

# The Unsustainability of the Anarchist Justification of Terrorism

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## Summary

*The paper deals with anarchist claims about the moral justification of terrorism in the context of just war theory. The authors attempt to show that the anarchist justification of terrorism fails to satisfy relevant just war norms, and that it should be bound by those norms because in its current form it is unsustainable due to its failure to set limited political objectives.*

Keywords: *anarchism; terrorism; ethics; moral justification; just war theory*

## Introduction

The proliferation of philosophical interest in terrorism, since the advent of contemporary terrorism, has included various attempts to arrive at its definition and provide a normative framework for a moral evaluation of both terrorist and counter-terrorist activity. The crux of the debate has revolved around definitions that include the killing of non-combatants (e.g. Primoratz, 1990, 131; Steinhoff, 2004, 5; Coady, 2004, 5; Walzer, 2006, 197), thus categorizing terrorism as *a priori* immoral, and those which do not include the killing of non-combatants, thus providing a morally neutral definition (e.g. Le Vine, 1997, 59–60; Young, 2004, 46), and allowing for the application of just war principles in order to ascertain whether any terrorist organization could potentially ever satisfy them and morally justify its existence and/or actions (e.g. Valls, 2000, 66). Given the available literature on the potential moral justification of terrorism, special attention should be focused on the anarchist approach, because their view of the state as an inherently immoral actor broadens the framework within which attempts to morally justify non-state terrorist organizations can be understood. Although

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anarchist terrorism was in its prime in the latter part of the 19th century, the rise of both right and left extremism in our time may open the possibility for its resurgence, prompting the need to discuss its justification. The goal of the paper is not the actual moral justification of anarchist terrorism, but rather to attempt to show that anarchist claims about the justification of terrorist action against the state fail to satisfy the relevant moral standards provided by just war theory. In order to achieve this goal, the authors (1) provide a short outline of the main issues concerning the definition of terrorism and its influence on attempts to provide a normative framework for a moral analysis of terrorism, (2) outline the basic tenets of anarchist ideology, (3) apply them in the moral justification of terrorism in the context of just war theory.

### *1. Issues in the moral analysis of terrorism*

There is no single definition of terrorism which would suit the needs of all authors and actors in search of such a definition (e.g. Bilandžić & Lucić, 2015, 44–46). Since the term is both highly politicized and used daily in the media, a variety of violent acts against military and civilian persons performed by »anti-government dissidents or governments themselves, organized-crime syndicates, common criminals, rioting mobs, people engaged in militant protest, individual psychotics, or lone extortionists« (Hoffman, 2006, 1), which are not necessarily terrorist by their nature, are often labeled as such. Despite differences between various definitions of state (government) and non-state (anti-government) terrorism, both are »organized, deliberate and systematic« and both justify themselves by their goal of creating a just society (Hoffman, 2006, 3–4). The focus of this paper is, however, entirely on non-state terrorism, as any justification of state terrorism would be contrary to the basic tenets of anarchism.

Despite the difficulties caused by the various definitions and the changing nature of terrorism, the following five characteristics seem to be in common to all acts of terrorism (Hoffman, 2006, 40): terrorist acts always have political aims and motives; they are violent or at least include the threat of violence; they are designed to have psychological consequences and repercussions beyond the immediate act and victim; they are »conducted either by an organization with an identifiable chain of command or conspiratorial cell structure (whose members wear no uniform or identifying insignia) or by individuals or a small collection of individuals directly influenced, motivated, or inspired by the ideological aims or example of some existent terrorist movement and/or its leaders«; they are committed by non-state groups or subnational entities.

The above characteristics do not define terrorism to the full satisfaction of every possible stakeholder, but they define the characteristics of a terrorist act, which is sufficient for the purpose of this paper. More importantly, the list does not provide a definition of terrorism as violence directed at non-combatants or innocents. This is fundamental to any ethical discussion about terrorism because »[m]oral conclusions should follow from moral reasoning, grappling with the

moral issues themselves. To decide a normative issue by definitional considerations, then, ends the discussion before it begins» (Valls, 2000, 66). If the killing of innocents is included in a definition of terrorism, then there is no room left for any kind of moral discussion. Also, if the killing of innocents is included in the definition of terrorism or a terrorist act, then any organization or individual committing acts with all the above five characteristics, but managing to refrain from harming non-combatants would not be defined as terrorist. Because of this, the possibility should remain for terrorists to be able, at least in theory, to discriminate between combatants and non-combatants. This notion will be further explored for the purposes of evaluating the anarchist's moral justification of terrorism.

## 2. *Anarchy and anarchism*

While terrorism is a type of phenomenon, anarchism is an entire range of ideas about individual and social relations to the state and other possible forms of social organization.<sup>1</sup> As such, it may be even more difficult to define. The controversies included in the defining process begin with etymology. Kropotkin derives 'anarchy' from the ancient Greek *άν*— (an) and *ἀρχή* (archos),<sup>2</sup> meaning "without a ruler", further deriving 'anarchia' (*ἀναρχία*) as a mode of social organization without rule, or such that it denies authority (Kropotkin, 2019, 10). Daniel Guérin (1970, 27) derives 'anarchy' from 'anarche' (*ἀναρχή*) which can be taken to mean "without first principles".<sup>3</sup> Alois Halder mentions both roots, but places 'anarchy' into its historical context, pointing out that, in the Ancient Greek context, it had the negative connotation of lawlessness or immorality, in the Medieval scholastic period the positive connotation of God's complete independence, while in the Enlightenment period its meaning draws closer to the claim to be creating a society free of intellectual, religious and political authority (Halder, 2008, 20–21).

While the concept of anarchy is difficult to define, anarchism as a political ideology (and theory) proves to be even more elusive due to the tendency of anarchist authors to treat their theories as open systems of thought rather than proper doctrines.<sup>4</sup> This has brought about a mass proliferation of anarchist theo-

1 It is important to note that the concept of 'anarchy' which we attempt to define in this paper is very different from the concept of 'anarchy' as it is used in international relations theories, where it refers to a system of sovereign states over which there is no legitimate political authority (e.g. Jolić, 2011, 127; Mladić, 2011, 180–183; Popović, 2013, 57; Buzar, 2020a, 52–53).

2 Kropotkin's transliteration of the word *ἀρχή* does not correspond with 'archos', but with 'arche'. It is possible that Kropotkin meant to use *ἀρχός* (arkhós) which means leader, ruler, or chief (Liddell & Scott, 1996, 253).

3 The distinction between Kropotkin's and Guérin's positions on the etymology of 'anarchy' was shown by Vladimir Kirinić's Forward to *Antologija anarhizma* (Kirinić, 2003, 7–8).

4 This would apply to most of the classic anarchist authors such as William Godwin (1756–1836), Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865), Max Stirner (1806–1856), Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876), and Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921), but also authors who participated in workers' movements and violent usurpations in later years, who used their writings as a mode of propaganda, such as

ries and fractions such as anarcho–syndicalism, anarcho–communism, anarcho–collectivism, anarchists without adjectives, anarcho–individualism, anarcho–pacifism and anarcho–capitalism — all finding themselves under the umbrella term ‘anarchism’. Alongside the theoretical divides, anarchist movements have also been divided according to their preferred tactics and organizational structures, varying from illegalists (who include the use of terrorism), anti–organizationalists or individualists (who reject long term unions or political parties, but accept short term associations for solving imminent social issues), organizationalists (who advocate the creation of long term international workers’ associations as the holders of political power), and anarcho–syndicalists (who see unions as the vanguard of the economic struggle) (Turcato, 2009, 463–464).

All of the above have a number of common characteristics, of which the fundamental characteristic is the replacement of the state with a new social order which would favor free association and communal autonomy. Common among many anarchists are the following traits: (a) the belief that states and all political institutions are inherently evil and that their main function is the domination of a minority and exploitation of a majority (Godwin, 1842, XV–XVI; Stierner, 1976, 188; Proudhon, 1982, 195–197; Bakunin, 1979, 186; Kropotkin, 2009, 103); (b) a politico–anthropological assumption that human nature is benevolent and benign, but corrupted by the current social order and state coercion (Gelderloos, 2013, 36–38); (c) the centralist state structure should be abolished through revolutionary action (including violence) and/or peaceful reforms (Mintz, 1984, 113–114; Sekelj, 1987, 59–61), and (d) should be replaced by a federative association in which individuals or groups create free associations according to their wants and needs (cooperation is more efficient than coercion) (Knežević, 2012, 47); (e) a structured change in penological practices and the education system which will treat human beings with dignity and enable them to develop their full potential (Ward, 2004, 51–61; Carter, 2019, 41); (f) a critique of any capitalist system which favors the state structure (Meltzer, 1996, 41–42; Baillargeon, 2013, 14); (g) the abolishment of the judiciary and positive laws once a high degree of social cooperation and moral self–development has been reached (Kropotkin, 1898, 15; Cleyre, 2011, 92).

It is important to note that, of all the modalities of anarchist thought and various characteristics attributable to the many above–mentioned ideological strands, this paper is interested exclusively in the illegalist justification of terrorist means in light of their belief in the inherent immorality of the state which should be supplanted by revolutionary violent means.

Emma Goldman (1869–1940), Voltairine de Cleyre (1866–1912), Alexander Berkman (1970–1936), Nestor Mahno (1888–1934), and Errico Malatesta (1853–1932).

### 3. *Anarchism, terrorism and just war theory*

Andrew Valls (2000) provides a just war evaluation of terrorism in his article *Can Terrorism Be Justified?*, and shows, at the least, that the application of just war norms helps to discriminate between more and less immoral terrorist organizations, but also argues that it might be theoretically possible for a terrorist organization to satisfy these norms, even if they never do so in practice. The importance of Valls' evaluation is not in the attempt to justify terrorism, but in demonstrating that just war theory can be used to its full extent as an instrument for the moral critique of terrorism. The goal of this section of the paper is to add a possible anarchist interpretation to some arguments in order to see how the anarchist stance on the state and anarchist goals correlate to the conditions for a moral justification of terrorist action, and how it fits into the arguments made by Valls.<sup>5</sup>

Both the nature and attainment of this goal depend on how the anarchist stance towards the state is interpreted and to what end is terrorist action aimed in the anarchist's view. It has already been stated that a simple and straightforward definition of anarchism, or a clear description of the anarchists' justification of terrorist means, are not possible. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to stress that, for the the purpose of this paper, the anarchist justification of terrorism is as follows: a) states are inherently immoral (unjust) creations; b) as inherently immoral creations they should be abolished and replaced by different modes of social organization; c) the abolishment and replacement of the state is a moral imperative such that any available means of attaining this end, including violence and terrorism, are justified.

One might object that since just war theory is traditionally a very state–centric ethical theory, its norms simply do not apply to anarchist reasoning. However, contemporary attempts to include non–state actors into just war critiques (e.g. Valls, 2000, 66; Buzar, 2020a, 135–143; Buzar, 2020b, 1310) help to broaden the scope of potential phenomena and behaviors to which a just war critique can be applied. In short, if it is possible to provide a just war critique of terrorism in general, then it should be able to provide the same for anarchist terrorism. At worst, the anarchists will reject such a critique, though at the peril of ostracizing themselves from the only fully developed apparatus for a moral critique of the use of armed force in mainstream ethics.

The fundamental reason why the anarchist should submit to a just war critique is that the above anarchist justification would have to invoke the supreme emergency exemption,<sup>6</sup> according to which the state would be seen as such an imminent threat to humanity, or civilization, or survival altogether, and perhaps even commit to a doctrine of total war, in order to suspend the conventions of

5 The paper omits Valls' treatment of *jus ad bellum* right intention and *jus in bello* proportionality as his conclusions follow straightforwardly from the treatment of other just war norms.

6 For discussions on the supreme emergency exemption, see also Walzer (2006, 251–268).

war. Given the longevity of the state and the fact that it has become the most common mode of political organization, the anarchist is faced with either accepting the critique and renouncing terrorist means, or carrying an unbearable burden of proof for the supreme emergency exemption, and perhaps even facing the charge of individual complicity in war crimes.<sup>7</sup> Such a position is unsustainable.

### 3.1. *Just cause*

A state is usually considered to have a just cause for war in cases of aggression, which is usually defined as either the violation or imminent threat of the violation of its political independence and the integrity of the territory over which it has sovereignty. This right is based on the rights of its citizens, that is the right of its people, and specifically the right of self-determination. Valls (2000, 69–70) claims that »under some circumstances, some groups enjoy the right to self-determination. [...] Groups other than those constituted by the state in which they live can have a just cause to defend their right of self-determination. While just war theory relies on the rights of the citizens to ground the right of a state to defend itself, other communities within a state may have that same right«.

Valls also rejects the possibility of his argument being considered radical, and he refers to the articles of the UN Charter where the right to self-determination is granted not only to states but simply to “peoples.” Peoples who would be forcibly deprived of that right would certainly have a just cause for committing acts of political violence. In short, if there can be a just cause for war, then there can certainly be a just cause for terrorism, because there is nothing relevant to distinguish between the right of state and non-state actors. This is not to say that all terrorists have a just cause, just as it is not the case that all interstate wars have a just cause. It merely means that the possibility of a just cause cannot be *a priori* excluded.

Although this argument might be applicable to some terrorist organizations, it does not apply to anarchists, since they have no secessionist ambitions but a radical revolutionary ambition to abolish the state altogether. Their goal is not the defense of a collective identity against aggression but precisely an act of aggression against the *status quo*. The establishment of a just cause requires the need to protect the rights of self-determination for entire collectives (*peoples*), not individuals. If it was, in fact, the case that individuals had the right to political self-determination, then we might find ourselves advocating for a rather extreme version of the moral right to secession (e.g. Mladić & Buzar, 2015, 237; McGee, 1994, 11).

### 3.2. *Legitimate authority*

The requirement to have a legitimate or proper authority usually means to say that only states can legitimately go to war. If the word ‘war’ is emphasized

7 For the problem of complicity in war crimes, see Caron (2019, 107–123).

and defined in terms of interstate conflict, then surely Valls will agree. However, Valls is more interested in what it means to be a legitimate authority over the use of violent force. Namely, what makes an organization a legitimate authority over the use of force is its claim that it represents the interests and rights of its people. In a sense, this just war requirement is rooted in the defence of the national interest. Certainly, not all states can be said to represent these interests and rights, and because of this, not all states can be considered to be legitimate authorities in the above sense. Can non-state organizations be legitimate authorities in this sense? Well, if they can have a just cause, then surely some of them can be said to be representatives of the people they claim to represent. For this it should be sufficient »that the organization is widely seen as their representative by the members of the nation itself« (Valls, 2000, 71). Thus, these non-state organizations may enjoy the moral, if not always legal status of legitimate authorities.

Can anarchists satisfy this norm? There are at least two answers. Firstly, anarchist ideology is focused against any kind of state authority, which means that they automatically dispute the legitimate authority of the state to do anything whatsoever, let alone declare war. Secondly, one might claim that anarchist movements never had enough followers to be considered the people's representatives. What is certain is that, when it comes to the question of legitimate authority, anarchists' stark opposition to any kind of state puts them *a priori* in opposition to this just war norm altogether.

### 3.3. Last resort

The condition of last resort requires us not to succumb to violence unless it is a last resort, that is, unless all the reasonable modes of peaceful contention have already been exhausted. There is much doubt that a terrorist organization could fulfill such a requirement. Valls quotes Walzer as saying that violence is usually a first resort for these types of organizations, but they use the excuse of last resort in order to legitimize their actions (Valls, 2000, 72). He then finds two problems with Walzer's claim. First, he says that Walzer is making an *a priori* claim. Walzer discounts the possibility of last resort for terrorists, that is, for all non-state sanctioned violence, because he defines terrorism as random murder. The second problem is that Walzer seems to be using a double standard. Valls' question is: »Why can states arrive at a last resort, while stateless nations cannot?« (Valls, 2000, 73). There must be room for moral judgment in both cases of state and non-state actors. If nothing else, the double standard could be made to work in favor of non-state actors. They can easily claim that because they do not have the legal standing and the legal abilities of states, their last resort is much closer to the first than it is for states. In either case, it is highly problematic to say precisely how much time and effort invested in non-violence is to be considered reasonable, but that does not give authors such as Walzer the right to employ such a double standard. He does say that the »same argument applies to state officials who claim that they have tried 'everything' and are now compelled to kill hostages or bomb peasant villages« (Walzer, 2004, 53). However, nowhere does



Walzer exclude the possibility of these same state officials actually fulfilling the last resort requirement. His criterion, thus, is a double criterion relying solely on an *a priori* definition.

It seems abundantly clear that anarchists do not fulfill this condition, because the anarchist use of violent means is a method for mass mobilization rather than the last resort of an oppressed minority or majority. In explaining the usefulness of “propaganda by deed” Paul Brousse would claim that traditional written and oral propaganda was slow and inefficient, arguing that there was a need for using action (including violent action) for spreading anarchist ideas and inciting revolutions (Brousse, 2005). On a similar note, Carlo Cafiero claimed that violent political actions should be used on an opportunistic basis, while practising abstinence from any form of parliamentary politics (Cafiero, 2005). The concept of “propaganda by deed” did not insist that terrorism can be used only as a last resort (for protecting the oppressed) but as an efficient method or tool for accelerating collective class consciousness and thus initiating social revolution. Historical reconstructions of the anarchist movement also confirm that terrorism was initially used in a period when anarchists had a stable base of followers and had the sympathy of the working class (without state restrictions on distributing political literature), indicating that peaceful options were available, and terrorism was neither necessary nor was it used as a last resort (Carlson, 1972, 395; Pernicone, 1993, 283; Berry, 2002, 15).

### 3.4. *Proportionality*

The condition of proportionality, requiring that the costs of conflict be outweighed by its benefits, is certainly problematic, but no more is it problematic for terrorism than it is for conventional warfare. Namely, there does not seem to exist a valid way of weighing these costs and benefits because there is no unified measure. How does one weigh the cost of even a single human life sacrificed for a political goal? There are considerations to be made, but none are conclusive. However, just war theorists obviously consider it possible to fulfill the requirement of proportionality when it comes to state actors. Why not for non-state actors? »If modern warfare is sometimes justified, terrorism, in which the violence is usually on a far smaller scale, can be justified as well. This is especially clear if the end of the violence is the same or similar in both cases, such as when a nation wishes to vindicate its right to self-determination« (Valls, 2000, 74).

In the case of anarchist terrorism, the goal of which is to instigate a revolution for the overthrow of the state as such, rather than secession or revolution for the purpose of taking over power within the state, there does not seem to be any possibility of showing that terrorist means are proportionate to anarchist goals. On the one hand, if states are so inherently evil that any means to overthrow them are justified, it would seem that anarchists have a blank check to use any means they want and consider them proportionate. On the other hand, the goal of complete state abolition in favor of an untested mode of social existence is so



extensive that we cannot imagine an appropriate way to describe (let alone quantify) it for the purposes of comparison to any suggested means.

### 3.5. *Probability of success*

Can terrorist organizations have any reasonable probability of success? Again, we find Walzer claiming that this is not possible. Valls quotes him as saying »no nation that I know owes its freedom to a campaign of random murder« (Walzer, 2004, 56; Valls, 2000, 73). There is more than one problem in this claim. First of all, there is the ever recurring definition of terrorism as random murder that we find in Walzer. If one thing is clear, it is that the randomness of any terrorist attack is merely an illusion. These attacks are deliberate, organized, and often well planned. Also, Walzer's own definition of terrorism seems to exclude many empirical examples that would go a long way in disproving his position. Of course, evidence of the successfulness of terrorism is very ambiguous and incomplete (Valls, 2000, 74), but there are examples that merit at least some consideration even if they fall outside of Walzer's own definition of terrorism. Valls mentions the attack on the US Marines army barracks in Beirut in 1982. Whether or not this act fulfilled any of the other requirements of just war theory is beside the point. What is important is that it was successful in its intentions — it prompted the US withdrawal from Lebanon (Valls, 2000, 74). An even more compelling example is that of the Jewish organization Irgun, which in 1946 under the leadership of Menachem Begin bombed the King David Hotel in Jerusalem because it was the headquarters of British rule in Palestine. This was no act of random killing, yet it was still an act of terrorism, and it is mentioned as such in literature on terrorism (Hoffman, 2006, 48–49). It was certainly not by the merits of that sole terrorist act — but the agenda of the Irgun was ultimately fulfilled — that the formation of the state of Israel was brought about, with no less than Begin as one of the leaders of that state.

The history of anarchist movements indicates that the probability of success is very low. While there have been successful terrorist organizations, especially of the anti-colonial kind, anarchist terrorists have not been able to reach their goal of abolishing the state. At times they have been able to foster an atmosphere of fear, but this fear was merely a means to a political end which was not achieved.

### 3.6. *Discrimination*

The most challenging just war requirement for terrorism is the requirement of discrimination between combatants and non-combatants. As noted earlier, the bulk of the definitions of terrorism make it seem as though terrorism is necessarily connected to indiscriminate killing. However, it has to be possible for terrorism to be discriminate and still be terrorism. It has to be conceptually possible. Of course, the issue at hand is not merely definitional. There are violent acts committed by organizations commonly thought of as terrorist organizations that discriminate rather than pursue indiscriminate violence. Valls' examples of the-

se are the aforementioned attack on the US Marine barracks in Beirut and the killing of Aldo Moro by the Italian Red Brigades in 1978 (Valls, 2000, 75–76). Of course, Valls may be making a mistake here. The mere fact that soldiers were the target of the attack in Beirut does not necessarily mean that the attack was discriminatory. Even soldiers, when they are not on combat duty, can be considered as non-combatants. On the other hand, terrorists use terror precisely because they cannot face down standing armies in traditional battle scenarios, so by redefining the battlefield they might insist that all military personnel and political leaders are in some sense combatants.

Anarchist terrorists have generally not discriminated between combatants and non-combatants, but the important question is, could they do so. There is no general rule accepted by all anarchists, but if we consider that the goal is the complete overthrow of the state, then anyone supporting that system would be considered, by the anarchist terrorist, a legitimate target. In that case, a number of people who justifiably consider themselves non-combatants, and therefore morally immune from direct and intentional attack, would find that they have a target drawn on their person. In the most notorious example of bombing the Cafe Terminus, Émile Henry considered all members of the bourgeois class to be passive supporters of capitalism and state power and who should therefore be considered legitimate targets (Henry, 2015, 78–81). Due to the overwhelming goals of the anarchist, it seems beyond any practical scenario that they would be truly able to discriminate between legitimate and illegitimate targets, nor that they would be able to devise a theoretical approach to the problem.

### *Conclusion*

The paper has made clear that, given the norms of just war theory, anarchism fails to provide a credible justification for terrorism, because anarchist goals are so broad and essentially unlimited that they would justify any means. The belief that the abolishment and replacement of the state is such a moral imperative that any available means of attaining this end are justified is an invitation to limitless warfare, or what is also known as total war.

If anarchists accept just war norms as relevant, they should renounce any illegal and violent revolutionary action against the state. If this is so, then the question remaining would be, “Why should they accept these norms?” The answer is, “Because the doctrine of supreme emergency cannot be applied to anarchism.” Given the longevity of the state, and the fact that it has become the most common mode of political organization, the anarchist is faced with either conceding the point, or carrying an unbearable burden of proof.

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*Neodrživost anarhističkoga opravdanja terorizma*

Stipe Buzar\*, Karlo Seke\*\*

*Sažetak*

*Suvremene rasprave o moralnoj opravdanosti terorizma uglavnom su usmjerene na evaluaciju terorističkih skupina koje su djelovale u drugoj polovici 20. stoljeća, zanemarujući prvi međunarodni val terorizma koji je bio obilježen revolucionarnim djelovanjem. U članku su prikazane osnovne karakteristike anarhističke teorije i organizacije sa svrhom propitivanje moralne opravdanosti anarhističkoga terorizma u kontekstu teorije pravednoga rata i potrebe za novim normativnim okvirom u prosuđivanju protu–državnoga terorizma i anarhističke teorije. Metodološki je pristup uključivao analitičku (rašćlanjivanje temeljnih karakteristika anarhizma i načela teorije pravednoga rata), deskriptivnu (opisi pojedinih terorističkih napada) i komparativnu metodu (usporedbe raznovrsnih terorističkih skupina s obzirom na zadovoljenje normi pravednoga ratovanja). U zaključku autori tvrde da anarhističko opravdanje terorizma ne zadovoljava norme pravednoga ratovanja te nije održivo zbog nemogućnosti jasnoga ograničavanja vlastitih političkih ciljeva.*

*Ključne riječi: anarhizam; terorizam; etika; moralno opravdanje; teorija pravednoga rata*

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