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Hate, Terror, and Collectivism Culminate in Orlando

By Dan Sanchez
June 17, 2016

The massacre in Orlando has the usual political narratives all jumbled up. It was gun violence against gays. Therefore, say Hillary Clinton supporters, it validates calls for gun restrictions and anti-hate laws. Yet it was also an act of terrorism by a Muslim whose parents immigrated from Afghanistan. Therefore, say Donald Trump supporters, it validates calls for immigration restrictions and religious profiling.

Was the Orlando attack terrorism or a hate crime? In usual political discourse, both terms are used mostly for manipulation rather than communication. Partisans of established power slap the “terrorism” label on all forms guerrilla/asymmetric warfare, or even simple resistance. Yet they never apply it to atrocities perpetrated by governments and factions they favor. And the notion of “hate crime” is promulgated by those who want to replace justice with social engineering and reeducation.

But it can be useful to reflect on the everyday meaning of the words themselves and how they apply to the Orlando attack and its context.

What is terror? Fear can be a rational response to a threat, while terror can be thought of as an irrational excess of fear. Indeed, the goal of a terrorist attack is typically to manipulate people by terrorizing them into overreacting. Osama bin Laden wanted to goad the US into overextending itself militarily: what he called a “policy in bleeding America to the point of bankruptcy.” An official aim of ISIS (to which the Orlando attacker claimed allegiance) is to use terrorist attacks

to radicalize and polarize the world: to whip up both anti-Western passions within Islam and Islamophobia within the West: to shrink what ISIS calls the “gray zone” of mutual tolerance and precipitate a final clash of civilizations.

These strategies depend on transmuting terror into hate. What is hate? Anger can be a rational response to an offender, while hate can be thought of as an irrational excess of anger. Hate is anger that overflows to cover, not only specific offenders, but those considered members of the same category as the offenders. Hate is anger dispersed through a collectivist prism.

Outraged by the attacks of September 11, 2001, many Americans yielded to terror and hate by sanctioning a generation of war against Muslims abroad, overturning entire swaths of the Greater Middle East. Nearly all of the Muslim individuals whose lives were then destroyed or upended had absolutely nothing to do with 9/11 or subsequent attacks. And nearly all of the Muslim governments that have been targeted for regime change (in Iraq, Libya, and Syria) were secular regimes and actually mortal enemies of the Islamic jihadist groups targeting western civilians. But for many in post-9/11 America, none of those distinctions mattered. Bombs were dropping on members of the broadly-conceived “enemy herd” and that was fine by them. Since they were driven by bigoted, collectivist anger, these wars can be called “hate crimes” in a sense.

These wars also qualified as terrorism: efforts to use “shock and awe” to cow a foreign people into submission. Instead, they drove many young Muslim men (including many who were small children or not yet born on 9/11) into tribal radicalism and hate. For them too, the delirium of hate blurred and even erased distinctions between their attackers (in this case, Western governments) and those lumped in the same broadly-conceived “enemy herd” as their attackers (Western civilians ruled by those governments in San Bernardino, Paris, Brussels, Orlando, etc.). Such young men have been ripe for recruitment (whether organizational or merely spiritual, as in the case of many lone wolf attackers) into groups like ISIS and Al Nusra (the Syrian branch of Al Qaeda): groups which arose amid the failed-state chaos sown by US war-making in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and elsewhere.

The Orlando attack was terrorism (using violence against civilians to motivate political change), as the attacker was allegedly trying to convince “Americans to stop bombing his country.” And since his outrage over US military policy motivated an attack on civilians simply because they were American, such collectivist violence can also be considered a hate crime in a sense.

Far from motivating a ceasefire, the new wave of attacks has only unleashed a new wave of hate in the West: this time in the form of Islamophobia (further incited by Trump) focused more on policy assaults against domestic Muslims than foreign ones.

The San Bernardino and Orlando attacks have also whipped up the terror of American liberals over firearms, steeling their resolve to collectively disarm American civilians.

And of course the Orlando assault was most likely also motivated by bigoted, collective hatred toward gays, making it a hate crime in yet another sense.

In the eyes of justice and jurisprudence, crimes like the Orlando massacre should be viewed as acts of murder, pure and simple. They should not be treated any differently from any other mass murder, regardless of their broader motivation. But in the eyes of social philosophy, it can be useful to recognize the senses in which such attacks are both terrorism and hate crimes, and the sense in which the campaigns of mass murder we call wars are also terrorism and hate crimes.

The atrocity in Orlando should be viewed as the latest chapter in an ongoing cycle of terror and hate. Only then will we have the understanding necessary to break that cycle: to stop reacting to collectivist, indiscriminate violence in kind: to uphold the individualistic notions of justice and protection that are necessary for our freedom, peace, and security.