

ON THE MEANING OF TERROR

Benjamin F. Hadis
Department of Sociology
Montclair State University
Montclair, NJ 07043 / USA

hadisb@mail.montclair.edu

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Abstract – A speech act model is suggested to interpret the meaning, the intended audience, and the purpose of acts of terror. Considered a formal ideology, in the sense that no alternative courses of action are imaginable, terror expresses a redemption from the myth of having been wronged. Thus, acts of terror metacommunicate a (purported) natural connection between myth and violent redemption. Terror as speech is directed to fellow in-group members as the intended audience and emphasizes the relevance of establishing and maintaining a phatic communion. This explains the endurance of terror –even when it is not successful at imposing its agents’ image of social reality.

Introduction

This paper offers an analytical model to address the symbolic order of those who plan, coordinate, carry out, approve, favor, justify and sympathize with actions of terror. Its focus is the ideological standpoint that finds violent acts against random victims both justifiable and the only viable method to accomplish a desired outcome. Within this model, I contend that such an ideological standpoint *makes sense* to those who partake of a cultural frame for whom violence symbolizes the redressing of their having been wronged. It is the symbolic referent embodied in the violent action what gives meaning to such action as a deliverance from a wrong.¹

By *ideological* standpoint, I am not merely referring to the *content* of ideas, in the sense that those who engage in, or approve of the use of terror share a repertoire of statements, ideas, and principles. Certainly, they may do so. Rather, I especially refer to the epistemological, *formal* aspect of ideology, in the sense that it puts “blindness” to those who partake of it, resulting in a delimited, restrictive interpretation of reality. One of the earliest, Destutt de Tracy’s (1770) notion of ideology refers to the content aspect of systems of ideas. Marx and Engels (1848) also emphasize the content aspect of ideology, as does Mannheim (1936). Marx, however, complemented the content approach on ideology with his notions of reification and fetishism (1867), which focus on the formal aspects of ideology. Whether the emphasis is on the content or formal aspects, these authors refer to ideology as residing in the realm of thought (superstructure). In his essay on the ideological state apparatuses, Althusser (1978) goes beyond the notion of ideology as thought. He considers ideology as embedded in the structure of state

¹The concept of *symbolic order*, introduced by Jacques Lacan (1977, 1981:321-340) as that which encompasses signs, representations, significations, and images precedes the individual and is linked to Freud’s notion of the superego. Žižek has popularized the use of this concept in his analyses of everyday cultural myths (1991: 79-83). My use of symbolic order, far less deterministic than Lacan’s or Žižek’s, is closer to Goffman’s concept of frame (1974), yet retaining the systemic approach conveyed by Saussure’s *syntagmatic and associative relations* (1959: 122-127) and Levi-Strauss’s *universe of rules* (1968: 34-60)

institutions and practices. My analysis of the ideology of terror is closest to Althusser's structuralist perspective. From a structuralist standpoint, the use or display of terror is ideological in the sense that it precludes any alternative means or solution as untenable, ineffective, undignified, running against the core of the in-group's beliefs, or simply unacceptable. Furthermore, violent acts against random victims are, for groups that practice terror, tactically justified as the *only* feasible way of redressing a wrong. In this sense, we can predicate the ideological character of these acts of terror when those who engage in them see random violence as the sole course of acceptable and meaningful action possible. What renders terror actions ideological is the meaning they acquire within the symbolic order in which they make sense. From a content perspective, we may be able to single out as many ideologies of terror as there are groups which practice this type of violence. From a formal perspective, it is possible to identify all those engagements in the use of terror as a single ideological structure insofar as any group which practices it presents this violent alternative course of action as natural, and as the only feasible one to redress a wrong done unto the group's people, nation, or community.

Because of the stigma attached to terrorism and terrorists, there is little agreement about the definition of these terms, let alone that of terror *per se* among scholars. Laqueur (1977) states that there is not –and there will never be found– a comprehensive definition of terrorism that could satisfy everyone. Yet he insists that one should not abandon the enterprise of studying terrorism just because its definition is evasive. To avoid the issue of stigmatizing terrorists, some authors emphasize the *purposive* character of terror as a means to altering or maintaining the status quo² (Gibbs, 1989; Drake, 1998). Somehow, attaching a purpose to terror would make it rational rather than emotional or “evil” for the sake of it. Maskaliünaité (2002) offers a lucid account of the methodological problems brought about by each criterion contained in 109 definitions of terrorism surveyed by Schmid et al (1988). An emphasis on *terror or fear* is present in the majority of definitions, though not every action involving terror successfully triggers terror --“an extreme form of anxiety, often accompanied by aggression, denial, constricted affect, and followed by frightening imagery and intrusive, repetitive recollection.” (Schmid et al, 1988: p.19). Is the intention of triggering terror, alone, enough? If so, how do we ascertain the intentions of those who engage in what we call terror? Rather than focusing on the intentions of those who engage in “terrorism” Oliverio (1997) considers this notion a political construct, in the sense that not all acts of (political) violence have been defined as terrorism. These same problems apply to another criterion of definition identified by Schmid et al (1988), namely the perpetrators' expectations about anticipated psychological reactions. Defining terror by the fact that victims are not the objects of the *perpetrators'* anger is the least problematic among the criteria of definition. This is a useful criterion when we wish to differentiate between the use of terror and political assassination –or other violent acts. Yet it is not always clear that those who engage in acts of terror view their victims as innocent. Finally, that acts of terror entail organized and systematic planning is a useful criterion of definition, for it helps to differentiate organized acts of terror from spontaneous acts of violence as well as from those carried out by isolated individuals. Aware of the shortcomings of many of these criteria of definition, *I propose*

²When terrorist violence is used by the State or by those who control the distribution of power in society, their aim is to maintain the status quo. Contrariwise, subjugated groups may use terror as a means to change the normative order of society.

to define acts of terror as systematically planned violent actions against random victims. This definition invokes the use of violence regardless of whether or not it is exercised against victims who are the object of the victimizers' anger. I am aware that this narrow definition leaves out other forms of violence where the victims are not randomly targeted. This is so because I prefer to distinguish between the strategy of terror and that of political assassination.

The factor of terror is present, in the sense that with random violence anybody can be a victim—a situation that triggers anxiety and fear. Yet by invoking the issue of terror, one may be emphasizing, unwittingly, its instrumentality: acts of terror might appear as a means to impose the image of social order held by the in-group. If the imposition of the group's normative image of the social order were the ultimate purpose of random victimization, we would have to assume that public opinion—the potential victims—are the intended audience of acts of terror. That the intended audience of terror-messages is public opinion, however, is a problematic assumption that this paper will address.

The assumption that the purpose of random victimization, by instilling fear, is to impose the in-group's image of the social order is often held by those who equate the clandestine terror actions of subordinate (insurgent) groups with those carried out by the State or its stand-ins. With this reasoning, terror is not necessarily *anti-status-quo*. A group engaged in acts of terror, in this sense, would also entail those whose intention is to terrorize the population into accepting status-quo. The latter illustrates what is commonly referred to as "state terrorism." Insofar as this purpose of shaping public opinion and, ultimately, the normative order of society often appears as the manifest goal of those who engage in acts of terror, one would expect that the use of terror implies a conversation with those whose support is pursued. Nevertheless, I will discuss the extent to which the intended audience of terror is not necessarily the population at large. Rather, terror is an important channel of communication with fellow in-group members. In sum, terror actions are characterized by the terror inducement that random victimization thrusts, rather than by their purported goal of influencing the image of social reality to be undertaken by public opinion.

Furthermore, I also wish to clarify that terror, as a strategy used by groups, is far from enough to define a group as "terrorist" or all their actions as "terrorism." These are currently pejorative terms, used ideologically by other groups to discredit all of the former's actions, motives, and intentions and, ultimately, to ignore their symbolic order.

The purpose of this paper is to unveil the symbolic order shared by those who carry out or approve of violence against random victims. For them, such actions accomplish the redressing of a wrong and, therefore make sense. Their symbolic order is meaningful to them, regardless of whether we call them *terrorists* or *freedom fighters*.

Whether those who engage in acts of terror consider their victims as innocent or not is not relevant as a definition criterion. If they conceive of victims as necessary pawns in a tactical pursuit to accomplish an ultimate goal, they see their victims as neither innocent nor as individuals deserving punishment. On the other hand, if they see their victims as members of the

group of wrongdoers, the victimizers consider that the victims are justifiably deserving targets. Yet what characterizes terror as a strategy is not the moral quality of the victims but the fact that violence is directed toward targets who become victims by happenstance.³ Certainly, one could argue that a soldier (or an insurgent militia) who dies in a battle is also short-changed by happenstance –in the sense that the next fellow-soldier (or fellow-militia) could have been a casualty rather than the former– and this apparent similarity would make regular warfare indistinguishable from the use of terror. However, the possibility of being a casualty of war is part of soldiering. This applies to both conventional and guerrilla warfare. On the other hand, acts of terror, which always involve a diffuse element of surprise, do not generally forewarn their potential victims about their impending doom.⁴ We can even characterize random violence actions that result in no injuries or death as acts of terror insofar as their execution carries the likelihood that they will result in victims. In this sense, an enhanced feeling of *terror* (fear) is the outcome regardless of the magnitude of physical or personal damages resulting from acts of terror. What matters is both the symbolism of terror as an avenue to redressing a wrong, and the consequent fear that is spread among those who are –or who could potentially become– victims of indiscriminate, random violence.⁵

Terror involves two distinct symbolic orders: 1) one that bestows meaning to a violent act undertaken by those who see it as redressing a wrong to the in-group; and 2) another symbolic order that is harbored by the potential victims, for whom the meaning of violence as a source of fear reshapes the image of the social reality in which they live. This reshaping of the image of social reality does not mimic the image that the random victimizers harbor. Rather, it is an image where the factor of fear alters past perceptions of the social reality. The shaping of a *culture of fear* has been addressed in the context of state terrorism in the Southern Cone of South America during the 1970s and 1980s. (Corradi et al., 1992; Graham-Jones, 2001) I am not going to focus too much on the symbolic order of potential victims' fear beyond the fact that those who engage in acts of terror may anticipate and acknowledge the fear experienced by the potential target population –and may thus consider it as a means to redressing a wrong done to their own group, people, or nation. The main question I am addressing is how the symbolic order shared by those who engage in acts of terror gives meaning to their violent actions. That those who antagonize them customarily label them as *terrorists* entails a schematic notion that depicts them as villains who relish their role of evildoers, who are proud of being such –and who make their sympathizers proud of them as well. Even if those who engage in acts of terror are aware of the fact that human beings suffer (or may suffer) the consequences of their actions, their symbolic

³Le Vine (1997) argues that the innocence or guilt of victims is “largely irrelevant,” in the sense that they are targeted because of the calculated shock that their victimhood will cause. In this case, what matters is who the audience(s) of the terror attacks are.

⁴There have been acts involving terror preceded by a short-notice warning to facilitate the evacuation of a site to be bombed. Yet fatalities may indeed occur since it is not always feasible to completely evacuate a facility.

⁵From the content aspect of ideology, it is possible to interpret the redeeming purpose of violence as a gendered construct involving a masculine rhetoric of engaging in risky actions. (Brison, 2002; Kimmel, 2001) Such a rhetoric does not preclude women from engaging in acts of terror, but it helps to explain why the overwhelming majority of those who engage in random victimization are male.

order gives meaning to their actions as justifiable, muffles any sympathy toward suffering fellow human beings outside the in-group, reinforces the “only alternative” component of terror’s ideological standpoint, dehumanizes the victims, retells the story of the in-group’s having been wronged, and invokes violence as the only path to the deliverance of the group from the wrong they have been exacted⁶. The euphemism “collateral damage” used in military jargon to refer to civilian casualties of war fulfills most of the above functions as well –except that the deliverance from a wrong is not a necessary ingredient in the symbolic order of professional warriors.⁷ When this mythic element of deliverance from a wrong orients the actions of the military, their “collateral damage” interpretations may denounce an ideology of terror.

In the first section of this paper, I will address acts of terror as exercised by groups that share the conviction that they are redeeming their nation, community, or people of a wrong done to it. Furthermore, I will show that these groups narrate their stories of their having been wronged in mythical terms.

In the second section, I will consider individual acts of random target violence as speech. In other words, I will treat acts of terror as individual expressions of an underlying ideology. This section analyzes ideologies of terror that present violent actions against random victims as natural responses to, and as the only possible alternatives imagined to redeem *the people* from their having been wronged.

The third section of the paper will propose a method of analysis to understand how the ideology of terror is embedded in the very structure of terror acts. Thus, I will consider the concept of metacommunication, whereby whoever is conveying a message is, at the same time, also communicating their decision to select specific meanings –and not others– and to combine such meanings in a prescribed way. In this sense, I will comment on how one can analyze an act of terror in terms of the meanings it emphasizes –the semantics of terror– as well as the particular combination of such meanings –the syntax of terror.

The final section considers who the main audience the perpetrators of acts of terror intend to reach are, and for what effect. I will contend that the intended audience constitute fellow in-group members, and that the main effect of terror is to instill further terror as a way to maintain the in-group integrated and operative.

The Myth of Having Been Wronged

For the purpose of the present analysis, whether the in-group has objectively been wronged or not is irrelevant. In its symbolic order, the group of those who practice violence

⁶In an interview, an Islamist terrorist commander stated: “I am not a murderer. A murderer is someone with a psychological problem; armed actions have a goal, even if civilians are killed, it is not because we like it or are bloodthirsty. It is a fact in a people’s struggle the group doesn’t do it because it wants to kill civilians, but because the jihad must go on.” (Post et al., 2003: 179)

⁷Narratives of wrongdoing, however, are often used as referents to justify the onset of wars –e.g. “remember The Alamo,” “Pearl Harbor attacked,” and “Nine-Eleven.”

against random victims gives coherence to the myth of their having been wronged by constantly invoking it as their motivation for action. By *myth*, I mean that the story of wrongdoing has been told and retold innumerable times, that the structure of its narrative remains unaltered, and that it reinforces the group's *esprit de corps*. "Myth is not defined by the object of its message," wrote Barthes, "but by the way in which it utters this message: there are formal limits to myth, there are no 'substantial' ones." (1972: 109) In their analysis of semi-structured interviews with incarcerated Palestinian militants involved in terror actions, Post, Sprinzak & Denny (2003: 176), point out that "the statements of individual members echoed, in some cases verbatim, the public rhetoric of the respective groups." The historical facts may be real, but the interviewees narrate the story with a format that keeps the symbolic order that sustains it alive and unaltered. This is the same symbolic order that proclaims that the in-group must be delivered from a wrong; that there is but one possible course of action to enact such redress; that this redress must be violent; and that it will take further acts of violence to face the continuous wrongdoing against the in-group. Furthermore, the violence must be enacted, and then reenacted, because the integrity of the in-group is at stake in the symbolic order: the villains outside must suffer –and they should better take the in-group into account. An incarcerated secular Palestinian, interviewed by Post et al., stated: "armed attacks are an integral part of the organization's struggle against the Zionist occupier. There is no other way to redeem the land of Palestine and expel the occupier. Our goals can only be achieved through force, but force is the means, not the end. History shows that without force it will be impossible to achieve independence. Those who carry out the attacks are doing Allah's work . . ." (Post et al., 2003, 178)

The link between the mythical having-been-wronged and violence is explicit in Osama Bin-Laden's use of the notion of *jihad*, a continuous struggle against those who occupy the lands of Islam, take their property, and denigrate its people. A mythical reference to the Crusades, as the origin of all the iniquities suffered by Islam in the hands of the "infidels," is reinforced by Bin Laden as a continuous process that calls for redress:

"It should not be hidden from you that the people of Islam had suffered from aggression, iniquity and injustice imposed on them by the Zionist Crusaders alliance and their collaborators; to the extent that the Muslims blood became the cheapest and their wealth as loot in the hands of the enemies. Today we work from the same mountains to lift the iniquity that had been imposed on the Ummah by the Zionist-Crusader alliance, particularly after they have occupied the blessed land around Jerusalem, route of the journey of the Prophet (. . .) and the land of the two Holy Places. (...) We wish to study the means that we could follow to return the situation to its normal path. And to return to the people their own rights, particularly after the large damages and the great aggression on the life and the religion of the people. (...) At the time when the Ummah has not regained the first Qiblah and the route of the journey of the Prophet (. . .) the Saudi regime had stunted the Ummah in the remaining sanctities, the Holy city of Makka and the mosque of the Prophet (. . .) by calling the Christians' army to defend the regime. The crusaders were permitted to be in the land of the two Holy Places. Not surprisingly though, the King himself wore the cross on his chest. The country was widely opened from the north to the south and from east to the west for the crusaders."(Bin Laden, 1996)

Bin Laden denounces the Saudi kingdom as an accomplice to the "Crusaders" in the sense that the kingdom allows the latter to roam around the Arabian peninsula –a holy place for

Islam– as well as for the “blasphemy” of substituting man-made laws for the Shari’ah (divine law). The “normal path” Bin Laden refers to evokes a mythical, united and intact Islamic community (the *Ummah*), whose members naturally follow the laws given to the people by Allah. This community may not be united now, as Allah wanted the Ummah to be. The mythical wrongdoer, the Crusaders, are responsible for such disunity:

“Therefore (. . .) the situation cannot be rectified (. . .) unless the root of the problem is tackled. Hence it is essential to hit the main enemy who divided the Ummah into small and little countries and pushed it, for the last few decades, into a state of confusion.”
(Bin Laden, 1996)

Regardless of the specific content of the myth, the factor of having been wronged is linked to redeeming acts of violence that result in random targeting terror’s victims. Another example of such a myth of having been wronged comes from Argentina. Like in the mythology of Al Qaeda, the myth about the leadership’s interpretation of *the will of the people* is central to the symbolic order of Peronism’s Left wing. In this myth, the role of Eva Perón in the people’s cause represents the popular movement’s genuine revolutionary expression. Without emasculating the figure of General Perón, the myth represents long-dead Evita as the embodiment of *her* people. “Si Evita viviera sería Montonera” (if Evita were alive⁸, she would be a Montonera) –thus the chant of Montoneros and their sympathizers went during rallies in the 1970s. Movimiento Peronista Montoneros was the Peronist-Leftist guerrilla organization active in Argentina at that time. They mostly engaged in political assassination and hostage taking, targeting their victims among the military and the corporate world. Montoneros did not engage in random victimization as a redress against their having been wronged, however. Terror was not their thing. At worst, innocent victims resulted from some of their actions as “collateral damage.” Thus, although the myth of having been wronged informs acts of terror, not every such myth leads to random victimization

The motif of a wrong committed against the community and a call for the wrong to be redressed is also present when the perpetrators of random target violence are not sub-national rebel militias but rather those who control state institutions. More than 20 years have passed since Uruguay regained democracy, yet its military are still embracing the notion that they saved the country from the Soviet communist conspiracy launched from Cuba to the rest of the continent. The myth that fueled their terror was that of an outmost democratic and stable country –“the Switzerland of South America”:

“Once a model democratic system, it was attacked in its structural bases, and the Uruguayan society was surprised by facts hitherto unknown in the country.
“Already by 1962, but especially since 1967, local terrorist groups carried out a growing wave of armed robberies, kidnapping, attacks with explosives, assassinations, and the overpowering of cities, causing uncertainty about the survival of Uruguay as a free and sovereign state. (...)

⁸María Eva Duarte de Perón, Evita, died of cancer at age 33 in 1952, three years before the coup that ousted her husband.

“Nevertheless, the moral forces that had been forged through the spirit of the Uruguayan soldier’s traditional values enabled the Army to adapt its doctrine quickly and to ready its resources so as to fulfill its sacred duty of defending the Nation from the subversive aggressor at any cost.”(República del Uruguay)

The cost of “defending the Nation” entailed not only the death of 60 police and armed forces personnel, but also that its mythically democratic system was suspended in Uruguay over a period of 13 years, from 1972 to 1985.

Although it is possible to find multiple myths in the political discourse of most social movements, those central in ideologies of terror are the myths that embody affronts against the dignity of the group. These perceived indignities may be real or imaginary. Yet, whether they are factual or fantasized, these indignities cannot explain why the in-group resorts to acts of terror to redeem the mythical wrong exacted on its people. I contend that acts of terror result from perceived indignities toward the central myths of the in-group, independently of how real the facts that the myth narrates are. Thus, whether Israelis evicted Palestinians during the 1948 war—as groups that are prone to engage in acts of terror among the latter express—or Palestinians fled their homes because of the misinformation that sheikhs in their communities spread—as the Israeli account narrates the story—is of little relevance in explaining the centrality of the indignities experienced by the Palestinians in the conflict. Terror ensues as a strategy when the symbolic order cast by the vanguard (or in-group) presents no other solution to redeem these indignities but a redemption that must be violently executed, again and again, until the objective is fulfilled—regardless of how long it might take to fulfill such redemption.

The first question, then, is why do those who perceive indignities against their group use terror (that is, random violence) to redeem their myths? Secondly, why does not the group see a strategy other than engaging in terror as possible? Furthermore, why does the strategy of terror continue over a long period of time even when it does not render the desired results of achieving the model of society that the in-group embraces? To address these issues, we need to consider the symbolic order that legitimizes acts of violence against random victims as an ideology that is rendered and reinforced in the very actions of terror.

Terror actions as speech

Acts of terror reenact the myth of the affront and indignities suffered by the group. Yet these violent acts against random victims are not merely reactions against those indignities. The intention of terror may be instrumental, in the sense that it is used as a way to influence public opinion—so that it adheres to the image of society that the in-group harbors. In this sense, we can consider random victimization as a form of speech and, as such, we can analyze it as a message that those who engage in terror communicate to others. Those *others* are their own comrades in arms, sympathizers, those who have wronged the in-group, and the rest of society. With so many recipients for a single message, the structure of the message-terror precludes all those different audiences from reading the message in a uniform way—a situation over which those who engage in acts of terror have no control.

That their enemies (those who have wronged them) interpret their actions as *terrorist* and as *evil*, is meaningless to the symbolic order of those who engage in violence against random victims. In their symbolic order, there is little room for hope that their wrongdoers will change their ways, let alone their own image of social reality. If and when it changes, the expectation is that the image of social reality will change due to public opinion pressure and not out of the kindness of the wrongdoers. Furthermore, the latter will not understand words. Only deeds will count, one at a time. In a 1997 interview, Osama Bin Laden answered the following to then CNN correspondent Peter Arnett's question as to what message he would like to send to then President Clinton:

“The hearts of Muslims are filled with hatred towards the United States of America and the American president. The President has a heart that knows no words. A heart that kills hundreds of children, definitely knows no words. Our people in the Arabian Peninsula will send him messages with no words because he does not know any words”. (Bin Laden, 1997)

In Bin Laden's and his fellow in-group members' symbolic order, the messages with no words were, presumably, the only ones that the *wrongdoers* would be able to understand: that the violence of the latter is being met with violence; that the in-group means what they “say” with their deeds; that the *wrongdoers* should better take the in-group into account; and that, if they are listening, the *wrongdoers* should better change their ways. (The last part, though, does not imply that there is much expectation that the “wrongdoers” are actually paying attention.) In short, the “wrongdoers” are not the main intended audience. Comrades, sympathizers, and the public at large are the intended audiences of random victimization. In that same exchange with Mr. Arnett, Mr. Bin Laden said he had no words for Mr. Clinton, but he did have the following message for the mothers of the American troops in the Middle East and, by extension, to the American public opinion in general:

“(…) a message (...) to the mothers of the American troops who came here with their military uniform walking proudly up and down our land while the scholars of our country are thrown in prisons. I say that this represents a blatant provocation to 1.25 billion Muslims. (...) if they are concerned for their sons, then let them object to the American government's policy and to the American president. Do not let themselves be cheated by his standing before the bodies of the killed soldiers describing the freedom fighters in Saudi Arabia as terrorists. It is he who is a terrorist who pushed their sons into this for the sake of the Israeli interest. We believe that the American army in Saudi Arabia came to separate between the Muslims and the people for not ruling in accordance with Allah's wish. They came to be in support of the Israeli forces in occupied Palestine. (Bin Laden, 1997)

Just like he tells the “wrongdoers,” Bin Laden is telling the public in general, part of his intended audience, that he and his comrades mean business. It may take a while until the general public opinion changes its mind and adopts the symbolic order of Mr. Bin Laden's. Yet his expectation is that, with the help of terror, the American public opinion will see the light. Not only because the sheer number of Muslims throughout the world will turn their presence conspicuous, but also because failure to adopting the point of view of Al Qaeda will only bring

tragedy and suffering to American families. If the mothers cannot reason yet, he banks on their ability to comprehend emotionally the symbols shared by Bin Laden and his comrades.

With their purported goal of achieving a change in the social order, violent acts against random victims communicate instrumentality. Their aim appears to be influencing the normative social order image adopted by a growing segment of the population. Understood as a communication act, this instrumental character of violence performs an information function. Yet it is the expressive, phatic⁹, and meta-communicative functions of communication which acquire a more central meaning in the ideology of terror. (Jakobson 1990:75) The expressive function of violence involves an emotional deliverance from a mythic wrong. In establishing and maintaining social communication, the phatic function of terror emphasizes the in-group cohesion around the will of its vanguard, and its boundaries. Furthermore, violence metacommunicates the legitimacy of the order represented by the signs selected (and the way they are combined) in the planning and execution of the acts of terror, e.g., the crumbling of the Twin Towers (foretelling an economic power's collapse), the penetrable armor of the Pentagon, *Deus ex machina*, etc.

Thus, terror-messages address audiences other than wrongdoers and victims –i.e., comrades in arms as well as sympathizers. In this case, the message emphasizes the expressive, phatic, and meta-communication functions of communication. My contention is that these three functions are relevant in the explanation of why the in-group picks the strategy of terror to redeem the wrong that has been done unto them. These communication functions, furthermore, are especially useful to explain the endurance of the terror approach despite its mixed success rate. In fact, these phatic and expressive functions have more explanatory power than the instrumental expectation that the population at large will adopt the in-group's image of the social order. Although terror has been instrumental, on some occasions, in changing the heart of the population at large–e.g., the Algerian Revolution, as analyzed in Hutchinson (1972) and Crenshaw (1995)– its success is unusual.¹⁰ That terror seldom accomplishes its goal of shaping public opinion is related to the fact that the use of terror, in most cases, ends up alienating the population at large as well as sympathizers in the fringes. The latter may be especially alienated by the high cost brought in by an escalate of violence as well as by the increasing zealotry of the in-group –zealotry which often translates into violence against the fringes of the population that is sympathetic to the in-group's cause. In the end, the in-group does command discipline but their esteem may be dissipating. The question, again, is why does the in-group resort to random

⁹Phatic communion is a term that Bronislaw Malinowski (1999) applied to speech communication. It refers to the function of speech that establishes a social relationship, rather than conveying information.. The narrow linguistic meaning of phatic entails keeping the channels of communication open. In this sense, the phatic function of speech communication emphasizes the channels of communication (e.g., “How do you do?” or “Uhuh”), rather than the contents of the message or the syntax with which the message is uttered. In a broader, social sense, phatic communion refers to the establishing and maintenance of social relationships.

¹⁰Laqueur (2004: 54) notes that “Statistics show that in the terrorist attacks during the past decade, considerably more Muslims were killed than infidels.” He also distinguishes between guerrilla warfare and terrorism, pointing out that “it is easy to think of guerrilla movements that defeated the forces opposing them, but it is very difficult to remember more than a few cases in which terrorism has had any lasting effect.” (1986: 91)

victimization as a way to redress past wrongs (factual or mythical) if such a strategy is ill-conducive to restitution, let alone to the goal of realizing the image of social order that the in-group preaches? The analytical model I am proposing postulates that the primarily intended, and eager, audience for the message-terror is the in-group itself, and whoever accepts to be recruited into the in-group. Everyone else is welcome, provided that they do not interfere with the precepts of the in-group.

To accept the symbolic order of acts of terror as espoused by the in-group entails to convert into their frame. Provided that converts do not question the symbolic order, the in-group would welcome and recruit them among the sympathizers. The mere acceptance of the myth of having been wronged, widespread among the sympathizers, is not enough to count a sympathizer as an in-group convert. To be part of the in-group, one must also adopt the syntax that metacommunicates that *there is no alternative choice of strategy to redeem the wrong against the community other than the use of violence against random targets*.

The Semantics and Syntax of Terror

By our definition, victims of terror are random. However, the actions wherein these victims are targeted are not random. Rather, these actions convey messages that are embedded in their details as well as in the way such details are structured. Details of such random victim violence actions include: the type of location where the action takes place; who the most likely victims resulting from this action could be; the weapon(s) or instrument(s) used to cause casualties; the time of the day; the day of the week; perhaps the proximity (or not) to a holiday or date of remembrance; the potential number of victims; the type of country where the action takes place; whether deaths are possibly intended—as opposed to merely igniting fear; whether the victimizers leave a (linguistic) message *in situ*, whether the organization that carries out the action claims responsibility for it; whether there is a single action in a single place, or rather a series of coordinated, simultaneous actions; whether there is a series of actions carried out during a short period of time—and, if so, the periodicity of such actions; the number of individuals involved in the action; their respective gender(s); whether the action is highly risky to the victimizers; whether the action is planned as a suicide mission; the preparation and training time that the action entails; whether the victims' bodies are retrievable; whether the victims disappear without a trace; and whether the organization that carries the action engages solely in the strategy of terror, or they combine terror with other kinds of violent actions (such as guerrilla warfare, political assassination, etc).

Combinations of these details convey structures of meaning. A structure of meaning results from the combination of two or more separate details which, in isolation from each other, convey a different meaning than these details—concepts manifest together, when arranged in a combined pattern. Linguistic examples of structures of meaning include not only idiomatic phrases, but also typical expressions that recur in speech—such as, e.g., “larger than life” or “at the end of the day.” First-order structures of meaning can also get combined so as to produce second-order structures of meaning. If one applies the notion of structure of meaning to the analysis of acts of terror, it is possible to recognize a “terror style” when a group that engages in such acts patterns combinations of terror details in a typical fashion. An in-group that combines

structures of meaning in a typical fashion prescribes combinations of terror details as syntactically acceptable. In other words, the constant display of a similar pattern (or combination of details), metacommunicates what comes *natural*, i.e., what is acceptable by the users of this symbolism and syntax of terror. Thus, e.g. the use of “low technology” weaponry in targeting a high power center conveys the notion of terror as the strategy of the weak, David defeating Goliath, which reinforces the notion that there are no impenetrable targets. Along with this structure of meaning, the further combination with a relatively large number of commandos carrying out simultaneous attacks casts the notion of war. Every single action by the in-group involving coordinated violence against random victims reinforces the prescription that only military-like, i.e., hierarchical, violent actions based on surprise and undertaken by commandoes who dutifully obey their superiors’ directives– can successfully deliver the in-group of the indignity they have been wronged with. The legitimacy of the hierarchical command line is thus naturalized.

The symbolic order that terror actions metacommunicate is also present in multiple speeches conveyed by its frame users, included linguistic messages. In an email message to his mother on the eve of his action, British “shoe bomber” Richard Reid wrote: "I didn't do this act out of ignorance nor did i (*sic*) do just because i want to die, but rather because i see it as a duty upon me to help remove the oppressive american forces upon the muslim lands and that this is the only way for us to do so as we do not have other means to fight them." He also referred to the war element: "what i am doing is part of the ongoing war between islam and disbelief." (Los Angeles Times, 1/22/2003) In his narrative, Reid recites his reference to a dutiful soldiering in a redeeming war of the weak against the powerful, which one can only fight by bringing violence against random victims.¹¹

The “speech” that violent actions lodge against random victims is ideological in the sense that it presents itself as the only possible course of action to redeem the group from its having been wronged. The question is why the in-group does not deem alternative courses of action as possible. What prevents such alternatives from even being imagined? The prescribed combination of redemption with random violence embedded in every act of terror both responds to, and reinforces, the conviction that there is nothing else that can be done to deliver the group from the affront it has suffered. The prescription of this ideological connection is most effective when individual speeches refrain from calling attention on alternative courses of action. Yet this provision does not entail a proscription of alternative combinations of details. Such alternative combinations tend not to be explicit, since they do not make sense in the group’s symbolic order. Should someone in the group suggest the use of, e.g., humor to mock wrongdoers as a way to redeem the group, they would probably have to explain why they are bringing up such an irreverent theme when dealing with the mythic proportions –and arch-serious issue– of their having been wronged. In this case, humor would not make sense –and it would even be defined as offensive by the in-group. In other than terror contexts, alternatives to violence against random victims have been quite effective at enrolling sympathizers, and eventually spreading the

¹¹ In this example, the potential victimizer of random victims portrays his cause as one of the weak against the powerful. This should not be interpreted as a statement that all actions involving the strategy of terror convey the same notion. Indeed, actions of terror launched by a government against the civilian population do not (generally) convey such a notion.

in-group's image of the social order, e.g., civil disobedience during the height of the United States Civil Rights movement, Gandhi's non-violence movement, the Zvakwana-Sokwanele grass-roots movement currently operating in Zimbabwe¹², or its predecessors in Belarus (Zubr), Ukraine (Pora), Serbia (Otpor), or Argentina (Asambleas Populares). (Sharp, 1993)

Thus, every violent act against random victims metacommunicates the acceptable meaning that links terror, and only terror, with the redemption of the in-group from the mythical having been wronged. The more violent acts against random victims are, the more terror is accepted as a natural deliverance from that wrong. For the in-group, there is no way out: war must go on. Still, the question is why does terror target *random*, rather than *specific* victims? Why does it come natural to the in-group to target victims randomly? What is it so natural in the acceptance of violent random victimization as a legitimate means to redeem one's group from a wrong?

Responding to a question posed by Hamid Mir, editor of the Pakistani English language newspaper Dawn, as to how he could justify the killing of a "large number innocent people, (...) hundreds of them being Muslims," in the September 11, 2001, attacks, Osama Bin Laden replied:

This is a major point in jurisprudence. In my view, if an enemy occupies a Muslim territory and uses common people as human shield, then it is permitted to attack that enemy. For instance, if bandits barge into a home and hold a child hostage, then the child's father can attack the bandits and in that attack even the child may get hurt. America and its allies are massacring us in Palestine, Chechenya, Kashmir and Iraq. The Muslims have the right to attack America in reprisal. The Islamic Shariat says Muslims should not live in the land of the infidel for long. The Sept 11 attacks were not targeted at women and children.¹³ The real targets were America's icons of military and economic power. The Holy Prophet was against killing women and children. When he saw a dead woman during a war, he asked why was she killed? But if a child is above 13 and wields a weapon against Muslims, then it is permitted to kill him. (Asian Affairs, 2002)

In this statement, Mr. Bin Laden equates the September 11 attacks to what a father would *naturally* do to bandits who have invaded his home and taken his child hostage. Such an action is presented as not merely permitted by Islamic law but as a most *natural* reaction. The reference to Islamic law concerns the principled constraints that prohibit the killing of women and children – or, at least, the principle that those who kill women and children are obligated to respond to a higher authority– as well as what the (Islamic) legal definition of a "child" is. This Islamic legal reference is also used to respond to the killing of fellow Muslims as collateral damage in a war, a Crusade, in which "America and its allies are massacring us..." This "us" he mentions refers to

¹² The Zvakwana-Sokwanele homepage, <http://www.zvakwana.com>, describes some of the group's actions, such as the dissemination of anti-Mugabe messages accompanying free condoms or slivers of soap left in public spaces.

¹³ Along with Bin Laden's reference to the father as the child's protector who naturally uses violence, this reference to the innocence of women and children reinforces the gendered rhetoric of violence (and terror) I have pointed out in note 5.

the Ummah, the mythical community being wronged by the “infidel Crusaders” everywhere – Palestine, Chechnya, Kashmir, Iraq. By equating the supposedly *natural* reaction of a father defending (even if possibly hurting) his child to those he calls “the defenders of Islam,” Mr. Bin Laden’s statement naturalizes the primordialist approach that supports random victim targeting: blood links, filial responsibility, call for action at any cost. If anyone else apart from “the real targets” (“America’s icons of military and economic power”) perishes, this is a bearable cost. When the world denounces the cruelty of killing innocent victims, Mr. Bin Laden’s primordialist stance denounces the general public opinion as being one-sided and out of proportion. In 1996, he told a British journalist that “(w)hen sixty Jews are killed inside Palestine, all the world gathers (...) to criticize the action, while the deaths of 600,000 Iraqi children (because of the US sanctions) do not receive the same reaction. Killing those Iraqi schoolchildren is a crusade against Islam.” (Bin Laden, 2002) Furthermore, his primordialist approach questions the innocence of those who perish in acts of terror that the in-group undertakes to deliver the *Ummah* of its having been wronged. In response to a question from CNN’s Peter Arnett, Mr. Bin Laden said that “the American people are not exonerated from responsibility, because they chose their government and voted for it despite their knowledge of its crimes in Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq and in other places and its support of its agent regimes who filled our prisons with our best children and scholars.”(Bin Laden, 2002) To say that Americans “are not exonerated” in the sense that they are the ones who elect their government is not the same to say that all Americans are responsible for the “crusade” of their government. The meaning this speech conveys, however, is that the American public is indirectly responsible for the actions of their government. Nonetheless, the use of a primordialist approach in naturalizing the fatal results of violent actions conveys the meaning that the primary duties of the in-group defenders are precisely to defend its own people –and that whatever happens to outsiders is fair game.

A variant to considering random victims as unavoidable collateral damage is to present them as guilty by association rather than as innocent individuals. We can find such an image nowadays among the Argentine military. Bitter about the current social disapproval of their institution’s “dirty war” against Leftist guerrillas, a violent use of terror that caused thousands of disappearances –with many among their innocent victims being randomly, blindly targeted– these self-appointed defenders of Western and Christian values vent their disgust in the Web site “La década del 70; Guerra Revolucionaria en la República Argentina.” Commenting on the civilian claims about the disappearance of fellow Argentinians, this group of military officers state:

“Let’s clarify: denunciations do not imply that they are proven 100%... even if they were right, there would have been less than 9,000 guerrillas and terrorists dead in a war lasting more than 10 years.

“They tell us ‘O.K., but just ONE life is important.’ We are TOTALLY in agreement... but in a frame of violence in which society acts as a hostage of terrorists, what matters is to save innocent lives even if it is painful to put these delinquents out of commission. This is not a crime but a logical act of self-defense.

“As to the notion that just one life is important, we insist, sure this is so. But then, why this perseverance in LYING as to a number that has no real referents? Why insisting in a figure of 30,000 [disappearances] when reality, history, and their own numbers can’t come up –even if they count some people twice– with 9,000 souls?” (La década del 70).

Ambiguously, this group of military officers are implying that all those who died during the “dirty war” were guerrillas and terrorists; that their loss of life was sad; but that they, the military, “in a frame of violence,” could only do what is natural (“logical”): to put these *delinquents* “out of commission.” They even question the exact number of the deceased¹⁴ and blame their current accusers of distorting reality.¹⁵ In other words, for this group of military officers there were no innocent victims. According to a widely quoted statement by General Ibérico Saint Jean, military governor of Buenos Aires Province during the 1970s, “First we kill all the subversives; then, their collaborators; later, those who sympathize with them; afterward, those who remain indifferent; and finally, the undecided.”

Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh invoked a similar guilty-by-association consideration about the victims of his random victim violence. Prior to his April 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building there, McVeigh told his friends Michael and Lori Fortier “that he wanted to cause a general uprising in America and that the bombing would occur on the anniversary of the end of the Waco siege. McVeigh rationalized the inevitable loss of life by concluding that anyone who worked in the Federal Building was guilty by association with those responsible for Waco.” (U.S. Court of Appeals, 1998) He also expressed to them “that he chose the Murrah Building as the target because he believed that (1) the orders for the attack at Waco¹⁶ emanated from the building, (2) the building housed people involved in the Waco raid, and (3) the building's U-shape and glass front made it an easy target.” He also typed letters, used in his trials as evidence, in which he “justified the use of violence against federal agents as retaliation for the events in Waco.” (U. S. Court of Appeals for the 10th Circuit, 1998). Like the military genocides in Argentina, McVeigh saw no other victims of his violence than the ones he considered the wrongdoers against his comrades in Waco.

Whether victimizers consider their victims as guilty by association or as necessary yet innocent pawns, their violence against random victims metacommunicates its natural, redemptive connection with the wrong done to the community. The more the victimizers metacommunicate (i.e., prescribe) this connection through their acts of terror, the more the in-group casts it as a natural expression of deliverance from the wrong done to its people. Once the communication

¹⁴ Most of the bodies of those killed by the armed forces have not been accounted for. Those who were arrested by the security forces were technically kidnapped, since there was never a formal booking, security personnel who took them in were always in plainclothes, and there were no public records of the whereabouts of those who disappeared this way. After these kidnappings, family members had to start a futile pilgrimage to police stations and army barracks to find out nothing about their loved ones. Many of the disappeared died during torture sessions. Others were thrown, groggy yet alive, from aircraft flying over the River Plate estuary or the Atlantic Ocean.

¹⁵ This propaganda technique is based on the same mechanism used by current ideologues of the Holocaust denial.

¹⁶ When ATF raided a weapons stockpile at the Branch Davidians cult compound in Waco, TX, on February 23, 1993, deaths occurred on both sides. The FBI was called in to take over, and a standstill lasted until April 19, 1993, when the FBI charged in with tanks and tear gas. The Branch Davidians responded by firing on the tanks and ignited fires that engulfed the entire compound, resulting in 75 cult members dead and only nine survivors.

has been established on these terms, it will tend to endure through a phatic communion that expects total commitment from in-group members and potential converts.

The expressiveness of terror in a phatic communion

In addition to expressing a grievance against the purported iniquities that the myth of having been wronged proclaims, terror expresses, through its very actions, that the in-group is delivering the community from that wrong. Should this expressive emphasis on the link between having been wronged and violence be absent, terror would probably be regarded as pointless and the in-group would find hard to find support and new recruits. Yet, it is not because of the support they seek, or because they are recruiting new cadres, that those who engage in acts of terror use such method to redeem their group from having been wronged. Mainly, they are expressing the importance of their actions unto themselves. As manifested by a Palestinian militant interviewed by Post et al. in jail in Israel, “I regarded armed actions to be essential, it is the very basis of my organization and I am sure that was the case with other Palestinian organizations. An armed action proclaims that I am here, I exist, I am strong, I am in control, I am in the field, I am on the map.” (2003: 183). It is thus through terror that the in-group expresses their commitment to the community, their legitimating the in-group’s chain of command and its decision making process. It is also through terror that the in-group expresses its reenacting the myth of having been wronged and its redemption from it. In his discourse analysis of the violent Basque nationalist group ETA’s justification for their use of street violence, Van den Broek concludes that “for a terrorist organization involved in a strategy of radicalization, a discourse of legitimation is essential, and, in this case, this discourse is principally aimed at those who sympathize with the organization’s goals. (. . .) Hence the failure to successfully legitimize violent actions that go *in crescendo* within the circles of its political following may make the organization reconsider its strategy of radicalization.” (2004: 733).¹⁷

The question that comes to mind is why would the in-group need to keep reminding itself that they are redeeming the community/people/nation from the wrong they have been done? Once the recruits have been converted into the symbolic order that naturalizes the connection between the myth of the wrongdoing and the (violent) redemption, why must this staccato of violence persist? What else do the in-group members need to know that they did not get in previous terror-messages? I contend that the answer to these related questions lies in the phatic function of terror-messages. The phatic function emphasizes the relevance of communication channels. In this case, what the phatic function emphasizes is the relevance of terror as a channel of communication. Furthermore, terror communicates the *raison d’être* of the in-group, the legitimacy of its leadership, its certitude, its identity, its role in history. Most importantly, terror serves the phatic function of establishing as well as maintaining the group’s *esprit de corps*. Were it not for the phatic communion that gets established, recruits would probably find hard to

¹⁷Van den Broek also asserts that there are other “faces” of the Basque nationalist discourse, including statements, before and after street violence acts, directed to the general public. His conclusion is that when violence intensifies and the general public becomes alienated the principal discourse is aimed at the organization’s followers, lest internal dissidence cause massive exits.

commit highly to the myth of having been wronged, let alone to the imperatives of redemption. In other words, through its phatic function, terror instills terror¹⁸. It is not that terror continues because those who engage in random victim violence relish violence for its own sake, to the point that they, pathologically, get pleasure out of inflicting death to others. As a Palestinian militant stated to Post et al. (see footnote 6), “in a people’s struggle, the group doesn’t do it because it wants to kill civilians, but because *jihad* must go on.” In other words, this is an external imperative that emanates from the phatic communion. Through its phatic function, the terror action-message keeps the in-group engaged in random victim violence.

Should the in-group stop their strategy of terror, its *esprit de corps* would be seriously compromised. Questions could emerge among its cadres about the hierarchy’s legitimacy unless the silence is explained as temporary and as part of a tactical decision that is keeping the “wrongdoers” guessing *when* the in-group will strike again. Insofar as the in-group sees itself symbolically in control of the situation, its members will remain committed to the cause, the myth, the fight, and the *modus operandi*. After all, the group’s phatic communion keeps it going for it projects an elitist notion of itself, one where the in-group appears as the only body capable of redeeming the community, people or nation through its actions. They picture themselves as both enlightened and righteous and, as such, as embodying the will of the people. The phatic function of the terror-message is in charge of maintaining this conception alive.

* * *

The ideology of terror, like any ideology, is not exempted of contradictions. At all levels, its communication is often exposed to ambiguity lapses akin to experiences of misframing (Goffman, 1974: 308-321). Although the phatic function of violent messages helps to cast the righteousness of the group’s hierarchy, even in-group members at times discover this mechanism and end up rejecting important pieces of the symbolic order of terror. In an interview, Argentine member of Congress, writer and former Montonero Miguel Bonasso tells of his disappointment with the movement’s leadership and about his eventual departure from the group: “There is a certain critique (of Montonero leaders Rodolfo Galimberti, Mario Eduardo Firmenich, and Fernando Vaca Narvaja) in one of my earlier books, “*Recuerdo de la muerte.*” And “*Diario de un clandestino*” culminates with my breakup with Montoneros.” “I believe that (the causes of this breakup) are creeping up (in those books). They have to do with a growing elitist, militaristic vision that sets itself apart from the people. The book shows that the decision to be a militant is not taken overnight. (. . .) I also attempted to show that being a clandestine entails a painful experience. One doesn’t undertake it happily or frivolously, but rather slides into it. It’s like a comma, (in the sense that) it has degrees. It was very difficult to break up with Montoneros, despite the disagreements, at a specific moment in time” not necessarily because it was dangerous but rather out of a “sort of moral self-doubt” in the sense that “it would imply a betrayal of one’s *compañeros.*” (Bonasso, n/d). With these words, Bonasso tells us that the phatic

¹⁸In their analysis of the role of the media, Schmid and de Graaf (1982) also conclude that violence breeds violence, since its coverage by the media motivates terrorists to continue with their actions. I agree that notoriety is valued by those who use the tactic of terrorism. I contend, however, that they chiefly do so because the media contributes to validate the messages that circulate within the phatic community.

function of terror is far more powerful than terror's metacommunicative function. You may discover your dissidence with the group's ideological supports of terror –militarism, elitism, even the way terror and the mythical redemption are presented as a natural combination – yet what is extremely difficult to do is to break up with the in-group. This difficulty responds more to the moral structure of the group –its collective conscience– than to psychological factors at the level of the individual, such as the emotion of fear. (Durkheim, 1885)

Arin Ahmed, a 20-year-old Palestinian woman was about to blow herself up in Rishon Letzion, Israel, in 2002, but desisted. Apprehended by the Israeli Defense Forces a few days later, she was interviewed in jail by Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer. A journalist from newspaper Ha'aretz recorded the exchange. As she recounted the experience of her recruitment and delivery to the chosen bombing site by her handler, Ms. Ahmed manifested a first glimpse of frame trouble when she was rushed to carry out the attack only four days after she initially declared her intention to be a female *shaheed* (martyr).¹⁹ Yet, she continued with her (and her handlers') plan until she reached the bombing site. Then, she told Defense Minister Ben-Eliezer,

"I got out of the car. The place wasn't exactly like I'd seen on the map. I saw a lot of people, mothers with children, teenage boys and girls. I remembered an Israeli girl my age whom I used to be in touch with. I suddenly understood what I was about to do and I said to myself: How can I do such a thing? I changed my mind. Issam²⁰ also had second thoughts, but they managed to convince him to go ahead. I saw him go and blow himself up.

"I decided that I wasn't going to do it. They were very angry at me. They yelled at me the whole way back. And they also tried to send me to carry out another attack in Jerusalem. But I'd already changed my mind and given up the whole idea. I stayed at home, until your forces came and arrested me." (Ha'aretz, 6/20/2002)

Seeds of doubt about the wisdom of the operation were having some effect on Ms. Ahmed's mind when she realized that it took only four days for her Fatah Tanzim group contacts to *allow* her "to become a martyr." In the end, once she was in the presence of her potential victims, she was able to separate the notion of redeeming the community's having been wronged from the notion of violence inflicted on those random (and innocent) victims. She humanized her potential victims through a fleeting image of an Israeli girl she had befriended. Once she broke through the symbolic order that had brought her to Rishon Letzion to carry out her mission, and decided not to pursue it, it was not possible for her handlers to convince Ahmed otherwise. Issam's fate, on the other hand, was more malleable in the hands of their handlers. In comparing Bonasso's departure from Montoneros and Ahmed's refusal to be used as a suicide bomber, it is evident that the phatic function of violence was more powerful in Bonasso's case. Despite Ahmed's accepting a suicide mission, she had not been as thoroughly socialized into the in-

¹⁹.She gave her being despondent upon the death of her militant boyfriend Jad as the reason to wanting to be a suicide bomber for the Fatah Tanzim group.

²⁰Issam Badir, a 16-year-old boy, was instructed to blow himself up –in a coordinated fashion– a few minutes earlier than Ms. Ahmed. The idea was that people fleeing Issam's bombing would be caught by Arin Ahmed's and killed at the other end of the plaza.

group as Bonasso, a cadre in Montoneros was. She had not had enough time to be involved in a phatic communion and remained –despite the seriousness of her death plan– in the outer fringes of the in-group. Her experience contrasts with that of Rasan Stitti, another would-be suicide bomber interviewed by Defense Minister Ben-Eliezer. Stitti underwent a six-month training before he was deployed as a suicide bomber. He attempted his mission several times, but the presence of security prevented him from carrying out each one of his plans. Like the question he posed to Ahmed during her interview, Ben-Eliezer asked Stitti what his thoughts were as he was about to kill innocent Israelis –whether he hated Jews that much.

Stiti: "No, not at all. I don't hate Jews. That's not it. I just wanted to take part in my people's war of national liberation. It's a holy war for the liberation of occupied Palestine. That's what I was thinking all the time."

Ben-Eliezer: "But in the place you were supposed to blow yourself up, you would see with your own eyes the people whom you were about to kill. Did you ever ask yourself: Why them? What have they done? Why do they deserve to die?"

Stiti: "I wouldn't have seen that. We don't see them at all. What's before my eyes is [becoming] a shaheed. Everything is for the sake of the commandment. That's what I was told. The shaheed is on a very high level and everyone respects him. I wanted to participate in the liberation of my people, to fulfill the sacred commandment, to be a source of pride to my people and my friends." (Ha'aretz, 6/20/2002)

His allegiance to the in-group and community oriented the actions of this would-be suicide bomber. The phatic communion ensured that he would not even register who his potential victims were. He would not even see them. His training specifically emphasized that he would not pay attention to his victims, and that only his “sacred commandment” would guide him.²¹ Even in death, the esteem of his family and phatic communion for having participated in his people’s “holy war” would enlighten the righteousness of his actions.

Conclusions

I have characterized terror as actions that, by targeting victims randomly, spread fear among the public at large. The manifest goal of such acts of random victimization is to urge public opinion to adopt the social order image of the organization that coordinates and carries out acts of terror. Yet empirical evidence indicates that random violence, in the long run, may tend to alienate the population at large rather than to gain their support for the organization’s political aims.

Organizations involved in random victim violence differ idiosyncratically in terms of the symbolic order that orients their terror actions. Indeed, acts of terror are carried out by the extreme Left as well as by the extreme Right –among others. However, those disparate symbolic

²¹Neither Ben-Eliezer nor the Shin Beth officers present during the interview believed Stitti’s assertion that he did not hate the Jews. Nor did they believe him when he said that if he were released he would never again try to be a suicide bomber. On the other hand, they did believe Ahmed’s contention that, if released, she would abandon the area and go to live with her mother in Jordan.

orders conform formal ideologies that present (and prescribe) acts of terror as the only possible strategy to redeem the community from a wrong done to it. The ideology of terror sustains a natural link between random victim violence and redemption from a wrong that is mythically narrated. The wrong done to the community, people, or nation is not *mythical* in the sense that it is *not real*. Rather, it is mythical insofar as the story of wrongdoing is told and retold with the same narrative format, time and again.

As a formal ideology, it takes for granted that terror, and only terror, will redeem the people, community, or nation from the wrong done to it. Because they are manifestations of this formal ideology, we can consider terror acts as forms of speech that prescribe a natural, logical link between violence against random victims and redeeming the group of the wrong done to it. Within this approach, we see terror acts as messages that carry and reinforce in its utterances the ideology of terror as the only way possible to redeem the group. This ideology is embedded in the structure of those acts of random victimization. In this sense, the staging of each act of terror prescribes the syntax of terror –i.e., particular combinations of terror acts’ details and the meaning that result– as natural.

Whereas the manifest goal of using terror to influence public opinion appears to be communicated to all sorts of recipients of the terror-message, I contend that random victim violence is not used primarily to communicate with the population at large or with the “wrongdoers.” Instead, the foremost intended audience of terror is the legion of sympathizers and fellow in-group members.

In addition to its metacommunicative function, terror-messages involve expressiveness and the establishing and maintenance of terror as the organization’s natural channel of communication. The latter entails the formation of a phatic communion. The phatic function of the terror-message explains why terror endures despite its poor success record in achieving a generalized support for the image of social order held by the in-group. In this sense, terror instills the further use of terror. In the end, the in-group keeps communicating among themselves the sheer importance of continuing with its violent acts. Under these circumstances, the manifest goal of influencing public opinion so as to realize the in-group’s image of social order becomes a footnote. Besides, the fact that this manifest goal is elusive reinforces both the myth of having been wronged and the need for a continuous, violent redemption.

Just like with any other ideology, the one that naturalizes terror as the only possible redemption from a wrong done to the people will, from time to time, fail to guarantee that its frame remains always meaningful to its intended audience. Different sources of ambiguities are bound to bring troubles to the frame. In short, no ideology is infallible. Insofar as the endurance of acts of terror dwells on the phatic function that sustains it, we can conclude that frame trouble is the result of a faltering phatic communion.

Inasmuch as terror is a redemptive strategy used against a mythical wrong done unto the people, what options are available to call an end to violence? A “war on terror” presents the obvious disadvantage that it responds to violence with further violence. Most importantly, counter-terrorism refuels the myth of wrongdoing and, by doing so, renders further legitimacy to the in-group in the eyes of both their cadres and their sympathizers. There is one venue to lessen

the impact of terror, though. It entails to unveil the ideology that sustains terror in such a way that troubles in its frame will pop up. The more frequently such troubles emerge, the higher the likelihood of defections within the ranks of the in-group. If these frame troubles dwell in the phatic function of terror-messages, the ideology is very seriously compromised.

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