

Terrorism as reflected in Joseph Conrad's the secret agent: A sociological approach

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, there are so many people talking and discussing what we called terrorism. However, most of us still do not have sufficient insight related to the kinds, motivations, and purposes of terror attacks. This paper is aimed to find the types of terror attack as reflected in *The Secret Agent* by Joseph Conrad and to show the causes of terror as reflected in the novel. The researchers apply descriptive qualitative as the method of analyzing the data. Some of the research findings are as follows. First, the terror attacks found in the novel are physical and mental. Second, the causes of terror are political and economic.



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1. Introduction

These days, many people are talking and discussing what we called as terrorism or the terror that occurs during terrorism. People often think and judge that terrorism is the act that came from a certain religion. To avoid misconception and misunderstanding of terrorism, people should know, at least, what terrorism is in general. Terrorism cannot be easily identified, in that not all crimes suspected as terrorism can be included as one. It is necessary to find out the suspects, their aims, and the victims. In May 2008 in Surabaya, Indonesia, three suicide bombings occurred at the same time in different locations. The authorities confirmed that the crime was committed by a family. Another example, there was a mass shooting in October 2017 in Las Vegas USA, where a man held a machine gun on the 32nd floor of a hotel and shot it to the audience of a music festival, killing at least 58 people and injuring almost 500. Still, in the same year, in June, a man sent a threat message to a public prosecutor, which caused a feeling of terror in the receiver.

Of all the crimes, the first will be likely the most picked one by people in general because it attacked a worship place, and the purpose is of a particular group. Similarly, the novel entitled *The Secret Agent* by Joseph Conrad shows a different perspective of terror, the one that can be an example of terrorism. To analyze the work, the sociological approach is chosen since it helps to cover a larger aspect of a social viewpoint inside the novel. According to Austin Turk (2004), a sociological concept and method have been effectively applied (although mostly by non-sociologists) to understand and to go against terrorism. The issue has attracted great attention since the events of September 11, that it becomes apparent that sociology has developed a theoretical understanding of the sociological basis of terrorism. In the literature about the issue, several theoretical approaches have emphasized the social and psychological considerations that are significant in understanding terrorism (Silke, 2003; Stout, 2002; Hudson, 1999; Reich, 1990). Terrorism is defined as a commission of criminal acts and most violent to the victims; the targets are civilians or the authority. Besides, it is usually committed

at least partly for political, religious, or social purposes. Less formally, it is necessary to note that terrorism is commonly committed by the members of sub-national groups, as mentioned by Smith, Gruenewald, Roberts, and Damphousse (2015).

The present study is expected to give the readers a clear insight of terrorism as the act of evilness of a misguided human trapped by a wrong way of thinking or brainwashed by another individual or particular group intending for violence and war. The research shows the reasons for terrorism reflected in the novel, allowing us to understand the happening and enhance our alertness.

1.1. Theory of Terrorism

Common people will define terrorism as an act of violence, such as bombing, killing the mass of people, or others. However, experts have given their thoughts about the term. Safaei (2016) mentioned that the origins of terrorism date back to Dionysius, tyranny, hedonism, wine, and blood. These influence the human mind by giving cruel punishment for the sake of goodness. The stupidity of the issue is common, and the brutal acts can be distinguished into two major groups. The first is the loyal followers of a variety of religious denominations who behead their innocent victims on behalf of the compassionate deity. The second is the promoters of a particular ideology who murder civilians under the mask of liberation and democratization.

Meanwhile, according to Jarvis (2009), terrorism includes several kinds of strategies associated with violence, promoting the desire of exposing fear to the public. Terrorism is explained as a form of survival of an organization amidst the competitive environment (Crenshaw, 2008: 13). Further, terrorism has a particular feature that is difficult to explain, worse than any common crime that is only about money. Instead, terrorism often involves the commission of serious violence towards innocent people. The purpose is solely victimization. A terrorist usually commits the crime with the support of a sub-national group; an adult offender commonly acts alone. Terrorism is carried out in part of social, political, or religious reasons. The common crimes mentioned earlier are committed for the sake of self-interest (Agnew, 2010).

The term 'terrorism' does not imply to condemn the opponent. Today's terrorists' activities are religious. Not all of the practitioners are called terrorism, in that they are sanctified and considered vital in theological doctrines. Carnage is a crucial part of a rite. Ritualistic terrorism or crime is certain. The concept of religious deity differs from one another; a terrorist in one culture is regarded as a freedom fighter in another (Safaei, 2016).

The historical incident of 9/11 became a hint for terrorism to grow. It is created within a social and political context; no one can reflect terrorism as void. The majority of observers believe that a person committing a terror attack, such as bombing a public transportation, is abnormal (Horgan as cited in Safaei, 2016).

1.2. Types of Terror Attack

Terror attacks are not always associated with bombs, guns, or other common perceptions spread among people that it involves physical aspects. Instead, terrorism can attack the psychological being of an individual. There are generally two types of terror attacks. The first is physical, which includes bombs and guns, as mentioned by Lemke and Paar (2005: 458), in that physical attack is interpreted as all attacks based on the physical aspect. The second is psychological; terrorism devastates the psychological functioning of a person. The threat of terror may result in severe psychological consequences, such as trauma (Butler, 2003).

The incidents caused by a terrorist may trigger a particular reaction. Alexander and Klein (2005: 458) proposed that those having psychopathology will develop several kinds of reactions. The first includes emotional, such as denial, numbness, shock, fear, anxiety, helplessness, and hopelessness. The next reaction will be cognitive, which includes confusion, disorientation, and hyper-vigilance (i.e. increased sense of risk); it causes impaired concentration and memory. The third reaction is social, such as withdrawal, irritability, as well as the loss of trust and faith. The fourth is physical, such as automatic hyper-arousal, insomnia, and loss of energy.

A terrorist uses different types of attacks to achieve their aims. In the present study, terrorism in the novel is categorized as physical. Taking from <https://www.twp.howell.nj.us/388/Types-of-terrorist-attacks>, there are at least six physical types of the terror attack.

1) Explosions

Terrorists have frequently used this type of attack. It is not difficult for them to make an explosion. Everything related to it is offered by the Internet, books, or other sources. Indeed, the materials are easily found in stores. Besides, explosive devices are portable, in that it is easy to put on vehicles or attached to the human body as a means of transport. Furthermore, it can be exploded from remote locations, or by a suicide bomber. An explosion turns out to be an effective way to cause damage to social, political, financial, and religious institutions. The attacks often occur in public places, such as city streets or facilities, with thousands of people gathering.

2) Biological Threats

Biological threats refer to toxins or organisms that can kill or incapacitate people, crops, and livestock. There are three types of biological agents in a terror attack: toxins, viruses, and bacteria. Most biological agents are difficult to grow. Even so, once used, it is easy to spread into the air, infecting the victims. If it is by animals, it can be a disease spread to humans. Others can also contaminate foods and water. The transfer method is aerosol, in that it will be inhaled by any being. The impact is deadly.

3) Chemical Threats

A chemical weapon is another deadly threat to terrorism. Poisons in the form of vapors, solids, aerosols, and liquids take the effect on animals, plants, and humans.

4) Nuclear Blast

What distinguishes nuclear blast with common explosions is the size of the damage. It destroys a particular area larger than the one caused by a common explosion and it uses radioactive material that can contaminate the water, air, and ground surfaces.

5) Hazards of Nuclear Devices

Hazards caused by nuclear devices are difficult to predict. The damage depends on several aspects, such as the size of the device, the height to where it is detonated, the nature of the surface beneath the explosion, and the existing meteorological conditions.

6) Radioactive Fallout

Radioactive fallout is one of the effects of a nuclear blast. No individual can escape from this. Blasts occur to a ground surface that can create greater amounts of fallout, compared to the one that occurs in the air, where the blast can be carried by a wind current for hundreds of miles away. A small portable device is enough to cause severe damage. The worst, nuclear radiation cannot be smelled or seen. In other words, it is undetected by normal senses. The radiation can be identified using a radiation-monitoring device. Consequently, the level of emergency is different from other types, such as the one caused by natural disasters.

7) Radiological Dispersion Device

Radiological Dispersion Device or RDD is known as “dirty bomb” or dirty nuke”. It combines a conventional explosive device and radioactive material; it is intended to disperse radioactive material in a wide range of areas. The main purpose of its usage is to trigger economic disruption and psychological fear.

1.3. The Causes of Terror

Terrorism is congregated by several reasons, of which each type may have different causes. Terrorism occurs in any place, regardless of the condition of the country. It is neither related to the type of government. It happens as the outcome of several factors, such as the combination of political and economic development, as well as deficiency and class structure (Bjorgo, 2005). The variables of causes are commonly called “root causes,” by the political community, either direct or indirect factors by Newman in Butler (2015). The root causes are divided into three: economic, political, and social.

1) *Economic Factors*

The most frequent economic cause of terrorism is poverty. People who are underprivileged in terms of funds and opportunities tend to create hatred and turn the feeling to terrorism, enabling them to clarify their barbarity (Newman in Butler, 2015). Poverty includes several aspects, such as the poverty gap and the size of the homeless population. In the Middle East, the social gap between the have and have not is high, in that the latter are left without jobs and thus they become penniless (Mohammad in Butler, 2015). As the disparity grows, people become furious about the condition. They cannot attain what others can, causing inner differences within a particular geographical zone. Consequently, terrorism becomes potential.

2) *Political Factors*

A political factor, such as repression of the government can trigger a terror attack. In this case, political rights and public liberties are the variables of government domination (Berrebi & Oswald in Butler, 2015). Feeble and undemocratic governments hurt the population. Besides, misuses of human rights, as a direct consequence of government suppression, is a potential cause of a terror attack (Newman in Butler, 2015). Previous studies indicate that terrorism is closely related to social unfairness due to government domination.

3) *Social Factors*

Another cause of terrorism is a social condition. Some studies include education level to be one of the variables in this context. However, the results are not strong enough to confirm the influence of education on terrorism. Nevertheless, as it is included in the social issue, the social condition is worth studying for the present research. A study conducted by Schmid in Butler (2015), revealed that there is a correlation between terrorism and human development. Another social aspect included here is religion. In modern days, terrorism is connected to religious extremism, evident in the increase of violence (Martin in Butler, 2015). Religious terrorism belongs to political violence, motivated by an absolute belief of another world power. The terrorists believe in the greater glory of the faith (Martin in Butler, 2015). The present study analyzes the type of terror and the influencing factors as seen in the novel entitled *The Secret Agent*.

2. Research Method

The research is categorized into library type. According to Mardalis in *Studi Kepustakaan Mengenai Landasan Teori dan Praktik Konseling Expressive Writing* written by Mirzaqon and Purwoko (2018), it is a study of which the data is collected by reading a variety of materials, such as documents, books, magazines, and historical records. To support the data, internet sources are also used in the study. Several steps are conducted to collect the data. Those are reading the sources, visiting libraries, taking notes, and categorizing the data.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. The Types of Terror Attack

In the novel, there are two kinds of terror: physical and psychological. Physical terror can inflict physical harm or unwanted physical contact upon a person. In “*The Secret Agent*”, the physical attack also includes an attack on a place (Lenke & Paar, 2005: 458). Meanwhile, mental or psychological terror refers to those related to the emotional aspects of an individual, as mentioned in the previous sub-topic (Alexander & Klein, 2005: 559).

1) *Physical Terror*

In the novel, the physical terror example is of explosion type. There was a suicide bombing in one of the events.

“We won’t discuss that point,” said Ossipon, with an air of rising above personal considerations. “I am afraid I’ll have to spoil your holiday for you, though. There’s a man blown up in Greenwich Park this morning.” (Conrad, 2007).

The bombing happens in a park, named Park of Greenwich. Ossipon, a comrade of an anarchist group, discusses with another character called Professor. The Professor is the one responsible to make and plant the bomb on Ossipon. He takes twenty seconds to explode the bomb.

“Ah! Here it is. Bomb in Greenwich Park. There isn’t much so far. Half-past eleven. Foggy morning. Effects of the explosion felt as far as Romney Road and Park Place. The enormous hole in the ground under a tree filled with smashed roots and broken branches. All round fragments of a man’s body blown to pieces. That’s all. The rest’s mere newspaper gup. No doubt a wicked attempt to blow up the Observatory, they say. H’m. That’s hardly credible” (Conrad, 2007).

There is an explosion in a park one morning. It is announced in a newspaper which is brought by Ossipon. The Professor studies the pages carefully to see what is happening in Greenwich Park. The bomb effect spread to a large area, as far as Romney Road and Park Place, creating a hole on the ground under a tree filled with roots and broken branches. Pieces of the body of the bomber are also found in the chaotic damage of the tree.

2) Mental Terror

Physical terrors are commonly followed by a psychological one, especially to the people nearby. Indeed, it may spread to others who are not in the same place or region, as the result of mass media. Terror causes anxiety, fear, shock, and so on.

“It’s that damned Heat—eh?” he said. “He upset you. He’s a brute, blurting it out like this to a woman. I made myself ill thinking how to break it to you. I sat for hours in the little parlour of Cheshire Cheese thinking over the best way. You understand I never meant any harm to come to that boy.”

Mr. Verloc, the Secret Agent, was speaking the truth. It was his marital affection that had received the greatest shock from the premature explosion. (Conrad, 2007).

It is clear that Mr. Verloc, the secret agent, is comforting his wife, Winnie after the visit of an inspector named Heat. He is the authority handling the crime of terrorism. It is said that the bomb in Greenwich Park involves Winnie’s brother, who is also Verloc’s brother in law, named Stevie. The suicide bombing has caused a change in the marital affection between Verloc and Winnie. This can be included as a mental terror.

“The sensibilities of the class you are attacking are soon blunted. Property seems to them an indestructible thing. You can’t count upon their emotions either of pity or fear for very long. A bomb outrage to have any influence on public opinion now must go beyond the intention of vengeance or terrorism. It must be purely destructive” (Conrad, 2007).

The quotation is an event where Verloc is talking to his boss, Mr. Vladimir, who is also the head of a country. Vladimir instructs Verloc to start a series of outrage by planting a bomb. This way, Vladimir is trying to drive public opinion. Here, there is a close relationship between mental and physical terror.

3.2. The Causes of Terror

Terror is one of those crimes that we should strongly condemn. It concluded that any certain form of terrorism is the consequence of the arrangement of some factors (Bjorgo, 2005). According to Newman in Butler (2015), the political science community used the term to refer to these as a “root causes”, could be direct or indirect factors that help us understand various incidents of terrorism. There are three categories of root causes: economic factors, political factors, and social factors but from the novel, it can be concluded that political and economic factors are the causes of terror to occur.

1) Political Factor

A different theory states that the factor of political like government repression also steers to terrorism. It can be seen from the quotation below It is mentioned previously that government repression can cause terrorism, shown in the following quotation.

“What we want is to administer a tonic to the Conference in Milan,” he said airily. “Its deliberations upon international action for the suppression of political crime seem to get

anywhere. England lags. This country is absurd with its sentimental regard for individual liberty. It's intolerable to think that all your friends have got only to come over to—" (Conrad, 2007).

Vladimir is discussing with Verloc, stating that Verloc can be an agent of the proletariat. Even so, the embassy wants to create terror by delivering a tonic to a conference in order to suppress the politics of the country. Vladimir has his personal opinion, in that the country holds an absurd belief of individual liberty.

"It would be much more to the point to have them all under lock and key. England must be brought into line. The imbecile bourgeoisie of this country makes themselves the accomplices of the very people whose aim is to drive them out of their houses to starve in ditches. And they have the political power still if they only had the sense to use it for their preservation. I suppose you agree that the middle classes are stupid?" (Conrad, 2007).

Vladimir wants to trap the delegation of the country and makes England be part of it. This way, it is evident that the country has a low political system.

2) Economic Factor

Another influencing factor of terrorism is the economy. Financial problems can inspire an individual or a certain group of people to go against the law. It is evident in the following quotation.

"__by the force of economic conditions. Capitalism has made socialism, and the laws made by the capitalism for the protection of property are responsible for anarchism" (Conrad, 2007).

Michaelis is one of the members of the anarchist group. He tells Verloc that the economic condition has caused poverty. It also leads to a decrease the life quality, while anarchism increases.

"Do you know how I would call the nature of the present economic conditions? I would call it cannibalistic. That's what it is! They are nourishing their greed on the quivering flesh and the warm blood of the people—nothing else." (Conrad, 2007).

Here, one of the characters is furious about the economic condition. It represents the life quality of the people in the novel. In other words, the economy can be the biggest factor of an individual bringing terror.

4. Conclusion

Several conclusions can be taken from the discussion. First, the novel contains a physical and mental type of terror attack. The physical attack takes the form of explosion, gun stealing, and mass provocation. These have led to mental terror, in that they cause fear, shock, and traumatic feeling. Second, political and economic factors are the cause of terror in the novel. Different opinions in politics may trigger a chaotic condition. Besides, seeing from the economic factor, terrorism is caused by low income or low quality of life.

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