

Distinguishing Classical Tyrannicide from Modern Terrorism

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"L'homme est un *zoon politikon*. Il tue pour des idées"
J-P Charnay, *Terrorisme et Culture*

Tyrannicide has traditionally been distinguished from political assassination in terms of the difference between public and private life. Tyrannicide was a self-sacrificing act for public benefit (and so morally esteemed); common assassination, its opposite, namely, a self-serving act for private gain (and correspondingly censured). Terrorist assassinations, though similarly condemned, raise a special problem since they purport to be self-denying acts for the public good. It is argued that a satisfactory distinction between them and tyrannicide cannot be drawn on the basis of historical or behavioral criteria alone, and consequently a supplementary "teleological" criterion is required. This leads to a consideration of the "classical" and "ideological" styles of politics as the respective contexts of tyrannicide and terrorism. In context, terrorism and tyrannicide can be seen as not only categorically different but also antithetical kinds of political violence. Terrorism, in short, is a form of tyranny of which tyrannicide is a negation.

Between the French and Russian revolutions, terrorism ceased to be the concern of regimes, and became the business of insurgents instead. In this epoch insurrectionary terrorism largely consisted of assassinating prominent figures in public life (other familiar terrorist tactics are mostly later innovations). Yet it was not until toward the end of the nineteenth century that this novel political phenomenon was correctly labeled and to some extent recognized for what it was. Even then, this occurred only because Russian terrorists identified and publicized themselves as such.

Up to that time, terrorist *Attentate*, such as that of Karl Sand on Kotzebue (1819), the attempt on the British Cabinet by the Cato Street conspirators (1820), or Orsini's attack on Napoleon III (1858), were represented and (mis)interpreted in terms of that classical genre of political murder, tyrannicide. In part, this was because terrorists and their supporters sought to justify assassination attempts through appealing to the acknowledged legitimacy of tyrannicide.¹ Tyrannicide was no crime, John Stuart Mill observed in *On Liberty*; it was, "an act of exalted virtue."² Partly also, it was because "terrorism" still denoted the events of the Reign of Terror in France (1793-1794); it was in this sense that Marx used the term when he deplored the lack of terrorism in the 1848 revolutions, for example. Since any