How (not) to study terrorism

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This article disputes the premise dominant in moral philosophy and the social sciences that a strict definition of terrorism is needed in order to evaluate and confront contemporary political violence. I argue that a definition of terrorism is not only unhelpful but also impossible if we take the historicity and flexibility of the concept seriously. Failure to account for terrorism as a historical phenomenon produces serious analytical and epistemological problems that result in an anachronistic, ahistorical, and reductive understanding. Because there are no historically or contextually stable answers to the question what terrorism is, I argue for a novel account of terrorism that replaces the attempt to define terrorism with an analysis of its meaning and function within a specific context.

Keywords: terrorism, definition, history

I. Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century, philosophers and social scientists as well as lawyers and policy makers concerned with security and political violence struggled to define terrorism. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, questions about the definition of terrorism have been raised with new urgency. Now more than ever, terrorism seems to demand an unequivocal definition.

To be sure, there is no shortage of definitions of terrorism in the scholarly literature (Schmid 1984). However, they are characterized by a considerable tension. On the one hand, lack of agreement about what constitutes terrorism results in an abundance of legal, scholarly and conventional definitions. On the other hand, there is an assumption that one knows terrorism when one sees it. Terrorism is simply what terrorists do, and the question of who and what terrorists are, is an ahistorical and context independent one. On this account,

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terrorism is recognized intuitively as a specific set of actions perpetrated by terrorists, who are also identified intuitively.

Because it seems so difficult to define terrorism, some scholars have advised against attempts to define terrorism on purely pragmatic grounds (Fletcher 2006; J. Waldron 2004). This article seeks to demonstrate that there are more fundamental epistemological, methodological and analytical reasons for resisting a definitional approach. I begin with a critical review of major approaches to studying terrorism (Sections II-V). An exhaustive discussion of the existing literature on terrorism not only goes beyond the scope of this article but also seems impossible, given the number of publications in the field. Consequently, the texts and authors examined in this context have to be regarded as key contributions to and exemplary representatives of terrorism scholarship. Based on the problems identified in much of this research, I argue for a novel account of terrorism which offers a more nuanced and more productive understanding of terrorism as a historically and contextually variable phenomenon (Section VI). I suggest that by studying the history of terrorism in terms of difference rather than similarity, one can overcome the problematic view that the concept of terrorism is based on the definition of the term, which is a context-independent and ahistorical constant. Instead, the concept of terrorism cannot be separated from a wider linguistic, social, political, and cultural context which constitutes an indispensable framework for any attempt to talk about terrorism.

II. Terrorism Studies

In the context of struggles for national liberation and decolonization as well as increasing ideological opposition to liberal democracy, the late 1960s saw a dramatic increase in political violence exercised by non-state actors and radical social movements. While this
violence was summarily called terrorism, an unequivocal definition of terrorism was needed in order to take political and legal action. At this juncture, the academic field of Terrorism Studies emerged within the social sciences.¹

Terrorism Studies produced a vast number of definitions of terrorism in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions of terrorism. What these definitions share is an understanding of terrorism as the ‘indiscriminate use of violence against a civil population with the aim of spreading panic and pressurizing a government or an international political authority’ (Zolo 2009a). Because of the broad implications of this view, this approach has led to the identification of allegedly similar manifestations of violence throughout history and an attempt to develop effective counter-terrorist strategies on the basis of knowledge about how terrorism was fought and defeated in the past.

Three fundamental problems with this approach can be identified: The first and most profound is its problematic treatment of history. Calling the Zealots of ancient Judea or medieval Assassins terrorists avant la lettre is not only anachronistic but also decontextualizes the currently dominant understanding of terrorism, imposing it on violent actions that had different aims, used different tactics, and were interpreted in a different way at the time they were performed. The result is that Terrorism Studies distorted historical knowledge and inhibited understanding of these forms of violence.²

Second, on a purely descriptive level, state violence all too often appears identical to terrorism. Terrorism studies pays insufficient attention to the fact that states also engage in ‘the deliberate killing of innocent people, at random, in order to spread fear through a whole population and force the hand of its political leaders’ (Walzer 2006a)³. Consequently, it fails to recognize that the distinction which separates state violence from terrorism is imposed by actors who have a stake in a particular way of defining terrorism. In other words, despite a
seemingly objective definition, the *de facto* attribution of the term serves the ideological purposes of the state by excluding states as subjects of terrorism.

Third, the definitions of terrorism proposed by Terrorism Studies invariably contain a normative element. That is to say, they claim to merely describe a phenomenon yet do so in explicitly normative terms. Some moral philosophers in particular argue that a normative definition is the necessary prerequisite for any kind of ethical evaluation of terrorism. As Tamar Meisels claims, ‘if terminology is to contribute to ethical judgment, the definition itself ought to highlight the characteristic normative category in question’ (Meisels 2009, 334). Meisels further contends that because terrorism is a derogatory term – which is ‘why no one applies it to himself or herself and practically everyone nowadays attempts to apply it to his or her enemies’ – we can assume that the ‘characterizing features we are looking for’ in our attempt to define terrorism ‘are bound to be at least objectionable if they are to bear any connection with ordinary speech’ (Meisels 2009, 334). The unfortunate consequence of this view is that this reliance on everyday speech introduces a moral judgment of terrorism as wrong or evil into academic discourse. This judgment then becomes one of terrorism’s essential characteristics and is built into a definition whose ostensible purpose is to serve as the basis of philosophical moral assessment. Thus, even those philosophers who concede or, indeed, insist that their conceptions of terrorism may very well apply to states, adopt definitions that are normatively biased.4

To conclude, the definitions offered by Terrorism Studies are based on everyday conceptions of terrorism that are normative and ideological. These definitions then become the basis for an investigation of historical cases of political violence and an anachronistic attribution of a currently dominant understanding of terrorism to forms of violence that were perceived in very different ways at the time. The outcome is not only a distortion of
historical knowledge but also a biased and prejudiced representation of contemporary forms of political violence.

III. Terrorist profiling

While Terrorism Studies played into the hands of powerful political interests by producing definitions that were ahistorical, open to political instrumentalization, and biased, these definitions failed to bring about satisfactory results with regard to effective counter-terrorist policies. Because terrorism was recognized by way of identifying its constitutive elements, it could only be confirmed retrospectively, after acts of terrorism had been committed. A drastic increase in political violence in the 1970s along with an internationalization of terrorism increased political pressure to not only respond to but rather prevent terrorist violence.

The programmatic shift to prevention during the 1970s was closely connected with the establishment of a new approach in terrorism research that claimed to single out terrorists before they could carry out terrorist acts. By replacing the attempt of the ‘soft’ social sciences to determine terrorism by defining terrorist violence, this new approach was based on ‘hard’ scientific facts concerning the terrorist personality. Its aim was a ‘fixed and unambiguous “terrorist profile”’, a list of characteristics that permit identification of actual or potential terrorists’ (Crenshaw 2000, 407). However, like their social-scientific predecessor, major socio-statistical studies were not only ideologically biased and lacked scientific objectivity, but also produced unsatisfactory results (cf. Russell and Miller 1977). Terrorist profiling failed to provide an objective, conclusive and determinate terrorist profile, because it could not explain why relatively unsuspicious individuals eventually turned to terrorism.
The impossibility of establishing a clear empirical connection between terrorism and personal hardship or a precarious social status gave rise to the hypothesis that any attempt at determining the rationality behind terrorism was futile because a terrorist rationality simply did not exist. Rather, it was surmised that terrorism was fundamentally irrational and ‘its advocates … sick’ (Rasch 1979, 79). Instead of being considered criminal behavior, terrorism became an issue of pathology, deviance and personality disorder.\(^5\) A whole range of systems of classification was developed on the basis of an alleged connection between terrorism and abnormality (cf. Silke 1998). Psychoanalytical approaches investigated the connection between childhood trauma, low self-esteem and terrorist behavior was noticeable in studies of female terrorists who were described as ‘everything women are not supposed to be’ (Crenshaw 2000, 408).\(^6\) More recently, psychologists have turned to tracking pathways of terrorists, that is, to determine particular life events that explain why rational individuals turn to terrorist and, thus, irrational behavior.

Even though there is significant doubt about the scientific validity and plausibility of these studies, an association of terrorism and psychological deviance is of great political use.\(^7\) As Wilfried Rasch has demonstrated, ‘endeavours to explain the phenomenon of terrorism with the help of psychological or psychopathological models or, as has been done during trials, to denounce the offenders simply as paranoids, neurotics, or psychopaths, are intentionally part of the psychological warfare by which the offenders, their goals and their ideas, are disqualified. If this can be achieved, a discussion of the terrorists’ political arguments and related issues may be avoided’ (Rasch 1979, 79). The statistical, sociological and psychological instruments deployed in terrorism research have helped to create a ‘vast apparatus for the “fight against terrorism”’ and the screening and monitoring of suspicious persons, ‘not just for highly treasonable or terrorist activities, but for any activities that might
cast doubts on their political “reliability” (Rasch 1979, 85). In short, there are political interests that result in a reluctance to let go of scientifically unsound and refuted assumptions about the psychological abnormality of terrorists.

In conclusion, ostensibly neutral ‘hard’ scientific data about terrorism appear to serve the same ideological interests as the knowledge produced by the ‘soft’ sciences associated with Terrorism Studies. In fact, because of the need to identify terrorist who then become subjects of psychological, psychiatric and socio-statistical research, the ‘knowledge’ produced by terrorist profilers was equally biased and no more reliable than the definitions of terrorism established by Terrorism Studies.

**IV. Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS)**

In 1996, anthropologists Joseba Zulaika and William A. Douglass conducted ethnographic research into the Basque experience with terrorism and suggested an alternative account of terrorism as a discourse that constructs the terrorist as a political subject. Insisting on the discursive construction of a terrorist threat, on the one hand, and on the very real effects of discursive formations, on the other, the authors showed how an image of terrorism became a structural reality and a historical force, thereby facilitating otherwise unjustifiable techniques of power (Zulaika and Douglass 1996).

Zulaika’s and Douglass’ work gave rise to a serious attempt at a ‘revitalising “critical turn” within the broader terrorism studies field’ (Jackson 2009a). The newly emerging field of CTS attacked ‘the truly voluminous output’ of mainstream terrorism studies in the wake of 9/11 (Jackson, Smyth, and Gunning 2009, 1). Emphasizing the need for a new methodological approach and critical perspective in terrorism scholarship, CTS has since found its niche within an academic landscape that is increasingly concerned with the
justification of a global war on terrorism and the problematic relationship between international law, national sovereignty, and imperial power.

Proponents of CTS research argue that a critical perspective on terrorism is pertinent given the limitations of traditional accounts. CTS claims to respond to four major shortcomings of traditional terrorism studies: methodological and analytical weaknesses; biased normativity in favor of state interests; a problem-solving approach; and institutional and intellectual ties with state security projects. More specifically, CTS scholars reprimand traditional terrorism studies for relying on ‘poor research methods and procedures’, a ‘failure to develop an accepted definition of terrorism’, a lack of interdisciplinary research, a ‘persistent lack of historicity’, as well as failure to sufficiently analyze state terrorism (Jackson 2007, 244-245).

Even though CTS scholars correctly point out some of the major shortcomings of conventional terrorism scholarship, some of their key objections are simply false. First, claiming that the field of terrorism research lacks historicity, interdisciplinarity and a focus on state terrorism is disingenuous and factually wrong. While the way in which historical examples of terrorism are used in much of the more mainstream literature is indeed problematic (section II), critical scholars of terrorism are wrong to accuse traditional scholarship of a lack of historicity and contextualization. Even though one might harbor legitimate concerns about the motivations for and approach to historical examples, it is insincere, to say the least, to discount a whole body of literature examining the relevance of the history of political violence for terrorism studies. Second, it is certainly true that the bulk of terrorism research has traditionally been policy-oriented or at least used for political purposes. Nevertheless, it does not follow that neutral or unbiased knowledge about terrorism, including knowledge about the contexts and conditions in which something like
terrorism is mobilized as a form of violence or as a discursive representation of violence, is impossible. Neither does the overwhelmingly pejorative understanding of the term terrorism necessarily preclude any objective knowledge of the concept, its meaning, and its use. Similarly, many more mainstream scholars in the field have documented the use of terrorism historically made by states and governments against their own populations. While it is true that these scholars have generally been unwilling to extend this kind of analysis to the United States and other liberal democracies, a wholesale dismissal of terrorism research for not considering state terrorism tout court is both false and dishonest.9

More interesting for the purpose of this article, however, is the solution proposed by CTS to the failure of Terrorism Studies to generate an accepted definition of terrorism. One might expect a certain reluctance to define terrorism, given CTS scholars’ committement to the ‘inherent ontological instability of the “terrorism” category’ (Jackson 2007, 244) and their consequent ‘skepticism towards … the “terrorism” label because it is recognized that in practice it has always been a pejorative rather than analytical term and that to use the term is a powerful form of labeling that implies a political judgement about the legitimacy of actors and their actions’ (Jackson 2007, 247). It is, therefore, all the more surprising that ‘CTS views terrorism fundamentally as a strategy or a tactic of political violence’ which ‘involves the deliberate targeting of civilians in order to intimidate or terrorise for distinctly political purposes’ (Jackson 2007, 248).

Despite the claim that terrorism is neither a ‘brute fact’ nor an ‘analytical term’ but instead a way of representing violence in a certain way (Jackson 2007, 247), CTS nevertheless conceptualizes terrorism as a ‘form of behaviour that can, within specific discursive and structural contexts, be understood as “terrorist”’ (Jackson, Smyth, and Gunning 2009, 9). Not only does this view reproduce key elements of many mainstream definitions of
terrorism, but also belies the alleged anti-naturalism, anti-essentialism and anti-determinism of CTS by having to determine the specific difference that distinguishes the tactic of terrorism from other forms of political violence.

Even though CTS scholars are critical of the attribution of the label ‘terrorism’ to certain kinds of violence, they agree with traditional accounts of terrorism that something like terrorism exists and that it is possible to identify it. The problem diagnosed by CTS, then, is not only that governments themselves seem to engage in what they define as terrorism, but that governments apply the term to forms of violence that are, in fact, legitimate forms of resistance, insurgency or civil conflict. CTS scholars claim to know that governments do this because of ideological reasons. They also argue that governments are not justified in doing so. Consequently, CTS scholars seek to reclaim and reserve the label terrorism for forms of violence that are ‘properly’ terrorist. As Jackson explains, CTS consequently has to be ‘openly normative in orientation’ because ‘through the identification of who the “terrorist other” actually is – deciding and affirming which individuals and groups may be rightly called “terrorists” is a routine practice in the field – terrorism studies actually provides an authoritative judgment about who may legitimately be killed, tortured, rendered or incarcerated by the state in the name of counter-terrorism’ (Jackson 2007, 249).

It is, however, not at all clear by what standards this distinction is made or on what basis CTS scholars can claim a privileged position in distinguishing between terrorist and non-terrorist or legitimate and illegitimate violence – let alone attribute authority to determine who may be tortured or killed on the basis of such problematic arguments. CTS scholars have to introduce a criterion by which to differentiate terrorism proper from legitimate violence, a criterion that is neither clear cut nor historically or contextually stable. Justifications of violence in terms of a natural or moral right to violent resistance, for
instance, are not too far away from the legitimation of state violence proffered by conventional terrorism research. Just like Terrorism Studies, CTS enshrines terrorism as an instrument for classifying particular types of behavior and then giving that classification the force of law. By announcing its critical stance towards governments’ opportunism and politicization of terrorism, CTS covers over its own complicity in the production of a powerful weapon that allows to attribute legitimacy to certain forms of violence while criminalizing others.

V. Radical approaches

After the events of 9/11, a new approach to terrorism emerged in legal, political and International Relations theory that sought to account for terrorism as the unavoidable product of Western politics, the despotism of liberal universalism or global capital. More concretely, scholars in this field attempt to make sense of the illiberal practices of ostensibly liberal democracies in the context of the War on Terror (cf. Bigo and Tsoukala 2008; Dillon and Reid 2009; Evans 2012).

One of the most prominent approaches in this field argues that the rhetoric of terrorism not only establishes a permanent state of exception but also reveals the United States to be the new global sovereign (cf. Schmitt 2005). It is further contended that exceptional measures deployed in the context of terrorism are not actually exceptional but rather indicative of the normal workings of liberalism and the rule of law. The dismantling of legal norms, the outlawing of terrorist suspects, the surveillance of individuals and the suspension of constitutional rights are merely the most visible manifestation of the underlying logic of any political order. On this view, the concept of terrorism is an expedient instrument to justify the imperialism and violence inherent in liberalism and the rule of law.
In contrast to Carl Schmitt’s endorsement of sovereign decisionism, most radical scholars concerned with a critical analysis of the instrumentalization of terrorism discourse in the War on Terror seek to highlight the catastrophic consequences of exceptional politics. Mobilizing Foucault’s work on risk, security and a specifically modern (bio)political concern with life as well as Agamben’s historical and analytic ‘correction’ or ‘completion’ of Foucault, they argue that discourses of terrorism help to create an atmosphere of risk, fear and danger that in turn allows for the exercise of sovereign power in the form of exceptional measures not covered by law under normal conditions (cf. Agamben 1998). Detention camps like Guantanamo Bay, black sites and torture facilities such as Abu Ghraib but also exceptional legislation such as the USA PATRIOT Act or the UK Terrorism Acts are a case in point.

In a global context, these mechanisms result in a situation where, under the pretext of pre-emptive strike, human rights and the promotion of democracy, the US has become an imperial power that is *legibus solutus* at the international level, while ‘in the domestic sphere its power is “non-representative”’ and opposed to the principles of the European *Rechtsstaat* (Zolo 2009a). The representation of terrorism as a threat to freedom, security and humanity serves to exempt major powers from their own laws, thereby enabling the pursuit of imperial interests in the guise of humanitarian motives and a concern with freedom, democracy and security. The intertwining of the rhetoric of human rights with discourses of terrorism justifies illegal wars waged by the West for the protection of its interests and the expansion of power as both a liberating mission and pre-emptive strike.

While terrorism serves as the justification for this new kind of imperialism, its effect is that the new emperors (the United States and its allies) are getting away with crimes against peace that are far worse than those acts of violence usually branded as terrorism which deny the hegemony of the West. As a consequence, some scholars have not only suggested that
the real terrorists are the world’s major powers and that terrorism is the weapon of the major powers, but that those acts of violence traditionally identified as terrorism have to be understood as an attempt to interrupt the violence of global capital and its ideological backer, liberalism (Chomsky 2001; Derrida 2005; Zolo 2009b). More outlandish renderings of this line of argument can be found in the work of Slavoj Žižek who, based on a distorted interpretation of Walter Benjamin’s deconstruction of the relationship between violence and law, has proposed an interpretation of terrorism as ‘divine violence’ (Žižek 2008). Other examples are Jean Baudrillard, who claimed that the suicide bombers of 9/11 only did what ‘we’ had wished for, or the German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen who called 9/11 ‘the greatest work of art there has ever been’ (Baudrillard 2003; Stockhausen 2002, 76-77; my translation).

From a theoretical standpoint, this understanding, albeit far from defining terrorism as a naturally given and relatively stable form of violence, nevertheless sees it in its continuity as the constitutive outside of Western politics, liberalism, and capitalism. This explanation is no less ideological, ahistorical and reductive than more traditional accounts of terrorism. By treating present-day political practices as the logical result of an inescapable historical development of Western politics and failing to take seriously the complex and uneven development of terrorism, capitalism, and liberal law, radical accounts of terrorism reduce to sameness things which are, in fact, important differences. But, one might object, how do we know that we are not actually dealing with the same thing? Why should we, to all appearances arbitrarily, draw distinctions between manifestations of violence which, by all accounts, seem to share important features? While I will suspend the question of terrorism’s ontological (in)stability for the remainder of this article, I will try to show in the following section that there are good reasons for assuming its variability on methodological grounds.
VI. An alternative approach

I argued in previous sections that terrorism studies, traditional and critical alike, suffers from a series of methodological problems. These problems result from attempts of terrorism scholars to identify the essence of terrorism in a set of constitutive elements or conditions. Whether they are regarded as naturally given or discursively produced, the search for these elements and conditions invariably results in an understanding of terrorism that is ahistorical, reductive, and ideologically biased. While there might indeed be certain similarities that can be found in perceptions of terrorism at various points in time, the assumed stability of terrorism is merely conventional, that is, the effect rather than the cause of habitual ways of defining terrorism. As such, the claim that terrorism is definable ignores and actually obscures the contestations over the term, the resistances against dominant interpretations, the power struggles underlying these frictions, and the various effects that can be achieved by deploying a rhetoric of terrorism in different social, historical and political contexts.

To avoid the kind of politically charged, ahistorical, and naturalizing account of terrorism prevalent in much of the literature on terrorism, we ought to adopt the methodological premise that terrorism is something different in different circumstances. The question what terrorism is has to be replaced with an attempt to discover what ‘terrorism’ means, what it does or helps to do, and how it functions in a given context. Instead of an examination of history in search of acts of violence that ‘will have been’ terrorism once they are passed through the grid of current taxonomies, history becomes a repository of singular experiences which can be examined in relation to the concept of terrorism, as it is mobilized and operationalized in different rhetorical, political, and legal frameworks. In other words, a
more reliable and accurate understanding of terrorism is to be found not in a universal definition but in particular cases and statements that employ this term.

One might object that approaching terrorism by way of its concrete discursive manifestations leaves the scholar at an impasse where nothing can be said about terrorism except what has already been said. More than that, it would seem foolish to assume that we cannot identify any similarities or commonalities in the real violence actually taking place at different points in history. The difficulty that presents itself is, thus, how to overcome the problems associated with the search for an objectively valid, universal essence of terrorism, while also avoiding the claim that nothing can be said about terrorism since the only object of scholarly analysis are its politically, historically, socially, and culturally determined representations.

We can begin to resolve this difficulty by noting the importance of those politically, historically, socially, and culturally determined representations for the study of terrorism. While it is not my intention to suggest that no real violence is used in so-called acts of terrorism, it cannot be denied that there is something other than or, rather, in addition to the actual violence that makes political violence terrorism. How else could the arbitrary use of violence against civilians for political purposes be considered terrorism in some instances, as in the case of 9/11, but not in others, as for example during the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 (cf. Zolo 2009a)? The identification of violence as terrorism evidently relies on a complex framework of references that determines how terrorism is understood and, hence, when the terrorism label can be applied in a meaningful way. Even though concrete examples of terrorism are indispensible for any meaningful inquiry into terrorism as a historical phenomenon, the primary purpose of that inquiry is the extrapolation of regularities and patterns that shed light on the wider frameworks of historical, social,
cultural, and political interests, concepts, and rationalities within which terms like ‘terrorism’ become meaningful. More concretely, whether an act of violence is considered to be just, legitimate, or beneficial for the common good or, instead, as an act of terrorism against the security and well-being of a given community, depends on more general conceptions of justice, legitimacy, and what is considered necessary or permitted for the welfare of society. Since these perceptions change over time and vary from one community to another, the concept of terrorism is subject to similar re-articulations.

On this account, terrorism appears as a nominal concept, so to speak, that is attributed to certain acts of violence within a wider network of references. As such, its meaning can be derived from similarities in the discursive representation of terrorism that can be established through an examination of particular examples. In this way, our understanding of terrorism is not enslaved to particularities and thus general enough to allow for comparison, while at the same time avoiding the universality and invariance of a definition.

If there is anything more that can be said about terrorism at all, the dominant understanding of terrorism as a particular form in which violence presents itself has to be replaced with the premise of the flexibility of terrorism as the content of a concept that is articulated within a set of variable parameters. We are only able to identify regularities and ruptures and, thus, periods in which hegemonic conceptions of terrorism have prevailed over and against subversive discourses if we straddle the line between reducing terrorism to mere discourse and ascribing to it universal status.

While a comprehensive account of terrorism based on the alternative account outlined above is beyond the scope of this article, a cursory application of its methodological principles to three paradigmatic examples of terrorism will suffice to highlight the virtues of this approach and indicate some potential findings. Until the middle of the nineteenth
century, terrorism had largely been understood in the context of the French Revolution. The first phase of Thermidorian rule immediately after Robespierre’s execution in 1794 was characterized by an understanding of terrorism as the ‘justice of cannibals’, exercised by a government that had to preserve its power by ‘threatening people, threatening them always and for everything, threatening them with all the cruelties one can imagine’ (Tallien 1847, 513-614; my translation). On this account, terrorism was ‘incessant agony’, ‘terror itself, which installs itself in the soul despite a feeling of innocence’, which results in ‘a stupid fear of people’ (Tallien 1847, 613; my translation). The Thermidorian identification of terrorism with the Jacobin Reign of Terror was echoed by political commentators on all sides of the ideological spectrum. Rejecting the Jacobins’ restriction of the freedom of expression, the pamphleteer Gracchus Babeuf initially denounced terrorism as ‘the government of blood, the government of Robespierre, the tyranny of Robespierre, the despotism of the committees, and all the subsequent atrocities, the guillotining, the shootings, the drownings, oppression, despair, all forms of squalor, deprivation and misery’ (Babeuf 1966a, 4; my translation). In light of increasing violence and mass liquidations of those suspected of Jacobinism, however, Babeuf proclaimed that the word terrorist had become ‘synonymous with patriot and friend of the principles’ in the hands of the new government (Babeuf 1966b, 304; my translation). The Thermidorians were soon accused of using terrorism as a ‘mot magique’ and a ‘trompe-l’œil’, a sham that allowed them to secure their power and silence their enemies (Brunot 1937, 654; Aulard 1951, 567). Faced with further intensification of Thermidorian counter-terrorist violence, Babeuf ultimately accused the Thermidorians of being terrorists themselves. Referring to their leader, Jean Lambert Tallien, as ‘the terrorist from Bordeaux’ (Babeuf 1966b, 306; my translation), he demanded that Tallien had to be ‘guillotined. But how? Like a terrorist, too … a drinker of blood, a destroyer, an incendiary’
The French Revolution was thus characterized, on the one hand, by hegemonic political rhetoric that identified terrorism with the Jacobin Reign of Terror and established a conception of terrorism as a certain form of government and an instrument of state power. On the other hand, subversive discourses circulated that regarded the terrorism label as a useful rhetorical instrument that allowed the Thermidorian government to denounce and eliminate its opponents while at the same time engaging in its own kind of terrorism, that is, in excessive, illegal, and therefore illegitimate violence against true patriots. Regardless of ideological commitments, the concept of terrorism was articulated around the problem of the legitimacy of state violence.

It was not until the crises of 1848 that terrorism was uncoupled from state violence. Despite continued reference to the Jacobin Reign of Terror, the term was repositioned in response to changing contexts. Babeuf’s identification of terrorism and patriotism was absorbed by Early Socialists like Saint-Simon and Blanqui and made its way into the theories of a small number of influential Russian revolutionaries (cf. Morozov 1972; Stepniak 1883). Even though most anarchists denounced violence, the protracted implementation of political, legal, and economic reforms resulted in increasing radicalization and the development of a violent revolutionary movement in Russia. The tsarist regime reacted with repression and revoked substantial parts of the Great Reforms. Against these measures, the revolutionaries called for a ‘Russian Jacobinism’ in the tradition of ‘the great terrorists of the 1790s’ (Herzen, cited in Venturi 1964, 293-296). While Stepniak glorified the terrorists as martyrs for freedom, there were other, more strategic ways of conceptualizing terrorism as the tactic of choice for ‘anti-government terrorists’ (Morozov 1972, 106). ‘Terroristic struggle’, according to Morozov, ‘has exactly this advantage that it can act unexpectedly and find means and ways which no one anticipated’ (Morozov 1972, 106). Because ‘it replaces by
a series of individual political assassination, which always hit their target, the massive revolutionary movements, where people often rise against each other because of misunderstanding and where a nation kills off its own children, while the enemy of the people watches from a secure shelter and sees to it that the people of the organization are destroyed’, terrorism ‘punishes only those who are really responsible for the evil deed’ and is, therefore, ‘the only just form of a revolution’ (Morozov 1972, 106). While the revolutionaries adopted the label terrorism in order to highlight their alliance with the Jacobin fight against absolutist monarchy, the tsarist regime mobilized a rhetoric of terrorism to prevent a loss of power through liberal reforms. After the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, the ‘Statute on measures to safeguard state security and public order’, or Security Law, was issued on August 14, 1881. Enacted as a temporary regulation limited to three years, this statute gave broad discretionary powers such as summary search, arrest, imprisonment, exile, and trial by courts-martial to government officials (cf. Daly 1995; Riasanovsky 2000; P. Waldron 1995). While these powers were used in exceedingly cruel ways, they were justified as counter-terrorist measures necessary for the protection of ‘the existing state structure’ and ‘the security of individuals and their property’ (P. Waldron 1995, 2). To stop the terrorists, opponents of the established regime and supporters of political and economic liberalization, the new penal code was suspended, and terrorists were tried by martial law and exceptional tribunals and condemned to exile or execution. In contrast to the hegemonic understanding of terrorism as excessive state violence in the French Revolution, in late-imperial Russia both the rhetoric of the regime as well as the self-understanding of the revolutionaries regarded terrorism as non-state violence aiming for liberal reform.

The concept of terrorism took on its current meaning and use only after the world wars and the experience of totalitarianism in the twentieth century. In an international legal
and political context characterized by the attempt to eliminate war, particularly aggressive war, terrorism was rearticulated as the ultimate international crime. The paradoxical result is that the perceived threat of terrorism justifies the exercise of aggressive and, consequently, formally illegal violence used by states in the name of preemptive self-defense and humanitarian intervention. Because conflicting political interests of UN member states stifled an accepted legal definition of terrorism, its meaning is effectively established by its use (cf. Friedrichs 2006). This has resulted has in the establishment of a ‘common understanding of terrorism’ with the convenient effect that states are put in a ‘position to determine on a case-by-case basis who the international public enemy … happens to be’ (Friedrichs 2006, 89). Given the organizational structure of the UN as well as the inequalities of power and influence among states, the lack of a legal definition and the ad hoc identification of terrorism is a tactical advantage for the world’s dominant powers. The framework within which the meaning of terrorism is thus determined is no longer one of the legality of violence and the nature of the perpetrator, but depends on whether the use of violence furthers or opposes ‘Western’ values. As the 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States maintains, ‘the great struggles of the twentieth century between liberty and totalitarianism ended with a decisive victory for the forces of freedom – and a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise’ (National Security Council 2002, 1). These values are allegedly ‘threatened by war and terror’, ‘challenged by the clashing wills of powerful states and the evil design of tyrants’, and ‘tested by widespread poverty and disease’; yet at the same time, ‘free trade and free markets have proven their ability to lift whole societies out of poverty – so the United States will work with individual nations, entire regions, and the entire global trading community to build a world that trades in freedom and therefore grows in prosperity’ (National Security Council
And while the 2011 U.S. Counter-Terrorism Strategy claims that ‘we are not at war with the tactic of terrorism or the religion of Islam’, the U.S. uses the terrorism label for ‘groups [that] seek to undermine the security and stability of allied and partner governments, foment regional conflicts, traffic in narcotics, or otherwise pursue agendas that are inimical to U.S. interest’ (Council on Foreign Relations 2011, 2-4). In contrast to the oscillation of terrorism between state-violence and anti-state violence exercised by non-state opponents of a regime through which the meaning of terrorism had been determined from the French Revolution until the end of the Second World War, terrorism today applies to anyone, state or non-state political actors, who presents a threat to the national security and political interests of the world’s major powers.

These three examples suggest a pattern in discourses of terrorism in which the concept names illegitimate violence exercised by a state against its own citizens in the eighteenth century, illegitimate non-state violence against an absolute monarch to extort liberal reforms in the late nineteenth century; and third, a broadening of the concept since the twentieth century that includes illegal and illegitimate state and non-state violence that threatens national security and the political interests of the world’s major powers. It would seem that, in spite of their differences, these conceptions share a smallest common denominator: violence whose legitimacy is contested. Nevertheless, I want to caution against such a minimal definition of terrorism for two reasons. First, because any definition, even a minimal one, partakes in the essentialism criticized above and is, thus, unable to benefit from the approach for which I argued. Second, because insisting that all terrorism involves ostensibly illegitimate violence excludes an analysis of phenomena like cyber terrorism where actual or threatened physical violence is absent. Future research on these and other historical cases as well as an extension of the analysis to the use of the concept of terrorism
in non-Western, colonial, and postcolonial contexts would not only allow for more reliable conclusions concerning the synchronic as well as diachronic differences in the meaning of terrorism, but also bring into view the variable function of terrorism discourse. Through detailed and extensive analysis of further archival data one could highlight the ways in which certain conceptions of terrorism are instrumental for the implementation of particular mechanisms of power. In other words, instead of examining ‘the State’ and its possible responses to terrorism given within its institutional framework, the alternative account of terrorism outlined in this section ultimately paves the way for an analysis of the necessity of particular discourses of terrorism as the condition of possibility of realizing political interests through certain techniques of power.

Even though the immediate response to such an investigation might well be to dismiss it as a frustrating exercise in historical relativism, it is worth considering that it may be precisely its fluidity and instability that makes terrorism such a successful political concept. There are reasons for the changing meaning of terrorism across time and between societies, and these reasons shed light on larger social, political, cultural or economic developments. The different articulations and applications of the term make it impossible to tell a history of terrorism as the history of a naturally given, unchanging, and unequivocally identifiable form of violence. At the same time, however, there are certain regularities in the articulation of terrorism that, even though they are historically contingent, are nevertheless identifiable and establish rules which, however fragile and transitory they might be, govern what can be said about terrorism. If we succeed in recognizing the contingency of these rules and comprehending terrorism as a variable historical function, perhaps we could begin to discern similarity where we assume difference, and difference where we assume identity. Perhaps it
would be the starting point for a more meaningful and politically productive evaluation of terrorism as well as other forms of political violence.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank William Scheuerman, Tarik Kochi, and two anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions and constructive criticism.

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1 For detailed yet rather schematic surveys of the field see (Ranstorp 2006; Gordon 2010).
2 For representatives of this problematic interpretation of historical cases of violence see (Chaliand and Blin 2007; Clutterbuck 1986; Crenshaw 1993; Hoffman 1998; Juergensmeyer 2001; Rapoport 1984; Rapoport 1990).
3 In this context, Zolo mentions crimes against peace perpetrated by the US and its allies in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Guatemala, Lebanon, Cuba, San Domingo, Grenada, Libya, Panama, Nicaragua or, more recently, the NATO intervention in Kosovo and the wars waged against Afghanistan and Iraq (Zolo 2009a).
4 For examples see (Walzer 2006b; Walzer 2006c; Goodin 2006; Honderich 2003; Honderich 2004; Held 2008). Tarik Kochi aptly refers to such definitions as ‘partisan judgments’ (Kochi 2009, 250).
6 See also (Neuberger and Valentini 1996).
7 As early as 1979, Rasch argued that ‘no conclusive evidence has been found for the assumption that a significant number of them are disturbed or abnormal’ (Rasch 1979, 80). Andrew Silke argues that the weakness of psychological and socio-statistical research is its reliance on largely ‘anecdotal evidence’ and its lack of ‘detailed descriptions of the data … gathered or of … analysis procedures’ (Silke 1998, 61). Many more differentiated psychological studies also support the claim that there is little to no evidence suggesting a link between terrorism and mental illness (Ferracuti and Bruno 1981; Ferracuti and Bruno 1983; Heskin 1980; Heskin 1994).
8 Some scholars have pointed out the similarities to strategies deployed in McCarthy America and suggested that terrorism has replaced communism as a political smear word. See for example (Buzan 2006; Colás and Saull 2006; Widmaier 2007).
9 For examples of this claim see (Blakeley 2007; Jackson 2007; Jackson, Smyth, and Gunning 2009; Jackson 2009b). For a more extensive discussion of the misinterpretations and factual errors committed by representatives of CTS see (Horgan and Boyle 2008; Weinberg and Eubank 2008). Horgan and Boyle in particular highlight the similarities and shared concerns of traditional and critical approaches in the field. For a slightly different line of argument, specifically with regard to the shortcomings of CTS resulting from an uncritical acceptance of certain traditions of critical theory, see (Michel and Richards 2009).
10 Jeffrey Sluka seems to take this approach when he argues that “there are many dozens of examples of the abuse of the epithet ‘terrorism’ by applying it to legitimate armed resistance movements, but just a few prominent contemporary examples include all of the major hot spots of political violence in the world today – including the Colombian government’s claim that the FARC are ‘terrorists’, the Israeli government’s claim that the PLO and the Hamas are ‘terrorists’, the Chinese government’s claim that Uigher and Tibetan activists are ‘terrorists’, the Indonesian government’s claim that the Free Papua Movement (OPM) and Free Aceh Movement (GAM) are ‘terrorists’, the Sri Lanka government’s claim that the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) are ‘terrorists’, the Spanish and French governments’ claim that the Basque ETA are ‘terrorists’, the Burmese junta’s claim that the ethnic rebels in the highlands are ‘terrorists’, the Indian government’s claim that the indigenous rebels in Kashmir and other regions are ‘terrorists’, and the US and UK governments’ claim that the insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan are ‘terrorists’” (Sluka 2009, 150).

See for instance (Bigo and Tsoukala 2008; Dillon and Reid 2009; Evans 2012; Odysseos and Petito 2007; Reid 2009).

For accounts of terrorism in terms of risk, security, and biopolitics see (Amoore and de Goede 2008; Bigo and Tsoukala 2008; Masters and Dauphinée 2006; Dillon and Neal 2008; Massumi 2005; Morton and Bygrave 2008; Neal 2006; Neal 2009; Reid 2009).

For analyses of practices such as torture and detention in the context of terrorism see (Butler 2004; Edkins and Pin-Fat 2005; Michaelsen and Shershow 2004; Minca 2005; Tagma 2009; Van Munster 2004; Vaughan-Williams 2007).

While the following discussion focuses on examples from a Western context, a more comprehensive application of the approach outlined in this article ought to include an exploration of the use of the terrorism label in non-Western contexts. For insightful examples of such a perspective see the analyses of the political usefulness of the rhetoric of terrorism in Sri Lanka and China in (Nadarajah and Sriskandarajah 2005; Chung 2002; Becquelin 2004).

This understanding of terrorism is what Charles de Montesquieu identifies as despotic government (Montesquieu 2002).

For insightful literature in this regard see (Barnard-Wills and Ashenden 2012; Helms, Constanza, and Johnson 2012; Weimann 2005).

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

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