

Review - Terrorism and the Politics of Social Change

Written by Austin T. Turk

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AUSTIN T. TURK, OCT 7 2013

Terrorism and the Politics of Social Change: A Durkheimian Analysis

By: James Dingley

Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2010



Substantively, James Dingley's *Terrorism and the Politics of Social Change* is an informed and informative analysis of the contextual sources of terrorism. The main thesis is that rural (tribal, parochial) Romanticism historically emerged in reaction against the Enlightenment model of social life. Legal-rational and scientific values, based on analytic thinking and formal organization, orders the lives of the urban masses conscripted out of their rural communities into the workplaces controlled by the elites. The loss of identity as part of a familiar local network, understood to be religiously grounded, leaves life without meaning.

In contrast, the Romantic model glorifies emotional commitment, feelings, informal relationships, and stability. Modernity in all aspects is rejected as a threat to the people's way of life—as indeed it is. Moreover, the threat is to the fundamental bedrock of society: its god. Individualism is abhorrent because it contradicts the subordination of persons to the priority of society's welfare over that of its parts.

Violence is both an integral, natural element of rural life and a predictable response to intrusions by outsiders. Given that their conduct is that of warriors defending their society, it follows that terrorists are quite understandably normal actors. Notably, suicide is heroic martyrdom, not symptomatic of mental disorder as usually presumed in modern

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conceptions of what constitutes normality. Rather, normality is action performed in accord with culturally shaped meaning, specifically understood as membership in and defense of a community.

Al-Qaida is a leading example of Romanticism in the form of contemporary Islamic fundamentalism. Rooted in a sense of community, isolation, and threatened by the existence of the powerful forces of modernism, jihadist terrorism is defined as good and necessary. Its ideological justification is provided by the more ancient version of Islam, which is "a warrior religion" (p.95).

Dingley's broad experience and emphasis on the need for a sociological perspective are commendable. However, British social anthropology is methodologically limiting insofar as it promotes field observations against quantitative research. In particular, there is not only a tendency to denigrate quantitative analysis but also a lack of awareness of the volume and sophistication of statistical research on terrorism, especially in the current American sociological literature.

A related difficulty is that Durkheimian structural functionalism is too readily taken to be the most appropriate sociological approach. There is virtually no consideration of criticisms of and alternatives to Durkheimian versions of systems modeling. Left unexamined and unresolved is the classic problem of how isolated, unchanging and bounded "static" societies really are, and how they change from internal as well as external dynamics. Communities of relatively isolated people have been largely and increasingly penetrated by economic and political globalization. In brief, the author's argument is overdrawn. The more useful theoretical starting point is, in my view, an analysis of the dynamics and outcomes of past and contemporary intragroup and intergroup conflicts.

It is arguable that the Islamic ummah (the Muslim community across the globe) is a contradiction. To meet its Romantic demands and simultaneously maintain the Enlightenment's life-sustaining productive scientific-technological structures is impossible. Consequently, one or the other must change, with the histories of other Romantic movements strongly indicating that Islam will over time be reformed (a trajectory similar to the cumulative adaptations of Catholicism). The more powerful Enlightenment model is on the ascendant; Romanticism can at most ensure its own destruction.

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