

The Age of Terrorism

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Guelke, Adrian. *The Age of Terrorism and the International Political System*. London: IB Tauris, 1998.

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Is the tide turning? There was a time when terrorism, or even the suggestion of terrorism, could arouse the media, politicians, the military, the business community and the public, like no other phenomenon. Thousands of books, films, TV shows and radio talk programs were devoted to trying to understand what was widely seen as the scourge of the contemporary world. Such a level of interest certainly contributed to the growth of new University courses and a steady student demand. But if we were a business -- or should we treat Universities as businesses given their attitude to cost effectiveness etc? -- would we now be looking to downsize having passed our peak? Are those of us involved in the "terrorism industry," as critics have described it without apparently being aware that they were as much a part of it as anyone else, facing a cultural trend making terrorism a "yesterday's course"?

Two books arising out of different backgrounds, and written with different aims, raise the question, do terrorism studies have a future? David Tucker is Acting Director (Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict) in the US Department of Defence. His aim is to highlight the strengths and weakness of US counter-terrorism strategy and organization. He has a clear policy orientation. Adrian Guelke is an academic at the University of Wittersrand who wrote the book as a PhD thesis whilst under the influence of Adam Roberts of Oxford and the London School of Economics. His aim is to challenge many of the basic conceptual and theoretical ideas associated with "terrorism." However, they both arrive at the conclusion that policy and theory have been based on a fundamental serious flaw -- we have failed to correctly problematize and conceptualize "terrorism." Tucker attributes much of the failure of policy and practice as arising from weakness in conceptualizing terrorism. Guelke sees much of the literature as being little more than propaganda by the West, resting as it does on a thoroughly weak and inadequate concept of terrorism. After nearly 30 years of study of political violence it may seem rather depressing that a practitioner and academic can conclude that we still have not got the basics right! For a teacher it is certainly uncomfortable to tell yet more generations of students that "there is no generally accepted definition of terrorism." There are certainly some students who quickly conclude, even if they modify their views later, that the best thing would be to abandon the word, preferably right now and before the next seminar!

However, neither of the two would claim to be earth shattering, although both challenge the reader, and Guelke does see himself as raising serious issues concerning the validity and integrity of the whole field of study. Are the Nineties going to be seen as the decade during which we decisively swung away from the "age of terrorism" into the new age of "Anything But Terrorism"? Are we seeing a paradigm shift away from trying to identify terrorism as a particular phenomenon around which scholars can construct

generalizations to viewing violence as entirely contextual? Both of these books challenge some basic tenets of terrorism studies by arguing that there are few worthwhile comparisons to be made between locations and type of violence: violence in Bosnia is different from that in Algeria; hate crimes are different from national liberation conflicts; revolutionary violence in Germany is not the same as in Columbia. Although Guelke goes further in this direction than Tucker, both argue that the concept has been corrupted by being too thinly spread. Both certainly argue that it is time to take a fresh look at the way we have thought about terrorism, whether as a distinct phenomenon or as a threat to security in the West.

Tucker's book on US policy toward international terrorism is divided into five large chapters: the first is a very useful overview of the history of US counter-terrorism policy; the second deals with the concept and seeks to limit its scope; the third critically assesses US responses; the fourth is concerned with organization, the bureaucracy of counter-terrorism; the fifth, and the one that he highlights, looks at strategy. He attacks recent attempts to broaden the scope of terrorism to describe all events that cause terror, events that we may describe as *terrible* (author's emphasis). He argues that if events such as wars, ethnic conflicts, or the gassing of the subway in Japan, do not have a political motive, or are not directed at influencing a larger audience, then they are not terrorism and it misleads both the policy maker and the public if they are so described. People who are absolutist, wish to wipe out another group or overcome an enemy by the use of force are certainly violent but they are not terrorists. The crucial criteria is whether they use violence to kill or injury a target because of the intrinsic qualities of the target or to terrorize through a process of identification with the victim; I am one of them and it could have been me. Killing one of "us" means that anyone of "us" could be next. Guelke also recognizes, as we shall see below, the importance of this process of identification although he is reluctant to give it central place in his discussion of the concept. In this sense Tucker is somewhat more conventional, within the literature on terrorism, in his approach. Tucker then uses his definition to evaluate US policy and strategy. He argues that most counter- terrorism measures have largely failed to deliver results. He is sceptical of no concessions, the Hostage Crisis in the Middle East being a good example. The criminalization policy of trying to arrest offenders has limited scope. Sanctions are hard to assess and are a broad weapon that should be used only in carefully defined circumstances. Military action may "signal will" but in the case of a classic example, Libya, more US citizens died after the attack than before. Even pre-emption is viewed with some scepticism because of its dependence on good intelligence, something that he rightly recognizes as valuable but hard to attain. The only effective strategy is disruption, the undermining of a group's ability to carry out violent acts. However, Tucker recognizes that disruption also has problems: the reliance on intelligence and the possibility of harming innocents. Both of these are well illustrated by the recent controversy over US air strikes in the Sudan and Afghanistan. However, there is obviously a danger with argument by elimination: all one ends up with is the universally true, but totally unhelpful, proposition that it's all very complicated! But more of this after we look at Guelke.

Guelke's aims are much broader and fundamental than Tucker. He argues that the "age of terrorism" was akin to McCarthyism in which the label was applied to achieve national and sectional interests that totally vitiated any attempt to be scholarly. We should abandon the concept forthwith and recognize that what we are dealing with are a wide variety of conflicts and types of violence and not some universal menace. To describe an act, a nation or a group as terrorist distorts their behavior and ours and causes unforeseen and harmful consequences. However, Guelke is not the first to make these types of criticism. Radical writers such as Chomsky and Herman,¹ and more mainstream authors such as Freedman and Warner,² have all cast doubt on the impartiality and value of the concept. I am also sceptical of Guelke's claim that state terrorism has not received the attention it rightly deserves. In my bibliographical database I have 112 references to state terrorism, excluding sponsorship, including some very good works on the concept.³

However, my main debate with Guelke is his desire to give up on the idea that there is something distinctive that we can call terrorism. It is true that it is often difficult to distinguish ethnic conflict from guerrilla warfare or national liberation struggle from civil war but I would argue that in all of these cases one can still identify something called terrorism. He rightly rejects the argument that terrorism can be distinguished from other forms of violence because civilians are targeted, although for the wrong reason. He argues that attacks on civilians are a part of modern war and that therefore one would be obliged to accept that many states are terrorists. If this was the argument then the dilemma of choosing to describe Britain as a terrorist state, say between 1942 and 1945, or abandoning the label may well lead one to choose the latter. But it is a false dilemma. An attack on a soldier can be just as much an act of terrorism as planting a bomb in a shopping centre. The issue does not rest on the nature of the target but on the objective of the violence. As Tucker described earlier the key issue is whether the aim is to destroy a target because it stands between you and your objective or whether one destroys it in order to send a message. Terrorism is an act of communication that requires an audience who identify with the victim and, at least in part, understand the message being sent. If the bombing of German cities was about sending a message to the German people then it may indeed have been terrorism but if the aim was to destroy people and property then it was not. It is not always easy to determine the aim of violence but Guelke fails to see that this is the central issue and not the red herring about the innocent or guilty. These concepts are subjective and would leave the field ridden with confusion. Objectives may be unclear or confused but there is at least the possibility of arriving at some form of scholarly judgement about what they were.

In conclusion, I find Tucker to be a very valuable addition to the literature because, although he does complicate our lives, he sticks like a rock to the key idea: terrorism is an act of violence in which the target is not the important objective, the aim is the impact of the act on others.

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Endnotes

1. E. Herman and G. O'Sullivan. *The "terrorism" industry: the experts and institutions that shape our view of terror* (New York: Pantheon, 1989); Frank Donner, "The terrorist as Scapegoat," *The Nation* (1978); E. Herman, *The Real Terror Network -- terrorism in fact and propaganda* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1982); N. Chomsky, *The Culture of Terrorism* (London: Pluto Press, 1988); Liz Curtis, *Ireland -- the propaganda War* (London: Pluto Press, 1984).

2. Lawrence Freedman, et al., *Terrorism and International Order* (London: Routledge/RIIA, 1986); Martin Warner and Roger Crisp, eds., *Terrorism Protest and Power* (Aldershot: Gower, 1990).

3. M. Stohl and G. Lopez, eds., *The State as Terrorist -- the dynamics of governmental violence and repression* (London: Aldwych, 1984); M. Stohl, et al., "State Violation of Human Rights," *Human Rights Quarterly* (1986); Richard Rubenstein, *Alchemists of Revolution -- terrorism in the modern world* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1987); G. Lopez and M. Stohl, eds., *Dependence, development and state repression* (New York: Greenwood, 1989); David T. Mason and Dale Krane, "The political economy of death squads," *International Studies Quarterly* (1989); Peter Sproat, "Can the State be terrorist?" *Terrorism: an international Journal* (1991), pp 19-29; Mark Lagon, "The International system and the Reagan Doctrine -- can realism explain aid to 'freedom fighters'?" *British Journal of Political Science* 1 (1992); Noemi Gal-Or, "State-sponsored terrorism -- a mode of diplomacy?" *Conflict Quarterly* (1993), pp.7-23; R.J. Rummel, *Death by Government: genocide and mass murder since 1900* (Plymouth: Transaction, 1995); D. Claridge, "State terrorism? applying a definitional model" *Terrorism and Political Violence* (1996), pp. 47-63.