UNDERSTANDING TERRORISM

Instructor: Tom Gerety

Wednesday, 11:00–1:30 p.m.

Office hours: Tuesdays, 2-4 p.m. and by appointment at any convenient time (office to be assigned). Please do not hesitate to bring up any disability with me as well as with the Moses Center (see below).

This seminar examines terrorist attacks and movements from an interdisciplinary perspective, seeking to reach a better understanding of the disputed concepts of ‘terrorism’ and ‘terrorists’. We will examine the motivations and backgrounds, the plots and ideologies--whether secular or religious--of those who consider themselves justified in deliberately killing non-combatants in furtherance of their goals. We will also examine the challenges of countering terrorism in societies with many ‘soft’ targets and extensive global conflicts and entanglements.

Terrorism itself is what philosophers call ‘an essentially contested concept’, one that is often used for rhetorical or political effect. We will begin with an examination of the various contested definitions of the term, seeking to understand how it is used in law, in moral argument and of course in political disputes. We will read case studies of terrorism and counter-terrorism, including moral and legal arguments about torture, prolonged detention and targeted killings. We will also try to understand how and why young men and women can be so powerfully drawn to violence, particularly violence against defenseless (and often randomly
targeted) civilians.

We will visit the 9/11 site in New York City and perhaps invite guests with direct experience of terrorism and radicalization, including representatives of both the police and the immigrant communities who have suffered profiling, prejudice and mistrust. Looking towards the future, we will examine local, national and international strategies--often unsuccessful and counter-productive--to prevent such attacks and to halt the radicalization that brings fresh recruits to terrorist movements.

This seminar will require several kinds of work from each student:

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION

Seminars work best when all come to class well prepared and ready to discuss and debate. Attendance is essential. Bring all readings to class on paper: no computer or smartphone use will be allowed except in special cases. Take notes on paper as well. You may miss class for truly urgent reasons such as illness, family emergencies or religious observance, but you should always email me with an explanation as soon as you know you will miss a session.

Two of you each week will be asked to lead discussion, aided by your reaction papers, described below, through most of the semester. Such ‘leads’ will take up perhaps fifteen minutes of discussion most weeks and should give each of you a chance to hone your skill in public speaking, including answering the questions posed by me and your
From time to time, I will begin a seminar meeting with a question that I will ask you to answer in writing. These will test your preparation and your impromptu writing.

Participation, including oral presentations and in-class writing, will count for 15% of your grade, with 5% for oral participation and 10% for written quizzes and comments.

WRITING AND EDITING

Clear, cogent, well edited writing is the most important skill we will work on in the seminar. Good writing requires an orderly, logical presentation of ideas and evidence. It is particularly important to make sure that each sentence and paragraph is understandable on its own and forms part of a logical sequence leading towards a definite conclusion. Students need to be sure they offer good evidence of various kinds for their arguments and conclusions. The seminar should help you with these skills.

Writing assignments for the class will be as follows:

1. After the first week, I will ask you to submit one page 'reactions' or responses to the readings on alternate weeks. These should identify and analyze what you take to be the most important theme or concept in the week’s assignment, noting your own agreement or disagreement with the author or authors. These should be submitted the night before the class, by 10 pm at the latest. One will be due the
first week and then one every two weeks thereafter. These seven pages will count for 15% of your grade.

2. Roughly two weeks into the semester, I will ask each of you to write a three page assessment of the definitions of terrorism we will have reviewed; this will count 10% of your grade. Then, before the spring break, I will ask you to reflect in depth on a question I will pose for you ten days in advance. This essay should be seven or eight pages in length, due immediately before the break. It will count for 20% of your grade.

3. During the semester I will press each of you to identify one issue that you would like to make the subject of a final paper. At the end of the tenth week, I will ask you to submit a two page outline of this final paper project. The outline should state the question you intend to answer and should identify, tentatively, the readings and research you intend to do to reach your conclusion. It should also include at least one page of argument. This outline will count for 5% of your grade.

4. Before the last class meeting, you should submit a partial draft of your final paper. The paper in its final form will be ten to twelve pages in length and the draft should be at least two thirds of that length. The timely submission of the rough draft will count for another 5% of your grade.

5. Before the end of the exam period you should submit your final essay. It should take into account my written review of your rough draft and any suggestions we agree on in one-on-one meetings on your outline and your rough draft. The final paper will count for the remaining 30% of your overall grade in the seminar.

Closely related to written skills are the skills of oral presentation, argument and debate. The seminar will require each student to participate in argument and debate, and to make an occasional presentation, usually in cooperation with at least one classmate.
GOALS FOR LEARNING

This seminar has several goals for learning:

1. Intellectual and conceptual: The seminar should provide you with a set of concepts for understanding and evaluating terrorism and terrorists, on the one hand, and counterterrorism strategies, on the other. These concepts include moral ideas such as the tension between consequentialism and absolutism; political ideas such as ‘reaction (or over-reaction)’, ‘containment’; legal concepts such as constitutional due process and the just war and human rights principles of international humanitarian law; and broadly social and psychological accounts of radicalization-to-violence.

2. Writing and speaking: The seminar should help you to organize and present arguments in clear, understandable terms, with progression from one point to the next, holding to a theme and moving towards a definite conclusion. The use of evidence is a key feature of good argument and the seminar will help you to identify the kinds of evidence most useful in various controversies.

3. Background knowledge of recent history: The seminar will require the reading and viewing of extensive materials in books, articles and film excerpts on the development of several terrorist groups, including the IRA, IS and White Supremacists in the United States. Thoughtful reading and reflection in this regard should give conscientious students a sophisticated background knowledge of features of the world we live in, including recent religious
SYLLABUS OF READINGS
BY WEEK:

(In this field, developments can be shockingly rapid. The syllabus below is tentative and subject to changes, even during the semester of the seminar.)

Books to be purchased or borrowed: Louise Richardson, What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat (Random House Paper, 2007) and Lawrence Wright, The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11 (Vintage Paper, 2007). Other readings will be sent to you by postings through the NYU website for our class.

1. Louise Richardson's What Terrorists Want (239 pages to be completed over the winter break in preparation for our first meeting).

2. The Breivik Case, Seierstad excerpts (20 pages); Knausgard, “The
Inexplicable,” New Yorker Magazine online, (22 pages),
http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/05/25/the-inexplicable; and
Flynn, GQ online (12 pages),
Breivik and Norway, Capture and Punishment, Seierstad excerpts (25
pages); Fisher, The Atlantic online (5 pages),
https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/08/a-different-justice-why-anders-breivik-only-got-21-years-for-killing-77-people/261532/ ;

4. The Boston Marathon Attack, Immigration and Alienation: NYT,
Boston Globe, Rolling Stone, etc. (Offprints, 70 pages)

5. The Question of Insanity and Free Will: Dylann Roof, Adam Lanza and
the Insanity Defense, PBS Frontline, A Crime of Insanity,
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/crime/, Selections from
The New Yorker Essays on Dylann Roof,
http://www.newyorker.com/tag/dylann-roof-tag; Cevallos, “Don’t Rely
On...” CNN Opinion,

The M’Naghten Case at Old Bailey,

1-6, 130 pages).

7. Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, Lawrence Wright, The Looming Tower, Part II
(chh. 7-14, 100 pages).


11. Profiling and Discriminatory Suspicion and Surveillance:


Note that at NYU academic accommodations are always available for students with disabilities. The Moses Center website is www.nyu.edu/csd. Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu) for further information. Please reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester and let me know of your need for assistance.

TOM GERETY, Collegiate Professor, joined the NYU faculty in 2005 to teach courses in law and the humanities. He first came to NYU to head up the Brennan Center for Justice at the Law School. He served as President
of Amherst College from 1994 to 2003 and of Trinity College from 1989 to 1994. From 1986 to 1989 he was Dean and Nippert Professor at the College of Law of the University of Cincinnati. As a law professor, he taught and wrote on constitutional law and political philosophy, with a special emphasis on First Amendment freedoms, including speech, privacy, and religious freedom. He wrote and narrated a PBS series, Visions of the Constitution, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. He is the author of a book of essays on the liberal arts, The Freshman Who Hated Socrates. He holds degrees in law and philosophy from Yale.