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Terrorism as an aesthetic signifier: The afterlives of terrorism discourse in Western reactions to wartime suffering

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Abstract
What are the legacies of the war on terror? This paper seeks to answer this question through an analysis of vernacular uses of terrorism discourse in political commentary on the Ukraine war. The paper describes how the set of tropes, ideas, and recurrent metaphors that constituted the historical backbone of narratives about terrorism before and after 9/11 is now being mobilised in the context of interstate conflict. Instead of rejecting such deployments of terrorism as lay misappropriations of an otherwise-objective concept, we argue that they evidence the aesthetic force of terrorism discourse in organising our ethical relationship to different experiences of (in)human suffering. The paper advances the concept of terrorism as an aesthetic signifier, to provide two contributions to terrorism studies. First, we argue that narrative approaches to the study of political violence in IR can only move forward if they bypass the field's traditional framing of terrorism – which we dub the (il)legitimacy trap – and push the boundaries of critique beyond the idea of terrorism as unacceptable violence. Second, we contend that IR scholars must situate the signifiers orbiting the discourse on terror within wider racialised aesthetic regimes dictating the visibility and invisibility of collective suffering. With these two moves, we hope to bring more attention to the question of victimisation in terrorism studies, a field historically focused on perpetrators and the conditions of perpetration of violence.

Keywords: collective suffering; critical terrorism studies; international relations; reactionary politics; Ukraine war

Introduction

What has the war on terror left behind? This special issue has raised the central question this paper seeks to answer by drawing both on academic debates within terrorism studies and through reference to vernacular understandings of terror at play in journalistic and policy spheres. The objective here is to investigate the afterlives of terrorism discourse – the set of tropes, ideas, and recurrent metaphors that constituted the historical backbone of narratives about terrorism during the war on terror – and explore how these legacies help us to make sense of present-day geopolitical concerns (primarily, but not exclusively the Ukraine war). The paper builds on the empirical observation that Anglo-American media coverage and policy statements related to the Ukraine war showcase the subtle borrowing of the aesthetic of morality, deviance, and monstrosity that are at the core of terrorism discourse. It advances the concept of terrorism as an *aesthetic signifier*, which we believe can bypass a central limitation faced by Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) scholarship, namely the focus on debates around the legitimacy or illegitimacy of violent acts – hereafter referred to as the *(il)legitimacy trap*.

Our main objective is to advance the narrative and discourse approaches to the study of political violence, following CTS' commitment to investigate what Zulaika and Douglass termed the 'mythography of Terror'[1] by turning attention to the role of terrorism discourse in organising our relationship to (in)human suffering. In so doing, the paper offers two important contributions that not only advance conversations ongoing in Security Studies and CTS, but also the broader understanding of the politics that underlies the discursive invocations of terrorism in contemporary geopolitics.

First, we suggest that the use of signifiers orbiting the concept of terrorism in non-academic spheres should not be dismissed as lay misappropriations which incorrectly use an otherwise-unbiased and analytical concept. Instead, we argue that the use of the term by journalists and politicians can evidence a more fundamental truth about the concept, which has escaped scholars engaged in the field's unending definitional debates: that the signifiers orbiting terrorism discourse do not primarily refer to specific acts of political violence but are part of an aesthetic regime which delimits the (in)visibility of human suffering, selectively deeming certain expressions of collective suffering unacceptable. The problem with terrorism discourse, we contend, is not that it creates hierarchies of legitimate or illegitimate violence, although it certainly does so. Following Kimberly Hutchings and Elizabeth Frazer,[2] we believe that no violence can be justified, in the sense of being made right a priori, which is invoked by the idea of legitimacy. We rather see the talk of the (il)legitimacy of violence as nothing but a trap that must be avoided due to the inherent risks it presents of misappropriation, misapprehension, and misapplication of CTS principles.

Importantly, we argue that the (il)legitimacy trap precludes a more fruitful incorporation of the themes of race, racialisation, and coloniality, beyond the idea of the formation of a suspect/at risk category or community or the allusion that the signifier terrorism attaches to certain bodies more easily than others.[3] The problem with terrorism discourse is that, in producing a consensus about what counts as unacceptable suffering, in colonising debates in terms of the (il)legitimacy trap, and in dislocating our political priorities to organised monster hunts, the discourse forecloses our horizons of ethical engagement. To be very clear, we do not mean engagement with perpetrators of violence – which scholars and policymakers may or may never feel any ethical obligation towards – but with the victims of other experiences of suffering unaccounted for in this aesthetic regime.

Here, we not only follow in the footsteps of critical scholarship emphasising that global terrorism is a political concept rather than a distinct empirical object or that terrorism experts make moral claims disguised as objective truth,[4] but also go beyond, arguing that the critical project to scrutinise the mythography of terror can only move forward if CTS scholars bypass the (il)legitimacy trap. This would involve seeing terrorism discourse as part of a much wider global racialised aesthetic regime whose problem lies not in denouncing violence per se, since violence must be denounced, but in restrictively governing the (in)visibility of suffering.

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[1] Joseba Zulaika and William Douglass, *Terror and Taboo: The Follies, Fables, and Faces of Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. x.

[2] Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, 'Avowing violence: Foucault and Derrida on politics, discourse and meaning', *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 37:2 (2011), pp. 3–23; Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, 'On politics and violence: Arendt contra Fanon', *Contemporary Political Theory*, 7:1 (2008), pp. 90–108; Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, 'Remnants and revenants: Politics and violence in the work of Agamben and Derrida', *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 13:2 (2011), pp. 127–44; Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, *Violence and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020).

[3] Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Anna Meier, 'Terror as justice, justice as terror: Counterterrorism and anti-Black racism in the United States', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 15:1 (2022), pp. 83–101; Francesco Ragazzi, 'Suspect community or suspect category? The impact of counter-terrorism as "policed multiculturalism"', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 42:5 (2016), pp. 724–41; Marie Breen-Smyth, 'Theorising the "suspect community": Counterterrorism, security practices and the public imagination', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 7:2 (2014), pp. 223–40.

[4] Anders Bjørkheim, 'One terrorism to rule them all: Turkey, the PKK and global terrorism discourse', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 23:3 (2020), pp. 487–510.

Second, against the grain of traditional scholarly work on terrorism, we cannot easily separate the analytical and moralising aspects of terrorism discourse or the appropriate and inappropriate (lay) uses of the term. For reasons that will become apparent later, they are indistinguishable in what we identify as the central aesthetic function of the signifier terrorism. Seeing terrorism as an aesthetic signifier builds on the wealth of the Critical International Relations (IR) and CTS traditions, emphasising deconstructive and psychoanalytical readings which dissociate the work of the signifier in processes of meaning-making from the reliance on a content/referent (an objective non-discursive reality from which the meaning of words would be derived). Paraphrasing Lacan,[5] this paper sees terrorism as a signifier which is only meant to signify other signifiers in a chain such as *evil, unacceptable, monstrous, irrational, violation*.

But this paper also makes a fundamental contribution to these traditions by arguing that the usefulness of terrorism as a descriptor and the political function its uses display do not come from the capacity to capture the essence of violent acts or to frame violence as exceptionally bad by rendering certain acts (il)legitimate. The political usefulness of terrorism discourse comes from the capacity to govern our relationship to collective suffering, reducing its unbearable complexity into a, if not palatable, at least legible story which forecloses the possibility of ethical engagement. Importantly, as the paper explains, this is not to suggest that terrorism is an *empty signifier* or a *thick signifier*.[6] The emphasis on the term 'aesthetic' is a reference to Rancière's understanding of *aesthesis* as a certain regime indissociable from politics, and which dictates the partitioning of the sensible, or the distribution of points of visibility within the polis; to dictate what can and what cannot be seen.[7] To reclaim terrorism as an aesthetic signifier is to suggest that its main function lies in providing a certain regime of visibility whereby social suffering is translated, recognised, and written off in accordance with a given symbolic Law (a chain of signifiers constituting the elements we associate with the discourse on terror).[8] It is also to emphasise the indissociable links between these signifiers and what Rancière called the logic of the *police*, with all the ambiguity of the term, as both something at work in the collective fabrication of consensus and inevitably tied up in the repressive state apparatus.

In engaging these contributions, one goal is to invite scholars in Security Studies and CTS to reach beyond the usual confines of their subfields and relate terrorism discourse to wider problems of global suffering. More importantly, we seek to expand the study of political violence in IR to

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[5]Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006).

[6]Our proposed concept of aesthetic signifier is similar to but differs in important ways from Laclau and Mouffe's idea of *empty signifier* and Huysmans's notion of *thick signifier*. While both concepts refer to the work of signification in ordering the world, which is also present in the concept of aesthetic signifier, they do so in contrasting ways. In Laclau and Mouffe, the empty signifier captures the fundamental impossibility of society masked by a shared sense that something is lacking in the polis (e.g. health, job opportunities, security) which are disparate demands that another signifier, say, justice, comes to agglutinate and supplement. In our view, this is not what is at work in uses of the signifier terror/ism, which and Laclaudian language would stand much closer to hegemonic than counter-hegemonic forms of antagonism. We have equal reservations about expanding Huysmans's concept of thick signifier to the study of terrorism. His notion of security as a thick signifier is Sausurrean in terminology but draws direct inspiration from Geertz's anthropological approach of thick description, which privileged an explanation of cultural forms and behaviours according to the context in which they are embedded and employed. In line with the general concerns of the subfield of International Political Sociology, Huysmans's contribution points to an analysis of how the meaning of security is defined by the contextual application of the term in specific language games. The concept of aesthetic signifier departs from a slightly different, psychoanalytically inspired notion, of how the use of the signifier terror/ism triggers into motion a symbolic chain that exceeds the context in which the signifier is evoked. See Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 2007); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985); Jeff Huysmans, 'Security! What do you mean?: From concept to thick signifier', *European Journal of International Relations*, 4:2 (1996), pp. 226–55.

[7]Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009); Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2011); Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013); Jacques Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010).

[8]Jessica Auchter, *Global Corpse Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

what we could metaphorically call an investigation of it smallest 'particle', which we identify to be the fluidity and complexity of human (and also non-human) suffering. To this end, and based on present-day commentary on Ukraine, and to a much smaller degree Palestine, the paper advances a reading of uses of the signifier terrorism as part of what one of us has elsewhere termed the *management of monstrosity*, or the collective process of formalisation of suffering into violence proper, which involves the recognition of suffering as socially unacceptable and the apportioning of blame and culpability.[9]

Seeing terrorism discourse as part of a general and much older process of managing monstrosity points to one of the most important legacies of the war on terror: how the tropes, narratives, and metaphors that were revamped, reworked, and sedimented throughout the 2000s were grafted onto existing grids of intelligibility that continue to inform what we understand to be unacceptable suffering today. Since the 'end' of terrorism, or rather the global shift in analysing and framing threat that structures the contemporary context, the discursive foundations of the war on terror have morphed and been institutionalised into the collective processes of 'making' suffering appear as unacceptable by relating it to a monstrous cause/perpetrator. These processes can be seen at work in Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which we take as our main empirical point of illustration, or the Israeli campaign of violence unfolding before our eyes, which we feel an ethical obligation to mention here, even if not in the depth it deserves. To summarise, the paper draws out three key arguments.

First, we suggest that, in symbolic terms, the essence of post-9/11 terrorism discourse has lived on in contemporary political commentary and is being mobilised in subtle ways to make sense of contemporary conflicts, which, had they occurred in the mid-20th century, would be seen clearly through the lenses of realist great power conflict, proxy warfare, or territorial conquest. We highlight this through an examination of the Ukraine case but draw a larger theoretical lesson from the uses of terrorism discourse to make sense of this horrific war: if terrorism discourse persists beyond and outside of the phenomenon it purports to reference, it is because its main role was never to reference any phenomenon in particular but to organise, delimit, and formalise what counts as unacceptable suffering.

Second, we trace how scholarly focus on terrorism has shifted from the definitional debate that characterised the immediate post-9/11 context to a more perceptible invocation of moral claims. Specifically, we present the CTS claim that terrorism as a concept has been mustered in ways that suggest a certain moral orientation towards violent actors. We briefly engage the genealogy of terrorism's definitional debates, before underlining its evolution into the moralising aspects of Anglo-American terrorism discourse. In doing so we explain what we mean by the *(il)legitimacy trap* here, or the risks of focusing our intellectual efforts into debating the characterisation of terror as illegitimate. This becomes clear in our discussion of the Ukraine case – in particular of Mearsheimer's polemic statements about the conflict – and in our brief commentary on what is happening in Palestine, which the introduction of the special issue also addresses.

The third argument is that in this vein, terrorism is not unique. We explore what we frame as the 'management of monstrosity' to outline the larger discursive inscription of experiences of suffering within narrow regimes of visibility and accountability. We suggest that terrorism discourse is a key example of how human suffering is framed in contemporary global political imaginaries, where the unwillingness to face complex histories of suffering hides behind the desire to individualise violent acts.

These arguments work in tandem to highlight the ways terrorism discourse has survived as part of an aesthetic regime, to individualise, moralise, and, most importantly, organise our understandings of collective suffering, which has larger implications for how we understand political violence itself.

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[9] Henrique Tavares Furtado, 'The monstrous and the miscount: A radical theory of accountability', *Critical Military Studies*, Online First, pp. 1–16, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2023.2210407}.

Terrorism: From analytical to moral framings

This section outlines the origins of terrorism discourse and the definitional debates that have long characterised the study of political violence since at least the 1970s.[10] We illustrate a discursive shift that moved terrorism discourse from being centred on an analytical or definitional issue to a moral issue. In tracing this movement, we follow lines of inquiry within CTS that view terrorism as a discourse and pursue Anders Bjørkheim's suggestion that 'the concepts of terrorism/terrorist are often employed uncritically – even within academic circles traditionally sensitive to the constitutive power of political language and the dangers of conceptual reification'.[11] We also agree with Alexandra Homolar and Pablo Rodríguez-Merino, who contend that CTS scholars often reinforce traditional markers utilised to describe a violent event as terrorism.[12]

However, we move beyond this to argue that more attention needs to be drawn towards the role of terrorism discourse in organising our ethical relationship to different forms of collective suffering. Either in traditional or critical schools, scholars of terrorism have paid insufficient attention to how terrorism functions as an aesthetic *regime* in ways that exceed the framing of violent acts and relates to the translation and formalisation of collective suffering. Without awareness of terrorism as an aesthetic signifier, critical scholars cannot properly capture the dissemination of vernacular uses of terrorism discourse nor understand how the concept of racialisation and coloniality end up affecting and seeping into policy responses to suffering.

While the period of terror following the French Revolution is often evoked as a starting point of the modern concept of terrorism,[13] more recent genealogies identify the 1970s as a turning point, when different acts of assassination, kidnapping, hijacking, and bank robberies were bundled together under the label terrorism.[14] There is a strong consensus, however, that the lack of a commonly accepted definition has been a fundamental problem of terrorism studies.[15] Most scholarly work on terrorism begins with a discussion of definitions, often settling on the use of one in particular.[16] Even the latest branch of terrorism studies, CTS, seeks to examine how certain definitions of terrorism are constructed via particular discursive mechanisms which produces a hierarchy of violent acts ranging from the legitimate to the illegitimate use of force.[17] The effort to define terror – to outline its distinct character and essential features as a specific kind of political violence – only intensified after 9/11.

In the 1980s, Schmid, Jongman, and Stohl famously found more than 100 different definitions of terrorism. It is often noted that the emphasis on fear or terror, which Wilkinson saw as etymologically essential, appeared in only about half.[18] They identified key lingering questions in the

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[10]Martha Crenshaw (ed.), *Terrorism in Context* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), pp. 3–24; Thomas Badey, 'Defining international terrorism: A pragmatic approach', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 10:1 (1998), pp. 90–107; Boaz Ganor, 'Defining terrorism: Is one's man's terrorist another man's freedom fighter?', in David Lowe, Austin Turk, Das Dilip (eds), *Examining Political Violence: Studies of Terrorism, Counterterrorism, and Internal War* (New York: CRC Press, 2013), pp. 3–24; Gilbert Ramsay, 'Why terrorism can, but should not be defined', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 8:2 (2015), pp. 211, 1–28; Alex Schmid, A. J. Jongman, and Michael Stohl, *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories, and Literature* (Amsterdam: Transaction Books, 1988); Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Michel Wieviorka,'Terrorism in the context of academic research', in Martha Crenshaw (ed.), *Terrorism in Context* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), pp. 597–606.

[11]Bjørkheim, 'One terrorism', p. 488.

[12]Alexandra Homolar and Pablo A. Rodríguez-Merino, 'Making sense of terrorism: A narrative approach to the study of violent events', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 12:4 (2019), pp. 561–81.

[13]Walter Lacquer, *Terrorism* (London: Abacus, 1980); Paul Wilkinson, *Political Terrorism* (London: Macmillan, 1974).

[14]Lisa Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented 'Terrorism'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Joseba Zulaika, 'The self-fulfilling prophecies of counterterrorism', *Radical History Review*, 85 (2003), pp. 191–9.

[15]Badey, 'Defining international terrorism'.

[16]Andrew Silke (ed.), *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements and Failures* (London: Routledge, 2003).

[17]Kieran Ford, 'This violence good, that violence bad: Normative and state-centric discourses in British school textbooks', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 12:4 (2019), pp. 693–714.

[18]Wilkinson, *Political Terrorism*.

field, which were largely how to distinguish terrorism from other forms of violence, including guerrilla warfare and crime.[19] Importantly, these definitional debates in terrorism discourse sought to emphasise the existence of a referent: an object that exists (an act or set of acts of political violence), rather than one that is constructed. Given the widely assumed pre-existing status of this object, all that scholars and practitioners were left to do was to choose the proper definition to capture this very real, material referent of terrorism. In the aftermath of 9/11, the inability to anticipate and prevent the attack was largely attributed to an issue of inter-agency coordination, and one indicator of this was the lack of a central definition of terrorism. Indeed, having a good definition of terrorism has been widely connected in the scholarly community to effective international coordination and mobilisation of strategic response.[20]

With the war on terror at full steam, critical scholarship in the 2000s dared to ask a different question: what if this so-called conceptual fuzziness was the very point? Work within CTS has sought to emphasise a deeper dimension to definitional debates: the interconnected links between researchers and their object of study and politics of naming in the field; that, in a sense, 'we all make terrorism what (we say) it is'.[21] Richard Jackson posed a similar point in his depiction of the 'inherent ontological instability' of the concept of terrorism.[22] Hülsse and Spencer demonstrated how the discursive construction of terrorism post-9/11 shifted over time in Germany: at first constituted as war, but shifting after 2004 to a framing of crime, with Al-Qaeda becoming a criminal organisation rather than a military one, feeding the narrative of terrorism as an internal threat and underlining the need for a judicial response.[23] Lisa Stampnitzky painstakingly described the changes and transformations of a discourse that colonised the study of insurgent movements in the 1970s and was infused with a strong sense of anti-communism during the Reagan presidency.[24] Ondrej Ditrych went as far back to the 1930s as the point where a shared discourse on international terrorism was delineated.[25]

All of these works shared what Zulaika defined as an understanding of terrorism which attributed to the concept the status of being the episteme of our times: the grid of intelligibility with which researchers, civil society actors, and policymakers understood, evaluated, and responded to political violence.[26] In this sense, while terrorism discourse may itself draw on discourses of evil that pre-date and were co-opted by the war on terror, we are less concerned with parsing out the stories that specifically emerged under the auspices of the war on terror as separate from others, and rather with articulating the role that conceptual fuzziness plays in sustaining a particular view of the world at given moments in time.

CTS' paramount contribution to the study of political violence can be summarised in two lessons. First, due to this fuzziness, terrorism becomes the symbolic repository of an imagined universal antagonist,[27] 'a virtually ubiquitous phenomenon, for which there is a shared responsibility in fighting'.[28] This fighting, via mechanisms of counterterrorism, becomes envisioned as obligatory,

[19]Schmid, Jongman, and Stohl, *Political Terrorism*.

[20]Ganor, 'Defining terrorism', p. 18.

[21]Nicholas Onuf, 'Making terror/ism', *International Relations*, 23:1 (2009), pp. 53–60 (p. 54), available at: {https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117808100609}.

[22]Richard Jackson, 'The core commitments of critical terrorism studies', *European Political Science*, 6:3 (2007), pp. 244–51.

[23]Rainer Hülsse and Alexander Spencer, 'The metaphor of terror: Terrorism studies and the constructivist turn', *Security Dialogue*, 39:6 (2008), pp. 571–92.

[24]Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror*.

[25]Ondrej Ditrych, 'From discourse to dispositif: States and terrorism between Marseille and 9/11', *Security Dialogue*, 44:3 (2013), pp. 223–40.

[26]Zulaika, 'The self-fulfilling prophecies'.

[27]Mark Neocleous, 'The universal adversary will attack: Pigs, pirates, zombies, Satan and the class war', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 8:1 (2015), pp. 15–32.

[28]Bjørkheim, 'One terrorism', p. 488.

with no other choice, connected with the idea that negotiation with terrorists is politically unfeasible.[29] Harmonie Toros has demonstrated how the very application of the label of terrorism may be designed to forestall non-violent responses.[30] This relates to the notion that within the war on terror discourse, domestic security problems become envisaged as international security problems 'moved out of the realm of the strategic and "selfishly national" and relocated within the "higher grounds" of the morally good'.[31]

Second, the term terrorism itself comes to acquire a significant *moral* power, a normative judgement that is invoked, even without it being said, and which affects our perceptions of what counts as violence proper.[32] This is connected with the justification for the need to focus on definitions. Ganor suggests that one of the key reasons why we need one streamlined definition of terrorism is normative: we need to be able to separate terrorism from other forms of violence in order to morally condemn it more harshly and undermine its legitimacy.[33] Stampnitzky's now classic genealogy of terrorism studies explains that during the long institutionalisation of the subfield, 'the concept of terrorism became inherently associated with a moral judgment about the acts that we place in that category: terrorism is unacceptable violence'.[34] This conception of terrorism as inherently immoral is relatively new in the historical context; prior to the 1970s,[35] terrorism was treated as a more neutral tactic that was often adopted as a revolutionary strategy.[36] In the 1970s, efforts to reconceptualise terrorism as a particularly evil form of violence, rather than a strategic form, centred on Israel's Jonathan Institute, which sought to bring together world leaders to draw attention to the problem of terrorism.[37]

[29] Carl Miller, 'Is it possible and preferable to negotiate with terrorists?', *Defence Studies*, 11:1 (2011), pp. 145–85.

[30] Harmonie Toros, 'We don't negotiate with terrorists!': Legitimacy and complexity in terrorist conflicts', *Security Dialogue*, 39:4 (2008), pp. 407–26.

[31] Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 50.

[32] Helen Dexter, 'Terrorism and violence: Another violence is possible?', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 5:1 (2012), pp. 121–37.

[33] Ganor, 'Defining terrorism', p. 20.

[34] Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror*, p. 8.

[35] We must emphasise here that much of the history of terrorism studies we allude to in this article refers to the Anglo-American context of civilian-led research on political violence. The traditional timelines offered by genealogies of the subfield should not be taken as universalisable. They would not stand up to scrutiny, for example, in different contexts such as the French military writings on the Algerian War of Liberation in the 1950s or the production of counter-insurgency field manuals by the South American forces during the Cold/Dirty War. In both cases, the moral and analytical aspects of terrorism were never truly separated, and the sphere of counterterrorism and counter-insurgency remained blurred for a long time. Likewise, the colonisation of the study of political violence by the signifiers of terrorism discourse, in civilian-led research, which is masterfully dissected and described by Lisa Stampnitzky, should not be seen as universal but as the local outcome of provincial intellectual and political disputes within the sphere of influence of US academia. For example, this shift simply did not happen in Brazil, where the historiographical production on political violence in the late 20th century rarely resorted to the concept of terrorism and was simply constituted as the history of the *armed struggle*, focusing on themes which lie normally outside the radar of terrorism discourse, such as the reasons for the failure of the socialist revolution in the country. Some tentative explanations for this absence would include (1) the association between the signifier terrorism and conservative/reactionary movements which fought to discredit the resistance against the military regime and promote historical denialism of state terror (which re-emerged with a vengeance during the rise of the far-right leader Jair Bolsonaro); (2) the dissociation of conservative parties and groups from the legacy of militarism and violations of human rights during the political transition, which became known as the reconfiguration of *a direita envergonhada* (the shy right); (3) perhaps more interestingly, due to the contrast it poses to terrorism studies in the North, is the fact that the historiography of political violence was enriched by the boom of testimonial literature and a sizable number of former members of clandestine organisations turned historians of the period. See Henrique Tavares Furtado, *Politics of Impunity: The Failure of Transitional Justice in Brazil* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022); Henrique Tavares Furtado, 'On demons and dreamers: Violence, silence and the politics of impunity in the Brazilian truth commission', *Security Dialogue*, 48:4 (2017), pp. 316–33; Maud Chirio and Mariana Joffily, 'Moderniser la répression politique: La stratégie de formation de "l'homme de renseignement" sous la dictature Brésilienne', *Histoire@Politique*, 34:January–April (2018), pp. 1–14; Camila Rocha, Esther Solano, and Jonas Medeiros (eds), *The Bolsonaro Paradox: The Public Sphere and Right-Wing Counterpublicity in Contemporary Brazil* (Cham: Springer, 2021).

[36] Mats Fridlund, 'Terrorism: A very brief history', *Max Plank Institute*, (8 March 2019), available at: {https://www.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/feature-story/terrorism-very-brief-history}.

[37] Edward Herman and Gerry O'Sullivan, *The 'Terrorism' Industry: The Experts and Institutions That Shape Our View of Terror* (New York: Pantheon, 1989), pp. 104–6.

The identification of terrorism's ontological instability is central. Like genocide, the term acquired power in its usage, to the extent that the definition no longer mattered; rather, the power was situated in the invocation of the concept itself, which also invoked its correlate meanings. Specifically, and here the comparison with genocide is apt, terrorism came to be mobilised not as an analytical concept to understand political violence, but as a device to order the world on ethical, moral, and legal grounds, useful precisely because of the distinctions it introduces.

But despite the gains of CTS, the hunt for the missing link between *words and things*, between terror and its appropriate referent, is far from over. As Bjørkheim notes, research on terrorism as a general feature tends to 'treat it ontologically as a pre-given phenomenon' even in the present day.[38] What takes the place of the true referent, even among critical approaches, is the heuristic privilege afforded to *the violent act itself*. Traditional terrorism scholarship always adopted an actor-centric approach, hence the importance of defining who counts as a terrorist in the context of the definitional debates.[39] Even within CTS, where there is widespread recognition of the socially constructed nature of the concept, the ultimate conclusion is still that terrorism is a tactic which needs to be understood in its historical or political context, but the violent act is still the focus.[40] In other words, while CTS moves from the actor to the act in a discursive sense – emulating the evolution of perpetrator studies from the study of 'violent individuals' to the conditions of perpetration – debates still very much orbit the field's traditional frames of reference.[41] The scrutiny of the mythography of terror still coexists uneasily with the belief that the truth at the heart of the tactic can be reached and understood with reference to the appropriate historical context or an excavation of the terrorist subjectivity.[42]

This traditional framing involves what we call the *(il)legitimacy trap*, more specifically the relationship between terrorism discourse and the condemnation of violence. Historically, the terrorism label has been claimed by authoritarian governments to delegitimise domestic dissent and justify violent campaigns of political persecution, such as in Cold War Argentina, in Syria against democratic protestors, particularly in the early days of the revolution, or in China against Uyghurs. This is feasible precisely because of the conceptual fuzziness of terrorism, because of the essential instability between the analytical and the moral that cannot be suppressed, and which surfaces within certain historical contexts and functions to order and reorder our perceptions of the world. It is this instability that the concept of the aesthetical captures. Within this, it is important to consider the politics of the field. Indeed, scholars have suggested that terrorism studies as a field may be intimately linked to a politics that justified counter-insurgency tactics – 'counterinsurgency masquerading as political science'[43] – with Jackson noting that most terrorism studies scholars were embedded in or deeply connected to state institutions.[44] As a result, the scholarly focus, translated into the policy arena, has been on denunciation of terrorism rather than on comprehending it, which Jean-Marc Sorel suggests is connected to the underdevelopment of terrorism as a concept.[45]

While uses of the term by authoritarians are often deemed unfortunate co-optations of an otherwise-scientific/neutral study of political violence, we argue that they are, in effect, central to the workings of the signifier terrorism as a means of making sense of collective suffering and ordering the world. When Bashar al-Assad of Syria refers to democratic protesters as terrorists, then, he is conjuring the moral power of a word (terrorism) to define particular types of violence

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[38]Bjørkheim, 'One terrorism', p. 491.

[39]Hülsse and Spencer, 'The metaphor of terror', p. 572.

[40]Jackson, 'The core commitments'.

[41]Alexandra Homolar and Pablo A. Rodríguez-Merino, 'Making sense of terrorism: A narrative approach to the study of violent events', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 12:4 (2019), pp. 561–81.

[42]Joseba Zulaika and William Douglass, 'The terrorist subject: Terrorism studies and the absent subjectivity', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 1:1 (2008), pp. 27–36.

[43]Schmid, Jongman, and Stohl, *Political Terrorism*, p. 182.

[44]Jackson, 'The core commitments'.

[45]Jean-Marc Sorel, 'Some questions about the definition of terrorism and the fight against its financing', *European Journal of International Law*, 14:2 (2003), pp. 365–78 (p. 370).

as (il)legitimate. As Ford has noted, in British schoolbooks we see a fairly straightforward black-and-white discourse of 'this violence good, that violence bad' related to Al-Qaeda terrorism and Western intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan.[46] Richards has similarly suggested that both ISIS and Western governments adopt exclusionary narratives of good and evil, with each depicting 'the other as Evil by evoking interpretations of this concept tied to premodern superstition and irrationality'.[47]

Terrorism discourse draws on a sense that the violence at stake is *illegitimate*, on the language of *evil*, and on the figure of the *monster*. Marco Pinfari details a long history of representations of terrorists as 'inhuman, unthinkable, and unmanageable', mobilised both by counterterrorism discourse and by clandestine organisations themselves.[48] He notes that 'the nature of terrorism as a phenomenon based on the projection (or internalisation) of fear also contributes to making monster metaphors not just an incidental part of the political discourse but rather one of the fundamental, constitutive components of the way in which terrorism is presented and understood'.[49] Pinfari also emphasises the connections between monstrosity and the theatrical, dramatic, and performative dynamics of terrorism.

But what does this dynamic look like? The following section focuses on terrorism discourse in the context of the war in Ukraine. Specifically, we argue that great power rivalry and proxy war, concepts well understood during the Cold War, have been refigured in the contemporary Ukrainian context using the language of terrorism. This demonstrates two key things: first, that terrorism as a discourse continues to be mobilised in powerful ways, even outside of the specific context of what is traditionally understood as terrorist violence, and second, that terrorism works at the level of *aesthesis*, reorganising the messy reality of death and suffering according to visible and legible terms.

Terror in Ukraine

The war in Ukraine that began with Russian incursions on Ukrainian territory in 2022 (with roots in the annexation of Crimea in 2014) has drawn much attention from scholars of international security, raising questions about the future of the liberal international order.[50] Characterised as an inevitable return to rivalry or as 'the return of the Cold War', tensions in East–West relations centred on Ukraine seem to indicate the re-emergence of Cold War-era belief systems, not simply Cold War-era politics.[51] Yet as much as this case has inaugurated a revitalisation of great power rivalry discourse, news coverage and policy discussion of the case have framed it quite clearly using the language of terrorism.

This section seeks to make two main points. First, it assesses the depiction of the war in Ukraine using the framing of terrorism. How have scholars, journalists, and politicians used the framing of terrorism to describe this case? Specifically, how have great power dynamics been subsumed into this framing? Second, it outlines how, following the discussion in the previous section, the term terrorism works as an *aesthetic signifier*, blurring the boundaries between dispassionate analysis and moralising in the process of making sense and ordering the world. Drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière (see note 7), the term aesthetic here refers to the ways in which this signifier is used in the reorganisation of a regime of visibility of death and suffering via a conjoined moral, political, and

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[46] Ford, 'This violence good'.

[47] Imogen Richards, '"Good and evil" narratives in Islamic state media and Western government statements', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 10:3 (2017), pp.404–28 (p. 405).

[48] Marco Pinfari, *Terrorists as Monsters: The Unmanageable Other from the French Revolution to the Islamic State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 14.

[49] Pinfari, *Terrorists as Monsters*, p. 177.

[50] Thomas Wright, 'The return to great power rivalry was inevitable', *The Atlantic*, (12 September 2018), available at: {https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/09/liberal-international-order-free-world-trump-authoritarianism/569881/}.

[51] J. L. Black and Michael Johns (eds), *The Return of the Cold War: Ukraine, The West and Russia* (London: Routledge, 2016).

juridical frame of good and evil. Because the signifier terrorism is structured and underpinned by an inherent ambiguity or fuzziness, as evident in the definitional debates, in seeking to pin down the concept, instead a moral veracity linked to the concept is posited and reinforced. We do not see the journalistic and political uses of the concept as misuses, that is, as corruptions of an otherwise-rational category, but rather as key to an understanding of terror's aesthetic function and appeal.

As noted, the conflict in Ukraine has been quite thoroughly framed using the language of terrorism. Ukrainian President Zelensky has forcefully labelled Russia a terrorist state, noting in 2022 that 'Russia must be isolated at all levels and held accountable in order to end its long-standing policy of terrorism in Ukraine and across the globe'.[52] Zelensky is not alone is his use of the signifier terrorism. In 2023, the European Parliament voted to label Russia a 'state sponsor of terrorism,' noting that Russia uses 'means of terrorism' to commit war crimes,[53] itself an interesting determination because it frames Russia as both external to the terrorism (state sponsor) and agentic in its use of terrorism as a tactic of war (means of terrorism).[54]

This view seems to be in line with wider, vernacular understandings. For example, across the Atlantic, American-Polish journalist Anne Applebaum has also argued that Russia's war in Ukraine has turned into terrorism, suggesting that it is different from most contemporary wars.[55] Exceptionality, particularly with regards to enemy behaviour, is a hallmark of terrorism studies, often used to justify extralegal mechanisms of counterterrorism. This logic of exceptionality is underpinned by a particular normative power that functions in political ways. To return to the war in Ukraine, Applebaum argues that it is being fought in two ways: on a traditional front with combat over territory in eastern Ukraine, but also in various cities around the country that 'looks less like war and more like multiple acts of terrorism', referring primarily to Russian bombing campaigns that have become part of daily life in Ukraine. She uses the US criminal code definition of terrorism which frames it as 'an intimidation campaign using violence' to suggest that this maps onto Russia's targeting of Ukrainian cities.

And here we return again to the definitional debates. Yet Applebaum is not seeking to debate the definition but rather to apply it to a contemporary case. It is the case she has selected that makes this interesting for our purposes here. She suggests that because Russia is not pursuing 'traditional war aims' during their attacks on urban civilian targets, it falls under the definition of terrorism. As she notes: 'Russia, a legitimate, recognized world power – a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council – is directing constant, repetitive, visible terrorist violence against civilians, many of whom are nowhere near the fighting. The attacks are not errors or accidents.' But why not stick to the legal definition of war crimes, which would fit Applebaum's criteria? In this vein, the concept of terrorism is used to suggest that this non-traditional exceptional war-making is infused with significant moral implications, made clear in her notion that Russian attacks of this sort target human rights, international law, global institutions, and the very sense of shared humanity that underpins these systems, highlighting how extensively terrorism discourse has become embedded in moral notions of global order.

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[52]European Parliament, 'European Parliament declares Russia to be a state sponsor of terrorism', (23 November 2022), available at: {https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20221118IPR55707/european-parliament-declares-russia-to-be-a-state-sponsor-of-terrorism}.

[53]See Pinfari, *Terrorists as Monsters*.

[54]For more on the concept of state terrorism, see Richard Jackson, 'The ghosts of state terror: Knowledge, politics and terrorism studies', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 1:3 (2008), pp. 377–92; Michael Stohl, 'Old myths, new fantasies and the enduring realities of terrorism', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 1:1 (2008), pp. 5–16; Lee Jarvis and Michael Lister, 'State terrorism research and critical terrorism studies: An assessment', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 7:1 (2014), pp. 43–61; Ruth Blakeley, 'State violence as state terrorism', in Marie Breen-Smyth (ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Political Violence* (London: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 63–78.

[55]Anne Applebaum, 'Russia's war in Ukraine has turned into terrorism', *The Atlantic*, (13 July 2022), available at: {https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/07/russia-war-crimes-terrorism-definition/670500/}.

Even though the conflict is situated as a great power rivalry,[56] the language of terrorism does not disappear into thin air; on the contrary, it comes to envelop it. The fact that the war in Ukraine is portrayed as such a classic example of realist great power politics, as Mearsheimer has argued, does not preclude its reliance on terrorism discourse as an epistemic grid of intelligibility through which this rivalry is read. Part of the reason for this is that terrorism discourse provides a background against which audiences can properly understand in familiar terms the references being made about and against Russia's criminal act of aggression. How we understand this overwhelming war and the appalling suffering that ensued is filtered through terrorism discourse and thus must be reapplied to this episode of great power rivalry.

It is at this point that a critique of terrorism discourse might face the first problem caused by the (il)legitimacy trap, which we illustrate with reference to Mearsheimer's polemic statements on the conflict. Mearsheimer, who does not identify as a CTS scholar, has himself also emphasised the public tendency to want to understand the Russian invasion of Ukraine in what he sees as primarily moral terms. He suggests that American belief systems, which structure Western understandings more broadly, centralise the US as a 'noble country' working for 'the good of the international community'. He goes on to say that Americans frame the conflict in moral terms: 'they're the bad guys and we're the good guys'.[57] He has long argued – to the ire of many – that this framing results in a lack of acknowledgement of the role the West played in provoking Russian aggression by seeking to bring Ukraine into NATO and the European Union.[58] However problematic Mearsheimer's argument in this vein, he received personal attacks rather than oscholarly disagreement alone, perhaps due to a moral sense that his argument was untenable within the very dynamics of good and evil he references.

While great power politics has long been suffused with ideological values, in the notion that 'we are the good guys', harkening back to the values-based divisions of the Cold War, there is a new spin on this moral argument that draws on the legacies of the war on terror. One key reason for this may be that US moral hegemony rests heavily on claims of legitimacy underpinning the global fight against terrorism, which also positions good versus evil as in the classic George W. Bush's formulation of 'you're either with us or you're with the terrorists.'[59] Here is where we start to see the commonalities between the invocation of the monster in the context of terrorism and in the Ukrainian case. As Puar and Rai note, the dominant media has focused on particular language related to Islamic militants, including 'monster', 'shadowy evil', and 'diabolical', which they suggest frames the terrorist actor as 'the opposite of all that is just, human, and good. The terrorist-monster is pure evil and must be destroyed, according to this view.'[60]

It is not astonishing that a war that has caused so much suffering and produced so many scenes of death and stories of inhumanity is described via similar discursive tropes by European and anglophone commentators, let alone Ukrainians who are the direct victims and witnesses of this horror. All of this is conveyed in a direct and parsimonious way by the simple allusion to the words *evil, monstrous*, and *terror*. These signifiers, nestled as they are in the symbolic orbit of terrorism

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[56]Emma Ashford, 'The persistence of great-power politics: What the war in Ukraine has revealed about geopolitical rivalry', *Foreign Affairs*, (20 February 2023), available at: {https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/persistence-great-power-politics}.

[57]John Mearsheimer, 'I've been attacked … not with facts and logic, but personally: John Mearsheimer on the War in Ukraine', (12 January 2023), available at: {https://oxfordpoliticalreview.com/amp/2023/01/12/ive-been-attacked-not-with-facts-and-logic-but-personally-john-mearsheimer-on-the-war-in-ukraine/}.

[58]John Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault: The liberal delusions that provoked Putin', *Foreign Affairs*, 93:5 (2014), pp. 77–89.

[59]George W. Bush, 'Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American people', (20 September 2001), available at: {https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html}.

[60]Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai, 'Monster, terrorist, fag: The war on terrorism and the production of docile patriots', *Social Text*, 20:3 (2002), pp. 117–148 (p. 112).

discourse, are at work, illuminating the overwhelmingly horrific reality of the front when journalist John Sweeney suggests that Vladimir Putin is a 'fragile monster',[61] when Henry Kissinger likens Putin to a character from Dostoevsky,[62] and when Zelensky, echoing Martin Niemöller, warns that 'evil is still around today, and when evil comes after you, there will be no one to protect you'.[63] More than serving specific political objectives,[64] this framing, the invocation of 'evil' and 'terrorism' as proxies is part and parcel of the aesthetic ordering of the world; the way in which human beings make sense of what is ahead of them by mobilising vocabularies that lie behind.

The framing of the Ukraine case in the language of terror helps to illuminate and suggest a response to an observation within CTS with regards to the diffusion of counterterrorism dynamics beyond their original contexts. Mynster Christensen has noted that the unexpected nature of terrorist attacks has led to the development of precautionary measures that have proliferated even in states that have not experienced terrorist attacks. Counterterrorism measures have become standard policy, regardless of the actual existence of terrorism. Mynster Christensen suggests, through the example of Ghana, that states translate global norms for local contexts, operationalising pre-emptive measures in the context of local policing. She refers to this as 'counterterrorism in the absence of terror',[65] emphasising the way counterterrorism has metastasised. Yet this is intimately connected to the diffusion of terrorism itself, not as a phenomenon, but as a discourse, initially deployed by state agencies before and after 9/11, and later taking on a life of its own.

To sum up, in the characterisation of Russia's actions as terrorism, we can see the afterlives of terrorism discourse, instructing vernacular uses outside of the immediate context of non-state clandestine violence. We should note here that while we have focused on Ukraine, and the conflict there has perhaps had the effect of shifting global focus to the resurgence of great power rivalry, the legacy of terrorism discourse traced here is not unique to this case. Indeed, the flattening of terror and terrorism should be situated within the larger dynamics of violence, as we trace in the next section.

Terror and (in)visible suffering

This section takes the critique of terrorism discourse beyond the moralising condemnation of violence towards a larger dynamic associated with the political formalisation of human suffering, which we dub the *management of monstrosity*. To illustrate our point, we draw similarities between the characterisation of terror as *unacceptable/illegitimate violence* by CTS scholars and the works of political theorists on violence, in particular Claudian Card's concept of atrocities and Vittorio Bufacchi's etymology of violence. We argue that to better understand the political work being done by terrorism discourse, CTS scholars must qualify their understanding of 'violence' by breaking it down into smaller units, or its constitutive parts, namely the experience of suffering, which we see as a fundamental human experience. Our objective is to anchor a critique of terrorism discourse more solidly into different aesthetic regimes that control and restrict the ways in which human collectivities translate, organise, and silence different expressions of suffering.

[61]'A fragile monster': Author describes Putin's Character', *CNN*, available at: {https://edition.cnn.com/videos/tv/2022/08/08/amanpour-john-sweeney-putin-ukraine.cnn}.

[62]Peter Savdonik, 'The secret source of Putin's evil', *Vanity Fair*, (10 January 2017), available at: {https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/01/the-secret-source-of-putins-evil}.

[63]Cited in A. Craig Copetas, 'How Putin convinced the world that evil does exist', *The Daily Beast*, (4 March 2023), available at: {https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-putin-convinced-the-world-that-evil-does-exist}.

[64]Farhan Chak Mujahid, 'This is not the time to brand Vladimir Putin an "evil madman"', *Al-Jazeera*, (19 March 2022), available at: {https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/3/19/this-is-not-the-time-to-brand-putin-an-evil-madman}.

[65]Maya Mynster Christensen, 'Assessing threatening uncertainties: Counterterrorism and everyday practices of preemptive policing in Ghana', *Security Dialogue*, 54:2 (2023), pp. 137–54.

If we are to agree with Stampnitzky and other CTS scholars that the essence of terrorism denotes unacceptable violence, then terrorism discourse, including the general debates that permeate the field of terrorism studies, must be situated in the greater category of knowledge claims about violence. If we do that, we quickly realise that the definitional problems that define the study of terrorism are not unique. The very first thing that scholars venturing into the overwhelming complexity of the 'field' of violence studies notice is that, much like *terrorism*, the adjective *violent* can be applied to a plethora of disparate phenomena, sometimes with no apparent links.[66] Just like terrorism, violence works 'like pornography, we know [it] when we see it'.[67]

Fortunately, tentative typologies of violence as a social phenomenon exist, and they can help us navigate this complexity. Bufacchi provides a helpful point of departure in unpacking what we mean by *unacceptable violence* beyond the dangerous cliché that what is unacceptable violence for some would somehow be divine justice for others.[68] Bufacchi begins by tracing the etymological origins of the word in Latin: '*violentia*, meaning "vehemence", a passionate and uncontrolled force'. He explains that contemporary uses of the term violence have associated the notion of passionate, uncontrolled force with a sense of violation – the trespassing of norms, values, bodies – which he contends comes 'from the Latin *violare*, meaning "infringement"'.[69] Interestingly, the senses of an uncontrollable (excessive) and unwelcome (violating) experience is also at play in political framings of violent events as terrorism.[70]

Though Bufacchi's duo *violentia–violare* is imperfect – for example, it does not tell us anything about non-Western ways of making sense of suffering, as in the Maya Ixil concept of *txitzi'n*,[71] and it lacks the simplicity of the German *Gewalt*[72] – it does offer a semiological map; a way into the symbolic currency of a specific socio-politico-legal order which dictates what, in the universe of daily experiences, will effectively be seen as violent. And if that is the case, we contend that we must delve into what Kleinman and Kleinman defined as 'the existential grounds of human experience',[73] the raw material of discourse on violence, as it were, our relationship to suffering.

Commonly seen as pertaining to the domain of individual or private life, suffering 'is profoundly social in the sense that it helps constitute the social world'.[74] In a psychoanalytical, Lacanian orientation, what we call here suffering, goes beyond different expressions of mental or physical pain – the injuries and trauma we could easily associate with terror – to incorporate the more fluid

[66]Michel Wieviorka, *Violence: A New Approach* (London: Sage Publications, 2009); Randal Collins, *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Raymond Lee and Eizabeth Anne Stanko (eds), *Researching Violence: Essays on Methodology and Measurement* (London: Routledge, 2003); Frazer and Hutchings, *Violence and Political Theory*.

[67]Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat* (New York: Random House Trade, 2007), p. 3, emphasis added.

[68]Vittorio Bufacchi, 'Two concepts of violence', *Political Studies Review*, 3:2 (2005), pp. 193–204; Vittorio Bufacchi, 'Rethinking violence', *Global Crime*, 10:4 (2009), pp. 293–7.

[69]Bufacchi, 'Two concepts of violence', p. 194.

[70]Alexandra Homolar and Pablo A. Rodríguez-Merino, 'Making sense of terrorism: A narrative approach to the study of violent events', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 12:4 (2019), pp. 561–81.

[71]Ligia Peláez (ed.), *Memorias Rebeldes contra el olvido: Paasantzila txumb'al ti sortzeb'al k'u'l* (Guatemala: AVANCSO, 2008).

[72]Bertrand Ogilvie, 'Généalogie de la violence', *Tumultes*, 57 (2021), pp. 11–40; Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene* (London: Verso; 2009); Étienne Balibar, 'Reflections on "Gewalt"', *Historical Materialism*, 17:1 (2009), pp. 99–125; Étienne Balibar, *Violence et civilité* (Paris: Galilée, 2010); Jacques Derrida, 'Force of law: The "mystical fundation of authority"', in Michel Rosenfeld, David Gray Carlson, and Drucilla Cornell (eds), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 3–67; Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of violence', in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), pp. 277–300.

[73]Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman, 'The appeal of experience; The dismay of images: Cultural appropriations of suffering in our times', in Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock (eds), *Social Suffering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 1–24 (p. 1).

[74]Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock, 'Introduction', in Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock (eds), *Social Suffering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. ix–xxvii (p. xxiv).

understandings of angst, anxiety,[75] and a general discomfort[76] that we are granted by the faculty of speech. As speaking beings, human beings are both blessed with the capacity to name themselves and their environment and burdened with an unnameable remanent, the things which cannot be easily put into words. Our understanding of suffering incorporates this ontological dimension, which Lacan illustrated with a play on words, comparing the word suffering with the French expression *en souffrance*, meaning pending or awaiting deliverance.[77]

CTS inaugurated in Politics and IR a research agenda long pursued by anthropologists and sociologists of taking seriously the connections between terror, violence, and language.[78] Terrorism studies has long seen terror as deriving from the tradition of propaganda by deed and therefore as a communicative phenomenon.[79] Similarly, different vernacular languages admit, colloquially, that *violence speaks*, or that *one can speak through violence*.[80] We can think of violent acts as conveying messages of terror or the cries of resistance.[81] Or we can double down on this observation, as critical scholars have done, and argue that violence is always inscribed in a larger cultural text, mobilising certain tropes, the metaphors, metonymies, and gothic themes that infuse violent acts with meaning and a status.[82]

But if we are to conceptualise this problem in a way that does justice to the critical traditions in IR and CTS, we must turn closer attention to the effects of terrorism discourse in formalising/concealing human suffering. In fact, our call is not so much a 'turn to suffering' in terrorism studies as a *return* to the psychoanalytical foundations of the critique, which inspired the mythography of terror and narrative approaches to the study of violence in the discipline. The first step is to regard violence, to borrow a Lacanian formulation, as something that is *structured like a language*. We ought to take seriously the break this line enacted in relation to the age-old 'problem of mimesis –

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[75] Andreja Zevnik, Emmy Eklund, and Emmanuel-Pierre Guittet (eds), *Politics of Anxiety* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); Andreja Zevnik, 'From fear to anxiety: An exploration into a new socio-political temporality', *Law and Critique*, 28:3 (2017), pp. 235–46; Andreja Zevnik, 'Anxiety and political action in times of the Covid-19 pandemic', *International Relations*, 37:1 (2023), pp. 164–71; Andreja Zevnik, 'Anxious politics: Contesting fantasies surrounding the removal of statues of slavery and the Confederacy', *International Studies Quarterly*, 67:3 (2023), p. sqad054.

[76] Sarah Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

[77] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000); Lacan, *Écrits*; Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1999); Samo Tomšič and Andreja Zevnik, *Jacques Lacan: Between Psychoanalysis and Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015); Andreja Zevnik, *Lacan, Deleuze and World Politics: Re-thinking the Ontology of the Political Subject* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

[78] Jackson, 'The core commitments'; Richard Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counter-Terrorism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012); Charlotte Heath-Kelly, 'Critical terrorism studies, critical theory and the "naturalistic fallacy"', *Security Dialogue*, 41:3 (2010), pp. 235–54; Henrique Tavares Furtado, 'Against state terror: Lessons on memory, counterterrorism and resistance from the Global South', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 8:1 (2015), pp. 72–89; Henrique Tavares Furtado, 'When does repression become political? The use of the language of trauma in the context of violence and anxiety', in Andreja Zevnik, Emmy Eklund, and Emmanuel-Pierre Guittet (eds), *Politics of Anxiety* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), pp. 37–58; Jarvis Lee, 'Critical Terrorism Studies and the Far-Right: Beyond Problems and Solutions?' *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 15:1 (2022), pp. 13–37; Harmonie Toros, 'Terrorists, scholars and ordinary people: Confronting terrorism studies with field experiences', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 1:2 (2008), pp. 279–92; Harmonie Toros and Luca Mavelli, 'Terrorism, organised crime and the biopolitics of violence', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 6:1 (2013), pp. 73–91; Zulaika and Douglass, 'The terrorist subject'; Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Ireland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[79] Lacquer, *Terrorism*; Ramsay, 'Why terrorism can, but should not be defined'.

[80] Rita Laura Segato, *Las estructuras elementares de la violencia: Ensayos sobre género entre la antropología, el psicoanálisis y los derechos humanos* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros, 2010).

[81] To give an example in line with our case study, think for instance of the widespread practice adopted by Ukrainian soldiers of inscribing messages addressed to the Russian army on their artillery shells. See Maria Varenikoya, 'Ukrainians send a message with their bombs. On them, too', *New York Times*, (15 May 2023), available at: {https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/15/world/europe/ukrainian-rocket-messages.html?smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur}.

[82] François Debrix, *Global Powers of Horror: Security, Politics, and the Body in Pieces* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017); Richard Devetak, 'The gothic scene of international relations: Ghosts, monsters, terror and the sublime after September 11', *Review of International Studies*, 31:4 (2005), pp. 621–43.

of language as imitating or representing what it refers to'.[83] This means accepting that political violence is to be situated at the level of the play of signifiers, ridding itself of any remnants of a mimetic or referentialist worldview or the wish for a minimalist ontology to finally suture words and things back together;[84] but it also means that we must devote attention to the raw material of discourses on violence.

The second step is to unpacking the concept of violence in IR and CTS, seeing the senses of *violentia* and *violare* as the two conceptual poles that organise the inscription of suffering – which awaits deliverance in the aftermath – in the contemporary Western worldview as *violence proper*; the two central ideas that make up for the sense of *unacceptable* in shared imaginaries of terror, not only as unacceptable violence but beyond that, and most importantly from a critical perspective, as *forms of suffering* which are *consensually recognised as unacceptable.*

We should propose an uncompromising critique of terrorism studies (rather than a critical version of it) by emphasising that terror is a signifier with no correlative referent; that, paraphrasing Lacan, terror and terrorism are only signifiers meant to signify something for other signifiers – evil, irrational, madness, barbaric, justice, sacrifice – and that 'their meanings derive from language itself'.[85] Needless to say, this is not the same as arguing that there is nothing there, as if the kind of collective suffering and mass death that terrorism experts are all too keen to feed upon had no bearing in reality. We restrict ourselves to repeating the claim, because it needs repeating, until it is heard, that there is *no Thing* there, no coherent and unified object (the thing itself, be it terror as a tactic, be it an illegitimate act of violence) to which the signifiers orbiting terrorism discourse are intrinsically connected and therefore supposed to name. All that we have is the formless fluidity of (in)human suffering, awaiting a process of collective formalisation to become visible in the political sphere.

Simply put, terrorism is another word utilised in attempts at producing a political consensus on what kinds of suffering should be seen as utterly unacceptable. More than a type of clandestine activity, a rationale, an identity, or even just an empty signifier, as Zulaika and Douglass would have it, terrorism continues to operate as an *aesthetic signifier*, drawing consensual lines between the forms of suffering that matter and those that do not and therefore managing an unequal economy of visibility between these experiences.[86] This is to say that the deployment of terrorism discourse should be situated – more than in any scholarly effort to make sense of clandestine or governmental efforts to rule through fear – in the ways in which suffering is translated, recognised, and written off in accordance with contemporary worldviews.

The fundamental difference is that, once conceptualised as an *aesthetic* signifier, terrorism becomes more than an empty or hollow term – in the sense intended by Laclau and Mouffe of something that stands in for a sense of emptiness and lack – and becomes a device or a supplement which guides us through the abundant and overwhelming reality of suffering. We are somewhat extending the example given by Mynster Christensen of forms of discourse on terror in the absence of terrorism to the paradigmatic view of how terrorism works not only at the intersection between reason, politics, and morality,[87] but as an aesthetic concept grounding the possibility of these three dimensions.

Contrary to previous efforts we do not see in the vernacular uses of the language of terror – such as in attempts to explain Russia's war in Ukraine – the corruption of an otherwise rational and scientific concept, but rather we emphasise the aesthetic principle at work in these usages. Seen in this light, terrorism is not an analytical category – arguably in the same way as other categories

[83] Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy, 'Introduction: Saussure and his context', in Ferdinand de Saussure (ed.), *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. xv–xlviii (p. xv).

[84] Richard Jackson, 'In defence of "terrorism": Finding a way through a forest of misconceptions', *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, 3:2 (2011), pp. 116–30.

[85] Zulaika and Douglass, 'Terror and taboo', p. xi.

[86] Furtado, 'The monstruous and the miscount'.

[87] Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror*.

used to study political violence, such as insurgency, assassination, kidnapping, armed struggle – but a symbolic device that fundamentally reorganises a given aesthetic regime, assigning different degrees of visibility to human suffering via the apportioning of blame, immorality, and deviance to certain acts and actors.

To translate an experience of collective suffering as terror is to make its violent nature (the symbolic links to *violentia–violare*) apparent. This means not only revealing something that was once hidden, but in the sense that, once categorised as uncontrollable and unwelcome, this experience *jumps out at our eyes* as violence proper.[88] The problem of violence – the status of the signifier violence in politics – is intimately connected to the question of visibility[89] and is therefore an inherently aesthetic problem, in a Rancièrian sense. Discourses of violence normally revolve around the two claims that violence is either *in your face*, as in more traditional approaches, or that *it remains out of sight*, in the less observable forms of structural violence as per the iceberg metaphor.[90]

It is here, in the interplay between the visible and the invisible that Richardson's mention of *pornography* in a book on terrorism ceases to be an amusing jest and is instead a slip of tongue betraying a fundamental truth: terrorism is situated at the intersection between the proper and improper, the object of the gaze and the voyeur; it plays, in the study of politics, the same role that sexuality played in the emerging field of psychoanalysis: the site that expresses the incoherences and contradiction of a hypocritical political order and is therefore something always subject to co-optation by *the police* (which stands in here for the anti-egalitarian forces of reactionarism).[91] The difference is that while sexuality organises the realm of desire, terrorism discourse organises our relation to different forms of suffering. The particular ocular politics of terrorism and counterterrorism, with a perpetrator of violence who is often faceless and a (voyeuristic) system of violence to counter terrorism premised on being able to see all without the enemy seeing back, highlights the significance often attributed to *making visible*. It also underlines the taboo that governs things that *should* remain unseen, connected primarily to that which disrupts the integrity of the human body, yet which are at the same time spectacular forms of suffering. It is precisely this horrifying suffering that is deemed to be *Real* by virtue of its extreme obscenity.[92]

The use of the signifiers orbiting terrorism discourse produces a clarifying spark, illuminating reality by anchoring the fluidity of suffering to other signifiers such as uncontrollable (*violentia*) and unwelcome (*violare*), constituting thereby a sense of terror as wholly unacceptable suffering. To give a new twist to an old saying: underlying the assumption 'that we know terrorism when we see it' is the unspoken, Cartesian operation *we know terrorism, therefore we see*. Visibility, after all, is often considered a precondition for qualified political life, for mattering to and for counting as a member of a political community. This effect of shedding light onto something, of evidencing its allegedly pre-existing nature, its inherent truth, is what makes the discursive deployment of terror part of wider social processes of managing monstrosity: the attaching of suffering to an object-cause, the individuals and events whose criminalisation and repudiation demonstrates the kinds of suffering we cannot accept or live with, or, to paraphrase former British prime minister Boris Johnson, the suffering we cannot simply 'take on the chin'.

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[88]Note that this is very different from the concept of recognition, which implies the acceptance of a pre-existing ontology.

[89]Auchter, *Global Corpse Politics*; Yves Winter, 'Violence and visibility', *New Political Science*, 34:2 (2012), pp. 195–202, Bertrand Ogilvie, 'Violence et représentation: La production de l'homme-jetable', *Lignes*, 26:3 (1995), pp. 113–41.

[90]Johan Galtung, 'Violence, peace, and peace research', *Journal of Peace Research*, 6:3 (1969), pp. 167–91.

[91]We understand reactionarism, following Corey Robin's work (Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2018]), as an intellectually driven praxis which originated in the conservative reaction to the French Revolution and seeks 'to build a broad-based movement of elites and masses against the emancipation of the lower orders' (p. xi). Our suggestion here is that the effort to achieve a broad-based movement requires to some degree the anti-political technology of consensus and, hence, the mobilisation of aesthetic signifiers such as those orbiting terrorism discourse. In this sense, the fact that charges of political terrorism/*terreur* seem to have first appeared in the modern political scene during the Thermidorian Reaction in France seems like an interesting coincidence which invites further exploration.

[92]Auchter, *Global Corpse Politics*.

Suffering can only be translated as violence if it is associated with an object, or set of objects, that works as its cause. This object then becomes the receptacle of characteristics associated with wanton suffering – suffering that is in excess of what is needed for the rational reproduction of a political community – which accords it an impassionate or excessive character. To be regarded as unwelcome, a discrete act or causal chain of violations must be identified. These objects are the many monsters that populate discourse on violence – the mad, evil, irrational, and sadistic perpetrators, the terrorists themselves – and which serve as points of anchorage for a discourse that, in attempting to reveal the nature of the world, lets in something fundamental about us. Hence our emphasis earlier on the significance of the policy and scholarly focus on the actor in the context of terrorism and its definitional debate.

The very word monsters, etymologically traced to the French verb *montrer*, meaning to show, to display, to exhibit, suggests the 'beings or things to be shown'.[93] To embark on the management of monstrosity is to make particular forms of suffering visible, not by bringing them into the light, though this is a necessary step, but above all by making them appear as violence or terror via an act of demonstration – the linking of this unacceptable suffering to a cause/source. This act of demonstration, as the term implies, is an utterly political act because it implies either the reproduction or the reorganisation of regimes of visibility, 'the discursive conditions that structure the field of appearance', what can be shown and who can be seen, in a given political order.[94] Therefore, because they point at the foundations of regimes of appearance and disappearance, visibility and obscurity, 'monsters have something to show us about our world and ourselves'.[95] Indeed, it is no coincidence that monstrosity has 'come to organize the discourse on terrorism'.[96]

Avoiding the (il)legitimacy trap, or how not to sound like Mearsheimer

This paper argues that foregrounding the role of terrorism discourse in evidencing the visibility of suffering in a political community can provide an invaluable contribution to the narrative study of violence in IR and CTS. In part, we contend that such a turn to suffering would provide a way to avoid or escape what we see as the dangerous *(il)legitimacy trap*: the focus that terrorism discourse enforces on the question of whether violent acts are justified or legitimate or indeed can ever be justifiable or legitimised. We seek to clarify here a common misunderstanding, which even respectable critical scholars often inadvertently reproduce, that lies in conflating the mythography of terror with the individualisation of responsibility for violence acts and, further yet, the hypocritical production of scapegoats.[97]

As part of an aesthetic regime organising the visibility of suffering, terrorism discourse is inextricably related to the question of culpability and responsibility. The naming and taming of suffering involve a juridical-political aspect, the placing of blame, as it were, and this certainly requires a level of individualisation: suffering must be attached to a transgression, someone or something must be found guilty/responsible.[98] Claudia Card's theory of evil is illustrative of the problem at hand. Card seeks to define evil via resort to the template of mass atrocities which she conceptualises as intolerable harm, similarly to Stampnitzky's notion of terrorism as unacceptable violence. Both have a

[93]Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 70; Donna Haraway, 'The promises of monsters: A regenerative politics for inappropriate/d others', in Lawrence Grossberg et al. (eds), *Cultural Studies* (New York;London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 295–336.

[94]Winter, 'Violence and visibility', p. 199.

[95]Mark Neocleous, *The Monstrous and the Dead: Burke, Marx, Fascism* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), p. 5.

[96]Puar and Rai, 'Monster, terrorist, fag', p. 118.

[97]Yuliya Yurchenko, 'Democratic socialism or barbarism: A reply to Hans-Herbert Kögler', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 26:4 (2023), pp. 591–99.

[98]There are important differences between guilt and responsibility which we are not touching on here. For more see Iris Marion Young and Martha Nussbaum, *Responsibility for Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

strong focus on the element of culpability, on the perpetrators of harm and violence deemed to be intolerable or unacceptable.[99]

Above all, the problematic of culpability lies at the birth of modern individuality. What we are calling here aesthetic regimes often effect an *individualisation of suffering*, both in the sense that a good deal of suffering is relegated to the realm of individual, private life, and therefore depoliticised,[100] and in the sense that collective suffering, once politicised, is often blamed on individual causes. Complex and intricate structures of responsibility for suffering are rendered simplified by the search for a causal chain that aims to identify the origins of unacceptable ordeals in the acts and psychological state of individuals. In fact, many commentators place the social production of individuality as one of the central conjoined forms of veridiction/administration/conflict management in modern Western societies. Modern disciplinary societies of the 18th and 19th century highlight the way the institutionalisation of state power came hand in hand with the appearance of the individual in the historical scene. As a category that structured modern forms of (political) subjectivity, the individual represented the atomic (in the original sense of indivisible) unit of the social.[101] And indeed, we see this play out in the focus on the terrorist actor in the definitional discussion earlier in the paper.

The place of this unit in the workings of social control, the process of drawing the contours of, and stipulating responses to, transgressive behaviour, often framed as a monstrosity, cannot be overestimated. Indeed, Foucault refers to monsters as one of three elements linked to the definition of social abnormals.[102] Alan Norrie's critique of the abstract individualism that structures Western legal thought, and particularly criminal law, is illustrative of the problem posed by the (il)legitimacy trap to CTS scholarship.[103] According to Norrie, the vision of the individual supporting modern Western legal systems, always seen 'in abstract terms as the intending, acting, voluntary subject',[104] fabricates a split between two different visions of justice: one legal and contained vision, focusing the attribution of culpability in the mapping of an *actus reus* (the objective harm) to the *mens rea* of the accused (the guilty mind); and another based on the social contextual motivations that could explain, if not excuse, the wrongdoer's actions. In Norrie's words, this split was a 'historically engineered separation relating to the need to extricate individual legal (and moral) responsibility from social responsibility and arguments about what was socially just'.[105] It is fair to say that the terrorism discourse, as part of a wider management of monstrosity in the West, has inherited this essential antinomy from Western legal reasoning.

Very often, the denunciation of terrorism discourse by CTS scholars focuses on the hypocritical production of hierarchies of legitimate and illegitimate violence. Though we have come a long way since the unsophisticated claims that *one person's terrorist was someone else's freedom fighter*, so abundant in the early days of the field, critiques of terrorism discourse can sometimes allude to the political responsibility of victimised societies for having produced the conditions of possibility for terrorism in the first place. The prime example is the emphasis put on the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, on the forms of colonialism and neocolonialism that pre-dated them; or we could add the more recent occupation of Palestine by the Israeli state in fuelling if not causing further

[99]Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 4.

[100]Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock (eds), *Social Suffering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

[101]Didier Fassin, Bruce Western, Rebecca M. McLennan, David W. Garland, and Christopher Kutz, *The Will to Punish* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Michel Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

[102]As noted by Puar and Rai, 'Monster, terrorist, fag', p. 118.

[103]Alan Norrie, *Punishment, Responsibility and Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Alan Norrie, *Law and the Beautiful Soul* (London: The GlassHouse Press, 2005); Alan Norrie, 'Critical realism and the metaphysics of justice', *Journal of Critical Realism*, 15:4 (2016), pp. 391–408; Alan Norrie, *Justice and the Slaughter Bench: Essays on Law's Broken Dialectic* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017); Alan Norrie, 'Legal and social murder: What's the difference?', *Criminal Law Review*, 7 (2018), pp. 531–42.

[104]Norrie, *Law and the Beautiful Soul*, p. 118.

[105]Norrie, *Law and the Beautiful Soul*, p. 129.

terrorism. To be clear, none of this amounts to victim-blaming, but it can be misinterpreted as such, as it has been in the past.[106]

By countering the focus of traditional terrorism studies on culpability with an investigation of the context and historical motivations that could explain violence, CTS scholars risk locking themselves in a fruitless discussion regarding the legitimacy of violence. To keep within the confines of our case study, the Ukrainian war, the *(il)legitimacy trap* risks blurring the very important boundaries between the fundamental investigation of the conditions of perpetration of violent acts and the form of scapegoating we find at play in Mearsheimer's exculpation of Russian military aggressiveness. It is perfectly possible, and indeed necessary, both to condemn Putin's violence in Ukraine as *the opposite of all that is just human and good* and to refuse the co-optation of the debate in the terms dictated by terrorism discourse. All we need to do is refuse to debate the merits of the uses of violence or the conditions under which it becomes just. This debate fundamentally excludes the victims of violence who, having lost their lives, cannot possibly stand to gain anything from it. In the case of resistance movements, it risks treating someone's existence as somehow a choice.

Instead, our intellectual effort should be channelled towards revealing the ways in which the adoption of the signifiers orbiting terrorism discourse forecloses the possibility of ethical engagement with other forms of suffering. This, we contend, provides a better platform to integrate recent concerns of CTS, such as the concepts of race, the relative neglect of far-right extremism, and the theme of coloniality, in the narrative studies of political violence.[107] For example, a political community that *wholeheartedly condemns* the attempted murder or actual assassination of racialised individuals as illegitimate and unacceptable can perfectly well accept the immense suffering of racialised bodies as tolerable, and indeed even necessary.[108] Without dismissing the complexities of the historical racialisation of eastern Europeans, we simply need to compare the Western responses to Ukraine and Palestine to understand this point.

We write this paper as an invitation to look at the critique of terrorism discourse from a different angle. The problem of terrorism discourse lies not necessarily in the individualisation of guilt for violence in the figure of terrorists nor with the denunciation of terror as unacceptable violence. Perpetrators of horrendous acts must be held guilty if indeed guilty they are. As Herbert Marcuse felt compelled to remind the supporters of the Rote Armee Fraktion, murder is not a political weapon, but just another form of individualisation of the complex causes of human suffering in the figure of the slain victim.[109] It is true that terrorism discourse effects a form of *symbolic enclosure*:[110] the fending off of responsibility for violence and terror in an indivisible site denoted by a master signifier (a guilty individual, a nation, a religion, a people, a time period) meant to stand in for the universal antagonist of everything that is good and proper. And it is certainly true that this has deleterious effects on our understanding of the conditions of perpetration of violent acts or on the suffering caused by non-individualisable phenomena, such as the indiscriminate glorification of militarism, the mainstreaming of hate speech, or what Roger Griffin described, somewhat prophetically before 9/11, as the entrenchment of ethnocratic liberalism.[111]

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[106]James Hopkins, 'Psychologically disturbed and on the side of the terrorists: The delegitimisation of critical intellectuals in terrorism and political violence', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 7:2 (2014), pp. 297–312.

[107]Sanne Groothuis, 'Researching race, racialisation, and racism in critical terrorism studies: Clarifying conceptual ambiguities', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 13:4 (2020), pp. 680–701; Rabea Khan, 'Race, coloniality and the post 9/11 counter-discourse: Critical Terrorism Studies and the reproduction of the Islam-terrorism discourse', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 14:4 (2021), pp. 498–501.

[108]Melanie Richter-Montpetit, 'Beyond the erotics of Orientalism: Lawfare, torture and the racial-sexual grammars of legitimate suffering', *Security Dialogue*, 45:1 (2014), pp. 43–62.

[109]Herbert Marcuse and Jeffrey Herf, 'Murder is not a political weapon', *New German Critique*, 12 (1977), pp. 77–9 (p. 7).

[110]Furtado, 'Politics of impunity'.

[111]Roger Griffin, 'Interregnum or endgame? The radical right in the "post-fascist" era', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 5:2 (2000), pp. 163–78; Fran Amery and Aurelien Mondon, 'Othering, peaking, populism and moral panics: The reactionary strategies of organised transphobia', *The Sociological Review*, April (2024); Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter, *Reactionary*

But as this paper has sought to demonstrate, this isn't the only or even perhaps the biggest problem. Terrorism discourse is one example of a wider aesthetic ordering of the world, one device whereby human beings attempt to tame and organise the untameable complexity of (in)human suffering in the present by mobilising vocabularies of the past.

Conclusion

In this paper, we investigated the historical transformation of discursive tropes that played a fundamental part in the Anglo-American war on terror and their re-adaptation to understand modern conflicts with reference to the Ukrainian case. We argued that media coverage and policy statements related to modern conflicts, with Ukraine as a prime example, draw on the language of terror, with different levels of subtlety, using well-worn concepts associated with terrorism discourse to make sense of (in)human suffering. We advanced the concept of terrorism as an aesthetic signifier in order to foreground the role of the signifiers of terrorism discourse in the formalisation of suffering in more precise terms. The paper invited CTS scholars to bypass the (il)legitimacy trap, or the focus of analysis on the justifiability of violence, and turn instead to suffering and the experience of victimisation as the raw materials with which the deployment of terrorism discourse attempts to organise the world.

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