Cocta News

COCTA-sponsored panels have been held at the APSA meeting in Washington DC between Aug 30 and Sept 2 as well as at the European Symposium on Concept Formation and Measurement during Sept 27–30, 1984. We will report on some of the papers presented at these meetings in COCTA News, focussing on some of the more COCTA-relevant sections of these papers. If a complete paper is asked for, please, write to the author. This time we deal with the concept of terrorism as analysed by John J. Nutter at the Political Science Department of Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill. 60201, USA.

TERRORISM: A Problem of Definition or Epistemology? (J.J. Nutter)

The first step in theory building is the resolution of basic epistemological issues. In terrorism studies the basic issue is usually called the "definitional problem", the delineation of explicit criteria by which one may judge an event or group to be either terrorist or not (see Jenkins, 1978:1). The absence of well defined and operationalized limits on the behavior labelled "terrorism" is a critical lacuna. It is difficult to research terrorism for two reasons. First, the term is often applied "promiscuously" to include nearly the entire spectrum of socio-political violence and conflict. Second, more rigorous scholarly specifications are often produced and then ignored. The end result is confusion. One heard that 1975 was the "Year of the Terrorist" while others argued simultaneously that total terrorist violence actually declined in that year. By redefining terrorism, a procedure that *post hoc* doubled the number of terrorist events from 1968–1979, the Reagan Administration was able to claim that terrorism was the greatest global threat to human rights. This is also a problem for collectors of data.

Yet the problem goes beyond that of simple definition. The basic epistemological assumption is that terrorism is a discrete behavior, conceptually and operationally isolable from "legitimate" political violence, guerilla warfare, banditry, civil war, criminal violence, etc. This view may be termed the "box" approach to terrorism (and conflict), or in Bell's language, the "terrorist pigeonhole". The box view implies that there are some criteria by which events may be classified – all events within a box meet same criteria. Less than rigorous specification and application of the criteria is what is commonly meant by the "definitional problem", which has lead to inappropriate comparisons. But terrorism is not a unitary concept, nor even necessarily a class of homogenous acts. It is labelled a tactic, as indeed it is if considered against the broader background of social conflict (see Gurr for one classification scheme). However, terrorism is actually several tactics lumped together. Commonly, one thinks of skyjacking, kidnapping, bombing, assassination, and hostage taking as acts of terrorism. That they are categorized together implies some underlying basis of identity, presumably tapped by common characteristics. Thus, if one were to categorize acts of violence by certain criteria, including those that define terrorism, one would expect the terrorism events to "fit" in the correct box, and non "terrorism" events to be excluded. This assumption is the focus of our inquiry.

This paper addresses the problem of terrorism from both a conceptual and operational standpoint. It argues that those acts commonly described as "terrorist" do not empirically fit the concept as it is used in the literature. It begins by deriving from the literature the explicit criteria by which conflict events are classified as "terrorism". These criteria then are operationalized by reference to a set of coded data on "terrorist" events. The paper concludes by suggesting an epistemological alternative that better fits the empirical evidence.

At the outset of the paper, the epistemology of terrorism was described as the "box approach". This examination has shown, if nothing else, that it is an ill fit. One should not expect the box to fit exactly, since any classification scheme is imperfect, yet it is reasonable to expect a better match than this. Categories are merely simplifications. Perhaps terrorism, or small scale violence, is not amenable to this kind of simplification. Surely the measurement of its characteristics is not truly dichotomous. There are innumerable degrees of violence. The continuum of violence stretches from a few dollars worth of property damage to the massacre of hundreds of people. The coerciveness of violence can at least be divided into three categories – non-coercive, indirect or implied coercion (making an example of someone), and direct coercion. There are many degrees of "politicalness" and target discrimination and legitimacy. We should not be dealing with boxes at all. Many of the violent events in this data set have different combinations of characteristics (simplified though they may be), yet we are intuitively aware that they are fundamentally similar in some respects, primarily in context. If we recognize that the similarity results from the nature of this context, the study of clandestine violent groups may prove more valuable in the future.

PLANS FOR 1985

COCTA will sponsor panels at the International Political Science Association's major meeting in Paris between July 15–20. Two of these panels are outlined below.

1985 IPSA Congress Panels for the COCTA Research Committee, Paris, July 16–20, 1985

George J.GRAHAM, Jr., Vanderbilt University

Session 1: Problems of formalization and testing in political analysis.

Chairperson: Judith A. GILLESPIE (Boston University). Papers: G.Robert BOYNTON (University of Iowa): Formal languages and a science of politics without numbers. – Robert T. HOLT (University of Minnesota), Stuart J.THORSEN (Syracuse University) : The logic of formal theory in political science. – Rick K.WILSON (Rice University): Models in search of a test: Contributions of experimentation to the design and development

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of formal theory. – Dina A.ZINNES, Robert G. MUNCASTER (University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana): Fitting versus testing.
Discussants: Cleo CHERRYHOLMES (Michigan State University), Elinor OSTROM (Indiana University), Karen A. FESTE (University of Denver).

Session 2: Problems of conceptualization for political research.

Chairperson: Kenneth JANDA (Northwestern University).
Papers: George J.GRAHAM, Jr. (Vanderbilt University): Concepts and measurement in action theory. – James J.GLASS (University of Maryland), Michael DIAMOND (University of Missouri): Delusion and ritual as methods for organizing perception. – Zorauko MLINAR (University of Ljubljana): On the structural concept of growth. – Henry TEUNE (University of Pennsylvania): On the concept and measurement of growth.
Discussants: Jan-Erik LANE (University of Umea), Jacek KUGLER (Vanderbilt University), Jacques GERSTLE (Paris).

Session 3: Special Cosponsored Meeting (with the Research Committee on Ethnicity and Politics)

Chairpersons: Fred W.RIGGS and Dennis L.THOMPSON
Participants: John AYOADE (University of Ibadan). Naomi CHAZAN (Hebrew University), Surendra CHOPRA (Guru Nanak Dev University), Jean LAPONCE (University of British Columbia), Martha OLCOTT (Colgate University), Donald ROTHCHILD (University of California, Davis).
The Business Meeting will be chaired by Fred W.RIGGS (University of Hawaii).

The Glasgow Round Table on Ethnicity and Politics

The first opportunity to present the draft INTERCOCTA glossary to a group of specialists in ethnicity research came during August 1984 at the Round Table of the Research Committee on Ethnicity and Politics of the International Political Science Association, which was held at the University of Glasgow, Scotland, Aug.15–17, 1984. Quite a few participants agreed to join the network of COCTA, and some will participate in the jointly organized panel of COCTA and the Ethnicity Committee to be held in Paris, July 16-20, 1985 (see above). At this occasion, participants will have had an opportunity to use and evaluate the draft glossary, and they will prepare comments and suggestions on the basis of this experience.

Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism (CRSN)

A notice about the INTERCOCTA project has been included in the latest issue of the CRSN (Vol.11, No.1). Prof.Thomas SPIRA, editor of the Review, writes enthusiastically about the project that it "...will revolutionize the transmission of scholarly information, and put an end to the terminological and semantic chaos in the field of ethnic studies and nationalism". We are most grateful for his support and we hope that the editors of other journals concerned with ethnic phenomena and problems will participate in the further development of this work.

Jan-Erik Lane
Secretary of COCTA

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