it is “expected” to occur: in a site that is expected to be “peaceful” (i.e. western/civilized, not a war zone); in a place where those considered “representative” live, i.e. not the “inner city,” and further: when it is unexpected, on a site perceived as “innocent,” and disconnected from explicit political causes or actions (thus attacks on an expressly “political” or “partisan” site are, ironically, less likely to be treated as terrorism than “random” or purely generic/civilian sites). The key thing here is what we might call the generalizability of those attacked- can they be seen as representative of the nation/our way of life, with all of the connotations of racial, class, and religious hierarchy and inequality that this entails.¹⁴ The less that this is seen to be the case, less likely an incident is to be treated as terrorism. This also explains why terrorism is commonly described by politicians as “attacks on our way of life”—because this is a conclusion derived from those sorts of incidents to which the label is most likely to be applied: those that target sites/groups most likely to be seen as representative of “us” (America or “the West”), usually committed by outsiders or those perceived to “out of place.” And furthermore, I suggest that this is what leads to the definition of such violence as “illegitimate”: it is not simply that “illegitimate” violence itself is considered terrorism, but rather, the reverse, that those acts labeled terrorism are illegitimate because they are “out of place,” not because of anything inherent to the acts.

Secondly, the application of terrorism can be seen to define “the enemy.” What does this mean? As many critics have noted, the definition of acts as terrorism tends to be dependent upon the identity of the perpetrator, with, at the current moment, those perceived to be Arab and

/or Muslim most likely to attract the label, while similar acts, when committed by those of differing backgrounds, will likely be categorized differently. An illustrative case here is the varying practical and discursive interpretation of the threat posed by (white, Christian, American) right-wing extremists. Despite a spreading consensus among both experts and police¹⁵ that this group represents the greatest potential threat of domestic mass violence in the U.S., this has not been translated accordingly into policy, and the labeling of right-wing violence as terrorism is still fairly contested by both politicians and the media. Following the release of a 2013 report from the Department of Homeland Security which highlighted the increasing danger from right-wing extremists, multiple politicians and commentators lashed out:

House Republican Leader, John Boehner, dismissed the report as “offensive and unacceptable.” Republican Rep. Gus Bilirakis called it “political and ideological profiling.” Conservative commentator Michelle Malkin wrote that it “was one of the most embarrassingly shoddy pieces of propaganda I’d ever read.”¹⁶

Third, the designation of an act of violence as terrorism defines that act as within the scope of the political, rather than the private, the personal, or the peculiar. For example, following the killing of nine Black churchgoers in 2015, the Director of the FBI initially discounted labelling this act as terrorism, commenting that, “Terrorism is act of violence done or threatens to in order to try to influence a public body or citizenry so it’s more of a political act and again based on what I know so more I don’t see it as a political act.”¹⁷ The public debate following the mass shooting of patrons of the *Pulse* gay nightclub in Orlando, FL in June 2016 can be used to illustrate how conceptualizations of terrorism define what is political. Like other mass shootings in recent American history, debate following the event centered on the question of whether this was terrorism. Initial reports that the shooter, Omar Mateen, was a Muslim of

Afghan heritage, and had “pledged allegiance” to ISIS in a 911 call made from the scene of the attack made this seem to be a straightforward case for most observers. And yet, after reports that Mateen had visited the club previously, and may have harbored same-sex desires, experts and the media began to seem much less certain about the designation of the massacre as terrorism. What I want to suggest here is that this shift tells us something about what sorts of violence counts as “political” in the contemporary U.S. If Mateen’s motives were linked to his sexuality, the thinking goes, the shooting was best understood as non-political.¹⁸ This interpretation has been contested by others, however, who pointed out that LGBTQ individuals and spaces have long been targets of violence stoked by homophobic currents in the dominant culture.¹⁹ In other words, what is at stake here in the application of the label “terrorism,” is whether violence against LGBTQ communities and individuals is understood as a *political* problem, or a more private form of violence, to be understood by reference to an individual’s psychology, rather than broader political or cultural forces. The struggle over whether the Pulse massacre constitutes terrorism is not unique: we can see similar struggles at play in the attempts of some feminists to reinterpret domestic violence as a form of terrorism,²⁰ or the Black Lives Matter movement to reinterpret police killings of African-Americans as a form of state terror. What all of these cases share is a struggle over whether categories of violence should be understood as primarily private, or primarily public and political. And because “terrorism” has come to be seen as perhaps the ultimate form of political violence in contemporary American society, these struggles often take the form of attempts to reclaim that label.

Commentary from both academic and journalistic advocates of “fixing” the definition tends to suggest that a proper definition of terrorism would be neutral both positionally (i.e. that it would apply equally to those we consider enemies and those we view as friends) and morally

(i.e. that it would not take into account the question of whether we approve of the acts of violence in question). As to the question of the “political,” the stabilizers tend to presume that the question of what is, or is not, political, is either self-evident, or at the very least, can be held steady. While I have previously pointed to the weakly institutionalized character of the field of terrorism expertise,²¹ here I return to my assertion that the problem of defining terrorism is a struggle over defining the enemy, the boundaries of legitimate violence, and the boundary of the political and the non-political. In other words, advocates of the stabilizing impulse, both in academic and journalistic debates, tends to presume that these three concerns can be purged from the debate. Yet it may be that none of these assumptions are correct.

The difficulty with this project of “fixing” the concept, and perhaps one reason why it has not yet succeeded, is that the “politicization” of (the concept of) terrorism is not primarily a corruption of an otherwise neutral term—in which case the solution would be simply the purification of the concept—the separation of the “core” essential bits from the extraneous, pasted on “politicized” pieces which bias it in one direction or another. Instead, however, “the political” is central to the concept from the start, and the question of what constitutes as “political” problem or motivation is itself contested—as I have suggested, it may be that the definition of “terrorism” defines what is political, rather than the other way round. Similarly, the questions of who is “the enemy” and when violence is legitimate or illegitimate are both central to conceptualization of “terrorism,” and themselves highly contested. Rather than trying to define “terrorism,” therefore, this chapter has suggested that we analyze the ways in which (struggles over) the definition(s) of terrorism act as conduits for struggles over three questions central to contemporary social and political life: “who is the enemy?”, “when is violence (il)legitimate?”, and “what is (and is not) political?”

¹ Lisa Stampnitzky, *Disciplining terror: How experts invented terrorism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

² *ibid.*

³ Interview with Brian Jenkins, as quoted in *ibid.*.

⁴ Alex P. Schmid and Albert J. Jongman, *Political terrorism: A new guide to actors, authors, concepts, data bases, theories and literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1988); Robert O. Slater, Michael Stohl, and Defense Academic Research Support Program, *Current perspectives on international terrorism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988):3; David Brannan, Phillip F. Esler, and N. T. Anders Strindberg, "Talking to 'terrorists': Towards an independent analytical framework for the study of violent substate activism," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 24(2001):11

⁵ This section draws on my book, *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented Terrorism* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), and Lisa Stampnitzky, "Disciplining an unruly field: Terrorism studies and theories of scientific/intellectual production," *Qualitative Sociology* 34, no. 1 (2011)..

⁶ *Ibid.*.

⁷ Crenshaw, Martha. 1995. *Terrorism in context*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

⁸ Schmid and Jongman, *Political terrorism: A new guide to actors, authors, concepts, data bases, theories and literature*.:xxi, 3; *ibid.*

⁹ Glenn Greenwald, "Refusal to Call Charleston Shootings "Terrorism" Again Shows It's a Meaningless Propaganda Term," *The Intercept* (6/19/2015), <https://theintercept.com/2015/06/19/refusal-call-charleston-shootings-terrorism-shows-meaningless-propaganda-term/>.

¹⁰ Sean Illing, "We must call him a terrorist: Dylann Roof, Fox News and the truth about why language matters ", *Salon*, no. Jun 21, 2015 (2015), http://www.salon.com/2015/06/21/we_must_call_him_a_terrorist_dylann_roof_fox_news_and_the_truth_about_why_language_matters/.

¹¹ Anthea Butler, "Shooters of color are called 'terrorists' and 'thugs.' Why are white shooters called 'mentally ill'?", *The Washington Post* (6/18/2015), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/06/18/call-the-charleston-church-shooting-what-it-is-terrorism/>.

¹² Richard Jackson, "The ghosts of state terror: knowledge, politics and terrorism studies," *Critical studies on terrorism* 1, no. 3 (2008); "Unknown knowns: the subjugated knowledge of terrorism studies," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 5, no. 1 (2012); Richard Jackson, Marie Smyth, and Jeroen Gunning, eds., *Critical terrorism studies: A new research agenda* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2009); Joseba Zulaika, *Terrorism: The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Edward Said, "The essential terrorist," in *Blaming the victims: Spurious scholarship and the Palestinian question*, ed. Edward Said and Christopher Hitchens (New York: Verso, 2001 (1988)).

¹³ Arun Kundnani, "Violence comes home: an interview with Arun Kundnani," *OpenDemocracy.com*(2015), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arun-kundnani-opendemocracy/violence-comes-home-interview-with-arun-kundnani>.

¹⁴ And thus attacks on the state/ on soldiers can also be included as terrorist attacks, in practice, as long as they fit this general schema.

¹⁵ "This month, the headlines were about a Muslim man in Boston who was accused of threatening police officers with a knife. Last month, two Muslims attacked an anti-Islamic conference in Garland, Tex. The month before, a Muslim man was charged with plotting to drive a truck bomb onto a military installation in Kansas. If you keep up with the news, you know that a small but steady stream of American Muslims, radicalized by overseas extremists, are engaging in violence here in the United States. But headlines can mislead. The main terrorist threat in the United States is not from violent Muslim extremists, but from right-wing extremists. Just ask the police. In a survey we conducted with the Police Executive Research Forum last year of 382 law enforcement agencies, 74 percent reported anti-government extremism as one of the top three terrorist threats in their jurisdiction; 39 percent listed extremism connected with Al Qaeda or like-minded terrorist organizations. And only 3 percent identified the threat from Muslim extremists as severe, compared with 7 percent for anti-government and other forms of extremism." Charles Kurzman and David Schanzer, "The Growing Right-Wing Terror Threat," *The New York Times* (6/16/2015), http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/16/opinion/the-other-terror-threat.html?nytmobile=0&_r=0. (See also Scott Shane, "Homegrown Extremists Tied to Deadlier Toll Than Jihadists in U.S. Since 9/11," *The New York Times* (6/25/2015), <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/25/us/tally-of-attacks-in-us-challenges-perceptions-of-top-terror-threat.html>. and Maggie Ybarra, "Majority of fatal attacks on U.S. soil carried out by white supremacists, not

terrorists," *The Washington Times* (6/24/2015), <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/jun/24/majority-of-fatal-attacks-on-us-soil-carried-out-b/>.)

¹⁶ Illing, "We must call him a terrorist: Dylann Roof, Fox News and the truth about why language matters ".

¹⁷ Andrew Husband, "FBI Director Says Charleston Shooting Not Terrorism," *Mediaite* (6/20/2015), <http://www.mediaite.com/tv/fbi-director-says-charleston-shooting-not-terrorism/>.

¹⁸ e.g. Jay Weaver and David Ovalle, "What motivated Orlando killer? It was more than terrorism, experts say ", *Miami Herald* (6/17/2016), <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/state/florida/article84511132.html>.

¹⁹ See, for example, Greggor Mattson, "Post-Orlando Truth For You: Gay Bars Aren't 'Safe Spaces'," *The Daily Beast* (6/18/2016), <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/06/18/post-orlando-truth-for-you-gay-bars-aren-t-safe-spaces.html>. and "Interview: If Orlando wasn't terrorism, why do gays feel terrorized?," (2016), <https://greggormattson.com/2016/06/16/interview-if-orlando-wasnt-terrorism-why-do-gays-feel-terrorized/>.

²⁰ Robin Morgan, *The Demon Lover: On the Sexuality of Terrorism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989).

²¹ Stampnitzky, "Disciplining an unruly field: Terrorism studies and theories of scientific/ intellectual production."