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# LOW-INTENSITY CULTURAL CONFLICT

Critical Art, Terrorism and the Neuro-Linguistic Environment

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*Hence "terrorism" is not so much a thing or a state-of-being as it is a reflection of this necessary fiction, necessary, that is, to the art and practice of war. "Terrorism" is the act of creating terror, which of course is as likely to be carried out by a lawfully acting force dropping bombs on civilians, for example, as it is by an unlawfully acting gang of religious extremists blowing up the Federal building in Oklahoma. The former get medals while the latter get the electric chair.*

**Michael Taussig**

Early in the morning of May 11, 2004 Hope Kurtz, wife of artist and art professor Steve Kurtz, died in her sleep of cardiac arrest. Steve called 911 and emergency assistance arrived promptly. Soon after entering the Kurtz residence the police made a call to the FBI who later confiscated Steve's art supplies, manuscripts, computer and even Hope's body under suspicion of bio-terrorism related activities. Initially the incident was thought to be a mistake, with FBI and Joint Terrorism Task Force officials assuming that the biological agents in Kurtz's possession were intended for violent means. The materials were actually part of an art work about genetically-modified foods. I do not find it difficult to imagine an FBI agent lacking a solid grasp on the intricacies of situationist art works, it's hardly a genre that is broadly understood or even appreciated. But the timing and events were certainly tragic for Kurtz, who was illegally detained the morning of his wife's death and has been living with the threat of Federal prison ever since.

One could understand a bit of hysteria on the part of the FBI until a full explanation of the situation was found, but unfortunately this hysteria does not appear to be subsiding. One of Kurtz's projects was a mobile lab that tested food for genetic modification. It was completely legal and the organisms he possessed were harmless bacteria that can be acquired by any amateur student of biology. He's going to court and faces 20 years in federal prison nonetheless. Could the FBI be simply trying to "save face" here by not wanting to admit a gross misunderstanding of Kurtz's work, or is it fair to assume there may be some serious suppression of dissident politics going on? Perhaps a look into the work of the Critical Art Ensemble, an art collective of which Kurtz is a member, could help illuminate the motives involved.

*"Those familiar with CAE's modeling of ECD [ Electronic Civil Disobedience ] know that it was an inversion of the model of civil disobedience (CD). Rather than attempting to create a mass movement of public objectors, CAE suggested a decentralized flow of particularized microorganizations (cells) that would produce multiple currents and trajectories to slow the velocity of capitalist political economy."*

- from **Civil Disobedience in the Public Sphere**

The Critical Art Ensemble produces books of theory of how digital technology has provided new avenues for resistance against and disruption of "the velocity of capitalist political economy." This theoretical work, while limited to ideas and not involving actual action, sits much closer to the cognitive borderlines between art and terrorism than does the scientific

work which got Kurtz so much attention from the FBI. By promoting a disruption of the mainstream economic system, the CAE could be construed to fit the Council on Foreign Relations' vaguely worded definition of cyberterrorism:

*While some people use the term "cyberterrorism" (which was coined in the 1980s) to refer to any major computer-based attack on the U.S. government or economy, many terrorism experts would not consider cyberattacks by glory-seeking individuals, organizations with criminal motives, or hostile governments engaging in information warfare to be cyberterrorism. Like other terrorist acts, **cyberterror attacks are typically premeditated, politically motivated, perpetrated by small groups rather than governments, and designed to call attention to a cause, spread fear, or otherwise influence the public and decision-makers.** (bold added)*

By this definition the work of the CAE seems to be worthy of the cyberterrorism label. They are hoping to disrupt the US economy with premeditated, politically motivated attempts to influence the public. The definition fits, so even though Kurtz's biological agents and artworks were completely within the law, it's still possible to persecute him for his *politics*. I share the opinion of Ed Cardoni, who purports that the FBI "are opportunistically exploiting the convenient hook of suspicious biological material (in the context of post-9/11 anthrax incidents, both real and hoaxed) to go after an intellectual for his IDEAS. I'm afraid they, too, may have looked deeper into CAE writings ... which are in fact political, radical, and subversive." There is no space here for a lengthy discussion about the dangerous implications of anti-terrorism legislation based on such vague definitions. What I am interested in exploring is how our language gets twisted into our understanding of events without being noticed, how our judgments are shaped by our words. In this case the labels of "artist" or "terrorist" could both be applied to Kurtz depending on one's ideological standpoint, and indeed both have been.

The Steve Kurtz / CAE case demonstrates a severe lack of clarity in the ongoing political discourse on terrorism. While fighting terrorism is widely considered to be instrumental to peace and security across the planet, the lack of precision in identifying this 'evil' of terrorism is profound. While there are very serious implications for the free expression of creativity and subversive thought, there are also massive complications on a geo-political level that are equally grounded in vague semantics and Orwellian 'doublespeak.' As one of the premiere linguists of the 20th Century, Noam Chomsky has credentials to speak with authority on the use of language:

*“[W]hat is terrorism? I have been assuming we understand it. Well, what is it? Well, there happen to be some easy answers to this. There is an official definition. You can find it in the US code or in US army manuals. A brief statement of it taken from a US army manual, is fair enough, is that terror is the calculated use of violence or the threat of violence to attain political or religious ideological goals through intimidation, coercion, or instilling fear. That’s terrorism ... But there’s a problem ... If you take a look at the definition of Low Intensity Warfare which is official US policy you find that it is a very close paraphrase of what I just read. In fact, Low Intensity Conflict is just another name for terrorism. That’s why all countries, as far as I know, call whatever horrendous acts they are carrying out, counter terrorism. We happen to call it Counter Insurgency or Low Intensity Conflict. So that’s a serious problem. You can’t use the actual definitions.” (bold added)*

Chomsky is renowned, though hardly universally admired, for his ability to scientifically dissect language and expose its subtle twists and manipulations. When he says “You can’t use the actual definitions” he is implying that a universal application of the definition of terrorism would result in many of the governments on this planet, that of the US in particular, being accused of terrorism on a massive scale. He goes on to document a slew of examples where American foreign policy fits precisely into definitions of international terrorism, from the US interventions in Latin America throughout the 1980s [#1] to trade embargoes, sanctions, bombings and coups that have inflicted terror around the globe since WWII.

By contrasting these uses of the term ‘terrorism,’ it becomes clear that the word itself is more of a value judgment, a subjective evaluation, than a precise label for action. The same is true when using the word ‘art.’ And while most associate terrorism with direct physical violence, even this attribute gets bogged down in semantics. Are only those responsible for sensationalized bombings, blatant subversion or physical destruction worthy of the ‘terrorism’ label? What of the economic policies that keep the majority of the world hungry or sick in order to protect the massive capital of a minute rich minority? Is there room in our discourse for the ‘corpo-terrorist?’

Violence, whether political, symbolic or direct, or committed slowly, discretely or via proxy often goes unnoticed while small incidents of sensationalized violence become the shocking news of the day. My speculation is that this phenomenon is a result of our incomplete or imprecise dialogue surrounding ‘terrorism’. Our ability to process and understand the social, political and cultural systems of which we are a part is deeply rooted in our ability to

conceptualize them. Korzybski called this the “neuro-linguistic environment” in which we live, a kind of feedback loop between perception via the senses and understanding via language. Our language effects which pieces of information are actually registered within our conscious mind. When our language gets confused and the subjective is taken as fact then our actual perceptions, and thus our reality, can be seriously effected. This is a fact well known to, and often abused by, those in positions of power:

*“Today the world at large has to consider a serious situation, unparalleled in history, where a few sick individuals, through verbal distortions, falsifications, identifications, etc., have trained a whole generation in a pathological use of our neuro-semantic and neuro-linguistic mechanisms...”*

**Alfred Korzybski, 1941**

While Korzybski was most likely speaking of Hitler, I find his words most prescient and worthy of consideration as the world is subjected to an international ‘war on terrorism.’

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