Neil J. Smelser

The Faces of Terrorism: Social and Psychological Dimensions. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, ISBN: 978-0-691-14935-6, 285pp., £15.95)

In the decade since the 9/11 terrorist attacks there have been countless books and articles published that have sought to explain Islamist terrorism and explore policy responses to terrorism from the Muslim world. A smaller sector of the literature has sought to place Islamist terror in its international political context, drawing parallels with terrorism in the Basque country, Northern Ireland and domestic groups in the United States. A smaller sector again seeks to explore not only to describe such terrorism and explore policy responses to it but also to dig deeper and uncover the motivations that drive terrorists and those that respond to acts of terrorism to. Such works are, by necessity, interdisciplinary, drawing, of course, on political science and international relations but also sociology, psychology, economics and public policy studies, among many other fields. This sub-segment of the much broader field of terrorism studies offers the reader a chance to understand all aspects of terrorism in a variety of contexts, from what motivates a Tamil Tiger suicide bomber in Sri Lanka to what explains Irish Republican Army tactics in the mainland United Kingdom, from how military power is used to counter sub-state terrorist elements to how those terrorist actors are recruited in the first place. Broader in its conception of the notion of terrorism and wise to the complexities that terrorism should engender in policy debates, books that fall into this sub-segment of the field are both the most challenging to read and, when well executed, the most rewarding for the scholar of international politics.

Neil Smelser's *The Faces of Terrorism* falls clearly within this segment of literature. In a concise three-part, seven-chapter study Smelser unpacks he social and psychological dimensions of terrorism and complicates debates that are so often reduced to political sound bites produced for consumption by the news media. The first part of the book (Part I: Introduction) problematises the issue of terrorism, complicating the popular conceptions of the term with reference to various paradoxes that seem to emerge consistently whenever it is discussed. For example, Smelser points to the wealth of professional and academic literature relating to terrorism, a term that lacks disciplinary or even popularly accepted definition, a problem he considers in greater detail in the book's appendix, 'The Infernal Problems of Definition and Designation'. The second part of the book (Part II: Causes and Dynamics) consists of three chapters that unpack the conditions, ideological factors, motivations and the important role of the media in presenting, interpreting and shaping acts of terrorism and terrorists themselves. These chapters are focussed on the terrorists, terrorist groups and the necessary social, economic and psychological conditions for terrorism. The third part of the book (Part III: Consequences and Control), to paraphrase the author, turns the analysis around to focus on the targets of terrorist acts and their reactions to terrorism, both individually, as groups and in public policy terms. This part of the book moves the reader from examination of how individuals in various situations experience different levels of personal anxiety with regards to the threat of terrorism through to state strategies to discourage or defend against terrorism and the broad issues relating to

the future threat of terrorism and the options available to governments to respond to those threats. Smelser concludes in somewhat hopeful terms from the perspective of the United States and the West, more generally, though he also notes the 'double edged sword' that Western advantages in the fight against terror represent in that same fight.

Smelser's approach is accessible and engages the interest of the reader throughout. His theoretical propositions are supported by examples drawn from a variety of studies and his own decades of experience as an expert in the field. Indeed, the insertion of personal anecdotes to illustrate key positions in the text – for example, the author's experience assessing the psychology of the Unabomber (pp.60-63) or experiencing first-hand the confusion of a terrorist scare at San Francisco airport (pp.135-137) – allow the reader to clearly identify the theoretical proposition with a practical illustration. Smelser is effective in communicating the complexities of terrorism and highlighting the sometimes impossible political dilemmas that liberal democracies face in combating terrorism. Perhaps the best example of this is the symbiotic relationship between the media and terrorist groups (pp.105-118) where the Western commitment to the freedom of the press to report what it chooses must be balanced against the increasingly obvious role of the media in promoting terrorism and feeding the terrorist recruiting machine. Faced with such dilemmas, Smelser does not seek to provide prescriptive policy solutions but rather highlights the social role that such institutions play in combating, promoting, provoking and defending against terrorism. Smelser's assessments of the efficacy of various counter-terrorist strategies is useful both from a scholarly perspective – fitting nicely with Joseph Nye's smart power thesis – and from a practical policymaking standpoint. Indeed, Smelser's advocating of a counter-terrorist approach described as 'Patience and Death by Strangulation' (pp.195-199) seems to broadly describe the evolving counter-terrorism strategy of the United States under the Obama administration and the Clinton State Department as intelligence, financial and military resources are harnessed in combination in an effort to confront terrorist threats.

Smelser's book should appeal to the scholar and student of terrorism and policymakers seeking a greater understanding of the threat of terrorism. The book also holds cross-disciplinary appeal, however, and would surely interest sociologists and psychologists, too. This book, too, is one of the less common academic works that could find popular appeal, with Smelser's accessible style and personal examples allowing even readers unfamiliar with the field to find much of interest within its pages. Well argued and with such broad appeal, Smelser's contribution to understanding terrorism is important, complete and required reading for anyone examining the issue that, ten years after 9/11, remains at the top of the international political agenda.

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