

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF TERRORISM

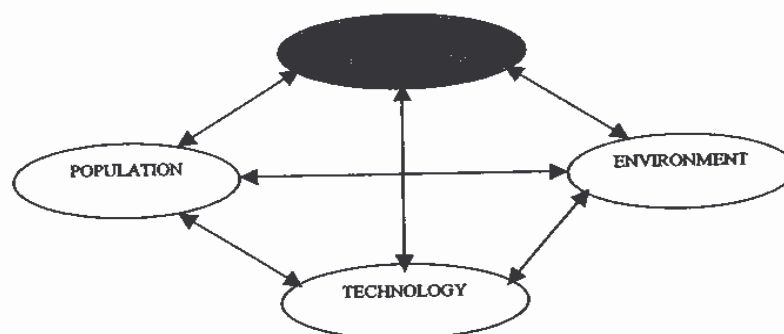
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Terrorism is a social phenomenon, and as such it must be treated as any other social phenomenon, which means that it must be explained through other social phenomena. Its causes are mainly social, and its consequences are also mainly social. Personality traits of terrorists, or consequences of terrorism for individuals are therefore excluded from this analysis. The purpose of this brief essay is to point out some of the factors that may have an influence on the present growth of terrorism, and especially international terrorism. The main hypothesis that will be examined is that present terrorism seems to be more a consequence of growing social and economic inequalities between countries and within countries, and not so much a consequence of a “clash of civilizations” or of a particular set of religious beliefs and values, i.e. Islam. It will be further hypothesized that the increasing perception and awareness that peoples have of those social and economic inequalities are even more important than the objective inequalities themselves. Finally, it will also be argued that the process of globalisation that characterizes the present world has also affected the new face of terrorism.

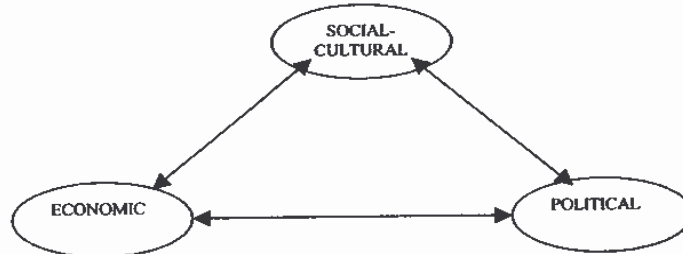
According to social ecosystem theory, economic, political and cultural organizations are instrumental responses that human populations develop to better adapt to their (natural and social) environment within a given state of the arts (technology) (Hawley 1986, Duncan 1964). Human populations are the only biotic populations that adapt to their environment through culture, which may be considered, for heuristic purposes, as material culture (technology) and non-material culture (social organisation, that includes science, as well a religious and ideological belief and value systems). Culture, both material and non-material, is therefore an instrumental response, and as such must be evaluated not so much in terms of good or bad (which are subjective), but in terms of its degree of efficacy to secure the survival of the human population concerned in the best possible conditions. There are no “absolute” better family arrangements, or economic systems, or political systems, but social organisations that, “at a particular time” and “given a certain technology” seem to be the best adaptive response to meet the needs of a particular human population.

The Social Ecosystem



All four elements of the social ecosystem influence and are influenced by the other three, in the sense that significant changes in one element will produce changes in the other three elements. Thus, changes in technology and, more specifically, new advances in the technologies of communication and transportation, have produced continuous expansions of the environment, so that human populations have been able to obtain resources farther and farther away, directly through the expansion of the community, or indirectly through an increase of interdependence with other communities. Social ecosystems have expanded through time on the basis of the interaction of the four elements of the ecosystem [population, environment, social organization and value systems (non-material culture) and technology (material culture)] (Hawley 1986, Díez-Nicolás 1982). The history of mankind has been a continuous process of expansion from very small autarchic independent communities to very large interdependent communities. When interdependence implied more permanent relations, communities of a larger scale and greater internal differentiation were established (i.e. modern metropolitan areas encompass many urban and rural areas with a greater division of labour among them, and the European Union is becoming an increasingly interdependent supra-national community with a new division of labour among the component national communities). In this process, isomorphic processes tend to produce similar social organizational structures to facilitate exchange and communication among increasingly interdependent social systems. Obviously, isomorphism takes place earlier with respect to economic systems (because exchange and interaction among societies is generally first and more importantly based on economic interdependence), and this would explain why economic systems have been historically more homogeneous within wide world regions, while showing great political and cultural variation within them. The focus of this paper, nevertheless, is on the social organisation, that is, on the non-material aspects of culture.

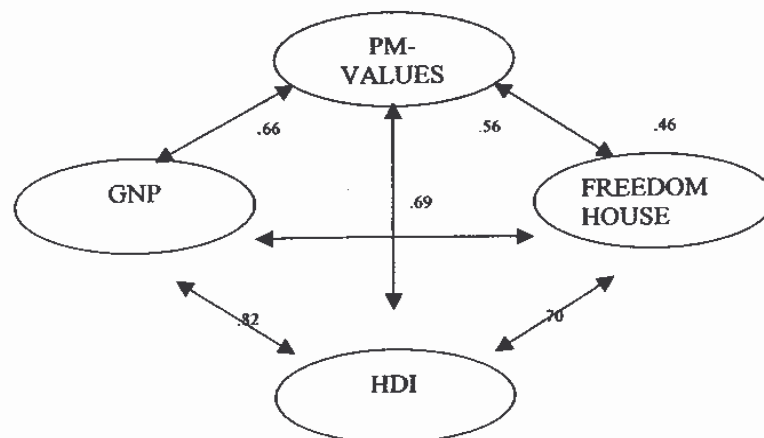
Social Organisation: Subsystems



For more than two centuries social scientists have struggled about the hen and egg problem, that is, whether the economic system (Marx), the political system (Lasswell) or the cultural system (Max Weber) are determinant of the other two systems. It is now clear that the three subsystems are very interrelated, though the correlation among them is not perfect. Thus, a political democracy seems to require that a significant part of the population shares a common set of values with respect to civic and human rights as well as a certain degree of free-market economy, and similar arguments would apply with respect to the pre-requisites for certain economic and social institutions to exist.

Fukuyama (1991) has argued that we approach “the end of history” because, since the fall of the Berlin wall, there is only one model of economy and only one model of polity that all societies seem to have attained or claim to be in the process of attaining: free-market economy and parliamentary democracy. However, this is not quite the situation. First of all, not all societies are parliamentary democracies nor are they free-market economies, so that in spite of their claims, there is a wide range of variation in the degree that they have really attained one and the other. Second, the process towards parliamentary democracy and free-market economy is not unidirectional, but on the contrary, some societies seem to be going in the opposite direction.

Correlation coefficients (Pearson's r) between Political, Economic, Social and Cultural Indicators in 82 Societies



Using some commonly accepted indicators to measure the performance of 82 countries (Diez-Nicolás 2003) on each one of four dimensions: economic (GNP per capita), political (Freedom House country ratings on civic freedoms), social (UN Human Development Index) and cultural (Inglehart's post-materialism scale), it may easily be ascertained that societies show a high degree of variation in all four measures, thus providing the basis for rejecting Fukuyama's hypothesis. However, the very high correlation coefficients between each pair of variables (all significant at the .001 level) provide empirical evidence that there seem to be significant relationships among the four subsystems, implying isomorphic structures in all of them, as one would expect according to the social ecosystem theory. Also, an examination of time series on all four indicators show that there are drawbacks in many countries (some countries have now a lower GNP per capita than they had years ago, some societies have lower FHR or HDI than in preceding years, and some Latin American societies, to give an example, show that the index of post-materialism in their societies in the 2000 wave is lower than it was in the 1995 wave).

Globalisation, on the other hand, has been an ongoing process since the dawn of History, as small and ancient autarchic and independent communities grew and established relations of interdependence with other similar communities at higher (more complex) levels of internal differentiation and external specialisation. And globalisation in one sphere (i.e. the economic) brings globalisation in many other spheres (i.e. political, social, cultural) precisely because of the high interrelationship among subsystems that has just been discussed above. History has shown the succession of many different economic, political, social and cultural systems, all of them being social responses to achieve the best adaptation possible of their populations to the existing and accessible environment. And there is no proof that the political and economic systems that prevail in most societies at present (parliamentary democracy and free-market economy) will prevail forever, but on the contrary, the most likely outcome is that they will change, just as the social system (all the great variety of social institutions) and the belief and value systems will also change, because population, the environment and technology are also changing continuously.

To be more specific, since the end of World War II, changes in the world social ecosystem seem to have accelerated, and even more so since the first oil crisis of 1973. At that time many voices warned of some problems that were facing Humanity, and that can be summarised as follows:

- Accelerated world population growth. According to accepted estimates, the world population was about 250 million at the beginning of our era, it took 1650 years to double, 200 years (1850) to double again, 100 years (1950) to double again, and in only 50 years it has trebled, reaching more than 6,000 millions inhabitants. Though it is true that the rate of growth has decreased from more than 2.0% per year during the decade of the '60s to about 1.3% per year at present, this growth implies duplicating the population every 60 years approximately. In any case, the rate of world population growth since 1950 has never before been experienced.
- The pressure of this growing population on resources has also increased dramatically, also at an exponential rate, not only because the present world population is more than 25 times that of 2,000 years ago, but because each person's per capita consumption of natural resources is more than 100 times that of our ancestors at that time, among other things because we live three times as long as they did. The threats of Humanity to the environment have been the object

of attention of the World Federation of Scientists in preceding years, and therefore they will not be repeated here. Nevertheless, it must be underlined that the threat is not only the extinction of thousands of plant and animal species, or the extinction of some minerals or other non-biotic resources, but the real threat is that mankind can really destroy the planet Earth by changing the climate or by weapons of mass destruction.

- Though technology, by definition, also grows exponentially (because each new invention is the result of the combination of other existing technological products), the fact is that the pressure of population on the environment is producing a reduction of the quality of life, and because those in positions of power will use their power to maximize their access to increasingly limited resources.
- This situation, in fact, is leading to increasing inequalities both between countries and within countries. All the available data support the assertion that income inequalities between the rich and the poor countries have been growing since the decade 1980s. Thus, the richest region in the world in 1963 had a GNP per capita about 40 times that of the poorest region, and the situation remained more or less the same in 1973, but the ratio increased to 51 times in 1983, to 91 times in 1993, and to 103 times in 2000. Most national reports, both in developed and less developed countries, show a similar trend of increasing social and economic inequalities within countries.
- A very important question is that, apart from the fact that inequalities are increasing, the perception of inequalities has grown and continues to grow even more rapidly, due to the globalisation of mass media. Thus, in pre-industrial times, the (objective) level of living for most people was always somewhat below their (subjective) standard of living. That is, every individual aimed at a standard of living that was about 20% above their level of living, but the relative differences were rather stable at any level of living, implying that they were two parallel lines that varied positively with social class: i.e., the higher the social class, the higher their level of living and their standard of living. Nowadays mass media has made it possible for all social classes to share the same standard of living (everybody aims more or less for the same life styles, fashions and products) though great differences in levels of living persist and even increase, as has been argued before. Social and economic inequalities, between countries and within countries, are much more visible, and therefore create greater frustration within large portions of societies. Almost everybody today has access to regular or satellite television in any part of the world, no matter how poor the country, and therefore they can see how people in other societies live, or how some people in their own society live, creating a sense of relative deprivation never experienced in earlier times.
- It is through the perception of inequalities that social frustration grows, leading to social conflicts, latent or manifest. It is the awareness of the great gap that separates the "have" and the "have not" that produces social unrest, mainly because the gap seems so big that the individual doesn't see any possibility of ever filling it. In earlier times, when people's aims were not so distant from their objective level of living, they could be convinced that some day they might reach them. But the gap is so wide today that it is difficult for any individual at the bottom of society to admit that some day they might enjoy the life style of those on top of the socio-economic ladder.

- Consequently, increasing perceived socio-economic inequalities lead to social conflict, at least latent conflict, which may result in two different but complementary social responses. On the side of the "have not", the response may be social unrest, demonstrations, some types of delinquency, but also revolutionary movements and even terrorism, as the extreme ways of expressing discontent and desperation. The more and more frequent, and increasingly violent, acts of terrorism all over the world are examples of this desperate response. But on the side of those who "have", the response will be one of defending their interests and their life style at any cost, using authority and force whenever necessary, both in international or intra-national conflicts. The wars in Afganistan and Irak are only the latest examples of these responses. As may easily be seen, both social answers imply some recourse to violence.

The present situation of the world, and even more important, its future, does not seem very bright, but this should not really be surprising, as all the arguments discussed above were already anticipated following the first oil crisis of 1973, when different experts announced the economic limits of growth (Meadows 1972), the social limits of growth (Hirsh 1978) and the ecological threats (Toffler 1975), as well as the expected increase in inequalities, conflicts and potential recourse to authoritarian regimes (Council on Environmental Quality and Department of State 1980, Díez-Nicolás 1980). In fact, from that date onwards, population growth continues to be very high, the threats to environment are even greater than they were then (as recognised in the Kyoto Treaty and in the many reports on the extreme danger of proliferation of mass destruction weapons, not only nuclear but also chemical and biological), social and economic inequalities have increased without any doubt both between countries and within countries, and social conflicts between and within countries have proliferated in comparison with the period of the Cold War, both in terms of terrorism and what might be called "legal" repression.

One very important consequence of the growth of violence is that security is threatened by terrorism, no question about that. National and international terrorism are a true threat to the security of individuals in almost any place in the world, because the means and resources that terrorist groups have at their disposal are much bigger than ever before, and communication facilities allow their mobility. In other words, threats to personal and collective security have become global.

But there are other threats, threats to individual freedoms and civil rights that result from the countermeasures adopted by many governments as a response to demonstrations, revolutionary movements and terrorism. In most developed countries, but also in the less developed, governments and parliaments are adopting measures to combat the threats to security that, in the opinion of important segments of the population, represent a real danger to democracy. This situation is especially notorious in the United States, as a consequence of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre's Twin Towers. But most countries are approving new legislation to limit migratory movements and to reinforce penal legislation for some types of crime.

Globalisation has therefore reached the threats to security, but it has also reached the threats to freedom. Among the latter, it must be underlined that globalisation implies greater mobility of persons, products, services, etc., but, due to governmental responses to terrorism mobility is finding more and more obstacles among receiving countries. As was said at the beginning, globalisation has been a consequence of the expansion of social ecosystems until only one global world social

ecosystem is being established. But this process has been made possible by the continuous advances in the communication and transportation technologies that have facilitated geographic mobility. The paradox, however, is that mobility, free circulation, has only been attained with respect to capital, while free circulation of products and persons have to face increasing obstacles. Free circulation of capital is more or less global, but protectionist legislation disguised under the most curious forms is increasing, and legislation to control and reduce immigration flows is also being approved in most immigration countries.

Although in some cases repressive responses to terrorism can be understood, and even justified, governments should also understand that the existence of great social and economic inequalities is increasingly rejected by a majority of the population in all societies because they have great visibility through mass media, and consequently the best way to reduce frustration and violent responses, including terrorist actions, is to engage in social and economic policies that will significantly reduce inequalities between countries and within countries. Social and economic inequalities explain a greater part of terrorism than cultural differences, and especially religious differences, as argued by Huntington (1996). Not recognising this fact may lead to displaced repressive measures.

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