

Why We Need Critical Terrorism Studies

Written by Richard Jackson

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RICHARD JACKSON, APR 8 2008

The study of political terrorism is one of the fastest growing areas of academic research in the English-speaking world, producing thousands of publications annually, as well as new study programmes, research projects, PhD theses, research institutes, think-tanks, conferences, seminars, and other academic activities. It was the events of 11 September 2001 that really galvanised the contemporary study of political terrorism and animated a whole new generation of scholars.

As with any relatively new field of research and teaching, terrorism studies faces a number of conceptual, epistemological, and methodological problems and challenges.[1] Some of these problems include: the failure to develop rigorous theories—or even to agree on a definition or set of identifying criteria—for the field's primary concept (there are over two hundred different definitions of 'terrorism' currently used in the literature); the treatment of 'terrorism' as an objective, ontologically stable phenomenon that can be studied unproblematically; an over-reliance on secondary sources and a frequent failure to undertake primary research, particularly in terms of face-to-face engagement with individuals and groups named as 'terrorists' (most terrorism 'experts' have never met a 'terrorist'); a failure to appreciate the cultural-ideological biases inherent to Western academic and political discourses of terrorism; a restricted set of specific research topics within the field, including an over-emphasis on non-state forms of terrorism and the lack of research on state terrorism; a large number of new scholars since 11 September 2001 who lack adequate grounding in the extensive existing literature on the wider study of political violence and social movements; and a persistent tendency to treat the current terrorist threat facing certain Western states as unprecedented, highly threatening and exceptional.

In addition, a number of critically-minded scholars have argued that the field must also face up to a number of unique normative and political challenges. These include: political biases in common research subjects, including the tendency to focus on groups and states which Western states are opposed to (and the simultaneous failure to study the terrorism practiced by Western states and their allies); the tendency to reinforce and reproduce (rather than challenge) many of the dominant myths about terrorism put forward by the state and the popular media, including the myths that terrorism poses a major threat to international security and that terrorists are mentally unstable; the failure to appreciate and reflect upon the politics of naming in regards to 'terrorism' and the social-political consequences of terrorism research for particular communities and individuals; the adoption of what can broadly be called 'problem-solving' approaches to the study of political terror; frequently compromising financial and political relationships between states and their security agencies and some scholars and analysts engaged in the study of non-state terrorism; and the prioritising of topics tailored to the demands of policy-makers for practically useful knowledge in the fight against terrorism.

It is in this context that advocates of a distinctly 'critical' approach to the study of terrorism suggest that one way to overcome many of these weaknesses and challenges in the field is to adopt a particular set of ontological, methodological, and political-normative commitments. The specific commitments and attitudes of CTS have been discussed in detail elsewhere.[2] They can be summarised briefly as: an acute sensitivity to the politics of labelling and the acceptance of the fundamental ontological insecurity of the 'terrorism' label and thus extreme care in its use during research; a commitment to inter-disciplinarity and a willingness to engage with research from disciplines outside of international relations (there is some excellent terrorism research from anthropology, for example); a commitment to transparency regarding the values and political standpoints of researchers, particularly as they relate

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to the geo-political interests and values of the states they work in; a willingness by researchers to expand the focus of their research to include topics such as the use of terrorism by states, gender dimensions of terrorism, ethical-normative analysis of counter-terrorism, and the discursive foundations which make 'terrorism studies' possible in the first place; adherence to a set of responsible research ethics which take account of the various users of terrorism research, including the 'suspect communities' from which terrorists often emerge and the populations who bear the brunt of counter-terrorism policies; a commitment to taking the subjectivity of both the researcher and the researched seriously, particularly in terms of being willing to 'talk to terrorists'; and a commitment to normative values and a broadly defined notion of emancipation. These commitments go beyond simply the call to engage in more rigorous and self-reflective research. In their normative dimensions in particular, these kinds of commitments amount to an orientation that shares many of the same attitudes and approaches as the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory and the Welsh School of Critical Security Studies.

The call for the establishment of a new, more reflexive 'critical' terrorism studies (CTS) is a self-conscious and deliberate attempt to try and overcome some of the problems that have been noted about the broader field of terrorism studies, and to attract scholars who study terrorism but are uncomfortable associating with a field that has historically been closely aligned with the state. The initial aim of CTS advocates has been to map out a new 'critical' set of approaches to the study of political terrorism, and to generate a new, broader research agenda. To this end, we convened a new Critical Studies on Terrorism Working Group (CSTWG) within the British International Studies Association (BISA) in early 2006.[3] The intention of the working group is to establish an international network of critically-oriented terrorism scholars, to generate and coordinate new kinds of research activities, and to organise papers and panels for conferences. Later, in October 2006, we organised a special conference on the topic, 'Is it time for a critical terrorism studies?', partly out of which we published a symposium on 'The Case for Critical Terrorism Studies' in the journal, *European Political Science* (volume 6, number 3). In terms of teaching, a number of openly 'critical' terrorism studies modules and programmes have been established at Aberystwyth University, the University of Kent at Canterbury, the University of Manchester, and elsewhere. Lastly and perhaps most importantly, in early 2007 we launched a new peer-reviewed academic journal entitled *Critical Studies on Terrorism*. [4] The aim of the journal is to provide a focal point for the publication of explicitly 'critical' research on terrorism, to provide a forum in which critical and orthodox accounts of terrorism can engage in respectful debate, and to review and influence developments in the wider field of research.

Despite a promising start however, the call for a more 'critical' terrorism studies contains within it a number of dangers and challenges.[5] These include: the danger of bifurcating the broader field into critical and orthodox intellectual ghettos who refuse to engage with each other's concerns; the failure to communicate clearly with orthodox scholars about the goals and aims of CTS, particularly the willingness of critical scholars to engage in respectful debate about common concerns; the danger that critical scholarship will become so self-conscious that it becomes the study of its own discourses and there is a progressive disengagement from the empirical study of political violence in the 'real' world (that is, the failure to develop a coherent and credible research agenda); the difficulties of negotiating the balance between independent scholarship and 'policy relevance'; and the need to try and overcome the Atlantic divide between American and European and Australasian terrorism scholars, which to some degree maps onto the broader orthodox-critical divide.

Such dangers will have to be carefully negotiated if the broader study of political terrorism is going to advance and mature beyond its present state. In this, there is a crucial opportunity for young scholars at the start of their academic careers to build a stronger, more robust and reflexive terrorism studies by adopting the commitments and values of CTS.

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Notes

[1] Some of the best reviews of the terrorism studies field which discuss these problems and challenges include:

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Herman, E., (1982). *The Real Terror Network: Terrorism in Fact and Propaganda*, South End Press; Schmid, A. and Jongman, A. (1988) *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Databases, Theories and Literature*, Oxford: North Holland; Herman, E. and O'Sullivan, G. (1989) *The 'Terrorism' Industry: The Experts and Institutions that Shape our View of Terror*, New York: Pantheon Books; George, A. (ed.), (1991) *Western State Terrorism*, Cambridge: Polity Press; Reid, E. (1993) 'Terrorism Research and the Diffusion of Ideas', *Knowledge and Policy*, 6(1): 17-39; Zulaika, J. and Douglass, W. (1996) *Terror and Taboo: The Follies, Fables, and Faces of Terrorism*, London: Routledge; Silke, A. (ed.), (2004). *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements and Failures*, London: Frank Cass; Burnett, J. and Whyte, D. (2005) 'Embedded Expertise and the New Terrorism', *Journal for Crime, Conflict and the Media* 1(4): 1-18; Ranstorp, M. (ed.), (2006). *Mapping Terrorism Research: State of the Art, Gaps and Future Direction*, London: Routledge; and Jackson, R. (forthcoming). 'The Study of Political Terror after September 11, 2001: Problems, Challenges and Future Directions', *Political Studies Review*.

[2] The characteristics and commitments of critical terrorism studies (CTS) are discussed in more detail in the following publications: Gunning, J. (2007). 'The Case for a Critical Terrorism Studies?', *Government & Opposition*, vol. 42, no. 3, pp. 363-94; Breen Smyth, M. (2007). 'A Critical Research Agenda for the Study of Political Terrorism', *European Political Science*, vol. 6, no. 3; and Jackson, R. (2007). 'The Core Commitments of Critical Terrorism Studies', *European Political Science*, vol. 6, no.3, pp. 244-51; Breen Smyth, M., Gunning, J. and Jackson, R. (eds.), (forthcoming). *Critical Terrorism Studies: Framing a New Research Agenda*, London: Routledge

[3] The CSTWG website can be accessed at: <http://www.bisa.ac.uk/groups/7/index.asp>.

[4] The journal's website and the contents of the first issue can be viewed at: <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=g791259001~db=all>.

[5] These dangers and challenges are discussed in the symposium on critical terrorism studies in volume 1, issues 1 and 2 of *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, and in Gunning, J. (2007). 'Babies and Bathwaters: Reflecting on the Pitfalls of Critical Terrorism Studies', *European Political Science*, vol.6, no.3.