

**The concept of terrorism and historical time: comparing 9/11 to the  
*Terreur***

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# The concept of terrorism and historical time: comparing 9/11 to the *Terreur*<sup>1</sup>

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9/11 is a paradigmatic event: one cannot evoke and understand the notion of terrorism without having the fall of the Twin Towers in mind. Here is one of the main characteristics of “basic historical concepts” (*Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* – Koselleck [1972] 2011): these are sociopolitical notions which are both central and specific to their epoch, resulting from as much as reflecting history in the making. From that perspective, the theoretical framework of *conceptual history* (Koselleck) calls for historicising such concepts in order to better grasp their meaning, function and the historical context in which they are embedded. More broadly, basic historical concepts are good indicators of the perception of historical time – and of the changes in what Hartog calls “regimes of historicity” (the articulation of past, present and future) (Hartog [2003] 2015).

In that respect, the aim here is to parallel and compare the conceptual significance of two fundamental events that frame the history of the concept of terrorism: 11 September 2001 and the *Terreur* of the French Revolution (from which the concept originates). Whereas the post-1794 concept evoked both a traumatising past and an apocalyptic future, the post-9/11 one reflects a situation in which history seems stuck in the present. Therefore, on which conceptual bases was the basic historical concept of terrorism created in 1794, how wide is the gap with the post-9/11 concept of terrorism and what does this difference tell us?

At stake here is the relationship between concepts and events. In the context of conceptual history, the notion of event refers to something singularised as a coherent historical whole retrospectively, through the work of memory and history. Here, basic historical concepts discursively shape historical events and their meaning – as put by Koselleck, “The theoretical premise underlying the method of conceptual history [...] is not only that history finds expression in certain concepts, but that events only attain the status of history through the process of being conceptualised” (Koselleck [1972] 2011, 20). Indeed, concepts make possible the aggregation of mere *incidents* into a singular event, while also making it intelligible by inscribing this singularity into a broader history understood through the same concepts – allowing for analogies and comparisons.

But the relation is also reverse: concepts are themselves created and shaped by events. Their present meaning is therefore to be traced back through a genealogical inquiry that takes into consideration this succession of events and their effects on language and

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discourse. It is on this ground that two (otherwise very different) events, the *Terreur* and 9/11, can be compared, as being constructed and remembered through the changing conceptualisations of terrorism, which they contributed to transforming in return.

The concept of terrorism results, indeed, from what one may call a *discursive event* (Guilhaumou 2006): at the end of summer 1793, in an increasingly precarious context for the French Revolution, Royer, a member of the then-dominant Jacobin faction, encouraged his fellow deputies to “Make terror the order of the day” (“*Placez la terreur à l’ordre du jour*”) – a formula that would immediately become a rallying cry (Schechter 2018), indicating an unprecedented sacralisation of popular sovereignty, replacing that of the monarch (Wahnich [2003] 2012). This would give its name to the period going from the summer 1793 to July 1794, *la Terreur*, as an episode marked by the establishment of a state of exception made necessary to secure revolutionary advances against the numerous threats.

The words “*terroriste*” and “*terrorisme*” appeared afterwards in 1794, in the mouth of the new ruling faction, the more moderate and liberal Thermidorians. At first, “terrorism” simply meant “the (bloody) reign of terror of 1793-1794”, in a delegitimising fashion. This is how it gained significance during the 19<sup>th</sup> century: as a *historical* concept, designating a specific time-period singularised retrospectively as one single and coherent historical event, as well as its main features (radical, revolutionary and popular aspirations; but also the revolutionary government’s “tyrannical” tendencies). Through this understanding, the concept also started to generalise and to circulate beyond French borders and language: soon, “terrorism” was anything that was *analogous* to the 1793-1794 reign of terror. Hence its invocations, mainly by moderate or conservative ruling factions: like 1793-1794 Jacobins (as perceived through Thermidorian narratives and memories), a “terrorist” was a revolutionary that was considered too radical and/or with despotic inclinations.

In short, the early-19<sup>th</sup> century concept of terrorism designated the *illegitimate* revolution, by contrast with the successful, moderate-bourgeois revolutions of the past. Broadly speaking, the concept of terrorism was *temporalised* (Koselleck [1972] 2011, 11-13) and illustrated Western-19<sup>th</sup> century perception of historical time: as something in a constant *acceleration*, aiming for the accomplishment of the principles of the Enlightenment. Concepts such as terrorism reflected and nurtured this perceived progress of mankind: just like the concept of revolution was understood in reference to the past English, American and French experiences while also evoking an idealised future, terrorism referred both to a *space of experience* (the *Terreur* of the French Revolution, remembered as a traumatising event) and to a *horizon of expectation* (any future revolution which, if turning too radical, could result in the advent of a new, apocalyptic *Terreur*) (Koselleck [1979] 2004, 43-57; 255-275). In sum, “terrorism” indicated the necessity to close the “age of revolution” (Hobsbawm 1962) in the name

of liberal moderation.

While the 19<sup>th</sup> century was marked by the temporalisation and politicisation of sociopolitical concepts, the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw, by contrast, their depoliticisation and a growing tendency to *presentism* (concepts no longer referring to an alternative future but rather describing an ever-expanding present) (Hoffmann et al. 2012, 82-83; Hartog [2003] 2015). No more a polemical reference to a possible revolutionary future, the concept of terrorism has been objectified as a mere *method* and a *crime*, hence as a very *present* and persistent threat. Reified as an act (the *attentat*), the concept enshrines the definitive end of the “age of revolution” and supports the idea of a liberal-democratic “end of history” (Fukuyama 1992). By now, the label “terrorist” contributes to denying most of the political aspirations underlying the violence named as such. The relatively recent notion of “counter-terrorism” then appears as a neutral police operation against which no-one could or should dare to disagree, despite the persistent lack of clarity inherent to the uses of the concept today.

In that sense, the attacks against the World Trade Center, live-streamed all around the globe and characterised by their immediacy while becoming from the outset an object of history and memory, constitute the quintessential event through which the concept of terrorism is now understood. And also, not without a bitter irony, a trauma that made possible what the concept of terrorism was about two centuries ago: exceptional and emergency measures undertaken by governments in the name of a higher cause justifying, among other things, arbitrary arrests and detentions, increased surveillance, the reduction of civil liberties to combat the “enemy within”, etc.

Comparing the nearly one-year-long period remembered as *la Terreur* with the several hours that made 9/11 may seem odd. Yet, both are not so dissimilar if taken as *events*, namely as objects of history and remembrance, constructed *ex post* as coherent totalities, separating a *before* and an *after* and made intelligible in the lights of the same concept, *terrorism*.

Still, 9/11 differs from the *Terreur* regarding its discursive significance: whereas declaring terror “the order of the day” was *revolutionary* in every sense of the word, no major discontinuity was introduced by the images of the planes crashing on the WTC, nor by G.W. Bush’s subsequent speech separating “us” from “the terrorists” and waging a “war on terror” (Bush 2001): all those elements, although never represented or stated so powerfully and consistently until then, were already conceivable before 2001.

So were the exceptional counter-terrorist practices associated with the “war on terror”, which were already taking shape during the 1990s. Thus, if 9/11 was “the absolute event, the ‘mother’ of all events” (Baudrillard 2001), in that it synthesised and ingrained deeper our contemporary image of terrorism, it did not, however, open up new and unforeseeable horizons. It simply rooted history deeper in its unescapable present,

characterised by a relentless war against an invisible, erratic and elusive enemy, with no alternative future in sight.

What lessons can be drawn, 20 years later? History and memory are battlefields. Basic historical concepts (and their political significance) result from events and, by extension, from the constant renegotiation of how these should be remembered. As an event subject to memorial work and interpretation, 9/11 and the related concept of terrorism have imposed the prism through which many subsequent issues would be understood up until today – security and exceptionalism, migration, freedom of expression and caricature, etc. Re-thinking 9/11 and the concept of terrorism therefore implies to ask the question of what our desirable political horizons should be. In short, if “terrorism” is now inseparable from 9/11 (and vice versa), then it is crucial not to leave the memories of this event to those that used September 2001 attacks as an opportunity for “hijacking” the concept of terrorism and the political agenda which it has contributed to legitimising ever since.

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