

‘Terrorism’ is a loaded word in the media and public discourse, and a highly contested one in the field of International Relations (IR) (Sherwin 2015; Hoffmann 1998; Malkki, Sallamaa 2018; Shariatmadari 2015). The word came into use in 1794 to describe members and supporters of the Jacobins during the French Revolution “who advocated and practised methods of partisan repression and bloodshed in the propagation of the principles of democracy and equality.” (Shariatmadari 2015). Throughout the 19th and 20th century, the term was expanded to include the idea of persons who employ methods of violence and intimidation for political reasons (Shariatmadari 2015). “In a post-9/11 world, the term seems all-pervasive and its use ever more extensive.” (Malkki, Sallamaa 2018, p. 862). Our understanding of the term has become clouded and confused and is now more emotionally and politically charged than descriptive or informative (Shariatmadari 2015; Malkki, Sallamaa 2018; Prater 2009) which is highly dangerous and needs to be unpacked and explored. Part of the reason for this confusion is due to the over-usage of the term in the media and literature as Figure 1 from David Shariatmadari

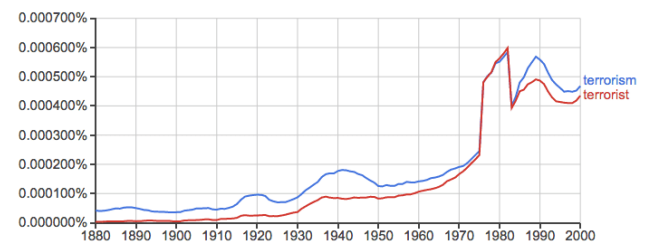


Figure 1 (Shariatmadari 2015)

shows the use of the usage of the words ‘terrorism’ and ‘terrorist’ over time in English language texts. Due to the length of time the word ‘terrorism’ has been in circulation, and the sheer breadth of ideas and examples it has covered over its history, we do not have a definition fit for purpose (Hoffman 1998; Prater 2009; Boehmer 2007; Malkki, Sallamaa 2018; Crenshaw 1981). This essay will argue that the reason some violent acts are labelled as ‘terrorist’ and others are not is because of the fuzziness of its definition but also because it depends on the positionality of the actor labelling other actors or acts. This essay will use a postcolonial and constructivist lens to explore this and look at the case studies of Extinction Rebellion, police brutality and differing language of reports by the Daily Mirror.

'Terrorism' has become a challenging term to clearly define due to its emotive nature. Since the 1970s, terrorism has been a pejorative term instead of a neutral one (Malkki, Sallamaa 2018); it has become "a political tool and label that communicates moral judgement and/or political condemnation." (Malkki, Sallamaa 2018, p. 863). It is understandable that the language surrounding terrorism is affected by emotions- we are only human and terror attacks are designed to incite fear and terror (Hoffman 1998; Malkki, Sallamaa 2018; Prater 2009; Shariatmadari 2015). This does not have to be a bad thing as, despite what realists argue, IR and global politics is not about states as "black boxes or billiard balls" (Mearsheimer 2001, p. 11), but about people. As a result, we have a duty to acknowledge the emotions of humans and our current understanding of terrorism and use of realism do not allow for this which has created a greatly misunderstood term that causes dangerous categorisations. The field of IR has made progress both in terms of understanding the role of emotion in 'creating' terrorists and our view of terrorism but "models of terrorism are still not integrated into wider theories of contemporary society" (Wright-Neville, Smith 2009, p. 89). We have made terrorism such an emotionally and morally loaded term (Malkki, Sallamaa 2018; Wright-Neville, Smith 2009) that we have become scared of the term itself. Therefore, some acts of violence are labelled 'terrorist' while others are not as although we can sense the emotion behind the term, we do not acknowledge it properly and therefore use it inappropriately and maliciously for political motivations. Terrorism is not an issue isolated to IR; it is an issue of humanity. Therefore, IR scholars need to work with psychologists, anthropologists, psychiatrists and a variety of other disciplines and professionals to truly understand the humans behind terrorists. Only then can we hope to understand terrorism, find a suitable definition or at least criteria and stop making biased decisions about who is and is not a terrorist.

With the rate at which media and technology are growing, it seems unsurprising that since the turn of the century, terrorists have relied heavily on media sources to spread their

message (Iqbal 2015; Vasterman et al. 2005). There are strong suggestions that the media and terrorist actors have a symbiotic relationship (Wilkinson 1997; Iqbal 2015); humans are inherently drawn to disaster situations so there is an increased viewership when outlets air terrorist incidents and terrorists want to spread their message to as many people as they can which allows this symbiotic relationship to function well (Wilkinson 1997). It is therefore understandable why the media is so focused on terror attacks, but the question remains about “*how* the media covers terrorist incidents” (Iqbal 2015, p. 91). The relationship between the media and terrorism is incomplete unless one incorporates a layer of postcolonial theory. Unfortunately, the perpetrator of an attack seems to be more important for the media’s judgement about whether an incident is terror related, than the actual facts (Corbin 2017; Kearns et al. 2019b; Kearns, Amarasingam 2019a). A clear example of this is the biased, racist reporting of the Daily Mirror. When referring to the 2019 Christchurch attack by Brenton Tarrant, a clear terrorist incident, their headline was ‘Angelic boy who grew into evil far-right mass killer’ (Kearns, Amarasingam 2019a; Young 2019). The words ‘terrorist’ or ‘terrorism’ do not appear in the article. However, when reporting on Omar Mateen’s 2016 terror attack on Pulse Nightclub, the headline read ‘ISIS Maniac Kills 50 in Gay Nightclub’ (Kearns, Amarasingam 2019a). Unfortunately, this skewed portrayal of terrorists depending on race and religion is not limited to the Daily Mirror. A study of major media sources (including CNN.com, The New York Times and The Washington Post) found that the amount of media attention increased by 758% if the perpetrator of the attack was Muslim whereas it increased by 62% per fatality which shows once again how our understanding of terrorism is linked closely to religion instead of outcome (Ritchie et al. 2019). Using critical race theory and exploring cognitive bias, we can see two disturbingly common false narratives surrounding terrorism in America. “The first is that “terrorists are always (brown) Muslims.” The second is that “white people are never terrorists.”” (Corbin 2017, p. 455). It is vital that we incorporate postcolonial and critical race theories into our study and reporting of terrorist and suspected terror incidents as race and religion are unfortunately clear determining features of the labelling of violent acts as either terrorist or non-terrorist (Corbin 2017;

Kearns, Amarasingam 2019a). We need to ensure that our understanding of terrorism prioritises political motivation, a desire to gain attention for a group or ideology and a willingness to inflict harm and fear- not centre on race or religion (Hoffman 1998; Boehner 2007; Corbin 2017).

Research has continually shown the political advantages of using the word terrorist to describe one's enemy; it delegitimises them, portrays them as evil and is often used to justify counter-measurements that would otherwise be deemed inappropriate (Malkki, Sallamaa 2018). The human rights abuses and unnecessary bloodshed at Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp (Amnesty International UK 2020) and the nearly 400,000 civilian casualties in the Middle East in the name of the 'War on Terror' are just a few examples of the way even democratic countries like the United States are willing to compromise human rights when it comes to treating 'terrorists'. A prominent case of a seemingly inappropriate labelling of a group as 'terrorist' for political gains was the UK Home Office's decision to add non-violent environmental and animal rights groups like Extinction Rebellion (XR), Peta, Sea Shepherd and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) (BBC 2020). It seems unjustifiable that a government can put non-violent groups engaging in their right to peaceful protest on an extremist list with groups like the far-right National Action and swastika-bearing campaigns (BBC 2020). It seems then that, "terrorism and terrorists are, at least partly, simply what we define them to be" (Shariatmadari 2015). In this case, we ought to employ postcolonial and constructivist lenses when looking at terrorism as 'who' or 'what' a terrorist group or act is depends on the actor describing them. This shows one of the greatest flaws with our understandings of terrorism and with realism as a central component of IR; it appears that the state can throw politically charged labels like 'terrorism' at any action or movement that they deem to be a threat. They can delegitimise any movement and can use 'counter terrorism' measures or tactics that would not normally be accepted or tolerated under any other name. One could perhaps argue that the words 'terror' and 'terrorism' hold such power and

opportunity for damage when used by the wrong actor or for the wrong reasons, that we should be more scared of it than terrorist actors.

A commonly held definition of terrorism “is the use of violence to intimidate another.” (Prater 2009, p. 95). If we take this definition then we must address a significant systemic problem apparent across the world- the police (Prater 2009). The Equal Justice Initiative state that between 1877 and 1940, over 4,400 African-Americans were lynched (EJI 2022). Police brutality is merely the 21st century’s answer to lynching (Prater 2009). More than 3 million people have signed a petition to label the Ku Klux Klan as a terrorist organisation which shows that even if the US government do not recognise the acts of lynching and racial hate crimes as an act of terrorism, the public does (Hall 2020; Change.org 2022). One must wonder whether some Klansmembers have swapped white robes for blue shirts, guns and badges (Prater 2009)? “Terrorism is like a chameleon; it takes many forms” (Prater 2009, p. 96) and the uniform of the police act as camouflage. Acts of police brutality appear to be terror-related incidents but the state and blue shirts protect them which forces the question of who decides who is a ‘terrorist’ and who is not? We tend to view the state as being threatened by terrorist organisations but what if the state is the threat?

In conclusion, there are several reasons as to why some acts of violence are considered ‘terrorist’ and others are not. One of the key factors is that for far too long we have had an unclear definition of terrorism due to the significant changes in meaning the term has had over the past few centuries. As a result of this, we now have a clouded definition, and the word has lost value. Another reason is that unfortunately the media, the police, the government, and the public still face cognitive biases and therefore have preconceptions about what terrorists should look like and what their motivations should be. ‘Terrorism’ has also become a highly loaded word that sparks huge amounts of emotion and attention and delegitimises the actor who is described by it. It has therefore become a political tool used against opponents or ‘enemies’ of the state. It has lost its informative value and been replaced by a

value-laden judgement instead. This has caused non-violent groups like Extinction Rebellion who cause disruption but not violence or death, to be viewed as terrorist alongside neo-Nazi organisations, highlighting the flawed nature of the term. Another reason as to why some acts of violence are labelled as 'terrorist' is because this means that they receive unprecedented levels of attention from the media, police and intelligence services in a way non-terrorist attacks do not. Therefore, choosing whether an attack is labelled as terrorist or not is highly political as it determines the agenda and priorities of a nation which is why certain acts will not be labelled as terrorist. We will likely never be able to come up with a concrete definition for terrorism and unfortunately, the problem of terrorism is not one that will disappear any time soon. We must not be disheartened by this but rather see it as an opportunity for interdisciplinary communication and co-operation and remember the humanity of all actors in IR and global politics. It is vital that we remind ourselves of the impact of emotion and inevitable irrationality of actors, the influence of certain words and social constructions and the way in which we frame information. We have a duty as humans to encourage peace and open communication and this can begin by acknowledging that our definition of terrorism, like many other definitions in IR, is outdated and has dangerous consequences so we ought to work together to find honesty, meaning and value for it.

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