Review of "The United States and Terrorism: An Ironic Perspective"

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1. INTRODUCTION

In his recently published *The United States and Terrorism: An Ironic Perspective* (hereafter, UST), Ron Hirschbein examines the history of war—especially the use of terroristic carpet and/or mass destruction bombings of civilian populations—from the perspective of the many layers of *irony* which characterize the policies, propaganda, and hubris of United States’ engagement. As an optics, Hirschbein argues that irony offers a unique opportunity to
underscore both the immensity of the violence and loss that is war, and the myriad ways in which war is rationalized, euphemized, eulogized, and elided in the interest of objectives often far less noble than the flag-waving rhetoric of its proponents. “This is not the first book on terrorism,” he writes, “but it’s unique: it recounts recent American encounters with terrorism in an unsettling ironic light” (UST, p. 1). Appealing to philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, Hirschbein proposes a “narrative account of terrorism from World War II to the present,” but with a special focus on the “incongruities in the language that would be humorous if it weren’t tragic; and incongruous situations in which war planners provoke what they intend to prevent” (UST, p. 1). Hirschbein’s aim, in other words, is to explore the irony not only of waging war as a means to peace, but, as Ludwig Wittgenstein, might put it, the language games deployed to shield objectives ulterior to and often incongruous with the propaganda required to gain public support.

No doubt, Hirschbein’s right about this much: irony abounds in these accounts. Indeed, given the sheer volume of scholarship devoted to comprehending the out-sized role of the United States in war and terror and, as Hirschbein rightly notes, the extent to which such accounts are themselves party to the ideological mission of defending the country from its critics, his claim to uniqueness is bound to be a tall order. Hence, it’s not necessarily dissuasive that The United States and Terrorism doesn’t quite live up to that promise; what is dissuasive is that he anchors uniqueness to the optics of irony-detection. This strategy, I suggest, sinks Hirschbein’s ship for at least five reasons. Some of these concern his apparent but unexamined assumption that he can advance his argument for a unique perspective by way of spelling out ironies implicit in the political rhetoric of war and terror (reason one); others concern philosophically suspect choices that an optics of irony-detection compel Hirschbein to make.
The problem with *The United States and Terrorism* boils down, however, to this: the optics of irony-detection is ultimately too narrow in its scope to live up to the uniqueness Hirschbein promises; hence, his claim to original insight or depth beyond the scholarship to date is destined to fall flat. And worse: the work ultimately generates its own dark irony in that while Hirschbein argues that what characterizes the 21st century is that we no longer care about truth in justifications for war, he does manifestly care—destining *The United States and Terrorism* to both the stillborn and, channeling Nietzsche more intimately than he intends, to nihilism.

**Reason One: Irony can only be shown; it can’t be explained—and still be ironic.** In the effort to substantiate his claim to the “uniqueness” of the irony-detection strategy Hirschbein fails to consider that more traditional accounts—those that take themselves to be offering a “straight” read of history—often radiate irony, unintentionally but unmistakably. The more ideologically nationalist, the more richly ironic—more so than any deliberate attempt to spell out their blind spots and incongruities. Hirschbein rightly describes the many and telling inconsistencies, even outright contradictions, between the words and deeds of war; but in the act of calling out the irony rife in the decision to atom-bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki (UST, p. 30-2), his account actually has the effect of deflating its punch. It’s like having the punchline of a joke explained to you; it doesn’t feel funny anymore. So too having the irony of the U.S. bringing peace to the Pacific by terror-bombing 150 thousand people to death spelled out in virtue of its gratuity and/or its ulterior motives with respect to the Soviets; there’s loads of irony here, but the feeling of it is lost.

Put differently: I’m not convinced that Hirschbein, or anyone, can explain irony; it must be felt; it’s an implicit and
defining aspect of the ironic that it solicits emotional reaction. As Wittgenstein might put it, you can point, but you cannot say, and you have to care about the gaps and fissures that irony exposes—or it won’t feel like anything. Traditional historical accounts do a superb job of creating that affective charge precisely because they’re not trying to do so. That’s part of what’s so ironic—that they don’t see the irony in their attempt to justify the use of the atom bomb. Hirschbein’s attempt to explain irony has the opposite effect; irony-detection neutralizes its incongruous payload before it can be felt. Ironically, he explains irony away.

**Reason Two:** Terrorizing consequences are not necessarily the result of terrorism. In the interest of making a persuasive case for the uniqueness of the optics of irony-detection, Hirschbein glosses over, distorts, conflates or simply ignores important philosophical differences between “terrorizing” and “terrorism.” He adopts an approach that, clearly consequentialist, treats all acts that have the terrorizing of noncombatants as a result as terrorism, regardless potentially important differences in histories, motives, objectives, or perpetrators. What makes all such acts candidates for “irony,” just is that human populations are terrorized. Regardless whether the causes find their origins in the state’s appeal to ethical principles like peace or justice, or the complex ideological, economic, and religious drivers of substate groups, the irony, for Hirschbein, lay in the fact of carnage whose excess defies justification. By glossing over differences of motive and perpetrator, Hirschbein can block the ideological strategy of defining terrorism solely in terms of substate groups like Al Qaida (UST, p. 4), and thereby make the nation state the primary—most ironically central—focus of his attention. No other entity can wield the power of the state and its military, therefore the state cannot be allowed exemption from critical evaluation in light of the consequences of its
actions. Moreover, because the United States exists, at least in principle, as an instantiation of peace and justice, its acts of terror epitomize the incongruity of state power more than any other. As Hirschbein puts it: “[o]fficials and their supporters respond that it’s obscene to suggest moral equivalence between jihadists killing noncombatants and American forces inadvertently causing collateral damage. They insist that US policymakers and the jihadists inhabit radically different moral universes” (UST, p. 4).

Hirschbein is no doubt right—US policymakers and jihadists do not necessarily inhabit radically different moral universes, and we certainly don’t want to let countries off the hook for their commission or complicity in acts of political violence simply because they’re countries and not ideologically identified organizations. “[W]hether by accident or design,” he writes, “American actions harm noncombatants” (UST, p. 4, p. 92). Absolutely—but while Hirschbein’s desire to include the country within the ambit of moral evaluation is praiseworthy, this doesn’t obviate the fact that there’s a morally significant difference, between “accident” and “design”; such a difference may in fact make the actions of immense military operations even more reprehensible—no matter what we call them. But there’s no way to justify that assessment—to get beyond the mere irony of consequences that outweigh any justification—without probing that difference. Feeling the irony embedded in the incongruous policies of, for example, the G.W. Bush administration’s preemptive strike doctrine, its absurd and slippery justification(s) for invading Iraq, and the fact of that country’s post-war U.S. sponsored instability is just the beginning of evaluation—not its zenith.

“And what was “shock and awe” about?” continues Hirschbein. “Didn’t it send the signal message of terrorism? Be afraid. Be terribly afraid” (UST, p. 4). No doubt “shock
and awe” was terrorizing, and by design, but it’s only on Hirschbein’s un-argued assumption that the motive and status of the perpetrator are largely irrelevant to the judgment that an act constitutes terrorism that we can conclude either that the “signal” purpose of “shock and awe” was to terrorize or that there were not other, potentially more “signal,” motives. As Hirschbein’s own analysis suggests concerning access to ports, oil, and influence in the Middle East, there were other motives, most if not all of which make clear that “shock and awe” was simply a military means to a set of inchoate, but nonetheless geopolitical ends. Terror for its own sake was no more the point of shock and awe than were dead Japanese citizens the signal point of dropping the Atom bomb—even if both actions are morally condemnable on many other grounds.

Motives do matter: the November 2015 Islamic State bombings in Paris clearly include political objectives, but the creation of a permanent state of terror is not, for them, merely a means to an end—it forms a crucial aspect of realizing and maintaining an Islamic Caliphate. If there’s irony to be appreciated here, it lay in recognizing that organizations like the Islamic State have plainly little use for the rationalizing rhetoric of the state to conceal its use of violence; ISIS deploys the appeal to terror at every level of its organizational mission—recruitment, disposition of duty, resource acquisition, suicide assignment, discipline, and weapons manufacture. While it’s certainly arguable that the state also utilizes various coercive means, economic and political, to insure its standing armies, its aims are hardly the creation of a permanent state of exploitable terror; that, after all, doesn’t get people out to go shopping. In short, acts of war are terrorizing, but if we think motives and objectives matter—and they do—acts of war are not terrorism, and this is not merely a difference of semantics.
Reason Three: Shaming does not an argument make:

Hirschbein reiterates his commitment to consequences as the primary (if not sole) criterion for determining whether an action counts as terrorism regularly throughout *The United States and Terrorism*. He clearly knows, however, that the consequentialist approach has its detractors. When he deadpans, for example, that “[c]ontroversies about semantics and ethics don’t matter to the dead” (UST, p. 92), he says what few would contest, but evades the point: they do matter to the living because motives and objectives are not merely semantic. Understanding them can encourage actions that prevent suffering and death. To point out what doesn’t matter to the dead isn’t an argument; it’s a sort of shaming, a tactic Hirschbein repeats in reference to the firebombing of Pyongyang during the Korean war: “[a]gain, whether these actions fit one of the many contested definitions of terrorism distracts from what is salient: the deaths of hundreds of thousands of noncombatants” (UST, p. 104). How dare we suggest that defining terrorism in any other terms might be ethically defensible? How dare we search for clues, say, in the motives of the North Koreans, the Vietcong, the Taliban, the Islamic State in the effort to prevent the next episode of political violence?

The problem with this approach is that not only is shaming a philosophically suspect tactic, it will fail on any reader astute enough to wonder whether consequences are the only criteria for determining what constitutes terrorism. While attempting to neutralize the controversy may help Hirschbein consolidate a specific rhetorical site for the irony that attends the consequences of policies and actions that produce suffering in the name of peace and justice, its actual effect is to highlight the contrived narrowness of the irony-detection strategy. In reminding us that “[s]urely noncombatant casualties were foreseen” in Iraq, Hirschbein obscures the difference between “foreseen” and “deliberate,” but this
Reason Four: “Terror” isn’t necessarily “terrorism,” and definitions matter. There are many contested views about how we should define terrorism, and Hirschbein makes a valuable point when, appealing to sociologist Lisa Stampnitsky, he argues that the use of this language has shifted over time (p. 132). But Hirschbein misunderstands Stampnitsky’s central claim when he remarks that “[a]s she notes, prior to the 1972 Munich massacre American authorities defined airline hijackers, kidnappers, and various bandits and rebels as criminals, not terrorists,” (UST, p. 132). True—but this isn’t because the terrorizing actions of governments were defined by contrast as terrorism, and it’s not because “[t]hese felons of yesterday didn’t challenge the state’s monopoly” (UST, p. 132). The actions of governments weren’t explicitly defined as terrorism even if their consequences terrorized; hence Stampnitsky’s claim (true or false) has no real bearing on Hirschbein’s endeavor to reverse engineer history from the standpoint of the consequences, and it’s irrelevant whether the state constitutes a monopoly: the Munich actors were more than mere criminals; period.

It’s doubly ironic, then, that Hirschbein unintentionally discloses the difference between post-Munich references to terrorism—defined in terms of the actions of substate groups—and the uses of terror by the state to ostensibly achieve peace and justice in war when he writes:
Post-Munich discourse went to extremes to express the rage and humiliation of being upstaged by non-state actors, actors who proved the nation state could no longer protect its citizens. The official lexicon had an expression for violence taken to extremes—“terrorism.” During World War II, facing a “supreme emergency,” the Allies endorsed what I called “Just Terrorism Theory”: they believed they were justified, if not obligated, in taking extreme measures to defeat the Axis powers. Accordingly, they inflicted the worst imaginable violence” terror bombing designed to kill, destroy, and demoralize. Terrorism expert Brian Jenkins got it right: terrorism is theater. Terror bombing sent a message in the Asian and European theaters: ordinary citizens were exquisitely vulnerable to horror visited by alien powers. (UST, p. 133-4).

No doubt, terror bombing did send this message—but creating a permanent state of terror was neither its only nor its primary purpose, however otherwise unjust we may find the actions of the state. Hirschbein implicitly concedes as much when he claims, “the Allies believed they were justified.” “Inflicting the worst imaginable violence” could never have been justified on the grounds that it was the worst imaginable even if the Allies’ arguments for terror bombing were poor—indeed, even if any argument for that magnitude of violence is indefensible. Hirschbein’s “ironic” reading of history from its consequences conflates having an effect with intending that and only that effect. But the fact that ordinary citizens were “exquisitely vulnerable” doesn’t imply that they were targeted by the Allies because they were vulnerable. That case would be difficult to make—however
otherwise misguided the Allies’ decisions, and however much we may describe the consequences as a kind of horror-theater for the consumption of others.

In effect, Hirschbein mistakes the zeal with which “terrorism” was appropriated to the post-Munich lexicon for its expropriation from pre-Munich discourse in order to validate his “Just Terrorism Theory” as—and deeply ironically—the right description of the intentions, motives, objectives of, for example, the Allies during World War II. I say “ironically” because while Hirschbein appeals to the magnitude of the consequences to justify his argument for irony-detection, it’s ultimately to the intentions of the agents responsible for terror bombing he must aver to justify their actions as “terrorism.” The problem is then two-fold: in the first place, “terrorism” didn’t need to be expropriated from anywhere. As Stampnitsky makes clear, the point of adopting “terrorism” was to distinguish, as Hirschbein points out, “venal, all too common perfidy”—mere crime—from ideologically motivated well-planned actions whose aim is to create a permanent state of fear. In the second, it’s unlikely and unknowable whether the intentions of the Allies (or the Truman, Eisenhower, Nixon, Johnson, or Bush administrations) were to create a state of fear; yet, we’re required to impute such intentions if terror bombing is to be terrorism as the “Just Terrorism Theory” requires. To the objection that terrorist organizations like Al Qaida, the Michigan Militia, the Bundy family, the Islamic State, the NRA, Earth First!, or the Ku Klux Klan also have objectives beyond creating a permanent state of fear—true, but irrelevant since it’s not their status as perpetrators of terrorism that’s in question here—except that in order to disqualify any or all from candidacy, we need a definition of terrorism that reaches well beyond a calculation of the magnitude of consequences.
Reason Five: Cognitive insolence and the end of irony (?)

In the fifth and final chapter of The United States and Terrorism, Hirschbein makes a case for the claim that “[t]here’s no need to avoid cognitive dissonance in a culture that promotes cognitive insolence”:

truth isn’t merely ignored, it’s ridiculed. Bush and his advisors finally got it. They realized their audience could handle the truth because no one cares. When entertainment becomes the métier of discourse, it’s not merely a means to propagandize: entertainment becomes an end in itself…The Bush administration determined that Americans no longer inhabit a reality-based culture (UST, p. 177-8)

He then goes on to profile the many (and often profoundly crass) ways in which the Iraq War has been transformed into entertainment for American consumers uninterested in distinguishing between wars and video games, news and movies. He walks us through the manipulation of the media, the censorship of anything that undermined the war’s entertainment value (images of carnage, recognition of Iraqi casualties), the use of patriotic slogans, music, torrential propaganda rained down through every media outlet as news (not only FOX), and the creation of heroic images, movies (American Sniper, for example), and fund-raising organization (Wounded Warrior, for instance). He reviews several well-established critiques of the war: the Bush Doctrine’s patent violation of international law, the uses of torture, the fact that Saddam Husain had no connection to the terrorist attacks of 9-11, the absence of weapons of mass destruction, the whole-cloth fabrication of a threat to national security, the Obama administration’s war-by-drone strikes. And he bewails a culture that’s more interested in the
inane gruel of TV programming like Honey Boo Boo (or Duck Dynasty) than in any real engagement in issues of civic (much less global) import.

But while Hirschbein appears to see this demoralizing insolence (and insularity) as the zenith of irony, as irony steam-rolled to its most deafening crescendo in the sheer endlessness of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (or the “new” Cold War with Vladimir Putin’s Russia, the Syrian refugee crisis, terrorizing pathogens like Ebola and the Zika Virus, climate change…), I’d argue that if he’s right that no one cares then the current state of the culture is actually not irony’s zenith—but its inglorious and unremarkable death. Irony depends utterly on our caring about things like motives, intentions, and objectives because the consequences of war, or contagion, or tsunami, or starvation don’t look all that different from the point of view of the consequences alone. If we accept Hirschbein’s definition and judge the ironic in light of the immense suffering that results as a consequence of policies that, incongruously, appeal to peace and justice, then once we no longer care about the incongruity—once we’re no longer outraged by the consequences (or whether we’re even privy to them)—irony is simply vanquished. Forever. If the consequences of a war matter no more to us (so long as we’re not the ones dying) than the cliff-hanger episode at the end of this season’s The Walking Dead, there just is no incongruity between the policy of whatever president’s in power and sending another hundred special forces troops to Iraq or a few more “advisors” to Afghanistan—or an air strike on a Doctors Without Borders hospital in Kunduz, or Aleppo.

The great irony of The United States and Terrorism is that its point is to get us to care. Yet, in offering us an optics through which we can witness terror from only one perspective, namely, looking backwards from consequences
cast as the deliberate attempt to create an enduring state of fear, Hirschbein unwittingly drives his reader to precisely the collapse of caring he decries in his final chapter. If the production of terror describes the essential character of the state’s response to conflict, the ultimate consequence isn’t even suffering; it’s nihilism. It’s the nihilist who amuses her or himself to death. Ironic too that the narrative Hirschbein provides up to this pseudo-crescendo is littered with incidents, decisions, blunders, policy junctures, all from the history of war—WWII, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan—as if reacquainting ourselves with these facts will reignite our capacity to care; he must hope so. Yet, if his characterization of 21st century America’s cultural zeitgeist is correct, what could justify the expectation that The United States and Terrorism could steer us to another course? If Hirschbein’s right about the fundamental insight of G.W. Bush, et al., and we just don’t care about the justifications—no matter how absurd—that get us into war so long as it’s entertaining, we’re truly doomed. After all, given our current trajectory through climate change, our next wars won’t be about high-minded principles like justice, but rather something far more mundane, existential, and resistant to cognitive insolence: clean water.

**The way back to caring about political violence**: While I appreciate his effort to reinvigorate our caring about the consequences of political violence by getting us to see the ironic incongruities that pockmark our history as a country, the truth is that because irony cannot be known, but rather must be felt, Hirschbein’s project was crippled from the outset. There is, however, a silver lining: we can return to the drawing board and try again to hammer out workable definitions of terrorism. Indeed, if it’s the terrorism of the present we seek to understand and prevent, whether our prospective definitions apply to the past matters less than deciding that what counts is not merely a matter of
semantics. That’s of course a decision to care, and Hirschbein could be right—perhaps we’ve gone too far. But I don’t think he believes that; after all, he wrote a book.

So, in the spirit of returning to the drawing board, I’ll close by proposing three criteria that I think offer a very general, but practicable, framework for any discourse about modern day terrorism. There’s not much of irony here, but in the end I assume we’re not really after derisive laughter, but rather the more profane, but nonetheless hopeful desire to be emancipated from the absurd suffering death of the noncombatant:

- First, because debates about what constitutes terrorism involve serious and sustained consideration about what motives define the terrorist, who all counts as having such motives, whether such motives are attributable to individuals, organizations, countries, or all three under different descriptions, they’re critical to an understanding of terrorism beyond—and before—its consequences. However contentious and messy, debate can generate caring, and it can inform just strategies for addressing political violence.

- Second, nation states like the U.S. are not less morally culpable or condemnable if we determine that terror bombings as well as other military actions in Japan, Germany, Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq—Panama, Grenada, Syria, Lybia, etc.—are not properly characterized as terrorism. The philosopher’s job is to find the most appropriate, comprehensive, truth-telling
vocabulary to describe and explain the actors and the actions whose consequences are suffering and preventable death. High-magnitude suffering may produce more irony in light of the incongruous policies that cause it, but magnitude is neither the only criteria for what counts as ironic, nor is it the sole arbiter of what counts as significant in moral evaluation. Hence, what matters most is not whether particular policies or decisions are incongruous with their putative goals; what matters is coming to understand the causes—complex and messy—of terrorism, and responding in a fashion that makes future acts of political violence less likely. That this likely requires abandoning absurdities like “American exceptionalism” or “manifest destiny” is a tall order, but one not taller than confronting squarely the most likely culprit and beneficiary of contemporary terrorism: globalized corporate capitalism.

- Third, it’s morally incumbent to make the effort—no matter how contentious—to define terrorism—whether this fits with the past or not. What we need is a definition that’s flexible enough to accommodate a wide and evolving range of actions which have noncombatant populations, nonhuman animal species, and ecosystems as their targets, but not so flexible or broad that disease vectors, tsunamis, earthquakes, drought, and tornadoes can count in virtue of their sheer devastation.
In short, we can continue to track a course that is nihilism; but we manifestly cannot afford it.