

The philosophy of terrorism: why blaming victims offers no justification for terrorist attacks

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Terrorist attacks are often justified by their perpetrators on the basis that victims are complicit in some policy or action which is worthy of being met with by violence. But how should we view such arguments from a philosophical perspective? Igor Primoratz writes that while terrorists are likely to portray their actions as a morally justified 'armed struggle', the indirect contribution of the victims' acts to the contested policies, insufficiently voluntary character of these acts, and the disproportionate nature of the violence inflicted on victims ensures that we can reject these arguments and legitimately condemn such attacks as 'terrorism'.



How might one seek to justify morally some act or campaign of terrorism? One might argue that although the direct victims are ordinary citizens, they *aren't* innocent of the wrongs the terrorists are fighting against. Alternatively, one might concede the innocence of those victims and argue that attacks on them are nevertheless morally justified, either by their good consequences on balance, or by some other moral considerations. In this article, I look into the first line of argument.

Terrorism: blaming the victims

Since terrorism is indiscriminate violence against ordinary citizens, arguments challenging their innocence must rely on some claim of their collective responsibility. Yet many find the very idea of collective responsibility an unacceptable throwback to pre-modern times. Surely moral responsibility essentially belongs to the individual.

However, not all types of collective responsibility are incompatible with the view that responsibility is essentially individual. We can distinguish between “strong” collective responsibility, which is completely independent of the choices and actions of individuals, and “weak” collective responsibility, which is ultimately grounded in such choices and actions. The former is based on certain assumptions about the nature of human groups which cannot be reduced to that of individuals comprising them. It is said to accrue to individual members of certain groups even though they may have done nothing to partake in it, and even though their membership in these groups is not a matter of choice. The latter presupposes no such assumptions. It is basically a type of individual responsibility – it is generated by the individual’s own choices and actions – which is also collective in that it is bound up with the individual’s membership in a group.

Strong collective responsibility may seem a good basis for a moral justification of terrorism insofar as it provides a sufficiently wide reach of such justification. If, for example, all Israelis are indeed collectively responsible for the wrongs the State of Israel has been committing against Palestinians and if those wrongs constitute a just cause for their armed struggle against Israel, then Palestinian militants can legitimately attack any random collection of Israeli civilians. Yet one hardly ever comes across attempts at justifying Palestinian terrorism in these terms. This view says that one can be *guilty* of a policy one has neither devised, nor implemented, nor supported, and that one can be a *wrongdoer* without deliberately *doing* (or *omitting to do*) anything in particular. That is, it cannot be stated without incongruity.

A justification of terrorism in terms of complicity of its direct victims can also be based on a weak version of collective responsibility. One example of such an argument was provided by Osama Bin Laden in an interview in November 2001:

The American people should remember that they pay taxes to their government and that they voted for their president. Their government makes weapons and provides them to Israel, which they use to kill Palestinian Muslims. Given that the American Congress is a committee that represents the people, the fact that it agrees with the actions of the American government proves that America in its entirety is responsible for the atrocities that it is committing against Muslims.

The claim is that all Americans (“America in its entirety”) are eligible to be killed: some for devising and implementing America’s policies, others for voting in elections that decide who will be devising those policies, and still others for paying taxes that make the implementation of those policies possible.

Another example of this type of argument relates to state terrorism envisaged as a core component of the “war on terrorism.” In an essay titled “[Who May We Bomb?](#)” Barry Buzan, emeritus professor of international relations at the LSE, deplores the notion that in war, a distinction should be made between a people and its government. A people can “deserve its government.” When it does, it needn’t be treated differently than its government. If that government is the enemy, the civilian population it governs is the enemy too, and may be bombed. Wars are conducted “not just between groups of fighters, but between groups of fighters and their networks of support.”

How does a civilian population come to deserve its government? The simplest way is by voting for it. Not everyone takes part in voting, but having the option of voting, even if one makes nouse of it, is enough to become deserving of whatever the outcome of the voting turns out to be. Therefore civilians in a democracy are legitimate targets. So are civilians under an authoritarian regime, where the regime has wide support or acquiescence (passive acceptance). Acquiescence can be coerced, but “such coercion is usually visible, allowing distinctions to be drawn between passive acceptance and terrorized obedience.” Only civilians living under “blatant tyrannies” are clearly off the hook. In general, “the question whether people get the government they deserve can often be answered quite simply on the basis of day-to-day observations about the relationship between the demos and the government.”

In Buzan’s view, then, whenever civilians participate in the political process by voting, or have the option of doing so even though they don’t make use of it, or when they support the government, or merely acquiesce in its policies, they all become legitimate targets of deadly violence, just like their leaders and armed forces. Since that violence will be deployed with a view to making people change their minds about the kind of government they want to have, it will qualify as terrorism. Buzan does not call it that, but what his argument seeks to justify is state terrorism as part and parcel of the “war on terrorism.”

The arguments of Bin Laden and Buzan are meant to show that ordinary citizens are complicit in wrongs that constitute a just cause for resort to violence, and therefore are not protected against violence; and they deploy the idea of collective responsibility. However, this isn’t collective responsibility in the strong sense. Ordinary citizens aren’t said to be complicit in the wrongs at issue simply because of who they are – because of an ascribed, rather than chosen identity, defined by membership in a certain polity. It is rather collective responsibility in a weak sense: a type of responsibility that is essentially individual in that it is generated by some action or omission of the individual, but also collective, in that the individual acts as she does in virtue of her membership in the group, and that this membership is an indication that she is guilty of such action or omission.

Considerations deployed in these arguments for the claim that the direct victims of terrorism, whether insurgent or state, are not really innocent, although they are but ordinary citizens, include:

1. That ordinary citizens in some general, unanalysed sense “support” their government and its unjust policies.
2. That failing this they at least acquiesce in those policies.
3. That they have installed their government in power by voting, or could have voted even if they did not.
4. That they pay taxes which the government spends on devising and implementing unjust policies.

Now, such actions and omissions may well be the ground for moral condemnation of those found guilty of them. Of course, such condemnation will presuppose harsh moral condemnation of practices or policies involved. Let us grant, for the sake of argument, that the practices and policies at issue are indeed gravely unjust – unjust to a degree that can justify resort to violence, when that is the only way of putting an end to them. Then we need to ask two questions. First, are all those on the receiving end of terrorist violence guilty of such acts or omissions? Is their group membership a reliable indication that they are? Second, with regard to those who are guilty of those acts or omissions, is that enough to justify targeting them with such violence?

With regard to most of the acts and omissions listed above, group membership is an unreliable indicator. Being a citizen of a polity may, but need not involve voting for its government, supporting it in any way, including by paying taxes, or acquiescing in its policies. A citizen may be completely apolitical. Or she may oppose the government or the policy at issue and work for a change of policy or even a change of government. Her income may be below the taxation threshold. Finally, more often than not, a random collection of ordinary citizens is likely to include minors; and minors, for obvious reasons, can't be charged with acts or omissions that are at issue here. Thus in almost every terrorist attack, some of the direct victims may satisfy the terrorists' criteria of complicity with the wrongs they fight against, and some may not. A bomb planted in a coffee shop or on a city bus, or dropped from a plane on a city, can't kill or maim only those ordinary citizens who are complicit in the iniquities of their government, while staying clear of those who aren't.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that violence can be employed in a way that harms only those ordinary citizens who do vote for the government, or support it and its unjust policies in some way, or acquiesce in those policies, or pay taxes which the government uses for devising and implementing those policies. Is that enough as a moral justification of the violence? Those citizens aren't innocent in the strongest sense of being completely free of any wrongdoing. They aren't innocent in the more down-to-earth sense of having nothing to do with the policies the terrorist seeks to abolish. On the contrary, they are implicated in them in certain ways.

That may well call for moral criticism, and perhaps some further unfavourable response. But surely they are innocent in the sense relevant to the issue under discussion: surely there is nothing they have done, or omitted doing, that makes them deserve, or liable, to be killed or maimed. If at this point the terrorist were to point out that Smith voted in the last elections, Jones was paying taxes, Black was expressing support for the contested policies while White was acquiescing in them, and go on to say that that made the lot of them a legitimate target of deadly violence, that, it seems to me, would be an ineffective rebuttal. For it would ignore the drastic disproportion between their offence and his response to it.

With regard to each of the four types of complicity listed above, we would need to consider just how causally significant it is for the injustice at issue, and just how voluntary it is. Having established that, we would need to ask whether the nature and degree of wrongdoing and culpability that come to the fore are enough for the persons concerned to deserve, or become liable, to be targeted by the kind of violence terrorists employ – that is, to be killed or maimed. To fail to examine every type of complicity in its own right and to continue instead to take any of them as indication enough of non-innocence and ground enough for liability to be killed or maimed would indicate a superficial and implausible view of responsibility and liability.

A credible view of these matters is one that grounds a person's responsibility for some wrongdoing in that person's acts or omissions that are *significantly voluntary*, that is, informed and free, and have a *sufficiently strong connection* with that wrongdoing. Further, it provides for a certain morally acceptable *proportion* between what a person is responsible for and the unfavourable response to which he is liable on that account.

Of course, a terrorist may also adopt a very different view of responsibility and liability: one which does make a person liable to be blown to pieces if, for instance, that person voted in the last elections (even if her vote was for the opposition), or if she has been paying taxes (even if there was no way of avoiding paying them), or if she has voiced support of the government or acquiesced in it (even though her reasons for doing so have nothing to do with

the policies the terrorist opposes). If the terrorist can't be persuaded to revise his view of responsibility and liability – say, by considering whether he would like to see that view applied to his family and friends by some militants with an agenda he doesn't share – then there is not much room for further discussion.

The terrorist is likely to insist that his direct victims aren't innocent of, but rather complicit in, the policies he fights against, and that therefore what he does when killing and maiming them isn't really terrorism, but rather morally justified armed struggle. In response, we can point out the problematic, indirect, fractional contribution of the victims' acts and omissions to the contested policies, the insufficiently voluntary character of such acts and omissions, as well as the drastic disproportion between those acts and omissions and the violence the terrorist inflicts on them; reject his views of responsibility and liability as preposterous; and portray and condemn what he does as terrorism.

A more detailed discussion of the material in this article is available in [Terrorism: A Philosophical Investigation](#) (Polity, 2013).

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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