Toward an Anthropology of Terrorism

As noted in Chapter 10 of *Introducing Anthropology of Religion*, terrorism (or any other form of violence) is not unique to religion, nor is terrorism inherent in religion. There are many reasons and causes for terrorism other than religion, and not all religions have conducted or condoned terrorism. However, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, there has been a distinct association between religion (especially Islam) and terrorism, at least in the minds of many.

Worse, in popular discourse and in policy discussions, the impression is often given that terrorists are in principle uncivilized, if not insane. Terrorism is thus portrayed largely as a psychological or mental health issue: terrorists are “irrational,” or so consumed with anger and hate that they strike out blindly at innocents, using tactics that are condemned by the international community of rational civilized humans. If our first instinct is to dismiss terrorists as ill or evil, it is difficult to understand terrorism.

Anthropology has not been a leading voice in the academic or public debate about terrorism, but surely the discipline’s perspective of comparative, holistic, and relativistic thinking has something to contribute to the issue. A leading anthropologist on the subject of terrorism, Jeffrey Sluka, has suggested what the discipline brings to the study of terrorism and “of human conflict in all its forms,” namely

- a *cultural* perspective; extreme topical and theoretical eclecticism; a cross-culturally comparative and holistic perspective; an ethnographic approach based on long-term fieldwork and direct participant-observation in the community studied; a scientific commitment to both objectivity and getting as close as possible to the subject, participants’, or *emic* point of view; an appreciation of the impact of ethno-centrism and cultural relativity; and a humanist concern for ethics, the potentially negative effects research may have on those studied (2009: 138).

More precisely, he states that, first and most basically, “anthropologists have written detailed critical ethnographies of popular armed resistance movements described as ‘terrorists’” (140); he himself has
researched ethnic violence in Northern Ireland and anti-terrorism activities in New Zealand, for instance.

Of course, it is difficult and dangerous to enter into a society gripped by terrorism, let alone into a terrorism organization, but that is the only way to discover what is happening “on the inside.”

Second, he asserts that anthropology has maintained a historical and evolutionary angle on terrorism, recognizing that “terrorism, as a coercive strategy of political intimidation or fear, is as old as the state or civilization”; holistically, terrorism “is a dependent variable in the state equation of social inequality and stratification, rather than the independent variable most elites, governments, and orthodox terrorism studies experts treat it as” (139). In the modern context, “anthropologists are more aware than most of the fact that, historically, all the indigenous and other ‘nation peoples’ who have resisted state conquest and domination have been denounced and vilified by those states as inhuman ‘savages’” (140).

This leads to Sluka’s third point, that anthropologists “have applied our core concept—culture—to the debate, developing new conceptual models of state terrorism and ‘cultures of terror’ where fear becomes a ‘normal’ or everyday part of peoples’ way of life” (140). But anthropologists go far beyond the description and analysis of the culture of terrorists; they have also examined and criticized how victimized cultures understand and apply the label ‘terrorism’ to certain acts, thus exposing “the idea of terrorism and how it is employed in society today” (140).

What Sluka and other anthropologists of terrorism generally advocate is a form of “critical terrorism studies,” which, according to Richard Jackson of the National Center for Peace and Conflict Studies in New Zealand, entails appreciating that terrorism is culturally constructed (both by and for the perpetrators and victims), that “terrorism” is a concept and a label that is inherently unstable (that is, its
meaning varies between groups and changes over time), and that scholars should be involved not only in analysis but in “emancipatory political praxis” (that is, trying to solve the problems that spark terrorism and other social violence in the first place) (2007: 244). Even scholars in other disciplines like Jacob Stump and Priya Dixit have adopted an essentially anthropological perspective in calling for a “completely constructivist critical terrorism studies” that comprehends terrorism as a discourse and “as a concept that is used in practice by various social actors,” which practices “constitute identities, interests, and actors” (2012: 212).

This may be an extremely unfamiliar, perhaps even uncomfortable, way to think about terrorism, but then if there is one as-yet-unremarked dimension of anthropology, it is that it *disturbs and corrodes conventional concepts and understandings*. Elsewhere, Sluka has asserted bluntly that the “empirical reality of the contemporary armed popular movements we have studied has simply not fitted with the ‘terrorism’ image presented by governments and the mainstream media” which is typically “unreliable, invalid, biased, and propagandistic” (2010: 51-2).

Another anthropologist who, if anything, has even more strongly condemned the standard “mishandling of suicide terrorism” is Scott Atran, who wrote that a “common notion in the U.S. administration and media spin on the war on terrorism is that suicide attackers are evil, deluded, or homicidal misfits who thrive on poverty, ignorance, and anarchy,” or worse that they “hate freedom”; on the contrary, “survey data reliably show that most Muslims who support suicide terrorism and trust bin Laden favor elected government, personal liberty, educational opportunity, and economic choice” (2004: 73). Contrary to popular impressions, terrorists “exhibit no socially dysfunctional attributes” or major psychological pathologies” (76). Atran actually concludes that terrorists are “more ideologically driven than grievance-driven” (81), and ideologies are entirely cultural thought-systems. To learn more about these ideologies,
Atran endorses doing something that politicians and victims seldom do but that anthropologists do for a living—actually talking to them, even if we regard them as enemies (2010).

Beyond the ideologies and “cultures” of terrorist groups, anthropology can also investigate their social structure and institutional organization. Atran directs attention, for example, to the system of radical religious schools that prepare the next generation of terrorists; he fully understands the positive social works that terrorist groups do in the absence of functioning governments and adequate social services. This suggests an approach for combatting terrorism: “democratic nations that fight terrorism therefore must discreetly help others in these societies to compete with, rather than attempt to crush, such programs for the bodies, minds, and hearts of people” (2004: 84). In short, if terrorism is a culture and a social structure, then anti-terrorism must also be a culture and social structure.

Cultural anthropology probably has more immediate applications to terrorism than physical anthropology and archaeology, but these other anthropologies are not without their benefits. Physical anthropology can be a vital part of identifying victims and returning them to their families. Both physical anthropology and archaeology can shed light on past practices of violence and genocide and the cultural history of terrorism. Finally, lest we consider anthropology a tangential player in the social science of terrorism, it is worth noting that the U.S. Army has hired and deployed anthropologists in its “Human Terrain System” to collect ethnographic data on enemy combatants and their wider society in Iraq and Afghanistan and to supply that information in useable form for subsequent military action. Reasonably, anthropologists are concerned about the practical and ethical implications of such collaboration.

References


