

# Terror as an Object of Science

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Published on the internet at <http://www.anis-online.de/1/essays/16e.pdf>

*Summary: In the time after September 11 terror and terrorism have in a new way become an object of science. The degree of abstraction in the concepts and their suggestive connotations require a distinction of basic lines of questions. Those can be grasped on three levels which are reviewed in the article at hand. It is about (a) the cognitive level, on which the linguistic usage and the mental frames are examined within which terror is conceptualized, (b) the analytical level which is about definitions, politically and judicially relevant circumstances and the dichotomy terror/state-terror, and (c) the ethical level with its action imperative for the sciences and the aspect of non-positivist peace research as a necessary supplement to the fear-inducing image of terror.*

## I. Introduction

Since September 11 the concepts "terror" and "terrorism"<sup>1</sup> have been used frequently and in a new way in the international public discourse, within the frame of the "struggle against terror(ism)" or "war against terror(ism)", respectively. A good survey of terror research and of the research on the concept of terror is provided in the omnibus volume "Terror & the War against it. Public Reflections" (in German).<sup>2</sup> In it, essays on the subject of terror and terrorism are collected, it is about definitions of the concept, politological analyses, theoretical and practical approaches. While reading these articles, three things become apparant: that terror(ism) already is an established object of science, that one of the decisive points of the terror discourse is the elucidation of the concept, and that we are dealing with an interdisciplinary project in which so divers disciplines participate as philosophy, political science, sociology, history, psychology, semantics, ethics, Islamic studies, theology, media science, cognitive sciences and law.

The wide range of meanings of the concept "terror(ism)" requires differentiations. Was, for example, the cow object of examination, then there could also be a meeting of a diversity of disciplines, like zoology, nutrition sciences, cultural sciences, geography, tannery, cooking, and yet the task would be much less complicated, because the concept "cow" has a different ontological status, as it refers to a physical object and thus constitutes a first order entity<sup>3</sup> while the concept "terror" (to the central problems of which belongs that it is occasionally used in an unprecise and also valuing way, in the different discourses of newspapers, conferences or in universities) refers to abstract situations and states of affairs of second and third order.

Prior to a first approach toward the contents of the phenomenon terror and the concept of terror there is this epistemological aspect that here a discourse has evolved which - in several ways - starts with a phenomenon or keyword, respectively, and which, as far as I can see, does not genuinely originate in the discourse of violence or in a specialisation of political sciences or the like. This surely has to do with the new trend of structuring the world in terms of keywords in the age of the internet, a trend from which the academic world cannot stand aloof, but foremost it has to do with concrete social interests of reaching norms and reactions to terrorist acts by understanding and categorizing them, with the aim of establishing peace. It is not by accident that the title of the current chain seminar in Kiel (see next paragraph) is "Terrorism, a threat to peace" and it is not by accident that the closing discussion is called "The mastering of terror and war -

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<sup>1</sup> The two concepts cannot be too far apart from each other as they share the adjective "terrorist", the participle "(the) terrorist" and the verb "terrorize". "Terror" can be regarded as the broader concept which covers "terrorism". This discussion already is part of the analysis.

<sup>2</sup> Georg Meggle (ed) (2003): "Terror & the War against it. Public Reflections" with about 30 contributions, in the framework of a two semester chain seminar with the same name at the University of Leipzig 2002-2003.

<sup>3</sup> John Lyons (1983): "Semantics", vol. 2, pp. 71 ff. (Quoted after the German translation)

where to begin?" as can be derived from the flyer. This wish is not restricted to pacifists, it is a general concern, even though it can be interpreted in very different ways by different groups, a condition which reflects in the debate around the definition of terror.

Due to the complexity and the grade of abstraction of the concept of terror and of terror as a phenomenon it is necessary to organize the questions which shape the discourse. For this reason, some thoughts concerning the definition of the concept "terror" as well as the structure of the terror discourse are collected in the article at hand, on the occasion of a lecture by Professor Georg Meggle (University of Leipzig) on the subject "What is terrorism?" at the University of Kiel on October 21, 2004<sup>4</sup> and on the occasion of the UN definition of terrorism from October 2004.

## II. Levels of terror research

There are several groups professionally interested in the research of terror and of "terror" (the concept): army people, politicians, journalists, academics, economists, citizens, they all are concerned with the phenomenon in one way or another and they are shaping the discourse. Different lines of questions can be observed which in the following will be presented on three levels: the cognitive, the analytical, and the ethical.<sup>5</sup>

### a. Terror cognitively

New concepts and new usages of concepts refer to changes and thus are interesting for the sciences and humanities. The sociologist Norbert Elias, for example, observed the first occurrence of the French concept "civilité" in Erasmus from Rotterdam in 1530 as well as the emergence of the French and German concepts "civilisation/Zivilisation" in the eighteenth century, in Mirabeau and Kant. Via the linguistic surroundings of the concepts Elias was able to make cultural-historical statements and to draw conclusions.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the analysis of "terror" and "terrorism", respectively, can lead to relevant statements.

"Terror" and derived from it "terrorism" are no neutral concepts. They are partly used with political motivation, they are also used in a generalized way and it is not always clear which aspects of these concepts are highlighted in the individual scientists, journalists or politicians, and what the motif of the research and of the usage of the terms is. The discourse is heterogeneous. The cognitive level denotes the conceptual or hermeneutic level. The questions here mediate between language, language usage, the mind and the consciousness. Thus the cognitive level is a critical one in the sense that the philosophical questions, which are connected to the definition of terror and the concept "terror", are ordered and structured. Abstract concepts like "terror" are naturally used metaphorically and have cognitive frames which are also called scenarios and frameworks.<sup>7</sup> A vivid example for this is "time" about which we can almost entirely only talk and

<sup>4</sup> First lecture of the chain seminar "Terrorism, threat to peace. Causes, effects, dangers" (Oct. 21, 2004 until Feb. 10, 2005), organized by the Schleswig-Holstein Institute for the Sciences of Peace (SCHIFF, see <http://www.schiff.uni-kiel.de>) at Kiel University and by the Heinrich Boell Foundation Schleswig-Holstein. The chain seminar is part of the project "Foreign and Security Politics" by several regional foundations of the Heinrich Boell Foundation.

<sup>5</sup> In his article "Terror & Counter-Terror. First Ethic Reflections", in: *Dt. Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, Berlin, 50 (2002) 1, pp. 149-162, Georg Meggle divides the question of terrorism into three sub-questions: the semantic question (What is T?), the verification question (By what is T recognized?), and the evaluation question (page 32). The present contribution can be regarded as a supplement to this differentiation. This article of Meggle's is newly printed in the mentioned omnibus volume "Terror & the War against it" (pp. 31-43). The pagination quoted here refers to the newer edition.

<sup>6</sup> Norbert Elias (edition 1993): "On the Process of Civilization" (2 vols.), Frankfurt. vol. 1, pp. 8, 47, 66 (of the German version).

<sup>7</sup> See the standard work by George Lakoff/ Mark Johnson (1980): "Metaphors we live by".

think in spatial terms. We map these spatial terms onto the domain of time, this is a metaphorical usage. With these mental frames, also of the concepts "terror" and "terrorism", basic differentiations in respect to the object of the investigation or the discourse, respectively, can be made. Here are three instances of different employments of "terror" in linguistic usage:

- (a) Committing a T-act according to Meggle's definition <sup>8</sup>
- (b) Strong attack on state order
- (c) Enervating behavior

Comment: (a) represents the analytical, scientific method with which both the concept and the respective phenomenon are defined. More below, in point II b. (b) represents the more specific usage of the concept in everyday language, in journalism, and in politics. For example in the sentence: „At a suicide assault of a Palestinian terrorist in the West Jordan Land on Tuesday three Israeli soldiers were injured, one of them with danger for his life.“<sup>9</sup> In this example there is no defined concept of terror behind the utterance, but rather a constellation of roles. Or this one: "In view of terrorist violence the state is as helpless as an aristocrat in former times was in view of insults against his honor; every idiot was allowed to force him into the limits, he was dependent on the accidental impulse of hostile evil."<sup>10</sup> Thus in this field of terror as an object of science the mental frames are examined in their linguistic usages. Here is a bridge to (c), it shows the metaphorical and pragmatic extensions in informal speech, providing valuable insights in the cognitive frame of the overall concept. In his Kiel lecture, Professor Meggle gave the example of parents „terrorized“ by their children. In a terror database 1 made of public quotes such linguistic usages in their cognitive contexts can be collected, as a basis for the analytical and ethical levels, also for media analyses and for the philosophical questioning of social attitudes, also for metaphor research<sup>11</sup>. Thus, on this hermeneutical-cognitive level the concepts "terror", "terrorist", "terrorist act", "terrorism" etc. in their linguistic usages are collected and structured. The etymological aspect can also be subsumed under this level: Latin „terror“ means 1. fright, terror 2. (person.) God of terror, 3. (meton.) fright, terror, 4. terrible news.<sup>12</sup>

## **b. Terror analytically**

Now it can become clear in detail what the object of the investigation is and what the philosophical questions aim at. Into which „slots“ they belong. Let us concentrate on (a) here which by its defining nature also considers (b), like in the plausible question: "What is the difference between a terrorist act and strong violent resistance against a government?" On this level one is moving in the analytical discourse of violence, as opposed to the cognitive. Terror definitions are discussed and terror is classified. Subject matter is definitions, situations, and politically relevant states of affairs. The evaluating and suggestive aspect of the concept is stripped off. For Professor Meggle, for example, the „T-act“ stands in the center of the analysis and he does not call it „terrorist act“ in order to avoid all evaluation of the concept and all bias in

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<sup>8</sup> More below in part II b.

<sup>9</sup> Sueddeutsche Zeitung, Sep. 15, 2004, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Sueddeutsche Zeitung Sep. 10, 2004, p. 13: "The impossible exchange. Why hostage-taking is the most effective of all terrorist weapons" by Burkhard Müller. - See an analysis of the terror issue in: Anis Hamadeh (September 2004): "Meet the Press: The Sueddeutsche Zeitung. A simultaneous Online Review", pdf-file at <http://www.anis-online.de/mediendatenbank/PressezeitSZ/e0.pdf> (25 pp., German and English).

<sup>11</sup> Such databases about abstract concepts had been introduced in the nineties at the linguistics department of the Anglists (e.g. Prof. em. Radden) at the Uni Hamburg and elaborated by students for metaphor research.

<sup>12</sup> Stowasser's Latin-German School and Hand Dictionary (3d edition 1910).

the analysis. This stripping off of the suggestive does in the analysis bear a lot of similarities with the anti-Semitism discourse which has a parallel structure.<sup>13</sup>

Among the many definitions within the spectrum T-act/terror/terrorism belongs the one by Georg Meggle: „T-acts are acts of (attempted) causing of aims via violence-induced terror against innocents.“<sup>14</sup> Tony Coady has collected five definitions, among them the one used by the FBI: „Terrorism is the illegal use of pressure or violence against individuals or property in order to intimidate or force a government, the civil population or parts of it while pursuing political or social aims.“ His own definition is: “Terrorism is the organized use of violence aiming at non-combatants (‘innocents’ in a special sense), for political ends.“<sup>15</sup>

Such definitions open up a field of analysis as they consist of elements which can and must be seen in their relationship to each other. Ontologically, a T-act or act of terror is an entity of at least second order, i.e. a situation, a state of affairs. Such elements, which make up the terror situation (or the T-act etc.) are, for example, in Meggle’s analysis: the act (e.g. ignition of bomb), the actor (terrorist), the violence addressee (e.g. café visitor), the terror addressee (e.g. civil population), the final addressee (government) and the intended effect (e.g. release of prisoners)<sup>16</sup>. A supplementing approach is provided in Johan Galtung’s „terrorism matrix“ in which the structures of the terrorism debate are declined parallelly from three different points of view: the one of US fundamentalism, the one of peace journalism and the one of Wahhabism which resembles the first one.<sup>17</sup> A terror database 2 can be employed in which cases of typical up to potential T-acts are gathered, structured and assessed. With the help of the preliminary results of the first database concerning linguistic evidence of the concept statements are possible about kinds, grades, and prototypes<sup>18</sup> of T-acts, perhaps also about family resemblances<sup>19</sup> of the elements which constitute a T-act. Into this line also belong demarcations against other concepts/phenomena like „guerilla“<sup>20</sup>, „war“, „struggle for freedom“, „legitimate resistance“ etc. The empirical data, which are gathered and assessed here, are not only relevant for philosophy and the political sciences, but they also represent a juridicial basis, an orientation for jurisdiction in major cases.

Another central aspect of the terror analysis is the dichotomy terror/state terror. Igor Primoratz refers to the fact that in the general consciousness acts committed by a state are by definition not conceptualized as terror (or T-acts etc.).<sup>21</sup> Many theoreticians and practitioners refuse such a double standard so that the whole discourse factually receives a strong ethical component. Noam Chomsky quotes the definition of terrorism from US American law texts and army handbooks.

<sup>13</sup> See Anis Hamadeh (Februar 2004): "The Reproach of anti-Semitism in critical Reflection. Representation and Analysis of German Press Sources. Study for the Attac Workshop "Semitism/Middle East" , 14./15. February 2004 in Hannover", English Summary at <http://www.anis-online.de/1/essays/14/14e.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> "Terror & Counter-Terror", s.a. note 2, p. 35.

<sup>15</sup> Tony Coady: "What is Terrorism?", in: "Terror & the War against it", s.a. note 2, pp. 72 and 73. Both terror definitions are retranslated from German.

<sup>16</sup> Meggle, "Terror& Counter-Terror", p. 34.

<sup>17</sup> "The USA, the West and the rest after September 11 / October 7, 2001. An interim Report", in: "Terror & the War against it", s.a. note 2, p. 289.

<sup>18</sup> For the prototype theory in the cognitive sciences see George Lakoff (1987): "Women, Fire and Dangerous Things". The most significant prototype of T-acts in the current collective consciousness doubtlessly is the assault of September 11.

<sup>19</sup> "Family resemblance" is a concept which was used by Ludwig Wittgenstein to denote a set of elements which contribute to the definition, for example in the concept "game". The intersecting sets of these elements can vary broadly. See Wittgenstein, "Philosophical Examinations", index. - Both the prototype theory and the one of family resemblance is relevant for part II a (terror cognitively) already.

<sup>20</sup> See Daniel Messelken: "Guerilla and Terrorism: Forms of (just) War?", in: "Terror & the War against it", s.a. note 2, pp. 147-165.

<sup>21</sup> Igor Primoratz: "State Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism", in: "Terror & the War against it", s.a. note 2, pp. 53-68.

According to this, terrorism is the "calculated use or threat of violence (...), through intimidation, pressure or the induction of fear, to reach aims which by their nature are political, religious, or ideological." Chomsky calls this definition "useless", because it would represent the governmental policy and because it would give the wrong answers on the question who the terrorists are.<sup>22</sup> Similar is the statement of Georg Meggle in respect to the definition of terrorism in the UN Security Council resolution 1566 from Oct. 08, 2004, where he says: "No single one of the hitherto existing ,concept definitions of the international agreements' is formulated in a way that it also denotes state terrorism to be ,terrorism'" .<sup>23</sup>

At this point a threshold is detectable, connecting the analytical with the the politically evaluating and ethical-moral discourses, very similar to the violence discourse which in many respects includes the terror discourse and which is its fundament.<sup>24</sup>

### c. Terror ethically

On this level of the discourse about terror and terrorism the object of investigation is for example the question of the just war, like in the contributions of the above-mentioned omnibus volume. One of the prominent characteristics of the terrorism debate is the more or less implicit wish for overcoming the historical phase of terror and counter-terror in which we are situated now. As state terrorism often is not conceptualized as real or equally relevant terrorism (as can be seen in the mass media) we find a lack of discursive balance reaching far into ethical spheres. This is the question of power, the one which asks in how far the terror discourse is a discourse of the rulers in which participants are preferred or handicapped from the outset and where it is not arguments that matter but the person who utters them, with the ideology he or she follows. But even beyond the immediate political struggle the ethical and moral assessments of terror and counter-terror by academics like Chomsky, Galtung and Meggle are of such character that the violations of international and human rights committed by governmental actors form a significant pivot of the discussion. Primoratz argues in favor of the thesis that state terrorism is morally worse than non-governmental terrorism.<sup>25</sup> Most authors of the sources used here would subscribe to the statement of Véronique Zanetti's: "Nevertheless it has to be regarded a fact that president Bush's slogan ,we are at war' is legally wrong."<sup>26</sup> Sabine Schiffer, German scientist in the field of communication and media education, remarks sarcastically: "At the moment we are learning that a preventive strike is defense, just as attacking generally is the best defense. International law, too, seems to have proven to be too sluggish, as people today increasingly change over to pre-emptive killings of suspects (...) in order to avoid the efforts of capture, imprisonment, and certainly trial."<sup>27</sup> One cannot meaningfully fight terror with counter-terror, this is what the vast majority of the here considered authors think.

Consequently emerging from these conclusions, which come about in the attempt of mastering the phase of terror and counter-terror, is an action imperative for the sciences and arts. This firstly means the development of proper definitions and criteria of terror(ism), independent of

<sup>22</sup> Noam Chomsky (2004): "Terror and State. September 11 - Backgrounds and Effects: Wars, Terror, Torture, Media", quoted after the German pre-print in the daily paper *junge Welt*, Sep. 03, 2004, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> in: "Terror in the Security Council? Remarks on Resolution 1566 of the Security Council (October 8, 2004)", paper basing on the lecture in Kiel on Oct. 21, 2004, see <http://www.uni-leipzig.de/~philos>. Similarly Coady, s. note 15, p. 73. - The wording of the UN resolution 1566 can be obtained at <http://usinfo.state.gov/is/Archive/2004/Oct/12-567962.html>.

<sup>24</sup> See the works of Professor Johan Galtung.

<sup>25</sup> See note 21, p. 60 ff.

<sup>26</sup> "Paradigm Change in International Law?" in: "Terror & the War against it", s.a. note 2, p. 123.

<sup>27</sup> "High Noon - The USA and its Wild West Myth", October 2004, see <http://www.anis-online.de/1/rooms/sabineschiffer/2.htm#wildwest> (in German). Sabine Schiffer's PhD thesis from 2004 is called: "The Presentation of Islam in the (German) Press. Language, pictures, Suggestions. A Selection of Techniques and Samples."

groups and classes (classes like state vs. non-state)<sup>28</sup>, analyzing states of affairs and situations. Secondly it means developing an accompanying philosophy of non-terror in order to neutralize the suggestive notion of the concept and to provide alternatives to unburden the didactic-repressive mainstream of the terror discourse. For this is what the public terror discussion has in common with the anti-Semitism discussion and the fundamentalism discussion: the measures which are meant to lead to the mastering of the problem mostly just exclude people in one way or another and are not aiming at bringing about dialogues. Thus peace research can be regarded to be the second half of terror research. Because as long as one is fixed on terror one will in the end only be able to find terror and not peace. Thus, supplementing cognitive structures have to be created and promoted in the societies which include the concept "terror", regarding it as a reference to only one part of a non-functioning and scared society within a general framework. In other words: the fear-inducing social image lacks a wishful social image as a counter-balance, with a reality of its own. Maybe a counter-concept, a complementary science.

Such an approach indeed is followed by the political scientist Professor Glenn D. Paige in Hawaii with his concept of "nonkilling", in his study „Nonkilling Global Political Science“.<sup>29</sup> In it, he not only opposes the "lethal philosophical tradition" (p. 6) of Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Marx and Engels, Rousseau and Weber, but implicitly also the whole positivist tradition which deals with material and "factual" things, for example the terror phenomenon. He contrasts this tradition in a supplementing way with the examination of the possibilities of nonkilling societies, the possibilities of nonkilling, i.e. a thing which is not extant in a positivist sense, although there definitively are and have been nonkilling features in all walks of science and society, only that this becomes apparant only after the research done by Paige. He formulates the questions of the science of nonkilling like this: "A nonkilling political science paradigm shift implies need for a four-part logic of nonkilling political analysis. We need to know the causes of killing; the causes of nonkilling; the causes of transition between killing and nonkilling; and the characteristics of completely killing-free societies."<sup>30</sup>

Not only some eccentric academics, but also the mainstream media and the politicians are aware of the fact that the establishment of international law as well as the establishment of the human rights are unseparably tied to what one can call the solution of the problem of terrorism. It is known that true dialogues and a common morality are the key for an international pacification. It is also known that the frontal publics are not leading these dialogues in an appropriate way and that they are not following such a homogeneity of standards, fearing this could lead to major, unpredictable political consequences. It could also appear to be the admission of a decade-long, century-long double standard which in the end is grounded in class thinking, in in-groups and out-groups with different standards which are not critically examined. And yet the observer cannot help concluding that the political developments after September 11 have been violently escalating and that engagement for peace at some point in the future or in the past not only refers to a theoretical responsibility, but to an existential affair for the societies.

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<sup>28</sup> This is not to deny the violence monopoly of the state, it rather is about the credibility of the state and the jurisdiction of its violent actions.

<sup>29</sup> Glenn D. Paige (2002): "Nonkilling Global Political Science", PDF: [http://www.globalnonviolence.org/docs/nonkilling/nonkilling\\_text.pdf](http://www.globalnonviolence.org/docs/nonkilling/nonkilling_text.pdf). And the review by Anis Hamadeh (Sep. 19, 2003): "Perspectives for Nonkilling as a Social Norm. New branch of Political Science beyond the 'lethal philosophical tradition'" at <http://www.anis-online.de/1/rooms/glenn/review.htm>.

<sup>30</sup> "Nonkilling Global Political Science", see note before, p. 72, chapter "Implications for Political Science".