

## ***Matteo Vergani: How Is Terrorism Changing Us? Threat Perception and Political Attitudes in the Age of Terror.***

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Terrorism, the indiscriminate use of violence against government targets as well as civilians to express a political, ideological, or religious view, is not a foreign concept to the international system. However, since the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., terrorism is perhaps in the spotlight more than ever. Vergani's book aims to show how the perception of the threat of terrorism erodes civil liberties, sows doubt about the loyalties of immigrants, and heightens the left-right ideological divide.

Matteo Vergani is a postdoctoral researcher at Deakin University, Australia, and Senior Research Fellow at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalization. His expertise in the field of extremism and hate with a focus on empirical evaluation of prevention and reduction programs is clearly visible throughout his book *How Is Terrorism Changing Us? Threat Perception and Political Attitudes in the Age of Terror*. Vergani's main thesis is that threats of terrorism, especially within a multicultural society, can change people's political attitudes, thus leading to the adoption of draconian measures which are anti-democratic and undermine the rule of law. When this tendency is pushed to its limits or breaking point, otherwise democratic societies which usually respect the rule of law and democratic values are forced to adopt anti-democratic legislation and laws that further promote the "Us" versus "Them" dichotomy within the society. Vergani's analysis points out three specific situations in which the "Us" vs. "Them" attitude is enhanced by the threat of terrorism. For example, under the right conditions, governments can increase support for draconian policies and anti-system attitudes. Second, governments in democratic societies can exacerbate the differences between ideological and religious groups. And, finally, when the threat of terrorism is associated with out-groups, the out-groups erode the trust between immigrants and their host societies in multicultural democracies.

Vergani defends his thesis by examining two theoretical mechanisms – social and individual – to explain how the perceived threat of terrorism can change people's political attitudes. Those two theoretical mechanisms consider the following questions: who are the people within a society impacted by terrorism, meaning are they part of the "in" groups or "atomized" individuals; what does terrorism trigger, that is, does it trigger a sense of belonging or does it lead to a quest for the meaning of life and advancement of the terrorist's causes; and finally, what is the process? Does terrorism threaten group identities or does it lead to a psychological existence of terror?

Vergani's book is composed of eight chapters, and these are divided into two parts. The first part is composed of Chapters 2, 3, and 4. In it, Vergani examines the impact of media exposure on the perception of the threat of terrorism and the reasons why journalists tend to prioritize terrorism over other news topics. Obviously, journalism in the twenty-first century has become more sensationalized, and as a result, whatever "bleeds" leads in the headlines. Also, sensationalized news stories have a tendency to catch the short attention span of readers and ignite their passion or hatred against the "Others."

Terrorism is a cancer that will not go away despite a whole-of-government approach to defeating it in a society. Vergani defines terrorism as a form of psychological warfare that aims to reach political objectives, and states that it is used because it is perceived to

be an instrumental means to achieving those aims (p. 12). Based on Vergani's definition, terrorism has multifunctional objectives when perpetrated by sympathizers of the terrorists. One such objective is to instill fear and resentment in multicultural societies. This can be examined by looking at the social and individual mechanisms through which terrorism can change people's political attitudes. While most individuals are more likely to die from a chronic disease such as diabetes or chronic heart disease than to die in a terrorist attack, a mere mention of the word terrorism strikes fear into the hearts and minds of individuals regardless of whether their society has or has not been a victim of a terrorist attack. The actions perpetrated by terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant bring fear and a sense of vulnerability to a country's citizens despite their government's efforts to protect them.

Why does terrorism cause more fear in individuals than an ordinary criminal attack on the streets? This is not simply a rhetorical question. Vergani argues that there are three reasons for why the perceived threat of terrorism could become a real threat. First, deaths at the hands of others provoke more moral outrage than accidental ones. Second, the very objective of terrorism is to terrorize a population through the media, since the media reports make the population see a terrorist attack as an unpredictable event that could hit anyone anywhere. Finally, terrorism aims at maximum publicity and political impact (p. 31). Vergani's three reasons highlight the fact that acts of terrorism have both a political and an emotional effect. From a political viewpoint, terrorists want to show citizens and governments alike that they do not have total control of the situation. In terms of the emotional aspect, terrorism instills fear in the hearts and minds of citizens. Their resulting sense of despair and inability to carry on their daily activities without looking over their shoulders can overcome them.

In the second part of the book, composed of Chapters 5, 6, and 7, Vergani examines the effects of terrorism on people's political attitudes, primarily in terms of the social construction of reality based on media representation. This is an important discussion for the field of International Relations and the study of terrorism. The threat of terrorism, either perceived or real, does not exist in a vacuum. Bernard Cohen, the dean of American communication theory, in his book *The Press and Foreign Policy* (1963), stated that "*the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about*" (p. 13). Vergani also emphasizes the importance of the media in his book, arguing that the media makes an important contribution to magnifying perceptions of threat, especially in countries where there is no direct experience of terrorism (p. 33). In other words, the media's images of terrorists as powerful and threatening, increase the fear and citizens' preference for negotiations rather than military action. Conversely, when the news frames the terrorist act as an injustice, the viewers experience more anger, and consequently they increase their support for aggression.

Another important contribution to the existing literature on terrorism is Vergani's discussion of how the threat of terrorism creates in-groups and brings people together in the spirit of solidarity in moments of chaos. Think of the post-9/11 United States, where citizens, without much thinking, overwhelmingly supported the passage of the PATRIOT Act by members of Congress only to later realize that the devil was in the details of the bill. However, as Vergani succinctly explains, "*the threat of violence makes people cling to the group of belonging and its values and traditions, and it boosts aggression against the enemy, both real and perceived*" (p. 22). The perception or fear of terrorism creates an "Us" versus "Them" political environment which leads to nations adopting a strategy of tension. This strategy of tension is used by political groups or political parties to create an atmosphere of chaos to demonstrate the need for the State, which has a legitimate monopoly over the use of force, to impose draconian laws and regulations to control human behavior, regardless of whether the laws and regulations are necessary. The strategy

of tension “*is a form of political engineering*” (p. 24). That is to say, it is a strategy which motivates the political action used by political parties to achieve some desired effect on the social and political system. Perhaps the best examples of this are the U.S. President Donald J. Trump’s anti-immigration policy and his transgender ban on the military, whose aim is to foment discord and ignite his political base into action in light of the loss suffered by the Republican Party in the 2018 general elections for the House of Representatives. The discussion of “Us” vs. “Them” as a political tool within society was first introduced by the political scientist Harold R. Isaacs in his book *Idols of the Tribe: Group Identity and Political Change* (1975). In it, Isaacs argues that the “We” in society are perceived as having all the good attributes that society should embrace and value, while the “Other” or “Them” are the undesirable, the rotten totem, the untouchable of society.

Vergani’s strategy of tension also highlights the fact that the perceived threat of terrorism can change people’s attitudes when it triggers in-group and out-group identities that resonate with the current political environment as seen in much of Europe, in the United States, and, most recently, in Brazil with the election of Jair Bolsonaro. In order to validate his position, Vergani relies on two theories of mass communication theory, namely, agenda setting and priming theory. Agenda-setting is the ability of the media to highlight issues it considers important, thus making politicians and viewers see the issue as important as well. Agenda-setting theory dates back to 1922, when the newspaper columnist Walter Lippman called our attention to the fact that the media had an awesome power to present images to the public. Priming theory, on the other hand, argues that the way in which politicians propose to counter the threat of terrorism becomes a key criterion for evaluating them in the minds of the voters. Vergani points out that watching emotional news reports about terrorism on TV has a greater emotional impact than watching news reports about the same events accompanied by less emotional imagery.

The last important contribution to the terrorist literature by Vergani is his discussion of the market-oriented and public-oriented media systems as promoters of the threat of terrorism, either real or perceived. According to Vergani, “*commercial media companies are particular keen to underline the emotional implications of terrorism news, more than public-owned media companies*” (p. 76). The market-oriented media system operates on the basis of if it “bleeds,” it leads. The function of the media in a market-oriented media system is to entertain or provide infotainment, not to educate the public consumers. Television shows such as *The Maury Povich Show*, a television program that deals with sensationalistic topics such as individuals attempting to discover the paternity of children, became popular in the U.S. since they do not require much thinking or analysis. They are purely infotainment. Also, tabloid journalism prevails in a market-oriented media system due to its focus on strong emotions and attempts to captivate the audiences through the exaggeration of negative information, sensationalism, and shock.

While Vergani’s book is a welcome contribution to the terrorism literature, there are a few shortcomings in it. For example, the book lacks a discussion of terrorism as a national security concern. Terrorism is an important issue that cannot be dissociated from the nation-state. Therefore, the book would benefit from a discussion of how terrorism as a national security issue makes the nation-state more vulnerable, thus further fomenting the dichotomy and separation between “Us” and “Them”. Another shortcoming from a communication theory point of view is the absence of any discussion of the explosion of open-source information as a contributing factor in the rise of websites promoting the sick ideology of terrorism. Lastly, Vergani misses an important topic of discussion regarding the media in the twenty-first century: the rise of “deepfakes.” “Deepfakes” are highly realistic and difficult-to-detect digital manipulations of audio or video. Those “deepfake” videos which are widely produced by ISIS and Al-Qaeda include digitally manipulated audio or video material that is designed to be as realistic as possible. Those

so-called realistic images, which are essentially fake, could be a powder keg waiting to be ignited by any other social and political issues in a society (Zegart – Morell 2019).

In conclusion, Vergani's *How Is Terrorism Changing Us?* is a long overdue and important contribution to the study of political terrorism and mass media communication. I recommend this book to anyone interested in comparative politics or international relations. Vergani's book calls attention to the fact that the "*perceived threat of terrorism pushes significant segments of the society to adopt more authoritarian views that are security-focused, aggressive and simplistic*" (p. 152). Those views promote short term gains and political capital; in the long run, however, they undermine the rule of law and democratic values. Furthermore, authoritarian views and anti-establishment attitudes are the foundations of populism. As Vergani succinctly pointed out, "*Trump's electoral base, dominated as it is by older white voters with less formal education, is characterized by poorer physical and mental health, depression, and disappointment which potentially make them even more vulnerable to perceived threats*" (p. 156). While the anti-establishment attitude is clearly embraced by Trump's supporters, it is also further alienating the "Others." Welcome to the brave new world of the twenty-first century.

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### Literature

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