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# Instead of repression

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# Instead of repression

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***When confronted by terrorism, governments normally respond with repression, which can aggravate the problem. But there are alternatives for dealing with terrorism, including social justice, technological resilience, communication choking, civilian counterterrorism and nonviolent action.***

In the face of a terrorist threat or attack, the first instinct of governments is repression: surveillance, arrests, interrogation, imprisonment, perhaps torture. Tough new laws may be introduced. Overall, the surveillance and coercive powers of the state are exercised and strengthened. I call this approach the repression paradigm, because it is a coherent system of belief and action assumed to be correct despite any contrary evidence.

The strengths of repression seem obvious enough: terrorists are watched, tracked down, captured and put out of commission, potential terrorists are deterred, and members of the public are reassured that strong action is being taken on their behalf.

But repression has some serious weaknesses too. It may actually provoke terrorism by alienating some people, driving them to desperate measures. Terrorism expert Richard Rubenstein (1987: 232) says that the policy of

retaliation is really about revenge and is reminiscent of the blood feud. Indeed, some terrorists actually seek to provoke repression in order to reveal the iron fist of the state and incite more people to join their resistance. The result is a 'downward terror spiral' in which insurgents and repressive governments escalate their violence. Paddy Hillyard (1993) studied how British people experienced the Prevention of Terrorism Acts. He says that 'Widespread violation of human rights in the so-called "war against terrorism" is counterproductive.' (Hillyard 2005).

Another down side of repression is that government powers can be turned against others besides terrorists, such as trade unionists, environmentalists, artists, churches and ethnic minorities, indeed any individual or group that seems to pose a threat to those running the repression apparatus. Vietnamese fighting US troops during the Vietnam war were called terrorists. Opponents of the South African apartheid regime were called terrorists.

Governments do not adhere to a consistent definition of terrorism. Instead, the word 'terrorist' is used as a political label, a term of condemnation (Geerty 1997; Hocking 2004).

Governments seldom discuss the negative effects of repression. These are discounted, ignored or treated as unfortunate, but seldom used as a reason to reconsider their whole approach. The repression approach is indeed a paradigm because alternatives are not on the agenda. If a terrorist attack is foiled, this is said to show the value of police powers. If an attack occurs, it is said to demonstrate that more police funding and powers are needed. Whatever happens, it does not shake the repression mindset.

The repression paradigm directs attention to terrorism by non-state groups. The very existence of state terrorism - which kills vastly more than the non-state variety - is seldom even acknowledged, much less treated as an urgent problem (Stohl and Lopez 1984).

There are alternatives to repression, though they receive little attention and little funding. Here I look at five possibilities. The first, social justice, is often recommended by progressives as a way to prevent terrorism. The second, technological resilience, has been recommended by commentators on

technological risk. The third, communication choking, arises from an examination of terrorism as a method of communication. The fourth, civilian counterterrorism, is highlighted by actions by the passengers on United Airlines Flight 93. The fifth, nonviolent action, is a well-developed alternative to violence for promoting social change. Each of these options is outlined briefly in the following sections in order to show that there are alternatives to repression.

## **Social justice**

Contrary to popular beliefs, terrorists are not inherently sadistic, irrational or malicious. Roy Baumeister (1997) in his insightful book *Evil* argues that people who perpetrate cruelty and violence are individuals like anyone else, seeing themselves as victims or as justified. People certainly commit evil deeds, but according to Baumeister, the idea of pure evil is a myth, though an exceedingly powerful one.

Some people who resort to violence are driven by their own beliefs about social justice. Well known examples include violent challenges to Israeli confiscation and occupation of Palestinian lands, to South Africa's previous apartheid system of white rule and to British rule over Northern Ireland. The advocates of social justice say that if perceived injustices are acknowledged, addressed and rectified, much of the incentive for terrorism would be removed.

In many conflicts, both sides feel aggrieved, perceiving themselves as the victims of injustice. In such circumstances, they may feel justified in using violence. Those with more power are able to use violence with the backing of law and/or authority, such as when governments declare war or use force against internal dissidents. When those with less power use violence, they are commonly labelled terrorists.

It seems sensible to believe that promoting social justice can reduce the incentive for insurgent terrorism, though certainly not eliminate it - after all, some terrorists, such as the Ku Klux Klan and Al Qaeda, oppose racial or sexual equality. Strangely, though, there seem to be no empirical studies of the effectiveness of social justice as a means to reduce terrorism.

## **Resilient technology**

Terrorism does not require advanced technology. A knife, a gun or a simple bomb can be enough to injure and kill and certainly to frighten. But the biggest fear-generator is terrorists obtaining weapons of mass destruction. One of the main arguments for invading Iraq was to stop Saddam Hussein giving WMD to terrorists.

Looking at the vulnerabilities of industrial society to violent attack, the biggest risks stem from large technological systems such as power plants, nuclear facilities and chemical factories. These are characterised by large investments, dependence on experts and serious potential risks. They are obvious targets for anyone setting out to cause maximum damage.

It is quite possible to design alternative technological systems to achieve the same ends but without large risks (Martin 2001). Critics of the nuclear fuel cycle - uranium mining, enrichment, nuclear power, reprocessing - have argued for decades that it creates the risk of nuclear terrorism. Getting rid of nuclear technology would definitely reduce the risk. Nuclear medicine could continue, because most radioisotopes can be produced using cyclotrons.

More generally, large power plants -fossil fuel and large dams as well as nuclear power - lock in technological vulnerability. The alternative is small-scale wind, solar and hydro power, combined with energy efficiency and urban planning to reduce energy requirements. Such energy alternatives have been investigated and promoted since the 1970s and are feasible today.

Redesigning technological systems to minimise vulnerability to attack would reduce opportunities for terrorists. It would not eliminate terrorism, but it would certainly make people safer.

## **Communication choking**

Media coverage is the lifeblood of terrorism. Indeed, terrorism has been called 'a violent communication strategy' (Schmid and de Graaf 1982: 15; see also Nacos 2002; Tuman 2003). As a communication process from sender to receiver, the terrorist is the sender, the victim is the message generator, the western mass media

serve as the communication channel and the public is the receiver. The effect of 9/11 came not just from the scale of the attack but from its intense media coverage.

It is well known that mass media focus on conflict, especially violence. A peaceful rally of thousands may receive no coverage except for a minor scuffle that makes the whole event appear violent. The reporting of suicide bombings in Israel is so intense that few people realise that there are large numbers of peaceful protests by both Israelis and Palestinians, often jointly.

In essence, the mass media amplify the actions of those using violence so that peaceful activities become virtually invisible to the wider public. The routine operation of the news media serves to highlight bad news and submerge good news.

There is no easy way to rectify this situation, but it certainly deserves more attention. Government censorship is not a promising solution, because it is likely to create more interest in the forbidden topic. Another possibility is public pressure to create a different culture within news organisations, in which giving publicity to terrorism is seen as akin to revealing war plans or alerting criminals to attempts to arrest them. These are close analogies. The mass media, in reporting terrorist threats and actions, are unwittingly serving as tools of the terrorists. Choking the flow of words and images about terrorism would greatly reduce the attraction of terrorism in the first place.

The idea of communication choking of terrorism is hard to grasp, so entrenched are ideas of freedom of the press. The key here is the pervasive bias in the way this freedom is used, with obsessive attention to violence and a general disregard for peaceful protest. If the mass media chose to exercise their freedom differently, then terrorism would be suffocated.

It is unfair to blame only the media because, although they play a key role in setting the political agenda, they also respond to the public. If consumers of the news switched off when terrorism stories came on, the media would get the message. But how likely is this? Who has the capacity to say, 'I'm not going to watch news about terrorism, because it only helps terrorists?'

## **Civilian counterterrorism**

On 11 September 2001, four US passenger aircraft were hijacked, all intended as tools of attack. Two hit the Trade Center towers in close succession. This gave an obvious signal that there might be other attacks. Of the other two hijacked aircraft, American Flight 77 reached the hijackers' target, the Pentagon, but United Airlines Flight 93 did not. It was brought down by direct action by passengers.

Elaine Scarry (2003) in an essay titled 'Citizenship in emergency' contrasts these different outcomes. She compares the government's response to Flight 77, in which centralised decision-making was slow and ineffectual, with the passengers' response in Flight 93. These passengers collected information - especially using mobile phones - shared it with each other, engaged in a rapid participatory decision-making process, and then proceeded to overcome the hijackers. They lost their lives but would have anyway and in the event probably saved the lives of many others.

Scarry argues that this 'egalitarian defence model' is the only one that worked, both on 9/11 and against the 'shoe bomber' in December 2001. She points out that the hijackers, before their action, worried about passenger resistance but not about interception by fighter aircraft.

If the approach of civilian counterterrorism is taken seriously, aircraft passengers would be given information and training in detecting threats, gathering information, making judgements, reaching collective decisions and taking action. This is a clear challenge to the repression paradigm, which advocates tighter airport security and armed guards on flights, making passengers at best passive recipients of protection and at worst the focus of suspicions and harassment.

The civilian model can be applied more widely than defending against hijackings. As well as threat recognition, information collection and decision making, it can include skills in disabling weapons, detecting conspiracies and reacting in an emergency.

The repression approach includes limited citizen input, namely reporting suspicions to government agencies, but this is superficial

compared to the civilian model. More importantly, the repression approach, by putting everyone under suspicion and introducing penalties for having any connection with terrorism, actually discourages citizen participation, by making people afraid not only of terrorists but afraid that by taking an interest in terrorist techniques, they might become suspects themselves. The repression approach fosters distrust and disempowerment, whereas the civilian model is based on trust and empowerment.

The civilian model can also be applied to intelligence, the process of gathering and making sense of information about threats. In the repression approach, the intelligence system is based on secrecy. In the civilian model, multiple agencies would make their findings publicly available and thus subject to testing. A precedent is the Shipping Research Bureau, based in the Netherlands in the 1980s, which gathered information about ships violating the embargo on trade with apartheid South Africa. By publishing its findings, it fixed its mistakes, developed new sources and gained credibility. Its accuracy was far greater than much of the work of Dutch secret government agencies at the time (de Valk 2005).

The promise of publicly shared intelligence is suggested by analogues of free software and wikipedia, the encyclopaedia based on public contributions. In these cases, the keys to their success are harnessing contributions from many volunteers to an outcome that can be inspected by anyone. The civilian model is based on trust, openness and participation, which reinforce each other. It is in stark contrast to the repression approach, which is based on a destructive synergy of distrust, secrecy and dependence on professionals.

## **Nonviolent action**

The methods used by terrorists are based on violence: bombings, hijackings, assassinations. These are usually contrasted with conventional means of political action, such as voting, lobbying, and publicity. But there is a third major option: nonviolent action.

For bringing about social change, nonviolent action is an alternative to terrorism. If governments supported nonviolent action, this would undercut the attraction of terrorism. It



would also help promote social justice and thereby reduce incentives for terrorism.

Nonviolent action includes a range of methods, including rallies, social ostracism, fasts, boycotts, strikes, sit-ins and setting up alternative institutions (Sharp 1973, 2005). Nonviolent action means no physical violence by the activists, though in many cases violence is used against them. Property damage, such as sabotage in a factory, is on the boundary between nonviolence and violence.

Nonviolent action receives little government funding or media attention compared to violence, but nevertheless has had some notable successes in the past century. Most famously, the Indian independence movement, led by Gandhi, was based on nonviolent action, achieving success with few lives lost. In contrast to their restraint in India, the British in Kenya used torture, killings and concentration camps in putting down the violent Mau Mau rebellion (Elkins 2005).

Nonviolent action has been the prime means to overthrow many repressive rulers, such as in the Philippines in 1986, Eastern Europe in 1989, Indonesia in 1998 and Serbia in 2000 (Ackerman and DuVall 2000; Schock 2005; Zunes et al. 1999).

For those who want to help create a better society, nonviolent action is a well-developed approach that has many advantages compared to violence. It tends to reduce death and suffering, because it is hard to justify violence against nonviolent protesters. It allows participation by women, people with disabilities, children and the elderly, whereas the majority of soldiers and terrorists are young fit men. With nonviolent action, the means - nonviolence - are compatible with the ends, a more peaceful society. Therefore, nonviolent change is less likely to lead to new forms of oppression than violent social change.

There are several cases when nonviolent action was more successful than violence. Armed struggle against apartheid was largely a failure. It was only after anti-apartheid struggle switched to nonviolent action that it was a success. In East Timor, armed struggle after 1975 was unsuccessful. Only in the late 1980s, after Fretilin refrained from armed attacks and emphasised peaceful protest in urban areas did international opinion switch significantly

against the Indonesian occupiers, most notably after the Dili massacre in 1991.

The Palestine Liberation Organisation used terrorism for many years with a singular lack of success. Then in 1987 the intifada spontaneously emerged, gaining widespread support in Palestine and winning far greater sympathy internationally.

In contrast to nonviolent action as a means of social change, violence has a very poor record. Most armed struggles are unsuccessful. There is not a single case in which people's armed struggle in an advanced industrial society has overthrown the government. The successes of armed struggle in countries such as in China, Vietnam and Algeria have come at a terrific human cost, with hundreds of thousands killed and often a continuing legacy of repressive government. In Palestine, the second intifada, beginning in 2000, has been far less effective due to the use of violence, most notably suicide bombings. More widely, Muslim terrorism has damaged sympathy for Muslims generally.

If those who are dissatisfied with what is happening around them knew about the power of nonviolent action and could join nonviolent movements, many of them would not consider violence (Rubenstein 1987). The development of effective nonviolent movements is a way to reduce the attraction of terrorism.

Unfortunately, the repression approach does not help this process. By clamping down on civil liberties, repression makes it harder to engage in nonviolent action, reducing participation and hence encouraging some to believe that violence is their only option. For governments and citizens, a far more productive option is to educate and train people, from school onwards, in how to engage in nonviolent action in responsible and effective ways. With these tools of social struggle in their hands, citizens could pursue their goals and, through their example, show that there are better paths to the future than terrorism.

## **Conclusion**

The repression approach to terrorism has a virtual stranglehold on government policy and public debate. The mass media, through saturation coverage of both terrorism and anti-terrorism, encourage acceptance of the

repression paradigm. This is a self-perpetuating cycle, because repression so often provokes terrorism (Korte 2005; Soule 1989). The policy of collective punishment, when an entire community is attacked because of the actions of a few within it - such as Israeli operations against Palestinian towns and US operations against Afghanistan and Iraq - strengthens those who want to widen the conflict, namely both terrorists and warmongers.

Yet there are alternatives. I have outlined five - social justice, resilient technology, communicating choking, civilian counterterrorism and nonviolent action - that have great promise. None of them is the solution to all terrorism, but any one would very likely reduce terrorism with far fewer adverse consequences than the repression approach.

These alternatives deserve far greater attention. So why haven't they received it? The answer is straightforward: every one of them poses a challenge to vested interests, whether governments, corporations or security establishments.

These alternatives are also challenges to citizens. Instead of leaving the problem to professionals, the alternatives require greater personal participation in efforts to oppose terrorism and create a society in which violence is less attractive. That is challenging but also empowering.

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