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A Tale of Two Terrorists

By Elliot Sperber
June 13, 2016

Nearly 15 years since its fiery debut, Bush’s “War on Terror” has somehow (and for some time now, too) been banalized into the humdrum of Obama’s permanent war; in light of this, as terrorism continues to simultaneously deviate from and reflect social norms, it seems entirely fitting that the two people vying for the presidency of the United States should be terrorists themselves.

More than merely corrupt (that euphemism for criminal), or incompetent, in the course of her tenure as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton repeatedly committed acts of state-terrorism. From supporting coups in Honduras and Ukraine, to her essential role in the destruction of Libya, to her encouragement of Israeli war crimes against the people of Gaza (and let’s not forget her significant contribution, as senator, to the devastation of Iraq), Clinton has been deeply involved in the commission of war crimes and state-terror.

Compared to so rich a record, Trump’s terrorism is no doubt meager. Though he has certainly terrorized his share of working people over the course of his business career, he lacks Clinton’s experience with such things as state of the art weaponry. Yet, despite these serious limitations, as a candidate for president his terroristic potential genuinely shines. Not only does Trump promise future terrorization (of Muslims, immigrants, journalists, and others), his mere promises have the effect of terrorizing people in the present. But, the discerning reader inquires, do such threats in fact amount to terrorism?

Although the concept is integral to national and international politics, little agreement has ever existed as to what constitutes the crime of terrorism – a lack of agreement that does not simply arise from terrorism’s complexity. The difficulty also inheres in devising a definition of terrorism that doesn’t in some way implicate the military, politicians, businesspeople, and the police in criminality – at rates, by the way, that far exceed those of the small-time terrorist. For while most amateur terrorists only ever commit a few acts of terror, cops and soldiers are able to commit acts of terror daily, for years. And, through their proxies and minions, businessmen and politicians often terrorize entire regions of the globe for generations. Consequently, the “terrorist” tends to be distinguished from other distributors of terror by largely arbitrary, subjective, and often times meaningless determinations.

Although theorists and scholars have been unable to reach anything approximating consensus regarding the definition of terrorism, there nevertheless are some aspects of terrorism that are nearly universally agreed upon. That terrorism involves the violent targeting of civilians, for example, is a relatively uncontentious element. As it turns out, though, this ostensibly uncontroversial notion quickly raises a problem. The police, you see, regularly target and terrorize civilians. Even if it is not intentional, which it often is not, terror is a regular and foreseeable outcome of policing. And what about border patrol guards, and prison guards? The response to this arrives in the form of a qualification: terrorism, we’re told, is only terrorism when acts of terror are perpetrated by non-state actors. Many wholeheartedly accept this limiting definition. Others, meanwhile, accept the more expansive view that such a thing as state-terrorism exists as well. And why shouldn’t it?

After all, terrorism originated – modernly, at least – with state actors during the Reign of Terror (the short terror, as opposed to the long terror of feudalism) in 1790s France. Not only did terrorism develop historically as an adjunct to, and aspect of, the nation-state, terror defines the very essence of the modern nation-state; for one of the necessary components of the nation-state is its territory, and territory is distinguishable from the more neutral, less determinate concepts of land, and country, by the fact that a territory (derived from the word terror) is technically an area demarcated by force and terror.

Border guards, therefore, do not deviate from their historico-political purpose when they terrorize civilians. It is the nice border guard, as opposed to the sadistic one, who is the deviant, the anomaly. As such, the police and border guards, among others who employ terror against civilians, creating a climate of fear conducive to the smooth functioning of the global order, may be fairly regarded as a type of terrorist. And because they are typically paid (by the state, or by private companies) for these activities they can also be regarded as professional terrorists. In contrast to this, the professional terrorist, is the amateur terrorist.

Derived from the Latin verb *amare*, which means to love, the amateur terrorist (more than the professional, at least) is motivated nearly exclusively by a variety of love: passion. Unlike the professional terrorist (the border guard, the cop, or even the hooded Klan member – who historically enjoyed a large degree of state or local support), it is the impassioned, amateur terrorist who has come to symbolize the terrorist in the cultural imaginary. But though the suicide-vest-clad terrorist may have replaced the bomb throwing anarchist, among other cartoonish figures, as the stereotypical image of the terrorist, we should not neglect to consider

the fact that the terrorist of the street is only a small-time terrorist – an amateur able to be defined by his or her enemy precisely because of his or her lack of power.

This is not to say that the terror produced by the amateur is not real. It certainly is, even as it's amplified out of all proportion by the funhouse mirrors of the mass media – a distortion that creates a monster (simultaneously subhuman and superhuman) whose ubiquitous image functions to eclipse the generally quantitatively and qualitatively greater terror attending the regular bombing of large regions of the world (Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Gaza, etc.).

Yes, the amateur terrorist is weak. But this should not be construed to mean that only the weak resort to terror. It isn't even necessarily the case that only the small-time, amateur terrorist blows herself up in the marketplace or street. Big-time terrorists, state-terrorists, resort to such displays from time to time when their power appears to be threatened. As in Ireland and Italy in the 1970s, state-terrorists on occasion perpetrate such acts, both to instill terror and to frame their ideological opponents. When the truly powerful are secure in their position, however, they needn't act at all to instill terror; at times their mere presence suffices. Or, in keeping with the panoptic principle, simply appearing to be present is often sufficient. Via drone warfare, among other technologies, the United States has recently managed to attain a power once the sole purview of the gods – the ability to be everywhere at once. Possessing the capacity to inflict injury or death at any time, nearly anywhere, by employing these weapons across vast stretches of the globe Obama has shown the world what lies beyond the global state of emergency: the global state of terror. And, back to the point, not only does Hillary Clinton support these policies internationally; via her support of Bill Clinton's crime bill (which, through its police and prison buildup, greatly enhanced state terror capacities), among other policies, she supports them domestically as well.

Though some may contest the validity of its application to such practices as quotidian police work, the designation of state terror is hardly hyperbolic. Among others, the Black Lives Matter movement attests to the ubiquity of the black community's regular experience of multiple forms of state-terror. In addition to the state-terror stemming from municipal police departments, and border patrols, Latino communities throughout the US are also subjected to the quantitatively and qualitatively unprecedented round-ups of immigrants by Obama's ICE agency. Though seldom reported in the mainstream press, Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents regularly break into people's homes, separate families, detain people, often in solitary confinement, instilling nothing short of a state of terror. And, like his other policies, Hillary would continue Obama's terrorization of immigrants as well.

Whether it involves the macro-terrors and micro-terrors inseparable from contemporary police practices, or the micro-terrors associated with other forms of control, such as debt collection (whose ever-present threats of dispossession and ruination induce levels of stress that lead more and more indebted people to commit suicide), the powerless are regularly exposed to terror. Pressured into place by the panoply of free trade agreements presently knitting the US and its allies into an ever deeper imperialistic embrace, the demographic most keenly experiencing the amplification of political-economic micro-terrors is the white working class. If only because other groups have relatively less to lose, the loss of jobs and wealth (as well as the loss of status formerly conferred by racist norms) attending the unprecedented redistribution of wealth and

power of the last few decades has led to rates of early death (often from suicide and drug overdoses) comparable to death rates found among gay men during the AIDS epidemic. This demographic provides much of Donald Trump's support. Beyond his racism, xenophobia and sexism, Trump's appeal lies in the fact that he consistently lashes out at the anthropophagous status quo – the status quo that Clinton so vigorously defends, and so stridently promises to continue. Yet, Trump is something of a terrorist, too.

Though less experienced in state-terrorism than Clinton, Trump has nevertheless demonstrated a penchant for terroristic thinking. Stoking xenophobic and racist passions, Trump's presidential campaign reads like a list of planned terror. Expelling 11 million immigrants, banning Muslims, persecuting the press – the barely hidden subtext of the promise to make “America Great Again” is a promise to travel through time to a period of uncontested white supremacy (a historical situation that was itself maintained by systemic terrorism). Trump's implicitly genocidal positions not only align with terrorist organizations such as the KKK (which he distanced himself from in notoriously hesitant fashion), it also jibes with that of neo-nazi terrorist Dylann Roof, who killed 9 black churchgoers last year in Charleston, South Carolina.

A future Trump administration is not unique in having genuinely genocidal implications, however. Coupled with her hawkish foreign policy orientation (which includes building up NATO as much as it involves building nuclear weapons, and aggression toward Russia along with the military and economic encirclement of China known euphemistically as the “pivot to Asia”), Clinton's embrace of the ecocidal status quo could easily wind up terrorizing the world just as much as a Trump administration would – illustrating, despite their very real differences, that this political-economic system is incapable of functioning beyond the rule of terror.