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CRITICAL TERRORISM STUDIES
AFTER 9/11

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Introduction
Although terrorism research has tended toward problem-solving and policy-relevant analysis (Jarvis 2009a), a number of alternative, critical interventions took place during and immediately after the Cold War period (see Jackson et al. 2011: 31–33). Despite its importance—in its own right and for subsequent developments—this work comprised a set of heterogeneous and disconnected studies situated in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and political economy. As such, it did not offer—or seek to offer—anything approaching an alternative paradigm for the study of terrorism. And, perhaps because of this, it had limited impact on the field of terrorism research itself (Gunning 2007a: 237). Something similar happened in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks where a further body of research emerged exploring the framing and consequences of George W. Bush’s “war on terror[ism]”. Although, again, this was not specifically directed at debates within “terrorism studies”, this work was also important for subsequent developments because it included sustained explorations of the rhetoric used to describe and to justify this new security paradigm (Collins and Glover 2002; Silberstein 2002).

In this chapter, I focus on a body of more contemporary scholarship that has often self-consciously and explicitly portrayed itself as a “critical” alternative to what is variously described as orthodox, conventional, traditional or mainstream terrorism studies. The profile of this work—referred to here as critical terrorism studies (CTS)—has grown rapidly from 2006 onwards, gaining momentum with initiatives such as the establishment of a new academic journal, Critical Studies on Terrorism; the formation of a professional working group of the same name within the British International Studies Association (BISA); and the regular holding of academic events such as conferences on this theme (see Jackson et al. 2009b: 1–3). Although there remains considerable theoretical, methodological, and normative diversity across the various work identifying as or associated with CTS (compare Jarvis 2009a; Herring and Stokes 2011; Prixit and Stump 2011), the landscape of terrorism research has undeniably been affected by it. To explore how this has been so, this chapter begins by elucidating five major contributions of this work, namely: criticisms of “traditional” terrorism research; elaborating an alternative critical paradigm or set of commitments for the study of terrorism; excavating and unpacking the discursive construction of terrorism across sites including mainstream politics, the news media, popular culture, and everyday life; directing attention to the continuing...
importance of state terrorism; and outlining the diverse impacts of counterterrorism practices and technologies.

The chapter’s second section then focuses on five criticisms or limitations of critical terrorism studies in which it is seen as predicated on a “straw person” account of “orthodox terrorism studies”; lacking in originality; too interested in political point-scoring; internally fractured; and reliant on an unpersuasive understanding of political discourse and its centrality within the politics of terror. The chapter concludes by pointing to future trajectories of CTS. While optimistic about those futures, it argues that all labels – terrorism, orthodox terrorism studies, critical terrorism studies – should be approached as unstable and porous short-hands which are unable to capture the fluid and complex reality they purport to describe.

Core themes and contributions

Perhaps the most prominent theme connecting research associated with critical terrorism studies has been a shared attempt to highlight a number of potentially serious problems within “mainstream” terrorism research. Four types of criticism have been particularly significant here. First is a series of conceptual and definitional criticisms of this work, including accusations of a theoretical lacuna within much terrorism scholarship (Ranstorp 2009: 33–34) and the presentism therein, which has led to a widespread neglect of historical contexts and cases (Silke 2009: 45–46). Especially important here is the argument that terrorism studies has tended to treat terrorism as an objective reality rather than a social construction – as a form of violence or tactic whose meaning is self-evident rather than an outcome of representation (Jackson et al. 2011: 15). A subsidiary criticism is that in doing so, terrorism research has also tended to reduce terrorism to a very narrow and specific set of violences, namely those conducted by non-state actors against civilians. As we shall see later, this is often seen to preclude discussion of state terrorism: a form of violence that is, for many, of far greater historical and contemporary significance.

Second are the perceived methodological limitations of much traditional work on terrorism. Several authors have pointed to a lack of primary empirical research in this field and the recycling of assumptions and truisms that this encourages. Part of the problem here is the continuing existence of a taboo that encourages researchers to not speak directly to those designated as terrorists in order to protect their scholarly independence (see Zulaika and Douglass 1996; Zulaika 2012: 52–53). Concerns about the researcher’s personal safety also play into this problem, as do perceived difficulties of access with clandestine violent organisations. Although there is some excellent terrorism research which draws directly on interviews and other forms of encounter with current or former terrorists (see, for example, Horgan 2009), such projects were, until recently, relatively rare. This is problematic because it leads to a partial – incomplete and biased – understanding of the motivations leading people to join, participate in, and leave such groups. As the anthropologist Jeffrey Sluka (2008: 168) put it:

The most obvious and fatal failure in the objectivity of pro-state terrorism experts is their refusal to look at the question from the point of view of those defined as “terrorists” or from the perspective of the people living in communities where “terrorists” originate and find their popular support.

A third criticism elaborated within CTS focuses on the politics of terrorism research. In this criticism, terrorism researchers are seen to lack critical distance from the interests and agendas of governments or think tanks with whom they are often close professional or financial ties – for
instance, via research funding. Although such networks are neither unique to terrorism research nor in themselves evidence of a lack of scholarly integrity, critics argue that these relationships have been fundamental in shaping the evolution of terrorism research (see, for example, Burnett and Whyte 2005). These criticisms build on earlier and contemporary accounts of a “terrorism industry” (see Herman and O’Sullivan 1989; George 1991a), understood as a loose network of journalists, politicians, researchers, bureaucrats, security entrepreneurs and others who contribute to “the costly stoking of fear and the often even more costly encouragement of overreaction [to terrorism]” (Mueller 2006: 33; see also Mueller 2005). These criticisms are important because they encourage us to think more carefully about the nature and foundations of terrorism “expertise” (see Stampnitzky 2011, this volume), as well as the question of what may or may not be said by those claiming this moniker (Jackson 2012).

A fourth – and arguably the most important – criticism refers to the purposes of terrorism research. Here, traditional terrorism research is seen as unduly limited by a very narrow conception of scholarly responsibility that amounts to the production of “policy-relevant, problem-solving research” (Jarvis 2009a: 15). This is unfortunate for critics because it tends toward simplistic and conservative understandings of the world:

The problem-solving approach is positivist and objectivist, and seeks to explain the “terrorist other” from within state-centric paradigms rather than to understand the “other” inter-subjectively using interpretative or ethnographic methods. It divides the world sharply into dichotomies (for instance, between the legitimate and “good” state, and the illegitimate and “evil” “terrorists”). It posits assumptions based on these dichotomies, often without adequately exploring whether these assumptions are borne out in practice.

(Gunning 2007b: 371–372)

Although this characterisation is a little caricatured, as Gunning (2007b: 371) himself notes, terrorism research has, in the main, tended to try to stand back from terrorist violence, in an attempt to explain and prevent it, without reflecting on the prior questions of why, how and which violences become designated terrorist. As a result, those engaging in this research have been accused of seeing themselves as little more than an “adjunct to the various Western counterterrorism agencies” (Brannan et al. cited in Breen Smyth 2009: 196).

As this suggests, CTS has devoted considerable attention to unpacking and exploring the ways in which terrorism research has traditionally been conducted. In the remainder of this section, I turn to four areas of substantive research which have been particularly productive in recent work. Although there are potential tensions between some of these research areas – a point to which I return in the following section – they together contribute to a vital and growing research agenda with real potential to fundamentally shape the direction of terrorism research more broadly.

A first contribution has been the elaboration of an alternative framework – or, less strongly, a set of commitments – through which to study terrorism. The original pioneers of CTS – Richard Jackson, Marie Breen Smyth and Jeroen Gunning – have written most fully on this, arguing in an early position statement:

CTS has a particular approach and orientation that marks it out from much of the orthodox terrorism studies literature in terms of its ontological position, its epistemology, its methodological orientation, its research ethics and praxis, its normative commitment, particularly in regards to emancipation, its reflexivity, and its expanded research foci and priorities.

(Jackson et al. 2009a: 227)
As they elaborate, this involves approaching terrorism as a social rather than a brute fact; prioritising human rather than national security as the referent for terrorism research; a normative commitment to ending the human suffering caused by terrorism and counterterrorism alike; a continuous and critical reflexivity toward terrorism knowledge; and a commitment to methodological pluralism and responsible research ethics (Jackson et al. 2009a: 221–226). Subsequent contributions to the literature have worked both to develop this alternative research framework – for example, via fuller discussion of methodological issues (Stump and Dixit 2013) – as well as to render it accessible for newcomers to terrorism research in the form of introductory textbooks (Jackson et al. 2011). The most important contribution of this elaboration of a new set of research commitments has been its emphasis on, and sensitivity toward, the politics of labelling and a movement from definition to description in the analysis of “terrorism” (Jackson et al. 2011: 115–116).

A second major contribution of CTS has been its encouragement of a large body of work unpacking the construction and consequences of discourses on terrorism and counterterrorism. Despite the early contributions noted in this chapter’s introduction, Jackson’s (2005) *Writing the War on Terrorism* was pivotal in setting this research agenda, providing what remains the fullest excavation of the political discourse surrounding the war on terrorism (see also Jackson 2007b), including how the American self and terrorist other were constructed in this paradigm. In his subsequent work, Jackson (2007c) turned his attention to the role of this discourse in normalising torture in Abu Ghraib and beyond, as well as its continuity into the presidency of Barack Obama (Jackson 2011; also Bentley and Holland 2013; Jarvis and Holland 2014). Related research has interrogated the “radicalisation” discourse which has been so prominent in debates around the causes of terrorism (see Kundnani 2012; Heath-Kelly 2013; Baker-Beall et al. 2015); the gendered nature of terrorism discourse and assumptions therein about the perpetrators and victims of violence (see Shepherd 2006; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007; Sjoberg 2009; Sylvester and Parashar 2009); the role of claims about time and history within the war on terror discourse (see Holland 2009; Jarvis 2009b; Fisher 2015); and the (re)production of terrorism discourse within popular culture (see Puar and Rai 2002; Croft 2006; Wild 2014). More recently, other studies have broadened the emphasis on Western elites within much of this discursive work by looking at the ways in which actors outside of the global south (Bartolucci 2010), as well as “ordinary” or non–elite actors (O’Loughlin and Gillespie 2012; Jarvis and Lister 2015) understand and articulate (counter)terrorism. Although clearly diverse, this work has been invaluable in demonstrating the contingency of specific representations of terrorism, the importance of exclusions and absences within terrorism discourse and how such representations “travel” across time, space and domain.

A third area in which CTS has been particularly productive is in explorations of the significance and role of state terrorism within national, regional and global politics. Although important precedents for this work may again be identified (see, for example, Stohl and Lopez 1984, 1988; George 1991b), contemporary critical scholars have been vital in working to “bring the state back in” to terrorism research (Blakeley 2007, 2008). Ruth Blakeley (2009: 4) has been at the forefront of these efforts, arguing in her monograph on the topic that “Northern liberal democratic states have frequently used state terrorism, along with other forms of repression, in pursuit of their foreign policy objectives”, including, but not limited to, the war on terrorism (Blakeley 2010a; see also Aksan and Bailes 2013). Related work has confronted common objections to the very concept of state terrorism (see Blakeley 2010b; Jackson et al. 2010), explored reasons for the concept’s limited historical presence in terrorism research (see Jackson 2008) and highlighted the importance of such violences for power relations in the global political economy more broadly (see Herring and Stokes
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2011; McKeown 2011). Other scholars have developed detailed analyses of the operation of state terrorism in specific national or regional contexts, including in Colombia (Stokes 2005), the Philippines (Holden 2011), Pakistan (Murphy 2013) and beyond (Byman 2005). This work is significant not only because it encourages a rethinking of the status and significance of terrorism within the global system, but because it also unsettles broader assumptions within international relations (IR) and terrorism research, including assumptions around the legitimacy of various violences and their protagonists (Jarvis and Lister 2014).

A further significant research area concerns the subjection of counterterrorism practices, policies and techniques to critical scrutiny. Widespread concern around the conduct of the war on terrorism across the world has underpinned much of this work, with its enormous death and injury tolls, immense financial costs, abuses of prisoners, various scandals and trampling over human rights. Blakeley and Raphael’s (n.d.) Rendition Project is a good example of this work. It documents in painstaking detail the global rendition and detention system drawing on public information, including flight data. Aslam (2011) has similarly questioned the less secretive, but no less controversial, usage of “drone strikes” as a counterterrorism tool by the Bush and Obama administrations (see also Calhoun, this volume).

At the domestic level, much attention has focused on the production and treatment of Muslim populations as “suspect” after 9/11 (see Breen Smyth 2009, 2015; Ali 2015; Ragazzi 2015), while other work has charted the impact of counterterrorism policies on everyday life and citizenship more broadly (see Jarvis and Lister 2013; Lister and Jarvis 2013). This research not only calls the efficacy, legality and legitimacy of dominant counterterrorism practices into question – a task given added urgency with the war on terrorism’s movement from the exceptional to the normal (Heath-Kelly et al. 2014; Sylvester 2014). It also points to potentially significant historical precedents and continuities with earlier counterterrorism campaigns, especially by the British state in Northern Ireland.

Criticisms and limitations of CTS

Given the ambition and scope of the above-mentioned research, it is perhaps unsurprising that CTS has in turn been subject to criticism of varying degrees of hostility. Amongst the most significant of these criticisms has been the “straw person” argument that the very existence of a mainstream or orthodox terrorism studies is itself questionable – an accusation that works to question the need for and validity of any form of CTS research agenda. Horgan and Boyle (2008: 57), for instance, highlight considerable heterogeneity within “traditional” terrorism literature, arguing:

A cursory review of the terrorism literature reveals that attempts to generalize about something called Orthodox Terrorism Studies are deeply problematic. . . . Among terrorism scholars, there are wide disagreements about, among others, the definition of terrorism, the causes of terrorism, the role and value of the concept of “radicalization” and “extremism”, the role of state terror, the role that foreign policy plays in motivating or facilitating terrorism, the ethics of terrorism, and the proper way to conduct “counter-terrorism”.

(Horgan and Boyle: 57)

A related criticism is that the perceived methodological and conceptual limitations of traditional terrorism research – such as its state-centrism or lack of primary research – had already been widely recognised and, at times, addressed before the arrival of CTS (Horgan and Boyle 2008; Weinberg and Eubank 2008: 190–191; Jones and Smith 2009: 295; Hayward 2011: 57–58).
Lutz (2010), for example, argues that the neglect of state violence within terrorism research had been well-documented prior to the recent critical turn and, in addition, that there had been some engagement with state terror practices in spite of this neglect (see also Michel and Richards 2009). Lutz’s (2010: 36–38) broader argument here is that CTS should be cautious in using “state terrorism” as a label, given that even the most reprehensible or “evil” of state violences may not always be accurately described this way.

A third criticism – perhaps an extension of the previous two – is that CTS, at least in its earliest conceptions, was overenthusiastic in its attempts to differentiate itself from orthodox or traditional terrorism research. Viewed thus, CTS had been distracted by an attempt to demarcate a simplistic, unnecessary and potentially counterproductive traditional/critical distinction in a move more reminiscent of political point-scoring than serious academic research. For Egerton (2009: 58), for example, “the case of the existence of a coherent orthodoxy has been overstated in the pursuit of a uniform point of contrast”. He goes on to say that this “exceeds the construction of a straw man. It leads to those advocating a ‘critical’ approach standing on the outside and critiquing an orthodoxy of their own making rather than also developing a normatively driven, substantive, critical approach” (Egerton 2009: 59; see also Stokes 2009: 87–88). It is important here to remember that traditional terrorism studies have been notoriously self-critical of their own research record (Stampnitzky 2011). One of the most famous overviews of the field – first published in 1988 – argued, for example, that “there are probably few areas in the social science literature on which so much is written on the basis of so little research” (Schmid and Jongman 1988: 179; also Schmid 2011: 462–470).

A fourth issue concerns the identity of CTS and whether it represents a single coherent framework or an umbrella term for a variety of non-traditional approaches to terrorism research. Statements of “core commitments” and the like imply the former: that critical terrorism studies possesses an identifiable collection of meta-theoretical and normative assumptions and values (Jackson 2007a; Jackson et al 2011: 34–42). Prominent within these are discussions of the importance of “emancipation” as a goal of such research; discussions which connect CTS to Frankfurt School Critical Theory in particular (compare McDonald 2009; Toros and Gunning 2009; Heath-Kelly 2010). Other contributions to this literature, however, have depicted CTS as a more diverse research orientation cohered around a shared impulse to intervene in the politics of (counter)terrorism (Gunning 2007b; Jarvis 2009a; Stump and Dixit 2013). As Burke (2008: 38) put it in an early contribution:

the greatest possible pluralism and engagement consistent with the critical enterprise should be encouraged – one that can encompass works that are, in their concerns and conception, profoundly challenging to elites and policy practitioners, works much closer in style and focus to theirs, and everything in between.

This tension between the desire to forge a distinct academic/political identity and a willingness to encourage pluralism and inclusivity is one that continues to confront critical security studies, an important forerunner of CTS in many respects (compare Krause and Williams 1997 with Booth 2007).

A final set of charges centres on the importance and understanding of discourse within CTS. Stump and Dixit (2012: 211), for instance, posit a methodological inconsistency within CTS such that “terrorism is treated as a discursive construction and an independently existing state of affairs”. Their response is to argue for a thicker, interpretivist approach to terrorism discourse in which “whether or not terrorism exists is less important than how terrorism and terrorists are constructed in practice” (Stump and Dixit 2012: 212; see also Hülse and Spencer 2008). Others
draw the opposite conclusion, arguing that CTS attributes too great an importance to the role of discourse within the politics of counterterrorism. Stokes (2009: 88), for example, suggests that:

wars launched in the name of counter-terrorism are not purely driven by certain hegemonic discourses, but are also part of the West’s economic interests in oil, strategic interests in military bases in the Middle East, and the desire to maintain American hegemony into the twenty-first century by controlling one of the crucial resource-rich regions for global capitalism.

Against this backdrop of extradiscursive interests and contexts, Joseph (2009: 97) argues that critical terrorism studies needs to engage in critical analysis of “the real structures of power and oppression that have an objective basis and that give meaning to the [terrorism] discourse just as the discourse might give meaning to them”. More recently still, Herring and Stokes (2011) have similarly suggested that historical materialism and critical realism provide useful but as yet underemployed insights for CTS.

Conclusion

It would be premature to assess the likely legacy of CTS, given that much of the literature discussed in this chapter is, at most, ten years old and often far younger. It is clear, however, that this work has already had a significant impact on the field of terrorism research. As Tables 3.1 and 3.2 demonstrate, the main CTS journal – Critical Studies on Terrorism – had published work by authors located in over twenty different countries within its first seven volumes alone. Importantly for an explicitly “critical” outlet, this included considerable contributions by female scholars. As indicated, the value of this and related work has been considerable, including establishing major new research projects and priorities (for example, around terrorism discourse) and encouraging a revisiting of previously axiomatic assumptions and conventions (for example, around the terrorism/non-state connection). Moreover, however valid one believes the criticisms of this work to be, scholars associated with CTS research have addressed many of these at length, often either before or coterminal with the identification of such criticisms by others (see, for example, Jackson et al. 2009a: 232–236).

Looking ahead, future work in CTS is likely to benefit, in my view, from still greater effort toward genuinely multidisciplinary initiatives, including with researchers in disciplines such as

| Table 3.1 Geographical residence of lead author in items published in Critical Studies on Terrorism (Volumes 1–7) |
|---|---|
| Country | Number |
| United Kingdom | 93 |
| United States of America | 44 |
| Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany | 5 |
| Finland, Republic of Ireland | 4 |
| New Zealand, the Netherlands, Norway | 3 |
| Pakistan, Portugal | 2 |
| Belgium, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Czech Republic, Ghana, Israel, the Philippines, Sweden, Turkey, United Arab Emirates | 1 |
| None listed | 1 |
the physical sciences, linguistics, law, psychology and media studies. The distinction with “traditional” terrorism studies is also likely to become less prominent within attempts to contextualise and justify new research projects now that significant and high profile trajectories of “critical” terrorism research have been established. While far less Western-centric than earlier traditions of terrorism research, there is also scope for further work still on the politics of (counter)terrorism beyond the global north. The increasing visibility of militant groups such as the Lord’s Resistance Army, Boko Haram and al Shabaab, amongst others, means that African regions in particular are likely to attract increasing attention amongst terrorism researchers of various stripes.

However CTS does develop in the future, it is likely to undergo considerable change from its earliest imaginations and instantiations. That, for me, is a desirable outcome of the vibrancy and internal debate associated with any serious and living research programme. What this will mean for the identity of CTS will be up for debate, especially given its successes in attracting early career researchers to this project (if it is such a thing). This, again, is as it should be: just as “terrorism” is a political label, so too is “critical terrorism studies” and indeed “traditional terrorism studies” or any of its synonyms. Such labels constitute the thing they purport to describe, rather than reflect its essence or reality. Thus, if CTS continues to be seen as a relevant way of identifying and differentiating particular types of terrorism research from others (by virtue of theoretical or normative commitments), then the term will remain both useful and in use. Experience thus far suggests that this will be the case.

**Note**

1 Data was collected by the author from a manual search of the relevant contents pages listed on the Taylor & Francis *Critical Studies on Terrorism* website.

**References**


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