The Geometry of Terrorism*

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Terrorism in its purest form is self-help by organized civilians who covertly inflict mass violence on other civilians. Pure sociology explains terrorism with its social geometry—its multidimensional location and direction in social space. Here I build on the work of Senechal de la Roche (1996) and propose the following geometrical model: Pure terrorism arises intercollectively and upwardly across long distances in multidimensional space. Yet because social distance historically corresponded to physical distance, terrorism often lacked the physical geometry necessary for its occurrence: physical closeness to civilians socially distant enough to attract terrorism. New technology has made physical distance increasingly irrelevant, however, and terrorism has proliferated. But technology also shrinks the social universe and sows the seeds of terrorism's destruction.

A bomb explodes on an airplane or a street filled with shoppers. Several individuals enter a church or restaurant and spray the room with bullets, indiscriminately killing men, women, and children. These are typical examples of terrorism, a phenomenon that proliferated in various parts of the world during the 20th and early 21st centuries. Terrorists have launched attacks in the name of diverse groups, including Irish Catholics against Protestants of British ancestry in Northern Ireland; Tamil Hindus against Sinhalese Buddhists in Sri Lanka; Arab and Berber Muslims against French Catholics and others of European ancestry in Algeria; and Arab Muslims against Jews in Israel. In turn, terrorism attracts an aggressive mode of social control (known as counterterrorism) that blends elements of warfare with those of criminal justice.

In the following pages I outline a theory of terrorism and its social control. The theory is pure sociology, a radically sociological strategy that first appears in my earlier work on law and other forms of social control (e.g., Black 1976, 1998). I begin with an overview of pure sociology and its applicability to violence.

THE PURE SOCIOLOGY OF VIOLENCE

Pure sociology explains human behavior with its social geometry—its multidimensional location and direction in social space (see, e.g., Black 1995, 2000a, 2000b, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c). It ignores the contents of the human mind, such as thoughts

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and feelings, and is entirely free of psychology. It also ignores human goals or ends, whether of persons or groups, and is therefore entirely free of teleology (see Black 1995:848–50, 861–64). It even ignores the human in human behavior and instead addresses the behavior of social life in the strictest sense, such as the behavior of law, science, art, or supernatural beings. It explains these phenomena neither with the characteristics of individuals nor those of collectivities but rather with their social geometry, such as the social distances they span, their social elevation, and their direction from one social location to another.

Social space has various dimensions—horizontal (such as degrees of intimacy and integration); vertical (inequality); corporate (involvement of groups); cultural (such as language and religion); and normative (social control). The multidimensional location and direction of social life predicts and explains its behavior. Conflicts with more distant adversaries (such as strangers) attract more law and punishment (Black 1976:40–48), for example, and ideas with more distant subjects (such as nonhumans) are more scientific and successful (Black 2000a:349–61).[1] The social geometry of conflicts thus explains litigiousness and punitiveness, and the social geometry of ideas explains their scienticity and success. Now consider violence.

Violence is the use of force, and most violence is social control: It defines and responds to deviant behavior. Much is self-help—the handling of a grievance with aggression, such as the beating of a child who misbehaves, the killing of a spouse who is unfaithful, or the rioting of prisoners against their guards (see Black 1983, 1990:74–79). Violent self-help includes everything from pushing or slapping an individual to bombing a city or exterminating an ethnic group (see generally Black 2002d).

Such violence partly resembles law. For example, both are forms of justice; their distribution is highly precise; and they sometimes obey similar geometrical principles. Just as distant conflicts attract more law and punishment than close conflicts, for instance, so they attract more violence. Consider the use of weapons: Hold constant the conflict (such as an insult or theft), and the lethality of weapons is a direct function of social distance, both relational and cultural (Black 2002d:4–10). Other dimensions of social geometry are relevant to the occurrence and nature of violence as well, such as whether a grievance is downward (against an inferior); upward (against a superior); lateral (against an equal); collective (by or against a group); outward (against a marginal); or inward (against someone more integrated).

Violence might appear to be an unpredictable outburst or unexplainable explosion, but it arises with geometrical precision. It is unpredictable and unexplainable only if we seek its origins in the characteristics of individuals (such as their beliefs or frustrations) or in the characteristics of societies, communities, or other collectivities (such as their cultural values or level of inequality). But violent individuals and violent collectivities do not exist: No individual or collectivity is violent in all settings at all times, and neither individualistic nor collectivistic theories predict and explain precisely when and how violence occurs (see Black 1995:852–58, 2002d:1–3). Violence occurs when the social geometry of a conflict—the conflict structure—is violent. Every form of violence has its own structure, whether a beating structure, dueling structure, lynching structure, feuding structure, genocide structure—or terrorism structure (see, e.g., Black 1990:74–79; Baumgartner 1992; Senechal de la Roche 1996, 1997; Cooney 1998; Black 2002d). Structures kill and maim, not individuals or collectivities.

[1]The relationship between law and relational distance is curvilinear, with the least law across the shortest and longest distances (such as between members of the same household and between nations). The same applies to the relationship between law and cultural distance (Black 1976:40–46, 73–78).

PURE TERRORISM

Pure terrorism is self-help by organized civilians who covertly inflict mass violence on other civilians (see Senechal de la Roche 1996:101–05; Ganor 1998, 2001). This definition is what Max Weber calls an "ideal type"—a specification of something in its purest sense (see Weber [1904] 1949:89–112, [1922] 1964:89, 110). Pure terrorism also includes foiled plans, attempts, and threats to inflict mass violence on civilians, such as a 1995 plan by Arab Muslims to blow up simultaneously 11 airplanes bound for the United States from Asia; a 1993 attempt by Arab Muslims to blow up the World Trade Center in New York City; and a 2002 threat by Chechen Muslims to blow up a theater in Moscow. Although pure terrorism has all the elements above, terrorism occurs in lesser degrees as well, such as by unorganized civilians or against government officials. But here I address pure terrorism alone.

Like much other violence, pure terrorism is social control. It belongs to the same family as law, gossip, ostracism, ridicule, and other processes that define and respond to deviant behavior. It is self-help, the handling of a grievance with aggression. Although it partly resembles other self-help, including many homicides and assaults in everyday life (Black 1983, 1998:xiv–xvi; see also Cooney 1998), terrorism is collective violence—a group project—and in this respect resembles rioting, lynching, and vigilantism (see Senechal de la Roche 1996). Like rioting and feuding, it entails a logic of collective liability: Vulnerability attaches to a social location (such as a particular nationality, religion, or ethnicity) rather than to wrongful conduct by those attacked (see Black 1987:49–50, 55–57; Senechal de la Roche 1996:103–05). Like feuding, too, pure terrorism is recurrent, a series of episodes over time. But unlike most feuding, terrorism kills or maims not merely a person or two but a large number, possibly hundreds or thousands. It is mass violence. And it is normally unilateral—one-sided rather than reciprocal (see Black 1984:5–6, 1995:855, n. 130; Senechal de la Roche 1996:101–02).

Pure terrorism is not only collective but well organized—more organized than the crowds in riots or lynchings (Senechal de la Roche 1996:103–05). Although vigilantism is similarly unilateral, recurrent, and organized, it targets only those deemed guilty of a particular offense rather than any member of a social location (Senechal de la Roche 1996:103–05, see also 118–21). The covert nature of terrorism likewise distinguishes it from most vigilantism, rioting, and lynching. Terrorists operate underground, possibly alone, though as agents of an organization.

Pure terrorism is more war-like than most collective violence, including individual killings by organized groups (such as assassinations of Spanish government officials by Basque nationalists in the 20th century) or mass killings by unorganized individuals (such as a 1995 bombing of a U.S. government building in Oklahoma City).[2] Its typically interethnic and sometimes international character is war-like as well. Yet pure terrorism is not true warfare. It is a form of quasi-warfare (compare Huntington 1996:216–17).

Because terrorists may wield highly destructive weapons (conceivably biological, chemical, or nuclear) capable of killing numerous civilians of both sexes and all ages, terrorism may resemble episodes of conventional warfare. But unlike conventional warfare, terrorism is unilateral and covert rather than bilateral and overt, and its targets are civilian rather than military. It also lacks the game-like elements of some

[2]Because the Basque assassinations and the Oklahoma City bombing had governmental targets, neither qualifies as pure terrorism (which has only civilian targets). In addition, the former was not mass violence, and the latter was not an organizational action.

warfare (known as rules of war), such as the wearing of uniforms, nonviolence by and toward those who surrender, and the exclusion of weapons regarded as inhumane or unfair (see, e.g., Loy and Hesketh 1995; Walzer 2000:46–47). Conventional warfare commonly has a well-defined beginning (such as a declaration of war) and conclusion (such as the surrender of one side), and former enemies may resume normal relations when it ends. But terrorists seldom take prisoners (except for ransom) and often kill those they take. And imprisoned terrorists may wait only for another chance for more attacks, possibly ignoring peace treaties by their representatives. Terrorism effectively is interminable—unless it succeeds.

Pure terrorism operates on a small scale with hit-and-run tactics akin to guerrilla warfare, though guerrillas mainly launch attacks from relatively inaccessible rural hideouts while terrorists camouflage themselves as ordinary civilians in urban and other active settings to strike in the midst of their enemy.[3] More importantly, in its pure form guerrilla warfare has military targets, while pure terrorism has civilian targets (see Ganor 1998). Even so, those popularly known as guerrillas may sometimes engage in terrorism (when they attack civilians), and those popularly known as terrorists may sometimes engage in guerrilla warfare (when they attack military facilities or personnel).

A nearly pure example of terrorism occurred in the United States on September 11, 2001, when 19 Arab Muslims (mostly Saudis) hijacked four airplanes and successfully crashed two of them into New York City's World Trade Center and one into the Pentagon military complex near Washington, D.C., killing nearly 3,000 civilians (and some military personnel) and destroying property worth billions of dollars.[4] The terrorists apparently were associated with a militant Muslim organization known as al-Qaeda, whose leader Osama bin Laden preached that the United States was part of a Christian and Jewish "crusade" against Islam (see, e.g., bin Laden's proclamation in Jacquard 2002:258–59).

THE LOGIC OF DESTRUCTION

Shortly after September 11, many observers (including the American Sociological Association—see ASA 2001) described the events of that day as "criminal acts." But to call something criminal suggests that its explanation should be criminological—a theory of why people engage in deviant behavior such as robbery, rape, or burglary—often behavior with no moralistic element at all. Because terrorism is highly moralistic, however, it belongs to the same family as law and other social control. It differs from ordinary crime in other respects as well, such as its highly organized and war-like character. To classify terrorism merely as a form of crime thus obscures its sociological identity and obstructs its scientific understanding (see Black 1998:xiv–xvi). Terrorism requires a theory of social control, specifically a theory that explains self-help by organized civilians who covertly inflict mass violence on other civilians.

Violent self-help occurs in various scenarios. Vengeance answers aggression (as in blood feuds), for example, discipline punishes insubordination (as in slave whippings), and rebellion challenges authority (as in slave uprisings) (see Black 1990:78–79). But

[3]A noteworthy feature of many terrorist attacks of the past is their suicidal nature (see, e.g., Ganor 2000; Schweitzer 2000).

[4]The September 11 attacks partly deviated from pure terrorism because one target—the Pentagon—was military rather than civilian. Government officials such as judges or members of parliament are neither military nor civilian but have characteristics of both. Attacks on government officials alone (such as the Basque assassinations) therefore do not qualify as pure terrorism either.

pure terrorism commonly begins as a form of coercion—a threat backed by force: "Do X, or suffer the consequences."[5] An aggrieved group explicitly or implicitly threatens violence until the enemy (usually a nation-state) complies with a longstanding demand (compare Senechal de la Roche 1996:118–19). Terrorists typically demand a restoration of the past, such as political independence, lost territory, or a customary way of life. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, for instance, Tamils demanded independence from Sri Lanka; Palestinians demanded lost territory from Israel; and Muslims demanded an end to American and other Western involvement in their world and way of life.[6] Terrorists also use more limited forms of coercion, such as threatening to kill hostages unless fellow terrorists are freed from prison.

Once begun, terrorism and counterterrorism may exhibit feud-like elements of vengeance, each side answering aggression with aggression, a process that may extend over many years (see, e.g., Simon 2001:23–25). Yet the exchange of killings normally is uneven, not the "tit-for-tat" exchange of the classic blood feud (see Black 1990: 75–78, 1995:855, n. 130, 2002d:12–15).[7] Terrorism also may be part of a rebellion, such as an uprising against a colonial regime.

THE SOCIAL GEOMETRY OF TERRORISM

Although a longstanding grievance usually underlies terrorism, the grievance alone does not explain the violence. It also must have the right geometry—a particular location and direction in social space. What, then, is the social geometry of pure terrorism? Here I build on Roberta Senechal de la Roche's (1996, 2001) theory of collective violence—applicable not only to terrorism but to rioting, lynching, and vigilantism. She proposes that terrorism arises with a high degree of cultural distance, relational distance, inequality, and functional independence—together comprising a condition of "social polarization" between the aggrieved and their enemy (1996: 120, see also 118–22; Black 1990:75–79). The extent of social polarization explains both the occurrence of terrorism and its level of violence (Senechal de la Roche 1996:115–22).

Pure terrorism also has an intercollective direction, one group against another.[8] Terrorists represent an aggrieved collectivity (such as an ethnicity or religion) and attack civilians associated with another collectivity (such as an ethnicity, religion, or

[5]Coercion also occurs in international conflicts, such as when one nation threatens another with violence if a demand is not met. It is present in legal and other conflicts as well (see Mileski 1971:especially 4–9; Grabosky and Braithwaite 1986:7–8). Coercion may be predatory too, such as when an armed robber or rapist threatens violence when demanding money or sexual cooperation.

[6]The demands of the highly religious Muslim international terrorists of the late 20th and early 21st centuries were far less specific than the demands of those such as the Irish Catholics of Northern Ireland or Tamils of Sri Lanka, who explicitly demanded political independence from their enemies. Although the Muslim terrorists and their colleagues spoke of various grievances against the West—such as American support for Israel or American troops in Saudi Arabia—their movement was so religious and sacrificial that it resembled the radically mystical Christian movements of medieval Europe, whose "utopian" orientation "tends at every moment to turn into hostility towards the world, its culture, and all its works and earthly achievements" (Mannheim 1936:220, see also 211–19; Cohn 1970). Their attacks were said to be skirmishes in a holy war (*jihad*) expressing not only hostility to the West but a high degree of ascetic religiosity as well. Hence, it is difficult to know what—if anything—would have prevented or ended their attacks.

[7]Terrorism may occur entirely as an act of vengeance as well, without a demand. Some evidence suggests, for example, that the largely unsuccessful 1993 bombing and cyanide gassing of the World Trade Center by Arab Muslims was revenge for the 1991 American attack on Iraq: The bombing occurred exactly two years after the United States initiated its war on Iraq; it included no demand; and no organization claimed credit for it (see Mylroie 2000).

[8]Although Senechal de la Roche (1996:102–05, 115–22) defines terrorism as a highly organized form of collective violence against collectively liable individuals (who may be civilian or governmental), she does not explain terrorism with its intercollective nature.

nation-state). And pure terrorism has an upward direction, against a social superior. It is a form of "social control from below" (Baumgartner 1984).[9]

All of Senechal de la Roche's variables are varieties of social distance: In addition to cultural and relational distance, "inequality" is vertical distance (such as a difference in wealth), and "functional independence" is a kind of functional distance (a degree of cooperation). Terrorism crosses other social distances as well—other vertical distances (such as radial distance, a difference in social integration); organizational distance (a difference in the capacity for corporate action); and another kind of functional distance (a difference in social activity, such as modes of livelihood). In other words, pure terrorism strikes across very long distances and along diverse dimensions of social space—cultural, relational, economic, hierarchical, functional, and so on.[10]

Accordingly: *Pure terrorism arises intercollectively and upwardly across long distances in multidimensional social space*. So travel the bullets, bombs, and other weapons of terrorists. And the greater the social distances, the greater their destructiveness (see Senechal de la Roche 1996:115–22; Black 2002d:5–9).[11] An excellent social location for highly destructive terrorism thus would be a grievance against a powerful nation-state by a group ethnically and otherwise extremely far away in social space, such as the indigenous people of a colonial society or members of another society.

The geometrical model fits diverse cases of terrorism that began in the 20th century, such as Arab and Berber Muslim attacks on French Catholics and other Europeans in Algeria; Tamil Hindu attacks on Sinhalese Buddhists in Sri Lanka; and Palestinian Muslim attacks on Jews in Israel. The same applies to the mostly Muslim terrorism against non-Muslims in the early 21st century, such as Indonesian Muslim attacks on nightclubs patronized by Australian and other Christians (as well as Hindus) in Bali; Pakistani Muslim attacks on Christian churches in Pakistan; Indian Muslim attacks on Indian Hindu gatherings in Kashmir; Filipino Muslim attacks on Filipino and other Christians in the southern Philippines; and Arab Muslim attacks on New York's World Trade Center.

The model similarly fits numerous failed plans, attempts, and threats by terrorists, such as a largely failed bombing and cyanide gassing of the World Trade Center by Arab Muslims in 1993 (designed to kill 250,000 people); an attempt by a British-Arab Muslim to explode a bomb concealed in his shoe on an airplane bound from Paris to Miami in 2001; and an apparent plan by Moroccan Muslims to poison Rome's water supply with cyanide in 2002—all intercollective and upward mass killings of civilians across very long distances in multidimensional space.

Now consider where terrorism does *not* occur—and where it is rare or less destructive. The geometrical model implies that terrorism will not occur where conflicts are individual rather than collective, where conflicts are downward (against social inferiors) or lateral (against equals) rather than upward, and where the adversaries are

[9]The vertical dimension of social space refers to the distribution of social status, including economic (wealth); hierarchical (authority); normative (respectability); cultural (conventionality); radial (integration); and functional status (performance). For more details, see Black (1976, 2000a:349, n. 20). Senechal de la Roche notes that "terrorism is usually upwardly directed" but does not include its vertical direction in her theory of terrorism (1996:113, see also 114).

[10]A social distance is a difference between social locations, including wealth (economic distance); authority (hierarchical distance); integration (radial distance); culture (cultural distance); intimacy (relational distance); organization (organizational distance); and activities (functional distance). For more details, see Black (1976, 2000a:348, n. 13).

[11]The model implies a threshold effect: Terrorism is likely only if a conflict spans very long distances in social space.

closer rather than farther apart in social space (such as members of the same ethnicity and community rather than members of different ethnicities and societies).

Where, for example, was the terrorism in the largely homogeneous tribal and peasant societies studied by anthropologists or the more complex but largely homogeneous societies studied by historians of the distant past? It did not exist. In modern life as well, closer civilians such as those of the same or similar ethnicity are largely immune to terrorism, especially its deadlier forms. If closer collective conflicts lead to violence at all, they produce different forms with fewer civilian casualties, such as riots, assassinations, kidnappings, and guerrilla warfare. During the 20th century, for example, communist insurgents in southeast Asia and Latin America employed guerrilla warfare against government targets rather than mass attacks on civilians like themselves. Basque nationalists in Spain mostly favored assassinations of police, soldiers, and government officials rather than mass attacks on Spanish-speaking civilians somewhat close to themselves. Catalonian nationalists, even closer to Spanish speakers (including linguistically), engaged in little violence at all. The violence between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland mostly stopped short of terrorism, too, though Catholics exported some terrorism to England against civilians farther away in social space (see, e.g., Hewitt 2002). Yet while an absence of the right social geometry is enough to prevent or reduce terrorism, its presence is not enough to produce terrorism. Physical opportunities also are necessary—a rarity until the 20th century.

THE PHYSICAL GEOMETRY OF TERRORISM

For most of human history, social geometry largely corresponded to physical geometry. Social distances matched physical distances: The people closest in social space (relationally, culturally, and otherwise) were the closest in physical space, and those separated by the greatest social distances were separated by the greatest physical distances. Exceptions include colonial societies (such as African or Asian regions ruled by Europeans); multiethnic societies (such as Indonesia and various African nations); and ethnic enclaves in mainly homogeneous societies (such as Jewish ghettos or Gypsy bands in medieval Europe).[12]

Violence requires contact, and most occurs in limited areas of physical space where people are close in social space—within households, neighborhoods, and communities. But the greatest violence (such as the bombing of cities and other mass killings of civilians) mostly occurs when military forces cross long physical as well as social distances. Civilians may also inflict considerable violence on fellow civilians when they live close together in physical space while widely separated in social space, illustrated by massacres of European Jews by Christians or Indian Muslims and Hindus by each other. Yet for most of human history, physical separation prevented mass violence between civilians separated by the longest distances in social space. It was impossible. No contact, no violence.

And no contact, no terrorism. A look at the history of the world shows that the social geometry of terrorism is far more frequent than terrorism itself. Terrorism is rare. It also is recent—a phenomenon of the 20th and 21st centuries (see Walzer 2000:98). The reason is physical rather than social: Terrorism has mostly been impossible. Intercollective and upward grievances often have spanned long distances

[12]Other exceptions include interethnic master-slave and patron-client relationships.

in social space, but the aggrieved civilians have had little or no physical access to enemy civilians. At the same time, those physically close enough were not socially distant enough. Although both the social and physical geometry of terrorism are necessary conditions for its occurrence, then, neither alone is a sufficient condition. *Terrorism arises only when a grievance has a social geometry distant enough and a physical geometry close enough for mass violence against civilians.*

Consider, for example, the many demands for political independence by indigenous people in colonial societies during the 20th century—particularly African and Asian societies ruled by European nations such as Great Britain, France, and Holland. All such demands had the right social geometry for terrorism: an intercollective and upward direction that crossed long social distances, including vertical (political, military, and economic domination by the foreigners over the natives); cultural (ethnic differences between the foreigners and natives); relational (social segregation between the foreigners and natives); and functional distances (different ways of life followed by the foreigners and natives).[13] Yet because few European civilians lived in the colonies, close enough to kill, terrorism was mostly absent. Millions lived in Europe, but for all practical purposes were too far away to attack. How could African tribesmen or Asian peasants go to Europe to kill civilians? It was largely impossible. No civilians, no terrorism.

A lack of European civilians made terrorism difficult if not impossible in most European colonies. Instead, anticolonial violence primarily involved guerrilla warfare and other government-oriented aggression. Terrorism occurred only where large numbers of enemy civilians lived in the colonial society—uncommon but not unknown. Colonial Algeria, for example, had an ideal physical and social geometry for terrorism: More than one million French and other ethnically European civilians lived in urban and rural Algeria when Arab and Berber Muslims rebelled against French rule in 1954, and terrorism flourished. Muslims reportedly launched thousands of terrorist attacks with more than 10,000 casualties (including over 2,500 deaths) during the nearly eight years of the rebellion (Horne 1977:538). The attacks included the explosion of bombs hidden in restaurants and other European gathering places and also the killing and mutilation of European families surprised in their homes (see generally Horne 1977:especially Ch. 9).[14] In the 1950s, the Mau Mau rebellion (by members of the Kikuyu tribe) against the British in colonial Kenya likewise included attacks on some of the many British settlers, though the number reportedly killed was fewer than 50 (Edgerton 1989:107).[15]

Colonial terrorism illustrates the history of all terrorism. Because the social geometry of terrorism rarely converges with a physical geometry that provides opportunities for mass violence against enemy civilians, terrorism has been rare for most of human history. The exceptions—with good physical as well as social conditions for terrorism—included Northern Ireland (the Catholic minority living among the Protestant majority); Sri Lanka (the Tamil minority living in a region of the mainly Sinhalese country); and Israel (the Palestinians living in territories near the Jews).

As the 20th century advanced, however, a new factor greatly increased the opportunities for terrorism: technology. Rapid transportation and electronic communications shrink

[13]This discussion excludes colonial societies where transplanted countrymen of the colonial regime largely displace the indigenous population, as occurred in Australia, New Zealand, and various parts of North and South America. In these cases social closeness among the transplanted civilians precludes terrorism even during violent movements for independence from the home society.

[14]The Arabs and Berbers killed numerous Muslims as well—estimated at more than 75,000—for failing to support the rebellion or other differences within their own ranks (Horne 1977:538).

[15]They killed nearly as many Indian as British civilians (26 versus 32) and also nearly 2,000 African civilians regarded as loyal to the British (Edgerton 1989:107).

the world by shortening the time needed to travel and interact across physical space (see McLuhan 1964). As physical distance loses its relevance, terrorists can more easily plan and launch attacks thousands of miles from home, illustrated by the American attacks of September 11, 2001—literally impossible less than a century earlier. Potential civilian targets travel to foreign places as well, creating new opportunities for terrorist attacks aboard airplanes and in airports, hotels, resorts, tourist attractions, and other settings where foreigners congregate, illustrated by numerous planned, attempted, and successful bombings of airplanes, and such cases as a 1997 attack by Egyptian Muslims on foreigners touring the ruins of Luxor; a 2002 attack by Indonesian Muslims on nightclubs catering to foreigners in Bali; and a 2003 attack by Saudi Muslims on a residential complex housing foreigners in Riyadh. New technology also yields more portable and more deadly explosives and other weapons, including weapons of mass destruction and otherwise friendly conveniences convertible into weapons, illustrated by the use of airplanes as massive bombs in the attacks of September 11. Technology thus both globalizes the possibility of terrorism and magnifies its destructive capability.[16]

As the relevance of physical geometry declines, the fatefulness of social geometry rises. The social geometry of a grievance becomes not merely a necessary but a sufficient condition for terrorism. And because grievances with the right social geometry continued to arise and persist in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, terrorism greatly increased.

Yet while new technology enhances opportunities for terrorism by shrinking physical space, it also sows the seeds of terrorism's destruction. By increasing contact between people separated by long social as well as physical distances, modern transportation and communications increase global intimacy, cultural homogeneity, and other forms of human closeness—a multidimensional process that shrinks social space at the same time that it shrinks physical space. *Technology thus makes terrorism easier and deadlier in the short term, but in the long term it destroys the social geometry on which terrorism depends.*

THE LOGIC OF RETALIATION

Terrorism begets counterterrorism, a case of the social control of social control: justice in response to crime that is itself a form of justice (see Black 1983). Terrorism is a particularly aggressive form of justice, and so is its social control. Counterterrorism is considerably more aggressive than ordinary criminal justice—partly warfare and partly law. Pure sociology explains why.

The social geometry of terrorism also explains counterterrorism. Law is scarce at the extremes of social distance—in the closest conflicts (such as between friends or relatives) and in the most distant conflicts (such as between different tribes or nations): Law is a curvilinear function of social distance (see Black 1976:40–46, 73–78).[17] Hence, just as extremely long social distances from the enemy undermine the use of law by terrorists, so they undermine its use by counterterrorists—especially when the conflict is international. The intercollective and upward direction of terrorism is similarly inimical to law (Black 1976:21–30). Although the downward direction of counterterrorism

[16]The physical geometry of conflict also influences other forms of violence, as does the ability of technology to shrink physical space. The airplane increases the physical and therefore social reach of warfare, for example, and other modern transportation has the same effect on violence once limited to smaller areas, such as rioting, gang warfare, and genocide. In turn, the severity of violence increases with its social reach (see, e.g., Black 2002d:especially 14–15).

[17]Social distance here refers to relational distance (intimacy); cultural distance (homogeneity); and functional distance (similarity of activities).

attracts law, especially criminal law, the collective nature of terrorism does not (Black 1976:21–30, 92–99). Counterterrorism therefore combines criminal justice with quasi-warfare (see Black 1998:144–45, 149–53).

BEYOND CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Although counterterrorism pursues individual offenders as criminals, it also reaches beyond individual cases to destroy a collective enemy. It prosecutes some but detains others in a condition akin to prisoners of war—particularly noncitizens from the most distant locations in social space. Often as covert as terrorism itself, counterterrorism may nonetheless include war-like attacks on terrorists and their partisans, illustrated by the American military campaign against the Muslim organization known as al-Qaeda and its supporters in Afghanistan after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Quasi-warfare begets quasi-warfare in a vicious circle, counterterrorism answering terrorism that attracts more terrorism, more counterterrorism, and so on. Terrorism may beget other collective violence as well, illustrated by Protestant violence against Catholics in Northern Ireland and Jewish violence against Palestinian Muslims. What happens depends on the social and physical geometry of each conflict.

Counterterrorism is primarily preventive, even preemptive, striking and possibly killing terrorists before they themselves can strike (see Black 1984:8–9). It looks to the future—to what might happen where—guarding potential targets, screening for bombs and other weapons, and restricting entry to vulnerable places. It likewise employs various intelligence techniques (possibly including torture) to locate terrorists before they can launch attacks. And just as new technology makes terrorism easier and deadlier, so it increases the effectiveness of counterterrorism with better methods of prevention.

But terrorists may also win. The enemy may meet their demands. Terrorism thus apparently contributed to the collapse of European colonialism and eventually may encourage other transformations across the globe. Yet not all terrorism has an obvious demand. Why, for example, did Arab Muslims attack the United States on September 11? Was it punishment for American involvement in the Islamic world? Part of an Islamic crusade? A strike at Satan? A rendezvous with God? We do not know, and may never know.

THE EVOLUTION OF TERRORISM

Pure terrorism is largely if not totally a phenomenon of the modern age, particularly the late 20th century and beyond. Far from primitive or uncivilized, it is virtually unknown in tribal, medieval, or early modern societies.[18] Terrorism by and against civilians requires physical contact between enemies separated by huge chasms in social space—a combination of physical and social geometry uncommon in human history. Enter modern technology, including rapid transportation, electronic communications, and new weapons that offer the possibility of mass violence between people separated by both physical and social space, those of different regions and nations with different religions, languages, and customs. Social geology shifts, and the ground trembles.

Witness the rise of international terrorism, dramatized by the events of September 11—surprise attacks by alien warriors crossing national boundaries in search of justice. Technology twists the shape of global space, initiating an age of international

[18]Muslim international terrorism is chronologically modern, but, as mentioned in footnote 6, it partly resembles utopian religious movements in medieval Europe—movements that arose during what Mannheim calls "a period of tremendous social disintegration" (1936:226, see also 211–19; Cohn 1970).

upheaval with war-like slaughters of unsuspecting foreigners at home and abroad. Witness the new architecture of death, unwittingly designed by engineers of modern efficiency—shopping malls, hotels, buses, and airplanes that collect and confine swarms of civilians unable to defend themselves against invisible enemies blending into the crowd.

International terrorism erupts from below like a volcano. Millions watch the carnage and take sides, many mourning and many celebrating, everyone certain of who is right and who is wrong. The warriors are champions of lost land and lost power, defenders of sacred traditions contaminated by modernity, fighting what may be an irreversible infection of an irresistible way of life entering the social atmosphere of their changing societies. Executioners are everywhere, and everyone is guilty, liable at any moment to mutilation and oblivion. Isomorphic with its social field, international terrorism is a prism flashing its origins, the fragmentation of bombs and shredding of bodies reflecting and recapitulating the disintegration of dying civilizations invaded by the present (see Black 1990:90–93).

Yet terrorism in its pure form is a rare species of social control, its lifespan limited to the time of shocking implosions of physical and social space during the 20th and 21st centuries. The conditions of its existence ultimately become the conditions of its decline. The intermingling of peoples and cultures, technologically and otherwise, inexorably destroys the differences now polarizing populations and collectivizing violence. As the social universe shrinks, right and wrong lose the clarity that comes only with enough distance in social space. Partisanship weakens. Enemies disappear. Along with the extermination of tribes and villages, the bombing of cities, the genocides, the torture of countless prisoners—all in the name of morality—terrorism finally becomes merely an interesting specimen from an earlier stage of social evolution. Its inevitable fate is sociological death (see generally Black 1998 chs. 7–8, especially 154–55).

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