ON TERRORISM AND THE POLITICS OF COMPULSION

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The concept of ‘terrorism’ is problematized and argued to be at one end of a continuum of behaviour that can be characterised as ‘compulsion’. This approach to conflict is explained in terms of Transactional Analysis and the inadequacy of ‘compulsion’ as a means of managing human affairs (politics) is explored in relation to the use of power that it requires, and to the responses it generates. An alternative behaviour, based upon ‘turning the other cheek’ and Satyagraha (confronting), is advocated in the expectation that it will prove more fruitful in managing conflict and reducing terrorist outrages.

KEYWORDS: Bateson, compulsion, conflict, confronting, TA, terrorism

INTRODUCTION

When we are confronted by two separate acts, one that is described as ‘terrorism’ and the other as a military act conducted to prevent acts of ‘terrorism’ we are being asked to subscribe to a world view that accepts force as a legitimate instrument of policy made acceptable by the nature of the circumstances in which it is used. When the first act is the suicide bombing of a bus containing women and school children, as well as soldiers returning to base after the weekend furlough, and the second is a rocket attack from a helicopter upon the ‘offices’ of a ‘terrorist organisation’, in which women and children are killed as well as the members of the said organisation, then we are being asked to discriminate between two acts that are so similar in their consequences for innocent bystanders that someone as wise as the fabled King Solomon would be hard pressed to formulate a reasonable distinction.

This does not seem to deter various spokespersons from labelling, and counter-labelling, incidents of violence. This rhetoric itself fuels the underlying conflicts rather than contributes to their resolution. Indeed it seems that the presentation of
the rights and wrongs of such acts of violence is undertaken based upon a number of assumptions that ensures failure to promote any way forward and entrenches us in tit-for-tat exchanges.

I would like, in the course of this article, to deal with some of the assumptions and misunderstandings that underpin the representation of such behaviours, to emphasise that retaliation on its own is counter productive and to highlight the need for truly democratic responses to conflict as a way to gain positive impulsion in its’ management – if we have the will.

TERRORISM DEFINED

The first challenge is to recognise that the inconsistent use of words contributes to conflict and is part of an overall political strategy of compulsion. Instead of trying to achieve clarity in the search for a way forward, the protagonists employ linguistic subterfuges that actually obscure meaning. As Bandler and Grinder (1975) exemplified in their book, ‘the Structure of Magic’, which deals with the interplay between language, thought and behaviour, if we examine the word ‘terrorism’ itself we see that it is what is called a nominalization. This is the misrepresentation of a process (a verb) by substituting it with an event (a noun). As O’Connor and Seymour (1990) pointed out, if you can’t put the noun in a wheelbarrow and wheel it down the street, then it isn’t a thing – it’s a process.

So what does this mean? Nominalizations are forms of language distortion that enable us to express complex, abstract concepts simply. This is fine as far as it goes, but of course the simplification is helpful in some circumstances and unhelpful in others. Rhetoric relies heavily upon the ability of the speaker to carry the audience with them through the use of such ‘smoke and mirrors’ devices as nominalizations. ‘Terrorism is evil!’ goes up the cry or ‘Democracy is good!’ Yet the speaker appears not to need to provide any explanation of all the meaning that remains hidden in the noun.

By their very nature, processes are less bounded than objects. They are made up of many different sub-processes, stopping points, and divergences. Without explaining these in detail it would be impossible to win support and agreement for the justification of a process. Hence the use of a convenient nominalization, which glosses over all of the issues and deletes all possibility of contention. However, if we are to rid the world of ‘terrorism’ then we must exercise precision in the language we use when deliberating about it. Eubank and Weinberg (2001) described terrorism in the following explicit terms:

Characteristically terrorist violence involves small-scale and highly planned attacks carried out by relatively small groups or, in some instances, single individuals against non-combatants usually for the purpose of sending a message to some audience.

However, this leaves a sense of inadequacy in the degree to which this covers all instances to which the epithet ‘terrorism’ has been attached. Can we
discern any consistency in the use of the epithet that may enable us to identify specific instances unequivocally as one of them?

- Are innocent people specifically targeted? (but there are plenty of instances where this was not the intention and yet they have been labelled as acts of terror, for example, the suicide bombing of USS *Cole* in Yemen, and vice versa, the bombing of Hiroshima).
- Is there a fundamental intention to frighten or to cause fear? (If at all possible death itself is an insufficient objective, it must be unexpected and very painful and accompanied by mutilated survivors. Yet consider the widespread use of anti-personnel mines – which is not normally referred to as terrorism).
- Is there an intention to force people to do something against their wishes? (Otherwise it would be just some irrational, psychopathic and sadistic act undertaken for its own sake, for example, the Washington Snipers).
- Does the act come as the end-result of a judicial process? (Although many condemn it, capital punishment is often justified by the fact that it comes at the end of a long, formal process of deliberation in public – although capital punishment’s so called deterrent effect implies an element of creation of fear. However, the assassinations of leaders of ‘terrorist organisations’ would seem to fall outside this criterion – and thus qualify as acts of terrorism).
- Has there been a legal declaration of war? (Only states can legally declare war – so all rebel groups and unrecognised states (e.g., Palestine), are automatically excluded from “legitimate” acts of violence).
- Has the Geneva Convention been observed? (Inadequacy in conventional arms persuades the under-dog to resort to various *ruse de guerre* in order to gain some leverage (e.g., Hostage taking, or placing vital targets amongst civilian populations, but see also the plight of the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay).
- Has the act been sanctioned by a United Nations’ Resolution? (Again, access to the legitimising forum of the UN is denied to all who are not recognised states. Even so the processes of the Security Council are far from transparent, and the ability of powerful states to corrupt decisions by offers and threats relating to aid money or other inducements is openly flaunted and even represented as “winning the argument”).

It is clear, therefore, that the word terrorism is used ambiguously and has the potential to add to conflict through condemnatory rhetoric. Rather than being pinned down to a single term, it may be better to think in terms of a continuum of violent behaviours. In this continuum acts like 11th September are located at one extreme, but are never-the-less connected to and continuous with all other sorts of violent acts and acts of violation. We can observe these acts being perpetrated by individuals or governments who, in other forums, openly condemn ‘terrorism’ as unacceptable. One man’s (sic) terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.

So is it possible to resolve this issue of where to set the boundaries of legitimate behaviour on this spectrum of violence? Is it possible to ascertain with
confidence where we stand – for or against terrorism, for this act and against that one? Is it possible to establish recognised limits to behaviour that can sit congruently with the words that we then use to condemn the behaviour of others? And without this clarity and congruence can we condemn the behaviour of others without damaging the prospects of any future resolution of conflict? Perhaps within the concept of conflict itself (another nominalization) we may discover, through a clearer appreciation of what is going on, a way forward to reduce acts of violence.

**APPROACHES TO CONFLICT**

Life and conflict are intertwined. Put two human beings together and conflicts emerge. Please note that violence is not implied by the nominalization – conflict, simply any and all forms of disagreement (For a useful review see Weeks 1992).

As Thomas (1976) recognised, the way we handle conflicts is governed by two vectors: (i) How much we want our objective (the substance of the conflict) and (ii) How much we value our relationship with the other party (which itself may be based upon our power relationship). This may be illustrated as in Figure 1.

Therefore, the choices open to us in how we approach a conflict can be considered as follows:

1. If the Objective is not of high immediate importance to us, or we lack the power to insist, and the relationship is also not important to us – then we may put the conflict on hold; we withdraw for the time being.
2. If the Objective is not of high importance to us, or we lack the power to insist, and the relationship is important to us, or the other person is powerful and we dare not offend them – then we give in; we concede more or less graciously.
3. If we need a resolution of the conflict, and are evenly matched with the other in power and determination – then we may engage in give and take; we compromise as the appropriate strategy, though recognising that it will leave neither party satisfied.

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<th>RELATIONSHIP</th>
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4. If the Objective is of high immediate importance to us, or we have the power to insist, and the relationship is also not important to us – then we may get our way; compelling the other person to concede.

5. If the Objective is of high importance to both of us, or we have balanced power, and the relationship is important to both of us – then we may work together to find a solution; we confront the issues but not the person.

We can see, clearly, that outrages of the kind that we outlined at the beginning of this article are located in the fourth box, compulsion. As we seek to get our own way, without consideration for the other, the choices open to the other are to concede and let the bully have their way; to withdraw and wait for a better time; to negotiate leading to a possible compromise; or to compel back. What does not seem to be in our repertoire is for both parties to move towards confronting their problems.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

At any moment the behaviour we choose is very much determined by our programming and character, as much as by any rational consideration of the prevailing situation. In that respect it is helpful for our deliberations here if we take recourse to Transactional Analysis (TA) (Berne 1966) to enable us to understand that programming. A central concept within the range of programming covered by TA is that of Life Positions. This involves our beliefs about ourselves and other people. Sometimes we are happy with ourselves; we like ourselves, but other times we may not. So there are two possible belief systems about self from which to view the world – ‘I am alright’, and ‘I am not alright’.

Similarly we may hold two alternative views of the people around us. So we may feel that ‘You are alright’ or ‘You are not alright’. Ernst (1971) combined these perspectives into a matrix of four possible life positions, as in Figure 2.

When we are in the Healthy position we are positive and work well with others. When they are in the Healthy position themselves the same holds true. So rationally we should seek to be in our Healthy position and to help others to be in

Fig. 2 The OK corral (modified from Ernst 1971)
their Healthy position. Unfortunately, quite often we are not responding from that location but from one of the other three, possible positions. When that is the case we fall into negative feelings and behaviour and so do other people in a similar case. When we are in the Paranoid position, or the Depressive position, or the Futility position, we encourage others to drop in to one of these less resourceful states too.

There are obvious links between Ernst’s psychological model of our life position, our psychological resource state, and our behaviour as manifested in our approach to conflict. For example the Futility position is linked to withdrawal, the Depressive position to concede and the Paranoid position to compulsion. The only approach to conflict management that falls within the Healthy position is confront. It is the only box in the matrix where we allow ourselves to want our objective and at the same time to allow other people to want their objectives whilst valuing them as human beings and our relationship with them.

Quite simply, these life positions are at the heart of the “terrorism” issue. Both parties rightly view the act of compulsion as an act of aggression. Seeking to get your own way by the use of your power, whatever its’ source, is actually to say that the relationship is unimportant. That to you the other person has little or no value.

THE FALLACY OF POWER

Exercising our ‘Power-over’ (For a discussion of relational power see Rowlands 1998) in conflict situations is most frequently negative in effect because its main point of action is in controlling or limiting the actions of others. As Chambers (1997 p.205) recognised:

Most uppers see their power in zero-sum terms: if they have less, others will have more, and they will be worse off. …We talk of ‘giving up power’ and ‘abandoning’ it, implying loss, and ‘losing’ and ‘gaining power’ implying a zero sum.

However, Power-over is falsely attractive in nature, since the acquisition of Power-over is usually accompanied by the need to hand over large quantities of it to others to act “in one’s name”. In addition, power-over is also disabling since it creates distance between decision-takers and the impact of their decisions. As Chambers (1997, p.76) recognised: “All power deceives, and exceptional power deceives exceptionally.” But, decision-takers are often less powerful than decision-implementers simply because humans lack the ability to control or do everything (omnipotence). Long and Villareal (1994 p.50) commented that:

Even those categorized as ‘oppressed’ are not utterly passive victims, and may become involved in active resistance. Likewise, the ‘powerful’ are not in complete control of the stage and the extent to which their power is forged by the so-called ‘powerless’ should not be underestimated.

Thus exemplifying that Power-over usually operates against Power-to. Power-to is characterised by being the energy that people can apply to their actions. Although
these actions may have positive or negative impact, the Power-to element is fundamentally positive-sum in nature. That is, the amount of Power-to that an individual possesses has no limiting effect upon the Power-to of any other individual. Motivation, determination, creativity and enthusiasm are essentially limitless and, if anything, are actually contagious. As such Power-to is a general good that enables people to achieve their goals (see Uphoff 1996).

People’s motivation, determination and enthusiasm are often in inverse proportion to the amount of Power-over that others hold. In certain circumstances Power-to can decline below zero in response to Power-over, and then it takes on a negative, destructive form, leading to increasing resistance, sabotage and ultimately violent opposition. Arendt (1970, p.53) asserts:

Violence can always destroy power; out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What can never grow out of it is power.

Two things from this are clear, firstly, the powerful always think that they are more powerful than they are, and secondly the powerless usually think that they are less powerful than they are. These misperceptions also encourage acts of compulsion.

A SYNTHESIS

In addition to the direct application of Power-over, when we withdraw from a conflict for years on end (as with the Falkland Island dispute, or the Irish settlement), what we are doing is storing up energy for violence in the future because we are acting from the Futility position of “You are not alright”. When we constantly make concessions we are storing up resentment that will ultimately spill over into violence in the future because we are acting from the Depressive position of “I am not alright”. When we compromise we deceive ourselves into thinking that we are behaving well, but continue to carry dissatisfaction of both parties forward into the future – awaiting an opportunity when the other weakens or softens to get our own way. When any party forces an issue it is an act that can be undertaken only from “You are not alright” and is one that invites return in kind. When any party does not engage fully with the interests of the other party future compulsion is being ensured.

In discussing terrorism we are in many senses discussing compulsion, albeit in an extreme form. This is an approach to conflict management made possible by a psychological position where the other party is devalued as a human being. Compulsion is evident when we do not place the well-being and interests of the other party at the same level as our own. It is an echo of our own Paranoid position in which we doubt our resolve or creativity that causes us to decline to negotiate “with a gun to our head” or to “talk with terrorists”.

The way forward that our previous analysis highlights is confronting. Importantly, this confronting approach precludes a number of behaviours, which have been characterised in the past as placation, compromise and concession on the one hand and procrastination on the other. It is captured in the politics and behaviour of
such contemporary figures as Ghandi, Luther King and Mandela who refused to resort to violence or concession and had the courage to accept the consequences of confronting. Shirer (1979, p.245) captured this essential point when he wrote:

Satyagraha, [Gandhi’s] supreme achievement, taught us all that there was a greater power in life than force, which seemed to have ruled the planet since men first sprouted on it. That power lay in the spirit, in Truth and love, in non-violent action.

This principled approach is embodied in religious teachings over many millennia that can be summarised in the Christian tradition of “turning the other cheek” – but it is important to capture the very positive nature of the original admonition “If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him your left.” 2 This cannot be understood as placation. It is not seeking to make the other person comfortable in their act of compulsion. In the terms of our model of approaches to conflict it is definitely not conceding (stepping aside), nor compromise (taking a middle way), nor withdrawal (into an angry sulk). Rather it is holding on to the Healthy position and demanding a constructive resolution that can only come from absorbing rather than reflecting the compelling behaviour of the other.

The alternative to terrorism cannot simply be for all parties in conflict to adopt an approach based upon “Containment”. To paraphrase Laing (1990) our ability to confront conflicts depends upon our willingness to enlist all the powers of every aspect of ourselves in the act of comprehending the other. It is this level of commitment to valuing the other that precludes the use of force by either party.

Again, in the words of Shirer (1979, p.24):

Satyagraha, a word [Gandhi] had coined from his native Gujarati and which, I suspected, meant much more, at least in Hindu consciousness, than civil disobedience, passive resistance, non co-operation and non-violence, though it encompassed all of these.

Nevertheless, we cannot divorce Terrorism from all other actions that take place in a system of behaviour that is characterised as compulsion. It is the pervasive way in which the majority of human cultures are infused by the use of compulsion that invites its adoption as a universal strategy, with actions that appear exploitative or mildly oppressive at one extreme through to acts of extreme violence or terror at the other. This may explain Eubank and Weinberg’s (2001) observation that ‘stable democracy and terrorism go together’, since current, stable democracies are also infused with compulsion as a core political strategy.

Just as programmed behaviour stemming from unresourceful life positions leads to approaches to conflict that are non-productive, so those behaviours themselves encourage the adoption of unresourceful life positions by the other party. Compulsion is in effect saying more than “I do not value you”, it is also saying “You are not alright”, which is an invitation to take up a life position of Depression or Futility at the very least. How can people respond hopefully to a situation where one American life has a value that is an order of magnitude greater
than the life of an Afghan? Again I am saying this, not to devalue the life of any human being, but to emphasise the call for equity that is at the heart of true democracy, of “I am Okay – You are Okay”, the Healthy life position.

A BEHAVIOURAL SHIFT

It is time for a shift of behaviour, to cultures that are based upon confronting. This might take the form of Satyagraha with its emphasis on non-violence but, for those who fear the consequences, the use of force in response to compulsion is not precluded within the new behaviour. However, such use of force would be absolutely restricted to self-defence, a measured, very proportional response undertaken without anger or malice. And, most importantly, that use of force must always have running in parallel to it the most energetic and whole-hearted engagement in non-violent processes that search for alternatives to the status quo to address the needs of all parties.

Why is this entire shift of behaviour so necessary in order to bring about an end to terrorism? It was Bateson’s (1972) genius to recognise that all adjectives descriptive of character (such as fanatical, domineering, or vengeful) are descriptions of the possible results of what he called “Deutero-Learning” (the acquisition of apperceptive habits) and that “the individual will be led to acquire or reject apperceptive habits by ... a ... stream of events ... mediated to them through language, art, technology and other cultural media”. In other words we are predisposed to respond to circumstances in certain ways by the messages we have received from our culture about the way that the world “is”. Additionally it is necessary to recognise, with Berman (1981, p.218), that:

Adjectives descriptive of character are really descriptions of ... transactions, not entities, and the transactions exist between the person and his or her environment. No person is hostile or careless in a vacuum, despite the contrary contentions of Pavlov, Skinner and the whole behavioural school.

Indeed, it is clear that the actions we observe and condemn as ‘terrorism’ stem from a world-view that has been fostered within a system of relationships and culture that extends beyond the individual’s immediate environment and into a global arena. This is not to say that there is a particular cause and effect relationship between action and reaction but that, within General Systems Theory (Von Bertalanffy 1968), there is an interrelationship between our behaviour and that of the people upon whom our behaviour impacts.

If we are to end terrorism, and indeed violence of any kind, as a pattern of behaviour then it is pertinent to ask, with Bateson (1972, p.457), “What sort of ... learning context would we devise in order to inculcate this habit [of rejecting violence]?” The answer is, of course, to provide the [developing] children of the world with a Healthy life position through presenting them with a culture of confronting difficulties and one in which the habit of compulsion is not used by role models but that is seen everywhere and at all times to be a counter productive strategy.
TERRORISM AND COMPULSION

To those who would argue that compulsion is a necessary part of our competitive, free market world I would say that confronting does not preclude competition but rather contains the wisdom to recognise, in the words of Bateson (1972, p.457),

that if an organism sets to work with a focus on its own survival and thinks that that is the way to select its adaptive moves, its progress ends up with a destroyed environment. If the organism ends up destroying its environment, it has in fact destroyed itself.

Darwin got it wrong. The unit of selection is not the individual, nor the family-line, it is the flexibility of the organism, as measured by the heterogeneity of its population, within a flexible environment. In other words, it is not individuals or genes that survive, but systems of interacting individuals and resources, which for our current purposes means social systems and culture. If we do not find room for other peoples, other cultures and interests other than our own, then we place our collective survival at the gravest risk.

Sport, particularly the Corinthian spirit, is an example of how competition and confronting are entirely compatible. It is interesting to note, however, how the influences of compulsion from our wider culture are increasingly being manifested in all forms of cheating, professionalism and gamesmanship.

The challenge of terrorism to human wellbeing is so great that it will require an entire culture change in respect of the way we approach conflict. A change that builds a global system of societies that eschew all forms of compulsion and which, through their adoption of confronting, encourages others to draw their boundaries of legitimate behaviour at that level. To get what you want by the use of your power is to be nothing better than a bully. To fail to engage with other peoples’ legitimate concerns and needs in the pursuit of a selfish interest is to signal their diminished value, to demonstrate only lip-service to democratic principles and to place one’s own, long term, survival at risk.

To argue that ‘compulsion’ is part of human nature and so cannot be changed is to mistake innate nature for learned behaviour, to equate humanity with the dinosaurs. Julian Jaynes’ (1993) thesis on the emergence of human consciousness from more fixed, unconscious patterns of behaviour (similar to the life experience of other animals) places the acquisition of this uniquely human faculty within recent history (about 3000 years ago), with the clear implication that, as yet, we have only a limited perception of what final impact reason will have upon what it means to be human.

Of course our world system of politics, business and the media is totally bound up in the compulsion paradigm and, although we need a democratic system that values plurality and diversity, the few individuals and vested interests that currently control the world’s resources are not going to change overnight. But changes will have to take place at all levels of human interaction, and we must not be afraid of starting within our own, albeit limited, arenas. This will mean developing the skills and attitudes of confronting and exercising them in all that we do. It will not be easy, far from it. It will demand courage and a tolerance of
human failings. But surely we can believe that it is possible to improve matters. The road of confronting conflict and engaging with other people in the search for solutions is an exceedingly tough one, but we have examples in all cultures. The question is, do we have the will and the courage to follow them?

NOTES

1 It is the same level – what is being asked of us is not to concede or to compromise on our own objectives, simply not to force others to concede or compromise.

2 Gospel according to Matthew 5, v39, New English Bible.

3 Based upon the admonition of ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’ Exodus 21,v.24, Authorised version.

4 Leaving the matter of vengeance to God, see Paul’s letter to the Romans 12 v 19.

REFERENCES.