

Review - Confessions of a Terrorist: A Novel

Written by Pamela Ligouri Bunker

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Review - Confessions of a Terrorist: A Novel

<https://www.e-ir.info/2014/06/12/review-confessions-of-a-terrorist-a-novel/>

PAMELA LIGOURI BUNKER, JUN 12 2014

Confessions of a Terrorist: A Novel

By: Richard Jackson

London & New York: Zed Books, 2014

Richard Jackson's latest work continues his long-standing efforts at imbuing the consideration of terrorism and, in turn, counterterrorism with an approach that turns a critical eye to mainstream thinking. Jackson, professor of peace studies at the University of Otago, New Zealand, is also founding editor-in-chief of the journal *Critical Studies on Terrorism* and an icon of that school of thought. While his earlier academic books and articles have offered valuable insights into those preconceptions of terrorism and terrorists—and their accompanying narratives and discourse—which serve to limit our consideration of the subject to a politically acceptable and culturally shaped construct, this current work is indeed 'novel' both in approach and emphasis.

Breaking new ground, Jackson here presents his subject matter in the form of a readable work of fiction while maintaining the academic integrity of the arguments upon which the critical studies approach to terrorism is based. A substantial 336 pages, the book is formatted as a 'Top Secret' transcript of a recorded meeting between an MI-5 operative, Michael, and a wanted terrorist, a former Egyptian academic known to British Intelligence colloquially as The Professor. Furthering the effect, it includes retrospective commentary in the margins, ostensibly by a ranking governmental official reviewing the screened document 'in the public interest.' The ubiquitous passages blacked out in the name of national security invite the reader to 'fill in the blanks.' The work concludes with a brief synopsis of the author's self-described premise and intent, along with a selection of recommended literature for further reading on the topic.

At a general level, the work quite thoroughly reiterates the panoply of criticisms raised against what has been called "orthodox" terrorism studies by the critical studies genre. Significant here are the considerations raised by Jackson's 'terrorist' Professor regarding the problematic nature of the term itself and the way in which it delegitimizes a set of actions by one group when similar actions by their opponents are not so labeled (p. 253). Key to a number of these situations is the inherent, yet arguably forced, dichotomy between state and non-state terrorism, along with the continuum in the use of force that lies between 'terrorism' and 'war.' It is this context, in fact, that leads to the question which hangs over the book regarding who of the two individuals "is the real terrorist" in the room (pp. 8, 252).

A good part of the mid-section of the book also deals—through the dialogue between the protagonists—with specifically raising and then discrediting many of the tenets of the "new terrorism" perspective which rose up post-9/11 that suggested terrorism is now driven by religion, pathology, and revenge to the exclusion of any negotiable demands, and that its ultimate aim is to use WMD (p. 162). It also introduces the question of whether terrorism "works" and offers that this may be less related to stated long-term objectives by a terrorist organization than to achieving interim objectives, such as the incitement of governments to overreact in their counterterrorism efforts thereby motivating support for terrorists (p. 192), or even the desire on the part of those undertaking terrorist violence to simply regain a semblance of control (p. 125).

The real twist and strength of the work is that— through the device of this interactive conversation between the

Review - Confessions of a Terrorist: A Novel

Written by Pamela Ligouri Bunker

notional 'terrorist' and 'counter-terrorist'—Jackson allows the reader to become privy to the thought processes which underlie our expectations of *who* a terrorist is. In the guise of The Professor, he leads the reader into familiar ground regarding the often-suggested psychological bases and 'root causes' of terroristic behavior, then prods his/her consciousness by denying those easy answers to a complex phenomena. Of note is the questioning (pp. 27-34) of the increasingly used but largely misunderstood concepts of "extremism" and the "radicalization" process. Implicit throughout the book (but specifically on p. 25), Jackson uses both The Professor's and the governmental reviewer's comments to deftly point out that the primary reason that "experts" are often widely off-the-mark when it comes to explaining terrorist motivations is that they rarely correspond directly with the terrorists themselves. In his afterword, he specifically decries the "veil of ignorance" that leads to guesswork counter-terrorism, based on "imagined" terrorist thought processes and supported by media depictions of these individuals as pathological and lacking humanity (pp. 318-9).

Jackson additionally makes a number of side commentaries on important tangential issues. For example, the governmental "reviewer" (p. 12) notes university students and professors as increasingly "suspect," both a recognition by the author that terrorists are often indeed educated individuals, but also perhaps more a nod to issues of government harassment of academics accessing terrorist materials as a part of legitimate research. The discussion between the protagonists (beginning on p. 272) also turns to the effects of violence on soldiers and the preponderance of PTSD amongst those returning from wars in the Middle East. Western state involvement in torture and its effectiveness—or lack thereof—is also addressed (pp. 248-50).

Beyond the many valid points the work raises, a couple of critiques present themselves. First, the primary audience of the book remains unclear. Certainly, given the author's reputation, it is likely to attract the attention of academics in the field of terrorism studies. Jackson's utilization of the unique form of a novel, however, implies a desire to appeal to a broader audience. The subject matter and depth of information presented, though, is most likely to attract not the casual reader, but rather someone who likely has some knowledge and a preconceived stance on the topic.

The literary mechanisms employed—the blacked-out portions and side commentary that suggest an ongoing backstory—conceivably encourage a reader to give due thought to underlying circumstances with the real world potential to result in a situation such as the one presented. These same mechanisms, however, may instead invite some readers to validate a knee-jerk "conspiracy theory" mentality without absorbing the nuances of Jackson's arguments. On the other hand, the expectations of a fictional work lead Jackson to a somewhat clichéd ending, which may serve for a more open-minded audience to undo the lessons which proceed it by casting The Professor in an expected 'terroristic' light, and may even serve to reinforce those very notions of terrorists as being 'beyond negotiation' that he sets out to dispel.

If the audience is meant to be an academic one, however, this work makes the assumption common in the critical studies literature of an unwillingness of many, if not most, mainstream scholars to consider its alternative viewpoints—for example, the state as terrorist actor—as valid. The fact is, however, that some in "mainstream" terrorism studies have never been at odds with these views and—while arguably there is still much room for improvement—over the past six years since the launch of the journal *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, academia at large has broadened its scope. Thus, whether the reader is academic or layperson, Jackson may be 'preaching to the choir' in terms of the effectiveness of some of the general messages he is trying to impart, although his challenge of moving to dialogue with terrorists (and, one might add, the victims of terrorism) is a vital one.

A second and perhaps more bothersome critique, however, also comes to mind. Jackson's stated aim to break through the taboo of "talking to terrorists" by giving his terrorist a "voice" is somewhat unconvincing given that—as far as the reader knows—this character is purely fictionalized, although the product of an amalgam of arguments made by former militants and terrorists that the author has heard over the years (p. 321). While he clearly offers an educated and informed insight into what we might potentially glean from such a conversation, the "voice" we are hearing is, ultimately, that of Jackson himself.

The author specifically holds out the hope that his message will reach those responsible for counterterrorism decision-making and lead to a reconsideration of counter-productive CT approaches (p. 322). Despite this commendable goal,

Review - Confessions of a Terrorist: A Novel

Written by Pamela Ligouri Bunker

unfortunately this work as a *novel*, perhaps even more than its academic counterparts in both the 'mainstream' and critical studies realms, likely won't reach most policymakers.

This work does, however, have the potential to be a powerful eye-opener for students interested in the field of terrorism studies. It presents the panorama of important arguments challenging the inherent assumptions of the field in an engaging way and offers insights for scholars interested as to how to go about constructively looking at difficult questions through breaking the taboos on interacting with those who have embraced the method of terrorism. To this end, it should be required reading.

About the author:

Pamela Ligouri Bunker holds an MA degree in public policy from the Claremont Graduate University and is currently pursuing further graduate studies at the Handa Center for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St. Andrews. Her writings have been published in academic and professional journals as well as in book chapter form. She is co-editor of the forthcoming Routledge Advances in IPE work, *Global Criminal and Sovereign Free Economies and the Demise of the Western Democracies*.