What Carl Might Have Said About Terrorism: How Strategic Theory can Enlighten an Essentially Contested Debate

M.L.R. Smith & David Martin Jones
King’s College London, Department of War Studies

Contemporary discussions about terrorism are subject to endless distortions that render the term of doubtful analytical utility. However, the application of strategic theory can rescue the word from concept stretching and the constant attempt to occlude a tactical practice with moral judgements, and thereby restore its explanatory value. By asking what Carl von Clausewitz would have made of all the fuss about terrorism, this study reveals a number of fallacies that frequently encumber both popular and academic discourse. In so doing, a Clausewitzian sense of scepticism suggests that the first and most important of all intellectual tasks is the attempt to use language carefully and to apply the principles of parsimony and falsifiability.

What Carl Might Have Said About Terrorism: How Strategic Theory can Enlighten an Essentially Contested Debate

M.L.R. Smith
King's College London, Department of War Studies

David Martin Jones
King's College London, Department of War Studies

Academic discussions of terrorism usually begin with declarations that the term – either as an idea or a method of inquiry – is essentially contested. As a result, studying terrorism and terrorists remains a long way from acceptance as a legitimate object of social scientific inquiry.

Since 9/11 ‘terrorism’, as a term, has encapsulated instances of violent, often suicide related, attacks carried out by jihadist fighters sharing a non-negotiable interpretation of Islam. In this context, terror is a euphemism that avoids identifying the actual protagonists perpetrating violence: namely, fighters in a globalised Islamist movement. Governments and the mainstream media repeat this euphemism ad nauseam. Yet, it is ambiguous to imply that terrorism exists simultaneously as both a definite object and also a disputed and elusive phenomenon. If we are unclear about what the term means in common usage, this implies uncertainty about what it involves in practice. Consequently, public reaction and policy responses are often confused.

In other words, the use of the term ‘terrorism’ and its cognates, conflate a number of not necessarily related violent acts. As a basis for coherent inquiry this will not do. To make sense of this confused and contested area, we might pose the question, what might Carl von Clausewitz have said about terrorism? Although the notion of ‘terror’ as a political instrument is held to have entered the European vernacular around the time of the French Revolution, the word ‘terrorism’ would probably have been unknown to him. Had it been as prevalent in early nineteenth century public discourse as it is today, one might have thought he would have brought his methodical, and sceptical, eye to bear.

Clausewitz’s appreciation of the means of war as an objective tool of policy has enabled commentators ever since to theorise about war in a dispassionate manner. His modern interpreters often see his ideas as the foundation of modern strategic theory, that is, the analysis of ways, ends and means. Influenced by the detached intellectual style he brought to matters of armed force, what might latter-day Clausewitzians – strategic theorists – derive if they place ‘terrorism’ under the spotlight? We contend that a strategic theory approach can help clarify much that is currently lacking and incoherent in understanding the concept and analysis of terrorism.

War, Ways and Words

Readers of On War will note that Clausewitz was very careful about the terminology he used to understand the realities of war. One of his key observations was that the first duty of any decision maker is to be clinical in their comprehension of the kind of conflict in which they are engaging: ‘neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into something alien to its nature’. Fundamentally, that means describing things from first principles and establishing an accurate vocabulary with which to apprehend the world around you.

As a phenomenon, terrorism has been described as a threat of ‘absolute cosmic significance’. Recourse to such hyperbole suggests that the ‘terrorism’ is something that is all pervasive. Terminologically, this implies that ideologically disparate movements share only a felt need for the violent act.

These movements might include, inter alia: jihadists, ethnic and nationalist groups, animal rights, and environmental activists, as well as antifa militants. Amorphously attributing terrorism to these actors leads to concept stretching.[vi] At the same time, the label ‘terrorism’ also entails a value judgement, further distorting a location that contains no intrinsic moral value. The location ‘terrorism’ as a speech act has come to assume a pejorative illocution as well as an allocution warning against such acts. Thus, the concept of ‘terrorism’ is stretched, encumbered by moral assumptions that compromise the term’s analytic utility, combining moral and linguistically separate notions as if they were one and the same thing.[vii]

Confusing terrorism both as a performative act and a moral judgment is not just a problem in speech act theory.[viii] It has practical implications for government policy. First, the illocution that engagement in terrorism is emotionally or morally disturbed informs the convention that such an act is irrational. The secular social science and official governmental perspective considers terrorist violence an aberration. This has been a common trope in terrorism studies for over 40 years.[ix] The post-9/11 era, which witnessed suicide bombings and mass casualty attacks on soft targets, reinvigorated the view that such violence was nihilistic, and devoid of coherent political meaning.[x] Summarizing this perspective in the aftermath of 9/11, one scholar contended that the attacks ‘recklessness and indifference to consequences’ suggested that ‘this was an apolitical act’ containing no ‘rational military purpose’.[xi]

Diagnosing terrorism as irrational and apolitical invites a medical and psychiatric policy response to such mental derangement. In the wake of seemingly random ‘sole actor’ or ‘lone-wolf’ attacks after 2014, Western governments found this perspective particularly attractive. Thus, carefully planned and coordinated attacks on civilian targets across Europe between 2015 and 2017 were invariably described as ‘spontaneous’,[xii] ‘triggered by mental health issues’,[xiii] and personality disorders.[xiv] Rather than addressing the clearly stated political intent of violence, ‘experts’ claim that the violent actor ‘may simply be using the method of a terrorist attack – under whatever ideology – to excise personal demons’. [xv]

Treating a violent act as a form of mental illness is symptomatic of a more insidious facet of post-9/11 terrorism discourse. [xvi] This assumes that second order non-political factors like grievance, social alienation and psychiatric disorder, rather than ideological or religious conviction, inspire the violent deed. Focusing on second order factors also implies that terrorism has ‘root causes’ that may be treated. The outcome is often a nebulous policy to curb or ‘prevent’ the ‘terrorist threat’.

Causality, of course, is endlessly disputable and infinitely divisible.[xvii] This is particularly the case with discussions about terrorism’s supposed ‘root causes’. In the late nineteenth century, for example, European criminologists attributed the causes of anarchist inspired terrorist violence to factors ranging from vitamin deficiency, brain size and air pressure to moon phases.[xviii] As the elusive field of terrorism studies expanded in slightly more sophisticated directions during the wave of non-state violence during the 1970s, analysts would identify the ‘causes’ of international terrorism in both communism and nationalism. Terrorism studies in this era lumped together a number of otherwise disparate conflicts – in the Middle East, Latin America, Western Europe, Japan and North America – solely on the basis of tactical similarities. Regardless of geographic or political context – merely because protagonists resorted to bombings, kidnapping, and assassination – this rendered them liable to be described as instances of terrorism. Such analysis rarely yielded much in the way of insight.[xix]

More recently, neo-Marxist critical theorists have discovered their preferred ‘root causes’ of international terrorism residing in the exclusionary practices of the modern Western liberal state, with its associated sins of racism, sexism and patriarchy. [xx] Variations on this theme lead scholars and policymakers to identify relative deprivation and social grievances causing violent extremism. Accordingly, Stella Rimington, a former director of MI5, Britain’s domestic security service, stated in 2004 that ‘Terrorism is going to be there for a long time. It’s going to be there as long as there are people with grievances that they feel terrorism will help solve’. [xxi] Rimington’s statement exemplifies the malleable, contestable, and divisible understandings that the language of terror facilitates. Whether expressed in terms of ‘a war against’ or ‘root causes’ the infinitely stretched concept renders its study untenable.

Exposing Terrorism’s Fallacies

Terrorism is not hard to define

There are over 250 definitions of terrorism in circulation[xxv] and the apparent absence of consensus suggests a discipline that lacks an understanding of any kind of testable parameters.[xxvi] Therefore, the literature on terrorism studies assumes problematically that terror is ‘nearly impossible to define’. [xxvii] This is the first of many fallacies. Following the logic of strategic theory, however, terrorism can be defined clearly and falsifiably as the employment of fear to achieve
Terrorism does not achieve an independent social reality

Terrorism, understood as the creation of fear for a purpose, functions grammatically as an abstract noun. Abstract nouns, by definition, are not concrete. They define ideas, qualities and states that cannot be seen, heard, tasted, smelled or touched. Therefore, it is incorrect to apply the noun terrorism to observable phenomenon that terms like a ‘terror threat’ imply. Equally incorrect are statements to the effect that ‘terrorism is going to be around for a long time’. Once constructed abstract nouns, like happiness or hate, are usually around forever.

Terrorism has no causes

Abstract nouns, as we have suggested, are perceptions and conceptions of the human imagination. The meanings invested in abstract nouns – such as goodness, bravery, or terrorism – have no independent existence beyond the properties ascribed to them. Abstract nouns therefore can have no causes and to look for them is a fool’s errand. More particularly, to attempt to identify the ‘root causes’ of terrorism, as many analysts still do, [xxxi] as if they possess a special insight into the human condition is therefore misleading.

Terrorism can only be a tactic

By logical extension, if terrorism is an abstract noun denoting the creation or employment of fear to gain an objective then it must entail a conscious act. Therefore terrorism is a tactic, or means to achieve an end. Moreover, if terrorism entails an act of violence to engender a condition of fear, this conforms to Clausewitzian understandings of the role of tactics in war and politics. As Clausewitz observed, war is a continuation of politics by other means and where the deed of violence itself is ‘an act of force to compel the enemy to do our will’. [xxx] Given that war is an act of violence in pursuit of a political purpose it follows that terrorism – the creation/employment of fear for a purpose – is qualitatively no different from any other practice social actors may choose to achieve their goals.

Terrorism is a rational tool of policy

Given that terrorism is a conscious practice, it follows that the tactic has been intentionally selected to achieve or fulfill a purpose. It does not matter if the act succeeds in attaining the precise goal determined for it, because, like all future orientated action, its success or failure is unknowable in advance. Social actors nevertheless, calculate the risk involved in an action, together with its conformity to the actor’s values in the hope of achieving a desired outcome. It is, however, the intention behind the deed, which shows that an actor has decided to induce an extreme form of fear.

Terrorism is not a mental problem

As terrorism is a rational act intended to attain particular objectives, ipso facto, it is not a psychiatric disorder. Social actors choose the tactic of terror with a conscious expectation that it will promote their goals. It is a rationally purposive act.

To attribute mental and behavioural dysfunction to those engaged in acts of terrorism, and any wider cause that such acts are designed to further, is therefore misconceived.

Terrorism is not a basis for moral judgement

Medicalising terror in fact functions as a form of disapproval or disgust,[xxxii] Assigning insanity to a purposeful act signifies incomprehension rather than serious diagnosis. The psychiatry of terrorism is thus isomorphic with treating it in terms of moral disapprobation. When this happens, commentators are making normative assumptions about the immorality or insanity of an actor’s means. Media and political denunciations of the ‘evil of terrorism’ evince this tendency,[xxviii] It is strategically incoherent to conflate a term that denotes a tactic with a moral judgement. Like any tactic, terrorist violence may be used for good or bad. Deciding what constitutes a morally good or bad act is a wholly separate activity from evaluating the utility of a particular tactic.

Terrorism does not require non-state actors

An equally popular, but misleading, fiction is that those who practice terrorism are non-state actors.[xxxiv] If terrorism is a tactic, then there can be no discrimination between state or non-state actors who practise it. The strategic theorist Thomas Schelling recognised this when assessing the Cold War balance of terror. ‘The concept of ‘massive retaliation’, he wrote, ‘is terrorist’. He added that he meant ‘nothing derogatory or demeaning about strategic nuclear forces by emphasizing the traditional expectation that their primary use is to deter or intimidate, and thereby influence behavior, through the threat of enormous civilian damage’. [xxxv] In other words, any social entity, from the individual to the state might, for any number of reasons, choose the means of terror if it is deemed suitable for their ends.

Terrorism is not a weapon of the weak

Assumptions rarely travel singly. They come in pairs. Terrorism as a ‘weapon of the weak’ invariably accompanies the notion that it is a non-state activity.[xxxvi] Yet just as terrorism has no innate connection to normative judgements or non-state actors, neither does it have any necessary or obvious relationship with military inferiority.

There are no terrorist organisations

Public commentary regularly identifies ‘terrorist’ organisations.[xxxvii] Taken literally, a terrorist organisation implies a movement entirely dedicated solely to the tactic parsimoniously understood of creating fear to achieve a specific end. Yet, actors prepared to use violence rarely operate in this way. They select tactics they consider appropriate for advancing their goals at a particular point in time. A political organisation cannot therefore be usefully defined by the means it might happen to use at any one stage. Hence, there is no such thing as a terrorist organisation.

The notion of a ‘terrorist’ is erroneous

If it is misleading to speak of ‘terrorist organisations’ as if they were merely the sum of their tactics, it is equally misguided,
both semantically and analytically, to talk in the same manner of ‘terrorists’. Certainly, we may describe, for example, certain soldiers in armies by the military functions they perform – machine gunner, artilleryman, engineer, signaller, etc. – but the tactics they might employ (and the specific military and political effects such tactics are intended to achieve) will very likely vary with each contingent engagement. To refer to a political actor as a terrorist is a species of tautology akin to referring to a soldier as a ‘small arms combatant’.

One person’s terrorist is not another person’s freedom fighter

If there is one saying that captures the linguistic incoherence of terror discourse, it is the clichéd phrase that ‘one person’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter’. The phrase represents a classic category mistake: confusing a description with a moral judgement. The first part of the phrase alludes to the description of a tactic (someone seeking to create fear for a purpose), whilst the second part concerning the ‘freedom fighter’ contains a positive moral judgment. Yet, as we have seen, deciding what constitutes a morally good act is a wholly separate task to evaluating the utility, or otherwise, of a particular tactic. Depending on how an analyst might evaluate the contingent moral and political setting, it is perfectly possible to commit an act of terror in ‘a good cause’. One person’s terrorist is therefore not another person’s freedom fighter, not least because, depending on the moral calculus, it is entirely possible to be both at the same time.[xxxix]

Talking Terror Strategically

Applying strategic theory enables the analyst to avoid loading the term terrorism with assumptions that cannot be inferred from the premise that it concerns the creation of fear. Speaking strategically avoids emotive, capricious valuations that hold, among other things: that terrorism is a weapon of the weak (not necessarily); involves the intentional killing of innocent civilians (an arbitrary moral judgement); is an act undertaken only by non-state groups based on ethnic, religious, nationalistic, socialist or other ideological causes (a truism that, taken literally, implies all political acts are terrorist); and that terrorism is an observable existential reality. The epistemic confusion in contemporary terrorism studies arises primarily from assigning subjective moral judgements to an abstract noun.

Strategic theory, by contrast, avoids moral judgement. As a method of inquiry it evaluates how well the chosen means achieve stated ends. This understanding applies to all instrumental acts of violence. While this may seem callous, it is a necessary prerequisite for any dispassionate attempt to understand political decisions and actions. As Schelling explained, this is for two reasons: first, strategic ‘analysis is usually about the situation not the individuals – about the structure of incentives, of information and communication, the choices available, and the tactics that can be employed’.

[xli] Second, strategic theory ‘cannot proceed from the point of view of a single favoured participant. It deals with situations in which one party has to think about how the others are going to reach their decisions’. [xlii]

Analysing terrorism in instrumental, rather than judgmental, terms, as a strategy to obtain particular ends, separates the normative assumptions enveloping terrorism from the distinct attempt to assess its utility in the eyes of those who choose to employ its methods.[xliii] The intellectual effort therefore focuses upon whether a particular actor’s intent is directed at creating fear to attain ostensible goals rather than apportioning blame, guilt or judgement. The latter may constitute a legitimate basis for ethical inquiry, but it is a distinct, and unconnected, undertaking from that of assessing the precise intention of an act.

Approaching terrorism strategically allows for the dispassionate examination of motives rather than treating terrorism as an ‘evil’ beyond the realms of rational comprehension. Strategic thought eschews a moral stance in order to analyse objectively the means political actors utilise, including violence, to achieve their ends.[xliv] It disinterestedly investigates situations ‘within a framework that places the conscious choices of actors above any singular focus on the morality or causality of violence itself’.

Conclusion

Clausewitz, we might surmise, would have very little time for the distortions and occlusions that occur in the contemporary use of language about terrorism. Terrorism has become a contested concept through misleading assumptions that have allowed the description to become stretched and infused with normative connotations. This results in the political language of terror becoming ambiguous and distorted.

Applying the principles of accuracy and parsimony that he pioneered in the study of war enables us to chart a different and more meaningful path that facilitates insight and clarity, rather than add to the confusion and contestation that surrounds much contemporary debate. Strategic theory reveals that terrorism is a tactic that has at its core the explicit intention to create fear for a purpose. It can be studied as a rational and instrumental phenomenon, thus freeing terrorism from the ‘semantic bog’ in which it has been mired.[xlv]

Strategic theory also reveals the limitations of the current discourse about terrorism, which gives rise to incoherent speech acts. It can also remind us that a logic of social science inquiry requires parsimony and falsifiability. Unfortunately, much contemporary debate about terrorism has abandoned these principles. It is possible, however, to reveal a better way by replacing talking in tongues with clear speech acts.
References


[xxviii] Variations on this definition can work easily well: the creation of fear for a purpose, the use of fear for political ends, etc.


[xxx] Variations on this definition can work easily well: the creation of fear for a purpose, the use of fear for political ends, etc.


[xxviii] Variations on this definition can work easily well: the creation of fear for a purpose, the use of fear for political ends, etc.


[xxx] Clausewitz, On War, p. 75.


[xxxviii] To give an example: Royal Air Force’s night-time area bombing of Germany in the Second World War carried an explicit terror rationale designed to spread fear and panic in the German population and cause in civilian morale in a manner that was hoped would help end the war. There were ethical reservations about this campaign at the time, but few would ultimately contest that it was carried out for a moral good, namely the attempt to bring down the Nazi regime and thus end the war in as timely a manner as possible.


[xlii] Ibid., p. 199.


