

A. Odasuo Alali and
Kenoye Kelvin Eke (eds)
**Media Coverage of Terrorism:
Methods of Diffusion**
London, Sage 1991.
148 pp. pb.
ISBN 0 8039 4191 9

Yonah Alexander and Richard Latter (eds)
**Terrorism and the Media: Dilemmas for Government,
Journalists and the Public**
Washington, Brassey's, 1990
147 pp. £12.50 pb.
ISBN 0 08 037442 5

Yonah Alexander and
Robert G. Picard (eds)
In the Camera's Eye : News Coverage of Terrorist Events
Washington, Brassey's, 1991
156 pp. pb.
ISBN 0 08 037452 2

Conor Gearty
Terror
London, Faber, 1991
170 pp. hb.
ISBN 0 571 14450 0

Alexander George (ed)
Western State Terrorism
Cambridge, Polity Press
£11.95
264 pp. pb.
ISBN 0 7456 0931 7

Philip Schlesinger
**Media, State and the Nation: Political Violence and
Collective Identities**
London, Sage, 1991
202 pp. pb.
ISBN 0 8039 8504 5

Joanne Wright
Terrorist Propoganda
London, Macmillan, 1991
281 pp. hb.
ISBN 0 333 52711 9

All of these books are centrally concerned with the contest over the definition of acts of political violence. The titles of many of the books make plain that the subject to be studied is that special form of political violence - 'terrorism'. But almost immediately this lands most of the authors in difficulties. Defining 'terrorism' is one of the larger preoccupations and problems of this field.

For Western governments and many writers in the area, terrorism is an illegitimate form of violence which is a dangerous threat to liberal democracies. This view is the dominant one in Western countries and in the books reviewed here. There is another 'alternative' view which emphasises the rhetorical and ideological functions of the term terrorism. In this view Western governments and counter-insurgency writers label only their enemies as terrorists and conveniently ignore their own 'terrorist' actions and those of their allies or friends.

Many of the definitions involve the 'systematic', 'indiscriminate' or strategic use of 'murder' or other physical violence for political ends. Although some of these authors note the dangers of polemical uses of the term terrorism, they then go on to define it so that it mainly applies to anti-Western groups. Authors such as Joanne Wright and Professor Paul Wilkinson (writing in *Terrorism and the Media*), to whom Gearty refers as the 'doyenne' of British terrorism studies, have already made up their minds about the groups they think of as 'terrorist'. They then manage to define 'terrorism' so that it fits with their own preconceptions.

In an attempt to resolve such problems of definition Gearty focuses much of his book teasing out the subtleties of meaning present in the arguments of other theorists. Unfortunately, even his definitions are not immune from polemical implications. Gearty defines the 'pure' terrorist act as 'deliberate infliction... of severe physical violence' for political purposes, targeted indiscriminately. When this definition does not work, then it is manipulated to enable Gearty to distinguish groups of which he seemingly approves (he refers to the ANC as a 'genuine' liberation movement [p98]), from those of which he disapproves. This is quite clear in the case of Northern Ireland where, in order to label the IRA as terrorist, he redefines terrorism from the 'deliberate infliction' [p8] of indiscriminate violence to violence which is 'for all practical purposes indiscriminate in its effect' [p126].

Many counter-insurgency theorists suspect that terrorism across the world is linked by a conspiracy coordinated, or at least approved of, by the Soviet Union. Lord Chalfont, for example, is a leading proponent of this explanation. He goes so far as to suggest that 'international terrorism' depends for its existence on the 'police states' of the Soviet bloc. Readers in Northern Ireland may have noticed that the collapse of the Soviet Union does not seem to have immediately brought about the end of the IRA.

According to Wilkinson those who query the dominant usage of the term terrorism may be doing so as a 'device for obstructing cooperation in policies to combat terrorism'. Such a position renders almost all dissent outside the parameters of the official perspective as illegitimate. Thus a concern for civil liberties is suspected as fellow travelling by this school of counter-insurgency theorists. The question is, will the emergency laws and repressive legislation used

by liberal democratic states, allegedly to combat terrorism, actually result in the protection of democracy, or does the progressive drift to the strong state over the last twenty years lead us closer to a coercive authoritarian society? If it is the latter then we might well be wary of attempts to pass the latest 'anti-terrorist' legislation on grounds that it is a means of protecting 'democracy'.

In critiques of the official position, Schlesinger and the contributors to George's *Western State Terrorism* contend that definitions of terrorism can be explained mainly, as Herman and O'Sullivan put it, 'in terms of Western interests and policy, not by the actions and plans of the "terrorists"' [p39]. If terrorism consists of either 'strategic' or 'indiscriminate' attacks in which the victims are civilian, then why are the bombings of Dresden, Hiroshima, Vietnam and the Greenpeace ship 'Rainbow Warrior' not defined as 'terrorist'? And why was the carpet bombing of civilians in Iraq during the Gulf War not terrorism? The answer is, as George argues, that the term 'terrorism' has been virtually appropriated to signify atrocities targeting the West" [p1]

A central arena for contesting definitions of political violence is provided by the media of mass communications. It is here that battles for the legitimacy of particular acts of violence or particular definitions are won or lost. One pervasive assumption about media, and especially television, coverage of terrorism is that the media 'promote' terrorists or, in Mrs Thatcher's phrase, supply the 'oxygen of publicity'. Lord Chalfont, for example, suggests that, the 'terrorists' depend on the media for their continued existence. In the absence of any supporting evidence for this thesis, the best that can be said is that Michael Collins was not particularly hindered in his leadership of the IRA's 'terrorist' campaign against the British by the lack of television technology.

Others argue that the media has a 'contagious' effect on 'terrorism'. Again, little evidence is given, and the research which has been done, but which is ignored by these authors, suggests just the opposite [Curtis, 1984; Elliot, 1977; Henderson et al, 1991; Schlesinger et al, 1983]. Indeed, the comments of the former Chief Constable of the RUC, Sir John Herman, which are otherwise very critical of media coverage of Northern Ireland are full of praise for the hostile reporting of the Enniskillen bombing and of Loyalist opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. His argument is that in reporting the violence of non-state groups, the media are actually an ally rather than an opponent of the state. But this fleeting recognition of the value of the media for official information strategies is lost amongst the recriminations over how best to use the media in the 'war' against terrorism.

Much debate is based on an assumption that the media's proper role is to take part in the 'war' against 'terrorism'. The predominant question is: should the media impose 'voluntary self-restraint' upon itself or should the government intervene directly to censor media output. Wright, for example, approves of legalising a 'shoot-to-kill' policy and views the role of the media, and indeed academic research, as helping to obtain 'the necessary degree of political consensus' [p233-234] for such a move.

For critics such as Chalfont the media need to abandon any concern with 'impartial' or even accurate coverage and instead declare an open commitment to the official perspective.

The media, especially the BBC, must be persuaded to recognise that they have a clear and unequivocal responsibility on one side of this confrontation. They should concentrate a little less on the faults of the established order and a little more on the forces that threaten to destroy our society. [p21]

If they will not cooperate with the government 'voluntarily' then the preferred option for the editors of *Terrorism and the Media* is to threaten censorship by warning journalists that 'Irresponsible coverage may generate government action to restrict media freedoms' [p5]. If that fails the solution advocated by Wilkinson (in his paper presented to a conference in January 1988) is the introduction of a ban on broadcast interviews with 'terrorists'. This is, of course, precisely what happened in Britain in October 1988.

In the shadow of the agenda set by Western governments and counter-insurgency theorists, some of the American academics to be found in Alali and Eke's *Media Coverage of Terrorism* and Alexander and Picard's *In The Camera's Eye*, favour 'responsible' reporting. This is thought to be the best way to defeat the terrorists and to avoid direct censorship, thus keeping up the appearance that the media are independent from government.

The common thread running through these seemingly disparate approaches is the assumption that the media should be on the side of the state when it comes to the reporting of 'terrorism'. The only differences between these positions concern the efficacy of one tactic or another.

The contributors to *Western State Terrorism*, explicitly reject the view that the main research question is to assess methods of combating 'terrorism'. For them, as George argues, 'the plain and painful truth is that on any reasonable definition of terrorism, taken literally, the US and its friends are the major supporters, sponsors and perpetrators of terrorist incidents in the world today' [p1]. The role of the media in this situation is seen by some of these authors as being simply a 'transmission belt' for official views on terrorism. This is an analysis developed by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (both of whom have chapters in *Western State Terrorism*) over the last fifteen years. It poses a serious challenge to standard conceptions of a 'free press' by providing graphic illustrations of the vulnerability of the media to use as propaganda instruments.

However it is in this area that I am less happy with the argument. While it seems clear that the media are not simply instruments of the 'terrorists', nor can they be said simply to reflect official thinking. In the case of Northern Ireland, for example, the media do not straightforwardly reflect official views and priorities. If they did we might never hear of human rights abuses or 'shoot to kill' operations and we might hear a lot more about a 'return to normality' in Northern Ireland. But nor should we, as Schlesinger argues 'buy the argument that [the media are] a fearless part of the mythic fourth estate' [p4]. The media do provide some space in which official nostrums can be contested, although it should be noted that the most advantageous positions for influencing the media are occupied by the institutions of the state. The representation of violent conflict is heavily constrained both by internal factors, such as self-censorship, and external factors, such as government

pressure and censorship legislation.

What I found most disappointing among this collection was the, mainly American, research to be found in *Media Coverage of Terrorism, Terrorism and the Media* and *In the Camera's Eye*. The main problem of this work is a failure to examine the information management and propaganda of governments of which the labelling of certain acts as 'terrorist' is an integral part. This leads on occasion to an assumption that the role of the research is unproblematically to enhance the ability of the state to deal with terrorism rather than critically examining the causes and motivations of both 'terrorists' and governments.

The most theoretically sophisticated and empirically grounded assessment of the relationship between the media and the state and the role of counter-insurgency ideology is undoubtedly Philip Schlesingers fine collection of essays. The contributions in *Western State Terrorism* are also very valuable. For those interested in the conflict in Northern Ireland, there is an impressively concise and thorough account of British strategy and the ideology of containment. What is most extraordinary about published work of the counter-insurgents in this collection (e.g. Wright, Wilkinson, Chalfont) is that not one of them mentions or refers to the critiques of their work advanced by Schlesinger and others. The ability to ignore critiques like this draws attention to the power of official counter-insurgency thought and it should make readers sceptical when American academic Robert Picard claims, in *Media Coverage of Terrorism*, that empirical research on 'terrorism and the media' will make it less likely that 'governments will act precipitously to control media coverage'. The Gulf War and the continuing propaganda warfare in Northern Ireland make a mockery of such claims. Intelligent and critical work on 'terrorism', counter-insurgency and the media is relatively rare and it has had little effect on the students of 'terrorism'. Nonetheless, it is important to contest the key propositions of counter-insurgency thought, otherwise, as Schlesinger concludes, their 'arguments just pass by on the nod' [p91]. The poverty of much of the work reviewed here adds little to our knowledge of the phenomenon of political violence and its representation in the media.

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B I O G R A P H Y

Joseph McMinn

Jonathan Swift: A Literary Life

London: Macmillan, 1991

172 pp. £35.00 hc.

ISBN 0 333 48584 X

£9.99 pb.

ISBN 0 333 48585 8

Joseph McMinn (ed.)

Swift's Irish Pamphlets: An Introductory Selection

Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1991

188 pp.

hc ISBN 0 86140 297 9

pb ISBN 0 86140 328 2

Ulster Editions and Monographs 2

Jonathan Swift has been fortunate in his recent biographers. Since the publication in 1983 of the third and final volume of Irvin Ehrenpreis's monumental study, *Swift: the Man, His Works and the Age*, two further biographies - J. A. Downie's *Jonathan Swift: Political Writer* (1984) and David Nokes' *Jonathan Swift: A hypocrite Reversed* (1985) - have offered shorter but often complementary accounts worthy of careful attention. The new biography by Joseph McMinn is, by some considerable measure, the briefest of the four, yet it provides a generally incisive and lucid account of Swift's career to the 'students and general readers' for whom it is intended, while more experienced readers will profit by the author's adroit placing of Swift's career in the 'professional, publishing and social contexts' which shaped his writing, in line with the stated aim of the Macmillan Literary Lives series to which this volume belongs. For all their varied merits, neither Downie nor Nokes paid sufficient attention to Swift's uneasy relationship to Ireland in the course of a life which saw him move from an ambitious young man determinedly seeking a career in England to the 'Hibernian Patriot' of the 1720s - and while Irvin Ehrenpreis offered a better balance between Swift's English and Irish experience, his argument that 'To dignify Irish politics, (Swift) had to see them not as directing a nation but as testing mankind' (*Swift*, III p5) is not entirely convincing.

Certainly, one of the particular strengths of Joseph McMinn's account of his subject is the attention the author pays to Swift's concern with Irish affairs. Indeed, while appropriately acknowledging Ehrenpreis's achievement, McMinn seems to have had Ehrenpreis in mind when arguing, in the 'Introduction' to *Swift's Irish Pamphlets*, against the received notion of his author as a 'satirist of an essential and universal human nature... based on a view of Swift as a writer whose vision transcends parochial and