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Why is Hate Crime Terrorism?

By Ben Debney
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If it seems to happen every other month, then the other month rolls around again, bringing another major gun atrocity in the US — this time in a gay nightclub in Orlando. As ever, the unavoidable shock and horror of the carnage, the deep sadness and pity for the helpless victims, then outrage at the callousness and brutality of the attacker, then the media crisis management campaign and the certain knowledge that, sooner or later, it will happen again. This time around the perpetrator was a lone gunman; the time before that it was a couple attacking a work party, The time before that, another lone gunman attacking a church. The time before that, a lone

gunman in a movie theatre. And that's just the recent massacres in the United States, the ones that make the news because whites and first worlders are amongst the victims.

As in the San Bernadino, the killer, Omar Mateen, pledged allegiance to Islamic State, a group with whom he was suspect of having contact but whom multiple investigations by the FBI cleared of terrorist affiliations. Did that mean he was really looking to carry out a terrorist act, or did he do so as an afterthought, 20 minutes into his killing spree, in order to give his sordid hate crime the pretense of some higher purpose? Having been a security guard for nine years, the idea that he had any Radical Islamist allegiances seems unlikely, since he was working for G4S, formerly known as the formerly the Wackenhut Corporation — a conglomerate not noted for its love of unpopular causes, worthy or otherwise.

Not that this has stopped many of the usual suspects from referring to it as an act of terrorism, of course. Donald Drumpf, to his everlasting infamy, tweeted 'appreciate the congrats for being right on radical Islamic terrorism,' following up with a statement reading, 'last night, our nation was attacked by a radical Islamic terrorist . . . it was the worst terrorist attack on our soil since 9/11, and the second of its kind in six months.' In his remarks today, Drumpf opined, 'President Obama disgracefully refused to even say the words 'Radical Islam'. For that reason alone, he should step down.' Conservative echo chamber *National Review* declared of the string of gun massacres over the last few years, 'Each time the suspects were motivated by Islamic extremism . . . each time President Obama and his team failed to identify the motive for the attacks as radical Islam.

Florida Governor Rick Scott said the attack was "clearly an act of terror." Even local Orange County sheriff Jerry Demings, got in on the act, throwing in for good measure, the opinion that 'This is an incident, as I see it, that we certainly classify as domestic terror incident.' The other presumptive nominee, Hillary Clinton, said in a statement that;

This was an act of terror. Law enforcement and intelligence agencies are hard at work, and we will learn more in the hours and days ahead. For now, we can say for certain that we need to redouble our efforts to defend our country from threats at home and abroad. That means defeating international terror groups, working with allies and partners to go after them wherever they are, countering their attempts to recruit people here and everywhere, and hardening our defenses at home. It also means refusing to be intimidated and staying true to our values.

Having said this, Clinton did also add the qualifier that 'This was also an act of hate,' before declaring that 'we need to keep guns like the ones used last night out of the hands of terrorists or other violent criminals; no specific mention of practitioners of hate. On the other side of the planet, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, personal approval rating sliding weeks out from a federal election, added;

We cannot be complacent, there are people outside our country – and some within it – who hate the freedoms we enjoy, and would seek to threaten them and undermine them with violence. And I know that I speak for all Australians when I say that we stand in solidarity with the people of the United States as they stand up to this terrorist, violent, hate-filled attack. And as we stand up too, whether it is in the skies above Syria and Iraq, in Afghanistan or on our borders.

As for the fact that the massacre was clearly aimed at the LGBT community, Turnbull had only crickets to add. Obama denounced it as ‘an act of terror and an act of hate,’ noting that ‘the FBI is appropriately investigating this as an act of terror.’ That the Orlando shooting was a hate crime is unmistakable given the location. If it was an act of terror, why bother specifically targeting a nightclub patronized by members of a socially marginalized community in a city over a hundred miles from where you live? It can hardly be said for sure to be an act of terror until all the facts are in, but under the weight of the hegemonic power of the corporate mass media to manufacture consent, empirical standards of proof as well as appropriate burdens of proof as per the democratic assumption that under conditions of freedom, the onus rests on power to justify itself to the individual, give way to Nietzsche’s observation to the effect that ‘all things are subject to interpretation; whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth.’ Given this fact, one might be forgiven for thinking the truth of an idea is determined by the number of people who believe it.

A clue as to how power functions in this respect presents itself to us in this instance in the fact that, as Glenn Greenwald pointed out at the time of the Charleston shootings in June 2015;

It was very hard — and still is — to escape the conclusion that the term “terrorism,” at least as it’s predominantly used in the post-9/11 West, is about the identity of those committing the violence and the identity of the targets. It manifestly has nothing to do with some neutral, objective assessment of the acts being labeled.

By way of demonstrating why he might have considered this the case, Greenwald referred back to February 2010, when Joseph Stack, an ‘anti-tax, anti-government fanatic,’ killed himself and an IRS manager, and injured 13 others after flying a small plane into the side of a regional IRS office in Austin, Texas. Despite choosing his target ‘for exclusively political reasons’ and leaving behind ‘a lengthy manifesto’ declaring that ‘violence not only is the answer, it is the only answer,’ Greenwald observed, not only ‘was the word “terrorism” not applied to Stack, but it was explicitly declared inapplicable by media outlets and government officials alike.’ For its part, the *New York Times* reported that although Stack’s attack ‘initially inspired fears of a terrorist attack,’ once the identity of the pilot became known, ‘the typical portrait of a terrorist driven by ideology’ was replaced as a description of him as ‘generally easygoing, a talented amateur musician with marital troubles and a maddening grudge against the tax authorities.’” In response, ‘officials ruled out any connection to terrorist groups or causes’; as ‘U.S. Muslim groups called for the incident to be declared “terrorism,” the FBI insisted it “was handling the case ‘as a criminal matter of an assault on a federal officer,’ not an act of terror.

The ‘very stark contrast’ to this came in the form of the October 2014, lone shooting at the Canadian Parliament building in Ottawa, carried out by a single individual, Michael Zehaf-Bibeau. The incident ‘instantly and universally declared to be “terrorism” the moment his status as a Muslim convert became known; ‘that this was a “terror attack” was mandated conventional wisdom before anything was known other than the Muslim identity of the perpetrator.’ In a manner foreshadowing the official response to the shootings in Orlando — and presumably all to follow in the future once that same officialdom fails once again to address the causes — Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper declared the massacre a terror attack, claiming that Zehaf-Bibeau was on his way to Syria to fight with jihadists’; since proved false, the

Canadian government was obliged to recant, dismissing it as “a mistake.” Of this development, Greenwald reflected that;

As it turns out, other than the fact that the perpetrator was Muslim and was aiming his violence at Westerners, almost nothing about this attack had the classic hallmarks of “terrorism.” In the days and weeks that followed, it became clear that Zehaf-Bibeau suffered from serious mental illness and “seemed to have become mentally unstable.” He had a history of arrests for petty offenses and had received psychiatric treatment. His friends recall him expressing no real political views but instead claiming he was possessed by the devil.

This ‘formed the ‘crucial backdrop for yesterday’s debate over whether the term “terrorism” applies to the heinous shooting by a white nationalist of nine African-Americans praying in a predominantly black church in Charleston, South Carolina.’ While these were framed by news reports suggesting “no sign of terrorism” — by which they meant: *it does not appear that the shooter is Muslim,*’ there clearly were in Dylann Roof’s avowed racism and his desire to strike terror into the heart of a black community he wished to see disappear. Since the issues of gun violence and terrorism are never dealt with at the core, at their root causes, these questions remain the crucial backdrop for discussion of the meaning of terrorism — today, as applied to the Orlando massacre, next time around, as applied to the next one.

Omar Mateen was born in the United States and by no account has ever shown any serious religious leanings; his ex-wife has described him as ‘a “private person” but not especially expressive about his Muslim faith.’ He was understood to be a registered Democrat. His father insists his actions had nothing to do with religion, but notes that ‘his son had become angry after seeing two gay people kissing in Miami, and he believed the incident was relevant to the attack.’ Mateen furthermore had exhibited overt misogynist traits, his behavior degenerating into violent abuse and domestic violence over trivial matters. ‘He beat me,’ said his ex-wife of four months Sitara Yusufiy. ‘He would just come home and start beating me up because the laundry wasn’t finished or something like that’ Suzanne Moore notes that Omar Mateen’s domestic violence was a clue to his murderous future, hatred of women and hatred of homosexuals being different branches of the same tree. ‘Man Haron Monis,’ she writes, ‘the gunman who in 2014 laid siege to a Sydney cafe where two people were killed . . . was on bail as an alleged accessory to the murder of his former wife, who had been stabbed and burned to death – there were more than 40 counts of sexual assault against him.’ Such facts notwithstanding, being the son of Afghan immigrants it does appear as per the Greenwald formula that Omar Mateen was a committed and devout Muslim, therefore the terrorist label applies — apparently. For those who do dabble in facts, Floridian attorneys report that, in hate crime investigations, the investigating officer will often look for the following times of evidence:

- 1/ Statements of the person accused of the crime;
- 2/ Statements made during the commission of the crime;
- 3/ The use of symbols associated with prejudice such as graffiti or tattoos;
- 4/ The nature of the offense itself;

- 5/ Circumstances leading up to the offense;
- 6/ The defendant's affiliation with extremist groups; and
- 7/ The existence of another apparent motive.

In order: (1) 'In an interview with NBC News this morning, Mateen's father said that he believes his son was motivated to commit a massacre after he witnessed two men kissing while he was in Miami' (Gawker); "They were kissing each other and touching each other and he said, 'Look at that. In front of my son, they are doing that,'" the elder Mr. Mateen said (*New York Times*); (2) 'Recent co-workers described Mateen's demeanor as aggressive and anti-gay. Daniel Gilroy, who worked with Mateen at the security company G4S, told Florida Today that "I quit because everything he said was toxic, and the company wouldn't do anything . . . This guy was unhinged and unstable. He talked of killing people"' (*The Daily Beast*); (4) Massacre carried out at a LGBT nightclub. While (1) and (2) appear to provide corroborating testimony for (4), indicating a hate crime, the *Washington Post* focuses its attention on the fact that 'the level of possible ties between Mateen and the Islamic State remains unclear . . . the militant group's al-Bayan Radio described him Monday as "one of the soldiers" of its self-described caliphate.' The willingness of Islamic State to own Mateen as their own is hardly surprising; it is in their interest to encourage the idea that their reach extends from Iraq to Florida (aided and abetted by a corporate media and political class more interested in exploiting a horrific hate crime to further their own ideological and geopolitical agendas than preventing such horrors from happening in the first place).

In her recent work *Disciplining Terror*, Liza Stampnitzky looks at the rise of terrorism as a field of academic study, exploring some of the more conspicuous shortcomings of a discourse tending 'to characterize terrorists as evil, pathological, irrational actors, fundamentally different from "us," a discourse stands in stark contrast to previous understandings of terrorism, inspired by research in counter-insurgency, merely as a strategy at the far end of a spectrum of options for political actors, whose apparently desperate behaviour could otherwise be understood through rational analysis. In this new discourse, Stampnitzky argues, the understanding of 'terrorism' in this sense serves to transform or 'reify' terrorism from a strategy or even a social relation that can be studied and rationally understood into an identity associated with a racist Arabic or Islamic stereotype. In a situation where 'the identity of those committing the violence and the identity of the targets' becomes the basis for the terrorist label, one that manifestly 'has nothing to do with some neutral, objective assessment of the acts being labeled,' moralistic stereotypes serve as a means of blame shifting and scapegoating.

Indeed, Stampnitzky's research seems to support the idea that the 'Othering' effects of the morally judgmental 'inherently terrorist' stereotype that seems to predominate in Islamophobic mythology tends to preclude any need for further critical analysis or reflection on the grounds that since these 'terrorists' were inherently evil, nothing could be gained from trying to understand their motivations and the conditions from which they arise. Conveniently enough perhaps for all of the aforementioned, this approach also absolves analysts and commentators of any apparent need or responsibility to reflect on their own part in the creation of conditions in which terrorism flourishes — be that terrorism carried out by individuals or small clusters, or

that carried out by states (which remains by far the greater of the two). But then again, one might argue that avoidance of any responsibility for creating the conditions in which terrorism flourishes has been a hallmark of the Western response to the non-state forms since 2001, that the patent failure of the so-called 'War on Terror' in the rise of Islamic State in a country that had no problem with religious fundamentalism previous to the US invasion has needed explaining away. Could it be that by misrepresenting as terrorism various atrocities resulting from widespread gun availability and hate crimes, which have nothing to do with terrorism, in order to further terrorize an already terrorized population into ideological conformity, and to avoid having to address the dysfunctionality of a society in which it is politically easier for Republicans to entertain the idea of banning Muslims than banning guns, presented an ideal opportunity?

If so, as it appears to be, the irony of this state of affairs of course is that, in order to do this, those who promote the idea of a 'War on Terror' have to keep the fear of non-state terrorists alive; this is arguably the fuel of the state terrorism that produces refugees from war, like the parents of Omar Mateen. Scaring people, after all, is what terrorists do. To promote the effects of their actions, then, is to aid and abet them. Proponents of War on Terrorism mythology, far from wanting to abolish terrorists, need them to exist on a permanent basis, as a permanent source of terror, as a permanent source of deviance from which to manufacture the necessary manufacture of consent through scare mongering so that they might achieve their own goals geopolitically.

This appears to be especially true in the Middle East, which in requiring state terrorism in the form of imperialist warfare necessitates for proponents of War on Terrorism mythology rendering themselves cause and cure of the same problem such that they might have some kind of enabling pretext. In this day and age, keeping the moral panic over terrorism upon which this Terror Scare has been built requires taking whatever opportunity comes to pass; hate crimes that can be passed off as acts of terrorism are the next best thing to threats that don't exist by virtue of having been vastly overblown. Those that do, such as the toxic fear and hate endemic to a society in which the social bonds are tearing apart at the seams, indicates a clear divide in the minds of those who control the levers of power between worthy and unworthy crises. For those falling into the latter category, more of the same as has appeared at Orlando, Charleston, San Bernadino and all the other episodes of violence is sure to come, as the vicious cycles that produced those atrocities continue to spiral along, resisting any intervention on the part of virtuous alternatives.