Aberystwyth University

The Core Commitments of Critical Terrorism Studies
Jackson, Richard Dean Wells

the core commitments of critical terrorism studies

richard jackson

Department of International Politics, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, Penglais, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion, Wales SY23 3FE, UK
E-mail: interpol@aber.ac.uk

Abstract

Critical terrorism studies (CTS) is founded firstly on a series of powerful critiques of the current state of orthodox terrorism studies, including: its poor methods and theories, its state centricity, its problem-solving orientation and its institutional and intellectual links to state security projects. Defined broadly by a sceptical attitude towards accepted terrorism 'knowledge', CTS is also characterised by a set of core epistemological, ontological and ethical commitments, including: an appreciation of the politically constructed nature of terrorism knowledge; an awareness of the inherent ontological instability of the 'terrorism' category; a commitment to critical reflexivity regarding the uses to which research findings are put; a set of well-defined research ethics and a normative commitment to an emancipatory political praxis.

Keywords critical terrorism studies; politics; ontology; epistemology; knowledge; ethics; emancipation

INTRODUCTION

The argument for critical terrorism studies (CTS) begins with four main criticisms of the traditional terrorism studies field. First, both past and more recent review exercises of the field reveal an embarrassing list of methodological and analytical weaknesses, including among others: a reliance on poor research methods and procedures, an over-reliance on secondary information and a general failure to undertake primary research (Zulaika and Douglass, 1996: 149–50; Silke, 2004a); a failure to develop an accepted definition of terrorism and to formulate rigorous theories and concepts (Schmid and Jongman, 1988); the descriptive, narrative and condemnatory character of much terrorism research output; the dominance of orthodox international relations (IR) approaches and a lack of interdisciplinarity; the tendency to treat contemporary terrorism as a 'new' phenomenon that started on September

11th, 2001 and a persistent lack of historicity (Silke, 2004c: 209); a restricted research focus on a few topical issues and a subsequent failure fully to engage with a range of other important subjects, not least the issue of state terrorism (Silke, 2004c: 206); and an overly policy prescriptive focus (Silke, 2004b: 58; Ilardi, 2004: 215).

Second, traditional terrorism studies has its theoretical and institutional origins in orthodox security studies and counter-insurgency studies (Burnett and Whyte, 2005: 11–13; Schmid and Jongman, 1988: 182). An influential review described much of the field's early output as 'counterinsurgency masquerading as political science' (Schmid and Jongman, 1988: 182). As a consequence, much terrorism research adopts state-centric priorities and perspectives and tends to reproduce a limited set of assumptions and narratives about the nature, causes and responses to terrorism. Collectively, these narratives make up a widely accepted 'knowledge' or discourse of terrorism (see Jackson, forthcoming, 2005). The key problem is that much of this 'knowledge' is highly contestable and largely unsupported by empirical research. In effect, this means that the field is in large part dominated by 'a cabal of virulent myths and half-truths whose reach extends even to the most learned and experienced' (Silke, 2004a: 20).

A third and related criticism of the field pertains to the 'embedded' or 'organic' nature of many terrorism experts and scholars; that is, the extent to which terrorism scholars are directly linked to state institutions and sources of power in ways that make it difficult to distinguish between the state and academic spheres (see George, 1991; Herman and O'Sullivan, 1989; Ilardi, 2004). Crucial in the evolution of what has been called 'the terrorism industry' has been the influence of the RAND Corporation, a non-profit research foundation founded by United States Air Force with deep ties to the American military and political establishments (Burnett and Whyte, 2005: 8). The main consequence of such links is that together with certain state, military, think-tank and public intellectuals, the leading terrorism studies scholars now constitute an influential and exclusive 'epistemic community' – a network of 'specialists with a common world view about cause and effect relationships which relate to their domain of expertise, and common political values about the type of policies to which they should be applied' (Stone, 1996: 86). From a Gramscian perspective, the core terrorism studies scholars can be understood as 'organic intellectuals' intimately connected – institutionally, financially, politically and ideologically – with a state hegemonic project.

A fourth main criticism is that the dominant knowledge of the field is an ideal type of 'problem-solving theory' (Gunning, forthcoming). As Robert Cox argues, problem-solving theory 'takes the world as it finds it, with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organised, as the given framework for action', and then works to 'make these relationships and institutions work smoothly by dealing effectively with particular sources of trouble' (Cox, 1981: 128–9). It does not question the extent to which the *status quo* – the hierarchies and operation of power and the inequalities and injustices thus generated – is implicated in the 'problem' of terrorism and other forms of subaltern violence. Moreover, through the use of social scientific language and modes of inquiry, political assumptions about terrorism are masqueraded as technical issues and sides are taken on terrorism's major ethical and political questions.

These four criticisms have important analytical and normative implications. Analytically, the state-centric orientation

of the field functions to narrow the potential range of research subjects, encourage conformity in outlook and method and obstruct vigorous, wide-ranging debate, particularly regarding the causes of non-state terrorism and the use of terrorism by liberal democratic states and their allies. More importantly, a normative perspective suggests that terrorism studies is a largely co-opted field of research that is deeply enmeshed with the actual practices of counter-terrorism and the exercise of state power.

THE CORE COMMITMENTS OF CTS

In a broad sense, CTS refers to terrorism-related research that self-consciously adopts a sceptical attitude towards state-centric understandings of terrorism and which does not take existing terrorism knowledge for granted but is willing to challenge widely held assumptions and beliefs. In this sense, rather than a precise theoretical label, CTS is more of an orientation or critical perspective that seeks to maintain a certain distance from prevailing ideologies and orthodoxies. Beyond such a broadly defined orientation, however, it can be argued that CTS is founded upon on a core set of epistemological, ontological and ethical–normative commitments. Not every CTS scholar will hold openly to these commitments; but collectively speaking, critical research on 'terrorism' will tend to adhere to them.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL COMMITMENTS

Without discounting the contributions of positivist social science, I would argue that CTS rests firstly upon an understanding of knowledge as a social process constructed through language, discourse and inter-subjective practices. From this perspective, it is understood that terror-ism knowledge always reflects the social–cultural context within which it emerges, which means among other things that it tends to be highly gendered and Euro-centric. CTS understands that knowledge is always intimately connected to power, that knowledge is 'always for someone and for some purpose' and that 'regimes of truth' function to entrench certain hierarchies of power and exclude alternative, counter-hegemonic forms of knowledge and practice. CTS therefore begins with an acceptance of the basic insecurity of all knowledge and the impossibility of neutral or objective knowledge about terrorism. It also evinces an acute sensitivity to the ways in which terrorism knowledge can be deployed as a political technology in the furtherance of hegemonic projects and directs attention to the interests that underlie knowledge claims. Thus, CTS starts by asking: who is terrorism knowledge for, and what functions does it serve in supporting their interests?

There are at least three practical consequences of this broad epistemological orientation. First, similar to the field of critical security studies (CSS), CTS begins from an analysis of the epistemological and ontological claims that make the discipline possible in the first place (Williams and Krause, 1997); in particular, the false naturalism of traditional theory and the political content of all terrorism knowledge. More specifically, its research focuses in part on uncovering and understanding the aims of knowledge production within terrorism studies, the operation of the terrorism studies epistemic community and more broadly, the social and political construction of terrorism knowledge. Such analysis can be achieved using deconstructive, narrative, genealogical, ethnographic and historical analyses, as well as Gramscian and constructivist approaches. The purpose of such research is not simply descriptive nor is it to establish the 'correct' or 'real

truth' of terrorism; rather, its aim is to destabilise dominant interpretations and demonstrate the inherently contested and political nature of the discourse – to reveal the politics behind seemingly neutral knowledge.

A second practical consequence for CTS research is a continuous and transparent critical–normative reflexivity in the knowledge-production process (Shaw, 2003). That is, CTS research acknowledges the impossibility of neutral or objective terrorism knowledge and evinces an acute awareness of the political uses to which it can be put, as well as its inbuilt biases and assumptions. It thus attempts to avoid the uncritical use of labels, assumptions and narratives regarding terrorism in ways that would naturalise them or imply that they were uncontested. Crucial in this respect is an appreciation of the inherently gendered and Eurocentric character of dominant knowledge and discourse on terrorism.

A third consequence for CTS research is methodological and disciplinary pluralism; in particular, a willingness to adopt post-positivist and non-IR-based methods and approaches. In this sense, CTS refuses to privilege materialist, rationalist and positivist approaches to social science over interpretive and reflectivist approaches (Price and Reus-Smit, 1998: 261). Avoiding an exclusionary commitment to the narrow logic of traditional social scientific explanation based on linear notions of cause and effect, CTS accepts that constructivist and post-structuralist approaches that subscribe to an interpretive 'logic of understanding' can open space for questions and perspectives that are foreclosed by positivism and rationalism. This stance is more than methodological; it is also political in the sense that it does not treat one model of social science as if it were the sole bearer of legitimacy (Smith, 2004: 514).

> *'Terrorism is fundamentally a social fact rather than a brute fact; … just as 'races' do not exist but classifications of humankind do, so too 'terrorism' does not exist but classifications of different forms of political violence do'.*

ONTOLOGICAL COMMITMENTS

Ontologically, CTS is characterised by a general scepticism towards, and often a reticence to employ, the 'terrorism' label because it is recognised that in practice it has always been a pejorative rather than analytical term and that to use the term is a powerful form of labelling that implies a political judgement about the legitimacy of actors and their actions. Terrorism is fundamentally a social fact rather than a brute fact; while extreme physical violence is experienced as a brute fact, its wider cultural–political meaning is decided by social agreement and inter-subjective practices. In this sense, just as 'races' do not exist but classifications of humankind do, so too 'terrorism' does not exist but classifications of different forms of political violence do (Sluka, 2002: 23). That is, 'The nature of terrorism is not inherent in the violent act itself. One and the same act… can be terrorist or not, depending on intention and circumstance' (Schmid and Jongman, 1988: 101) – not to mention cultural and political context. For this reason, CTS refuses to define terrorism either in ways that de-legitimise some actors while simultaneously according the mantle of legitimate violence to others, or in ways that legitimise violence

simply because they are conducted in particular circumstances, such as during war. Instead, CTS views terrorism fundamentally as a strategy or tactic of political violence that can be, and frequently is, employed by both state and non-state actors and during times of war and peace. As Charles Tilly puts it, 'Properly understood, terror is a strategy, not a creed. Terrorists range across a wide spectrum of organizations, circumstances and beliefs. Terrorism is not a single causally coherent phenomenon. No social scientist can speak responsibly as though it were' (Tilly, 2004: 5). Moreover, as a strategy, terrorism involves the deliberate targeting of civilians in order to intimidate or terrorise for distinctly *political* purposes. Alex Schmid explains that like war, terrorism is also a continuation of politics by other means (Schmid, 2004: 202).

The important point is that terrorism is not an ideology or form of politics in itself; it is rather, a tool employed at specific times, for specific periods of time, by specific actors and for specific political goals. Groups specialising solely in terror do sometimes form, but they are extremely rare and, typically, they remain highly unstable and ephemeral. In reality, most terrorism occurs in the context of wider political struggles in which the use of terror is one strategy among other more routine forms of contentious action (Tilly, 2004: 6; Schmid, 2004: 199). In this sense, terrorism is not a freestanding phenomenon: there is no terro*rism* as such, just the instrumental use of terror by actors. This has important implications for notions of identity, and subsequently for the strategies and ethics of counterterrorism, not least because it implies that the 'terrorist' label is never a fixed or essential identity and that 'terrorists' may choose to abandon its use as a tactic for achieving political aims. A pertinent illustration of the ontological instability of the terrorist label and the potentialities for political metamorphosis is the observation that there are no less than four recognised 'terrorists' who have gone on to win the Nobel Peace Prize: Menachim Begin, Sean McBride, Nelson Mandela and Yassir Arafat (Zulaika and Douglass, 1996: x). In other words, 'Once a terrorist, is not always a terrorist' (Schmid, 2004: 205). Similarly, the inability of the UK and US governments to agree on a common list of proscribed terrorist organisations, despite holding very similar definitions of terrorism, speaks to the inherent subjectivity of applying this label in the real world (see Silke, 2004a: 5–6).

There are a number of direct consequences of adopting this particular ontological stance. For example, there is a determination by CTS scholars to redress the current imbalance within traditional terrorism studies and 'bring the state back in' to terrorism research, exploring the logic and circumstances in which states employ civilian-directed violence to terrorise and intimidate society for political purposes. CTS is also interested in uncovering the political and strategic 'causes' or reasons why actors choose to employ terrorist tactics, and the processes by which they abandon the use of terrorism as a political strategy in particular historical and political contexts. In this sense, CTS is determined to avoid universalising practices that are in fact very specific and naturalising what is actually highly contingent (Campbell, 2005: 128). Instead, CTS remains acutely sensitive to the need for historical, political and cultural context in understanding the use of terrorism as a strategy. In addition, given the central role that labelling plays within the terrorism studies field, CTS is committed to questioning the nature and politics of representation – why, when, how and for what purpose do groups and individuals come to be named as 'terrorist' and what consequences does this have?

ETHICAL–NORMATIVE COMMITMENTS

In addition to reasons alluded to earlier, CTS is openly normative in orientation for the simple reason that through the identification of who the 'terrorist other' actually is – deciding and affirming which individuals and groups may be rightly called 'terrorists' is a routine practice in the field – terrorism studies actually provides an authoritative judgement about who may legitimately be killed, tortured, rendered or incarcerated by the state in the name of counter-terrorism. In this sense, there is no escaping the ethico-political content of the subject. Rather than projecting or attempting to maintain a false neutrality or objectivity, CTS openly adheres to the values and priorities of universal human and societal security, rather than traditional, narrowly defined conceptions of national security in which the state takes precedence over any other actor. Moreover, in the tradition of Critical Theory, the core commitment of CTS is to a broad conception of emancipation, which is understood as the realisation of greater human freedom and human potential and improvements in individual and social actualisation and well-being.

In practice, such a standpoint necessarily entails transparency in specifying one's political–normative stance and values, a continuous critical reflexivity regarding the aims, means and outcomes of terrorism research, particularly as it intersects with state counter-terrorism, and an enduring concern with questions of politics and ethics. In turn, this has clear implications for research funding, knowledge production and the ethics of research in 'suspect communities'. It also entails an enduringly critical stance towards projects of state counter-terrorism, particularly as they affect human and societal security. CTS recognises that such a stance involves a delicate and

> '…*terrorism studies actually provides an authoritative judgement about who may legitimately be killed, tortured, rendered or incarcerated by the state in the name of counter-terrorism'.*

creative balance between avoiding complicity in oppressive state practices through a continual process of critique, while simultaneously maintaining access to power in order to affect change. From this perspective, CTS is determined to go beyond critique and deconstruction and actively work to bring about positive social change – in part through an active engagement with the political process and the power holders in society.

In short, based on an acceptance of a fundamental prior responsibility to 'the other', CTS sees itself as being engaged in a critical praxis aimed at ending the use of terror by any and all actors and in promoting the exploration of non-violent forms of conflict transformation. Specifically, this entails a willingness to try to understand and empathise with the mind-sets, world views and subjectivities of non-Western 'others' and a simultaneous refusal to assume or impute their intentions and values (Barkawi, 2004). CTS scholars recognise that in relation to the '*terrorist* other', this is a taboo stance within Western scholarship. Moreover, it is a taboo that has been institutionalised in a legal framework in which withholding information from the authorities is a crime, in which academics are being asked to report on their students and in which attempting to understand the subjectivities of 'terrorist' suspects could be interpreted as 'glorification of

terrorism' – a crime under UK law. Nonetheless, CTS scholars view it as both analytically and ethically responsible and remain committed to defending the intellectual and ethical integrity of such work.

In this sense, CTS imbues many of the values, concerns and orientations of peace research, conflict resolution and CCS. Contrary to the views of some critics, CTS is not an anti-state or anti-Western project, a discourse of complacency or an appeasement of tyranny. Rather, it is a vigorous anti-terror project based on fundamental human rights and values, and a concern for social justice, equality and an end to structural and physical violence and discrimination. It views civilian-directed forms of violence as inherently illegitimate, regardless of what type of actor commits them, in what context or to what purpose. It also presupposes that human agency and human ingenuity are potentially unlimited, particularly in the pursuit of non-violent solutions to injustice and violence, and that there are more humane and effective ways of responding to terrorism than reflexively engaging in retaliatory and disproportionate counter-violence.

In sum, CTS is both a theoretical commitment and a political orientation. Theoretically, it engages in permanent critical exploration of the ontology, epistemology and praxis of terrorism studies and counter-terrorism practice, and seeks ultimately to introduce alternative interpretations and understandings into an established field of discourse. Politically, it is committed to an ethical reflexivity in relation to its own knowledge practices, an 'ethos of political criticism' (Campbell, 2005: 133) in relation to the broader field and an emancipatory politics in regards to praxeological questions raised by counter-terrorism policy.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have attempted briefly to sketch out the basis for an explicitly 'critical' terrorism studies in first, a multi-level critique of the field; and second, the articulation of a minimal set of shared epistemological, ontological and ethical–normative commitments. Clearly, this is only the starting point in a long and potentially fraught intellectual struggle and there are many dangers along the way, not least that CTS will fail to engage with orthodox terrorism studies scholars and security officials and instead evolve into an exclusionary and marginalised, ghettoised subfield. It will be the responsibility of both critical and orthodox terrorism scholars to ensure that this does not occur, but that through rigorous and respectful dialogue the broader field is invigorated and revitalised.

References

Barkawi, T. (2004) 'On the pedagogy of "Small Wars"', *International Affairs* 80(1): 19–38.

Burnett, J. and Whyte, D. (2005) 'Embedded expertise and the new terrorism', *Journal for Crime, Conflict and the Media* 1(4): 1–18.

Campbell, D. (2005) 'Beyond choice: the onto-politics of critique', *International Relations* 19(1): 127–134.

Cox, R. (1981) 'Social forces, states and world orders: beyond international relations theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 10(2): 126–155.

George, A. (ed.) (1991) *Western State Terrorism*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Q2 Gunning, J. (forthcoming) 'The case for a critical terrorism studies?' *Government & Opposition*.

Herman, E. and O'Sullivan, G. (1989) The 'Terrorism' Industry: The Experts and Institutions that Shape Our View of Terror, New York: Pantheon Books.

Ilardi, G. (2004) 'Redefining the Issues: The Future of Terrorism Research and the Search for Empathy', in A. Silke (ed.) *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements and Failures*, London: Frank Cass.

Jackson, R. (2005) *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counterterrorism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Jackson, R. (forthcoming) 'Constructing Enemies: "Islamic Terrorism" in Political and Academic Discourse', *Government & Opposition*.

Price, R. and Reus-Smit, C. (1998) 'Dangerous liaisons? Critical international theory and constructivism', *European Journal of International Relations* 4(3): 259–294.

Schmid, A. (2004) 'Frameworks for conceptualising terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16(2): 197–221.

Schmid, A. and Jongman, A. (1988) *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Databases, Theories and Literature*, Oxford: North Holland.

Shaw, K. (2003) 'Whose knowledge for what politics?' *Review of International Studies* 29: 199–221.

Silke, A. (2004a) 'An Introduction to Terrorism Research', in A. Silke (ed.) *Research on Terrorism*.

Silke, A. (2004b) 'The Devil You Know: Continuing Problems with Research on Terrorism', in A. Silke (ed.) *Research on Terrorism*.

Silke, A. (2004c) 'The Road Less Traveled: Recent Trends in Terrorism Research', in A. Silke (ed.) *Research on Terrorism*.

Sluka, J. (2002) 'Comment: what anthropologists should know about the concept of "Terrorism"', *Anthropology Today* 18(2): 22–23.

Smith, S. (2004) 'Singing our world into existence: international relations theory and September 11', *International Studies Quarterly* 48(3): 499–515.

Stone, D. (1996) *Capturing the Political Imagination: Think Tanks and the Policy Process*, London: Frank Cass.

Tilly, C. (2004) 'Terror, terrorism, terrorists', *Sociological Theory* 22(1): 5–13.

Williams, M. and Krause, K. (1997) 'Preface: Toward Critical Security Studies', in M. Williams and K. Krause (eds.) *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. vii–xxi.

Zulaika, J. and Douglass, W. (1996) *Terror and Taboo: The Follies, Fables, and Faces of Terrorism*, London: Routledge.

About the Author

Richard Jackson is Reader in International Politics, University of Wales, Aberystwyth. He is the founding editor of the journal *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, and the convenor of the British International Studies Association (BISA) Critical Studies on Terrorism Working Group (CSTWG). His most recent book is *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counterterrorism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005). His current research interests include: the discourses of terrorism; the social construction of political violence and international conflict resolution.