Interview – Charlotte Heath-Kelly

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Charlotte Heath-Kelly is a Professor of International Security at the University of Warwick. Her research interests include counterterrorism policies, memorialisation, and the integration of national security work within health, education and social care. She is currently leading a five-year project funded by the European Research Council, called 'Neoliberal Terror: The Radicalisation of Social Policy in Europe'. The project explores how 'preventing/countering violent extremism' programs are implemented across European countries, and how mental health professionals are involved within terrorism prevention. To date, the project has produced articles on the EU's Radicalisation Awareness Network, the Cold War history of psychiatric involvement in counter-extremism, and the development of pre-crime interventions in 20th Century international organisations. A documentary film will also be made about the impacts of Prevent referrals on marginalised and racialised communities.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I'm really enjoying work on 'objects' of international politics. Within the field of International Political Sociology, many researchers are now studying objects – like ice breaker ships, or digital infrastructure, or airport body scanners. Their work is a very important corrective to the dominant study of discourses, policy documents and speeches. By using 'actor network theory' (or other versions of object-oriented theory) these scholars can deeply engage with such objects, looking at them as 'actors' in their own right. They explore what these 'actors' make possible, but also the political limits they impose upon the world around them. Of course, we interact with objects all day long – so we shouldn't be surprised that they have agency and act upon the world.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

The person who has influenced me most was my PhD supervisor Professor Jenny Edkins. By working in close proximity to her, I learned a language for all the things I suspected about politics – but could never properly articulate. By engaging with her, and her encyclopaedic knowledge of Critical Theory, I became able to put words to the forces I could see acting in the world. I learned from her that 'discourse' shouldn't only mean 'written or spoken words'. Properly understood, discourse is much broader – it is a combination of political forces, disciplinary techniques and repressive interventions that act upon the world, to create dominant understandings and/or norms. The naturalisation of these norms and cultural texts then 'disappears' the politics which went into their creation, making them appear natural.

Other than from formal training, the most significant shifts in my thinking have come from engaging with participants in research projects. If you listen carefully to an interviewee, you will often be exposed to a world of understanding that was previously alien to you. This happened to me when completing the research for my first book, 'Politics of Violence', which involved interviewing ex-militants from the Greek-Cypriot and Italian-leftist militancy's of the 1950s and 70s respectively. I remember conducting extremely long and fruitful interviews with members of *Brigate Rosse* (Red Brigades) and *Prima Linea,* then retiring to sit on a bench – to ponder the vast amount of information shared with me. I realised that many ex-militants were telling me about a connection between explosives, violent acts, and the creation of meaning. It dawned on me that militants had been using political violence to disrupt a hegemonic system of meaning (that of everyday politics), to try and institute another world. That realisation was crucial for the

book which followed.

Another significant moment occurred during the research for my second book, 'Death and Security'. I was studying the new phenomenon of public memorials being built on sites of terrorism attack, during the War on Terror. I was initially interested in the public contestation of these designs, which never seem to progress smoothly, so I was interviewing the designers, commissioners, and opponents of memorials in London, New York, Washington, Oslo, Utøya, Madrid and Bali. My trip to Bali coincided with the 10th anniversary of the Sari Club and Paddy's Bar attacks in Kuta. Local organisers had arranged for a Balinese ceremony to take place at the memorial site, involving the performance of a narrative dance, to loud music and candlelight, intended to bring peace to any spirits still remaining there. Given that I had mainly been interviewing architects and designers, this different approach to a problematic site made a significant impact upon me. It dawned upon me that, in essence, there is little functional difference between the Balinese ceremony and the Westernised practice of memorialisation. Both are ritualised practices which function to bring peace to a site disturbed by atrocity and death. This 'reimagining' of memorialisation as a ritualised security practice (one which brings a feeling of peace back to a 'haunted' or disruptive site) was crucial for the book which followed.

You are one of the editors of *Critical Terrorism Studies at Ten*, a book that explores a field that is still quite new. What contributions do you think CTS gives to the literature and why is it important to further research in this field?

The Critical Terrorism Studies project has been very valuable, especially in the early years of the War on Terror, because it problematises the knee-jerk security reactions of policymakers to terrorism. Critical Terrorism Studies has shown that 'terrorism' is a label which functions to depoliticise certain forms of violence (which would otherwise be called insurgencies or civil wars, in some cases), enabling more repressive or invasive measures to be performed upon suspected communities. Critical Terrorism Studies has been particularly useful for pointing out how policing supposed 'precursor' behaviours to terrorism – like 'extremist' thought – stigmatises racialised communities and is not based on rigorous evidence. I particularly like Richard Jackson's paper on 'The Epistemological Crisis of Counterterrorism', which highlights the imaginative manoeuvres and back-flips that counterterrorist logic makes when designing technologies or policies to manage terrorist risk. New researchers are now coming forward within the Critical Terrorism Studies field to strengthen the study of race in counterterrorism practice, and this is a very welcome development.

You are currently working on a study of counter-radicalisation practices in Europe. Can you tell us more about the aim of the project and about the impact you expect it will have on the study of crime prevention?

At its core, the project explores how (and why) the liberal democracies of Europe have begun implementing large, cross-sectoral Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) programs. These programs have crossed into education, health, social care and policing, with local public sector workers tasked with reporting 'radicalised' persons to counterterrorism programs. The problem is that these people have committed no crime. Rather they are simply suspected, by an officer or teacher, of holding radical or uncommon views. PVE programs then decide whether the person requires an 'intervention' to reform their thinking (ideological 'mentoring') or help with employment or healthcare options, to reduce their 'risk of violence' (an arbitrary calculation, in itself). While strong defences are mounted that PVE is the simple extension of crime prevention programs (like youth work), this ignores the extension of preventive work to political and religious beliefs considered 'dangerous'. Liberal democracies are, counter to their foundational claims, problematising and policing the bounds of acceptable thought and belief.

Our project explores how these programs have embedded in European countries, how they travelled between countries and through international organisations, and the effects that they have on racialised minorities. The most important findings will soon be released in the Terrorism and Political Violence journal. This paper will show our 'index' of PVE in 38 countries – which is the first robust measurement of 'how much' PVE is implemented in each nation. Then, we use regression analysis to study why there is divergence between the amounts of PVE implemented in each country. We have found two reasons for the difference in 'how much' PVE is implemented between nations –

firstly, experiencing a terrorist attack since the year 2000 has a strong impact on the amount of PVE implemented by government; secondly, we have found a correlation with Muslim minority populations. So – states which implement more PVE, usually have larger Muslim minorities. Given that there is no relationship between Muslim population numbers and terrorist attacks themselves, our paper shows that PVE is correlated with *political suspicion of Muslims*. States which suspect or fear their Muslim populations will implement more PVE. PVE is, then, somewhat Islamophobic.

In a book chapter you argued that, for a variety of reasons, counter-radicalisation is not an effective counterterrorist tool. What approach do you think would have more positive results, if there is one?

'Effectiveness' is a complicated term. In other policy areas, 'effectiveness' is calculated according to large datasets and Bayesian analysis. So, in the insurance industry, the effectiveness of certain initiatives (like, putting new tyres on a vehicle) in preventing car accidents can be tested according to large datasets of the total number of car accidents per year. But this cannot be done for counterterrorism. The numbers of terrorist attacks per year are, thankfully, so small that they do not reach the level of 'statistical significance' – meaning the dataset of events isn't large enough to perform statistical analysis. So, it's very difficult to know if *any* counterterrorism measure is effective, because the security services are effectively guessing who might become a terrorist – based on incomplete information about their movements, intentions and networks.

The best solution would be to tackle some of the 'root causes' of terrorism (like foreign policy) while avoiding stigmatising racialised or minority communities through 'preventive work' (PVE) on their mindsets, beliefs and cultural practices. Think about it – ISIS formed in a US detention camp during the Iraq War. The US military invaded Iraq on the pretext of involvement in 9/11 (and then its supposed possession of nuclear weapons) before disbanding its entire military and occupying the country. It put the most radical insurgents in detention camps, where ISIS was then formed. ISIS then flourished after the US left Iraq, eventually establishing a caliphate and inspiring/directing attacks around the world. If the US and UK had not invaded Iraq, ISIS would never have formed – and those attacks would never have happened. Limiting the activities of our militaries (and reserving intervention for when it is absolutely necessary – as determined by a UN resolution) will limit the amount of 'blowback' we experience. Chalmers Johnson wrote an excellent book on this called *Blowback*.

Counterterrorism will never be able to prevent every single attack. For that to be possible, we would have to abandon liberal democracy and adopt a totalitarian political system where knowledge of all interactions, transactions and thoughts was passed immediately to the security services. As we do not want to surrender the benefits and freedoms of democracy, then we should take systemic actions that make terrorism less likely – such as avoiding the military occupation of other countries (which Robert Pape has shown is the central cause of suicide terrorism) and ensuring the fair distribution of resources and opportunities in society.

The UK Prevent strategy has ignited a public and academic debate since its adoption. What are your thoughts about it, especially its focus on the 'risk' of terrorism?

This is an enormous question which I will not be able to fully answer here, so I will begin by directing students of IR to the many articles about Prevent in Politics and Sociology journals. It is important to recognise that Prevent, and the P/CVE policies adopted by other countries and International Organisations, represent a drastic shift in the performance of national security. Whereas national security duties used to be reserved for intelligence, policing and security agencies, Prevent (and other P/CVE programs around the world) integrate the public sector in the delivery of security. Teachers, nurses, doctors, social care professionals, prison and probation staff, youth workers, and university lectures are now made responsible for delivering counter-extremism narratives (such as the British Values curriculum in England and Wales) and for reporting supposedly 'radicalising' people into referral programs run by the authorities. By integrating non-experts into security work, the potential for racist and uniformed referrals increases dramatically. People are free to engage their prejudices when they are instructed to look for possible radicals in the classroom or workplace, without clear criteria for terrorism risk (which don't exist, because the evidence base for 'radicalisation' indicators is extremely ambiguous). This is damaging for communities and democracy.

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The most important thing to remember is that 'radicalisation' is a new idea about 'what causes terrorism'. It was not produced through evidence-based research. Rather, the central motif of radicalisation discourse (that extreme ideology can transform a person and make them violent) was invented by policymakers in the aftermath of 9/11, 7/7 and the murder of Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam in 2004. Research on political violence and terrorism had always focused on sociological causes – like political opportunity structures, inter-group competition, trigger events for movements to become clandestine etc. It was policymakers who introduced the (strange) idea that ideas could take a person hostage and turn them towards terrorism.

Why did they do this? Well, they were confused by 9/11 and the early domestic terrorism events of the War on Terror. They couldn't understand the strategic reasoning behind them (however Fawaz Gerges has clearly shown that Al Qaeda's global insurgency had a strategic purpose in his book *The Far Enemy*). This confusion led them to focus on the religious identity of the perpetrators and assume that a fundamentalist ideology was responsible for the violence. Also, it was very convenient to follow this path of reasoning – because it completely obscures the role of Western foreign policy in creating groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS, through the invasion and occupation of other countries. The narrative of radicalisation places emphasis on individual level factors, like mental health, socio-economic disadvantage etc. However, many perpetrators have left video wills and explanations for their attacks, saying that they were motivated by the foreign policy of the state. The London bombers left a video will which centralised UK foreign policy as the reason for their attack; the Madrid bombings occurred soon after Spain joined the Iraq invasion; the Bataclan attack occurred after France used airstrikes against ISIS; Ali Harbi Ali stated in court that he murdered MP David Amess because he wanted to punish MPs who had voted for military action in Syria… The list goes on and on.

The risk-assessment typologies, used by Prevent to determine who is likely to become a terrorist, are methodologically flawed. As shown in an article by Scarcella et al., very few publish the datasets used to make these typologies – so researchers cannot check their validity, which is very worrying. Finally, Prevent (and P/CVE programs like it) place a lot of emphasis on religious dress, migration and even autism as 'risk factors' for radicalisation. This leads to the stigmatisation of Muslims in public and political discourse, as well as neurodiverse communities, and others. You can read more about the profiling of those with mental illnesses here, and you can see the stories of Muslims inappropriately referred to Prevent here.

In a 2017 Ted Talk you talked about the pervasiveness of counterterrorism laws and their role in the prevention of terrorist acts. How has the situation changed since then and what can we expect in the future?

I don't have a clear memory of the Ted Talk, but things have only got worse since 2017. Recently, the most worrying developments in counterterrorism include the creation of 'vulnerability support hubs' which place psychologists inside counterterrorism police headquarters. This is not to offer support, or pathways to mental health care, for detainees. Rather, placing NHS psychologists inside counterterrorism policing allows for the circumvention of data protection laws. These psychologists can request the medical information of any citizen, from other NHS practitioners. They use information about a person's mental health to inform decisions to detain or surveil them, conflating mental illness with 'terrorism risk' in a way that is condemned by the Royal College of Psychiatrists.

The joint psychologist-police teams create an unscientific risk score from medical information and surveillance information obtained by the police (such as, a right-wing demonstration is soon to occur in the city and may possibly trigger the suspect; or, the suspect has been seen driving on a motorway, which could be an indication of a plan to travel to London to attack civilians). These are real examples from cases dealt with by the Vulnerability Support Hubs, which you can read about here. People are then detained under mental health laws if they are deemed dangerous, or their therapists are asked to pass on information about the type of things said during talking therapy (which might indicate risk).

These are incredibly serious breaches of medical neutrality and democratic norms. Psychologists should not be incorporated within counterterrorism policing. This practice is both unscientific (as mental illness has no bearing on whether a person will go on to commit a terrorist attack) and contrary to established international agreements on the

neutrality of medical professionals.

On what we can expect in the future, the results of the Shawcross review of the Prevent Strategy are soon to be released. Indications are that Shawcross will recommend the downgrading of right-wing extremism as a threat, and the refocusing of Prevent's resources on Muslim communities. Senior police officers, civil liberties organisations and academics are united in condemning this discriminatory prospect.

What is your stance on the debate on the existence of root causes of terrorism? How can we understand the motivations behind the decision to engage in a terrorist act?

The 'root causes' debate hasn't existed since the early War on Terror. It was far more scholarly than contemporary work on 'radicalisation' and 'extremism' but, unfortunately, governments determine what much research funding can be used for. By setting up initiatives to fund research on 'radicalisation', governments and international organisations effectively steered academics to look at 'radicalisation' (the centring of individual level factors) rather than structural causes of violence. As I mentioned earlier, the work of Robert Pape (*Dying to Win*) and Fawaz Gerges (*The Far Enemy*) both convincingly demonstrate that political violence is the result of strategic decision-making by organisations. Terrorism may look irrational, but it has political causes, objectives and motives. Governments tend to ignore this, because it's more convenient to focus on individual-level factors – allowing them to avoid awkward questions about their foreign policy and its role in perpetuating insurgent violence.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Read widely! And ask questions. As you've probably learned by now, every essay question in Politics and International Relations is built around a debate. That means, there is no settled answer to a question and your instructors are looking for you to show knowledge of both sides of the debate. The better you can do this, and the more nuanced your interpretations of each argument, the better you will score. This develops a skill called 'critical thinking', which you will (hopefully) use for the rest of your lives, no matter what you choose to do. Critical thinking will stop you accepting simplistic arguments from politicians, journalists and colleagues. By looking at every side to an argument, and evaluating the merits and weaknesses of each, you will be in a more informed position to make your own choices. That should hopefully be good advice for life!