

The Morality of Terrorism

C. A. J. COADY

Throwing a bomb is bad,
Dropping a bomb is good;
Terror, no need to add,
Depends on who's wearing the hood.¹

There is a strong tendency in the scholarly and sub-scholarly literature on terrorism to treat it as something like an ideology. There is an equally strong tendency to treat it as always immoral. Both tendencies go hand in hand with a considerable degree of unclarity about the meaning of the term 'terrorism'. I shall try to dispel this unclarity and I shall argue that the first tendency is the product of confusion and that once this is understood, we can see, in the light of a more definite analysis of terrorism, that the second tendency raises issues of inconsistency, and even hypocrisy. Finally, I shall make some tentative suggestions about what categories of target may be morally legitimate objects of revolutionary violence, and I shall discuss some lines of objection to my overall approach.

The tendency to think of terrorism as an ideology is no doubt encouraged by superficial verbal resemblances—so many expressions ending in '-ism' are words for ideologies or systems of belief—but reflection indicates that the '-ism' ending here refers to no more than the relatively systematic nature of a method or a tactic. Let us start, unlike so much of the literature on terrorism, with some statements from terrorists themselves, or at any rate, those who would commonly be regarded as terrorists:

(1) *Carlos Marighela*, the Brazilian revolutionary, who had such a strong influence on the development of urban guerilla warfare in South America, devotes only two paragraphs to what he calls 'terrorism' in his *Handbook of Urban Guerrilla Warfare* published in 1969, the year of his death. His definition is rather restrictive. 'By terrorism', he writes, 'I mean the use of bomb attacks',² but although narrow the definition picks out a central terrorist technique and

¹ Roger Woddis, 'Ethics for Everyman', from *The New Oxford Book of Light Verse*, chosen and edited by Kingsley Amis (Oxford University Press, 1978), 292.

² Carlos Marighela, *Handbook of Urban Guerilla Warfare*, collected in *For the Liberation of Brazil* by Carlos Marighela, trans. John Butt and Rosemary Sheed (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 89.

makes it clear that it is a means to political objectives. Elsewhere, when discussing other techniques such as kidnapping or execution of informers (which would probably be called 'terrorist' by others, certainly by newspapers) Marighela makes it clear that such acts are to subserve the wider political objectives of the revolution. It is a weakness of his and other such writings that they do not always show that the various paramilitary techniques will actually promote these wider objectives, but that is another matter; it is clear that Marighela believes that they will. Talking of executions, for instance, he says: 'We should use the death penalty for such people as American spies, agents of the dictatorship, torturers, fascists in the government who have committed crimes against patriots or tried to capture them, police informers'.³ It is apparent from this quotation that the killing of these categories of person is viewed by Marighela as a kind of judicial punishment to be justified in whatever way such punishments are justified, especially in times of war.

(2) Another important theorist and spokesman for South American revolutionary movements, Régis Debray, wrote of what he called 'city terrorism' in his book *Revolution in the Revolution?* as follows:

Of course city terrorism cannot assume any decisive role and it entails certain dangers of a political order. But if it is subordinate to the fundamental struggle, the struggle in the countryside, it has, from the military point of view, a strategic value; it immobilizes thousands of enemy soldiers, it ties up most of the repressive mechanism in unrewarding tasks of protection . . . the government must, since it is the government, protect everywhere the interests of property owners; the *guerrilleros* don't have to protect anything anywhere⁴

We can see from these extracts that far from being an ideology, or long-range goal of action, terrorism, or what many people would regard as terrorism, is treated as a technique in the service of such a goal. This is hardly surprising for terror is a form of violence and violence is primarily a means. It must of course be conceded that just as there are those who treat violence generally as *almost* an end in itself so there are those who do the same for terrorism. A parallel with orthodox warfare is here, as elsewhere, instructive. If we read some of the responses in Great Britain to the outbreak of World War I there is present a sort of lust for violence which treats it almost as a self-sufficient end, certainly something intimately connected with

³ Ibid. 87.

⁴ Régis Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution?* trans. Bobbye Ortiz (London: Monthly Review Press, 1967), 75.

personal growth or virtue. Consider, for instance, the English poet Julian Grenfell whose much anthologized poem 'Into Battle' expressed so well the intoxication with war that so many of his generation seem to have had. Grenfell, a sensitive and intelligent man, wrote to his mother from the front saying '... I *adore* war. It is like a big picnic without the objectlessness of a picnic. I've never been so well or so happy.'⁵ Grenfell was awarded the DSO for crawling out into no-man's land and almost into enemy trenches in order to snipe at Germans. It was his own idea and he killed three Germans. Afterwards, he made two entries in his game book; they come after an entry for October 1914 of '105 partridges' and read: 'November 16th: 1 Pomeranian;—November 17th: 2 Pomeranians'.⁶ In Georges Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* there is a similar euphoria about working class violence though there is a theoretical framework within which violence functions as a means to political ends.⁷ Something of the sort is true also of Franz Fanon's eulogies to anti-colonial violence in *The Wretched of the Earth* where killing is praised for its liberating and even ennobling effects upon the killer (although the case histories provided sit uneasily with the thesis maintained).⁸ Similarly, with some terrorist operations it may be that the terror itself has assumed the status of an end so that terrorism has become a sort of ideology, the wreaking of havoc itself a value that needs little or no justifying purpose beyond it.

Let us acknowledge then that there are warriors who treat war as self-justifying and terrorists who treat terror as self-justifying but let us ignore them as aberrational. Such aberrations need their own discussion but shall not find it here. It may be possible to argue that those who begin by treating war or terror as means inevitably finish up treating them as ends; this is an important line of moral criticism but it contains the implicit concession that the activities can seem justifiable as means, and since this is how they are usually defended, this is how they should, in the first instance, be examined.

This is precisely the way discussions of the morality of war often proceed. Clausewitz's dictum, 'War is the continuation of policy by other means', is announced and then a debate ensues as to the

⁵ Quoted in Nicholas Mosley, *Julian Grenfell: His Life and the Times of His Death* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976), 239.

⁶ *Ibid.* 243.

⁷ Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. T. E. Hulme (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1925).

⁸ Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* trans. Constance Farrington (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967). For the praise of violence see especially pp. 73–74, for the case histories see Chapter 5 and especially case 3 on pp. 210–212.

C. A. J. Coady

efficiency of war in promoting those policy objectives. As reflection on the morality of war has developed in the past and also increasingly in recent years, this stark utilitarian formula has been perceived to be inadequate. It has seemed clear to many that some means that would be effective in producing the desired policy objectives are morally inadmissible or at least dubious—for instance, introducing deadly poison into the enemy's civilian water supply to facilitate the defeat of his troops. Many believe, in my view rightly, that the obliteration bombing of enemy cities is equally reprehensible even if one's cause is right and it can be shown that the bombing hastens one's achievement of victory and reduces one's own casualties. All of this is related to questions traditionally discussed in just war theory under the category of the *jus in bello* and debate in the area has been given a certain amount of renewed currency by several recent books.⁹ But the terminology is not my concern here. The crucial point is merely that when violence is viewed as a means to certain ends (believed to be) of importance then there are broadly three ways of assessing its morality. One is to reject it on the ground that the use of violence (or at any rate, severe violence) in the pursuit of good ends is never morally licit; this is the pacifist position.¹⁰ A second is to assess the violence solely in terms of its efficiency in contributing to the achievement of the good ends; this is the utilitarian response.¹¹ A third is to assess the violence, partly in terms of its efficiency, but more significantly in terms of the sort of violence it is, most particularly whether it is directed at morally appropriate targets but also whether it is barbaric or grotesque or disproportionate. (This last feature may fit into a purely utilitarian framework depending

⁹ Cf. Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (London: Allen Lane, 1978); Barrie Paskins and Michael Dockrill, *The Ethics of War* (London: Duckworth, 1979); James Turner Johnson, *Ideology, Reason and the Limitation of War* (Princeton University Press, 1975).

¹⁰ Here I simplify somewhat for purposes of exposition. What I sketch is certainly a pacifist position but some pacifists would accept the use of severe police violence within a legal framework but reject what they see as the basically unconstrained violence of war. For a good discussion of some of the issues to do with pacifism see Jenny Teichman, 'Pacifism', *Philosophical Investigations* 4 (January 1982).

¹¹ This is again shorthand but I think reasonable shorthand. In a fuller discussion we should distinguish that utilitarianism which looks to justify violence by its promotion of narrowly military goals and that which takes a wider view of the goods in question. There is also the question of rule utilitarianism. If rule-utilitarianism can be shown to be a genuine alternative to act-utilitarianism as a form of utilitarianism then perhaps some version of it would blur the line between the second and third responses.

The Morality of Terrorism

upon how it and the framework are described.) This third response I shall call the internal viewpoint since it does not treat the morality of the violence externally solely in terms of its consequences. It will of course be sensitive to consequences but not as the sole moral consideration. We should note that it is a significant part of this outlook to be concerned that non-combatants be afforded a moral immunity from direct military attack. In what follows, the pacifist position, important though it is, will be gently set aside because I am interested in comparisons between those who justify violence by the State (notably warfare) in pursuit of its goals and those who justify violence by non-State groups in pursuit of their goals. It is in the context of such justificatory endeavour that the moral problem of terrorism should be placed.

Before proceeding further along these lines it is appropriate to turn briefly to definitional matters. If terrorism is a method there is still the question, what method? It is clear from the earlier references to Marighela's views that the term 'terrorism' (or just 'terror') can be used more or less narrowly and it is unlikely that the term in 'ordinary' political parlance has any particularly definite sense since it has arisen and continues to be employed in contexts of a highly emotional, partisan, even hysterical nature. The semantic confusion generated by such contexts seems about equally distributed between supporters and opponents of terrorism but it is possible to discern in the welter of accusation, complaint and exposition an outline on which the different concerns and anxieties converge. I shall attempt to bring this outline into focus by defining the concept in terms which capture much of what seems to exercise people in their worries about terrorism and which allow me to continue my exploration of analogies between warfare and other forms of political violence. I think that it also does justice to the historical evolution of the term which is, for instance, well summarized in Laquer and Lineberry.¹² The definition used by Jan Schreiber in his book, *The Ultimate Weapon: Terrorists and World Order* will be my starting point. Schreiber defines terrorism as 'a political act, ordinarily committed by an organized group, involving death or the threat of death to non-combatants'.¹³ Although on the right path, this needs amending in certain obvious directions; as it stands, it is misleadingly unspecific about the kind of causal nexus indicated by the word 'involving'. It should at least be made clear that the political act

¹² Walter Laquer, *Terrorism* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977); R. C. Lineberry, *The Struggle Against Terrorism* (Wilson, 1977).

¹³ Jan Schreiber, *The Ultimate Weapon: Terrorists and World Order* (New York: Morrow, 1978), 20.

intentionally produced the death or threat of death to non-combatants, otherwise loud applause at a political rally which distracted a passing (civilian) motorist causing him to crash into a pole and die would count as an act of terrorism. As I use the term 'intentional' it is possible for there to be foreseen consequences of one's acts that are not intentional; for instance, the designer of a freeway may have good statistical reason to expect that some people will be killed in consequence of its being built but he does not intentionally bring about their deaths. There are those who dislike this usage but even they will distinguish somehow (and it is not always an easy matter to do it) between what is directly intentional and what is, if 'intentional', none the less only incidentally so and no part of the agent's purpose in acting. Distinctions of this kind seem required in familiar debates about the morality of warfare where there seems to be a vital distinction between a direct attack upon non-combatants and an attack which is aimed at combatants but is known to be likely to have incidental civilian casualties. If such a distinction is relevant to warfare it is also presumably pertinent to other uses of political violence and I take it to be in the spirit of Schreiber's discussion to treat the 'involving' as of the (directly) intentional kind.

The other modification to Schreiber's definition is to widen it a little since a terrorist act can be aimed at other severe injuries than death. Torture or the threat of torture would surely do the trick and so would lesser but still severe injury. By the same token, certain types of severe attacks upon property would probably count, for most people, as terrorist—e.g. the destruction of civil aeroplanes even without any danger to human life. As amended then, the definition of a terrorist act would go as follows: 'A political act, ordinarily committed by an organized group, which involves the intentional killing or other severe harming of non-combatants or the threat¹⁴ of the same or intentional severe damage to the property of non-combatants or the threat of the same'. The term 'terrorism' can then be defined as the tactic or policy of engaging in terrorist acts.

Certain consequences of this definition need to be noted:

(1) There is no explicit reference to some features of terrorist activity which commentators have regarded as important, for instance, the sort of wider effects it typically aims to produce, such as publicizing a forgotten cause, provoking an over-reaction from the

¹⁴ The definition treats threats as essentially intentional so that the specification 'intentional threat' would be pleonastic. If the reader believes that there can be unintentional threats then he should read the relevant part of the definition as referring to intentional threats.

enemy, intimidating some group who may or may not be the group under direct attack and so on. These features are important but I do not propose to treat such specific political objectives as part of the definition. The more general reference to 'a political act' is here advantageously vague because it does not restrict the political uses to which the terrorist tactic may be turned and it rightly allows for empirical investigation to determine what various groups use terrorism for. It might however be claimed that there is one very general effect of terror tactics that deserves to be written into the definition, namely, the effect of fear. The distinctive point of terrorism as a tactic, it will be said, is to terrorize, to spread fear and so destabilize social relations. This claim contains an insight into the sociology of terrorism but I do not think it should be made a matter of definition. (Here I side with Paskins and Dockrill against Martin Hughes.)¹⁵ My reasons are threefold. In the first place, stress upon this effect tends to preclude any serious concern with the more intrinsic issue of the type of methods used (as it may be) to generate the fear. This tendency is clearly at work in Hughes' treatment of the topic. Secondly the fear effect seems to some degree associated with all uses of political violence, including open warfare where civilian populations are involved though not directly attacked. Thirdly, intimate as the fear effect may be, it does nevertheless seem possible that terrorist attacks should give rise, not to the spread of fear and demoralization, but to defiance and a strengthening of resolve. It would be a defective definition which was forced to treat such attacks as thereby non-terrorist even though they had deliberately encompassed, let us say, the deaths of children. This last point has a further implication for the definition in terms of fear because if we seek to meet the counter-example by referring in the definition to an intention to spread fear rather than to actual production of it then we face the different problem, already mentioned, that we are prejudging an empirical investigation into the specific motives of those who choose to attack non-combatants. I do not, of course, deny that the tactic of deliberate attacks upon non-combatants is commonly perceived as being aimed at the creation of the sort of fear that produces panic and demoralization and, moreover, it can be admitted that the perception is often correct. The tactic is, after all, called 'terrorism'. Yet, for the reasons given, I would prefer to make no

¹⁵ Cf. B. Paskins and M. Dockrill, *op. cit.* 90, and Martin Hughes, 'Terrorism and National Security', *Philosophy* 57 (January 1982), 5. My agreement with Paskins and Dockrill is only partial, however, since they want to restrict the application of the term 'terrorism' to contexts of evasive warfare and so refuse to apply it to full scale wars between states.

C. A. J. Coady

reference to such motivation in the definition. The philosophy of language has made us familiar with situations in which the referent or extension of a term may be fixed by a predicate which does not determine the nature of the reality so indicated and which, if true at all of it, is so contingently. It seems to me that something similar holds of the link between terrorism and the motivation of creating fear. Those readers who agree with me that the attack upon non-combatants is the crucial definitional feature but are more impressed by the fear-creation motive than I am could amend the definition to include a subsidiary reference to the common presence of such motivation. The phrase 'and commonly involving the intention to create or maintain widespread fear' could then be inserted after the phrase 'an organized group.' Such a guarded and secondary reference to the fear effect would not materially affect the course of our discussion. I shall further discuss some of the issues raised by the relations between fear and terrorism at the end of this paper.

(2) As defined, terrorism is not a tactic restricted to revolutionaries or other non-governmental groups. Doubtless many people would be surprised at the idea that governments and authorized governmental instrumentalities do or can use terrorist methods for their political purposes but such surprise is usually the product of naivety or prejudice. Certainly if we see terrorism as a particular kind of employment of political violence (and this seems a central strand in all the varied and often confused uses of the expression) then we should surely be impressed by analogies and identities between methods used rather than dissimilarities between the powers and standings of the agents using them. Otherwise we run the risk of treating the term 'terrorism' the way some people treat the term 'obstinacy', as a state into which only others can lapse; the parallel state in their own case being described as 'strength of purpose'. There is, of course, no need to deny that the use of terror by non-State groups rather than by the State raises special theoretical issues and I shall have something to say about this later.

(3) Following Schreiber I have used the term 'non-combatant' where some may think the term 'innocent' more appropriate. Each term has its advantages and disadvantages; I prefer the expression 'non-combatant' at this point for reasons of convenience in exposition since the term 'innocent' may be even more likely to mislead. In traditional and contemporary discussions of the morality of warfare the category of 'the innocent' usually collapses into that of 'non-combatant' partly in order to avoid being sidetracked into a largely fruitless debate about mental states to which attributions of guilt or innocence are to be attached. But more of this later.

The Morality of Terrorism

(4) I have made no use of the notion of indiscriminate violence which often figures in definitions or discussions of terrorism. I have avoided this because I think that it is confusing. There is a sense in which I agree with the idea that terrorism involves indiscriminate violence, namely, the sense in which it fails to discriminate between combatant and non-combatant targets. This is all that Paskins and Dockrill mean by 'indiscriminate', for instance.¹⁶ On the other hand, many writers use 'indiscriminate' to convey the idea that terrorism is quite irrational in that the terrorist weapon is used in an indiscriminating way, as it were, wildly and pointlessly. This need not be true at all of attacks upon non-combatants or their property and there is usually a good deal of thought and selection going into the terrorist technique employed.

(5) Talk of 'indiscriminate violence' does, however, raise another issue. Some readers who agree with me on the importance of the combatant/non-combatant distinction and its relevance to the definition of terrorism, may none the less prefer to define terrorism more widely as any violation of the *jus in bello*. (I am indebted to Michael Stocker for drawing my attention to this possibility.) In other words, any use of political violence which stands under moral condemnation because of the type of violence used rather than its relation to the political goals of the users would then count as terrorist. I suspect that there is some linguistic warrant for this wider usage but, on the whole, I think we do more justice to the concerns usually articulated by the term 'terrorist' if we operate with the narrower definition I have proposed. If a revolutionary group adopted the immoral but not uncommon military policy of taking no prisoners ('yielding no quarter') or even of killing their prisoners after interrogation, then although the behaviour deserves moral condemnation it does seem to require somewhat different treatment from a direct attack upon the uninvolved. This is so even if the condemnation in both cases goes beyond utilitarian considerations. In any case, employing the wider concept of terrorism will not greatly affect the broad purposes of my discussion.

Let me return now to the idea that terrorism is a means or technique for the pursuit of political ends and should be judged morally in that light. I had begun to explore an analogy between moral judgments about the techniques of violence used by States to wage war and those used by non-State groups, such as revolutionary organizations, in pursuit of their objectives. In this connection I sketched a contrast between the utilitarian and internal approaches to

¹⁶ Ibid. 89.

C. A. J. Coady

such judgments.¹⁷ I want now to discuss certain interesting consequences of this contrast as it applies to the problem of terrorism and in particular I want to draw attention to the way that people tend to apply one outlook (the utilitarian) when discussing State violence (especially that of their own State) and another (the internal) when discussing the violence of non-State actors such as revolutionaries.

In discussions of the morality of warfare it will often be possible to come to the same conclusions about a given action or policy from either a utilitarian or internal perspective. That this is so stems partly from certain theoretical features of utilitarianism which need not concern us now but at a certain concrete level the point is clear enough. Certain civilian massacres, for instance, stand condemned not only because they constitute the deliberate killing of non-combatants but also because they could have been seen at the time to be inefficient means to the purported goal—terms such as ‘pointless’, ‘counter-productive’ and ‘wanton’ are germane to such cases. None the less, the history of warfare plainly shows us cases where the two moral perspectives yield quite different results. The Allied area bombing of German cities in World War II and the US nuclear attacks upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki are just two outstanding examples where the whole enterprise was to slaughter non-combatants and hence was plainly immoral on the internal perspective and yet was ‘justified’ in utilitarian terms. (I put ‘justified’ in quotation marks because, with the benefit of hindsight, it may be doubted whether these justifications were successful in their own terms. Especially in the case of the bombing of the German cities, it seems that the apparently desired effect of weakening German civilian morale and so bringing the war to an earlier end was not achieved. None the less, it is fair to say that some plausibility attached to such calculations at the time.) It is clear then that we have here a profound clash of the highest practical significance between these two approaches to moral judgment. It is a difficult and important task to adjudicate between them, a task which I shall not here attempt. My more modest goal is to point out some consequences of the clash for the discussion of terrorism but before I proceed to do so I should like to make just four comments. First, it

¹⁷ The contrast is the familiar one drawn by such writers as G. E. M. Anscombe, ‘War and Murder’ in *War and Morality*, Richard Wasserstrom (ed.) (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1970); Thomas Nagel ‘War and Massacre’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2 (1972); Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, and Jeffrie G. Murphy, ‘The Killing of the Innocent’, *The Monist* 57 (1973). By calling it ‘familiar’ I do not mean to say or imply that it is uncontentious.

The Morality of Terrorism

would be less than frank not to declare my own adherence to some version of the internal position. Second, the internal position about the morality of war or of political violence seems derived from quite general moral considerations of an anti-utilitarian or non-utilitarian nature which are deeply embedded in the inherited moral structures of what may still be called (though with some embarrassment) Western civilization. Third, however, it should be remarked that different positions are possible about the right way to resolve clashes between the utilitarian and non-utilitarian strands in our moral thinking. It is possible to hold that in the case of war, and every other case for that matter, utilitarian calculations should always yield to non-utilitarian constraints. Some writers have recently urged however that in certain very extreme circumstances the utilitarian calculations should prevail while others again say that in such extremities there can be no rubric for choice. I have views about these differences but shall here merely note them. Fourth, it is worth remarking also that the internal attitude to the morality of political violence is not only embodied in the long tradition of legal, moral and theological thinking that goes by the title of 'just war theory' but has also been embodied, at least to some degree, in the outlooks of professional soldiers with widely different cultural backgrounds. Hence it was that the British strategic bombing of German population centres was condemned at the time as immoral (because it was a direct attack upon non-combatants) not only by such peace activists as Vera Brittain but by senior British officers.¹⁸

I have stressed the contrast between the utilitarian and internal approaches to the morality of violence because it seems to me that many condemnations of terrorism are subject to the charge of inconsistency, if not hypocrisy, because they insist on applying one kind of morality to the State's use of violence in war (either international or civil or anti-insurgency) and another kind altogether to the use of violence by the non-State agent (e.g. the revolutionary). For one's own State a utilitarian standard is adopted which morally legitimates the intentional killing of non-combatants so that such acts of State terrorism¹⁹ as the bombing of Dresden are deemed to be

¹⁸ In Michael Walzer's words: 'At the height of the blitz many British officers still felt strongly that their own air attacks should be aimed only at military targets and that positive efforts should be made to minimize civilian casualties. They did not want to imitate Hitler, but to differentiate themselves from him.' *Just and Unjust Wars*, 257.

¹⁹ It is interesting that Neville Chamberlain in 1940 denounced such 'blackguardly' bombing proposals as 'mere terrorism'. See J. F. C. Fuller, *The Conduct of War, 1789–1961* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972), 280.

C. A. J. Coady

morally sanctioned by the good ends they supposedly serve. The same people, however, make the move to higher ground when considering the activities of the rebel or the revolutionary and judge his killing of non-combatants by the internal standard. In the case of the revolutionary, the thought is that even if his cause is just and his revolution legitimate, his methods are morally wrong because of what they are or involve. In the case of the State or its instrumentalities this thought is quietly abandoned and replaced by those utilitarian considerations which are denied to the revolutionaries.

Consistency may be achieved in either of two ways: by adopting the utilitarian response to both kinds of case or the internal response to both kinds of case. I would myself urge the second type of consistency and object to the technique of terrorism as immoral wherever and whenever it is used or proposed.²⁰ Does this amount to the moral rejection of both war and armed revolution? This is a serious issue precisely because both modern war and modern revolution have become so committed to tactics and strategies which are terrorist. In war, the bombing of civilian populations is the most striking example but there are other techniques such as the defoliation of forests, the destruction of crops, the destruction of villages, the slaughter of villagers and forced resettlement of populations which either are terrorist or involve terrorism. In revolutionary warfare the recourse to such weapons as letter bombs, bombs in public places, hijacking of civilian transportation and threats to kill passengers, random killings or maimings and so on are familiar. If such procedures are really intrinsic and inevitable then wars and revolutions stand under moral condemnation; this is perhaps the real challenge of modern pacifism. I am not myself persuaded (quite or yet) of the inevitability so let us now suppose that wars and revolutions can be waged without recourse (or with only marginal, as it were, accidental recourse) to terrorism.

This supposition itself presupposes that we can in both contexts make a distinction between combatants and non-combatants. Some writers who concede moral significance to the distinction claim none the less that in modern industrialized states it can no longer be drawn. These writers argue that, in modern conditions, warfare is

²⁰ It seems possible to espouse a less absolute form of internalism in which some actions can be seen as wrong from an internalist perspective but have, regrettably, to be done, at least partly because of the awful consequences of not doing them. Bernard Williams seems to hold such a view (see 'A Critique of Utilitarianism', in *Utilitarianism: For and Against* by J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams (Cambridge University Press, 1973), Ch. 5, and especially p. 117) and Michael Walzer (op. cit.) has condoned some of the terrorist bombing of World War II in this way.

The Morality of Terrorism

not just a matter of armies against armies but of nations against nations and so unified economically and spiritually are these entities that there is no real difference of role or function between any one citizen and another; hence from the moral point of view there is no discernible difference between shooting a soldier who is shooting at you and gunning down a defenceless child who is a member of the same nation as the soldier. The conclusion is perhaps sufficiently absurd or obscene to discredit the argument and the argument has been effectively criticized in any case by a number of recent writers.²¹ I cannot fully expound their critiques here but let me just stress the basic insight behind the prohibition on killing or attacking non-combatants. This is that we can only be justified in killing someone (leaving aside the difficult case of capital punishment) if they are actually engaged in prosecuting an attack upon us or others or engaged in some similar project involving the infliction of gross injustice. They then become legitimate targets for our essentially defensive violence. Now there will be those not actually firing a gun who will still be implicated in a chain of agency under the description 'prosecuting the attack' or some very similar description at whom it will be right to direct violence, e.g. a man bringing bullets to the gunman. Hence, the target area can be reasonably enlarged beyond the man with the gun but it is just absurd to enlarge it to include whole nations or even very considerable sections of them. This enlargement cannot be made to work simply by showing that there are various sustaining causal connections between certain groups and those who are the obvious combatants. Soldiers could not fight without food but this does not make combatants of the farmers who supply them with food as part of the business of sustaining their fellow countrymen. The farmer's activities are essentially directed towards nourishing the soldier *qua* man not *qua* soldier and he is not a combatant even if in his heart he supports the war (just as the soldier *is* a combatant even if he is a conscript who hates what he is doing). Similarly for the medics who try to heal and repair the men who are soldiers and for the mothers without whose contribution those men who are soldiers would not have been born. More generally in any nation at war there will be countless numbers of citizens who are not engaged in prosecuting the harmful activities which constitute the just grievance which entitles another country to take up arms. Most of the population of children, women and the aged fall into this category, as do most of the artisans and professional people and workers who are not directly involved in such war-related industries as the production of armaments. Of course, there

²¹ See especially John C. Ford, SJ, 'The Morality of Obliteration Bombing', collected in Wasserstrom, *op. cit.*, and the articles of Anscombe and Murphy previously cited.

C. A. J. Coady

may be soldiers who are pacifist conscripts determined not to shoot when the battle begins just as there may be elderly civilian ladies who are dedicated political agents taking some very active part in the war campaign but here, as elsewhere in the discussion of public morality, the idea of reasonable expectation is important and, prior to specific information to the contrary, it is reasonable to view soldiers with guns as engaged in prosecuting the attack and elderly civilian ladies as not. Much more could be said about this and I am not denying that there are grey areas but most of it has already been well said by others so I shall leave the defence of the viability of the distinction here for I want to pass on to another aspect of it.

One of the ironies of the attempt by supporters of State violence to undermine the combatant/non-combatant distinction is that some supporters of revolutionary violence have learned from them and equally speciously argue that in revolutionary struggle it is impossible to distinguish combatants and non-combatants amongst the 'enemy'. Here the supposedly unified enemy is often a class rather than a nation but in either case the notion of 'collective guilt' or 'collective combatant status' is very dubious, although those who say that the distinction is useless in war should be more sympathetic to the revolutionaries' theoretical position than they are. None the less there are interesting and rather tricky questions raised by transferring the notions of combatant and non-combatant from the context of formal international war to the area of conflict within the State. Before looking more fully at this however there is one point that should be briefly addressed.

It may be urged against much of what I have said that it assumes, especially in its parallels between war and revolution, that a revolution can be morally justified. It is this assumption that is highly debatable for it may be said that citizens can never be morally justified in bringing violence to bear against their rulers. In reply I would urge that *if* it is possible for some wars to be morally justifiable then it is hard to resist the extension of the justificatory patterns to the case of revolution. Certainly some regimes seem to have committed such wrongs against their own populations or against sub-groups within those populations as to create at least a *prima facie* case for violent redress. Nazi Germany and Uganda, under Amin, seem to present such cases; moreover, armed underground resistance to Nazi occupation forces in countries like France whose leaders signed a formal surrender treaty seem to bring us close to the revolutionary pattern and this was generally approved of by many people who are opposed to revolutionary violence in other contexts. It may be said that a moral case for revolution can exist against a dictatorship but never against a democracy. As a convinced democrat, I am sensitive to the force of this rejoinder but

The Morality of Terrorism

find its force blunted by two considerations. The first is that many basically non-democratic political societies have democratic trappings. South Africa, for instance, is frequently classed as a democracy because it has democratic forms for a section of its population but the restricted franchise surely disqualifies it from the protection of any argument against revolution based upon politically relevant properties of democracies. The second is that, ever since Tocqueville, political theorists have been aware of the problems posed by majority tyranny over minorities and by the deep and serious injustices that democratic legal machinery can countenance—the situation in Northern Ireland is not irrelevant here. In any event most revolutionary activity today goes on in countries, like many of those in South America, which make small pretence of being democratic.

The general theory of the just revolution needs more development but I want to press the issue about how such revolutions should be conducted and in particular who are the combatants and non-combatants. Let me begin with the point that revolutionaries themselves do not always have trouble distinguishing broadly between combatants and non-combatants though, of course, there are grey areas. To take an example used by Michael Walzer, the play by Albert Camus, entitled *The Just Assassins*, is based upon an actual episode in Russia early this century in which a group of revolutionaries decided to assassinate a Tsarist official, the Grand Duke Sergei, a man personally involved in the suppression of radical activity. The man chosen to do the killing hid a bomb under his coat and approached the victim's carriage but when he got close he realized that the Grand Duke had two small children on his lap so he abandoned the attempt and Camus has one of his comrades say, in accepting the decision, 'Even in destruction, there's a right way and a wrong way—and there are limits'.²²

Similarly, if one reads Guevara's *Bolivian Diary*, one is struck by the care with which targets are discriminated even to the point where captured Government soldiers and agents are given a political lecture and then released (the guerrillas not having the facilities to imprison captives).²³ Again in Régis Debray's *Revolution in the Revolution?* the only reference to terrorism is incidental and mostly critical; in so far as it is approved of, it is doubtful whether all that he calls terrorism would qualify on my definition. For instance he approves of the role of city terrorism in that 'it immobilizes thousands of

²² Walzer, *op. cit.* 199.

²³ Che Guevara, *Bolivian Diary*, trans. Carlos P. Hansen and Andrew Sinclair (London: Jonathan Cape/Lorrimer, 1968). For a few such incidents see pp. 67, 77 and 92.

C. A. J. Coady

enemy soldiers, it ties up most of the repressive mechanism in unrewarding tasks of protection: factories, bridges, electric generators, public buildings, highways, oil pipe-lines—these can keep busy as much as three-quarters of the army'.²⁴ Certainly, he does not seem to have in mind any sort of killing but rather sabotage of property which may or may not be non-combatant property and may or may not involve the risk of civilian deaths. The Cypriot revolutionary, General George Grivas, showed his sensitivity to the distinction in his memoirs when he wrote of the EOKA campaign, 'We did not strike, like the bomber, at random. We shot only British servicemen who would have killed us if they could have fired first, and civilians who were traitors or intelligence agents'.²⁵ Whether Grivas truly described EOKA practice is less important for our discussion than his acknowledgement of the possibility and desirability of directing revolutionary violence at morally legitimate targets.

In a just revolution then who are the combatants from a revolutionary's point of view? To begin with there are those who directly employ violence to perpetrate the injustices against which the revolution is aimed: the army or elements of it, the police or elements of it,²⁶ the secret police, foreigners directly involved in assisting the governmental forces in prosecuting the injustices, informers, and the politicians who are directing the 'oppression' complained of. This last category seems to extend the provisions of what Walzer calls 'the war convention' but not, I think, dramatically. If the politicians can be shown to be in a chain of agency directing the tyrannical behaviour which justifies the revolution then they seem to be legitimate targets. Let us suppose the IRA's revolutionary activity in Northern Ireland to be justified. Its use of bombs on railways and in pubs would clearly be illegitimate and a case of terrorism since such attacks necessarily fail to discriminate between combatants and non-combatants. Similarly with the killing of Mountbatten and the others on his boat since not only were they innocent but so surely was Mountbatten. A visiting scholar in criminology recently at Melbourne University tried to include Mountbatten as a legitimate target by pointing out the amount of 'Irish land' that he owned but this seems to be a clear case in which

²⁴ Debray, *op. cit.* 75.

²⁵ Quoted in Robert Taber, *The War of the Flea* (London: Paladin, 1972), 106.

²⁶ The importance of discrimination here is illustrated by the example of the Jewish revolutionaries who assassinated Lord Moyne in Cairo in 1944 but refused to kill an Egyptian policeman whom they did not regard as an agent of British imperialism in Palestine even though this refusal led to their capture. See Walzer, *op. cit.* 199.

The Morality of Terrorism

an insufficient connection with a chain of agency has been established. By contrast, there is at least the beginning of a case for the assassination of the Conservative spokesman on Northern Ireland, Airey Neave—not, I think, sufficient but at least addressed to considerations which have some relevance. A more clear-cut case is provided by the kidnap–killing of the American Public Safety Adviser, Dan Mitrione, in Uruguay in 1970. Mitrione had been sent to Uruguay to assist in the suppression of the Tupamaros insurgency. There is considerable evidence that he had an important role in the torture campaign waged against Uruguay's political prisoners. It would be absurd to regard his position as that of an uninvolved diplomat though this was how he was initially portrayed in the Western media at the time of his death.²⁷

Distinctions of this kind between targets of revolutionary violence are not only important for the revolutionaries from the point of view of how they should behave but also for observers concerned with describing their behaviour. The fact is of course that most observers, and especially the Press, describe any revolutionary as a terrorist and virtually any revolutionary use of violence as terrorism, including even the killing of soldiers. At least this is so throughout most of the Western media with respect to revolutionary violence directed against established governments in what is often called 'the Free World'. The revolutionaries in Afghanistan, on the other hand, are seldom if ever referred to as terrorist in the Western Press though I doubt that their tactics display more concern for moral scruple than those employed in Belfast or El Salvador. The assumption underlying this linguistic habit is of course that revolutions against us and our allies are unjustified whereas revolutions against our ideological enemies are invariably justified. The same assumption, with suitably adjusted referents for the indexical elements, guides the reporting of the Soviet bloc Press.

Whatever the naivety or cynicism of this assumption it does raise interesting theoretical issues since if we assume that some given revolutionary campaign is unjustified then we would seem to have some reason to make light of any distinction between the targets selected by the rebels. After all if a revolution is unjustified then any killing done in its name is unjustified whether of combatants or non-combatants. There is a point of connection here with just war theory since it would seem that we can make a precisely similar point about an unjustified war. Let us revert to the just war terminology mentioned earlier and refer to those considerations which morally

²⁷ For a sober assessment of allegations about Mitrione's role see A. J. Langguth, *Hidden Terrors* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), especially pp. 250–254.

justify the resort to arms in the first place as the *jus ad bellum* and those considerations which place moral constraints upon how the war is waged as the *jus in bello*. Terrorism is morally condemned under the *jus in bello* and it is sometimes held that the *jus in bello* and *jus ad bellum* are independent. Michael Walzer has, for instance, claimed that the 'two sorts of judgments are logically independent. It is perfectly possible for a just war to be fought unjustly and for an unjust war to be fought in strict accordance with the rules.'²⁸ I have argued against the first kind of independence elsewhere²⁹ and shall now merely reaffirm that it is imperilled by the thought that what the *jus ad bellum* justifies is a certain course of action *the nature of which* is partially specified by the means which are proposed or involved and which in turn fall under the judgment of the *jus in bello*. I want rather to focus here on the second kind of independence, the idea that an unjustified war can be fought in accordance with the moral rules of *jus in bello*. There is a sense in which this is clearly possible both for a war or for a revolution but there is also a sense in which, as I have already said, *all* the killing done by the warriors whose cause is unjust is itself unjustified so that the thought can easily arise that the victims in uniform are as much sinned against as any civilians killed in defiance of the *jus in bello* and the war conventions associated with it.

Is this thought correct? Almost but not quite. There is substantial truth in it but it tends to obscure something important, namely, that whatever the objective facts about a given State's justification in going to war its soldiery are likely to believe that they have good moral reason for trying to wound or kill enemy soldiers whereas, even subjectively, they will not be in the same position *vis-à-vis* the enemy's civilian population. This consideration has quite wide scope for it ranges from matters to do with trust in one's national leaders to quite specific issues to do with shooting back when you are shot at. All of these involve important questions of responsibility with which I cannot now deal but, taken in conjunction with the fact that it may often be a very difficult matter to determine which, if either, side in a war is justified in fighting, they make it intelligible that in the case of warfare, at least, we should continue to insist upon some moral differentiation between killing combatants and non-combatants even by those who are waging an unjust war. Such an insistence should not however be at the expense of the genuine insight contained in the idea that the killing of combatants in an unjust war is morally

²⁸ Walzer, *op. cit.* 21.

²⁹ C. A. J. Coady, 'The Leaders and the Led', *Inquiry* 23 (September 1980), 286.

The Morality of Terrorism

problematic. Of course, for our purposes, we have had to simplify a great deal and ignore many interesting complexities and difficulties posed by actual war situations where it may be that a war is unjustified on both sides or may appear to be justified on both or may begin as unjust and become just and so on.

What is the lesson of this digression for our discussion of terrorism and revolutionary violence? Surely this, that we should continue to make a distinction between two broad types of revolutionary violence, that which is directed at what would be legitimate targets if the revolution were justified and that which is directed at non-combatants. We should reserve the term 'terrorism' only for the latter and it can be unequivocally condemned. Violence of the former kind stands or falls morally by the judgment of the overall legitimacy of the revolutionary activity. Does this open the way to condoning far too many acts of political violence which understandably cause such widespread shock and distress? It all depends. If you think that violent revolutionary struggle is readily justifiable, an easy moral option, then you should be prepared for the consequences and have a realistic appreciation of what you are supporting. If, on the other hand, you think that violent revolution is sometimes, but only seldom, justifiable then the killings you condone will be far more restricted. (You can vehemently condemn the killing of Aldo Moro without regarding it as terrorist.) My own view is that violent revolution, like war, is only rarely justifiable though one's sympathies may often be more with the rebels because of their genuine and unlikely-to-be-remedied grievances.

Two final clarificatory points. My discussion of terrorism turns upon viewing it as a tactic but it may be urged that the means/end model upon which I rely is not always appropriate to the realities. Sometimes revolutionary terrorism and, for that matter, governmental terrorism, is employed not to achieve some definite end nor as an aberrational end-in-itself but as a piece of powerful symbolism, an act of self-assertion. Paskins and Dockrill in their book seem to take this view of both war and revolutionary violence:

It is . . . often difficult to answer the question whether war is useful or not. To look at the Allied bombing campaign as though it were *a priori* obvious that it was engaged in as means thought to be useful in the pursuit of some well-defined goal is, we argued, a very dubious proceeding. Many other explanations of the campaign are possible. The same is true of terrorism. One is apt to think of the terrorist as, however sympathetic, a ruthless figure prepared to use indiscriminate violence in pursuit of a well-defined goal. But there appears to us to be good theoretical reason

to doubt all such stereotypes. Often, states wage war because they believe that they have no alternative; similarly with the terrorist. . . . To wage war because one thinks one has no alternative, or because one believes that war is the only way to show that one is in earnest is not necessarily to do something which one assumes is understandable, or justifiable, as means to some end.³⁰

Although I think that some of this is confused there is no doubt that the passage identifies a real motivation. The first thing to note about it however is that, although it provides us with a salutary warning against too crude a construal of the goals terrorism may serve, it does not invalidate the means/end model. Indeed, the talk of 'having no alternative' needs to be construed in terms of certain goals and purposes in order to have sense made of it since there are usually other 'alternatives' which are however inconsistent with certain values or ends which it is believed that war or terrorism will promote or embody. Finland's war against the overwhelming odds of the Soviet Union had alternatives but none of them promoted or exhibited the values the Finns saw themselves emphatically defending by their hopeless war. If such ends are thought to be too internal or constitutive for the usual means/end model then I do not need to quarrel with the objector. The Finns were not engaging in war for its own sake but to show their earnestness about their independence (on one possible account of their motives). Similarly with the parallel case of revolutionary violence, especially terrorism. We can understand how a community may become so downtrodden and threatened in their identity and conditions of life as to believe that the only really emphatic and appropriate way of asserting what dignity they possess is to commit an act of terrorism. I do not think that in its pure form this is the typical case but it is a possible case, and ingredients related to it may figure in the more common cases.

Finally, let me return, as promised, to the connection between terrorism and fear. Earlier, I rejected the suggestion that terrorism should be defined wholly or partly in terms of the creation or spread of fear but there is no doubt that *one* of the reasons why people are so disturbed by terrorist activities is that they find such activities deeply undermining of social realities with which their lives are enmeshed and which provide a background of normalcy against which they can go about their ordinary living. (No doubt this is less important when their 'ordinary' lives are already dominated by fear and oppression.) From the perspective of this paper there is no reason to deny any of this. Indeed my account of terrorism goes far towards explaining why this should be so since the method of terror

³⁰ Paskins and Dockrill, *op. cit.* 94.

The Morality of Terrorism

is to attack those who have reason to think of themselves as uninvolved. It is also true, however, that any form of covert warfare, no matter how discriminating, will lead to the breaking down of normalcy conditions though not so dramatically as terrorism. Any form of low-intensity warfare (to use the jargon) will make familiar figures such as policemen, soldiers and politicians into targets; it will lead to the killing of apparently innocent people who are, in reality, informers, secret police or foreign political advisers; it will result in some mistaken or accidental killing or injuring of genuine non-combatants and itself create an atmosphere of suspicion. Here we have another potent source of the confusion between terrorism and other forms of revolutionary violence but confusion it remains, however understandable, for the terrorist seeks to gain his ends by deliberately attacking those who are not morally legitimate targets.

This collapse of the categories of clandestine warfare and terrorism has been given renewed currency by Martin Hughes' recent paper in *Philosophy*. Hughes simply defines terrorism as 'a war in which a secret army spreads fear' and he claims that secret armies 'must threaten everybody but their active supporters—and surely both lurking enemies and ambiguous, suspicious friends are quite frightening'.³¹ Hughes seems to think that clandestine warfare not only commonly creates the sort of fear discussed above but inevitably involves a policy of attacks upon non-combatants and so there is no need for a distinct definition of terrorism in terms of such a policy. In this he is surely mistaken. Guerrilla wars which make little or no use of terrorist tactics are not only possible but seem to have occurred though, notoriously, the facts are often hard to establish, partly because the reports and commentaries embody the sorts of confusions I am trying to dispel. One such 'clean' revolution appears to have been Castro's insurrection against Batista, another (perhaps more contentious) was the EOKA campaign against the British in Cyprus. Hughes argues that it is too much to ask of resisters and revolutionaries that they attack only military forces because 'great armies' are impregnable to such attacks. But, in the first place, this greatly exaggerates the immunity of regular forces from attack by irregular resistance groups, as both Cuba and Ireland demonstrate, and, secondly, it ignores the fact that orthodox military victory is not the usual aim of guerrilla attacks upon the enemy's armed forces since such attacks are intended primarily to produce political effects. In Vietnam, the Americans won the military victory in the Tet offensive but it none the less was a political victory for the Vietcong and decided the destiny of Vietnam. Moreover, Hughes' argument at

³¹ Hughes, *op. cit.* 5.

C. A. J. Coady

this point skates over the fact that the legitimate targets for a just revolution can go beyond men in uniform with guns.

Hughes does offer some concrete evidence for his view that covert wars must treat everyone but active supporters as the enemy and it consists in the 'famous fate' of Mrs Lindsay. This, he says, 'illustrates powerfully how necessary it is for revolutionaries to sap the courage of their civilian opponents. It seems hard to imagine how they could use any but very severe threats for this purpose.'³² Curiously, Hughes merely cites Mrs Lindsay's case and speaks of her 'convictions and courage' without giving any details.

The facts are that she was an elderly woman who supplied information to the British forces in January 1921, which resulted in their surprising an ambush and killing two IRA men and capturing ten others, five of whom were later executed. She was subsequently kidnapped and shot by the IRA who gave as their reason 'the stern necessity to protect our forces'. These details (provided by Townshend on whom Hughes relies³³) show that Mrs Lindsay's fate was not that of a mere 'civilian opponent' in the sense of one who disagreed with the IRA's aims and programme but rather that of an informer, one who could plausibly be viewed as taking an active part in the war. The IRA may well have been wrong to kill her, they may have even been wrong to view her as an informer for she may have acted to save British lives without realizing that she was condemning Irishmen but, whatever we decide about that, her fate does not illustrate the thesis that secret warfare must make targets of everyone but active supporters, that low-intensity warfare must be, in my sense, terrorist. Indeed, Townshend is able to report, shortly before discussing Mrs Lindsay's death, that the IRA 'did not show symptoms of the desperate terrorism which often marks guerrilla movements in decline. It continued to wage urban and rural war on roughly the same lines without resorting to indiscriminate attacks.'³⁴ Townshend's source, incidentally, for the story of Mrs Lindsay is H. C. Wylly's *History of the Manchester Regiment*. This makes very interesting reading. Wylly describes Mrs Lindsay as 'a brave loyalist woman' who gave 'a great example of courage and devotion to the Empire'.³⁵ After her disappearance, Lloyd George, during negotiations with de Valera, caused inquiries to be made amongst the rebels as to her fate. According to the rebel Parliament's Minister of

³² Ibid. 18.

³³ Charles Townshend, *The British Campaign in Ireland 1919–1921* (Oxford University Press, 1975), 153.

³⁴ Ibid. 152.

³⁵ H. C. Wylly, *History of the Manchester Regiment*, II (London: Forster Groom, 1925), 210.

The Morality of Terrorism

Defence she had been executed only after the British commander, General Strickland, ignored a letter from her pointing out that she would be killed if the British went ahead with the execution of five of the captured Irishmen. Five days after they were killed so was she. Wylly makes no mention of the fate of her butler–chauffeur, Joseph Clarke, who was kidnapped with her but the absence of comment strongly implies that his captors regarded Clarke as basically a non-combatant and released him.

I have throughout had to adopt many simplifications and approximations. One such is the implication that all revolutionary war is of a piece in style, tactic and strategy; another is that all sub-State political violence of an organized kind is *revolutionary* where plainly it is not; another that ‘secret war’ makes unambiguous sense; another that revolutionary war is always conducted within the national confines of the State which is the principal target but, of course, there is trans-national revolutionary activity and trans-national terrorism. Finally there is clearly room for dispute about the criteria for distinguishing combatant and non-combatant both in war and, even more awkwardly, in revolutionary contexts. I am not particularly enamoured of the words ‘combatant’ and ‘non-combatant’; in some ways, it might be clearer to speak of legitimate and non-legitimate targets but whichever usage appeals there are still problems of detail and principle in spelling out the notion of a chain of agency, which seems to be central to the distinction. This is an important and difficult task which I must leave to another occasion. In the present context, I will be happy enough if it can be agreed that the distinction exists and has the role I attribute to it and that clear cases can be described on either side of the divide.

University of Melbourne