Pace University

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Introduction to Sociology

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Tuesday and Thursday 1:50pm-3:15pm

Urbanization and Social Change/Movements:

Terrorism

Terrorism, by definition, is the use of violence and intimidation in the pursuit of political aims. It has been proven that terrorism is not always used directly for political betterment, it can also be used to promote an ideal or express anger towards another nation for acts they’ve committed that others disagree with. Terrorism is a universal expression of brutality defending a particular viewpoint, or a dissatisfied mindset with another nation or a nations citizens way of living. From the World Trade Center attacks on September 11, 2001, to the terrorist bombings in Benghazi, Libya on September 11, 2012, and the current terrorist atrocities committed each week by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Terrorism is a concept explored by researchers using the sociological perspectives: functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionism. These three perspectives shed insight, aid in our comprehension and analysis of terrorism.

Society is a unit made up of interrelated parts that work together. (Source 3) Societies have an interdependence and cooperation among one another that assists in its efficient functioning. When a group of people is shunned from society, or their values do not align with others, society begins to become latently dysfunctional. These groups of individuals that disagree with the beliefs of others in their communities can sometimes form radical groups that see the only way to spread their discontentment is through violent acts that inflict anguish among others.

Applying functional analysis, the change in one function contributes to changes or dysfunctions in another function, to the concept of terrorism has very intriguing outcomes. Terrorism is a violent crime that can cause death to hundreds, however terrorism also has the ability to shed light on the mistreatment of certain groups. For example, the terrorist group Hamas, they are a “Palestinian Islamic organization in the Palestinian territories and elsewhere in the Middle East including Qatar.” (Source 2) Hamas is not considered a terrorist group by several countries such as Russia and Switzerland, however the United States has deemed otherwise. In Israel, there is a conflict surrounding the Palestinians, the Israelis and their land. Issues ranging from the Palestinians trying to get air rights, having the freedom to use the main roads, and have their place of prayer rebuilt in its original location, all of these seemingly simple requests are not being considered by the Israelis. Hamas is a terrorist organization because the methods they use to express what they want and what they need are not conducive to the modern worlds view of “using your words.” This group is only using violence to gain attention, so they can give their people the necessities they feel they need. Functional analysis applies to this situation, although terrorism is a latent outcome, oppression of peoples basic needs, such as a homeland and clean water have forced them into a corner they feel the only way to get results is through acts of violence. There is a malfunction in Israel where all of its inhabitants, specifically the Palestinian refugees, basic needs are not being met, terrorism is a result of oppression, with small compromises the levels of tension could decrease.

In addition, “War and terrorism serve several important functions. For example, they increase social solidarity as a society unites to defeat a perceived enemy. Some wars have also helped preserve freedom and democracy. War helps to resolve international disputes over matters such as territorial boundaries and religious and other ideologies. Second, war generates a stronger sense of social bonding and solidarity within the societies that are at war. Third, wars many centuries ago, such as those in which ancient Rome in essence formed and grew from conquering various tribes, led to the development of the nation-state as a political institution.” As many negative connotations that terrorism has, it has undiscussed positive attributes as well.

According to the textbook, “Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer viewed society as a kind of living organism, similar to an animal’s body. Just as a person or animal has organs that function together, they wrote, so does society. And like an organism, if society is to function smoothly, its parts must work together in harmony. Emile Durkheim also viewed society as being composed of many parts, each with its own function. He said that when all the parts of society fulfill their functions, society is in a “normal” state. If they do not fulfill their functions, society is in an “abnormal” or “pathological” state.” (Source 3) I find it interesting that organs were compared by these scholars because terrorism stereotypically is the murdering of other individuals, therefore the killing of their organs. Essentially, a living body (living organism) is brutally assaulted or killed by animal like individuals (terrorists) possibly using guerrilla warfare tactics, it is fascinating how everything is so interconnected in the functional analysis concept. Like most things some scholars such as Robert Merton disagrees using the comparison of society to a living organism, however he still agreed that society as a whole unit is composed of parts that must work together. Knowing the universal definition of what most consider to be society and how it can efficiently function, problems can be solved using this as the goal objective.

The second concept in the sociological perspective is conflict theory. Conflict theory stresses how society is composed of groups that compete with one another for scarce resources, it may be mistaken at a quick glance as cooperation but underneath a struggle for power is often revealed. Conflict theory was founded by Karl Marx who concluded that the key to human history is class conflict, and in industrialized societies there is a struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. (Paraphrased Source 3)

Terrorism is essentially a struggle between different groups whether they are political, religious, etc., and finding common ground can seem near impossible when all this individuals feel is suppression, disrespect and hostility from others. “Conflict theorists view terrorism as nothing but a reaction to injustice, which is probably created in the minds of terrorists due to misguidance, illiteracy, or unrealistic goals, and that violent behaviors expressed by terrorist organizations are the result of individual frustration, aggression or showing a readiness to fight. Terrorist use violence because they believe that if they did not use violence they would lose a power struggle, which lead many conflict theorist to view it as a weapon of the weak.” (Source 4) I found it particularly interesting when it mentioned violence is used most to ensure a power struggle is not lost, especially between bourgeoisie and proletariat actors, that their voices and viewpoints that are not aligned with the norms of their communities are recognized.

Referring back to the group Hamas, a primary reason that this group uses violence is not to intentionally inflict anguish upon others, not to say some members do not feel this way, but it is primarily to assert their needs and ensure they are heard and recognized by the greater population, rather than to be suppressed by larger more dominant groups. The ideas of conflict come about due to scarce resources, such as limited food and water being imported to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip by Israelis. Conflict theory is often seen as the opposite of functionalism, I would not agree that it is the opposite, rather I think it is more appropriate to say some key components are lacking in conflict theory, but with proper communication resolutions can surmount. Conflict theory is challenging because those with power make the decisions, for example the notorious terrorist group al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda was formed “as a logistical network to support Muslims fighting against the Soviet Union during the Afghan War; members were recruited throughout the Islamic World. When the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, the organization dispersed but continued to oppose what its leaders considered corrupt Islamic regimes and foreign (ex. USA) presence in Islamic lands.” (Source 5) Terrorism is bad therefore the bourgeoisie that push the proletariats to such drastic measures to regain their homeland and sense of independence from outside influences are just as bad. Most terrorist groups are fighting injustice, conflict, power struggles and exploitation caused by outside influences trying to influence their ways of living based off of the ideals that “our way of living is better, more conducive to both genders, or more universally accepted.” Western civilization especially, cannot grasp the concepts that different religions have different ways of living, of treating its inhabitants, not all of the citizens like the way things are. Therefore, events like the Arab Spring occur in retaliation, a good portion of people feel oppressed, but still a good sum believe in the region, that way of thinking and being, and by inserting our ways of what is “right and acceptable” is causing tremendous upheaval and more terrorist groups as a result. However, like most things, if things are working and useful they are only that way for a select group of people.

In addition to functional analysis and conflict theory, there is symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism is how people use symbols to develop meaning, world-views, communications, and behaviors. It is impossible to understand human behavior without understanding the meaning of the behavior. For example, the Haqquani Network is a terrorist organization that uses guerrilla warfare to fight against the United States led NATO treaty. Once you begin to dissect and understand why the Haqquani Network wants to eliminate all Western influences in their land, mainly Pakistan and Afghanistan, then communicating with them and trying to compromise may reduce their violent tactics and help us to cordially work together to bring about results both sides can benefit from. Social life is created by people who are in constant interaction with one another, and once these interactions are intercepted or altered by outside forces hostility and defensive mechanisms are created to retaliate.

In addition, social constructionism examines our understanding of the world in coordination with other human beings. The two most essential elements to this theory are the assumption that human beings rationalize their experience by creating a model of the social world and how it functions, and the second is that language is the most essential system through which humans construct reality. (Paraphrased Source 6) Language is just labelling our thoughts, and although there are thousands of languages we now have advanced technology that lets us decipher what someone else is saying, therefore with our universal ability to communicate, why are we not practicing the concepts of verstehen: empathic understanding of human behavior. This would reduce terrorism, prevent or aid in the prevention of events such as the September 11 attacks on the twin towers or the attacks that occurred this past week in Paris, France.

Now I would like to mention an interesting term I came across whilst reading about functional analysis: ageism. I found it interesting how intense some individuals antagonistic feelings towards the elderly can be. Ageism is the prejudice and discrimination directed against people because of their age. Similarly, terrorism is a result not of ageism but of prejudice and discrimination directed against people because of a differing belief or way of living. As human beings, we spend far too much time enacting bigotry rather than learning to accept or understand their perspectives and adapting as a whole.

“Symbolic Interactionism is “a micro-level theory in which shared meanings, originations, and assumptions form the basic motivations behind peoples’ actions." In symbolic interactionism, face-to-face interaction creates the social world. Individuals act on a perceived meanings that appear to be self-constituting. Group membership is one of the major determinations of individual interpretations of reality, which enables symbolic interactionism to explain crime, and thus terrorism.” (Source 4) Face-to-face interaction creates the social world according to the article, with the new implementation of technology even as basic as the flip phone, it takes away from human interaction, and also provides an edge to terrorist groups who use IED’s and set them off using a cell phone call. Symbolic interactionism puts a lot of emphasis on the communication between individuals, and I wholeheartedly believe that if we truly listened unbiasedly to both sides of a nations issues, more people would be willing to cooperate rather than resort to terrorism, that is not to say terrorism would be eliminated because pleasing everyone is impossible, but understanding others behaviors and how they use symbols to develop meaning is important. For example, “symbols such as the flag evoke feelings of patriotism, perhaps especially when a nation is at war or when the United States invaded Iraq in March 2003, millions of Americans put magnetic yellow ribbons on their cars, SUVs, and pickup trucks to show their support for the troops.” (Source 1) Symbols do not have to be bold in order to contain importance, recognition of the small symbols and gestures is crucial to understand especially in other cultures.

The three concepts of the sociological perspective have helped me better understand social life and all of its components. Terrorism, especially in the news media as of late, is depicted as these horrible groups of individuals that commit constant atrocities towards innocent people in random locations. This is not entirely false, however exploring the deeper meaning behind the terrorist group and recognizing that these people are not entirely “innocent” is important. Functionalism suggests that the acts of terrorism are horrific, however terrorism itself has some positive attributes seldom pondered. For example, terrorism brings people together especially to defeat an enemy, like the United States after the Twin Tower attacks on 9/11. This concept has aided me to not immediately jump to hatred and cruel thoughts rather to take a moment and understand the terrorist groups backstory, maybe this is the only method they could conjure up to have effective results or gain attention for the injustices and poor conditions they are being forced to live in. In regards to conflict theory, I realized that those with the power may make the decisions but the decisions are carried out by the proletariat, rather than choosing to follow orders most do not agree with rising up, taking a stand, and having your voice be heard is not easy, but if there is a will there is a way. Terrorist groups are formed because the bourgeoisie have continued to ignore the proletariats wishes thus they fight back in violent ways to prove that they matter, the way they want things to be carried out should count just as much. I am not saying terrorism is a good way of expressing oneself or ones nations ideals, I am however recognizing what the people of these groups are trying to do, just like a non profit organization works to benefit causes for those who can’t, terrorist groups are trying to do the same thing, just a more radical version. Lastly, the symbolic interactionism concept helped me to understand how symbols as simple as a nations flag to a pin or a phrase they all hold value. Recognizing symbols, putting value in communication, and seeing that those symbols are how people form their world views is essential. Understanding that industrialized nations may have far different symbols than third world countries, but their symbols are just as important, especially when trying to understand and dissect the culture, group of people, and in this instance a terrorist groups motives. Each terrorist group has a logo with colors and possible a phrase attached, it has nicknames, those are all of value, they are all symbols that will lead to the understanding of their frustrations and why they choose to carry out acts of violence and instill anguish upon others.

In conclusion, the sociological perspective and its three components help to shed insight on terrorist groups and further understand why it is they commit these heinous crimes. Functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism really do make a difference and aid in our comprehension and analysis of terrorism.

Academic References

(Source 1) <http://2012books.lardbucket.org/books/a-primer-on-social-problems/s19-01-sociological-perspectives-on-w.html>

(Source 2) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamas>

(Source 3) Henslin, James M. Essentials of Sociology: A Down-To-Earth Approach. 11th ed. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

\*In Source 3 pages 12-22 and 320-328 were used.

(Source 4) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sociology_of_terrorism>

(Source 5) <http://www.britannica.com/topic/al-Qaeda>

(Source 6) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_constructionism>