Terrorism threatens to emerge as one of the great junk subjects of our era. It has already generated numerous junk seminars, endless junk TV shows, about half a dozen junk tanks and countless junk speeches and junk books. Plus which, it has evolved a whole breed of cretinous monomaniacs—junk experts—who fill the screens and the Op-Ed pages with their junk lucubrations. Herewith, then, my two cents' worth of junk reflections.

"Terrorism" was a buzzword of the Reaganites from the start. I remember attending a debate in 1981 at New York University, in which the reactionary side was taken by a man named Constantine Menges. The fact that Menges now directs terrorist operations against Nicaragua from the safety of the National Security Council is both here and there. On this occasion, having blathered for hours about terror and terrorists, he was asked by Alexander Cockburn to give a definition of "terrorism." Looking madly about, he dodged this perfectly simple and obvious question. Pressed, he thought for a bit and defined terrorism as "the use of violence for political ends."

The fatuity of this encapsulation, which would include everybody except absolute pacifists within its terms, is at least a faint improvement on the definition advanced by Menges's new employers. They define terrorism as "the use by some people of violence for some political ends." This merely adds hypocrisy to tautology. And the hypocrisy and tautology are so evident that many people have sickened of the whole debate. It is common on the left to hear the question dismissed as yet another junk ideological construct.

This would be a pity if it were to become general. Just because the Reaganites have appropriated the word, we must not conclude that there is nothing more to it than another example of imperial double standards. The original thinkers and founders of the socialist movement spent a great deal of time thinking about terrorism and criticizing it. There is much to be learned from those debates.

One can define a terrorist as someone who possesses the following qualities. His chief targets must be civilians and noncombatants (not always the same thing), and there must be a political reason why they are his prey. His cause must be a hopeless one. He must be without a realizable manifesto, program or objective. In other words, violence must be his end as well as his means.

Does anybody fit this bizarre profile? Yes, just as many who are supposed to fit it do not. All states and all armies employ terror, but they do not, except in rare cases, depend solely on its use. Many nationalist movements, such as the Irgun, the I.R.A., the P.L.O. and others have also employed violence against noncombatants in the course of operations, but cannot be reduced to the definition of "terrorist" tout court. The obvious objection to such a reductionist definition is that it would have to include the wartime Maquis and many other movements that have dirtied their hands with cruel and indiscriminate tactics.

Take, on the other hand, the South Moluccan gunmen in the Netherlands several years ago. Their tactic was to seize Dutch civilians—in one case a whole trainload of them—and hold them hostage, demanding the government of Indonesia grant independence to the South Moluccan archipelago. The government of Indonesia would under no circumstances relinquish said archipelago, and the one government in the world that would have the least chance of persuading it to do so would be the former colonial Dutch. It would be possible to describe the acts of the gunmen as terrorist—the use of random, hopeless violence against the innocent. Living in Holland, these people did not even have the excuse (which, say, Palestinians or Namibians do) that they had been forcibly denied other means of redress.

Following this logic, one can define the Red Brigades in Italy, the Baader-Meinhof group in Germany and the Japanese Red Army as terrorist. The declared intention of these groups was to provoke the state into taking fascist measures, the better to bring about the revolution. Interestingly, all three were made up of young people whose parents had lived under or been complicit with Axis regimes. And there was an echo of Third Period Stalinism in their politics too—the Stalinists in Germany and elsewhere who had said, in the greatest political betrayal of this century, "After Hitler, us." The frank denial of democratic values allows one to say that those involved had a terrorist mentality. Their links with organized crime and with former fascists only amplify the point. And their slogans—"Tanto pio, tanto meglio" ("The worse, the better")—are only variations of the old and discredited politque du pire.

It was against this kind of thinking and this method that the early Marxists wrote their sternest polemics. The Narodniks, the anarchists of "propaganda by deed" and the practitioners of assassination and provocation were condemned, not so much morally (no state or party has the moral right to condemn the use of violence) as because they engendered secrecy, conspiracy, sadism and despair. They also invited, as they often meant to, appalling state reprisals on open, democratic associations of working people. Many brave men and women—former Tupamaros in Uruguay, for example—now realize that their attempt to show the fascist character of the state brought down larger forces than themselves.

Some years ago, Claude Chabrol made a film about a terrorist group in Paris that doesn't want anything, can't get anything and never demands anything. It is slaughtered by the state, which is never as reluctant as liberals suppose to resort to indiscriminate terror on its own account. The film's title, Nada ("Nothing"), intentionally recalled the older and better name for terrorism, which is nihilism. The nihilist cannot be placated or satisfied. Like the Party of God, he wants nothing less than the impossible or the unthinkable. This is what distinguishes him from the revolutionary. And this is what he has in common with the rulers of our world, who subject us to lectures about the need to oppose terrorism while they prepare, daily and hourly, for the annihilation of us all. Those who contemplate the thermonuclear extinction of the species "for political ends" have nothing to learn from the nihilist tradition.