

The Event of Terrorism: ambiguous categories and public spectacle

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Abstract

This article examines the ways in which executive authority and media organisations categorise the spectacle of public violence and disaster, with particular reference to an event (the Germanwings crash in 2015) where large-scale fatalities were purposely caused. On occasions when a perpetrator commits multiple killings (acting impersonally but with ‘malice aforethought’, and usually against civilian victims), the immediate question appears to be whether or not the incident should be classified as a *terrorist* attack. This is especially the case during periods when mass or individual assaults are prominent in the public domain. In addition, however, there is usually a period of time when there is either some doubt as to the ‘correct’ depiction of an event, or caution is exercised as a general principle.

Although this hiatus reflects understandable concerns over the need to secure an accurate account, it is also, in part, generated by the problems inherent in the uses of unstable or contested definitions, which typify the family of terms that include both the *act* of terrorising individuals, groups and wider polities, and the supposedly *political* practice known as terrorism. This argument - that definitions of terrorist acts are both uncertain and flawed - is evident in the apparent refusal by some executive actors to consider certain types of incidents as terrorism *per se*.

Again, it appears that it is not always the scale of violence or the intent to terrorise that qualifies the occurrence as ‘terrorist’ in nature, but the actual or supposed affiliation of the perpetrators with specific political/religious beliefs or organisations. This is a form of *categorical myopia* (a leftover from earlier discursive configurations of the ‘war on terror’, which Mythen and Walklate suggested was the waging of hostilities “against an abstract noun” (2006: 129)) and is beginning to create dissent among a number of experts, critical academics, and citizens. This dissatisfaction stems, in my opinion, from the feeling that executive authorities continue to downgrade the seriousness of particular incidents: since ‘terrorism’ is supposed to be the most ‘offensive’ form of mass killing, the suspicion is that large-scale murder that terrorises but does not qualify as ‘terrorist’ activity, is relegated to an inferior category that requires less attention and less material recompense.

Categories and generic/particular events

In the current period, whenever a violent incident takes place - one that is initiated by a perpetrator determined to carry out spectacular murders of numerous individuals - one significant aspect of the news and its ‘agenda-setting’ procedures, is the need to distinguish between occurrences that can, and those that cannot be ascribed to terrorism. The attempt to place a particular

assault in one category or the other might seem to be nothing more than the exercise of common sense, as in some cases the motive for an act is made so clearly apparent, that its attributes are difficult to deny. This is true, for instance, when responsibility for terrorist assaults has been claimed by the putative culprits, and subsequently verified by executive authority. In other examples, the event may appear to fall short of the essential characteristics that would qualify it for inclusion in the designated class. Taken as a whole, the process of reproducing an intelligible overview of any specific event depends on its assignation to recognisable categories, which seems easy enough when some aspect of the occasion makes it seem like a ‘natural’ fit.

Behind, however, this apparently straightforward process lies an unspoken tension between two types of event, one described in academic literature as *generic* and another known as *particular* (Higginbotham, in Higginbotham et al, 2000: 50). In everyday, as well as in institutional practice, human beings look for patterns that can help make sense of, and narrativise, private and public occurrences, creating a tendency to sort events into a number of story types. van Dijk noted that “if we know or guess that an oncoming event is a story, we may activate our conventional knowledge about story schemata in our culture” (1988: 14). Higginbotham’s version of this insight is that “events enter semantic computation ... as they are linguistically represented through thematic grids” (2000: 76).

Although the analysis of complex texts now encompasses multi-modal approaches, marking a development from primarily linguistic models and allowing the finer interrogation of auditory/visual material, the substantive point remains: that the ready-made ‘typicality’ of any master category may be used to relegate some of the particular features of an incident to the background, particularly in instances where there is - as in this case - pressure to sort events into one of only two categories (‘terrorist related’ and ‘not terrorist related’). Before, however, this problematic issue is examined in more detail, we can begin with a typically ‘minor’ event, one for which (initially at least) only the simplest outline report was provided.

Categories and authoritative speech

An anonymous article in a British news source related an incident that took place “in a Poundland store in Oxfordshire”, where “a customer ... was stabbed to death” (*Independent*, 2015). After describing this apparently senseless attack, the article went on to note that “police say they *are not treating it as terrorism*” (2015, my emphasis). The way in which the police categorise an event can, of course, be controversial: the long history of cases where rape is ‘not treated’ as a serious sexual assault is a case in point. When police forces relegate a case to a less serious criminal division, or a specific individual to a lower level of priority, then this decision can affect the form of investigation that follows. However, as noted above, when violent events are reported in the news media, the response of authoritative public figures is cited as the primary source of explanatory intelligence.

This conforms to Bell's 1991 observation about the dependence on journalists of the 'facticity' of executive speech, meaning that when an authoritative statement is made, the fact of its utterance requires the media to recognise its import. The problem, of course, is that the fact of speech should not be transformed into an assumption about the 'truth' of content. Although journalists may question the statements made by politicians, police officers, and counter-terrorism experts, their opinions are nonetheless reproduced as an initial guide to violent incidents.

Accounts provided by other social actors are valued if, for example, they offer first hand evidence, if they emerge from the ranks of known or alleged perpetrators or, increasingly, if they are generated by those individuals who can offer an alternative and compelling interpretation of the 'terrorist' paradigm. In the example cited above, a decision has been taken which removes a 'terrifying' incident from the realm of terrorism, and it is unlikely that an analyst would take issue with this outcome.

The thesis offered here is not, however, that established media forms necessarily misrepresent violent events, nor that they merely convey the official definitions of these incidents. It is rather *i)* that "some of the factors that distort the representation of reality ... are ... premised upon everyday spontaneous cognitive and perceptual features and conceptions" (Lau, 2004: 707), *ii)* that the default or routine positions offered by dominant political actors convey a set of narrow conventions that reveal the deleterious legacy of the 'war on terror', and *iii)* that executive authority takes advantage of established assumptions to make terrorism appear as a particular form of ideologically motivated violence (Price: 2010).

According to the rhetorical utterances produced by political leaders, terrorism is committed on a large scale, by individual and/or collective 'non-state' actors, or by the clandestine operatives of rival powers that choose illicit methods to damage the ostensibly legitimate social order of the victimised nation. Terrorism is never attributed to the aggressive acts produced by the state that the speaker serves or represents, the hostile activities of which are described in alternative terms, as a form of legal or in some cases 'extraordinary' retribution, including acts of war and punitive raids.

The most strident of these ideological distinctions, between the supposedly more exalted quality of deeds committed by a formal power, and the evil conduct of its non-state rivals, is therefore weakened by the rhetorical opposition between the practices of the 'home' nation, and the ostensibly nefarious behaviour of alien but nonetheless *legitimate* state entities. If bona fide states can conduct terrorist operations, then this opens the door to a modification of the master-category, which has the potential to undermine the ethical claims of executive authority as a whole.

Overall, therefore, terrorism is given a specific ideological meaning, and is not represented simply as a technique that is available to social actors in general: armed insurgent groups are more likely to be labeled as exponents of terrorism than those 'non-political' individuals who are designated as psychologically unbalanced, while the association of state formations with

terrorism depends on their relative position as friends or enemies of the 'victimised' polity. The suggestion that terrorism can only be attributed to social actors who are driven by particular motives, means that it appears almost as a creed or belief (Price, 2010: 23), excluding some examples of mass violence that might otherwise help the analyst understand a much broader phenomenon of social, economic and psychological discontent.

The Germanwings crash: a sense of injustice

Based on what has been said above, my contention is therefore *i)* that the working definition of (post-9/11) terrorism, circulated by the public authorities of 'advanced' states, emphasises certain political characteristics at the expense of other modes of interpretation, and *ii)* that the consequence of this established practice is the creation of dissent among a number of legal analysts, state functionaries, and the relatives of victims. My second example of news coverage is used in an attempt to demonstrate these two points.

The Germanwings crash of 2015 was an event that - despite the scale and violence of the occasion - did not fit the standard definition of terrorism. A total of 149 people were killed when an aircraft was deliberately flown into a mountain range in the French Alps. Having locked the pilot out of the flight deck, the co-pilot, a troubled individual who had previously been treated for depression, set the auto-pilot to ensure that the aircraft would crash. An early report of 2015 noted, "Investigators ruled out terrorism early on, and their position did not change when it was revealed that they believed Andreas Lubitz had deliberately crashed the aircraft" (BBC news online). This development led one expert on air travel to identify "the excessive attention given to terrorism" at the expense of other threats (Calder, 27.3.15.). The fact that the cockpit door had been reinforced to make it more difficult for a hijacker to gain access, meant that the pilot, excluded from the flight deck, could not prevent Lubitz from carrying out his plan.

The sense that this event revealed the existence of a categorical inconsistency, was matched by the objection to the practical errors that arose from, and further reinforced, a distorted policy regime. The inability to provide standard explanations for the actions of 'disturbed' individuals like Lubitz are among the shortcomings that are beginning to receive attention within professional circles. The psychological imbalance attributed to individual murderers, for example, has reinforced the analysis of the unaffiliated 'lone wolf' assailant. In one recent case, a radio journalist caused extreme disquiet when he described the man who killed Labour MP Jo Cox as "deeply disturbed [and] mentally ill", and argued that it "muddie[d] the waters" to describe him as a terrorist: the British courts had established the sanity of the perpetrator, and had indeed found him guilty of terrorism (Sherwin, 6.3.17).

Professional attention often dwells, therefore, on the shared 'behavioural traits' of the individuals who carry out these massacres. One analyst, John D. Cohen (formerly the counter-terrorism coordinator for the Department of Homeland Security, and now an academic) gave a newspaper interview in

which he argued that these perpetrators go through a series of stages, “gravitating to an ideological cause” and thence to “tactics once reserved for *terrorist organisations*” (Gumbel, 2015, my emphasis). The suggestion here is that mass shootings are not automatically regarded as terrorist activities: instead, a certain kind of anti-social behaviour is the primary definer, after which potential offenders rationalise and aggrandise their discontent by associating it with deviant political philosophies. At first sight, this is a reasonable approach, because the psychological motivations that are supposed to underpin the actions of some jihadist and far-Right terrorists are meant to include conditions such as social isolation, personal dysfunction, and feelings of persecution. The problem lies with the tendency to amplify the cases of anyone who has an apparent affiliation with ‘Islamist’ doctrine, while giving less attention to the adherents of fascism. Some critics have pointed out a dangerous imbalance since, according to the New American Foundation, “domestic anti-government militants and white supremacists have killed more Americans since 9/11 than those inspired by al-Qaida and similar groups” (Shane, 2015).

My contention here is that there are many newsworthy incidents that might once have been treated as examples of pure criminality, without requiring further explanation. However, as suggested above, the ‘event’ of terrorism as a public phenomenon is discursively renewed through the discussion of successive incidents, requiring the formal intervention of authoritative social actors to draw attention to its salient features, and separating it from alternative explanations, that might otherwise help to adjust the impact of the dominant analytical perspective.

A limited conception of terrorism (a form, noted above, of ‘categorical myopia’) has particular effects on the type and scale of state intervention, as well as on the process with which this article is most concerned: the relationship between events, their mediation, and the production of official rationales. As argued previously, the difficulty of providing reliable descriptions of people or events, as each incident unfolds, entails not only ‘mistakes’ in classification, but can also be attributed to the enduring presence of flawed definitions of terrorism. In turn, the existence of these ambiguous templates seems to provide those in positions of authority with ready-made explanations that serve to protect their own interests, as distinct from those of the citizens they are supposed to represent.

Narrow political definitions of terrorist activity or state intervention are only abandoned and replaced with new approaches when they prove counter-productive for those in power (Price, 2010: 47), but the problem is that, to the relatives of those who have been deliberately terrorised and/or killed by mass murderers, current distinctions between forms of murder may seem offensive. As we have seen, the Germanwings crash of 2015 was not described as an act of terrorism, because it was not the consequence of belief-driven activities. Unless, however, the underlying flaws in ‘anti-terrorist’ policy and the inconsistent argument that states themselves do not commit acts of terror (or ‘terrorise’ their opponents) are addressed, public disquiet will continue to

undermine the validity of the entire category, while seeking to extend it to those mass murderers and nations that currently seem to avoid the full weight of moral approbation.

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