Chapter 16

Questioning Terrorism/Counterterrorism Rationality

Joseba Zulaika
University of Nevada, USA

William A. Douglass
University of Nevada, USA

ABSTRACT

In a post-9/11 world, terrorism has become a central focus around the globe, impacting national and international politics. Therefore, understanding the functioning of terrorism and counterterrorism rationality is necessary for furthering this area of study. In this chapter, the authors' key focus in advocating the deconstruction of terrorism is upon the discourse itself: its premises, beliefs, fears, definitions, rhetorical devices, imaginary constructions of the enemy, the inability to distinguish ritual bluff from actual combat, the logic of taboo, the injunction not to humanize the terrorist other, and moral self-righteousness. It is argued that by undermining its claims to apocalyptic powers and fears, terrorism would lose credibility as an effective rhetorical ploy and bellicose weapon for insurgents and governments alike. Thus, this chapter seeks to answer: Are Americans more secure after Afghanistan and Iraq; are Israelis safer behind the wall? Or are we simply doing exactly what is required to foment “terrorism” and make it ever more menacing?

INTRODUCTION

Since 9/11, terrorism has become the very thing of international and national politics. Those of us who have long been skeptical about the merits of terrorism discourse and critical of its political manipulations (by perpetrators and governments alike) are now confronted with its omnipresence as the last word regarding international relations and public policy. It seems that any politically and morally responsible analysis of the contemporary world must start with assuming the centrality of terrorism as the quintessential phenomenon of our times. How can we maintain skepticism towards the ongoing “war on terror,” while at the same time taking seriously the worldwide escalation of insurgent and suicidal violence?

Our key focus in advocating the deconstruction of terrorism is upon the discourse itself: its premises, beliefs, fears, definitions, rhetorical devices,
imaginary constructions of the enemy, the inability to distinguish ritual bluff from actual combat, the logic of taboo, the injunction not to humanize the terrorist other, and moral self-righteousness. We argued that, by undermining its claims to apocalyptic powers and fears, terrorism would lose credibility as an effective rhetorical ploy and bellicose weapon for insurgents and governments alike (Zulaika & Douglass, 1996). Have the post-9/11 events proven us wrong? Is the enshrinement of terrorism as indisputable worldwide obsession and threat, as well as the “War on Terror” as the single-minded task of American global policy, the unavoidable offshoots of 9/11? Or has the apotheosis of counterterrorism discourse impoverished us analytically and morally, and made us politically more vulnerable while ironically furthering the violence? In practical terms: are Americans more secure after Afghanistan and Iraq; are Israelis safer behind the wall? Or are we simply doing exactly what is required to foment “terrorism” and make it ever more menacing?

Terrorism goes to the heart of “the paradox of sovereignty” which, in Agamben’s formulation, “consists in the fact that the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order” (1998, p. 15). Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib are instances of the sovereign power’s capacity to be simultaneously inside and outside of the law. What best typifies the structure of the paradox is that exception becomes the norm. The exception reveals starkly whom has the sovereign power to decide and impose the legal boundaries; when the rules are applicable and when suspended. The omniscient and omnipotent sovereign power decides, for example, what constitutes legitimate torture and terrorist threat, arrogating to itself the right to employ the former when interrogating individuals suspected of terrorism (and even their “supporters”) and to launch preemptive strikes against sovereign states that it classifies as terrorist.

What is at stake regarding the capacity to establish a state of exception is the very possibility of state authority. Recourse to “exception” seeks to exercise control over an exteriority, which then gets included and thereby co-opted by exclusion. Counterterrorism discourse illustrates well this “taking of the outside” through the logic of exception. Empire must control the powers that oppose both its sovereign and indirect rule; hence the implied independence of terrorist exceptionality is intolerable. It is no longer enough (or even possible) to leave terrorists alone. Thus, paradoxically, terrorist outcasts are excluded from the “civilized” world, while simultaneously coming under the purview of imperial control because of the tabooed character of their exceptionality.

THE PATRIOT ACT

Despite the seemingly routine and standard quality of counterterrorism reports, they feed upon and reproduce a veritable “state of exception.” The Patriot Act illustrates this best. By the mid-1990s, under Clinton, Reagan’s counterterrorism sideshow of the 1980s was a major theme within American politics. However, with the Bush administration, it became the sine qua non for defining and then interpreting the everyday life of Americans. If, between 1989 and 1992, it could be argued that the boundaries between the real and the fictional were not clear in American counterterrorism discourse (zero fatalities in the United States, 34 Americans killed abroad and 1,443 published books on terrorism over four years) (Zulaika & Douglass, 1996, p. 31), after the first attack on the Twin Towers and Oklahoma City terror became an important functional reality of American politics that could be deployed in the middle of a crisis such as the Lewinski affair. However, all of that pales compared with President Bush’s post-9/11 world in which the war on terror appeared to have become the key, if not sole, purpose of American politics with epoch-making legislative consequences affecting national security at home and international cooperation abroad. The tragic events of 9/11