Feature Article: Theory and Practice

On the concept of terrorism

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Abstract   Many contemporary conceptualizations of terrorism inadvertently reify political conceptions of terrorism. Mainly because they in the end rely on the intentions of terrorists in defining 'terrorism', the *process* of terrorism, which involves an unfolding dialectic of actions and reactions, is omitted from researchers' focus. Thus, terrorism becomes simplified to intentional actions by terrorists, and this short-cutting of the causal chain of the process of terrorism facilitates both a political 'negation of history' and a 'rhetoric of response'. In this paper, I put forward a conceptualization of terrorism that transcends existing definitions and conceptualizations by first of all discerning between 'terrorism' and 'terror', and by subsequently conceptualizing terrorism as a paradox: what terrorism is, is inextricably bound to the reaction to terrorism. It is, in fact, the reaction of some states to terrorism that, in a sense *ex post facto*, constitutes an act as 'terrorism' by 'refolding' actions that unfolded subsequent to an event into that event as the root cause of the entire chain of events.
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Introduction: Causes and Conceptualizations of Terrorism

Terrorism, like everything else, comes in waves (Rapoport, 2001), in cycles (Bergesen and Lizardo, 2004), a Greek mind might speculate. And like terrorism, characterizations of (geo)political times as uniquely dominated by terrorism come and go. After the many cases of 'anarchist' terrorism between 1878 and 1914, *The Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (Hardman, 1933) concluded in 1933 that interest in terrorism was something only for anti-quarians. While each era is no doubt characterized by its own type of terrorism, there seems to be a tendency to regard the present as wholly unique and as a 'new' era, even as one in which terrorism 'for the first time' becomes a really pertinent political reality (Rapoport, 1984). Thus, according to Ulrich

Beck, 9/11 stands for 'something new in history', namely 'the complete collapse of language' (Beck, 2002, p. 39). Or for Zygmunt Bauman, 9/11 signals 'the symbolic end to the era of space' (Bauman, 2002, p. 81). Similarly, current terrorism is said to be 'new terrorism' (Laqueur, 1999; Lesser *et al*, 1999), 'more dangerous' (Hess, 2003), and a 'new breed of terrorist' is said to exist (Stern, 1999). We would currently be living in a 'time of terror' (Borradori, 2003). Then again, the years 1960–1980 have been called 'the years of terrorism' – an epithet hard to believe applicable to those years now, in an age with little historical memory and an urgency of geopolitical processes unfelt since the end of the Cold War. There are some striking similarities between the perspectives with which the West once regarded its Cold War opponent and those in which it depicts today's worldwide terrorism. While during the Cold War communism was in the West regarded to be a worldwide cowardice conspiracy, the same terms are used to describe today's 'age of terror' (Nuzzo, 2004; Wolin, 2004, p. 560). The same polarized rhetoric and occasional neglect of diplomacy are manifest. And finally, the same existential terms in which geopolitical conflicts are stated are present. Like during the Cold War, the divide is one between forces of Good and Evil. It is a certain 'way of life' that is at stake. Paradoxically, therefore, the current situation is thought to be unique but is described in terms proper to an earlier 'paradigm' (Huntington, 1996) of geopolitics. And the conceptualizations deployed in analyses of terrorism are themselves highly politicized.

In order to effectively analyse the causes and consequences of terrorism, I believe a more fundamental rethinking of the notion of terrorism is in order. Many contemporary conceptualizations inadvertently reify political conceptions of terrorism. Mainly because they, in the end, rely on the intentions of terrorists in defining 'terrorism', the *process* of terrorism, which involves an unfolding dialectic of actions and reactions, is omitted from researchers' focus. Thus, terrorism becomes simplified to intentional actions by terrorists, and this short-cutting of the causal chain of the process of terrorism facilitates both a political 'negation of history' and a 'rhetoric of response' (compare Nuzzo, 2004). I believe a more comprehensive conceptualization of terrorism is both more realistic and runs less risk of reifying political definitions of terrorism (compare Tilly, 2004). In this paper, I therefore put forward a conceptualization of terrorism that encompasses many aspects of terrorism contained in currently existing definitions and conceptualizations, but that transcends them by conceptualizing terrorism as a paradox: what terrorism is, is inextricably bound to the reaction to terrorism. It is, I will argue, in fact the reaction of some states to terrorism that, in a sense *ex post facto*, constitutes an act as 'terrorism' by 'refolding' actions that unfolded subsequent to an event into that event as the root cause of the entire chain of events. Because terrorism is paradoxically intertwined with the reactions to 'terrorism', research of 'causes'

of terrorism cannot do without explicit conceptualization of terrorism. This paper intends to offer some preliminary steps in that direction.

The Problem of Politics in Conceptualizing Terrorism

The main problem in defining or conceptualizing terrorism is political in nature. That is to say that what counts as terrorism and what does not fall under its heading is subject to political pressure and consequence. Such a political import of conceptualizations of terrorism can take different forms. After the experience of the 1878–1914 'wave' of terrorism, for instance, the *Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of Terrorism* (1937) laid much emphasis on terrorism as *anarchism*, and hence as a form of violence directed mainly towards heads of state. Reason for such emphasis lay in the murders of Alexander I of Yugoslavia and the president of the Council of the French Republic (Louis Barthou) in 1934. Such a conceptualization of terrorism neglects the 'positive' political substance of terrorism, that is, its revolutionary aspect. It does so precisely as a political negation of the threat of revolution (the murders were committed by the Macedonian nationalist-revolutionary VMRO and the Croatian fascist-nationalist Ustasa). Another kind of political import in the definition of terrorism becomes apparent in the statement of the *Organization of American States*, in 1970, that 'the political and ideological pretexts utilized as justification for these crimes [acts of terrorism, WS] in no way mitigate their cruelty and irrationality or the ignoble nature of the means employed, and in no way remove their character as acts of violation of essential human rights' (quoted in Dugard, 1974, p. 72). Thus, the political character of terrorism is, in what is itself a thoroughly political move, declared as violating 'human rights', the conceptualization of which is, again highly politically, framed as 'essential' and 'universal'. This is replicated in the May 2002 statement on human rights (in 2001) of the US *State Department*, in which countries depicted as 'human rights violators' are equalled to 'governments that promote international terror' (see Tilly, 2004, p. 6).

The greatest political problem in the definition of terrorism surely lies in the decision when to discern 'terrorist' from 'freedom fighter' (Jenkins, 1982; Hoffman, 1998; Hess, 2003) or when to differentiate between 'terrorism' and 'war of liberation' (Dugard, 1974, pp. 75–77). Freedom fighters fall under *jus ad bellum*, while terrorists do not. A historical case is that of the 'Islamic terrorism' of Mohammed Ahmed (self-proclaimed Mahdi) in Sudan in the 1890s, who initially succeeded in driving the British out of Sudan (Bergesen and Lizardo, 2004). Another is the aforementioned case of the Yugoslavian killings in 1934, in which the Macedonians were explicitly not portrayed as 'freedom fighters' during the International Conference on the Repression of

Terrorism which led to the Convention (Dugard, 1974). A case more relevant today is the current US response to supposed terrorists held in Guantanamo Bay. The detainees of Guantanamo Bay do not fall under *jus ad bellum*, and they are not prisoners of war (POWs); they are labelled by the USA as 'unlawful combatants' (US Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld) or 'enemy fighters'. The political substance of the definition of terrorism has not become an issue only recently. The US State Department stated on the concept of 'global terrorism' in 1992 that 'the term does not have unanimous definition because the United Nations has been incapable of agreeing on its definition (…) No definition has been unanimously accepted' (quoted in Nuzzo, 2004, p. 335). Yet, in 1987, only the USA and Israel opposed a UN definition of 'global terrorism', because the definition on vote separated the right to self-determination from terrorist activity. It did so mainly with a view to the then pertinent situation in South Africa, but the consequence of such a definition would have been that Palestinian 'terrorists' could no longer be regarded as such. Likewise, after 9/11 2001, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (encompassing 56 states) blocked a UN counter-terrorism proposal on the grounds that it should exclude national liberation fighters, including anti-Israeli groups, from its provisions. In September 2005, mainly Arab nations opposed a UN definition of terrorism (designed to become a worldwide standard) that amounted to equalling terrorism to all military violence against civilians. The issue whether to speak of freedom fighters or terrorists is in fact age-old. St Augustine's questioning of the difference between Alexander the Great and a pirate already illustrates the value judgement inherent in the use of the term 'terrorism'.

Characteristic of the political substance of the concept of 'terrorism' is, furthermore, the isolation of events. In 'the war on terrorism', the US slogan is 'America Responds'.[1] Thereby, the flow of geopolitical events is frozen at a certain point in time – 'terrorism' – which serves as an index and anchor point for subsequent actions now termed as 'responses' – even when much that the USA has done under that heading perhaps hardly qualifies as a 'response' to 'terrorism' (Bobrow, 2004; Nuzzo, 2004; Schwartz, 2004), at least when *prima facie* notions thereof are considered. Indeed, the *negation of history* in labelling certain acts as 'terrorist' is part and parcel of the *political* act of definition. The identification rests on a particular balance of remembrance/forgetting. A *rhetoric of response* is often in place, which identifies state action as response subsequent to an initial terrorist act. Such a rhetoric of response that enables a negation of history – and is still active also in scholarly circles (for example, in relation to 9/11: Dallmayr, 2002, p. 138) – was evident in US involvement in the Second World War as a 'response' to the 'unprovoked' Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, which, from a Japanese point of view, has been seen by some as a 'response' to Commodore Perry's opening up of Japan in 1853 (which led to

the subsequent Meiji revolution of 1868) (see Buruma, 2003). A similar logic of 'response' led the USA into Vietnam. Freezing the flow of global events is often accompanied by a kind of *argumentum ad hominem* of what motivates 'the' terrorist (Tilly, 2005), thereby psychologizing (Victoroff, 2005) what is essentially a political process. It leads, for instance, to the conducting of brain tests on Ulrike Meinhoff (Hess, 2003), or to accounts of the vindictiveness of mythicized figures such as Osama Bin Laden, in whom the whole issue of terrorism is condensed in a simplifying move that fits the routine of scoop-searching (Bourdieu, 1998) and complexity reducing media (Japp, 2003).

However, all this does not preclude the possibility of speaking of 'terrorism' in a sufficiently 'neutral' sense, or at least in a non-reifying way. If philosophers and social or political scientists are to effectively deploy a concept of terrorism, a definition is to be sought beyond the political problems involved in such a definition. Conceptualizations of terrorism are, on the other hand, often tainted by moral prejudice (Wellman, 1979). In other words, we must neither be satisfied with *political*, nor with *moral* conceptualizations, but seek a *philosophical* one. A conceptualization of terrorism cannot be sufficiently neutral so long as 'terrorism' is seen merely or mostly as a pejorative label (Merari, 1993).

Definitions and Conceptualizations of Terrorism

A roundup of some authoritative 'official' as well as scholarly definitions can serve to indicate the notions common to most definitions. According to the US Federal Law:

> The term 'terrorism' means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience. (…) The term 'international terrorism' means terrorism involving citizens or the territory of more than one country. (…) The term 'terrorist group' means any group practicing, or that has significant subgroups that practice, international terrorism (US Code, Title 22, § 2656f(d)).

Such definitions leave a considerable degree of latitude for discussion on terms such as 'subnational groups or clandestine agents' and 'politically motivated violence'. However, within the USA, different definitions are deployed. For the FBI, terrorism amounts to 'the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives' (FBI, 2006). These definitions entail various elements also present in

the many academic conceptualizations of terrorism (in 1983, Schmid and Jongman (1988) counted 109). Hardman described terrorism in 1948 as 'a term used to describe the method or the theory behind the method whereby an organized group or party seeks to achieve its avowed aims chiefly through the systematic use of violence' (Hardman, 1948, p. 575). The *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* describes it as referring to the 'systematic use or threat of violence to communicate a political message rather than defeat an opponent's military forces' (Crenshaw, 2001, p. 15604). This definition describes as further characteristics of terrorism the fact that symbolic targets are often chosen, that a wider audience is victim of terrorism and that it is a 'weapon of the weak' (Scott, 1985). Many conceptualizations of terrorism hold that it involves extreme violence: '[terrorism, WS] lies beyond the norms of violent political agitation that are accepted by a given society' (Thornton, 1964, p. 76). Terrorists are often forced to deploy forms of violence that, according to Tilly, 'fall outside the forms of political struggle operating within some current regime' (Tilly, 2004, p. 5). This is precisely what gives terrorism, in contradistinction to other forms of (political violence), its 'war-like character' (Black, 2004, p. 17). This is not to say that terrorism is not a political form of action (Hoffman, 1998). The extreme violence that is involved in terrorism is a violence that violates norms of violence. That means that terrorists are prepared to engage in things most people would not dare, such as suicide attacks (Baudrillard, 2002).

Many conceptualizations of terrorism therefore converge on the idea that it involves premeditated, politically or ideologically motivated (for example, Crenshaw Hutchinson, 1972; Laqueur, 1987; Drake, 1998; Hoffman, 1998) extreme violence (for example, Thornton, 1964; Crenshaw, 2001; Tilly, 2004) against civilians (for example, Stern, 2003; Black, 2004; Rodin, 2004) or symbolic targets (for example, Crenshaw, 2001) by some organization that seeks to influence some states by means of intimidation of an audience (for example, Gibbs, 1989; Crenshaw, 2001; Stern, 2003; Primoratz, 2004). These characteristics are well summarized in Enders and Sandler (2002, pp. 145–146).

The indirect instrumentality of terrorism

What can be first of all distilled from current conceptualizations is that terrorism works by way of an *indirect instrumentalism*. That is to say that terrorists lack the power to directly influence the actors (states mostly) whose behaviour they wish to change, and therefore target third parties. Thus, Stern defines terrorism as 'an act or threat of violence against non-combatants, with the objective of intimidating or otherwise influencing an audience or audiences' (Stern, 1999, p. 30, 2003). By targeting a few non-combatants

directly, terrorism targets an entire 'audience' indirectly (compare Wardlaw, 1982; Gibbs, 1989; Crenshaw, 2001; Enders and Sandler, 2002; Primoratz, 2004). But the indirect instrumentalism by means of which terrorism takes place is in fact a double one. For as the persons directly hit in a terrorist attack are not the ultimate focus of terrorism, neither is the wider audience in which terrorism raises fear. Schematically, one might say that A (terrorists) influence B (an enemy political entity) by means of an attack or the threat thereof on C (random civilians or symbolic targets) which is hoped by A, through the spread of fear among D (larger populace), to result a political pressure exerted on B by D and possibly E (foreign political entities). Since fear is an instrument in terrorism, terrorism is most effective when C and D are interchangeable. That is to say: it is most effective when its direct targets are civilians, not material symbolic targets, and it is, furthermore, most effective when its direct targets can be anyone of the larger audience in which terrorism raises fear. The interchangeability of the direct victims and members of the audience of terrorism most effectively raises fear. For this reason, Michael Walzer holds that 'randomness is the crucial feature of terrorist activity' (Walzer, 1977, p. 197). Hence, I would claim that the above description refers to terrorism in an ideal-typical sense (see Weber, 1988), which is more readily embodied by Al Qaeda than by the Baader–Meinhoff group or the Red Brigades. In Al Qaeda's 9/11 attacks, the randomness of the direct victims of terrorism was evident; in Rote Armee Fraktion actions, such was usually not the case. The latter group, for instance, kidnapped and killed bankers and businessmen, and its goal was not the spread of fear, but rather of class-consciousness, as it was a communist terrorist organization. Such a classification of terrorism can encompass definitions of terrorism that negate the necessity for randomness (for example, Laqueur, 1987), but it holds that randomness of immediate or direct targets is a feature of the most ideal-typical forms of terrorism.

Terrorism and terror

Scholarly definitions of terrorism usually differentiate between state- and non-state-perpetrated violence. In that case, 'terrorism' is often explicitly regarded as a type of violence perpetrated by non-state actors (for example, Gibbs, 1989; Laqueur, 1996; Enders and Sandler, 2002; Hess, 2003; Black, 2004). In many cases, the same is implicit in the conceptualization of terrorism (for example, Hardman, 1948; Alexander, 2004). On the other hand, many conceptualizations do not differentiate between state- and non-state-perpetrated violence at all (see Wellman, 1979; Wardlaw, 1982; Schmid and Jongman, 1988). In that case, 'terrorism' is something that states as well as non-state actors may engage in. Again, this may be explicit, and then terms like 'terrorist states' (for

example, Chomsky, 2001) or 'state terrorism' (*le terrorisme d'état*) (Camus, 1951, p. 214ff.) are being used. In another sense, Lefebvre called the most repressive society a 'société terroriste' (Lefebvre, 1968, p. 273ff.). In yet other cases, terrorism is said to possibly occur in the service of states. In a famous article on the 'causes of terrorism', Martha Crenshaw states that terrorism takes place both in the service of state interests and against states (Crenshaw, 1981, p. 379, 2001). From an ethical point of view, David Rodin has argued that the concept of terrorism can at times apply to state violence when that violence is directed towards non-combatants (Rodin, 2004). In many social scientific analyses, acknowledgement of the possibility of state-perpetrated terrorism is given, and either explicit (for example, Bergesen and Lizardo, 2004, p. 38; Bergesen and Han, 2005, pp. 134–135) or implicit (for example, Wilkinson, 1997) mention is made of a deliberate neglect thereof, and of focussing instead on non-state-perpetrated terrorism. According to Charles Tilly, the definition of 'terrorism' and 'terrorist' cannot be laid down unequivocally (Tilly, 2004, p. 12). While his concern is that sociologists might reify such concepts (Tilly, 2004), he evades the problem by dealing with 'terror' as a strategy that he conceptualizes in terms corresponding 'approximately to what many people mean by terror' (Tilly, 2004, p. 9). Yet, the lack of distance *vis-à-vis* commonsensical understanding leads all the more to the risk of reification. I believe it is necessary to untangle 'terror' and 'terrorism'.

An important indication of the difference between the two is gained from the etymology of the word 'terror', to which the affix 'ism' has been attached. The concept of 'terror' – etymologically rooted in Greek and Sanskrit words for 'fear' – was first used in a political context by Edmund Burke, who spoke of Robespierre's revolutionary government (from September 1793 to July 1794) as a 'Reign of Terror'. Robespierre himself regarded 'terror' as a form of justice. Hence, 'terrorism' has been defined as 'the attempt to govern or to oppose government by intimidation' (Pye, 1956, p. 102). Likewise, the *Oxford English Dictionary* entry on 'terrorism' speaks of 'government by intimidation'. Yet, since the original formulation used the word 'terror', I believe here lies a highly useful way of distinguishing between 'terror' and 'terrorism'. Terror refers to actions designed to spread fear by states, and hence it works 'top down'. It is not a state that needs to be influenced, but the people. By means of terror, a state causes a shock though its own institutions, inducing fear in order to remain control. As Lefort (2000, p. 201) has said: 'terror works in the service of foundation'. The Machiavellist idea that the prince or ruler is better off feared than loved is expressed *par excellence* in the idea of terror. The state of terror therefore runs directly counter to the state Hobbes finds preferable. Terrorism, by contrast, is perpetrated by non-state actors, works 'bottom up' to create, from the outside, a shock in institutions that induces fear. Both in terror and in terrorism, therefore, an indirect instrumentality is at work, but

only in the case of terrorism is this a doubly indirect instrumentality. Only terrorism targets a state via fear of an audience induced through direct targets. Terror is a 'domestic' affair, and induces fear among the public through randomly targeted acts of (threat of) violence upon its direct targets. What it seeks is no more than compliance. Typically, dictators use terror to remain in power. Some might say, however, that a democracy such as the USA is at times also characterized by aspects of terror, for instance, when terrorism alerts are raised during election times or when troops are deployed overseas. To regard terror as a domestic affair is to regard state action against other states or against foreign civilians not as terror, nor as terrorism. In such cases, I believe such labels are better unused, and 'political violence' or 'war' (legitimate or not) are more appropriate.

The Paradox of Terrorism

The account given thus far, while certainly relevant, for instance, in the legal context, still fails to encompass a crucial aspect of terrorism, which has to do with the political entity (usually an enemy state) which terrorism aims at by means of this doubly indirect instrumentalism. We shall have to leave the 'realist ontology' of terrorism here, according to which a definition of terrorism encompassing primary and secondary qualities, or the essence, or the prime connotations, of terrorism are thought to cover actually existing 'terrorism' in a way separable from a larger political process. The need for another conceptualization can be illustrated by taking up the problematic of the question of intentionality in terrorism.

Beyond intentionality

However, many aspects or characteristics of terrorism are discerned, there are basically only two aspects of current conceptualizations of terrorism which make up its core. All definitions or conceptualizations assume that terrorism concerns: (1) a certain form of violence (or possibly a threat thereof), and (2) a specific kind of intentionality. My preliminary definition of terrorism as 'a form of violence deployed against arbitrary or symbolic targets to induce fear in a wider audience, in order to influence some state' consists of two parts. It starts from 'a form of violence' and moves on to a 'deployed … to', with appending specifications concerning the doubly indirect instrumentality of the phenomenon. Something similar is, understandably, given the legal nature of this definition, at stake in the US Federal Law definition of 'terrorism'. Here, what is at stake is a form of violence that is 'premeditated', and 'usually

intended to …'. The same holds in case of Hardman's definition (Hardman, 1948, p. 575) or in that of Crenshaw: (Crenshaw, 2001, p. 15604). There is, I believe, a definite problem to the intrinsic reduction of definitions and conceptualizations of terrorism to the aspects of (1) violence and (2) intentionality.

What differentiates terrorism from other forms of violence according to these definitions is, in the final instance, a specific form of intentionality. Terrorism is thus usually defined, in the end, in terms *solely* of *intentions of terrorists*. Consider Enders and Sandler's definition: 'the premeditated use or threat of use of extranormal violence or brutality by subnational groups to obtain a political, religious, or ideological objective through intimidation of a huge audience, usually not directly involved with the policy making that the terrorists seek to influence' (Enders and Sandler, 2002, pp. 145–146). This definition falls into four parts, namely first, 'the use or threat of use of extranormal violence or brutality by subnational groups' (P1); second, the qualification P2 which specifies that what is described in P1 is 'premeditated (…) to obtain' what is described; third, in P2a as 'a political, religious, or ideological objective', through; fourth, P2b: 'intimidation of a huge audience, usually not directly involved with the policy making that the terrorists seek to influence'. The authors speak of the 'premeditated use' of violence (or threat thereof). Hence, it becomes clear that the definition entails, next to violence, the aspect of intentionality, and two auxiliary specifications of the content of that intentionality which is at the same time believed to be the way 'terrorism' works. The means used in terrorism are the means intended by terrorists. These specifications (P2a and P2b) can in fact be seen as elaborations of P2, in which the aspect of intentionality is highlighted. They are indeed a specification thereof, leaving the definition as consisting of two basic parts with further specifications.[2] The aspect of intentionality is present in many if not all discussions of terrorism (for example, Wardlaw, 1982; Laqueur, 1999; Crenshaw, 2001; FBI, 2006; Scheffler, 2006), although at times somewhat covertly, as, for instance, in Chomsky (2001, p. 19). Similarly, In Wellman's definition of terrorism as 'the use or attempted use of terror as a means of coercion' (Wellman, 1979, p. 250), the means (terror) and end (coercion) rationality at the core of the definition betrays the intentionality which forms the actual basis of the definition.[3] Even in an 'object-centred' definition such as Coady's (2004, p. 5), the intentionality is imminent in the choice of object (and in the political purposes).

Now, there is certainly no doubt about the existence of some form of intentionality in case of acts deemed 'terrorist' – for instance, a great deal of planning usually precedes such an act (for example, Gurr, 1979). Yet, terrorists' intentions are not enough to produce 'terrorism'. The silent assumption in many conceptualizations of terrorism is that terrorists are in principle able to produce intimidation or terrorization by means of a terrorist attack, whether they do so in a particular instance or not. Although intentionality is but one

aspect of definitions of terrorism, this involves the idea that terrorism *begins* with some intentional act of terrorism. This is a view that is highly relevant in certain contexts, for one in the legal context. It plays a significant role in the political context as well. That is precisely why I feel a political philosophical account should change the aspect here. When what 'terrorism' is, is in the end defined in terms of terrorists' intentions, a reduction to intentionality takes place that is part of a simplification and a reification of 'terrorism'. Such simplification enables the *negation of history* and the *rhetoric of response* and it ends up rendering lip service to politicians keen on isolating 'terrorism' in a rhetoric of response.

Terrorism and the strength of the other

The point made in the last section can be further developed by first invoking a somewhat forgotten definition of terrorism by Raymond Aron, according to whom 'an action is labeled 'terrorist' when its psychological effects are out of proportion to its purely physical result' (Aron, 2003, p. 170). Aron here draws attention to a significant characteristic of terrorism, which I have left as yet not discussed. What his definition – which falls short on many counts but, nonetheless, forcefully grasps a highly important aspect – comes down to is that the 'weapons of the weak' are forceful only when they are backed by *the strength of the other*, which is in most cases a state. Terrorism, because of its lack of resources and its unconventional ways of fighting, is in fact characterized by *a triply indirect instrumentality*. It is the *overreaction of the other (the enemy state)* which is crucial in terrorism. It is that overreaction which is able to produce sympathy for the terrorists' cause by third parties such as populations hostile to the attacked and overreacting state, and other states. Recent history offers a prime example of this dialectic. After 9/11, the US response consisted of the declaration of a 'war on terrorism'.[4] Yet, since a 'war' can only be waged against states (compare Hare, 1979) – in a post-Clausewitz state of the world there may not be wars but there may be 'terrorism' – and not against 'terrorism' in the abstract nor 'terrorists' in a more specified sense, the US response was redirected towards a more traditional geopolitical form of conflict. Thus, the sovereign states of Afghanistan and Iraq were attacked as part of the 'war on terrorism'. The war against two such states may be said to have been an overreaction to terrorism that in a sense *constituted* the 'terrorist' acts as terrorism. What ensued was widespread support for Al Qaeda in the Islamic world (for example, Haddad and Khashan, 2002; Sidanius *et al*, 2004), and the most serious post-Cold War rift between continental Europe and the USA. Yale sociologist Jeffrey Alexander therefore completely misses the point when he says that 9/11 in the end led to 'exactly the opposite

performance results from those the Al-Qaeda terrorists had intended' (Alexander, 2004, p. 88). According to Alexander, Bin Laden must have been 'deeply disappointed' (Alexander, 2004, p. 103). He misses the point in a way similar to George W. Bush, who said that:

> The pictures of airplanes flying into buildings, fires burning, huge structures collapsing, have filled us with disbelief, terrible sadness, and a quiet, unyielding anger. These acts of mass murder were intended to frighten our nation into chaos and retreat. But they have failed; our country is strong.[5]

The fact that the USA is strong is precisely what Al Qaeda had anticipated; terrorism works via the strength of the enemy. Having thus added a crucial characteristic to the conceptualization of terrorism, have we not reverted to the kind of intentionality critiqued above? I would say we have not. For, although we acknowledge the aspect of intentionality in terrorism, the characteristics we have discerned in terrorism in the above, constituting a triply indirect instrumentality, tip the scales and render a 'realistic' account of terrorism, relying wholly on the terrorist intentionality of terrorists, useless as such an approach falls short in grasping the paradoxical character of terrorism. Crucial in a definition of terrorism is the *dialectical aspect* of an overreaction in the process of terrorism. We come, then, to the paradox that it does not make a whole lot of sense to speak of terrorism where an overreaction to it is absent. The paralogical character of terrorism may be one reason why the aspect of overreaction to which Aron's definition points, is usually not mentioned in conceptualizations of terrorism. But reality does not always follow the logic of conceptualizations. The paradoxical character of terrorism consists of the fact that '*terrorism*' *is constituted by the (over)reaction to it*. The 'reaction' to it is therefore as much 'action' as it is 'reaction'. What the realist account of terrorism cannot encompass is the *temporalized dialectic* of terrorism. Paradoxes can be 'deparadoxized' through temporalization. 'Contradictions' following one another in time can exist in the same causal nexus without being contradictory. The nexus of events itself has a definite paradoxical character of apparent contradiction. In such a conceptualization of terrorism, the question of intentionality – while there *is* no doubt intentionality – simply becomes less relevant, since what in the end defines terrorism is not the intentionality of terrorists. Reason for the lack of relevance of intentionality in the conceptualization of terrorism is not that, as Rodin has argued, 'negligent and reckless' use of violence can also amount to terrorism (Rodin, 2004); it is irrelevant when seeking to conceptualize terrorism since it is not part of the core of what that concept entails. This is the crucial point I wish to make, and the next section is devoted to developing it further.

Terrorism as a Dialectical Process of Unfolding Refolding

Terrorism as a process

Terrorism, as it is a temporalized or dialectical phenomenon, should be seen not as a determinate or fixed action, but as a process. Charles Tilly holds a similar position. In critiquing the 'naïve realism' of Stern's (2003) explanation of religious terrorism, he reacts to her comparison between terrorism and a virus: 'Beware of virus analogies when it comes to human affairs! Viruses exist; we can see them under a microscope (…) To use the virus analogy for a social process, one must make sure one pins down the agent, the mechanism, and the consequences and make sure the agent produces its effects in essentially the same way every time' (Tilly, 2005, p. 20). The trouble, according to Tilly, lies in the homogenization of terrorism and terrorists that often occurs. His problem is, furthermore, that 'dispositional' analyses 'explain the actions of [coherent entities] by means of their orientations just before the point of action' (Tilly, 2005, p. 19). In other words, he critiques the intentionalist stance, which, for instance, seeks out the individual motives (Tilly, 2005, p. 19) underlying terrorism. Tilly, instead, opts for the analysis of what he calls the 'strategy of terror' (compare Tilly, 2004) 'as part of a political process' (Tilly, 2005, p. 21). This involves a relational perspective in which events prior to the violence in question are taken into consideration, and in which what Tilly calls 'terror' (which differs quite a bit from my conception of terror as rendered above) is seen as part of a political struggle. A perspective in some ways similar to Tilly's is that of Walter, who in 1964 wrote an article entitled 'Violence and the Process of Terror', in which he states that the ambiguity of the concept of terrorism leads him to speak of the more 'precise concept' of 'the process of terror' (Walter, 1964). The process of terror involves three elements, namely an act or threat of violence, an emotional reaction and the social effects thereof (Walter, 1964, p. 248). While, like in Tilly's case, I do not agree with the use of the term 'terror' here, the paradoxical character of terrorism discussed in the previous section does seem to necessitate its conceptualization in terms of such a process, in which terrorism does not exist (as does 'terror' for Walter) independently of reactions and effects. Such are conclusions not easily drawn in analyses of terrorism that claim to pay attention to 'process' or that move beyond intentionality. Randall Collins, in an article on rituals of solidarity in the USA subsequent to the events of 9/11, has said that 'sociological theory does not pay enough attention to the dynamics of processes over time' (Collins, 2004, p. 53). He continues, however, to discuss the process of US reactions to 9/11 while unproblematically assuming 'terrorism' to have already occurred. In other words, terrorism was, in his analysis, not part of the process. Such omissions need to be amended in a social theory or philosophy of terrorism.

Likewise, I agree with Alexander that 'we need to theorize terrorism differently, thinking of its violence less in physical and instrumental terms than as a particularly gruesome kind of symbolic action in a complex performative field' (Alexander, 2004, p. 88). Attention to the complexity of the 'performative field' of terrorism, as he calls it, is crucial in moving beyond the circularity of intentionalist conceptualizations of terrorism. From what was stated on Alexander's view in the section The paradox of terrorism, however, it will be clear that I disagree with him on how to achieve such theorization.

Of course, the idea of a process in which events unfold does not preclude the delineation and designation of events within that process. One might argue, then, that 'terrorism' is one such event that can, in principle, be regarded as isolable from history and subsequent events. Such is the 'naïve realistic' perspective on terrorism. However, precisely because terrorism is a temporalized event itself, a meta-event, one might say, consisting of several events, such a perspective misses the fundamental point in conceptualizing terrorism. Terrorism cannot be regarded without the temporalized aspects of terrorization and the dialectic of (over)reaction. Moreover, the political reality of terrorism precludes isolating an event and labelling it 'terrorism'. Such a conceptualization would be lacking in distance from competing political perspectives. Speaking in either politicians' or terrorists' terms will not provide insights fundamental enough to capture the dialectical process in which both politicians and terrorists are involved, and from which they necessarily make abstractions, freezing process, isolating events for political reasons. Since we are dealing with a political process, the only 'realistic' and non-reifying way of conceptualizing terrorism is to indeed regard it as a specific type of political process.

The unfolding refolding of terrorism

I will hence regard terrorism as a process in which events unfold that, only when taken together, constitute terrorism. One such unfolding event is usually a *refolding* of events into a designated starting point of terrorism, which is a specific instance of violence. The point to which events are refolded is where current definitions usually locate 'terrorism'. Yet, the point of a processual approach is to see the continuous political act of the defining of terrorism as part of an unfolding process. It is that part of the process that continually ensures consistency of that process by refolding all events unfolding in time into the one event that, according to the rhetoric of response espoused, set it all in motion. This refolding is vital in the negation of history that is part of the process of terrorism, since events are refolded into one neatly distinguishable point in time that is recognizable from a 'naïve realist' perspective, and they

are not refolded to a time before that point. In other words, events before the event in which the sequence is refolded, are not observed as part of terrorism. Yet, precisely because they are not observed as such, their exclusion is a defining part of the process of terrorism. It is, thus, a defining characteristic of that process that its processual character is negated. This is achieved by the continuous refolding of those events through which the process unfolds itself. Two approaches can further elucidate this perspective. The first is the Hegelian-dialectic perspective, as deployed in analysing terrorism by Angelica Nuzzo. The second is the communicative approach of Niklas Luhmann.

Nuzzo (2004) offers a Hegelian approach to the 'causes' of war, and applies this to 'terrorism' as the 'cause' of war in Iraq. Her approach allows a dialectics to be seen in which the 'effect' precedes the 'cause'. For, as she says, 'it is the effect that first constitutes the cause' (Nuzzo, 2004, p. 333). This dialectical approach breaks with the metaphysics of cause and that of intentionality, and it at once breaks down the concept of terrorism. Reasons, according to Nuzzo, are never 'just there, simply to be 'found' and brought to light' (Nuzzo, 2004, p. 332). Her Hegelian-dialectical approach starts from the intrinsic historical nature of reality and departs from the linear logic of history and causality. She is thus able to unravel what I have called the rhetoric of response, by turning the 'official' perspective topsy-turvy in claiming that terrorism is the 'true effect' or 'real consequence' of the 'war on terrorism'. Along these lines, I maintain that 'terrorism' is a temporalized process consisting of an *unfolding refolding* of events. An act setting off a causal chain is transformed in that causal chain, and as events unfold, a refolding takes place that pins the process of unfolding down on an initial act that is only observed as 'terrorism' because subsequent unfolding events allowed being refolded or retraced, and as such remoulded, into the act. Another way to frame this view is to invoke Niklas Luhmann's perspective on communication. I leave aside the main body of his social theory here and focus only on his conceptualization of communication. Luhmann moves beyond the outdated model of communication as a three-tier system of sender–message–receiver. This view is quite similar to the intentional view of terrorism, since what is received at the end of the communicative loop is quite simply what was put into it by the sender. To replace this view, Luhmann speaks of the 'self-referential retroactivity of communication' (Luhmann, 1984). He sees a communication as occurring the moment another communication follows it – communication, in other words, is only retroactively identified. What a 'communication' is, is socially speaking only relevant from the perspective of what it is thought to be by the 'receiver', and hence 'communication' is formed at the 'receiving' end. Communication only exists, paradoxically, when a recursive communication follows it. In a similar way, 'terrorism' is constituted in the process of (over)reactions to it. It is seen to unfold events that come to be taken as reactions to the initial terrorist act the

moment what is unfolded can be refolded into that act. Such refolding takes place, in practice, with the help of several discourses that supply the process of terrorism with new impetus by allowing new events to unfold or, in short, by supplying the process with time. To conclude, I shall briefly discuss these discourses.

Discourses of refolding

What is needed in support of the refolding of events into 'terrorism' is first of all a consistent twofold *discourse of identification*. This entails first of all an identification of the terrorist act by neatly tracing events to the event labelled 'terrorist'. That event is thereby construed as an 'action' in which responsibility can be allocated solely to its 'actor(s)' (cf. Nuzzo, 2004, p. 338). Furthermore, events before that event can be construed as 'causes', and events subsequent to it can be coded as either 'responses' or as 'repetitions'. Second, a discourse of identification identifies the initial event as an act not against the randomly targeted citizens in case, nor as an attack against the state, but as an attack on the collective body of the *nation*. The state is the mere embodied representation of the presence of the people. It is significant here that terrorism indeed utilizes the figure of representation, since it randomly targets civilians *because the random citizen is most representative of the people as a whole*. The greatest dispersal of fear among the collective is reached by targeting someone who could be anyone. The message 'you may be next' is conveyed during the unfolding of the process of terrorism (Price, 1977; compare Walzer, 1977). That is to say that neither 'terrorists' nor the state actually 'convey' that message, but that the dialectic between terrorist action and state action brings with it the fear of 'being next', even though the odds of being killed in a terrorist attack are far smaller than the chance of being killed in a traffic accident. Part of the discourse of identification are the *rhetoric of response* and the *negation of history* discussed in the section The problem of politics in conceptualizing terrorism. The idea of (over)reacting to terrorism or of 'response' presupposes a refolding of events to a starting point in which the response anchors, and refolding enables a further unfolding through responsive action. The name 'Ground Zero' symbolically marks a clock rewound to a decisive starting point. A particularly pertinent rhetorical device of identification that allows for an anchoring in a 'starting point' of 'terrorism' is the capturing of terrorism in symbolized images, such as 'axis of evil' or 'evil' in general. Another form of symbolized identification consists of reference to acts of terrorism through date or place of attack, such as '9/11', '11/4', or 'Madrid', 'London', 'Casablanca' (compare Derrida in Borradori, 2003). In particular, '9/11' has become a signifier with a 'supplement' (Derrida, 1974).

Second, a *discourse of denunciation* needs to be in place. The initial event – which is only turned into the 'initial act' of an identifiable sequence of events through a discourse of identification – needs to be constantly condemned and the public needs to be reminded that that which constitutes terrorism is the provocation which instigated subsequent state action – with all its discomforting but necessary consequences for the public. Philosophical analysis may contribute to a discourse of denunciation, for instance, by defining terrorism as a *prima facie* evil (Scheffler, 2006). This discourse of denunciation assures the image of an almost automatic mechanism between terrorism and retaliation or prevention of future terrorism, similar to the way Foucault describes the 'automatic' link between crime and punishment which appeared in the nineteenth century (Foucault, 1977). An often-used tactic of denunciation is the establishment of an opposition between human rights and terrorism, as has, for instance, been done by UN Secretary General Annan, who stated that 'by its very nature, terrorism is an assault on the fundamental principles of law, order, human rights (…)' (UN, 2005). Such oppositions, at the same time, strengthen the discourse of identification, since where universal human rights exist, the random citizen is most representative.

Third, then, a *discourse of endurance and victory* is required. Endurance is required for the dialectics of action–reaction to unfold. The rhetoric of victory is required in order to envisage an end to the unfolding of events, a final wrapping up of the whole process by means of a total annihilation of terrorism. History learns that terrorist organizations do not often end by means of 'victory', and hence the most severe forms of terrorism are most effectively sustained by means of a bellicose counter-rhetoric drawing parallels between the struggle against terrorism and a war, as in the current 'war against terrorism'. The discourse of endurance ensures a necessary stability to the process of terrorism, which gains its legitimacy from the prospect of a future victory. That prospect gives the dialectic of events the promise of an ultimate *Aufhebung*, a utopian image of unification, of the suspending of oppositions.

Mediated folding

Relatively little attention is given to the role of the mass media in studies of terrorism. Yet, the three discourses discussed above all require some form of mediation through mass media. The era of globalization is characterized by the emergence of global flows of information, bringing far-away places close-by. The mass media thus have the capability of disseminating and co-producing discourses of identification, denunciation and of endurance and victory throughout large parts of the world. The mass media are thus the *sine qua non* of 'global terrorism'. While Michel Wieviorka has argued that indifference

may exist between the media and terrorism (Wieviorka, 1988), a process of unfolding terrorism today necessarily involves media coverage, and it is highly questionable to what extent non-mediated violence can become terrorism. Without possible worldwide dissemination of the discourses mentioned, certainly no terrorism can be construed as 'global' (except in legal definitions involving the multinational character of a terrorist group). We live in a time when even Bin Laden listens to the news radio from Washington to hear of the attack he planned (Bernstein, 2002, p. 10). The media coverage of attacks such as those in New York, Washington and Madrid has many reasons. Two of them are relevant here in the context of the amplification of the events. First, the media function according to a logic of competition, which predisposes them to come up with news and scoops other media or networks do not have, thus forcing these other media to copy them. Competition thus has a homogenizing effect within the media, as analysed by Pierre Bourdieu (1998). Bourdieu notes how this logic leads to the production of 'omnibus-facts', involving highly emotionally charged reports with which a public as large as possible is able to identify (Bourdieu, 1998). Terrorism on Western soil is of course one such topic with which it is easy to become personally involved. The unfolding of terrorism thus thrives partly on the logic of competition that is a motor of the mass media.

Second, next to the three discourses mentioned, the production and disse-mination of *fear* is a crucial aspect of the terrorist process. Here, the media are the main productive institution. It does not make sense to say that a bomb attack causes fear throughout the Western hemisphere independently of its mass media coverage. In a sense, the mass media disseminate the impact of the bomb and, even without amplifying the 'facts', they amplify the event to the extent that it unfolds as a process of terrorism. Because new cannot remain new, mass media have a preference for conflicts and catastrophes (Luhmann, 2000, p. 20). This is in line with what Peter Sloterdijk has said on the relation-ship between mass media and collective identities. Today, those identities are formed within the media. 'Only by means of a permanent agitation from day to day do grand modern political bodies of the nation-state type let themselves be telecommunicatively integrated' (Sloterdijk, 1998, p. 29). His thesis is that in times of globalization, a clear picture of who 'we' are is gained by watching 'us' on TV (Sloterdijk, 2000). The best mobilizers of 'us' are catastrophes. And today, terrorism is as close as we can get to a mediatized apocalypse. As such, media contribute highly to the process of terrorism. Upon a suicide attack not mediated no process of terrorism unfolds. Thus, *the media provide the key structures of plausibility for 'terrorism'*. They do so in a way that is as performative as the process of terrorism itself. In answering the public's desire for (and right to) 'information', they produce global exposure and visibility of a local attack, thereby turning a highly localized event into a highly globalized

process. Global terrorism is another social form that indicates the relevance of what Roland Robertson has termed 'glocalization' (Robertson, 1992).

World mass media are of course all but united, and media in different regions of the world communicate competing discourses of terrorism. Thus, Al Jazeera may break decisively with the discourse of identification present in the case of Fox News coverage of 9/11, and Western viewers more easily identify with the latter variant (compare Alexander, 2004, p. 98). Finally, it can be expected that media coverage preselects what is and what is not 'terrorism' and thereby performatively produces terrorism and the lack thereof. This typically takes place along the well-known lines of 'terrorists' *vs* 'freedom fighters'. In Western Europe, Chechnyans are sooner seen as freedom fighters than as terrorists – an observation to a large extent relative to what Althusser would have called the 'ideological state apparatuses' of the mass media (Althusser, 2008).

Conclusion: Politics in the Process of Terrorism

The account I have given here is counter-intuitive. One might respond to it by arguing that it is nonsensical to assume that responses to 'terrorism' are part of 'terrorism'. But such can really only be argued while clinging to a notion of terrorism as *a priori* consisting of a single event, not a process. I would claim that from the perspective of political philosophy, it is more heuristically relevant to consider terrorism as a political process or in fact as a process that is itself part of a larger political process involving international relations between states. It is significant from such a perspective that the *process* of the 'unfolding refolding' of events is regarded as 'terrorism'. In the process, the ideology of events allots to the initial event the signifier of 'terrorism'. As such, only the event in which all unfolded events are refolded is regarded as terrorism. But from our perspective, 'terrorism' is a designation arising from the whole process of an unfolding refolding of events. Moreover, the *refolding* of events into an initial event *is part of the unfolding* that characterizes the entire process. One might say a political problem of this conceptualization of terrorism is that the state becomes accomplice in the process of terrorism. After all, there is no real 'terrorism' without the overreaction on the part of the state, which acts upon the *representation of terrorism* and *constitutes its presence* by means of a violent performativity. One might claim that this turns the facts topsy-turvy, or that it amounts to 'blaming the victim' since states, in the realist rhetoric, merely respond to clearly recognizable acts of terrorism. What the rhetoric of response does is to forget history. It freezes the flow of events and conceives as a terrorist attack as something occurring out of the blue, without incorporating either the dialectic of events leading up to the attack,

nor the dialectic of events that stabilize, through a refolding of events into a singularity, the image of 'terrorism' and the 'terrorist attack'. Yet, as the conceptualization of terrorism is a non-pejorative one, holding that events involving state action constitute a process of terrorism, is not much different from saying that a 'political process' is not constituted by the actions of only one party. Camus quotes Kaliayev, who asks the pertinent question 'peut-on parler de l'action terrorist sans y prendre part?' (quoted in Camus, 1962, p. 311). In the conceptualization of terrorism I propose, at least when state 'response' to 'terrorism' is concerned, the answer is 'no'. Invoking the image of terrorism as an unfolding refolding of events with the help of the discourses of identification, denunciation and victory and of the rhetoric of response rules out the realist image of 'terrorism', which, nonetheless, functions as the ideological basis on which terrorism operates.

Notes

1 http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/nationalsecurity/faq-what.html (accessed 26 July 2006).
2 It can rightly be said that P1 is a composite proposition as well, consisting of specifications of the type and actors of violence concerned. For my purposes here, it does not add to the clarity of the point I wish to make to further specify the elements of the definition accordingly.
3 This becomes apparent when Wellman says: 'The airline highjacker does not wish to terrify the pilot so that he loses his self-control and with it his control of the plane, although he does want to coerce the pilot into obeying his commands (…). Thus, his intent is to cause terror in the official who is in a position to take the demanded action, but it is not essential to his purpose that this official be in a state of intense fright' (Wellman, 1979, 251). Another problem that becomes apparent here is the neglect of the indirect instrumentality of terrorism. Wellman seems to assume that the person terrorized is the one to be coerced.
4 Another response consists of the draconic measures taken in immigration law with reference to 'terrorism' (cf. Buchanan, 2003).
5 http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/nationalsecurity/faq-what.html (accessed 1 August 2006).

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