ABSTRACT. Terrorism is a notoriously plastic word, depending on user, audience, and political context. This paper focuses on shifts in its meanings since the early 1970s. As federal statutes made terrorism a criminal offense, common usage changed from a broad meaning to one that specified terrorism as a political crime. The argument is that the state shapes meaning and public discourse through law. Peircean semiotics and the semiotic philosophy of Russian linguist Volosˇinov provide a framework to explore relationships among politics, law, and civil life. Applied to the events of September 11, 2001 such an analysis further allows better understanding of certain interpreters of the September 11 attacks, notably Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, and Jürgen Habermas.

1. Introduction: The Language of Terrorism

Changes in the meaning of terrorism are part of shifts in politics and power as much as they are linguistic changes. The relations among words and social conflict call for an analytic system that can take into account the reciprocal nature of meanings and power.

Representations of terrorism predate the word, as attested by certain artifacts located about fifty miles south of Mosul in Iraq. The conqueror and king of Assyria Assurnasirpal (884–860 BCE) imposed his rule over conquered territories by erecting stone monuments. Inscribed on them in cuneiform is the following:

I built a pillar over against his city gate and I flayed all the chiefs who had revolted, and I covered the pillar with their skin. Some I walled up within the pillar, some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes. . . .

Many captives from among them I burned with fire, and many I took as living captives. From some I cut off their noses, their ears and their fingers, of many I put out the eyes. I made one pillar of the living and another of heads...2

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The monuments bear bas-reliefs and inscriptions to inspire awe and fear. Assurnasipal was certainly not the first, but his use of representations of terror is especially striking.\(^3\)

Nonetheless, there was no word for the abstract concept of terrorism until modern times. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ‘terrorism’ first entered the English lexicon with Edmund Burke’s Whiggish fears of the French Revolution. Burke characterized the Jacobin ascendancy as a reign of terror. The origin of the word reveals its affinity with a fear of popular uprisings and revolutionary governments. Historical and contemporary surveys of terrorism emphasize its political character. In his encyclopedia article for the 1936 *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, J. B. S. Hardman models terrorism on nineteenth and early twentieth century political struggles. Hardman reviews the “Sinn Feiners” in Ireland between 1919 and 1921. He treats assassinations of political leaders and other luminaries as the paradigm, specifically citing the assassination of US President William McKinley and the shooting of Henry Clay Frick, an industrialist. Much of the article covers terrorism in Russia, inspired, Hardman says, by the writings of Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876) and developed by Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921). The Russian Narodnaya Volya is a model terrorist organization for Hardman. After the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, Russian terrorism declined, but revived in 1901 with the Socialist Revolutionary party. Hardman concludes with a brief discussion of terrorist methods in the civil war following the Bolshevist Revolution in which the Socialist Revolutionaries assassinated the German ambassador to the USSR, and made an attempt on the life of V. I. Lenin to disrupt the new Soviet regime. He notes that terrorist methods practiced by a government appear as law enforcement, and he excludes various other forms of violence such as individual or organized criminality, industrial clashes, and mob violence. Hardman takes terrorism as defiance of law.\(^4\)

During the Second World War the occupying armies called attacks by resistance fighters, terrorism. Beginning in the 1960s,

\(^3\) One art historian argues that the cuneiform script not only represented its subject matter, but that contemporaries treated the inscriptions as being a part of what they represented. Therefore, the inscription of Assurnasirpal mutilating bodies was to be experienced as if he were actually there. See especially chapters 4 and 5 in Zaina Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representations in Babylonia and Assyria* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).