The following observations on the current academic debate regarding the definition of terrorism are not meant to provide a complete overview of that debate. Instead, they serve to outline the character of this discourse: on the one hand, there exists a kind of core meaning of the term ‘terrorism’, while on the other, there exists profound disagreement on all features beyond this common denominator, particularly on three decisive characteristics which concern the terrorist method, the nature of the terrorist actor, and the nature of the victims of terrorism. Before turning to these characteristics, however, I shall draw more attention to the particularities of the term ‘terrorism’, which we have to be aware of when approaching definitional questions.

**Particularities of the term ‘terrorism’**

Clearly, the task of agreeing on a definition of terrorism is complicated by the strong negative connotation of the term. This negative connotation results from a comprehensible reaction of disapproval or even disgust at the violence involved in acts commonly referred to as terrorist. However, in some instances the term ‘terrorism’ seems to have become separated from its denotative content and is merely used to express one’s moral disaffirmation. No matter what characteristics a special incident displays, labelling it terrorist occasionally expresses nothing more than the speaker’s rejection of the incident or his desire to convince others of its moral abjection. There exists a tendency to apply the term ‘terrorism’ to a variety of incidents that do not actually have much in common apart from being disaffirmed. Such manipulative application leads to further conceptual vagueness.
Some may argue that instead of attempting to improve its definition, academic reflection on terrorism should merely point out that ‘terrorism’ is a highly manipulative term mainly used to condemn certain incidents or actors, with blurriness and negative connotation being its crucial characteristics. The problem with this approach is that it fails to acknowledge the denominative component of the term – it ignores the quite specific use of the term in legal and academic discourse – and it conflates evaluation and classification of acts.¹ In addition, the suggestion of abstaining from improving existing definitions is ignorant of the risk that such biased definitions bear when it comes to their practical application. As long as the term is used in order to condemn certain actors ad hoc politically as well as legally, should we not keep questioning its obviously partial application? The great variety of definitions of terrorism and their often arbitrary interpretation have grave consequences for our lives – terrorism-related legislation adopted in various Western democracies following the 9/11 terrorist attacks is only one example of this. It should be the academic’s task to reflect critically and possibly amend these biased definitions. It does not suffice to claim that any application of the term by legal or political actors, body of rules, or body of legislation is exclusively manipulative or arbitrary. In fact, only the critical reflection of definition(s) of terrorism can effectively avert such propagandistic use of the term. Such critical reflection is the aim of this section.

Furthermore, it is not true that ‘terrorism’ is always used to condemn certain kinds of action. Not only do some academics use the term in a neutral or non-assessing way, there are even scholars who think that the employment of terrorism may sometimes be morally required.² This implies that they do not consider terrorism condemnable under all circumstances, but even advocate it. That the term is used in a manipulative way in politics might be due to the business of politics rather than the term itself.³ In sum, there is more to the term ‘terrorism’ than its manipulative character, and it is important to distinguish the denominative and the evaluative component of the term ‘terrorism’ even if this distinction is often blurred in both the public and the academic discourse.

Another particularity of the term that needs mentioning is that its meaning has undergone decisive alterations throughout the centuries.⁵ Its first widespread application dates back to the Jacobins in the eighteenth century.⁶ Their reign of terror after the French Revolution was not only labelled terrorist but also so called with positive connotations. ‘Terrorism’ only gained a negative connotation later and turned from a