Sociological Theories

Austin (Ted) Turk argued that a sociology of terror should seek "to develop an explanation of its causation, the dynamics of its escalation and de-escalation in relation to other forms of political violence, and its impact on the stability and change of social orders" (2004:285).

Some important issues for sociological theories of terror:

✓ Organizing terror – effective forms: hierarchy vs. network

✓ Socializing terrorists – career development paths

✓ Terrorism as communication – mass media impacts covering terror; pro & con censorship arguments

✓ Social control of terrorists – law, crime & punishment

We'll examine networks and other forms of terrorist organization next time.

Theories about the socialization of terrorists usually depict a process of career development: progressive awareness, indoctrination, & training that takes a recruit from conventional SMO activism, to foot soldier in boot camp, to squad-leader, and ultimately to board of directors. Few make it to the top.

Mass Media and Terrorism

Mass media and terrorists have a symbiotic (mutual-benefit) relation. The 24/7 news cycle feeds off visual content. Terrorists need media coverage to frighten their intended audiences & propagandize their causes. Mainstream media concentrate on event facts, but seldom communicate their grievances and demands. Some media (e.g., Fox News, Al Jazeera) offer particularly slanted news reportage and opinions on conflicts involving their homelands.

Theories of mass comm & Internet examine how messages and images affect society. Media policies about coverage and access by terrorists to audiences may affect success or failure of some terrorist campaigns.

Does ignoring terror acts only make terrorists much more aggressive?

Can media over-exposure lead to public satiation, requiring yet greater "spectaculars" to break through an audiences' short attention-span?

Should the media facilitate or impede alternative viewpoints?

Censor events or offer public platforms to terrorists & their sympathizers?

Debate: Censor Terrorism Coverage?

Mainstream media tend to emphasize such themes as "grievances never justify violence," "violence expresses hate," & "reciprocal violence escalates destruction." Controversy rages over whether opposing views should be aired or censored. Class divides into small groups to develop pro/con arguments about censorship:

"COME UNTO ME, YE OPPREST!"
—Alley in the Memphis Commercial Appeal.
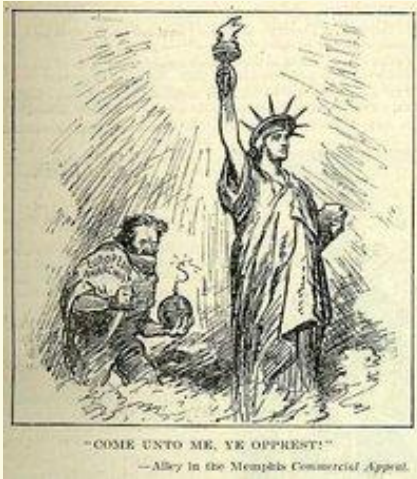
PRO: Why media coverage should be censored :

Give terrorists favorable publicity? Legitimize their goals and methods? Panic and demoralize the public? Lead to imitation? Help them recruit new supporters? Endanger hostages? Provoke vigilante or revenge attacks on minorities by the public?

CON: Why mass media coverage of terrorism should be uncensored:

Force terrorists to ever-greater atrocities to attract attention? Create a false sense of security? Spread rumors and panic? Keep the public from understanding the political situation? Let officials exaggerate dangers for their political gain? Fail to stop police actions that might be excessive? Undermine legal safeguards? Damage media credibility?

Pure Sociology

Donald Black took a sociology of law approach, applying his theory of "pure sociology" to predict and explain human behavior by its **social geometry** – multidimensional location and direction in social space. It uses neither psychological subjectivity nor actor goals and purposes. It doesn't explain human behavior, but "the behavior of social life."

Pure sociology "reverses the direction of human action by reconceptualizing the action of a person or group as the **action of a social entity** such as law or science or art. Social action becomes truly social." (Black 2000:347)

Legal sociology explains the behavior of law itself, not of people in law:

❑ A call to the police is an increase in law, a movement of law into a conflict

❑ Arrests, prosecutions, convictions & punishments are all increases of law

❑ Law behaves with the same principles everywhere throughout history

Where does more law occur: At the top or bottom of societies? In an upward or downward direction? Across close or distant social and cultural spaces?

Black, Donald. 2000. "Dreams of Pure Sociology." *Sociological Theory* 18:343-367.

Social Geometry of Social Distances

Social geometry is measured as distances in <u>multi-dimensional social space</u>:

❖ Horizontal: Degree of intimacy and integration: kin, friends, strangers

❖ Vertical: Socioeconomic & authority inequalities: class, status, power

❖ Corporate: Social distances between groups & organizations

❖ Cultural: Social distances between languages, religions, "We" vs. "Others"

❖ Normative: Social control of crime and punishment

<u>Controlling for access</u>, is someone more likely to insult, slap, beat, maim, torture, or murder:

A blood-relative? step-child? household member? neighbor? tribal member? countryman? stranger? foreigner?

For which close/distant relations will laws and punishments likely be applied <u>more severely</u>?

Black's pure sociology of law applies to <u>violence</u>. Two propositions:

▪ Conflicts with more distant adversaries attract more violence.

▪ Distant conflicts also attract greater law and punishment.

The Geometry of Terrorism

Can pure sociology explains "two forms of <u>justice</u>" – violence & terrorism? Why does he say, "<u>structures kill & maim</u>, not individuals or collectivities?"

"Most violence is social control … Much is self-help, the <u>handling of grievances by aggression</u> … Self-help includes everything from pushing or slapping an individual to bombing a city or exterminating an ethnic group."

By applying pure sociology to terrorism, Black proposes a Weberian <u>ideal type</u>:

Pure terrorism – "self-help by organized civilians who covertly inflict mass violence on other civilians" (Black 2004:16). Pure terror is highly moralistic, organized, and war-like.

Where and how much pure terrorism occurs depends on its social geometry. Black's core proposition explains the <u>location and direction</u> of terror:

✓ Pure terrorism arises intercollectively & upwardly across long distances; (e.g., by indigenous people of a colony or members of another society)

✓ Terrorism is absent or rare where conflicts are individual & downward or lateral (against social inferiors or members of same ethnicity, community)

Technology Shrinks Physical Geometry

The right social geometry is insufficient for terrorism. Also necessary are physical opportunities, which 20th century technologies provided.

"No contact, no terrorism." 19th c. terrorism mainly targeted colonial masters. 20th c. transportation & other inventions allow aggrieved groups to shrink geographic distances. Airports, high-rise buildings, sports arenas, and malls aggregate easy targets.

✓ Terrorism arises only when a grievance has a social geometry distant enough and a <u>physical geometry close enough</u> for mass violence against civilians

✓ Technology makes terrorism easier & deadlier in short run, but in the <u>long term destroys</u> the social geometry on which terrorism depends

Is Black too optimistic that globalization – by bringing people into greater intimacy – will ultimately destroy the social geometric conditions for terror?

Can social geometry explain why counterterrorism "combines criminal justice with quasi-warfare" in prevention, pre-emption, retaliation against attackers?