The Terrible Geographicalness of Terrorism: Reflections of a Hazards Geographer

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Oppositional engagement with the phenomenon of terrorism by geographers could bring much needed scholarly clarity and balance to the militaristic dominant discourse on terrorism. The hazards subfield within the discipline of geography is germane to research on terrorism, as hazards geographers have been deeply concerned with environmental and technological extremes threatening human life and well-being. A hazards perspective on terrorism could contribute towards defining terrorism, clarifying the contours of the terrorism discourse, root causes, and response. Insights gleaned from geographical research on social violence, technological and environmental hazards can be eminently applicable to researching various aspects of terrorism. The fundamental point is that terrorism is a deeply geographical phenomenon with potentially disastrous consequences for international peace. Beyond enhancing human safety, the geographical research agenda in terrorism will be part of the struggle to wrest control of the terrorism terminology away from the Western politico-military elites, to keep them from using it to whip their real or imagined enemies.

Introduction

The common refrain these days is that the world will never be the same again in the aftermath of September 11 2001. To me, that sounds too good to be true. The world—I am afraid—will continue to be the same as before; a world of grotesque differentials between the haves and have nots, a world where the life and suffering of the poor is cynically undervalued, and a world where September 11 type terrorists will continue to breed in social environments spawned by dictatorships, injustice, military occupations, covert operations and failures of “development”. The US policy towards terrorism, both in terms of addressing the root causes and in terms of providing security against it, draws its intellectual capital from the command and control approach, law enforcement, and national defense discourses (Wisner 2002). Mitchell (2003a) extends the criticism to argue that the analytical perspectives on homeland security are narrower than ever before. He argues that the present US government’s terrorism response policy privileges technology and national defense considerations over broader concerns with human security, reflexivity and social learning, as well as partnering with the public for vulnerability reduction.
A geographical engagement with the subject of terrorism could significantly expand the theoretical repertoire for studying the subject and informing counter-terrorism public policy. Geographers could contribute towards problem definition, terrorism response, identifying root causes, and unpacking the discursive constructs around the topic by analyzing the geographical distribution of the phenomenon and its impact on the everyday lives of its victims, both in the First and the Third World (Cutter, Richardson and Wilbanks 2002; Flint 2003c).

The field of hazards research within geography is particularly germane to the issue of understanding terrorism. The subject matter of hazards research is events and phenomena, both natural and technological, which threaten the life and well-being of human societies. The study of terrorism can therefore benefit from the accumulated experience, skills and insights of hazards research so as to contribute towards a more just, humane and therefore safer world. I will briefly review some of the relevant themes of hazards research before establishing specific connections between hazards research within the discipline of geography and its potential contribution towards establishing a geographical definition of the phenomenon of terrorism, as well as informing terrorism discourse, root causes and response.

**Hazards Research and Terrorism**

Gilbert White pioneered hazards research within the discipline of geography with his seminal work on flood hazards in the United States (White 1945). The hazards research tradition led by White and his students and collaborators, Robert Kates and Ian Burton, came to be known as the human ecology tradition (Kates and Burton 1986a, 1986b; Whyte 1986). The approach, consistent with its intellectual connections to the pragmatic tradition in American philosophy, emphasized the role of scientific knowledge, the need for understanding perceptions and behavior with regard to resources and hazards, and ultimately expansion of the range of choice open to individuals, communities and societies in their hazards adjustment decisions (Wescoat 1987, 1992; White 1974, 1986). Although the human ecology tradition was primarily concerned with “natural” extremes, it did inform research into more obviously human induced hazards, for example climate change and technological hazards (eg Cutter, Tiefenbacher and Solecki 1992; Cutter 1993; Kasterson et al 1990; Kates et al 1985; Zeigler and Johnson 1984). As the hazards research field matured within geography, it was complemented by a more radical perspective on hazards, which was more concerned with how social structures and discourses made various groups differently vulnerable to the ill effects of hazards as well as how representations of hazards in the public policy and scientific literature maintained the technocratic hegemony over problem definition and
its solutions (Blaikie and Brookefield 1987; Blaikie et al 1994; Hewitt 1983; Mustafa 2002; Pelling 2001; Wisner 1993, 1998). The radical perspective on hazards also came to be associated more closely with the political ecology tradition in the wider resource management and development studies literature within geography (also see RADIX web site: http://online.northumbria.ac.uk/geography_research/radix/).

Hazards research, thanks to its varied theoretical repertoire, has also ventured beyond the now well-established subjects of hazards research—natural/humanly induced environmental extremes and technological hazards—to the issues of war and violence as a hazard (Hewitt 1987, 1997; Mitchell 2002). Place annihilation as one of the most debilitating consequences of total war and even of some natural disasters as identified by Hewitt (1987, 1997) is a particularly pertinent insight to understanding September 11 and similar horrors around the world.

A much earlier engagement with the issue of social violence by a hazards geographer is Mitchell’s (1979) piece on “Social violence in Northern Ireland”. Mitchell draws attention to the spatial variations in propensities towards violence because of the spatiality of underlying socio-cultural and political differences. The work on Northern Ireland is also one of the first recognitions by geographers of how the targeting of everyday spaces of pubs, public transportation, dance halls etc engenders a society-wide climate of fear and terror. Alexander (2002) draws a comparison between the cataclysmic impact of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake and the September 11 attacks on two very cosmopolitan and commercial hubs of their times. He further draws a parallel between the extreme reaction of the Inquisition in response to the earthquake and the sheer futility of that reaction and the present day “war on terrorism”. In both cases he argues that the events signified the apparent victory of chaos over order, but in the long run the philosophical and cultural reflections instigated by the Lisbon earthquake led to beneficial cultural and material contributions to the European society. The question of whether the September 11 attacks may lead to a similar reflection and soul searching in the present day world of technology fetishes remains to be seen.

The wider geographical community has been quite attentive to the issue of terrorism and civil conflict as well. One of the earlier treatments of the issue of geography and terrorism is by Sidaway (1994) with regard to the Middle East. Drawing upon post-colonial theory and the work of Edward Said (eg Said 1978), he forcefully argues that Islamic identity is as unstable as a European, US or Israeli identity and all of them are subject to (at times theologically driven) attempts at consolidating political authority, and power. Construction of idealized geographies of the Middle East or the West is an attempt at creating a demonized Other as part of the same project. Le Billon

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(2001) develops a typology of natural-resources-related wars and civil conflict from a political ecological perspective. He argues that the perceived criminal character of rebel movements and corrupt governments’ inclusion in the global commodity market respond to an exclusionary form of globalization, echoing similar insights on terrorism by others; eg, see Flint (2003c).

More recently the anthology by Cutter, Richardson and Wilbanks (2003) highlights the potential contributions of geographers to the study of terrorism. The anthology spans the fields from the role of geographic information technologies to transportation geography to critical political geography. The anthology lists a daunting array of research questions, which can be best addressed by geographical research across the sub-disciplines of geography. Flint (2003c) goes a step further than the generally technological-centered emphasis of Cutter, Richardson and Wilbanks (2003) to outline a geographical research agenda on terrorism in a critical analytical mode much like this paper. Flint (2003c) stresses a geographical engagement with (1) the importance of geohistorical context and US role as the prime hegemonic power in understanding the position of contemporary terrorism, (2) the spatiality of terrorist networks and (3) the negative outcome of the so-called “war on terrorism”. I will engage Flint’s insights in this paper as I delve deeper into outlining a complementary research framework on terrorism.

Based on the brief overview above, I contend that it is a very small step for geographers to deploy their methodological and theoretical backgrounds to the study of terrorism. Both the human ecology and political ecological perspectives on hazards have important insights to offer the study of the phenomenon of September 11 style terrorism, in terms of clarifying the definition of the phenomenon, as well as in terms of terrorism response and illuminating its discursive underpinnings.

Problem Definition
Many scholars have engaged with the issue of terrorism, its history, political context, and definitional issues. Although the term terrorism may apply to some of the secret societies of political assassins in first-century Palestine or eleventh-century Persia (Laqueur 1987), the study of terrorism in its modern sense begins with the reign of terror used by the Jacobins in the aftermath of the French revolution in 1789–95 (Crenshaw 1995; Hoffman 1998). Hoffman (1998), while tracing the history of the terrorism phenomenon, shows that it was closely associated with state terror at its inception in the aftermath of the French revolution but came to be largely applied to sub-state left wing anarchist and revolutionary movements during the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century in mainland Europe and Russia. The concept had a brief realignment with the state during the
Fascist/Nazi era in Germany and Italy, but it reverted back to being understood as a sub-state phenomenon during the second half of the twentieth century. For an evolutionary account of the philosophical underpinnings of systematic terror as an instrument of politics, see Laqueur (1987) and Crenshaw (1995).

An important question at the outset may be, why is there even a need to indulge in a definitional exercise? As Crenshaw (1995) puts it, the task of definition inevitably involves transforming terrorism from a polemical label to an analytical tool. But the exercise of defining terrorism also has to take into account the relationship between language, politics and power. From a critical geopolitics perspective, the dominant conceptualizations of terrorism are really part of a repertoire of instruments used to further state craft, which can and should be questioned (eg, see Ó Tuathail 1996). The question of how terrorism is defined is inevitably linked with the questions: Who is defining? By what authority? And to what effect? The danger of appearing partisan in a definitional exercise for what is now just a polemical label, with all the “descriptive, evocative and symbolic elements” (Crenshaw 1995:9) does not imply that there is no need to develop a bounded conceptualization on which theoretical explanations can be built. Theory, explicitly or implicitly, does inform action and a better definition leads to better theorization and hence informs more thoughtful action, something that is desperately needed in the sphere of terrorism response. The definitional process, in the meantime, may yet become another exercise in geopolitics, but hopefully a geopolitics which is attentive to multi-scalar interactions from local to global, rather than fixated on the nation-state scale. But even beyond the intellectual merits, politically the definitional exercise is part of the struggle to wrest control of the terminology of terrorism away from the politico-military elites of the world, to keep them from using it to flog their real or imagined enemies.

Hoffman is one of the few scholars to have actually engaged in a definitional exercise, but his definition of terrorism “as the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change” (1998:43) is based upon his empirical reading of what has been considered terrorism in the past and his rather uncritical acceptance of that labeling exercise. In this section, I will be engaging with some of the official definitions that Hoffman (1998) uses to build his definition, but I seek to do this more from a critical-geographical perspective than as an exercise in defining empirical regularities.

The phenomenon of terrorism does not yet have an internationally accepted definition or scope. Webster’s dictionary defines terrorism as: “the act of terrorizing; use of force or threats to demoralize, intimidate, and subjugate, esp. such use as a political weapon or
policy” (1997:1382). The dictionary definition has the virtue of being fair and neutral, but it practically raises more questions than it answers. For example, if violence is directed towards raising morale as opposed to demoralizing, reassuring and encouraging as opposed to intimidating, and liberating as opposed to subjugating (generally on part of the perpetrators of violence), would that violence be terrorism? Also aren’t all victims of violence demoralized, intimidated and subjugated by virtue of the very act? Does not this definition universally equate all violence with terrorism? Even in this very simple definition, the normative value judgements about intimidation and subjugation are open to interpretation and debate. Things, however, get a lot more exciting as we get into more official definitions of terrorism. The following sampling should illustrate the point:

Terrorism is the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate and coerce government, the civilian population or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives. (Federal Bureau of Investigation)

Premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by sub national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience. (US Department of State 2000)

Terrorism is an act carried out to achieve an inhuman and corrupt (mufsid) objective, and involving [sic] threat to security of any kind, and violation of rights acknowledged by religion and mankind (Ayatollah Ali Taskhiri 1987).

[The United Nations] Reiterates that criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes are in any circumstance unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious, or other nature that may be invoked to justify them² (General Assembly Resolution 49/60 UN Declaration on Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism, 9 December 1994).

The FBI and the UN definition of terrorism have the common denominator of violence and the ascribed (political) motive of invoking terror. The FBI definition, however, delimits the terrorist violence as unlawful violence, ie lawful violence with similar motivations of invoking terror would not fall under the definition of terrorism. But law, as many geographers are quite aware, thanks to the body of knowledge from legal geographical analysis, is simply politics dressed in a different garb (Blomley 1994; Chouinard 1994). Similarly the question arises, are we talking about national, international, secular, moral or religious systems to distinguish lawful from unlawful
violence? Furthermore, the FBI definition includes attacks against property, presumably even when no human being is hurt, as included within the definition of terrorism. This is the first hint, though inadequate as discussed below, in the official definitions of the recognition of a spatial and geographical dimension of terrorism beyond the simple destruction of human life.

The more popular state department definition further qualifies the violent aspect of terrorism by delimiting it to non-state actors as perpetrators, ie states cannot commit terrorism by this definition. Secondly, it recognizes the theatrical aspect of the act, where elimination of actual victims is not the sole objective but rather to create a spectacle, which may have reverberations in the wider society. The definition is problematic on two counts. First by eliminating the state as a possible perpetrator of terrorism it defers to the dominant state-centric model of political organization and absolves it of responsibility even though its actions have led to more loss of life and property than any other act of violence by sub-state actors (Ahmad 2000; Hewitt 2001; Hoffman 1998). Furthermore, very often acts of violence have been committed against non-combatant civilians at the behest of states, for example, the 1980s car bombings in Beirut by the Saudi Intelligence, or the violent acts by the US-supported Contra rebels in Nicaragua (Marston and Rouhani 2001). Therefore, eliminating the nation state from the possible pool of terrorist suspects makes it a definition by the power structure of the nation state against those who may undermine its power and control.

Secondly, the definition is problematic because it only talks about non-combatants, which eliminates the very important geographic dimension of terrorism. If violence can only qualify as terrorist violence if non-combatants are its victims, then a possible attack on a cultural monument, eg the Statue of Liberty, in which no lives are lost, may not constitute terrorism.

The definition of terrorism by Ayatollah Ali Taskhiri, which was presented to the fifth Islamic Summit Conference, is a little broader in its scope as it defines any violation of security (presumably economic, physical, cultural etc) and fundamental rights as falling within the definition of terrorism. The Ayatollah, in his discussion of the concept, leaves struggles against colonialism, imperialism, despotism, racism and international aggression as falling outside the definition of terrorism. The Ayatollah’s subject position from the post-colonial developing world and that too from a revolutionary background colors his engagement with the concept.

A brief overview of the four definitions illustrates the problems with defining the concept. The three nationally specific definitions of terrorism allow for furtherance of the agendas of the respective power structures that they are associated with, eg the US definition with the
dominant legalistic and nation-state-based structures, and the Iranian definition with the oppositional resistance/violent struggle against perceived injustice. The UN definition, on the other hand, struggling to balance the competing visions of what constitutes terrorism, comes closest to the dictionary definition by being so broad as to simply equate violence calculated to instil fear and directed towards fulfillment of political ends with terrorism. In order for the exercise of defining terrorism to have any veracity it needs to conceptually delimit terrorist violence and be neutral and fair—a tall order in a world of differential power relations and even more lopsided representations of the material and discursive geographies of power.

With the above definitions and some of their implications in mind, I propose that terrorism is a phenomenon intricately tied to the concept of place. Place is defined by Pratt as “a portion of geographic space … in which social relations and identities are constituted. Such places may be officially recognized geographical entities or more informally organized sites of intersecting social relations, meaning and collective memory” (2000:582). In other words, place is constituted at the intersection of socio-economic processes and human experience of those processes. Cutter (1996) links the concept of place to hazards by identifying two streams of vulnerability research within hazards geography—one emphasizing the biophysical distribution of risk and loss and the other focusing on vulnerability as a preexisting condition of individuals and communities on account of social structural factors. She discerns a new direction in vulnerability studies, combining the elements of the two approaches, within an aerial or geographic domain, and calls it “vulnerability as a hazard of place” (Cutter 1996:533). Hewitt (1987, 1997) introduces the concept of “place annihilation” into the lexicon of hazards research as a result of war and violence. He contends that, beyond the actual loss of life and property through war or environmental extremes, sudden destruction of geographical spaces and localities deprives the victims of a whole set of memories, meanings, and identities invested in their communities and life spaces. The result can be psychologically, culturally and materially traumatic, thereby further accentuating the vulnerability of the hazard victims. One consequence of attacking places can be place alienation, whereby people end up being afraid of certain spaces because of the violence and danger associated with them. Drawing upon the above discussion I propose the following geographical definition of terrorism:

Terrorism is an act of violence, different from other acts of violence, eg, genocide, war, war crimes, political assassinations etc. in that it is (1) a spectacle directed towards a wider audience than the immediate victims, (2) directed towards place destruction and/or (3) place alienation.
By the above definition, who is the perpetrator of an act of violence is not the deciding factor in qualifying the act as terrorism—both state and non-state actors can perpetrate terrorism. Therefore, for example, neither the Palestinians nor the Israeli government can be absolved of terrorist acts if the acts of violence fulfill the above criteria. The motivations for the violence are irrelevant. Planting of car bombs in Cali, Colombia to intimidate a populace without any direct political motivations is as much an act of terrorism as the politically motivated suicide bombings in Israel and in the occupied territories. It does not matter if the destruction wrought upon a place inevitably leads to loss of life or injuries. Destruction of a cultural monument, eg the destruction of Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan, or the destruction of the mundane and everyday, eg empty shopping centers in Britain where the IRA generally called in the bomb warnings well in advance, with an eye towards terrorizing and alienating people from those and similar places, constitutes terrorism. When one feels that a grocery store, or even one’s own house, is not safe from the forces of terror, the objectives of terrorism have been achieved. Spectacular violence, leading to place destruction and consequently alienation of people from those places and spaces—cultural monuments, work places, homes, recreation areas, government buildings—lies at the heart of the terrorism project. A geographical approach to terrorism can bring much clarity to the partisan and parochial debate on the definition of terrorism.

The question of scale is a pertinent one when defining terrorism as place annihilation/alienation. Geographical scale as a material and discursive construction (Flint 1999, 2003d; Smith 2000) is integral to the construction of places of terror. According to Hewitt (2001:343), the state-centric scale of General Augusto Pinochet’s geographical ruminations was integral to his highly successful “coercive remaking or destruction of places” in Chile under his dictatorship. The complex of the Chilean prison system, torture chambers, and penal colonies, as well as the urban streets and plazas under curfew and military guard, created and maintained very well-known geographies of terror and place alienation. And all of that terror was justified in the name of the nation state and the supreme national interest. As Hewitt observes, “As in most reigns of terror, capture and death were more about where a person was, their family or social connections, than what they were doing or had done” (2001:342, emphasis added). Kropotkin on the other hand, with his “geographical awareness at all scales” and particularly his antipathy towards the “state building geographies” became one of the most vocal critics of state violence as well as an eloquent proponent of victim rights (Hewitt 2001:349, 350). I find Hewitt’s analysis quite pertinent to how we may engage with the spatiality of terrorism. If spaces and places to be defended against
terrorism are going to be conceptualized at the nation state scale, then the outcome is most likely to be the type of militarist war on terrorism that we observe today. But if conceptualization is going to be more sensitive to the local-level life spaces of terror victims and the cross-scalar processes of neoliberal capitalism, globalization, racism and sexism, which go into producing those places and their specific geographies, then the potential is there for a more enlightened and humanist engagement with the phenomenon of terrorism.

I maintain that it is through a critical engagement with the geographicalness and the geographical diversity of the discourses of terrorism that geographers could make a substantial contribution towards defining terrorism and clarifying the operational implications of such definitions. The above definition is not meant to close the debate on defining terrorism, but rather it purports to provide some clarity and direction to the debate. The definition is from my intellectual vantage point of a geographer and as a non-Western resident of the Western First World, who is deeply skeptical of the dominant Western state centric structures and interpretations of history and geography. Other perspectives in a critical mode could similarly advance an academically rigorous understanding of the phenomenon of terrorism.

Consistent with the trend in hazards research about democratizing risk analyses and communication (Cutter, Tiefenbacher and Solecki 1992; Cutter 1993; Kasperson et al 1988; Strydom 2002) and vulnerability analyses and mitigation (Tobin and Montz 1997; White 1988) there is a similar need to democratize the discourse on terrorism. How do religious and ethnic minorities in South Asia who are victims of politically motivated violence define terrorism? How much concern is being expressed to poorer victims of terrorism in the rural periphery by the urban industrialized core? How much sympathy should we expect from the rural periphery when we become victims of terrorism when we are willing to offer very little to them when it is their turn? What is the cartography of the terrorism discourse from urban industrial to rural agrarian societies, from victims of racism, sexism, economic exploitation and military occupations to global elites both in the First and the Third World? These are the questions that to my mind should lie at the heart of a geographical inquiry on terrorism.

The Terrorism Discourse

On the face of it, mentioning discourse and terrorism in the same sentence may seem very troubling. After all, what could be more concrete than mangled bodies and smoking ruins left in the aftermath of terrorist attacks? But there are ideational constructs both on the side of the perpetrators of terrorism and on the side of the potential
and actual victims of it that legitimize the actions of the actors and produce the context for action. The Cold War created its Red Brigades, Shining Paths, and rightist gangs in El Salvador. In the post Cold War world we have Al-Qaeda, Islamic Jihad, Tamil Tigers and others. Falah laments the invisibility to the world of the Israeli occupation and its material, emotional and spiritual asphyxiation of the Palestinian society by calling it “the paradox of the society of the spectacle and its special ability to mask the monstrous” (2004:598). Unpacking the discourses of terrorism on behalf of its perpetrators and on behalf of its victims is part of the project to keep our spectacle-obsessed modern society from masking the monstrous contexts within which terrorists are created and terrorism is perpetrated by state and non-state actors.

First, each of the discursive constructs legitimizing terrorism, be it in the name of nationalism or religion, draws upon the resentment of a populace about real and perceived injustices and proclaims to uphold the rights of the oppressed (Hoffman 1998). These real and perceived injustices have a distinct geography and are typical of the spaces and places in which they actualize. The cartography of the terrorism discourse will help us map the geography of injustice on to the geography of terrorism. But the cartography of terrorism will also have to move beyond the traditional compartmentalized geography of nation states (Flint 2003a, 2003b). The sovereign spaces of nation states and the nodal networks of international terrorism offer a fundamental challenge to the modern state-centered global geopolitics. The activity, policy and perception spaces of terrorism will all have to be a part of that cartography of terror (Murphy 2003). An engagement with the perception spaces of terrorism could, for example, help address some of the following questions: What type of a geographical imagination does Al-Qaeda engender? Does its internationalist, post nation state geographical horizon make it unique in the history of modern terrorism? Does Al-Qaeda's fixation with symbolic spaces, eg the holy shrines in Saudi Arabia, affect its choice of targets, eg the World Trade Center, US embassies etc? Religious institutions may play an important role in creating a sense of place, which determines the worldview and agency of individuals, including the decisions on supporting, engaging in and selecting targets for terrorist activity (Flint 2003c). Place as an outcome of cross-scalar material and discursive processes and the geographical imaginations it inculcates seems to be critical to understanding terrorism.

Second, with regard to the purported message of terrorist violence, I find Ken Hewitt’s concept of an, “archipelago of hazards” particularly instructive (Hewitt 1983). Just as in the technocratic mind, the natural hazards are banished to the periphery as unexpected events interrupting the (desirable?) flow of normal life, the terrorist violence
challenges our belief in the distinction between desirable and undesir-
able violence. In an international political system premised upon the
right of the institutions of state to legitimate violence and coercion, it
is a tall order to sell the distinction between collateral damage and
terrorist attacks when the end result of both may be mangled bodies
and smoking ruins (Smith 2002). But, more importantly, beyond the
actual ideologies of the terrorists, a more immediate question is, of
what are these terrorist activities symptomatic? After all, just as in
natural hazards we have come to describe the damage from extreme
events as symptomatic of the state of human environment interactions
at a place (Hewitt 1983, 1997; O’Riordan 1986), could we say that
terrorist violence is also symptomatic of some problems with a society,
both within and without? Could it be that certain spatial targets
of terrorist violence, symbols of global capitalism, military might,
consumerism, and occupation point to the complicity of the
institutions they house in the pervasive low-intensity, unreported
violence which may underlie our societies? Terrorism could also be
an attempt, though a misguided one, to unmask the “monstrous”
for research on a “values–vulnerability nexus”, because September 11
style terrorists seem to have a very good grasp of the perceived and
symbolic values of different spaces for the society and tend to target
them according to those values.

Third, a more important venue for unpacking the discourse of
terrorism is in the counter-terrorism sphere. Whereas the American
public seems to be looking for explanations for what happened on
September 11, the American government seems to be doing its level
best to declare that the only good explanation for why September 11
happened is that we are right and they are wrong. They hate our
freedoms and our wealth and the only thing we need to do differently
to prevent the repeat of those horrible events is (1) to smoke out the
terrorists from their hiding places, and (2) shore up our patriotism
and stand united (Agnew 2001). Needless to say, this sounds very
similar to much of our hazards policy, eg in the aftermath of a flood
what we need to do is to impose firmer controls upon nature and
redouble our efforts to subdue it. In the case of natural hazards, the
parameters of the discourse are dominated by technocratic concerns
because it is the technocrats working in engineering-related institu-
tions who are largely in charge of hazards management. Does the
militarist discourse on terrorism point to a similar domination of the
military mind over the “Western democracies”? I am not equating the
malice of a terrorist with the forces of nature, but limiting causation is
one of the time-honored strategies of power in the aftermath of a
disaster—touting technological prowess and the institutional power of
the state is the other. We know from hazards research that people
and institutions benefiting from the status quo and risky behavior are typically the ones who are also least vulnerable to hazards and therefore most resistant to changing the status quo (Mustafa 1998; Watts and Bohle 1993; Wisner 1998). Could a similar proposition hold for terrorism?

Lastly, making an explicit connection between globalization and terrorism may be appropriate here—Flint (2003a, 2003b) elaborates on the connection from a political geographical perspective. He argues that globalization is the main structure through which geographies of inclusion and exclusion are determined—the prime modernity or hegemonic power of the United States can be a cause of considerable resentment on the part of those who are excluded or perceive to be threatened by globalization. Flint (2003b) argues for an empathetic attitude towards those who are excluded in order to understand their particularities in the face of the universalizing tendencies of globalization. Along the same lines, it has been argued that international terrorism is a class act because it draws our attention, not because it causes the maximum damage but because it is made more visible by the largely Western-based media (Ahmad 2000). You cannot get a visa to come to the US or the West unless you can establish that you are firmly middle and upper middle class with sufficient resources for you to not want to stay in the West illegally. None of the September 11 hijackers were the poor and destitute of the Middle East. In fact, many of them were technically educated professionals from relatively more affluent countries, subscribing to a murderous ideology. For a very long time the poor of the world have been blamed for everything from rising crime, loss of jobs to now terrorism. This is one cross that they must not bear because international terrorism seems like a fratricidal conflict between the global elites. If anything, the poor of the world who do suffer from ethnically and religiously inspired terrorism in their daily lives get very little sympathy or attention from the world’s elites, eg the victims of sectarian terrorists in Pakistan, Tamil Tiger violence in Sri Lanka, and the drug mafia violence in Latin America.

The Search for the Root Causes of Terrorism

Although the dominant public and official mood may eschew any attempts at looking for root causes of terrorism beyond simplistic, and need I say biblical, notions of evil and envy (Abu-Nimer 2001; Agnew 2001), we as scholars are duty bound to secularize the discussion and seek non-essentialist causal explanations. It is rather contradictory that Western societies claiming allegiance to rationality, science and open inquiry would be the ones discouraging attempts at a free and open enquiry into the root causes of terrorism. But the enlightenment values have always had to be operationalized within
specific geographies of differential cultural, material and discursive power relations. The existence of the contradiction further lends credence to many of the critiques of the actual praxis of enlightenment (eg, see Foucault 1980), as well as, ironically, claims of Western hypocrisy by the likes of Osama-bin-Laden (Agnew 2001).

It may be useful to revisit the basics in hazards research with regard to finding the root causes of terrorism. The generally accepted definition of a hazard is when a natural or humanly induced extreme phenomenon comes into contact with a vulnerable population. The assumption in the above definition is that nature is neutral and it is human decisions on location, nature of economic activity, and social organization that actually create a hazard (Mileti 1999). In terms of industrial accidents and the body of research in the risk analysis tradition, the supposition is again that normal human activity, particularly in the context of modernity, has reduced certain risks while creating new and unexpected ones—and the need is for effective communication, mitigation, and adaptation to those risks (Beck 1992; Strydom 2002). The natural hazards body of theory, even at the basic definitional level, is confronted with a challenge when dealing with terrorism. The extreme phenomenon in the case of terrorism is neither neutral like natural extremes, nor is it unintentional or Untargeted as is generally the case with risky human behavior, eg chemical manufacturing or nuclear power production. Instead the perpetrators of terrorist violence tend to have specific targets in mind and generally all the instruments of modern technocratic thinking and practice are brought to bear upon the execution of terrorist attacks. How could hazards theory confront a hazard where the traditional assumptions about the nature of the extreme event no longer hold? Mitchell (2003b) argues that the most important implication for hazards theory of the targeted nature of terrorism is that attempts at anticipating and reducing the risk of terrorist attacks on sensitive installations or public buildings through heightened security and technical fixes is unlikely to be very useful. Instead he calls for greater attention to reducing vulnerability of populations, which is typically independent of specific risks.

On a more substantive level, when looking for explanation, it is important to note that every society has, and is capable of, throwing up terrorist elements. Just a brief look at who is who in the terrorist world should illustrate the point: Tim McVeigh, Meir Kahane, Osama bin Laden, Carlos the Jackal etc. Many actual terrorists may be a very small minority within their communities, but what makes them dangerous and effective is a social context in which there may be increasing sympathy for their actions, as a manifestation of just war. Criminal violence masquerading as lofty political struggles will be with us for a long time, but social context, which becomes the recruiting ground for
terrorists or a venue for providing succor to them, is what we can hope to confront and change. It may feel good to denounce each Palestinian suicide bomber as a terrorist, but the question merits asking, what is the context within which the merchants of death find such ready recruits—young men and now women in the prime of their lives who are willing to blow themselves up to take down others? As Falah asks, “What drives people [Palestinians] to that awful brink [of suicide bombing]? … Is it because they have lost all dignity, land, hope, or all these combined?” (2004:600). What is the social and geographical context for the Tamil suicide bombers in Sri Lanka, or Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, or the Militia movement in the United States? And most importantly, how does the social context link with the spatiality of terrorist violence? In other words, what does the target selection of cafes by Palestinian suicide bombers, or shopping malls by the IRA, or a Federal building by Tim McVeigh, tell us about the importance of those spaces in our societies? Does the experience of occupation and its role in alienating mundane life spaces of the Palestinians influence Hamas suicide bombers’ selection of Israeli streets and cafes? Could one then conclude that the spatiality of the occupation is directly linked to the spatiality of the Hamas terrorist attacks? Such a connection may be blasphemous for many in the Israeli and US governments, but geographical research on such linkages could go a long way towards explaining the root causes of terrorism and its anticipated future targets.

**Terrorism Response**
The two elements of response and root causes are interlinked. One looks for root causes not out of idle intellectual curiosity, but to use those as a guide to action. Depending upon the theoretical allegiances of the researchers in the human ecology or political ecology tradition, the search for explanations has taken different routes. In the human ecology tradition, the emphases have been on culturally, economically and administratively conditioned perceptions, which have in turn influenced the choices of adjustments to hazards (eg, see Saarinen 1966; White 1974). The objective of the human ecological research has been to expand the practical range of choice to hazards. But the process has to involve democratic discourse, and reasoned and scientific inquiry are supposed to be the guides to action. The present day strategies of Western governments, particularly of the United States, with their single-minded focus on waging war and further strengthening the government command and control apparatus in response to the terrorism threat, flies in the face of the accumulated wisdom in the hazards research. As Hewitt (2002) asks: Was the theoretical range of choice in response to the September 11 attacks ever considered? Was
even the practical range of choice ever considered? How democratic was the decision making in terms of deciding upon a course of action?

The victims of terrorism, particularly those of September 11, are also being painted with the same broad brush as the victims of natural hazards. Somehow all of them experienced similar suffering from the hazard and entire populations of the United States or Western Europe are equally vulnerable to future threats. Research in natural and technological hazards pointing to the role of class (Mustafa 1998, 2002; Watts and Bohle 1993; Wisner 1993, 1998), culture (Palm and Carroll 1998), gender and age (Cutter 1995; Enarson and Hearn-Morrow 1998; Fordham 1998) in influencing differential experience and vulnerability to hazards points to different conclusions. Furthermore, research on responses of hazards victims and the relief and recovery efforts in the aftermath of extreme events, eg earthquakes (Mileti and Passerini 1996; Palm 1992; Palm and Carroll 1998), Tornadoes (Paul 1999) and floods (Haque 2000; Penning-Rowsell 1996), could inform emergency planning and long-term response to terrorist attacks. Clearly much could be learned regarding the potential and existing victims of terrorism and their differential vulnerabilities and coping abilities to the hazard.

In responding to terrorism, the Bush administration is both metaphorically and literally treating it as a disease whose outbreaks must be isolated, controlled and finally eliminated (Mitchell 2003a). But as Mitchell argues, terrorism unlike a biological process, “is innately human in its causes and consequences. Its vulnerabilities (and risks) are human constructed; its aims and purposes are bound up with emotions, symbolism, ideas and values”. Consequently learning about both the motivations and intentions of its perpetrators as well as its consequences will require a human-centered rather than a technological-centered approach. Bottom up human participation and input in building resilience against terrorist acts would be key to terrorism response. Similarly, human-centered research on understanding terrorism’s causes and potential targets will provide the best guides for action. In that respect, some of the insights from hazards research coupled with the wider geographical concerns with understanding the spatiality of human social existence will be critical.

Conclusion
To summarize and conclude, insights from hazards research can first and foremost contribute to highlighting the hitherto less understood spatio-geographical aspects of the phenomenon of terrorism. A geographical definition of terrorism is offered in order to provide some direction to the much politicized and partisan debate on the definitional issue. The concerns of hazards research with differential vulnerability, democratizing risk analysis, risk communication, participatory

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response to hazards, unpacking the dominant technocratic discourse on hazards, and local to global linkages which create vulnerability in places, find ready application in terrorism response, search for root causes and unpacking of the discourses of terrorism.

Many hazards researchers are reluctant to lend the umbrella of hazards research to research on terrorism, given the intensity of government control over it thus far and the fear that the hazards research label may be used by the power structures to legitimize the nationalistic, ethnocentric and jingoistic aspects of the dominant discourse on terrorism. We as scholars are concerned with studying threats to society, and our lack of critical engagement with the subject will be tantamount to shirking our job of providing intellectual insights to the society. As Agnew argues:

We could start to challenge the whole logic upon which both his [Osama bin-Laden’s] and our actions in the world rely… This is a task Geography as a marginalized profession could set itself as a goal for the new century. Unlike in our distant past when geography was bound up with colonial adventurism, we are no longer as complicit with the seats of power as are many other more “popular fields” in the United States, fields such as political science and economics. With respect and understanding we should be advocates for knowing about and valuing a world of difference and distinctive if ever-changing, cultures; critics of global pressures for exploitation, coercion, and conformity; and proponents of non-violent approaches to resolving the fundamental conflicts that will undoubtedly continue to wrack humanity. (Agnew 2001:87)

I have tried to establish the clear geographicalness of the phenomenon of terrorism in this paper. The geographicalness, like every other aspect of terrorism, is terrible in its consequences for human security and well-being. Perhaps an oppositional engagement with the issue of terrorism, along some of the lines suggested in this paper, will be useful in bringing much needed scholarly clarity and balance to what has so far been an impassioned but a conceptually muddled discussion with potentially catastrophic consequences for world peace.

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Endnotes
1 Recognizing that the use of the term “nature” does not imply its distancing from the social aspects that may influence the apparently natural phenomena.
2 This is the closest that the UN comes to offering a definition of terrorism without explicitly declaring it as its officially recognized definition.
3 Even though these other types of violence may also have a spectacular aspect to them, the difference between these types of violence and terrorism is twofold. First, in say an assassination, the prime motivation is to kill the target, with accompanying possible publicity as a secondary objective. The person in an assassination is killed not because of the message it sends but because of the attributes of the person, and what they were doing or had done. Second, the definition links terrorism to place annihilation/alienation. Without the latter, it is argued that the act will not qualify as terrorism. Besides there is no hierarchy implied in the label terrorism. Genocide, or war crimes or other acts of violence are at times just as morally reprehensible as terrorism, if not more.

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