



The Globalization of Terrorism

Ihekwoaba D. Onwudiwe

Ashgate, 2001

Hbk: ISBN: 0754610950 £39.00/\$69.95

pp. 171 + xviii (including: bibliography)

The year 2001 was a huge one for terrorism. This little book missed it. Published six months before the momentous events of September one might feel inclined to forgive the author, series editor and publishers for failing to anticipate the broadly unimaginable. But the book's bigger failing is to have missed the 1990s. The entire closing chapter is an analysis of the lessons to be drawn from the situation in South Africa prior to the advent of Nelson Mandela.

It turns out that the book is an elaboration on the author's doctoral thesis submitted to Florida State University in 1993. Accordingly, most of the references date from the 60s, 70s and 80s, and the feel throughout is of a PhD that just took too long to complete. As the material pre-dates the modern obsession with globalization, one can only assume that the publishers thought this would make a great title to entice people to buy it.

As to the material itself, this is probably most diplomatically described as not rocket science. The thesis of the book is that 'terrorism *may be* a result of global inequality' (emphasis added, p. xv). This entirely equivocal formulation is then repeated elsewhere as we are informed that 'dependency *may* encourage terrorist acts' (p. 14). The only interesting, but largely predictable, fact is that most terrorist attacks are perpetrated against the US but take place within the Third World.

It would appear that the original contribution made to the literature by this work was to apply 'World Systems Theory' (WST) to the issue of terrorism. For the uninitiated, we are advised that WST 'argues that the pattern of a nation's development depends on the nation's position in the world economy' (p. 1). Thus countries are ranked hierarchically into three abstract categories; core, periphery and semi-periphery, based on a series of arbitrarily chosen economic, political and social indicators.

Like all league tables, this approach suffers from a problem of definition. What indicator(s) should be used for the purposes of such categorization? And how should they be weighted? Various, a hotchpotch of factors is postulated, including trade flows, diplomatic relations, fertility and school enrollments. It all smacks of desperately trying to find the right equation to prove a previously assumed argument, or an answer in search of a theory. It is hardly a surprise then that 'No individual researcher has fully embraced another writer's methodological argument' (p. 84).

As terrorism too is a notoriously vague term, we are left with a work that uses the ill-defined to analyse the non-specific. This formulation allows most people sufficient latitude to arrive at conclusions of their own choosing. In this particular case it is the

entirely plausible suggestion that 'state terrorism' is used by core nations to 'maintain their vital ... interests', whilst in the periphery, people adopt such measures to 'achieve liberation' (p. 52). How this platitude advances the contemporary discussion is anybody's guess.

Indeed, over the course of recent events, the Western powers have been at pains to point out that they have 'no selfish, strategic or economic interests' in Iraq, Afghanistan or anywhere else. This may be perceived as a lie by many but in fact reflects a situation whereby the West, more so than in any other period, is entirely lacking in confidence or conviction as to its own aims and purposes upon the world stage. It may be that the abdication of authority and power, rather than its excessive use, makes terrorism take on the particular form it does today. Certainly, the advent of non-state terrorist actors, such as Al Qa'ida, could be held to mirror the erosion of sovereign interests as evidenced by the development of the United Nations and the growing role of NGOs.

The simplistic 'cycles of violence' model of human behaviour presented here, known in the school yard as 'he/she started it', falls far short of the sort of diagnostic tool required to understand patterns of global terror, particularly now, in the aftermath of 9/11. The hijackers were clearly not poor kids from the Gaza strip, in many ways they were highly Westernized, to the point of understanding our psychology better than we do ourselves; hence their ability to commandeer four aircraft using little more than box-cutters.

Complaints about 'gluttony' (p. xv) amongst the rich nations and 'unequal distribution' (p. 59) are similarly limited in their ability to explain current predicaments. Indeed, this narrow economic approach may go to making matters worse rather than better. Underdevelopment in the periphery will require a consistent demand for more production worldwide than this focus on the sins of consumption and the failings of circulation allows. Restraint is the mood of the times and it is unwittingly echoed here. The new environmental pessimism that holds back development is connected to the confident imperialism of old through a common acceptance of the right of the core to impose its worldview on the periphery.

Most gallingly of all, having assumed that 'the world would be a more dangerous place to live in the twenty-first century' (p. 122) through the advent of weapons of mass destruction, the author then encourages 'violating even a country's sovereignty since the world will be a safer place in the long run' (p. 126).

The author does ask one interesting question as to why it was that, at the time of writing, 'West African countries have not participated in international terrorism' (p. 51). This, he proposes had to do with the strength of age-old social bonds within such societies. If so, he may care to wonder now, as countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone plunge ever more into the abyss, why it is that they do so? Rather than economic expansion and social change in themselves being predictors of confusion and chaos, it increasingly appears as though the key factor is a society's sense of confidence in handling such changes and its vision for the future that matters.

This, combined with a failure to provide young people with a sense of purpose and meaning, rather than simply a job, is what truly demoralizes us today. It also suggests that acts of terror will increasingly emanate from Western societies, as the consequences of the rejection of enlightenment values spreads ever closer. Now there's a prediction for you!

Bill Durodié, King's College London
