Terrorism, History, and Historians: A View from a Social Scientist

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The United States was born of a violent revolution, yet political violence occupies a unique position in the collective American psyche. The historian Beverly Gage states that until recently historians had a difficult time addressing how social violence shaped America's past; many of them assumed that "consensus rather than conflict" was the driving force behind the formation of the state. Further, she points out, even today most historians have little to say on the subject of terrorism. By the late 1960s, when the country was gripped by violence "everywhere," Gage writes, "Americans seemed to be thinking and talking about violence, except within the historical profession." She also highlights Richard Hofstadter's exhortation to his fellow historians to get involved and place the ongoing debate over violence within a sound historical perspective.[1]

Although Hofstadter's admonition was certainly appropriate, historians were not the only group surprised by the steadily increasing violence in the United States at that time; social scientists were as well. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, the United States was flush with total victory in a war that was seen almost unanimously as a battle between good and evil, and the nation began relishing its status as a "superpower." This lack of moral ambiguity continued during the height of the Cold War. As the country basked in its self-perception of being at the pinnacle of military, economic, and political power, American social science scholarship remained largely self-congratulatory. Violence was seen as an outcome of institutional and social structural imperfections found only in so-called third world nations. In the democratic West, common citizens were thought to be empowered by their ability to voluntarily form lobbying groups and to change the offending social order, thereby eliminating the need for violent revolutions. Yet reality stood in the way of this rosy requiem of social conflict in the West in the 1960s and 1970s. In the context of this incongruity, the prominent political scientist Harry Eckstein lamented in 1964: "When today's social science has become intellectual history, one question will certainly be asked about it: why did social science, which had produced so many studies on so many subjects,

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[1] Beverly Gage, "Terrorism and the American Experience: A State of the Field," *Journal of American History,* 98 (June 2011), 73. Richard Hofstadter, "Reflections on Violence in the United States," in *American Violence: A Documentary History,* ed. Richard Hofstadter and Mike Wallace (New York, 1970), 5.

produce so few on violent political disorder?"[2] By the end of the decade, social scientists rose to the occasion by producing an impressive number of studies on social conflict.

The primary difference between history and social science lies in the former's reluctance to develop a generalized theory, while the latter clamors for common rules that bind human behavior over time and geographic space. As a result, while historians work in the archives unearthing the sequence of events that led to a certain outcome, social scientists generally pursue data-driven analyses. Unfortunately, before the riotous 1960s there was no systematic effort to collect data on sociopolitical conflicts. In the absence of empirical verification, the study of conflict remained confined within the insightful yet speculative work of sociologists. That situation changed quickly as money poured in from government sources. Early efforts produced a number of impressive compendiums of data for nearly all countries of the world over a relatively large number of years. This collection of data sparked new efforts at building grand theories of rebellious behavior, with which the veracity of various hypotheses could be tested.[3]

The long, circuitous path of scholarship that links Aristotle to Karl Marx to the sociologists of the 1960s had uniformly looked at the imbalances in social structures as the primary generators of political malevolence. Yet the conundrum for social scientists in the 1960s and 1970s was that the fires of protest were burning brightly in the cities of North America and Western Europe, where the gradually rising tide of economic prosperity had made life easier for most. To solve this riddle, a group of political scientists offered the "relative derivation" theory. This theory applied to societal experience psychological theories that linked frustration felt by an individual with aggression (F-A theory). These theorists argued that violence occurred in affluent nations because aggressive behavior is not generated by the presence of absolute poverty but of its relative perception. Thanks to the collection of data on protest movements, a number of statistical studies tested these theories and the field amassed an impressive list of publications.[4]

The availability of numerical data on conflict also brought another group of reluctant bystanders into the debate: economists. Economics, as a discipline in the social sciences, has traditionally been most rigid in developing theories without the contaminating effects

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[2] Harry Eckstein, ed., *Internal War: Problems and Approaches* (New York, 1964), 1.

[3] For the work of sociologists, see, for example, Louis A. Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (New York, 1956); Ralph Dahrendorf, "Toward a Theory of Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution,* 2 (June 1958), 170–83; and Neil J. Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behavior* (New York, 1963). David Singer's data on *Correlates of War* began in 1963. See *Correlates of War,* http://www.correlatesofwar.org. This work by Singer was followed by Ivo K. Feierabend, Rosalind L. Feierabend, and Betty A. Nesvold, "Social Change and Political Violence: Cross-National Patterns," in *The History of Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives,* ed. Hugh D. Graham and Ted R. Gurr (New York, 1969), 632–87. Arthur Banks, *Cross-Polity Time Series Data* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971). Charles Taylor and Michael C. Hudson, *World Handbook of Political and Social Indicators* (Ann Arbor, 1971); Charles Taylor and Michael Jodice, *Annual Events Data* (New Haven, 1982). Ted R. Gurr, *Minorities at Risk,* http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar/. Dipak K. Gupta, "Tyranny of Data: Going beyond Theories," in *Tangled Roots: Social and Psychological Factors in the Genesis of Terrorism,* ed. Jeff Victoroff (Amsterdam, 2006), 37–50.

[4] John Dollard et al., *Frustration and Aggression* (New Haven, 1939). Ted R. Gurr, "A Causal Model of Civil Strife: A Comparative Analysis Using a New Indices," *American Political Science Review,* 62 (Dec. 1968), 1104–24. See also Ted R. Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (New Haven, 1970). Douglas A. Hibbs, *Mass Political Violence: A Cross-National Causal Analysis* (New York, 1973). Dipak K. Gupta and Yiannis P. Venieris, "Introducing New Dimensions in Macro Models: The Sociopolitical and Institutional Environments," *Economic Development and Cultural Change,* 30 (Oct. 1981), 31–58. Dipak K. Gupta, *The Economics of Political Violence: The Effect of Political Instability on Economic Growth* (New York, 1990).

of its sister disciplines. Yet there was overwhelming evidence that the process of economic development is inextricably linked with the generation of sociopolitical conflict, both as a by-product as well as constraint to economic growth. This understanding spurred many important publications by traditional economists.[5]

While social scientists became interested in the analyses of social violence, a change in the political landscape was afoot. The passage of civil rights legislation and the end of the Vietnam War considerably lowered tension in the United States. Consequently, by the late 1980s interest in conflict waned and with it, public funding for data collection.

As the leftist conflicts, which grabbed the most public attention, ebbed, a new wave of worldwide violence was about to strike, and it caught the nation largely unprepared. These right-wing movements were based on religious and racist identities. The conflict that engulfed the nation in the 1990s did not come from outside. The homegrown movements, often broadly referred to as the "militia" or "Christian Identity" movement targeted abortion clinics, symbols of state authority, or members of minority communities. From Waco, Texas, to Ruby Ridge, Montana, spectacular clashes with these groups became increasingly commonplace. However, the most devastating attack from right-wing violence came in 1995, when Timothy McVeigh blew up a building housing a number federal agencies in Oklahoma City. With that attack, public attention quickly changed to the threats of terrorism as opposed to urban riots and mass movements. Focus shifted toward seriously studying terrorism and a federally funded Web site, the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (MIPT), was set up under the supervision of the RAND Corporation. Soon thereafter came the September 11, 2001, attacks. Responding to the need for consistent data on terrorist groups and their followers, the MIPT was phased out and a new National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) was established at the University of Maryland, from which scholars could download publicly available information for free.[6]

Along with this collection of aggregate data, a number of federal agencies and their affiliate organizations, from the National Science Foundation and U.S. Institute of Peace to the agencies related to defense and homeland security, began sponsoring individual researchers to study specific groups or their members. The accumulated macro and micro data on terrorism offered a new challenge to the social science theory builders. Scholars quickly realized that the link between frustration and demonstration of anger felt at a societal level is not automatic. Nor, as psychiatrists and clinical psychologists also discovered, is there a specific personality type that is primarily susceptible toward joining terrorist organizations. Terrorism, scholars discovered, is a phenomenon that has to be explained with complex social, political, economic, and social-psychological factors. To solve the problem of a weak link between social structural factors, such as poverty, income inequality, and lack of political freedom, and violent political dissent,

    [5] Gupta and Venieris, "Introducing New Dimensions in Macro Models"; Yiannis P. Venieris and Dipak K. Gupta, "Income Distribution and Sociopolitical Instability as Determinants of Savings: A Cross-sectional Model," *Journal of Political Economy,* 94 (Aug. 1986), 873–83. Robert J. Barro, "Economic Growth in a Cross Section of Countries," *Quarterly Journal of Economics,* 106 (May 1991), 407–43. Robert. J. Barro, *Determinants of Economic Growth: A Cross-Country Empirical Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997); Jess Benhabib and Aldo Rustichini, "Social Conflict and Growth," *Journal of Economic Growth,* 1 (March 1996), 125–42; Alberto Alesina and Roberto Perotti, "Income Distribution, Political Instability, and Investment," *European Economic Review,* 40 (June 1996), 1203–28. Alberto Alesina and Dani Rodrik, "Distributive Politics and Economic Growth," *Quarterly Journal of Economics,* 109 (May 1994), 465–90.

    [6] David Rapoport, "The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism," in *Attacking Terrorism: Elements of a Grand Strategy,* ed. Audrey Kurth Cronin and James M. Ludes (Washington, 2004), 46–72. MIPT: *National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism,* http://www.mipt.org/; START: *National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism,* http://www.start.umd.edu/start/.

a few noted sociologists had previously argued that it is not enough to have a widespread feeling of frustration—absolute or relative—for a social movement to sustain itself over time. Such a movement must also procure resources and develop a social network. Despite the popularity of the "resource mobilization" theory in sociology, the primary problem of explaining the root causes of revolt remains unaddressed, since networks and resources do not crop up randomly. This problem leads us to the question of leadership.[7]

The economist Joseph Schumpeter pointed out in 1912 that market interactions alone do not explain long-term movements in the economy. He emphasized the work of entrepreneurs, who, through their innovations, cause economic evolution. Similarly, scholars emphasized the need to have "political entrepreneurs" to provide a shape of collective identity for a movement to start and sustain. These are the leaders, the Mohandas Gandhis, the V. I. Lenins, the Mao Zedongs, the Martin Luther Kings, and the Osama bin Ladens of the world, who are able to channel the collective anger felt in their communities to create full-fledged political movements.[8]

Apart from the absence of empirical data, terrorism studies, in its early stages, had to overcome a deep-seated ideological obstacle. At the end of the twentieth century, while social scientists were rising to the challenges of exploring the root causes of social movements, there was one area within the broad range of conflict studies where the literature was conspicuous in its near absence: terrorism. With the exception of a few noteworthy efforts, beginning perhaps with the pathbreaking work of the historian Walter Laqueur, few noted social science scholars had contributed anything on terrorism. This conscious aversion can perhaps be traced directly to the ideological implication of the term. In today's world a "terrorist" is seen as the moral equivalent of a serial killer. Yet in the first half of the twentieth century those who carried out attacks against an unjust system used the name as a badge of honor. As public perception changed, however, Menachem Begin (at one time held as a "terrorist" by the authorities in the British Mandate of Palestine, and later the elected prime minister of Israel) was the first to renounce the "terrorist" label by calling the occupying British the "real terrorists." Furthermore, if morality of action can be measured by the number of deaths, the actions of organized states have caused many more fatalities than any dissident group in history. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the first debate in the field of terrorism studies was over definition. Without an accepted definition, scholars, journalists, and government agencies defined terrorism in their own way. In 1988, in a seminal contribution to the emerging debate, Alex P. Schmid and Albert J. Jongman published a book that methodically examined over one hundred definitions of terrorism. Despite this heroic effort, "terrorism" remained a controversial term. Summarizing the continuing controversy two decades later,

[7] Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Malečková, "Education, Poverty, and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?," *Journal of Economic Perspectives,* 17 (Fall 2003), 119–44. Jerrold Post, "Terrorist Psycho-logic: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Psycho-logical Forces," in *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind,* ed. Walter Reich (Washington, 1998), 25–40. John Horgan, "The Search for Terrorist Personality," in *Terrorists, Victims, and Society: Psychological Perspectives on Terrorism and Its Consequences,* ed. Andrew Silke (Chichester, 2003), 3–28. On the social factors of terrorism, see Tore Bjorgo, ed., *The Root Causes of Terrorism: Myths, Reality, and Ways Forward* (London, 2005). Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action, and Politics* (New York, 1994); Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, "To Map Contentious Politics," *Mobilization,* 1 (March 1996), 17–34.

[8] Joseph Schumpeter, *The Theory of Economic Development: An Inquiry into Profits, Capital, Credit, Interest, and the Business Cycle,* trans. R. Opie (1912; New York, 1939). Dipak K. Gupta, *Path to Collective Madness: A Study in Social Order and Political Pathology* (Westport, 2001).

the noted sociologist Charles Tilly observed: "Some vivid terms serve political and nor-mative ends admirably despite hindering description and explanation of the social phe-nomena at which they point. . . . They . . . include *terror, terrorism,* and *terrorists*."[9]

To avoid this moral ambiguity many scholars either avoided the term altogether or chose to broaden the definition of terrorism to an extent that it lost its specific meaning. Unsurprisingly, those who were the first to address explicitly the topic of terrorism were members of think tanks and other organizations associated with the government or the intelligence community rather than scholars affiliated with academic institutions.[10]

The reluctance of academics to tackle this politically loaded subject disappeared after the 9/11 attacks. The number of books and articles on terrorism in the past decade alone is many multiples of the number published in the previous fifty years. Today, trying to get your arms around this vast literature is akin to attempting to drink at the mouth of a fire hose. During this publication frenzy, historians once again, as Gage points out, "kept the subject [of terrorism] at arm's length," particularly when it came to the American experi-ence. Academic historians have had, of course, plenty to say about individual rebellion and terrorist activities, but remained reticent about addressing the question of "terrorism."[11]

A number of factors contribute to this reluctance. First, the question of terrorism, as opposed to a particular terrorist or movement, requires generalization and theory build-ing, an anathema to most professional historians. Second, such efforts require theorizing about the motivations of the participants. By looking at acts alone, one cannot distin-guish between the workings of a repressive state, a dissident political group, a crazed religious cult, or the intimidations of organized crime syndicates. The only way out of this conundrum is to recognize that "terrorism" is a political act by nonstate actors, where the participants, in contrast to common criminals, see their acts as a way of achieving public good, such as national independence, social justice, or the establishment of a theocratic state. Terrorists are, thus, at least in their own minds, altruists.[12] By that definition the acts of the violent abolitionists should be classified as terrorism, as should the work of those who target doctors performing abortions. We must recognize that terrorism cannot be defined by a specific set of acts; it should be viewed instead as a strategy used by dissident organizations and their leaders to achieve their political goals. Some of these actors, such as Gandhi or King, may use nonviolence while others employ violence directed at non-combatant citizens. Surely, there is a strong moral aspect to those strategies of killing, but in examining their root causes or the life cycle of terrorist organizations, scholars should be more concerned about dispassionate analysis. Finally, terrorism studies, as opposed to

[9] Walter Laqueur, *Terrorism* (Boston, 1977). For exceptions to the lack of social science scholarship on terror-ism, see Alex Schmid and Jenny de Graaf, *Violence as Communication: Insurgent Terrorism and Western News Media* (Beverly Hills, 1982); Martha Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," *Contemporary Politics,* 13 (July 1981), 379–99; and David C. Rapoport, "Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions," *American Political Science Review,* 78 (Sept. 1984), 658–77. Menachem Begin, *The Revolt: Story of Irgun,* trans. Shmuel Katz (New York, 1951). On state-perpetrated violence, see Rudolph Rummel, *Death by Government* (New Brunswick, 1997). Paul Wilkinson, *Political Terrorism* (New York, 1974). Alex P. Schmid and Albert J. Jongman, *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories, and Literature,* (Beverly Hills, 1988). Charles Tilly, "Terror, Terrorism, and Terrorists," *Sociological Theory,* 22 (March 2004), 5–13, esp. 13.

[10] Paul Wilkinson, *Terrorism and Liberal State* (London, 1977); Brian Jenkins, *Terrorism and Personal Protection* (Boston, 1985); Zelic Freedman and Yonah Alexander, eds., *Perspectives on Terrorism* (Wilmington, 1983); Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York, 1998). Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (New York, 2002).

[11] Gage, "Terrorism and the American Experience," 79.

[12] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism.*

history, is primarily prescriptive in its orientation. The contributors often explicitly aim to influence public policies. This is one temptation that historians are largely apt to avoid. In sum, to engage in terrorism studies, historians may need to overcome their reluctance to engage in a field that requires: (1) generalizing, (2) stripping the term "terrorism" of its ideological component, (3) examining the motivating forces behind acts of violence, and (4) formulating policy prescriptions.

Although I agree with Gage that professional historians have been less than enthusiastic in contributing to terrorism studies, I think she somewhat overstates the argument that terrorism studies scholars have abandoned history. Excepting perhaps the economists, most academic scholars whose work she mentions are either trained historians or have relied heavily on history in their explanations. For instance, one of the most commonly accepted hypotheses in the field of terrorism studies is the so-called wave theory. In a sweeping conceptualization of the historical process that has generated terrorism, David Rapoport offered his "wave" theory, where the history of modern terrorism, starting in the 1880s can be seen as four large waves of common ideological frenzy that swept the world, with each wave lasting approximately forty years. The first wave was anarchism, followed by anticolonialism and then, new leftism. The world is currently experiencing the transnational wave of religious fundamentalism.[13]

Gage accuses many terrorism scholars of presentism, and specifically points out Marc Sageman's work. However, even Sageman, a trained psychiatrist and former member of the Central Intelligence Agency, traces the intellectual history of jihad in the Islamic religious context.[14]

The problem of "terrorism" has been with us since humans formed organized societies, and there is little doubt that it will continue to plague us as long as we live as a species. What is new, however, is the increasing capabilities of inflicting harm on an ever larger scale. If we are to manage this risk, historians and social scientists must work together to develop an intellectual framework within which we can examine theses events and propose policies for their mitigation.

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[13] For examples of books by economists, see Walter Enders and Todd Sandler, *The Political Economy of Terrorism* (New York, 2006); and Philip Keefer and Norman Loayza, eds., *Terrorism, Economic Development, and Political Openness* (New York, 2008). Marc Sageman, "Ripples in the Waves: Fantasies and Fashions," in *Terrorism, Identity, and Legitimacy: The Four Waves Theory and Political Violence,* ed. Jean E. Rosenfeld (London, 2011), 87–92. Rapoport, "Four Waves of Modern Terrorism."

[14] Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia, 2004).