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The Case for a Critical Terrorism Studies

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The Case for a Critical Terrorism Studies

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Introduction¹

This paper was written in response to three recent developments in the field of terrorism studies. First, since 2001 there has been a tremendous growth in terrorism-related research and teaching activities. Following the attacks in America, terrorism studies rapidly expanded from a relatively minor sub-field of security studies to a large stand alone field with its own dedicated journals, research centres, leading scholars and experts, research funding opportunities, conferences, seminars and study programmes. As a consequence, it is now one of the fastest expanding areas of research in the English-speaking academic world, with literally thousands of new books and articles published over the past few years,² significant investment in terrorism-related research projects and increasing numbers of postgraduate dissertations and undergraduate students.³ Such phenomenal growth calls for critical reflection on the state and direction of terrorism research.⁴

Second, there has already been a growing dissatisfaction with the quality of the voluminous output of the field. As detailed below, a number of authoritative scholarly reviews have maintained that much of the new research – and much of the early research on political terrorism – fails to meet rigorous standards of scholarship. Related to this, it is also possible to discern a growing and deep-seated sense of unease about the progress and consequences of the global war on terror (WOT). In late 2006, for example, the Iraq Study Group noted that, ‘Many Americans are dissatisfied, not just with the situation in Iraq but with the state of our political debate regarding Iraq... Our country deserves a debate that prizes substance over rhetoric.’⁵ In other words, in a political environment characterised by decreasing public and academic confidence in official approaches to

¹ This paper brings together in summary form some of the material that will shortly be published as a symposium in *European Political Science*, vol.6, no.3 (2007) entitled ‘The Case for Critical Terrorism Studies.’ A more extensive statement on the foundations and core principles of ‘critical terrorism studies’ and articles on related issues can be found there.

² Andrew Silke has claimed that if current trends continue, more than 90 percent of all terrorism studies literature will have been published since 2001, and that a new book on terrorism is published every six hours in the English language. See Jessica Shepherd, ‘The Rise and Rise of Terrorism Studies’, *The Guardian*, July 3, 2007. In fact, research using publishing databases found that even before 2001, terrorism publications had grown over 234 percent on average between 1988-2001 in fields like terrorism studies, communication studies, comparative politics, peace studies, economics and psychology. Avishag Gordon, 2004. ‘Terrorism and Knowledge Growth: A Databases and Internet Analysis’, in Andrew Silke, ed., *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements and Failures*, London: Frank Cass, p.109.

³ Research by Avishag Gordon found that in the ten years from 1990-1999 at least 160 research dissertations on terrorism-related subjects had been carried out. It can reasonably be assumed that this number has further increased since 2001. Avishag Gordon, 1999. ‘Terrorism Dissertations and the Evolution of a Speciality: An Analysis of Meta-Information’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol.11, no.2, pp.141-50.

⁴ See also John Horgan, 2006. ‘Understanding Terrorism: Old Assumptions, New Assertions, and Challenges for Research’, in J. Victoroff, ed., *Tangled Roots: Social and Psychological Factors in the Genesis of Terrorism*, Amsterdam: IOS Press/NATO Public Diplomacy Division, pp. 74-84.

⁵ The Iraq Study Group, (2006) *The Iraq Study Group Report*, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, December, available online at: http://www.usip.org/isg/iraq_study_group_report/report/1206/iraq_study_group_report.pdf, accessed 17 January, 2007, p. 4.

counter-terrorism, we argue that it is intellectually and politically timely to consider how a new, more critical approach might offer an alternative paradigm for considering political terror.

A third important development has been a growing number of openly ‘critical’ terrorism studies scholars, publications, doctoral research projects and teaching programs. The level of organisation and activity of this trend can be seen in several specific events. Taking the United Kingdom as an example, at Aberystwyth University, an explicitly critical approach to the study of political terror has been taught to undergraduate and graduate students since 2002, most notably with the creation of the world’s first Masters program dedicated to the study of ‘terrorism’ in 2002, and the establishment of the Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Contemporary Political Violence (CSRV) in 2005. In early 2006, a Critical Studies on Terrorism Working Group (CSTWG) was formally established within the British International Studies Association (BISA) to provide a network for critically-oriented scholars and a focus for research activities. That same year, the University of East London launched its own Masters in Terrorism Studies. In October 2006, a conference entitled ‘Is it Time for a Critical Terrorism Studies?’ was held in Manchester, jointly organised by CSTWG and CSRV, bringing together around fifty scholars from the UK, Europe and North America. Panels on critical terrorism studies were held at the December 2006 annual BISA conference and the March 2007 International Studies Association (ISA) annual convention in Chicago. Lastly, in 2007 a new international, peer-reviewed academic journal called *Critical Studies on Terrorism* was established, based in CSRV and published by Routledge.

Within the broader context of these developments, this paper attempts to set out the case for the creation of an explicitly ‘critical terrorism studies’ (CTS). The paper aims to map out and articulate some of its main justifications and central commitments, and in the process, differentiate CTS from the orthodox field. Perhaps more importantly, it explores some of the potential pitfalls and dangers of delineating an explicitly ‘critical’ approach. Although a loosely-defined ‘critical’ terrorism studies already exists through the scholars and activities described above, it can be argued that the intellectual case for a recognized CTS has yet to be made. A key purpose of this paper therefore, is to provoke debate and discussion about the underlying assumptions, focus, scope, research agenda, ethics, potential pitfalls and future trajectory of an openly ‘critical’ terrorism studies.

We argue that making the case for CTS depends initially on a considered critique of the current state of orthodox terrorism studies. In the first section, we provide a brief overview of a few of the main problems and challenges of the contemporary study of political terror. In the second part, we reflect on the potential pitfalls and obstacles of establishing an explicitly critical field. In the final section, we propose a set of epistemological, ontological, methodological and ethical-normative commitments, and suggest the initial outlines of a research program.

Weaknesses and Problems in the Study of Political Terror

Terrorism studies is not noted for either regular or critical self-reflection; nonetheless, there have been a number of important reviews of the field’s achievements and failures

over the past two decades.⁶ These studies highlight a plethora of weaknesses, problems and challenges, which we consider below.

Concepts, Theories and Methods

In the first instance, terrorism studies has been criticised for its failure to develop an accepted definition of terrorism and a subsequent failure to develop rigorous theories and concepts.⁷ The reality is that most terrorism scholars have simply abandoned the search for an agreed definition, and instead, tend to use the term without ever defining it. This is a real challenge for the field, as not only is the term highly contentious and laden with negative political and cultural connotations, but the failure to resolve the continual debate over key concepts and ideas is antithetical to theoretical innovation and intellectual progress.⁸ In part, this particular weakness reflects the roots of terrorism studies within the broader disciplines of international relations and security studies, which in turn have been criticised for having poorly-developed theories and concepts. It also reflects a certain lack of inter-disciplinarity and the failure to draw upon existing theoretical approaches within cognate fields (see below).

Terrorism studies has also been criticised for its poor research methods and procedures, in particular, its over-reliance on secondary information and general failure to undertake primary research.⁹ Although there are obvious challenges to some aspects of primary research in terms of ‘talking to terrorists’, a growing number of studies by scholars such as Mia Bloom, John Horgan, Jessica Stern and Jeroen Gunning (among many others) demonstrate that these obstacles are not nearly as insurmountable as some might assume. We would argue along with anthropologists like Joseba Zulaika that the failure to engage directly with the subject matter of terrorism studies is a reflection of their taboo nature in modern society with its associated fear of moral contamination. There is a pervasive attitude within some sectors of the field that understanding terrorist motives equates to sympathising with them and explaining their behaviour equates to justifying or exonerating it, which is why, quoting O’Leary and Silke, ‘much of what is written about terrorism ... is written by people who have never met a terrorist, or have never actually spent significant time on the ground in the areas most affected by conflict’.¹⁰ It is accurate to say that there are few fields of study where the subject is deliberately kept at such great ontological and moral distance from the researcher than

⁶ The most important reviews of the field include: Silke, *Research on Terrorism*; Magnus Ranstorp, ed., 2006. *Mapping Terrorism Research: State of the Art, Gaps and Future Direction*, London: Routledge; Jonny Burnett and Dave Whyte, 2005. ‘Embedded Expertise and the New Terrorism’, *Journal for Crime, Conflict and the Media*, vol.1, no.4, pp.1-18; Joseba Zulaika and William Douglass, 1996. *Terror and Taboo: The Follies, Fables, and Faces of Terrorism*, London: Routledge; Alexander George, ed., 1991. *Western State Terrorism*, Cambridge: Polity Press; Edward Herman and Gerry O’Sullivan, 1989. *The ‘Terrorism’ Industry: The Experts and Institutions that Shape our View of Terror*, New York: Pantheon Books; and Alex Schmid and Albert Jongman, 1988. *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Databases, Theories and Literature*, Oxford: North Holland.

⁷ Schmid and Jongman, *Political Terrorism*.

⁸ See Silke, *Research on Terrorism*.

⁹ Zulaika and Douglass, *Terror and Taboo*, pp.149-50; Silke, *Research on Terrorism*.

¹⁰ Brendan O’Leary and Andrew Silke, 2006. ‘Understanding and Ending Persistent Conflicts: Bridging Research and Policy’, in Marianne Heiberg, John Tirman and Brendan O’Leary, eds., *Terror, Insurgency and the State*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 393.

orthodox terrorism studies. A typical expression of this taboo comes from Jones and Smith who suggest that all efforts by critically-oriented scholars to understand the causes of contemporary terrorism or empathize with the injustices which may be driving it confers ‘a legitimacy which demands empathy’ and is akin to the toleration of Nazism.¹¹

A direct consequence of these conceptual and methodological challenges is that the terrorism studies literature is frequently overly descriptive, derivative and narrative-based rather than analytical, and adopts a morally condemnatory tone towards its subject matter. Particularly since the declaration of the WOT, the orthodox literature has exhibited a palpable aura of moral certitude. Although terrorism has always been viewed in moral terms, the tendency to characterise terrorists as ‘evil’ has, we believe, been greatly accentuated since 11 September, 2001.¹² This discourse of ‘evil’ is deeply antithetical to scientific inquiry, which calls for a more dispassionate and less moralistic analysis of the evidence. Yet to produce nuanced explanations for the motivation of terrorists for example, is as we have already noted, to risk being framed as an apologist for them. The absence of ‘other-centric’ research which examines the phenomenon of terrorism from points of view other than that of Western states is evident in the dearth of analytical accounts from those dispassionate about or sympathetic to the cause and methods of terrorists.¹³

Another challenge for the field is that much terrorism research tends towards ahistoricity and acontextuality. It frequently ignores both the historical experiences of numerous other countries as well as the existing literature on terrorism published prior to 2001. The tendency towards decontextualizing contemporary events, however, has long been a feature of orthodox terrorism research, well predating September 11: Andrew Silke’s analysis of 490 articles published in the core terrorism studies journals from 1990-1999 found that only 13 focused on non-contemporary terrorism, and of those, only seven looked at terrorism before 1960.¹⁴

A related criticism of terrorism research since 2001 is that it tends towards exceptionalizing the experience of the United States (US) and Al Qaeda, positing it as a ‘new type of terrorism [that] threatens the world’.¹⁵ Louise Richardson has described this tendency as, ‘American “exceptionalism”, the sense that America is different from (and implicitly superior to) the rest of the world.’¹⁶ The scale of the atrocity at the World Trade Centre was unprecedented in the practice of modern terror (if one excludes systematic state terror); however, the emphasis on the scale of the attack to the detriment

¹¹ David Jones and M.L.R. Smith, 2007. ‘Pedagogy or Pedantry: A Rejoinder to Our Critics’, *International Affairs*, vol.83, no.1, p.185. For a critique of this tendency in the field, see Zulaika and Douglass, *Terror and Taboo*, pp.149-50, 179; Cynthia Mahmood, 1995. *Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogues with Sikh Militants*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press; and Judith Butler, 2002. ‘Explanation and Exoneration’, *Theory & Event*, vol.5, no.4.

¹² Richard Jackson, 2005. *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counterterrorism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, p.66.

¹³ A notable exception to this tendency can be found in: Alan Feldman, 1991. *Formations of Violence: Narratives of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁴ Andrew Silke, 2004. ‘The Road Less Traveled: Recent Trends in Terrorism Research’, in Silke, *Research on Terrorism*, p.209.

¹⁵ Marc Sageman, 2004. *Understanding Terror Networks*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, p.vii.

¹⁶ Louise Richardson, 2006. *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Terrorist Threat*, London: John Murray, p.185.

of other dimensions has tended to negate the value and insights of previous scholarship and experiences of terrorism. The lines that had been drawn in the late 1990s between ‘old’ and ‘new’ terrorism¹⁷ are now accompanied by an even deeper line between pre- and post-September 11, 2001. As Hoffman puts it: ‘On 9/11, of course, Bin Laden wiped the slate clean of the conventional wisdom on terrorists and terrorism, and, by doing so, ushered in a new era of conflict – as well as a new discourse about it’.¹⁸ Notwithstanding new developments in the methodology and technology of terror and consequently in its strike power, the field shows a worrying tendency to ‘wipe the slate clean’, betraying a focus on method at the expense of motivation and political context.

Terrorism studies has also been noted for its restricted research focus on a highly selective number of presumed topical subjects and its consequent failure to fully engage with a range of other important topics. For example, in recent years, literally hundreds of studies have been undertaken on Al Qaeda and related forms of ‘Islamic terrorism’, Northern Ireland, the Middle East conflict and issues related to counter-terrorism in the US and UK, such as the role of the media, suicide terrorism, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) terrorism, cyber-terrorism and terrorist financing.¹⁹ In part, the problem is related to the disciplinary and geographical character of the main scholars in the field, who are generally from international relations and security studies and based in the US or UK. The cause and consequence of this restricted focus is a general failure to fully examine a range of other important issues, such as state terrorism, the impact of the war on terror on the global South, gender dimensions of terrorism, historical cases of terrorism, the cultural construction of terrorism, pathways out of terrorism, and the political causes of terrorism. Few of these subjects have thus far received the kind of sustained attention from scholars in the field that they deserve – or have been studied primarily from within other disciplines. Of particular concern is that, with only a few notable exceptions,²⁰ terrorism studies has failed to engage with the issues and practices of state terrorism, which in terms of the scale of human suffering and numbers of deaths caused, is a much more serious problem than non-state terrorism. Andrew Silke’s review reveals that only 12 out of 490 articles in the core journals examined issues of state terrorism.²¹

In the end, the conceptual and methodological weaknesses of much terrorism research, its tendency towards ahistoricity and its lack of disciplinary plurality, means that the field is in large part dominated by a common set of narratives, assumptions and beliefs about terrorism and counter-terrorism that are continually reproduced but which

¹⁷ Bruce Hoffman, 1999. *Inside Terrorism*. New York: Columbia University Press; Walter Laqueur, 1999. *The New Terrorism: Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction*, New York: Oxford University Press.

¹⁸ Bruce Hoffman, 2004. ‘Foreword’ in Silke, ed., *Research on Terrorism*, p.xviii.

¹⁹ See Silke, ‘The Road Less Traveled.’

²⁰ Some exceptional analyses of state terrorism include: Beau Grosscup, 2006. *Strategic Terror: The Politics and Ethics of Aerial Bombardment*, London: Zed Books; Daniel Byman, 2005. *Confronting Passive Sponsors of Terrorism*, Analysis Paper No. 4, The Saban Center for Middle East Policy, The Brookings Institution; Robert Slater and Michael Stohl, eds., 1988. *Current Perspectives on International Terrorism*, Basingstoke: Macmillan; Edward Herman, 1982. *The Real Terror Network: Terrorism in Fact and Propaganda*, Cambridge, MA: South End Press; and Michael Stohl, ed., 1979. *The Politics of Terrorism*, New York: Marcel Dekker. A number of excellent studies of state terrorism have come from disciplines outside of terrorism studies, such as anthropology; see for example, Jeffrey Sluka, ed., 2000. *Death Squad: The Anthropology of State Terror*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

²¹ Silke, ‘The Road Less Traveled’, p.206.

are in fact, often poorly supported by empirical research.²² Andrew Silke has described this dominant and commonly accepted terrorism ‘knowledge’ as, ‘a cabal of virulent myths and half-truths whose reach extends even to the most learned and experienced.’²³ In part, his assessment is based on a study of 32 prominent terrorism studies scholars in which the research process among these intellectuals was found to be a closed, circular and static system of information and investigation which tended to accept dominant myths about terrorism without strong empirical investigation for long periods before empirical research disproved them.²⁴ Disturbingly, these ‘myths of terrorism’ have been remarkably persistent; Michael Stohl surveyed the field in the late 1970s and found a similar set of widely accepted myths and half-truths.²⁵

State-centrism, Problem-solving and Embedded Expertise

In addition to its conceptual and methodological weaknesses, a more serious challenge for the field lies in the fact that a great deal of terrorism research tends towards state-centrism. In the first instance, much of the literature defines the ‘terrorist’ as the main or exclusive security problem and inquiry is largely restricted to the assembling of information and data that would solve or eradicate the ‘problem’ as the state defines it. This focus ignores both terrorism being a social phenomenon which is typically the outcome of a long dynamic process, and the potential contribution of the state itself to the creation of the conditions in which terrorist action by non-state actors occurs. Where terrorist motivation is considered, it is usually viewed as the result of individual pathology. The futile search for the ‘terrorist personality’²⁶ for example, is an attempt to pick out the deviant, evil or sick terrorist from the population of normal people. Whilst one can see the application of this approach to forensic profiling of terrorists, the pathologising mode dispenses with the need for deeper understanding and instead renders terrorism inexplicable, unknowable and overwhelming.

In fact, terrorism studies has long been criticised for its overly prescriptive focus, which is a reflection of its theoretical and institutional origins in orthodox security studies and counter-insurgency studies.²⁷ An influential review described much of the field’s early output as ‘counterinsurgency masquerading as political science’,²⁸ while Andrew Silke has concluded that much terrorism research is driven by policy concerns and is limited to addressing government agendas.²⁹ Moreover, it can be argued that the

²² Many of the dominant narratives and assumptions of orthodox terrorism studies are critically examined in: Richard Jackson, 2007. ‘Constructing Enemies: “Islamic Terrorism” in Political and Academic Discourse’, *Government & Opposition*, vol. 42, no. 3, pp. 394-426; Richard Jackson, 2007. ‘Critical Reflections on Counter-Sanctuary Discourse’, in Michael Innes, ed., *Denial of Sanctuary: Understanding Terrorist Safe Havens*, Westport, CT: Praeger Security International.

²³ Andrew Silke, 2004. ‘An Introduction to Terrorism Research’, in Silke, *Research on Terrorism*, p.20.

²⁴ Edna Reid, 1993. ‘Terrorism Research and the Diffusion of Ideas’, *Knowledge and Policy*, vol.6, p.28.

²⁵ See Michael Stohl, 1979. ‘Myths and Realities of Political Terrorism’, in Michael Stohl, ed., *The Politics of Terrorism*, New York: Marcel Dekker, 1-19.

²⁶ John Horgan, 2005. *The Psychology of Terrorism*, London: Frank Cass.

²⁷ The roots of terrorism studies in counter-insurgency are explored in Burnett and Whyte, ‘Embedded Expertise and the New Terrorism’, pp.11-13. See also Schmid and Jongman, *Political Terrorism*, p.182.

²⁸ Schmid and Jongman, *Political Terrorism*, p.182.

²⁹ Andrew Silke, 2004. ‘The Devil You Know: Continuing Problems with Research on Terrorism’, in Silke, ed., *Research on Terrorism*, p.58.

prescriptive focus has ‘diverted attention from other critical matters, not the least of which is the development of a sound theoretical understanding of the dynamics of terrorism.’³⁰

Another serious challenge for 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.³¹ A good illustration of this dynamic, and its contribution to the development of what has sometimes been called ‘the terrorism industry’, is the influence of the RAND Corporation, a non-profit research foundation founded by United States Air Force with strong ties to the American military and political establishments.³² 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 ‘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’ – although it is important to underline that even within embedded institutions such as RAND divergent views do exist (cf. Glenn Robinson’s work on Hamas).³³ Employing a Gramscian perspective, it can be argued that the core terrorism studies scholars function as ‘organic intellectuals’ intimately connected – institutionally, financially, politically and ideologically – with a state hegemonic project. Clearly, such a situation has serious implications for the integrity and independence of research on terrorism.

Given this state of affairs, and as discussed in greater detail elsewhere, the dominant knowledge of the field functions as a type of ‘problem-solving theory’.³⁴ 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’.³⁵ In this case, as we have already suggested, orthodox terrorism

³⁰ Gaetano Ilardi, 2004. ‘Redefining the Issues: The Future of Terrorism Research and the Search for Empathy’, in Silke, ed., *Research on Terrorism*, p.215.

³¹ A detailed, if somewhat polemical analysis of the public-private links that make up the ‘terrorism industry’ as it was before September 11, 2001 can be found in Herman and O’Sullivan, *The ‘Terrorism’ Industry* and George, *Western State Terrorism*. A more recent analysis can be found in Burnett and Whyte, ‘Embedded Expertise and the New Terrorism’. A more mainstream terrorism studies assessment concludes that terrorism ‘experts’ who do not maintain a strong pro-Western bias soon become marginalized in the field and are denied access to policymakers and major conferences. See Ilardi, ‘Redefining the Issues’ p.222.

³² Senior officials in several U.S. administrations have held positions in RAND, and as with other foundations and think tanks, there is a revolving door of personnel between RAND and the state. For example, Condoleeza Rice and Donald Rumsfeld are both former RAND administrators. See Burnett and Whyte, ‘Embedded Expertise’, p.8.

³³ Diane Stone, 1996. *Capturing the Political Imagination: Think Tanks and the Policy Process*, London: Frank Cass, p. 86; Glenn Robinson, 1997. *Building a Palestinian state: the incomplete revolution*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

³⁴ Jeroen Gunning, (2007). ‘The Case for a Critical Terrorism Studies?’, *Government & Opposition*, vol. 42, no. 3, pp. 363-94.

³⁵ Robert Cox, 1981. ‘Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol.10, no.2, pp.128-9.

studies 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 presented as immutable facts and the scholar typically aligns him or herself with the orthodoxy – usually the state – on terrorism’s major ethical and political questions.

The Impact of the War on Terrorism

Although not yet fully understood, there is little question that the WOT has impacted powerfully on the broader research culture, priorities and practices of universities and think-tanks. There are a number of reasons for this. In the first instance, there is an overwhelming security imperative that now pervades every aspect of the research process. The need for insight into violent or ‘terrorist’ movements and groups was spelled out by Vincent Cannistraro to the US House Committee on International Relations, in the following terms: ‘We must understand the nature of the threat before we can successfully confront it... Comprehending the danger and the mind-set of these groups is a first step to deterring the violence executed by the Osama Bin Ladens of this world’.³⁶ Consequently, the intelligence community – and by association, public and private funding bodies – regard with great interest those scholars who conduct research on militant groups. This clearly poses a number of dilemmas for independent scholars; for those researchers conducting fieldwork with armed groups for example, a real or perceived association with the intelligence or security community may spell a real or suspected breach of trust with their informants and could jeopardise their personal safety. Such associations invariably lead to the assumption that scholars support certain counter-terrorist practices such as the current use of extraordinary rendition, torture, internment or even politically-sanctioned targeted killings. For ethical, if not for safety reasons, it is important that scholars maintain a critical distance from practices which constitute breaches of human rights and possibly contravene international law. In the current global atmosphere, however, the security imperative exerts pressure on scholars to forgo such distance, but rather to shape their research agenda in ways that will primarily be useful to the state’s counter-terrorism agenda.

The politically dominant discourse of the WOT has also created a context in which governments have justified the introduction of legislation and security practices that have eroded civil liberties and contributed to the demonization of Muslim communities within their shores. In addition, the broader political climate of the WOT has ensured that efforts to understand the perspectives and motivations of terrorists are even more of a taboo within Western scholarship than they ever were. Moreover, this taboo 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 students³⁷ and in which attempting to understand the subjectivities of terrorist suspects

³⁶ Cited in Ilardi, ‘Redefining the Issues’, p.214.

³⁷ In late 2006, the Department of Education in the UK drew up proposals asking academics to report directly to Special Branch on ‘Asian-looking’ and Muslim students who they suspect of involvement in extremism and supporting terrorist violence. See Vikram Dodd, ‘Universities Urged to Spy on Muslims’,

could be interpreted as ‘glorification of terrorism’ – a crime under UK law. This discursive and political-legal context now defines the space in which scholars research, think and write about terrorism.

Avoiding Potential Dangers and Pitfalls of a Critical Terrorism Studies

As noted in the introduction, there is now a growing body of critically constituted studies of political terrorism. Though as yet amorphous and dispersed across different disciplines, a shared assumption of this body of research is that orthodox terrorism research is dominated by state-centric, problem-solving approaches and that a more critical engagement with the subject is required. Beyond that however, opinions are divided over what exactly constitutes a critical field, what its core organizing principles should be, or who should be considered part of this field. In this section, we reflect on some of the potential pitfalls and challenges facing CTS.

Boundaries and the Importance of Inclusivity

Elsewhere, we have identified two main reasons why a critical turn within terrorism studies is necessary.³⁸ One reason concerns the dominance of state-centric, problem-solving approaches within terrorism studies and the close ideological and organizational association of key researchers with state institutions – with the concomitant problems of ‘embedded expertise’, ahistoricity and heavy reliance on secondary sources replicating knowledge that by and large reinforces the *status quo*.

A second equally important, though often overlooked, reason concerns the disparate nature of existing critical research. Much critical research is already being carried out by anthropologists, social movement theorists, area studies specialists, peace studies theorists and psychologists, and others.³⁹ Yet, whether because of a suspicion of the agenda of orthodox terrorism studies, unease with the term ‘terrorism’ itself, or simply disciplinary fragmentation, much of this research is published outside the field of terrorism studies, thus preventing much-needed cross-fertilization. A study by Avishag Gordon for example, found that between 1988 and 2001 nearly 80 percent of articles on terrorism were published outside the core terrorism studies journals.⁴⁰ These statistics can only be taken as indicative since they are dependent on how one defines what constitutes core ‘terrorism studies’ journals and whether one includes articles that do not use the term ‘terrorism’ at all. Nevertheless, it is clear that much is published on the phenomenon

The Guardian, 16 October, 2006, available online at: <http://education.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,329601709-108229,00.html>, and ‘Disingenuous, Patronising and Dangerous’, *The Guardian*, 19 February, 2007, available online at: <http://education.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,329720570-108228,00.html>.

³⁸ Gunning, ‘The Case for a Critical Terrorism Studies?’; Jeroen Gunning, 2007. ‘Babies and Bathwaters: Reflecting on the Pitfalls of Critical Terrorism Studies’, *European Political Science*, vol.6, no.3.

³⁹ See, among many others: Donatella Della Porta, ed., 1992. *Social Movements and Violence: Participation in Underground Organizations*, International Social Movement Research, 4, London: JAI Press; Andrew Silke, 2003. *Terrorists, Victims and Society: Psychological Perspectives on Terrorism and its Consequences*, Chichester: Wiley; Heiberg, Tirman, and O’Leary, *Terror, Insurgency and the State*; and Harmonie Toros, 2006. ‘Joining Forces: Bringing Peace Research into Terrorism Studies’, Paper Prepared for the British International Studies Association (BISA) Annual Conference, 18-20 December, 2006, University College Cork, available online at: <http://www.bisa.ac.uk/2006/ppts/toros.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Gordon, ‘Terrorism and Knowledge Growth’, p.109.

of terrorism outside of the orthodox terrorism studies field. Furthermore, it seems that many of those who publish elsewhere do not wish to be identified with the established field of terrorism studies. A critically constituted field therefore may help to facilitate much-needed cross-fertilization and provide intellectual and political space within which scholars of cognate or marginalized perspectives can converge.

However, this introduces a fundamental tension. To be ‘critical’ in the first sense, a critical field must explicitly challenge state-centric, problem-solving perspectives and call into question existing definitions, assumptions and power structures. To be ‘critical’ in the second sense, it must also attempt to be inclusive, to enable the convergence of not only explicitly critical perspectives but also the more rigorous traditional, problem-solving perspectives of both cognate disciplines and terrorism studies. Much of interest has been written by, for instance, those traditional conflict resolution scholars who have moved beyond a narrow military understanding of security and placed violence in its wider social context.⁴¹ Similarly, traditional scholars within terrorism studies – including Robert Pape, Marc Sageman, Martha Crenshaw, Leonard Weinberg, Magnus Ranstorp, Adrian Guelke, Alex Schmid and several others⁴² have produced important research which challenges accepted knowledge and orthodoxy. Research from outside terrorism studies, however strong in other aspects, is meanwhile frequently marred by a lack of familiarity with core insights from the traditional terrorism studies literature.⁴³

Further complicating this dynamic is that the term ‘critical’ is itself highly contested. Poststructuralists and Critical Theorists for example, have a very different understanding of what constitutes a ‘critical’ approach, or indeed of what the chief aims of a critical field ought to be. At the very least, there is debate over whether a ‘critical’ field should attempt to be normative and policy-relevant or whether it should focus on power-knowledge issues and the deconstruction of hegemonic narratives.

In this respect, we would argue that important lessons can be learned from the ‘critical turn’ in cognate fields. Critical security studies (CSS) is of particular interest, since terrorism studies emerged from security and strategic studies. Within CSS, there are widely different trends. Williams and Krause for instance, propose a broad and inclusive approach to bring together those perspectives that fall outside the discipline’s mainstream.⁴⁴ Booth, conversely, advocates a more normative Critical Theory approach which demands not just critical self-reflexivity but a full-blown theory of critical security studies.⁴⁵ Booth holds that a field without a coherent organizing theory is too eclectic to withstand internal contradictions. Krause and Williams, on the other hand, argue that too normative a straightjacket will prevent the creation of a critical mass. Even though these internal divisions have triggered rich and insightful debates, the impact of CSS has arguably been muted by such divisions, and CSS has only partially succeeded in making security studies as a whole more self-reflexive. Though the creation of a separate sub-

⁴¹ See also Toros, ‘Joining Forces’; Jeroen Gunning, 2004. ‘Peace with Hamas? The transforming potential of political participation’, *International Affairs*, vol.80, no.2, pp.233-55.

⁴² Some of these scholars could also be classified as critical scholars in the sense of being ontologically, epistemologically and methodologically self-reflexive (see below).

⁴³ See Ariel Merrari, quoted in Silke, ‘The Devil You Know’, p. 69.

⁴⁴ Michael Williams and Keith Krause, 1997. ‘Preface’, in Keith Krause and Michael Williams, eds., *Critical Security Studies*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. vii-xxi.

⁴⁵ Ken Booth, 2004. ‘Introduction to Part 3 (Emancipation)’, in Ken Booth, ed., *Critical Security Studies and World Politics*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, pp. 181-8.

field highlighted the main field's shortcomings and created space for critical approaches, it also perhaps helped to create something of an intellectual ghetto which, however dynamic and thought-provoking, left the rest of the field to its original traditional tendencies.

CTS therefore must reflect carefully on how to proceed in the light of this experience. It must grapple with how to create sufficient space for critical studies on terrorism without ghettoising itself and leaving the mainstream to its traditional tendencies; how to ensure inclusion of both critically-minded traditionalists and the wide variety of critical perspectives; and how to prevent itself from imploding under the burden of either internal divisions or too much eclecticism.

'Terrorism': An Essentially Contested Concept

The adoption of 'terrorism' as the central organizing concept of the field creates a further set of potential problems. CTS rightly criticizes the way terrorism knowledge is constructed through a dominant discourse. But by creating a critical sub-field of terrorism studies, one risks reproducing knowledge that privileges violence over other types of behavior. This is particularly pertinent for those who study phenomena that might include 'terrorist' aspects. Many of those who study socially embedded organisations such as Hamas do not consider themselves part of a terrorism studies field, as for them political violence is part of a much more complex and diverse set of cultural, social and political processes.⁴⁶ By publishing in a field defined by the concept of 'terrorism', even if critically conceived, one risks not only reproducing the notion that Hamas is somehow exclusively defined by its tactical resort to 'terrorist' tactics, but also the very state-centric perspective that underpins this notion.

Outside the power structures that facilitated the emergence of a dedicated 'terrorism studies' field therefore, 'terrorism' does not constitute an obvious central organizing concept on which to build a coherent body of research. Individuals, groups and states move in and out of terrorism and often have little or nothing else in common with each other. There is little that the Unabomber, anti-abortionists, US agents training the Contras, al Qaeda and Hamas share beyond their use of at times similar tactics.⁴⁷ Moreover, yesterday's terrorists can become today's politicians or even statesmen (Menachim Begin and Nelson Mandela are both cases in point), begging the question of when a 'terrorist' phenomenon ceases to be a proper subject for 'terrorism studies'. More prosaically, as previously noted, usage of the term 'terrorism' also poses serious security and ethical problems for those conducting fieldwork among 'terrorists' and the communities they belong to – what Paddy Hillyard has aptly called 'suspect communities' in recognition of the way states typically frame these communities.⁴⁸ If one

⁴⁶ See Jeroen Gunning, forthcoming. *Hamas in Politics: Representation, Religion, Violence*, Hurst; Gunning, 'Peace with Hamas?'; Z. Abu-Amr, 1994. *Islamic Fundamentalism in the West Bank and Gaza: Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Jihad*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press; B. Milton-Edwards, 1996. *Islamic Politics in Palestine*, London: Tauris; and S. Mishal and A. Sela, 2000. *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence, and Coexistence*, New York: Columbia University Press.

⁴⁷ Magnus Ranstorp, 2006. 'Mapping Terrorism Research: Challenges and Priorities', in Ranstorp, *Mapping Terrorism Research*, pp.2-24.

⁴⁸ Paddy Hillyard, 1993. *Suspect Community: People's Experience of the Prevention of Terrorism Acts in Britain*, London: Pluto Press.

of the aims of CTS is to engage with those considered ‘terrorist’ and their communities, converging under the term ‘terrorism’ may have considerable drawbacks.

It is, nevertheless, our contention that unless we converge under a central concept such as ‘terrorism’, however problematic it may be in practice, much of this critical research will remain fragmented, thereby preventing much-needed cross-fertilization between critical and cognate perspectives. In addition, there are practical reasons for retaining the term, namely, eschewing the ‘terrorism’ label leaves traditional approaches and policy-makers relatively unchallenged, particularly in the race for research funding.

There are two further reasons for retaining ‘terrorism’ as a central organizing concept. First, one of the key tasks of CTS is to investigate the political, academic and cultural usage of the term. For that reason alone, it should be retained as a central marker. Second, the term ‘terrorism’ is currently so dominant within political structures and the broader culture that CTS cannot afford to abandon it. Academia does not exist outside the power structures and associated dominant discourses of the day. The term ‘terrorism’, however problematic, dominates public discourse and as such must be engaged with, deconstructed and challenged, rather than abandoned and left to less critical scholars.

Policy-Relevance, Funding and Co-option

At the heart of any critical project lies the notion of ‘emancipation’, however implicitly it is conceived. The challenge is that contending critical schools approach emancipation in different ways. Some denounce it as too implicated in grand meta-narratives and normative projects, including past and not so past, (neo)-colonial projects.⁴⁹ Yet, an increasing number of critical voices have observed that all critical projects derive from an underlying conception of a different order.⁵⁰ Even some of those most critical of the term, notably Derrida, have (re)-embraced the notion.⁵¹ To be ‘critical’, it seems, one has to have some normative notion of what is wrong and how things should be different. This need not involve a predetermined blueprint of utopia; indeed, such a blueprint is anathema to contemporary conceptions of ‘critical’. Rather, critical scholars typically acknowledge the non-exclusivity and revisability inherent to any normative position.⁵²

If emancipation is central to the critical project, we would argue that CTS cannot remain policy-irrelevant without belying its emancipatory commitment. It has to move beyond critique and deconstruction to reconstruction and policy-relevance.⁵³ The challenge of CTS is to engage policy-makers – as well as ‘terrorists’ and their communities – and work towards the realization of new paradigms, new practices and the

⁴⁹ H. Alker, 2004. ‘Emancipation in the Critical Security Studies Project’, in Booth, *Critical Security Studies and World Politics*, pp. 189-214.

⁵⁰ Richard Wyn Jones, 2004. ‘On Emancipation: Necessity, Capacity, and Concrete Utopias’, in Booth, *Critical Security Studies and World Politics*, pp. 215-36; Hayward Alker, 2004. ‘Emancipation in the critical security studies project’, in Booth, *Critical Security Studies*, p. 192; Kimberly Hutchings, 2001. ‘The Nature of Critique in Critical International Relations Theory’, in Richard Wyn Jones, ed., *Critical Theory and World Politics*. London: Lynne Rienner, p. 89.

⁵¹ Cf. Jacques Derrida, 1996. ‘Remarks On Deconstruction and Pragmatism’, in C. Mouffe, ed., *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, London: Routledge, p. 82; see also Alker, ‘Emancipation’, p. 202; Wyn Jones, ‘On Emancipation’, p. 219.

⁵² Wyn Jones, ‘On Emancipation’, p. 230; Hutchings, ‘The Nature of Critique’, p. 90.

⁵³ Ken Booth, 2004. ‘Beyond Critical Security Studies’, in Booth, *Critical Security Studies and World Politics*, pp. 259-89; Krause and Williams, *Critical Security Studies*.

transformation of political structures. That, after all, is the original meaning of the notion of ‘immanent critique’. Striving to be policy-relevant does not mean that one has to accept the validity of the term ‘terrorism’ or stop investigating the political interests behind it. Nor does it mean that all research must have policy-relevance or that one has to limit one’s research to what is relevant for the state, since the critical turn implies a move beyond state-centric perspectives. End-users could, and should, include both state and non-state actors, as long as the goal is to combat both the use of political terror by actors and the political structures that encourage its use.

However, engaging policy-makers raises the thorny issue of co-option. One of the fears of critical scholars is that by engaging with policy-makers, either they or their research become co-opted, whether through governments (ab)using independent research findings for their own ends, allowing one’s research to be overly shaped by the agendas of major grant-awarding bodies, or by gradually coming to uncritically adopt the perspectives and values of policy-makers. A more intractable problem is the one highlighted by Rengger that ‘the demand that theory must have a praxial dimension itself runs the risk of collapsing critical theory back into traditional theory by making it dependent on instrumental conceptions of rationality’.⁵⁴ A related problem is that by becoming embedded in existing power structures, one risks reproducing existing knowledge structures or inadvertently contributing to counter-terrorism policy that uncritically reifies the *status quo*. Such dilemmas have to be confronted and debated; non-engagement is not an option. Engagement is facilitated by the fact that as counter-terrorism projects flounder, advisors to policy-makers are increasingly eager for advice, even when it is ‘critical’.

For obvious reasons, ‘embedded’ terrorism scholars and traditional think-tanks have enjoyed a much closer relationship with policy-makers, allowing them both more institutionalized and more direct access. This is partly structural, since critical studies have been seen as inherently adversarial towards existing power structures. Critical scholars have also at times unnecessarily burned bridges by issuing blanket condemnations of all things associated with the state, whilst failing to engage with the public safety obligations of the authorities, and the challenges terrorism poses to such safety. Critical scholars cannot indulge in the unilateral demonizing of all state actors, at the same time as arguing against the comprehensive demonizing of all ‘terrorists’. Simply because a piece of research originates within RAND does not automatically invalidate it; conversely, a study emanating from a critical scholar is not inherently superior. Just as Fred Halliday critiqued those who privileged voices from ‘the South’ as somehow more authentic, critical scholars must guard against either privileging ‘terrorist’ voices or uncritically dismissing state or state-related actors.⁵⁵

In sum, critical scholars have to think carefully about how to engage with the status quo and centres of power without losing critical distance. The establishment of dedicated critical journals, seminars and conferences which actively seek to engage policy-makers is one way forward, as are collaborative efforts with traditional conferences already habitually attended by policy-makers. The creation of dedicated

⁵⁴ N. Rengger, 2001. ‘Negative Dialectic? The Two Modes of Critical Theory in World Politics’, in Wyn Jones, *Critical Theory and World Politics*, p.107.

⁵⁵ Fred Halliday, 1996. *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation: Religion and Politics in the Middle East*, London: Tauris.

research centers and think-tanks which strive to hold these tensions in balance may similarly be necessary.

Engaging policy-makers is not the only way forward; engaging ‘terrorists’ and ‘suspect communities’, as well as civil society actors more generally, is equally important. In the age of the blog, alternative news websites and transnational grassroots activism, CTS must be at the forefront of broadening the spectrum of discourses and making space for counter-hegemonic accounts. It can do this at universities – over the past four and a half years, over 600 students have been exposed to critical perspectives on terrorism at Aberystwyth University alone. This can also be achieved through participative research partnerships with ‘suspect communities’, or through publicly challenging new laws or directives, as some have already begun to do.

Lastly, there are some difficult issues surrounding funding for critical research. In the UK, a public row recently erupted when funding made available through the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) was found to have come directly from the government whose counter-terrorist interests were all too apparent in the first design of the research brief. Accepting such funding, even after revisions to the initial wording, has serious implications for the researchers’ perceived independence, as well as for personal safety in the field. Significantly, public funding is increasingly available for critical projects, as the authors of this paper can attest. However, those who pay for research will inevitably wish to shape the research agenda.

Emancipation, Universalism and Cultural Sensitivity

Although a critical commitment implies awareness of one’s own role in norm and knowledge production, commitment to the particular understanding of human security that underpins much critical thinking risks reproducing the very structures that have contributed to the emergence of terrorist conflicts. The notion of ‘human security’ is deeply embedded in the secular individualist perspective prevalent among Western (and Westernised) scholars, and, because of its hegemonic prevalence among international organisations and (Westernised) elites, it is this perspective that is perceived by many engaged in secessionist or ideological conflicts to be the conceptual driving force behind the order they are violently challenging. It is moreover often, though not exclusively, linked to a principled aversion to conflict and a privileging of non-violent methods which increases the tension between critical scholars and their research subjects if the latter believe this to be a covert attempt at legitimising the status quo by preventing them from ‘rectifying’ the situation through violence. Precisely because a critically conceived field has an ‘emancipatory’ agenda, it can end up imposing a normative agenda that replicates aspects of the power-knowledge structures that are part of the problem.

While as Western scholars we might endorse the secular, non-violent, individualistic perspectives alluded to above, it is important, from a critical point of view, to recognize their historical and cultural specificity. This is particularly apparent when studying societies which place a greater value on community and religion, or which regard violence – state or non-state – as less problematic or even integral to the maintenance of order. In the normative struggle between human security and state security perspectives therefore, critical scholars must not lose sight of their own cultural-historical biases and wrestle with how to remain sensitive to alternative voices while

staying true to their own principles. This scholarly cultural bias against violence becomes particularly problematic in situations where political methods of affecting change are believed to be ineffectual because of a severe asymmetry in the existing power balance. De-legitimizing all forms of subaltern violence, even if accompanied by a simultaneous condemnation of violent state responses, risks making the individuals and communities in target or ‘suspect’ communities less secure. This is a particular risk if the state in question is predominantly engaged in less visible violence, such as structural violence or violence that can be legally justified in the context of war as ‘collateral damage’. As a Lebanese friend of one of the authors argued towards the end of the Lebanese civil war, ‘sometimes it is better not to have peace than to have an unjust peace’. We may not agree with him, but it is a tension we are obliged to address.

In the end, whether CTS will succeed in circumnavigating these various pitfalls remains an open question. Other fields have been more or less successful in managing their critical turn and some tensions are inherently unavoidable. Given the existing opportunities, with state actors actively looking for alternative perspectives, and interest from cognate fields in ‘terrorism’ at an all time high, and, more urgently, given the potential for domestic and foreign policy to irretrievably erode civil liberties and further alienate entire communities, we have no option but to try.

Towards a Critical Research Agenda

At this juncture, we consider three important questions that might contribute to the formulation of a critical research agenda: What might a ‘critical’ approach to the study of political terrorism look like? What ontological, epistemological, methodological and ethical-normative commitments would characterize a critical scholarship? And is it feasible to include an explicitly emancipatory dimension within such an approach?

We propose that a critical scholarship be based on certain ontological and epistemological orientations, since the way we conceptualise and ‘do’ studies on political terror – the framing of the subject or problem, together with the conceptual tools and ideas about the subject – is intricately linked to the outcomes and overall integrity of research.

Ontological and Epistemological Commitments

At the most fundamental level, we argue that CTS should rest on an understanding – explicit or implicit – of knowledge as a social process that is constructed through language, discourse and inter-subjective practices. From this perspective, it is evident that knowledge about terrorism always reflects the social-cultural context within which it emerges. CTS also understands that knowledge is intimately connected to power, that knowledge is ‘always for someone and for some purpose’ and that ‘regimes of truth’ can function to entrench certain hierarchies of power and exclude alternative, counter-hegemonic forms of knowledge and practice. In other words, as a form of social science, CTS should start with an acceptance of the basic insecurity of all knowledge and the

impossibility of neutral or objective knowledge about terrorism.⁵⁶ It should also manifest sensitivity to the ways in which terrorism knowledge can be deployed as a ‘political technology’ in the furtherance of hegemonic projects and direct attention to the interests that underlie knowledge claims about terrorism. In other words, critical scholarship might begin by asking: how is terrorism knowledge constructed, who is terrorism knowledge for and how does it support their interests?

Ontologically, CTS should be characterised by a general scepticism towards, and a resultant reticence to employ, the ‘terrorism’ label. In practice, this label has always been a pejorative rather than analytical term; thus, to use the term is to apply a label 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 – a social fact. 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.⁵⁷ As Schmid and Jongman argue, ‘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’.⁵⁸ For this reason, CTS should strive to avoid defining terrorism either in ways that de-legitimizes the violence of only some actors while simultaneously according the mantle of legitimate violence to others,⁵⁹ or in ways that legitimize violence simply because it is conducted in particular circumstances, such as during war.

If the term is to be used, we would argue that it should be seen 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 both war or peace, and that depends on the discursive and social context of those who do the labelling.⁶⁰ And we would argue for limiting its meaning to the threat or use of physical violence directed mainly towards civilians in order to intimidate or terrorise for *political* purposes. As Alex Schmid puts it, like war,

⁵⁶ As Steve Smith puts it ‘there can be no such thing as a value-free, non-normative social science’. Steve Smith, 2004. ‘Singing Our World into Existence: International Relations Theory and September 11’, *International Studies Quarterly*, vol.48, p.499.

⁵⁷ Jeffrey Sluka, 2002. ‘Comment: What Anthropologists should know about the Concept of “Terrorism”’, *Anthropology Today*, vol.18, no.2, p.23.

⁵⁸ Schmid and Jongman, *Political Terrorism*, p.101.

⁵⁹ One of the most influential definitions in the world today, and one adopted uncritically by a great many terrorism studies scholars, comes from the U.S. State Department’s Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism. It states: ‘The term “terrorism” means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.’ This formulation clearly implies that terrorism is something ‘subnational groups’ largely do and legitimate state actors do not. It is therefore, according to this definition, a characteristic of certain groups rather than simply a strategy or tactic that any actor can adopt. U.S. Department of State, ‘Patterns of Global Terrorism’, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, 30 April, 2001, available online at: <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/pgtrpt/2000/2419.htm>.

⁶⁰ 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.’ Charles Tilly, 2004. ‘Terror, Terrorism, Terrorists’, *Sociological Theory*, vol.22, no.1, pp.5-13.

terrorism is also a continuation of politics by other means.⁶¹ In this context, terrorism is understood as one form of contentious politics.

Terrorism is not an ideology or form of politics in itself;⁶² it is rather, a tool employed at specific times, for specific periods of time, by specific actors and for specific political goals. In this sense, it is not a freestanding phenomenon: ultimately, there is no *terrorism*, just the instrumental use of terror by actors.⁶³ Similarly, there are no *terrorists*, merely actors – both state and non-state – who at certain moments deploy methods of terror. This has important implications for notions of identity, and subsequently for the strategies and ethics of counter-terrorism, 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 goals. 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 – although in some cases, opponents continued to label the prize winners ‘terrorist’.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, it is clear that: ‘Once a terrorist, is not always a terrorist.’⁶⁵

There are a number of important consequences of these basic ontological and epistemological orientations for a critical terrorism studies. First, there is the recognition that part of a CTS research agenda must begin with an analysis of the epistemological and ontological claims that make the field possible in the first place. In particular, the false naturalism of traditional theory must be challenged and the political content of all terrorism knowledge elucidated. More specifically, critical research must focus, at least 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, political and cultural construction of terrorism knowledge. The purpose of such research is not simply descriptive nor is it to establish the ‘correct’ or ‘real truth’ of terrorism; rather, it aims to destabilize rigid dominant interpretations and demonstrate the more fluid, inherently contested and political nature of the discourse. CTS must aim to reveal the underlying politics behind seemingly neutral knowledge. In turn, this implies that critical scholars should engage in a continuous and transparent critical-normative reflexivity regarding their own knowledge-production,⁶⁶ and exhibit an acute awareness of the political uses to which such knowledge can be put, as well as its inbuilt biases and assumptions.

⁶¹ Alex Schmid, 2004. ‘Frameworks for Conceptualising Terrorism’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol.16, no.2, p.202.

⁶² Groups specializing in terror and no other forms of political action 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, ‘Terror, Terrorism, Terrorists’, p.6.

⁶³ Brendan O’Duffy made this point in comments at the British International Studies Association Critical Studies on Terrorism Working Group (CSTWG) and the Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Contemporary Political Violence (CSRV) conference ‘Is it Time for a Critical Terrorism Studies?’, University of Manchester, 27-28 October 2006.

⁶⁴ See Zulaika and Douglass, *Terror and Taboo*, p.x.

⁶⁵ Schmid, ‘Frameworks for Conceptualising Terrorism’, p.205.

⁶⁶ See Karena Shaw, 2003. ‘Whose Knowledge for What Politics?’, *Review of International Studies*, vol.29, pp.199-221.

Second, CTS scholarship should be committed to avoiding totalizing analyses of power relations which allocate all the blame or responsibility to either state or non-state actors. Instead, a critical scholarship reflects the inherent complexities of power relations at both the state and non-state level. Critical scholars should recognise the ubiquitous existence of the abuse of power and breaches of human rights amongst *all* those who use violence and terror in the pursuit of their political goals.

Third, critical scholarship is contextualized in a longitudinal analysis of power relations at a local and global level. In other words, CTS should resist tendencies towards ahistoricity; rather critical scholarship is based on the recognition that the political use of terror is a consistent historical pattern. It holds that there is much to be learned from the history of the use of terror, and such history and previous scholarship is a resource to deepen understanding. Furthermore, critical approaches recognize that the experience of the political use of terror is a common human experience; it is not therefore feasible to exceptionalize the experience of any society, historical period or set of events. Such exceptionalizing precludes comparative analyses, which critical approaches value. Related to this, CTS is interested in uncovering the political and strategic ‘causes’ or reasons why actors choose to employ terrorist tactics, and the subsequent 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 depicting practices that are very specific as universal, and naturalizing what is actually highly contingent.⁶⁷

Fourth, the disciplinary base for CTS is spread over a wide range of fields, including sociology, anthropology, peace studies, economics, history and well as political science and international relations. A broad epistemological base that facilitates multidisciplinary work is essential, as is mutual respect across disciplinary boundaries. Within this multidisciplinary framework, particular attention should be paid to gender issues, in the light of the relative neglect of this dimension to date. Another research imbalance that should be redressed is to ‘bring the state back in’ to terrorism research, exploring the logic and circumstances in which states employ civilian-directed violence to terrorize and intimidate society for political purposes.⁶⁸

Finally, critical scholars of political violence and terror should recognise that a disparate range of actors hold stakes in the field, and remain conscious that these matters are not merely a matter of academic interest but are in many cases, matters of life and death. Critical scholarship must engage not only with other scholars, but also with relevant communities of interest such as policy makers, security practitioners, and ‘suspect communities’,⁶⁹ all of whom are end-users of academic research.

Methodological Commitments

We would argue that a range of methodological principles should also be adopted by critical scholars. At the most basic level, the reliability and validity of data poses a major challenge. Much of the information available to scholars has been filtered either through

⁶⁷ See David Campbell, 2005. ‘Beyond Choice: The Onto-politics of Critique’, *International Relations*, vol.19, no.1, p.128.

⁶⁸ See Ruth Blakeley, 2007. ‘Bringing the State Back in to Terrorism Studies’, *European Political Science*, vol.6, no.3.

⁶⁹ Hillyard, *Suspect Community*.

interested parties such as the intelligence services or the ‘terrorists’ themselves. As we have noted above, much of the data is secondary and there is a real lack of primary data in the field. Whilst there are undoubted challenges presented by collecting primary data these must be negotiated and overcome if the credibility of research is to be improved.⁷⁰

More importantly, we believe that critical scholars should place subjectivity at the core of their work. This can be achieved in a number of ways: by naming themselves, their positions and declaring their interests in relation to that which they research;⁷¹ by using methods such as the use of co-researchers and inter-subjective analysis; and by recognising the emotional forces associated with political violence and incorporating an understanding of its polarising effect on data, researchers and analysts. Related to this, critical scholarship should strive to resist the polarising forces of violence which exert a pull towards bifurcation, exclusion and simplicity at the expense of synthesis, inclusion and complexity.

Critical research should also be committed to methodological and disciplinary pluralism; in particular, it should exhibit a willingness to adopt post-positivist and non-international relations-based methods and approaches, and refuse to privilege materialist, rationalist and positivist approaches to social science over interpretive and reflectivist approaches.⁷² CTS should seek to avoid an exclusionary commitment to the narrow logic of traditional social scientific explanation based on linear notions of cause and effect, instead recognising that constructivist and post-structuralist approaches which 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.⁷³

Lastly, CTS should recognise that research is carried out within a particular legal environment which impacts on the work of the researcher and constrains thought and expression by for example, outlawing the ‘glorification of terrorism’ (as is the case in the UK). A critical scholarship should recognise its duty to defend as far as possible the ethical and intellectual integrity of its work, whilst honouring its commitments to its informants. The nature of the legal environment in the UK, the US and elsewhere can pose specific challenges to the conduct of research in the context of secrecy and securitization that invariably prevails. A critical scholarship should realistically appraise the risks and manage these responsibly within a challenging legal and political environment.

Ethical-Normative Commitments

CTS should be openly normative in orientation for one simple reason. Identifying individuals and groups who may be rightly called ‘terrorists’ is a routine practice by

⁷⁰ See Marie Smyth, 2004. ‘Using Participative Action Research with War Affected Populations: Lessons from Research in Northern Ireland and South Africa’, in M. Smyth and E. Williamson, eds., *Researchers and Their ‘Subjects’: Ethics, Power, Knowledge and Consent*, Bristol: Policy Press, pp. 137-56.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² See Richard Price and Christian Reus-Smit, 1998. ‘Dangerous Liaisons? Critical International Theory and Constructivism’, *European Journal of International Relations*, vol.4, no.3, p.261.

⁷³ Smith, ‘Singing Our World into Existence’, p.514.

scholars in the field. Through the identification of who the ‘terrorist other’ is, terrorism studies provides an authoritative judgement about who may legitimately be killed, tortured, rendered or incarcerated by the state in the name of counter-terrorism.⁷⁴ 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 should openly adhere 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.

In practice, this ethical standpoint has a number of important implications. First, it necessarily entails transparency in specifying one’s political-normative stance and values. This entails a continuous critical reflexivity about the aims, means and outcomes of terrorism research, particularly as it intersects with state counter-terrorism, accompanied by an enduring concern with questions of politics and ethics. As already noted, 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 should recognise that such a stance involves a delicate and creative balance between critiquing oppressive state practices, preserving a critical distance, and simultaneously maintaining access to power in order to affect change through an active engagement with the political process and the power holders in society.

Second, critical research should be oriented towards dissipating the fog of rhetoric and myth about political terror that is generated by both state and non-state actors involved in ‘terrorism’ and ‘counter-terrorism’.⁷⁵ Critical scholarship must strive to ensure that it does not collude with the amplification of the popular sense of threat associated with the use of political terror by non-state actors, and refuse to contribute to the proliferation of fear and the resultant manipulation of public policies. Rather, a critical scholarship should seek to appraise and contextualise the level of risk, independent of those who may have a political interest in amplifying or minimising that sense of risk, thereby contributing to a more reasoned and grounded public debate about how society should respond to campaigns of terror.⁷⁶

Third, we suggest that critical scholarship engages in a critical praxis aimed at the eradication of the use of political terror and the promotion of non-violent forms of conflict transformation instead. This can be achieved in part through challenging the evidence and arguments used by those state and non-state actors who hold that political terror is the most effective way of achieving their goals. Furthermore, critical research must aim to ‘do no harm’ to either the researchers or their informants, and where harm is likely, that any risk is recognised, assessed and voluntarily undertaken on the basis of

⁷⁴ In an explicit example of this kind of ethical practice, Rohan Gunaratna, an acclaimed terrorism ‘expert’, openly suggests the assassination of high profile Al Qaeda figures and leaders as a counter-terrorism strategy. Rohan Gunaratna, 2003. *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*, 2nd ed., London: Hurst & Co, pp.233-5. Another key figure in the field, Paul Wilkinson, engages in a more opaque version of the same practice by describing Israel’s extra-judicial assassinations as ‘ruthless acts of counter-terror’. Paul Wilkinson, 2002. *Terrorism Versus Democracy: The Liberal State Response*, London: Frank Cass, p.68.

⁷⁵ See Jackson, ‘Constructing Enemies’.

⁷⁶ Richard Jackson, 2007. ‘Playing the Politics of Fear: Writing the Terrorist Threat in the War on Terrorism’, in George Kassimeris, ed., *Playing Politics with Terrorism: A User’s Guide*, New York: Columbia University Press.

informed consent by those exposed to it. In part, this entails a willingness to try and understand and empathise with the mind-sets, world views and subjectivities of non-Western ‘others’ and a simultaneous refusal to assume or impute ‘others’ intentions and values.⁷⁷

Lastly, critical scholarship refuses to operate within the strict divisions that currently demarcate discourses of political violence. Divisions between terrorist and defender of freedom, between state and non-state actors, between traditional and critical studies of political terror, and between scholars and ‘suspect communities’ are, we feel, overly rigid. In refusing to work behind such walls in the intellectual, imagined and lived ghettos that violence creates, a critical scholarship undertakes reasonable calculated risks, in the interests of resisting the reproduction of divisions in the field, and thus the reproduction of violence itself. Additionally, critical scholarship recognizes the privileges associated with the role of scholar and the responsibilities associated with such privileges. Chief amongst these is the responsibility to engage with the challenges faced not only by demonised communities, but also by those with responsibility for ensuring public security and safety. Critical scholarship should address all those affected by such challenges and in a language that is intelligible to them.

A Commitment to an Emancipatory Project

In common with traditional scholars, a critical approach would recognise that the use of political terror by any actor is antithetical to human security and well-being. Any scholarship therefore should ultimately contribute, however indirectly, to undermining and eradicating the need of both state and non-state actors to resort to methods of political terror. A critical approach would advance universal human security, not merely the security of the state. That is, by including an emancipatory dimension to the methods and approaches used in carrying out research, and seeking to ameliorate some of the power imbalances between researcher and ‘subject’, critical research creates an emancipatory praxis that is capable of shaping not only the means of emancipation, but its outcomes.⁷⁸ The mission of CTS therefore, should entail the establishment of human security in the broader sense of ‘security’, as defined by Ken Booth to include all threats and obstacles to human actualisation, not merely those posed by political violence.⁷⁹ Such an approach implicitly raises further questions: For whom is this scholarship practised and whose interests are served? Who sponsors and shapes the research agenda? And how might one steer a critical path through these challenges?

In the final analysis, CTS imbues many of the values, concerns and orientations of peace research, conflict resolution and CSS. Contrary to the views of some critics, CTS is not an anti-state or anti-Western project; neither is it 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

⁷⁷ See Tarak Barkawi, 2004. ‘On the Pedagogy of “Small Wars”’, *International Affairs*, vol.80, no.1, pp.19-38.

⁷⁸ Marie Smyth, 2005. ‘Insider Outsider Issues in Researching Violence and Divided Societies’, in E. Porter, G. Robinson, M. Smyth, A. Schnabel and E. Osaghae, eds., *Researching Conflict in Africa: Insights and Experiences*, Tokyo: United Nations University Press, pp. 9-23.

⁷⁹ Booth, ‘Beyond Critical Security Studies’.

and physical violence and discrimination. It views deliberate civilian-directed forms of violence as 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, demonization and repression.

Towards A Critical Research Agenda

The identification of themes such as radicalisation, specific groups or populations that have become ‘suspect’, the role of religion in political violence and so on – and the making available of funding to those who work on them – is one way in which the contemporary field of terrorism studies is being shaped. This invariably moulds the field into yet more state-centric forms and risks the research itself becoming a mere adjunct to the counter-terrorism industry. Whilst this is understandable for those substantial numbers of researchers with close links to the military establishment and the state, it is hardly a healthy state of affairs for those scholars in the academy who lay claim to intellectual independence. In sum, a new critical research agenda is urgently needed.

There are three key ideas about contemporary terrorism which are taken for granted within critical approaches and which merit robust investigation and the production of good research evidence. The first of those is the idea that *there is a symbiotic relationship between terrorism and counter-terrorism* – that counter-terrorist interventions by the state which are primarily of a military and security nature tend to escalate rather than alleviate levels of perceived threat, actual violence and alienation of the base population. There is little in the way of systematic evidence to support this assertion. Systematic study and comparative analysis which evaluates the impact of state interventions in the short, medium and longer term would make for a more informed appraisal of the effectiveness of counter-terrorism approaches.

Second is the assertion that *military and physical force-based interventions against terrorism are largely ineffective*. In the light of recent experience in Iraq and Afghanistan and longer term interventions in the Palestinian Occupied Territories, Sri Lanka, Spain, Colombia, Kashmir, Chechnya and elsewhere, some military strategists have begun to articulate a return to a ‘hearts and minds’ approach when military strategies fail. Comparative analysis would confirm, refine or challenge this assertion.

Third there has been a curious assumption of the powerlessness of the state in the face of the terrorist threat. This is manifest in the resort to military action and the assertion of the absence of other alternative responses. In spite of decades of experience, state actors do not seem to have assembled a repertoire of non-military and non-repressive methods of addressing the threat or reality of terrorist violence. Rather, military and repressive responses appear to be the main responses in the state’s repertoire. This is compounded by political imperatives to appear to be ‘tough on terrorism’, whilst military experience might indicate a preference for a ‘hearts and minds’ strategy. Scholarly investigation into how terrorism is construed by its state targets, and how responses are assembled, validated and selected would greatly enhance understanding of power and effectiveness of the state to counter terrorism by a variety of means. Such

investigations could thus examine *the idea of civil policing as an alternative to counter-terrorist operations*.

Apart from these three widely accepted assumptions, other research projects and topics would also appear important. To begin with, at the conceptual level there is a need to interrogate the core concepts of the field, such as ‘terrorism’, ‘terrorist’, ‘security’, ‘radicalisation’, and the like, in order to provide more satisfactory definitions and theoretical formulations. Allied to this, is the need for further work on the broader theoretical frameworks within which terrorism studies has operated. As we have noted, the field to date has been under-theorised; critical scholars could make a valuable contribution towards rectifying this, particularly those from cognate disciplines like sociology, anthropology, conflict resolution, history and others.

A serious examination of the political and strategic roots of terrorism is also essential if current tendencies towards acontextuality and ahistoricism are to be effectively countered. Studies which locate terrorism in the context of conflicted political relationships and their tractability and openness to change through non-violent means will address important shortcomings in the current field. Similarly, historical studies on groups, movements and states who have used terror as a political method in decades and centuries gone by will fill an important gap.

Related to this, critical studies that explore transformation and methods of ‘coming out of terrorism’, including studies of groups who have successfully moved beyond violent struggle, will provide an alternative paradigm to the contemporary focus on the eradication of terrorism as the preferred – and often only – solution. Importantly, there are a growing number of studies on conflict resolution and terrorism which explore some of these dynamics.⁸⁰

The need for expansion beyond the state-centric orientation of contemporary research is particularly urgent. As we have stated, scholars must undertake ‘other-centric’ research which sheds light on the experience of ‘suspect communities’, with a focus on the subjectivity and lived experience of the ‘other’. Related to this, there is a genuine need to understand the nature and effects of terrorism and counter-terrorism on societies and communities of the global South. Too much current research focuses on Western societies to the detriment of non-Western states. Additionally, as we have stated, CTS must ‘bring the state back in’, examining the state as agents and sponsors of political terror. Increased attention by scholars to varieties of state terrorism and the role of the state in the sponsorship of terrorism would rectify a major gap in the field, particularly given that state violence is far more destructive, much more widespread and causes far more human suffering than non-state terrorism.

Finally, there are a number of other subjects suggested by the preceding discussion that would seem to be in urgent need of sustained critical research, including: the discursive practices that make the field of terrorism studies possible in the first place; the cultural construction of terrorism and its function as both a modern taboo and a marker of Western identity; the different ways in which communities within states experience terrorism and counter-terrorism; gender dimensions of terrorism and counter-

⁸⁰ Toros, ‘Joining Forces’; A. Cronin, 2006. ‘How al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups’, *International Security*, vol.31, pp. 7-48; Gunning, ‘Peace with Hamas?’; I. William Zartman, 2003. ‘Negotiating with Terrorists’, *Negotiation Journal*, vol.8, no.3; and P. Sederberg, 1995. ‘Conciliation as Counter-Terrorist Strategy’, *Journal of Peace Research*, vol.32, pp. 295-312.

terrorism; the political, historical, social and psychological reasons why actors decide to adopt terrorist tactics; the role of religion and ideology in making the adoption of terrorist tactics possible; the impact of the WOT on human rights legislation and practices; and the increasing economic and political role played by the corporate sector in securitization and counter-terrorism.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to demonstrate why a critically constituted terrorism studies is both necessary and timely, what some of the potential dangers and pitfalls of such a project might be, how such challenges could be overcome, and what a critical research agenda on political terror might look like. We have also tried to articulate an initial, and minimal, set of commitments that critically-oriented scholars might adopt.

The purpose of this article is not to prescriptively establish a new orthodoxy or rigid set of disciplinary boundaries; rather, its aim is to articulate the contours of a broad church in which critically-oriented scholars can unite behind a core set of concerns and commitments, and to stimulate further questions and debate about the current state of terrorism-related research. Neither is it meant to create division or provoke unnecessary conflict between orthodox and critical approaches to the study of political terror. As critically-oriented scholars, we are arguing for open, respectful but rigorous intellectual engagement with traditional terrorism studies scholars about the important issues facing the field. One of the key stimulants to scholarly innovation and development we believe, comes from disagreement and challenge to established orthodoxies. We hope that this paper will go some small way towards opening up new avenues for debate and research on political terrorism.