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The 'T' Word

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Conor Gearty in his effusive *Irish Times* review of Richard English's *Terrorism: How to Respond*, describes the latter as "a benign lifeguard, wading through a sea of teeming, turbulent mediocrity to rescue their drowning minds with the power of his intellect." 'They' are academics specialising in terrorism and the "sea of teeming, turbulent mediocrity" the academic literature on terrorism. Gearty lauds English's text as variously "outstanding," "beautifully written," "thoroughly on top of its subject," a "prodigious achievement." And it *is* a good book, though not one without flaws, and owing a huge debt to the very 'mediocre' literature(s) that Gearty dismisses.

An Historian by training, Richard English is Professor of Politics and Head of the School of Politics, International Studies, and Philosophy at Queens University Belfast where he teaches Irish history and politics. He is the author of, amongst other titles, *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland* (2006) and *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (2003). Indeed, English's solid grasp of Irish Republicanism is used to great effect in the present work, one of the most noteworthy aspects of which is his call, for academic and policymakers both, to learn from the past in order to respond more effectively to future terrorism. He then puts his own advice into action by devoting a large portion of his analysis to the lessons to be learned from the specific British-Irish experience of terrorism and responses to it and how these may be compared and contrasted to both historical cases of terrorism and the contemporary jihadi threat.

English's text is short, running to just 143 pages of analysis—with a further 21 pages of endnotes and 9 pages of bibliography—and divided into just four chapters. Each chapter is concerned with a single central question, as follows: What is terrorism? Why do people resort to terror? What can we learn from terrorism past? How should we respond? The first chapter is therefore concerned with the problem of definition(s), the second with the causes of terrorism, chapter three with the lessons of history, and the final chapter with proper counter-terrorist responses.

Chapter one begins with an arresting vignette regarding Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness playing with Tony Blair's children in the garden of 10 Downing Street, which English uses to underline terrorism's "many *problems* of definition" (p.2, italics in original). He lays out what he views as the eight major definitional problems in a structured fashion, discussing, in turn, the difficulty that there exist so many competing definitions of terrorism; the differences between 'terror' and 'terrorism'; the complicated relationship between states and terrorism and thence defining terrorism through reference to the identity of its perpetrator; the problem of defining terrorism based upon the identity of targets; the problem of defining terrorism by the kinds of attacks carried out or methods used; the problem that many terrorism campaigns are carried out by groups that also engage in other types of violent activity (e.g. guerrilla warfare, insurgency) and therefore which type of violence to prioritise in terms of group definition; the problem of change over time (e.g. the debates over

‘new’ terrorism, nuclear terrorism, etc.); and, finally, the fact that the term ‘terrorism’ is not a neutral, technical term, but a pejorative.

Given the above, English then asks if we should simply abandon “the ‘T’ word” (p.21). The short answer is ‘no,’ but what then are we to do given the problems raised? I appreciated the suggestion to employ the Wittgensteinian notion of ‘family resemblances,’ which would allow for understanding the similarities *and* differences amongst terrorisms; English himself dismisses this approach as “unnecessarily elusive,” however (p.22). Instead he draws our attention to the analysis of terrorism as a sub-species of war—‘family resemblance,’ anyone?—for which he makes a good case. He follows this up with his own definition of terrorism as follows:

“terrorism involves heterogeneous violence used or threatened with a political aim; it can involve a variety of acts, of targets, and of actors; it possesses an important psychological dimension, producing terror or fear among a directly threatened group and also a wider implied audience in the hope of maximizing political communication and achievement; it embodies the exerting and implementing of power, and the attempted redressing of power relations; it represents a subspecies of warfare, and as such it can form part of a wider campaign of violent and non-violent attempts at political leverage” (p.24).

One interesting aspect of the latter is that it underlines the communicative aspects of terrorism, which English doesn’t really address in his analysis of definitions. In fact, if I were to point to one significant omission from the slate of definitions of terrorism provided in this chapter, I would be inclined to point to Schmid and Jongman’s classic scholarly definition (1988), which also emphasises terrorism as a form of communication, but which is not mentioned in this text.

Chapter two deals with the causes of terrorism. It’s entitled ‘Why do people resort to terror?’ which is puzzling when one considers the authors assertion in the previous chapter “that the literal sense of the word ‘terrorism’ misleadingly suggests a distinctively central role for ‘terror’ itself” (p.7). Nevertheless, the chapter provides a good short introduction to this vast area, with English weighing the opportunities and potential difficulties of five approaches or types of explanation: psychological explanations; a civilisational approach (*à la* Huntington); the explanation from religion; the strategic viewpoint; and—the author’s preferred approach—the explanation from politics, within which is emphasised the explanation from nationalism. The importance of ethnicity and of broad social explanations as components of the explanation from politics are also mentioned here, but are not unfortunately discussed.

A comment here regarding the discussion of suicide terrorism in the section on explanations from religion: the author, in an aside, remarks “the radically religious do seem more likely than others to engage in suicide attacks, and that such attacks are more likely to target members of other religions than to target co-religionists” (p.36). Robert Pape’s data shows that between 1980 – 2001, more religiously-inspired than secular groups engaged in suicide terrorism (2003, 15 – 18) and, given the rise in jihadi suicide terrorism post-9/11 and the recent demise of the Tamil Tigers (LTTE), this trend is likely upward. The second observation strikes me as factually inaccurate however; in fact, precisely because of the upswing in suicide terrorist attacks by

jihadists, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also elsewhere, many of which feature heavy Muslim casualties. The Jordanian hotel bombings in November 2005 killed 56 people and wounded a further 96, the majority of whom were Muslims, for example.

Chapter three is the longest of the book's four chapters. It is divided into two parts, with the same questions—Why do significant terrorist campaigns begin? How are terrorist campaigns sustained? Why does terrorism end?—addressed in each. The questions are explored in the context of, first, the specific case of the Provisional IRA and followed-up by reflecting on the extent to which lessons learned from the Irish case may be applied to terrorism more generally. It's in this chapter that English's familiarity with the IRA really finds an outlet. The chapter includes an illuminating (indirect) comparison between the IRA and al-Qaeda in which the latter's actions are seen to be explainable in similar terms to those of the former. I'm not entirely convinced by this argument, but I certainly think that this chapter can be fruitfully read in conjunction with the direct comparison between the IRA and al-Qaeda undertaken by Peter Neumann in his *Old and New Terrorism* (2009, Ch. 2), in which Neumann comes to the conclusion that the IRA were a classic 'old' terrorist outfit and al-Qaeda and company are emphatically 'new.' While not dismissing English's argument(s) out of hand, one aspect of what he has to say struck me particularly in this regard: "vital effort must be put internationally into persuading, enticing, or manipulating terrorist leaderships towards a recognition that post-terrorism will prove more fruitful for them than terrorism" (p.127). What's to be done though if 'new' terrorism is characterised not by the existence of terrorist 'groups' as commonly understood, but loose networks of individuals acting out of a commitment to 'al-Qaedaism' rather than al-Qaeda? In other words, what if there is no leadership to talk to or, put another way, what if there now exist an unknown number of *petit* leaders with whom one might talk, but whom can't be identified? There are no satisfactory answers to these questions available in this text.

The book's final chapter is concerned with practical responses for the future that draw on lessons learned from terrorism past. English puts forward seven key pieces of advice here: we must learn to live with terrorism; where possible, its underlying root problems and causes should be addressed; the over militarization of response should be avoided; intelligence is the most vital element in successful counter-terrorism and should be invested in and improved; orthodox legal frameworks should be adhered to, as should the democratically established rule of law; security-related, financial, and technological preventative measures should be more highly coordinated; and strong credibility should be maintained in counter-terrorist public argument. This, though not new, is sound advice. In fact, in the final analysis, this could be said of the whole book: it says little that has not been said before, but collects the research and writing of many persons, disciplines, and decades, weighs it up in a clear and accessible way, with remarkable brevity and, in doing so, makes a good case for contextualised, historically-informed analysis of contemporary terrorist threats. It is thus recommended.

References

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