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**TERRORISM,
IDEOLOGY
AND
INJUSTICE**

DOLAN CUMMINGS

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Terrorism is rarely out of the news today. In the wake of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab’s failed attempt to blow up a plane over Detroit on Christmas Day [Ref: [Daily Telegraph](#)], and following subsequent investigations, the Home Office raised the UK terror threat in January to ‘severe’, meaning that an attack is ‘highly likely’ [Ref: [Independent](#)]. More than eight years on from the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington [Ref: [BBC](#)], and more than four years since the 7/7 attacks in London [Ref: [BBC](#)], the threat of radical Islamist terrorism continues to haunt British life. Debates rage about the efficacy and legitimacy of the ‘war on terror’, with some arguing that Western foreign policy only provokes further attacks [Ref: [Guardian](#)], and others insisting there can be no let up in the struggle to defeat terrorism [Ref: [BBC](#)]. Similarly, there are disputes about whether we should compromise our civil liberties for the sake of greater security, or whether that just diminishes the very freedom we are supposed to be defending [Ref: [Debating Matters](#)].

But what is terrorism, and what different understandings lie behind the various arguments about how to address it? Terrorism certainly means different things at different times and places, but by exploring the debates about terrorism here and now, we can also better understand our own society and the tensions within it.

Terrorism and injustice

Historically, debates about terrorism were closely connected to conflicting ideas about justice and injustice. Two or three decades ago, terrorism in the UK was most likely to mean Irish Republican violence. The Provisional IRA had been waging a campaign against the British state since 1969, both attacking British troops in Northern Ireland and conducting high-profile bomb attacks on the British mainland, resulting in civilian deaths and casualties [Ref: [BBC](#)]. Then it was relatively clear what was at stake: the IRA was demanding British withdrawal from Northern Ireland, and for reunification with the Republic. The British state, supported by the Unionist majority in Northern Ireland itself, refused to recognise this as a legitimate claim, and sought to defeat the IRA by military means. As with the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East [Ref: [Guardian](#)], the issue hinged on conflicting ideas about who was in the right, and while the majority of the British public opposed the IRA, there were those who believed they were rightly confronting injustice, including a very significant section of the Nationalist community in Northern Ireland itself. Indeed, in the twentieth century, it was often argued that, 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter'. Some argue that today's Islamist terror is also a response to injustice, whether the mistreatment of Muslims and the Palestinians in particular or the oppression of the poor world in general [Ref: [UN News Centre](#)]. Indian writer Arundhati Roy argued after the 2008 attacks on Mumbai that these were 'blowback' for various injustices [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. There was a huge controversy after the 7/7 attacks in London about whether they were a consequence of the invasion of Iraq [Ref: [Guardian](#)], with then Prime Minister Tony Blair refusing to accept that

they were. What is at stake however, is not merely motivation, or even the justice or injustice of the Iraq invasion or anything else, but also whether terrorists can be said to represent any constituency beyond themselves [Ref: [Carnegie Council](#)].

Terrorism and ideology

Terrorism is traditionally understood as being grounded in extremist ideologies. An ideology is a particular way of thinking that expresses the interests of a specific group, or a vision of the world as they would like it to be. The Irish and Palestinian cases can both be seen as examples of 'national liberation struggles', whereby a large group of people present themselves as a nation demanding sovereignty, which is not currently recognised by existing states [Ref: [IRSM](#)]. Not all advocates of these struggles endorsed violence, but those who did drew on the authority of that nationalist ideology. Other terrorists in the twentieth century claimed to be fighting for socialism, like the Red Brigades in Italy [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)], while still others have carried out attacks in the name of far-right ideologies [Ref: [The Times](#)]. Opposition to such terrorism can focus on condemning the tactics, while recognising the legitimacy of the ideology, or attacking the ideology itself. Those who argued that the 7/7 attacks were 'blowback' for the Iraq war typically condemned the attacks as murderous, while suggesting a real grievance lay behind them, and even that they added to the case against the war [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. In contrast, few people accepted the ideological assumptions of David Copeland, who nail-bombed a gay pub in London in 1999 [Ref: [BBC](#)]. In fact, one enduring response to terrorism is to label the terrorists as disturbed or insane, which may of course be true in some cases. Experts on

terrorism now often study the psychology of terrorists: while this does not preclude an ideological aspect to their behaviour, it does tend to diminish its importance [Ref: [APA](#)]. Others, notably the filmmaker Adam Curtis [Ref: [Internet Archive](#)], have focused on how contemporary Islamist ideology allegedly emerged not simply in opposition to Western foreign policy, but at other times as a result of Western support [Ref: [CRG](#)].

belief in social progress?

Terrorism and nihilism

Not all terrorism can be described as ideological, or indeed even as the work of disturbed individuals. Some of the earliest terrorists were the Russian nihilists of the nineteenth century, who rejected all authority and used violence against the existing order without putting forward a coherent ideology of their own [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)]. They were later superseded by the precursors of the communist movement, but the nihilist outlook has recurred at various times and in various places since. Nihilism is particularly associated with relatively privileged and educated sections of society, and some have suggested that many radical Islamist terrorists fit this mould rather better than that of the freedom fighter or even religious zealot [Ref: [Washington Examiner](#)]. Since many such terrorists, including the 9/11 attackers and the failed 'underpants bomber' of December 2009, were educated in the West, it has been suggested that we should look closer to home to understand their thinking, rather than blaming foreign ideologies [Ref: [New Statesman](#)]. Why is it that young people exposed to the best the West has to offer choose to reject everything it stands for? And what do the 'war on terror', and reactions to it domestically, tell us about Western attitudes to our own declared values, from civil liberties to the

ESSENTIAL READING

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NOTES

Understanding terrorism

Tori DeAngelis *American Psychological Association* November 2009

MI5 report challenges views on terrorism in Britain

Guardian 20 August 2009

Multiculturalism and the 'war on terror'

Munira Mirza *Rising East* 4 May 2006

Creating the enemy

Brendan O'Neill *spiked* 18 July 2005

Blair's Blowback

Gary Younge *Guardian* 11 July 2005

Fighting injustice, oppression only way to defeat terrorism

Todd Richissin *Sydney Morning Herald* 3 September 2004

Counter-terrorism

In Depth

We must target radicals – before they target us

Minette Marrin *The Sunday Times* 10 January 2010

'Could 7/7 Have Been Prevented?' Intelligence and Security

Committee Review

May 2009

The monster in the mirror

Arundhati Roy *Guardian* 13 December 2008

History: it's just one bloody thing after another,

Bill Durodie *spiked review of books* May 2008

Reasoning out suicidal mass murder

Rob Weatherill *Culture Wars* 4 March 2008

The root causes of terrorism

Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema *Islamabad Policy Research Institute* 4 February 2007

Killer Workout: Are gyms, not mosques, the main breeding ground for Islamic terrorists?

Brendan O'Neill *Slate* 1 June 2006

The making of the terror myth

Andy Beckett *Guardian* 15 October 2004

Rational Extremism: Understanding Terrorism in the Twenty-first Century

David A Lake *IO Foundation and MIT Symposium on September 11, Cambridge University Press* 24 April 2003

BACKGROUNDERS

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[PLO: History of a Revolution](#)
al-Jazeera 31 August 2009

[London Attacks](#)
BBC 8 July 2008

[Blind Faiths](#)
Ayaan Hirsi Ali *New York Times* 6 January 2008

[Book launch for Invitation to Terror](#)
Frank Furedi *Battle of Ideas* 2007

[Does al-Qaeda exist?](#)
spiked 28 November 2003

[The Changing Faces of Terrorism](#)
Professor Adam Roberts *BBC History* 27 August 2002

[10 Things to Know about Terrorism](#)
Mark LeVine *University of California, Irvine* 4 October 2001

[Provisional IRA: War, Ceasefire, Endgame?](#)
BBC News 2001

[Al Qaeda overview](#)
GlobalSecurity.org

[The Power of Nightmares](#)
Adam Curtis

ORGANISATIONS

[Antiwar.com](#)

[CIA & the War on Terrorism](#)

[MI5 on terrorism](#)

[UK Home Office current threat level](#)

[US Department of Homeland Security](#)

IN THE NEWS

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NOTES

Ministry of Justice lists eco-activists alongside terrorists

Guardian 26 January 2010

Miliband warns of terror threat after 'Bin Laden' tape aired

Guardian 24 January 2010

Yemen meeting caused switch to 'severe' terror alert

Independent 24 January 2010

'Bin Laden tape' warns Obama of more attacks

BBC News 24 January 2010

Al-Qaeda has trained female suicide bombers to attack West, US officials warn

Daily Telegraph 23 January 2010

Man arrested under Terrorism Act for Doncaster airport Twitter joke

Daily Telegraph 18 January 2010

'Hundreds of al-Qaeda militants planning attacks from Yemen'

The Times 29 December 2009

Police fear far-right terror attack

Guardian 6 July 2009

Tamils escalate London protest as hunger striker's condition worsens

Guardian 20 April 2009

'Poverty, injustice main causes of terrorism'

The Nation (Pakistan) 20 February 2009

Researchers have no 'right' to study terrorist materials

Melanie Newman *Times Higher Education* 17 July 2008

Two-thirds believe London bombings are linked to Iraq war

Guardian 19 July 2005

Two dead in London nail bomb

BBC News 1 May 1999

The drink bottle that could have downed a plane

Guardian 7 September 2009

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- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
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School/company/
organisation

Professional role
(if applicable)

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