

Terrorism: How to respond

By Richard English

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If you want to read one book which explains the phenomenon of terrorism, gives you a good historical grasp of the subject while also providing a dispassionate roadmap to guide you through the term's complex meanderings and its many intellectual cul-de-sacs, then this is the book for you. It is outstanding: short and beautifully written, it manages also to be thoroughly on top of its subject. Richard English has written on the IRA and Irish nationalism to great effect in the past and here uses this mastery of the local as a base-camp from which to ascend to the giddy heights of the universal, the so-called problem of world terrorism and how to respond to it. Gathering together a vast array of facts, academic scholarship, disciplinary perspectives and historical narratives, he then sorts all this disparate stuff into various right orders and deals it out to the reader in a way that makes a sense so simple as to be almost disconcerting: surely things cannot be as clear as this? But the answer is that they are, albeit only because Richard English has made them so. His prodigious achievement is to write a book on terrorism which the non-expert reader will enjoy hugely but which will also be clung onto with even greater enthusiasm and determination by the academic specialists for whom English will appear in the guise of a benign lifeguard, wading through a sea of teeming, turbulent mediocrity to rescue their drowning minds with the power of his intellect.

Nothing said here can be a substitute for reading the book itself. There are four chapters addressing four issues: what is terrorism? Why do people resort to terror? What can we learn from terrorism past? How should we respond? So far as the first two of these are concerned, English's method is first to identify various answers which are shown to be wrong but then to draw from each of them aspects of the more accurate answer towards which the author is moving his text. The third chapter is an extended analysis of the Northern Ireland conflict followed by a rigorous application of what has been learnt there to conflicts further afield. The final chapter produces a short guide on how to deal with terrorism, the simplicity of which is only possible because of the author's profound grasp of his subject.

To sacrifice the book's subtlety at the altar of journalistic concision, English believes that terrorism is violence used or threatened with a political aim which invariably has a strong psychological dimension and which is best seen as 'a subspecies of warfare' and therefore as something which 'can form part of a wider campaign of violent and non-violent attempts at political leverage.' Politics is never far from English's mind when he comes to the causes of terrorism. Tempting though it might be to settle for madness, badness or religious fanaticism as reasons why such violence occurs, simply recognising that 'strategic thinking remains a vital part of any explanation of terrorist activity' leads inexorably to a political understanding of the subject, one which embraces many causal factors and

which respects the context within which a specific campaign of such violence has arisen. To do this though, it is essential to remain 'reasonably calm and dispassionate' and to manage the trick of separating moral judgment from description of the technique of political action under scrutiny. History is also vital and one of the best features of this book is its sensitivity to the past.

Is the emotional detachment called for by English possible? Many years ago I set about writing a book on terrorism only to realise that the best way to grasp the subject was first to realise that it did not exist, that there is no such thing as a world-wide contagion of terror afflicting different parts of the world at different moments, like some man-made swine flu of hate. It is a discourse created by those in whose interests it lies to equate their political opponents with a label which is bound to cause widespread estrangement from their cause if it can be properly imposed on them. We have seen the Iranian authorities try this recently with regard to the street protests that greeted the election 'results' in that country recently. And Robert Mugabe has been at it for years in Zimbabwe. The most effective manoeuvring of this nature has of course been that of Israel: its current prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu was a 'terrorist expert' in a previous life and this state has had tremendous success in turning the Palestinian resistance into merely one of the many 'terrorist' groups that threaten civilisation and our 'Western' values of democracy and human rights. The transformation of resistance into terrorism has been one of the singular achievements of those whose job it has been to use words to defend actions that would otherwise have been seen for what it is: both morally and legally wrong. But 'counter-terrorism' can never be wrong because what it opposes is so awful.

At one point in the book, English wonders aloud whether in fact all we have is a bundle of case studies with no overarching subject behind them. I reluctantly concede that he is right to reject this idea – things have moved too far and too fast for writers of his ability and intellectual acumen to take themselves off a field of battle recognisable to everyone else on the basis that there is no fighting going on. There is a virtual war being waged over the meaning of the term. The outcome of these intellectual interactions feeds directly on to real battlefields, where 'terrorists' kill but also where they or those who are suspected of being like them or who are believed to harbour them are also killed (often in far greater numbers) – and this can include children, the old, doctors, even UN and Red Cross workers. It is necessary for all those who care about democracy and justice to engage, and it is fortunate indeed that we now have a spokesperson to hand of the quality of Richard English.