What does Critical Terrorism Studies contribute to the study of Terrorism?

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Critical terrorism studies (CTS) emerged in 2007 in response to what was perceived to be a rather lacklustre and naïve study of terrorism by traditional or orthodox scholars. Traditional literature has often been criticised for a severe paucity of methodological rigour coupled with a tendency to pander blindly to power relations produced by discourse(s) of terrorism. In this respect, CTS enriches the study of terrorism through its interdisciplinary nature and the informed and sustained challenge that it brings to the ruling ideas that manacle the scope of terrorism studies.

Introduction

First, in this article, the contribution of critical terrorism studies (CTS) to the study of terrorism will be described with reference to the implications of its epistemological commitments. This aspect of CTS will then be linked to the essentiality of discourse analysis to this theory and how the identification of discourse(s) liberates varying conceptions of terrorism. Subsequently, the ability of CTS to offer an alternative analytical framework to understand biases inherent in existing literature and how this theory helps to dismantle them will be outlined. However, while this article lauds the bestowments of CTS, the fallacy of omitting the criticisms that exist in relation to the application of CTS will not be committed. Finally the article will conclude by calling for a more pluralistic approach to the study of terrorism that embraces the merits of both CTS and orthodox scholarship.

Epistemological Commitments

One of the most basic differentiating factors between critical and traditional studies can be traced to their epistemological backgrounds. The foundations of CTS were born from postpositivism and draw heavily on this ideology to mould their argument and research.

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(Jackson et al. 2011). CTS is thus inherently concerned with the presence of discourse(s) and the pervasion of certain rhetoric around terrorism that influences the literature emanating from this field. As rooted in postpositivist epistemology, CTS doubts the possibility of value-neutral fact or a conception of reality that is free from bias. It is argued that theory always emerges to serve someone and for some purpose (Cox 1981) and the main predication of CTS delineates that the study of terrorism is no exception.

Directly linking to these core postpositivist commitments, CTS affords great prominence to the identification and deconstruction of discourse(s) within the study of terrorism. What a discourse represents is:

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\textit{a system of statements in which each individual statement makes sense [and] produces interpretive possibilities by making it virtually impossible to think outside of it. A discourse provides discursive spaces, i.e., concepts, categories, metaphors, models, and analogies by which meanings are created} (Doty 1993: 302).
\end{quote}

The revelation of discourse(s) and the acknowledgment of the influence of the political agenda provide a sustained challenge to the dominant knowledge structures that colour research and viewpoints on terrorism.

\begin{quote}
The accepted knowledge of the field is in many instances politically biased, but more importantly, it functions ideologically to reinforce and reify existing power structures of power in society, particularly that of the state, and to promote particular elite political projects (Jackson 2009: 67).
\end{quote}

Attempts by CTS to defy the prevailing discourse(s) on terrorism, therefore, embody one of the most potent contributions to the study of terrorism, through the portrayal of how conceptions of terrorism are moulded by political elites, with judgements of terrorism being almost predestined. Through identification and revelation, avoiding these structures in research becomes easier and as a result CTS can cater for the emergence of suppressed knowledge, narratives and genealogies (Edkins 2006).

\textbf{Methodological Framework}
CTS offers the study of terrorism an alternative methodological framework that works to escape the limitations of positivism that have come to define orthodox approaches. Indeed, traditional studies have been lambasted for being too shallow, methodologically weak and founding theories on simple narratives of singular events, even being labelled as an “a-theoretical undertaking” (Weinberg and Richardson 2004: 138). Thus, the methodological commitments of CTS strives to sidestep this affliction plaguing orthodox research; that is, “core, epistemological and political-normative problems…ranging from lack of conceptual clarity and theoretical sterility to political bias and a continuing dearth of primary research data” (Gunning 2007: 363).

Therefore, by unearthing pervading discourse(s) that distort how terrorism is studied, CTS brings an alternative framework for conceptualising terrorism that widens political options and also creates a more informed sphere of learning. CTS, as a research agenda that strays from the limitations imposed by the politically loaded conception of terrorism, can dismantle a number of misleading notions that surround terrorism. Of particular importance is how CTS identifies the dissemination of state bias in terrorism studies. Critical studies have chastised the dearth in traditional literature of the complicity of states in terrorist behaviour. The overarching orthodox consensus is that terrorist violence is “perpetuated by a subnational group or non-state entity” (Hoffman 1998: 43) with the study of instances of state terrorism hardly amounting to a relevant argument (Laqueur 1999). CTS has come to play a major role in highlighting the necessity to question the apparent state bias in terrorism studies that attempts to absolve states of any complicity in terrorism. For “when virtually the entire academic field collectively adopts state priorities and aims…it means that terrorism studies functions ideologically as an intellectual arm of the state and is aligned with its broader hegemonic project” (Jackson 2009: 78). Just one example of how CTS has deconstructed the reach of the state is through attempting to expose and eradicate the phenomenon of embedded expertise (Burnett and Whyte 2005). This concept points to instances where leading terrorism research is swayed by state power and funding. “We see terrorism knowledge not as some ideologically neutral expertise on a natural phenomenon, but as being created to reflect the priorities and values of certain social interests” (Miller and Mills 2009: 415). As a result of breaking this cycle and guiding study away from a critique of the role of the state, CTS has become essential for increasing the legitimacy and credibility of how terrorism is studied.

The ‘Normalisation’ of the Terrorist
CTS is often portrayed as dispelling the ‘them’ versus ‘us’ categorisation and subject-positioning that plagues research on terrorism. CTS plays a crucial role in trying to eradicate certain preconceptions that abound regarding terrorists; and, as a theory it also endeavours to show that the gap between:

*those who hate terrorism and those who carry it out, those who seek to delegitimise the acts of terrorists and those who incite them, and those who abjure terror and those who glorify it – is not as great as is implied or asserted by orthodox terrorism experts, the discourse of governments, or the popular press* (Booth 2008: 66).

In essence, CTS seeks to dissolve the inherent stigma and bias that haunts the study of terrorism; and, to lift the terrorist actor from an ‘exceptional’ construct and place it within a less sensationalised, ‘normalised’ narrative. This normalisation of the terrorist is quite a polemical contribution from CTS and yet it is essential in order to confront the changed nature of terrorism studies in the post 9/11 era. CTS therefore reminds the wider community that terrorists are rational actors with political goals and motivations and restricting them to such binaries as the ‘evil’ to ‘our good’ and the ‘fanatical terrorist’ to the ‘rational civilian’ erases the true motivations of the terrorist and severely impedes any chance of transformation (Bhatia 2005; Toros 2008).

**Criticisms from the Orthodox Tradition**

Orthodox scholars are not rendered mute in the face of the contributions of CTS and there exists a plethora of criticisms of this theory. One of the most resounding disparities of CTS has been the tendency for the paradigm to overstate the novelty of its case. This argument stems largely from the fact that traditional terrorism studies has long acknowledged and sought to rectify the weaknesses and inconsistencies of its own research. CTS scholars are thus criticised for actively failing to acknowledge that orthodox academia has also debated the political implications of naming terrorism and, perhaps most famous, are the implications stemming from the absence of a *definition* of terrorism (Schmid 2004; Kruglanski *et al* 2008).

Furthermore, while CTS has transformed how scholars foment their research and studies, it has also been heavily chastised for struggling to go beyond critique and deconstruction of discourse(s). Despite an emancipatory agenda, that “critical theory is not concerned only with
understanding and explaining the existing realities of world politics, it also intends to criticise in order to transform them” (Devetak 2005: 145), instances of such transformation remain scant and practical advice for counter-terrorism seems to elude the discipline. This demonstrates a major failing in the repertoire of CTS as:

*a critically conceived field cannot afford to be policy irrelevant while remaining true to the ‘emancipatory’ agenda implicit in the term ‘critical’, nor can it be uncritically universalist without betraying its ‘critical’ commitment”* (Gunning 2007: 384).

The inherent conflict, therefore, between active critique and practical utility exemplifies a major stumbling block for CTS. Indeed, this faltering emancipatory rhetoric can often be cited as a source of disillusionment for both orthodox and critical scholars.

However, perhaps one of the most damaging condemnations of CTS is the tendency of the approach to make a ‘straw man’ out of over forty years of learning on terrorism garnered from traditional approaches. Citing that orthodox understandings of terrorism are “solely interested in telling comforting lies to those in power” (Horgan and Boyle 2008: 54) can be conveyed as making a mockery of the intellectual work of traditional scholars. Although orthodox study has been largely exclusionary of the presence of power structures, this factor alone is not enough to consign traditional terrorism studies to a position of irrelevance.²

**A Pluralist Approach**

Considering that CTS may harbour the potential to disregard over forty years of scholarship earned from traditional terrorism studies, orthodox academics are neither powerless nor voiceless and have attempted to stunt the growth of this emergent critical field. As such, the appeal of a pluralist approach to the study of terrorism becomes clear as it embodies a logical solution to the apparent schism within terrorism studies. In this manner, facets of each approach could be utilised to represent a more holistic theory for studying and understanding terrorism. Despite the current imposition of a cycle of continuous antagonism, this antipathy

² Prime examples of integral terrorism research by orthodox scholars includes but are not limited to: Clutterbuck 1981, Jenkins 1980, Rapoport 2002 and Wilkinson 1976.
within the discipline is relatively unproductive and serves only to shroud the fact that critical and traditional terrorism research are actually complementary. These two spheres are less like enemies and are more akin to opposite sides of the same coin. Therefore they stand to make a radical contribution to terrorism studies if merged together. For the terrorism scholar can try to be as independently minded as possible and test for the robustness of findings based on different definition of the data, but the basic problem – that terrorism studies is ineluctably political – remains. This does not lead to an abandonment of empirical approaches to social and political enquiry, as “a key contribution of critical terrorism studies can be to make empirical scholarship more self-aware and reflective in practice” (Horgan and Boyle 2008: 52).

Nevertheless, the risk that exists is that there will be a perpetuation of the simplistic contention between CTS and traditional methods. The current debate within terrorism studies is inherently preoccupied with an epistemological battle that negates the possibility of a shared understanding of terrorism. What is essential and most prescient is not to argue for the obliteration of one theory over another, but to recognise the merits of each and take strong tenets from both to create a universalist approach. “We do not believe that terrorism studies should be reduced to a war of competing ideologies; the last thing we would want is for our dialogue with CTS scholars to be reduced to a war of position” (Horgan and Boyle 2008: 55). Whilst this notion of choking out certain differing voices in terrorism studies would be entirely detrimental, it is also essential that CTS is not forced to occupy and remain in a sphere of ‘alternative theory’. An equal standing for both approaches would be conducive to an environment that strives for the betterment of the study of terrorism and garners the merits associated with both critical and traditional terrorism studies.

**Conclusion**

The contributions from CTS can be heralded as the catalyst to a significant change in the field of terrorism studies. The dominance of the traditional scholar has been shaken and yet while there are considerable anomalies to this approach, to shun the foundational knowledge of terrorism that has so far been garnered would be irrational and foolish. Subsequently, pluralism in this field would enhance the contributions of *both* approaches and the healthy competition between CTS and traditional methods would allow the study of terrorism to flourish and break free from the political manacles of prevailing discourse.
Bibliography


