The lacking concept: "political attemptat".

Ami-Jacques Rapin, 22/05/2017

In his contribution to the collective volume *Contemporary Debates on Terrorism*, the late Paul Wilkinson (2012, 11) mocked the efforts of those who wanted to abandon the concept of terrorism while yet being "unable to find a suitable alternative". In the same vein, he suggested that "members of the 'critical terrorism studies' group" should cease to criticise the concept of terrorism and focus their efforts instead on empirical and historical research into the phenomenon (Wilkinson, 2012, 17). His suggestion to end the conceptual debate was not very reasonable since the very aim of the debate was to specify the subject of historical and empirical research around terrorism. But Wilkinson's point concerning the absence of a suitable alternative was not unfounded, since authors referred to as "rejectionists" by Richard Jackson (2011, 117) were working more on deconstructing of the concept of terrorism than on preparing a terminological framework to replace it.

For a replacement terminology to be useful, it must meet four requirements. First, it should establish axiological neutrality and seek to defuse the pejorative connotations inherent to the concept of terrorism, so that the central concept of our field of study will cease to be a rhetorical weapon in political debate, and scientific debate will be able to develop in a more serene atmosphere. Second, it should allow us to use *two* instead of just *one* concept for *two* different forms of political violence: the "terror" used by repressive States and "acts of terror" by non-state actors. Third, it should offer a solution to the definitional problem that has always faced those conducting "terrorism studies" by formulating a truly operational definition of the analysed object. Fourth, it should avoid conveying a preconceived idea ("terror") relating to the amplitude of the psychological impact generated by each of the acts of violence that the concept seeks to categorise.

A term likely to meet all these requirements is already widely used in both French and German (attentat/Attentat), as well as in Spanish and Portuguese (atentado). Its closest etymological equivalent in modern English is "attempt," as in making an "attempt" upon the life of someone. In its present use, however, the connotation is that the "attempt" was in the end unsuccessful. (The *Macmillan* dictionary defines this given meaning as "an illegal act, such as an attack on someone, that is unsuccessful" and the *Oxford Dictionary of English* as "a bid to kill someone".) This connotation is, however, recent and does not prevent us from proposing here a terminological redefinition that would entail only a slight modification in the word's morphology.

"Attempt" comes from the Latin verb *tempto (tento)* which could mean both "to handle, touch, feel, to try, attempt" and "to attack, assail" with the idea of attacking by surprise

(Lewis, 1916, 1068). The Latin root gave rise to *attempter* and *attemptat* in old French and medieval Anglo-Normand. In its transitive form, the verb *attempter* retained a meaning close to that in Latin, but a new meaning was added in its intransitive form: "to act wrongfully, plot". This new meaning was carried by the substantive *attemptat* which meant "prejudicial act, outrage, atrocity" [1].

In French, the concept of *attentat* retained this meaning of a prejudicial enterprise and, by extension, an aggression, the definition of the successive editions of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* evolving from an "Entreprise contre les Lois (Enterprise against the Laws)" (1st Edition 1694) to an "Entreprise criminelle ou illégale contre les personnes ou les choses (Criminal or illegal enterprise against persons or objects)" (6th edition 1832-5). The use of the word, of course, has evolved over time and its contemporary meaning indicates more specifically subversive violence rather than crimes in general, for which *attentat* was, for a long time, a "scholarly equivalent" (Malandain, 2012). But in French the concept has remained anchored in the idea of an effective violent act against the State or society, and not just an unsuccessful criminal attempt.

In English, the word evolved somewhat differently semantically, since it initially retained the double meaning of its Latin etymology. The dictionary of James Barclay (1813, 61) implies that the meaning of an attack against an enemy had become rarer, but, in the same period, Thomas Sheridan (1797) placed it in the following order of the various meanings of "Attempt": "An attack, an essay, an endeavour". In the 19th century, it continued to convey the different meanings, but a change appears to emerge in the definition of the *Century Dictionary* (1881, 371) which, in addition to "essay, trial, effort, endeavour" proposes "an effort to accomplish something by force or violence; an attack or assault". Apparently, the first meaning of the word (an effort to accomplish something) took over the second meaning (attack), which would explain why the idea of an unsuccessful effort finally prevails in certain contemporary definitions. It is moreover highly possible that a monument of literature contributed to this semantic evolution, successive generations of readers of *Macbeth* (act 2 scene 2) assimilating the idea that the word suggests an attempt and not an accomplished act: "The attempt and not the deed confound us".

Be that it as may, the meaning of the word "attempt" finally drifted away from that of *attentat* in French and German and *atentado* in Spanish and Portuguese. Whereas each of these languages has a single concept that makes possible the thought — and its verbal expression — of the different conditions in which clandestine armed violence occurs, English is forced to use different concepts: thus, bombings, suicide attacks and assassination attempts are called respectively *attentats à la bombe* (*Bombenattentat*, *atentado con bomba*, *atentado a bomba*), *attentats suicides* (*Selbstmordattentat*, *atentado suicida*) and *tentatives d'attentat* or *attentats commis contre quelqu'un* (*Attentatsversuch*, *intento de atentado*, *tentativas de atentado*). Quite simply, each of these languages has a term which allows its users to speak of clandestine acts of violence by non-state actors without referring to the concept of terrorism or act of terror. Thus, all the acts that are recorded in databases, such as the *Global Terrorism Database* or *The International Terrorism: Attributes of Terrorist Ev*ents, are simply *attentats* with the meaning that this

---

[1] http://www.anglo-norman.net.

concept has in French, German, Spanish and Portuguese. As a result, when a French, German, Spanish or Portuguese researcher uses such a database, he is not really studying a phenomenon of "terrorism" but a phenomenon of *attentats politiques* (acts of clandestine political violence). They all, of course, use the concept of "terrorism" if only to communicate with their English-speaking colleagues, whilst knowing that it is much more ambiguous than the concept of *attentat*.

For the English language to rediscover the older denotation of "attempt," it is not actually a question of reactivating the general meaning of "attack" that the word had until the 20th century. Let us consider rather the possibility of returning to the Anglo-Normand word "attemptat" conveying a different idea of "attempt," as John Jamieson (1825, 31) explained in his *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language*.

 "Attemptat: A wicked and injurious entreprise. It would appear that this term is never used in so indefinite a signification as that of English *attempt*. It seems always to include the idea of something, if not morally evil, at least physically so, as injurious in its consequences".

In this meaning, it is not that the action is unsuccessful (since it has consequences that are prejudicial), but the term still retains the idea of an enterprise in the stage of realisation, since what is not yet completed is not the act of violence itself (which effectively occurs), but the political project that it intends to fulfil (which remains only potential).

In Jamieson's definition, just as in the Anglo-Normand use of the term, "attemptat" has a negative connotation insofar as the act to which it refers is an act that is prejudicial to the law and society. This connotation is, however, less accentuated than in the concept of terrorism for two reasons, which, in actual fact, form just one. On the one hand, "attemptat" refers to the act itself (the *modus operandi*) and not the supposed prejudicial psychological consequences of the action on society (terror). On the other hand, as Jamieson noted, any judgement we make on it is not primarily moral but relates to the concrete implications of the action.

In other words, without claiming strict axiological neutrality, the concept of *attemptat* offers the great advantage of not confining us to the logic that all "terrorist acts" provoke terror (the psychological meaning of the term) or are the expression of the wish to spread terror. This is not the case, as we know: the acts in question, in their great diversity, do not have the same psychological impacts, and those that commit these acts are driven by varied, complex motivations.

It may indeed appear strange to have recourse to an archaism to replace syntagms that we have become accustomed to using: "acts of terror", "terrorist acts", "terrorist attacks" and "terrorist incidents". It is true that we could just as well consider the syntagm "acts of clandestine political violence," which has already marginally been used by authors such as Adrian Guelke (2004) and Dontella della Porta (2013). A "political attemptat" would be merely an "act of clandestine political violence," but as an expression it has an advantage over the newer descriptive one: as John Jamieson had understood, it conveys the idea of an act or enterprise in the course of accomplishment whose aim is more than the act of violence itself but is potentially "injurious in its consequences."

What working definition would allow the concept of a "political attemptat" to be thought without recourse to the burdensome concept of terror? Something like this: a planned, clandestine and sporadic act of violence directed against objects or persons with the intention of having a significant influence on the social relationships of public order and perceived to be a sufficiently serious act (anxiety-provoking) to present a threat to the stability and durability of these relationships.

 "Attemptat" is most certainly a neologism of little use in everyday language, for it is too influenced by the connation of "attempt" for the nuance to be perceived. It is no doubt a concept whose terminological pertinence will not be immediately perceived by researchers who may have good mastery of English but are not sensitive to the nuances of Jamieson's definition. Others will perhaps better recognise the interest of a general category of analysis that allows the repertoire of acts of "terrorism" to be thought without having recourse to the notion of "terror," which contains a preconceived judgement on the intention of the person committing the act and the act's psychological effects. Last but not least, the concept of "political attemptat" could be a good means for returning to a constructive dialogue between the "orthodox", "critical" and "rejectionist" schools of thought, who are all working on the same subject.

References

Barclay, James (1813) *Universal dictionary*, London, J. M'Gowan.

Della Porta, Donetalla (2013) *Clandestine Political Violence*, New York, Cambridge University Press.

Guelke, Adrian (2004), "Terrorism" in Kuper A. and Kuper J. (Eds), *The Social Science Encyclopedia*, New York, Routledge.

Jackson, Richard (2011) "In defence of "terrorism": finding a way through a forest of misconceptions", *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, vol: 3, pp 116-130.

Jamieson, John (1825) *Supplement to the Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language*, Edinburgh, W. & C. Tait.

Lewis, Charlton T. (1916) *A Latin Dictionary*, New York, American Book Company.

Malandain, Gilles (2012) "Les sens d'un mot: 'attentat', de l'Ancien Régime à nos jours", *La Révolution française. Cahiers de l'IHRF*, vol : 6. http://lrf.revues.org/363.

Sheridan, Thomas (1797) *A Complete Dictionary of the English Language*, London, Charles Dilly.

Wilkinson, Paul (2012) "Is terrorism still a useful analytical term or should it be abandoned? Yes: the utility of the concept of terrorism" in Jackson, R. and Sinclair, S.J. (Eds), *Contemporary Debates on Terrorism*, London, Routledge.