Critical Terrorism Studies: An Explanation, a Defence and a Way Forward

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Abstract
The aims of this paper are to introduce and explain the core commitments and dimensions of the critical terrorism studies (CTS) approach, to defend the retention of the term ‘terrorism’, and to briefly outline a future research agenda. To this end, the paper is divided into three sections. In the first section, I contextualise the rise of CTS and outline its central ontological, epistemological, methodological, and praxiological commitments, arguing that it is more than simply a call for better research on terrorism; rather, CTS offers a new way of understanding and researching terrorism. The second section focuses on the particular problem posed by the term ‘terrorism’ and argues that there are reasons for, and ways of, retaining the term without compromising the broader intellectual and/or emancipatory project. In addition, it explores some of the common misperceptions about the definition of terrorism and proposes a solution to these issues. In the final section, I outline some of the key challenges and dangers facing CTS. I suggest some key ways of avoiding these dangers and briefly outline a future research agenda.
Introduction

Critical approaches to the study of terrorism are not new. As Jeffrey Sluka (2009) notes, anthropologists have for many decades adopted a sceptical view of the dominant discourse and modes of study of those deemed ‘terrorists’, and as a consequence, much of the anthropological literature challenges commonly held assertions about the nature and causes of terrorism (see Zulaika, 1988; Zulaika and Douglass, 1996). During the cold war a number of mainly left-wing scholars similarly explored how the emerging field of Terrorism Studies was both politically biased towards Western states and appeared to function ideologically to legitimise the involvement of Western governments in the suppression of left-wing movements in parts of the developing world (Chomsky and Herman, 1979; Herman, 1982; Herman and O’Sullivan, 1989; George, 1991). However, critical approaches such as these have taken place largely outside of the main scholarly activities of what can be identified as the orthodox Terrorism Studies field. Certainly, such critical research has only rarely been published in the main Terrorism Studies journals or included in its conferences, and to date, it has arguably failed to influence the general focus and approach of mainstream, International Relations-based terrorism research.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the primary commitments and issues of another critical approach to the study of terrorism, one that has coalesced in the post-September 11, 2001 period but which is rooted in the insights of earlier criticisms. Unlike earlier critical approaches however, Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS), as it has become known, is beginning to have a real impact on the broader Terrorism Studies field: seminars and conference panels are regularly convened to debate its central ideas; critically-oriented teaching on terrorism is taking place at increasing numbers of universities; there are growing numbers of doctoral students focusing their research on different aspects of CTS: an increasing number of publications locate themselves theoretically within the CTS framework (see Jarvis, 2009a, 2009b); a Critical Studies on Terrorism Working Group has been established within the British International Studies Association (BISA): a new international peer-reviewed journal has been launched to publish critically-oriented research, Critical Studies on Terrorism; a CTS book series with a major publisher has been established: and there is a vibrant engagement with the CTS approach taking place across a range of different scholarly journals (see for example, Burke, 2009; Egerton, 2009; Horgan and Boyle, 2008; Hulss and Spencer, 2008; Jarvis, 2009a, 2009b; Jones and Smith, 2009; Joseph, 2009; Stokes, 2009; Weinberg and

1 Parts of this paper draw directly from material published in Jackson, Breen Smyth and Gunning, 2009a, 2009b. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 3rd Annual CICA-STR International Conference: ‘Political Violence and Collective Aggression: Considering the Past, Imagining the Future’, University of Ulster, Jordanstown Campus, Northern Ireland, 2-5 September, 2009.

2 The CSTWG Home Page can be accessed at: http://www.bisa.ac.uk/groups/7/index.asp.

3 The Critical Studies on Terrorism journal Home Page can be accessed at: http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/17539153.asp.

Eubank, 2008). It seems likely that it will soon be impossible to engage in terrorism-related research or teaching without engaging with CTS at some level.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section briefly outlines CTS as an analytical approach and explores its primary commitments. In the second section, I offer a defence for retaining the term ‘terrorism’ as the field’s central focus, despite its inherent limitations, and I suggest how it can be studied within a critical framework. In the final section, I discuss some of the main challenges and dangers facing CTS and the broader field of terrorism research, offer some suggestions for how they may be avoided and briefly discuss a future research agenda.

Critical Terrorism Studies: An Explanation

What has in the last few years become known as Critical Terrorism Studies or CTS began with a series of conversations between scholars in the United Kingdom in early 2006 about the generally poor state of terrorism-related research, particularly as it has developed since September 11, 2001. The problems and weaknesses of much (but clearly not all) orthodox terrorism research, and hence the need for a new approach, has been extensively analysed (see for example, Stohl, 1979; Herman, 1982; Schmid and Jongman, 1988; Herman and O’Sullivan, 1989; George, 1991; Reid, 1983, 1993, 1997; Zulaika and Douglass, 1996; Silke, 2001, 2003, 2004; Burnett and Whyte, 2005; Ranstorp, 2006). This initial dialogue developed into a series of concrete research activities – conferences, panels, articles, journal symposiums, and an edited volume – which sought to investigate, debate, and conceptualise the contours of an alternative and explicitly critical approach to the study of terrorism (see Blakeley 2007, 2008; Breen Smyth, 2007; Breen Smyth et al, 2008; Burke, 2008, 2009; Egerton, 2009; English, 2009; Gunning, 2007a, 2007b; Herring, 2008; Horgan and Boyle, 2008; Hulsse and Spencer, 2008; Jackson, 2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Jackson, Breen Smyth and Gunning, 2007, 2009c; Jarvis, 2009b; Joseph, 2009; Stokes, 2009; Weinberg and Eubank, 2008; Zulaika, 2008). As this expanding body of work indicates, CTS is broadly an approach to the study of terrorism that coalesces around a core set of ontological, epistemological, methodological, and ethical-normative commitments. In this section, I briefly summarise some of what I perceive to be the most important commitments that collectively make up the CTS approach.5

First, at its broadest, CTS can be understood as a critical orientation, a sceptical attitude, and a willingness to challenge received wisdom and knowledge about terrorism. In this sense, CTS can be conceived of as a very broad movement that allows multiple perspectives, some of which have been considered outside of the mainstream, to be brought into the same forum – with the attendant benefits for intellectual dialogue and debate in the context of Critical

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5 It is important to note that, like many other academic approaches, CTS is a broad church made up of diverse perspectives and ongoing disagreements over a number of important issues. The version of CTS presented here represents only one perspective on this dynamic new field.
Security Studies, see Krause and Williams, 1997: x-xi). In other words, CTS is committed to disciplinary and intellectual pluralism and a willingness to engage with a range of perspectives and approaches, including excellent research within the orthodox field which may originate within a problem-solving approach. From this perspective, CTS seeks to practice a ‘redemptive hermeneutic’ which aims to redeem what is valuable and useful in the views of the ‘Other’ (Neufeld 2001), whether this ‘Other’ is positivist, poststructuralist, ‘terrorist’, ‘counter-terrorist’, and so on. In short, ‘critical’ encompasses a diverse set of analytical, ontological, and normative traditions, ranging from positivist or realist perspectives from outside the mainstream, to Frankfurt School Critical Theory, Welsh School Critical Security Studies, Foucauldian discourse analysis, Derridaen deconstruction, and so on. Furthermore, and most importantly, it entails an ongoing process of intellectual engagement (rather than a fixed position or endpoint) with a wide range of perspectives and approaches.

At the same time however, I would argue that CTS research entails a particular ontological position which accepts that ‘terrorism’ is fundamentally a social fact rather than a brute fact: that its nature is not inherent to the violent act itself, but is dependent upon context, circumstance, intention, and crucially, social, cultural, legal, and political processes of interpretation, categorisation, and labelling (Schmid and Jongman, 1988: 101; Zulaika and Douglass, 1996). Similarly and importantly, the same ontological approach applies to the ‘terrorist’ label. Such a designation can never be an ontological statement about the nature or status of a particular individual: ‘terrorist’ is not an identity like ‘Amish’ or ‘Canadian’, nor is one ‘once a terrorist, always a terrorist’ (Schmid, 2004: 205; Toros, 2008; Toros and Gunning, 2009). It can be argued that there is little intellectual value to be gained by reducing or essentialising a person or group to what is usually a subset of their overall behaviour, and which, in some cases, does not even accurately describe their behaviour, even by its own definition. Groups specializing in terror and no other forms of political action do sometimes form, but they are extremely rare and typically remain highly unstable and ephemeral. In reality, most terrorism occurs in the context of wider political struggles in which the use of terror is one strategy among other more routine forms of contentious action (Tilly, 2004: 6).

For CTS scholars, the acceptance of the ontological insecurity of the ‘terrorism’ label results in an acute sensitivity to the politics of labelling and extreme care in the actual use of the term during research and teaching, while at the same time rejecting calls to eschew the term altogether (as I argue in the following section). It also leads to the rejection of universalism, essentialism, and exceptionalism in characterising ‘terrorism’, and instead, aims to prioritise specificity, context, history, and nuance.

This is not to say that within a CTS framework there can be no recognition of the actual violence in the ‘real world’ which is understood and experienced by people as ‘terrorism’. Rather, I suggest that there is a discursive, political, and cultural process by which ‘real world’ experiences of violence are

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6 However, it is important to recognise that ‘terrorism’ rarely causes ‘terror’ in the clinical sense of the term (see Rapin, 2009), and therefore, is an inaccurate descriptor.
given social meaning through the negotiated application of different kinds of political and intellectual labels. However, such labels and meanings are liable to change and contestation – yesterday’s ‘terrorist’ (Nelson Mandela) can be today’s Nobel Peace Prize holder (Nelson Mandela); actions and events never just ‘speak for themselves’. Of course, at the more interpretivist and poststructuralist end of the CTS spectrum, it may be ontologically problematic to talk of ‘actual violence’. However, Toros and Gunning (2009) have put forward the case for adopting a more Frankfurt School-inspired ontology which maintains a ‘minimal foundationalism’ in which the ontological distinction between subject and object is preserved and discourse and materiality are conceptualised as shaping each other in a dialectical, never-ceasing dynamic (rather than the one being solely constituted by the other). As such, the kind of critical position being advocated here recognises that there are observable ‘regularities’ in human activity (what positivists call laws), and that one can distinguish between different acts on the basis of their characteristics, even while recognising that these characteristics, and how one interprets them, are a product of their social context and thus, are not ‘objective facts’ (in the positivist sense).

The advantage of such an ontology is that it permits both the study of the discourses which produce ‘terrorism’ as a discursive subject, as well as the material interests which generate and sustain these discourses, and the actual political violence in the ‘real’ world which has ‘terroristic’ characteristics. This, and the fact that a Frankfurt School-inspired Critical Theory framework recognises the importance of problem-solving approaches, provides an important bridge to engaging with traditional Terrorism Studies.

A third component of the ontology around which CTS coalesces involves a shift from state-centricism and making state security the central concern, to a focus on the security, freedom, and well-being of human individuals (Toros and Gunning, 2009; Sluka, 2009). Just as (Welsh School) Critical Security Studies has argued that the primary referent to be secured should be the human individual and not the state – which, after all, is a relatively recent creation and has an ambiguous record of improving the security of human beings – CTS scholars tend to be more concerned with ending the suffering of human beings than with bolstering the state. This does not mean that CTS scholars are necessarily anti-state, or that the state (or other collectivities) should never be the focus of research. What it means is that one of the key yardsticks of legitimacy is whether an act or an organisation (including states and oppositional groups) improves the well-being of human beings.

This leads us to a fourth aspect of what I believe to be a key component of a CTS approach, namely, an explicit commitment to a set of normative values derived from a broadly defined notion of emancipation (Toros and Gunning, 2009; McDonald, 2009). Despite objections to the notion of emancipation and its past implication in hegemonic projects, CTS scholars for the most part see an emancipatory commitment to ending avoidable human suffering in most critical research on terrorism. In this, they follow Richard Wyn Jones (2004: 217-20) and

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7 At the same time, it is unarguable that those at the poststructuralist end of the critical spectrum may not be able to find themselves within such an ontological position.
Hayward Alker (2004: 192) in positing that all critical research derives from an underlying conception of a different order and thus contains an ‘emancipatory’ element. Here, emancipation is understood as a process of continuous immanent critique rather than any particular endpoint or universal grand narrative: a process of trying to construct ‘concrete utopias’ by realising the unfulfilled potential of existing structures, freeing individuals from unnecessary structural constraints, and the democratisation of the public sphere (see McDonald, 2009; Toros and Gunning, 2009). Within the context of Terrorism Studies, it can be seen as a normative commitment to both ending the use of terrorist violence (whether by state or non-state actors), and to addressing the conditions that can be seen to impel actors to resort to terrorist tactics.

In addition to the particular ontological position outlined above, I argue that critical research on terrorism should also exhibit a deep awareness of key epistemological issues, including the way in which knowledge is produced as a social process, the subjectivity of the researcher, and the link between knowledge and power, and consequently, the ways in which knowledge can be employed as ‘a political technology’ in the maintenance of hegemony by elites, institutions, and groups. In other words, a critical approach to terrorism research begins with the fundamental acceptance that wholly objective or neutral knowledge – ‘truth’ – about terrorism is impossible and there is always an ideological, ethical-political dimension to the research process (Toros and Gunning, 2009). This does not mean that all knowledge about the social world is hopelessly insecure, that we reject scholarly standards and procedures in research, or that ‘anchorages’ – relatively secure knowledge claims – cannot be found and built upon (Booth, 2008; Herring, 2008; Toros and Gunning, 2009). Rather, it suggests that, in addition to a commitment to the highest standards of scholarship, research on terrorism should also be characterised by a continuous and critical reflexivity in regards to its epistemology, ethics, and praxis. Importantly, such reflexivity itself opens up new areas of research, starting with the key question: who is terrorism research for and how does terrorism knowledge support particular interests?

The ontological position that terrorism is socially constructed and constituted by its context leads us, epistemologically, to call for a broadening of the focus of terrorism research to include both state and non-state terrorism, counter-terrorism, and other forms of violence such as structural or domestic violence, as well as (relevant) non-violent behaviour and social context (see Toros and Gunning, 2009; Gunning, 2009). Such a broadening will serve to deexceptionalise terrorist violence by placing socio-historical context at the heart of the investigation, restoring a past and a future to terrorism, allowing the concept to evolve along with the social world, and seeing (counter-)terrorism as part of wider political, societal, and economic dynamics. Engaging social movement theory, specific area studies expertise, and ethnographical methods constitute three practical paths to making context more central to terrorism research (Gunning, 2009; Sluka, 2009; Dalacoura, 2009; Breen Smyth, 2009).

Similarly, a central concern of CTS scholars must be to expand the set of accepted research topics to include those which have been ignored or silenced as a result of dominant ideological commitments. In particular, besides a greater
focus on historical context, there is a real need to ‘bring the state back in to terrorism studies’ (Blakeley, 2007) – to examine the nature and causes of state terrorism, particularly that by Western democratic states. It is also vital to make gender much more central to terrorism research (Sylvester and Parashar, 2009), among many other topics (see below).

The ontological rejection of traditional theory’s ‘fetishization of parts’ means, among other things, that epistemologically, a critical approach to terrorism should embed the phenomenon in broader social and political theory. Greater inter-disciplinarity – with a view to eventually doing away with disciplinary boundaries altogether – is one way to do this, although it is important to heed Booth’s warning against lowest common denominator inter-disciplinarity (Booth 2008). The establishment of an explicitly ‘critical’ field should help to bring in those from cognate disciplines who have so far shunned Terrorism Studies because of its reputation, earned or not, for political bias and lack of theoretical sophistication (see Gunning 2007a; Dalacoura, 2009). Another way to embed terrorism research in broader theory is to link terrorism more explicitly to the broader social processes of which it is part, and study it for what it has to say about these broader processes (see Gunning, 2009).

One of the consequences of the ontological and epistemological positions adopted by CTS is a commitment to transparency in regard to the researcher’s own values and standpoints, particularly as they relate to the geo-political interests and values of the society in which they live and work. In turn, this implies an abiding commitment to seeking to overcome the Euro/Westo-centric, Orientalist, and masculinised forms of knowledge which currently characterise the Terrorism Studies and Security Studies fields and social science more generally (see Toros and Gunning, 2009; Gunning, 2009; Sylvester and Parashar, 2009). It also implies a commitment to taking subjectivity seriously, in terms of both the researcher and the research subject (see Breen Smyth, 2009). This means being aware of and transparent about the values and impact of the researcher on the process and outcomes of the research, and being willing to seriously engage with the subjectivity of the ‘terrorist’. Importantly, this latter point implies an additional commitment to engaging in primary research when relevant, as opposed to relying primarily on secondary sources – a long-standing practice in terrorism research due to the perceived difficulties and dangers of face-to-face encounters with ‘terrorists’ (see Zulaika and Douglass, 1996).

In terms of methodological issues, as already suggested, CTS is committed to methodological and disciplinary pluralism in terrorism research. In particular, CTS sees value in post-positivist and non-International Relations-based methods and approaches, including discourse analysis, poststructuralism, constructivism, Critical Theory, historical materialism, and ethnography. Importantly, CTS refuses to privilege materialist, rationalist, and positivist approaches to social science over interpretive and reflectivist approaches (in the context of critical international relations, see Price and Reus-Smit, 1998: 261), and seeks to avoid an exclusionary commitment to the narrow logic of traditional social scientific explanation based on linear notions of cause and effect. Instead, CTS argues that post-positivist approaches which subscribe to an interpretive ‘logic of understanding’ can usefully open space for questions and perspectives that are
often foreclosed by positivism and rationalism. Furthermore, it can be argued that this stance is more than simply 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 (see Smith, 2004: 514).

Another important methodological commitment that flows from the CTS position is a permanent adherence to a set of responsible research ethics which take account of the various end-users of terrorism research, including informants, the ‘suspect communities’ from which terrorists often emerge, and the populations who bear the brunt of terrorist campaigns and counter-terrorism policies – as well as the wider public, other academics, and policy-makers. More concretely, this means ‘recognising the human behind the [terrorist] label’ (Booth, 2008: 73), identifying marginalised and silenced voices, the adoption of a ‘do no harm’ approach to research, operating transparently as a researcher, recognising the vulnerability of those we research, honouring undertakings of confidentiality and protecting our interviewees, utilising principles of informed consent, and taking responsibility for the anticipated impact of our research and the ways in which it may be utilised. Adopting research paradigms, such as participative action research which aims to establish partnerships with researched populations, particularly when working with ‘suspect communities’, is a method of attempting to give away or share one’s power as a researcher and an academic. As critical researchers, these are all principles, paradigms, and strategies that we ought to explore.

If a critically-informed research praxis is distinguished by its explicit commitment to human emancipation, an important component of CTS research is to try to influence policy; not being concerned with policy relevance is not an option for scholars committed to human emancipation (Gunning, 2007b; Toros and Gunning, 2009). However, this does not mean that one should limit oneself to being relevant to state elites. Critical scholars should engage both policy-makers and policy-takers, if their primary commitment is to humanity rather than the state. Engaging policy-takers furthermore, serves to lessen the risk of co-option by the status quo, particularly if those thus engaged include members of communities labelled ‘suspect’ by the state, those designated ‘terrorists’, and so on. However, to be effective, and to work towards realising the potential for immanent change within the status quo, critical scholars must simultaneously strive to engage those who are embedded in the state, members of the ‘counter-terrorist’ forces, the political elite, and so on. This is an area where critical scholars have arguably been weak in the past.

I would argue that a commitment to emancipation in turn implies, among other things: a commitment to praxis as organic intellectuals to help bring about concrete utopias out of the fissures and contradictions of existing structures (see Herring, 2008; Toros and Gunning, 2009); a continuous process of ‘immanent critique’ of existing power structures and practices in society; the moral and intellectual questioning of the instrumental rationality paradigm of political violence, whether it be terrorist or counter-terrorist violence, state or non-state violence (see Burke, 2008); the prioritising of human security over national security and working towards minimising all forms of physical, structural, and cultural violence (Toros and Gunning, 2009); and the serious scholarly and
practical exploration of non-violence, conflict transformation, and reconciliation as practical alternatives to terrorist and counter-terrorist violence. From this perspective, I believe that CTS is at heart an anti-hegemonic project, a kind of ‘outsider theorising’ which seeks to go ‘beyond problem-solving within the status quo and instead... to help engage through critical theory with the problem of the status quo’ (Booth, 2007).

Of course, the adoption of an anti-hegemonic, ‘critical’ standpoint requires a certain amount of intellectual and moral courage because it invariably engenders vigorous opposition from interests vested in the status quo – as a number of CTS scholars, including ourselves, have experienced (see Breen Smyth, 2009; Herring, 2008). CTS scholars must therefore adopt a prior commitment to refusing to give in to intimidation, abandoning research that is controversial, or to self-censorship. In the current political environment engendered by the war on terrorism, CTS scholars must be prepared to say the unsayable, whether it is to governments, the wider society, particular communities, or terrorists; in a very real sense, we must accept that ‘blasphemy is our business’ (Booth, 2008: 68).

At one level, CTS can be described simply as a call for much more rigorous and sensitive research. However, I believe that it is more than this. I suggest that CTS has a particular approach and orientation that marks it out from much of the orthodox Terrorism Studies literature in terms of its ontological position, its epistemology, its methodological orientation, its research ethics and praxis, its normative commitment, particularly in regards to emancipation, its reflexivity, and its expanded research foci and priorities. The perspective I have put forward here shares a great deal with and draws heavily upon Frankfurt School Critical Theory and particularly the way the Welsh School of Critical Security Studies has interpreted and applied it (see Toros and Gunning, 2009; McDonald, 2009). At the same time, I would argue that it cannot be reduced to a single perspective, and that anything from rigorous positivist critiques to poststructuralist deconstructions has a place. Rather, CTS is an overarching framework for critiquing existing research on terrorism, embedding terrorism research in broader social and political theory, and generating new kinds of questions and foci for study. As Ken Booth argues regarding Critical Security Studies, I would similarly suggest that CTS is an exciting new approach because it offers an ontology, an epistemology, and an orientation towards praxis (Booth, 2004).

‘Terrorism’: A Defence

A key question which flows directly from the CTS position outlined above – particularly its ontological and epistemological positions in relation to the socially constructed nature of ‘terrorism’ and the way it is studied – is whether the term ‘terrorism’ should be retained as the central organising concept of the

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8 A number of the points made in this section have been drawn from Jackson, 2008c, Jackson, Breen Smyth and Gunning, 2009b, and Jackson, Murphy and Poynting 2009.
field of study. If, as I have argued, ‘terrorism’ is a social construct, and since it is clearly now a politically and culturally-loaded term used primarily to delegitimize and demonise opponents, should we not as scholars eschew it as an analytical category and instead focus our research efforts on its production as a discursive subject and the wider ideological consequences of the ‘terrorism’ discourse? Also, might not many of the many well-documented problems of Terrorism Studies be overcome by abandoning the term altogether in academic research?

In this section, I wish to make two brief arguments in response to this question. First, there are a number of pragmatic and political-normative arguments for retaining the term ‘terrorism’, arguments which critical scholars cannot afford to ignore. Second, in any case, under a set of strict conditions, it is possible to conduct rigorous and useful research on both the forms of political violence which are currently understood and experienced as ‘terrorism’, as well as the discourses which construct the ‘terrorism’ label and the meanings given to this kind of violence. The conditions for such research include adopting many of the CTS commitments listed above, and employing a rigorous and transparent conceptual approach to the term ‘terrorism’.

The first argument for retaining ‘terrorism’ as an analytical concept is that, whilst recognising the inherent ontological instability of the term, it can be argued that unless scholars converge under a central concept like ‘terrorism’, however problematic it may be in practice, much critical research will remain fragmented, thereby preventing much-needed cross-fertilization between critical and cognate perspectives. Second, and related to this, 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 and political influence. Third, as I have suggested above, one of the key tasks of CTS is to investigate the political, academic and cultural usage and wider consequences of the term. This kind of research obviously cannot be done without retaining it as a central marker. Fourth, pragmatically, the term ‘terrorism’ is currently so dominant within existing political structures and the broader culture that CTS cannot really afford to abandon it. Academia does not exist outside the power structures and associated dominant discourses of the day. The term ‘terrorism’ dominates public discourse and as such must be engaged with, deconstructed and challenged, rather than abandoned and left to less critical scholars.

Finally, there is a compelling normative imperative to retain a term that de-legitimises particular kinds of political violence which instrumentalises human suffering, frequently of non-combatants, for the purposes of influencing an audience. Of course, the normative power of the terrorism label is highly dependent upon its consistent application to all qualifying cases, including Western state terrorism; the selectivity and bias of many terrorism scholars and political leaders in the past has seriously undermined this project by making it appear that the term is reserved for the West’s enemies. However, I would argue

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9 This point was made to me in conversation with Ken Booth, Aberystwyth University.
that this provides a reason for continued critical engagement rather than withdrawal and capitulation in the discursive struggle.

However, these arguments are in themselves insufficient on their own for scholars to retain the term ‘terrorism’. There must also be a clear ontological and epistemological basis for taking this position, as well as some guidance as to how to conduct critical research on those forms of political violence currently understood as ‘terrorism’. In the first instance, as noted above, the CTS approach accepts that there are observable ‘regularities’ in human activity, and one can distinguish between different acts on the basis of their characteristics, even while recognising that these characteristics, and how one interprets them, are a product of their social context and thus, are not ‘objective facts’ in the positivist sense (see Toros and Gunning, 2009). In this instance, political violence is a human regularity and it is possible to distinguish different forms of political violence – such as war, insurgency, genocide, coup d’état, torture, and terrorism – on the basis of their observable characteristics, while recognising that these characteristics and the meanings given to them are the product of a particular social scientific and broader cultural context. Accepting such a ‘minimal foundationalism’, in which the ontological distinction between subject and object is preserved, and discourse and materiality are conceptualised as shaping each other in a dialectical, never-ceasing dynamic (rather than the one being solely constituted by the other), allows for research on both instances of ‘real world’ political violence like terrorism, as well as the discursive processes by which such violence is given meaning. Moreover, rigorous research on this foundation can lead to the discovery of ‘anchorages’ – relatively secure knowledge claims – about the nature and causes of terrorism which can then be built upon (Booth, 2008).

In addition to the adoption of a ‘minimal foundationalism’ as the ontological basis for terrorism research, I would argue that it is also crucial for scholars in this area to adopt a continuous reflexivity in regards to epistemological issues. That is, they need to remain cognisant of the power-knowledge relationship (knowledge always works for someone and something and thus is never wholly neutral), the politics of labelling (labelling a group or individual as ‘terrorist’ – or paedophile – has real consequences for people’s lives), and the end-users and outcomes of terrorism knowledge (terrorism research can be used by counter-terrorism agencies or terrorist groups for their own purposes). In addition, as discussed previously, they should adhere to a strict set of research ethics which stipulates doing no harm, avoid essentialising or decontextualising the subject but instead problematise and contextualise it, take the subjectivity of both researcher and the researched seriously, and be transparent about the normativity of their work, among other things. Openly and consciously adopting these kinds of commitments would go a long way towards producing rigorous, critically-oriented research on ‘terrorism’.

However, the problem still remains that ‘terrorism’ and its defining characteristics remain highly contested and to some degree, misconceived. There are four common misconceptions in particular which contribute to some of the problems seen in orthodox terrorism research and which can pose an obstacle to rigorous, critical research. First, rooted in an implicit just war conception, it is
commonly argued that one of the distinguishing characteristics of terrorism is that it is by definition violence directed at ‘innocent civilians’ or sometimes, ‘non-combatants’. The problems with this conception include, among others: the difficulties of identifying the ‘innocent’ (there are always degrees of civilian support for violent groups and governments, for example); the difficulties of identifying ‘civilians’ (civilians may work for the military or carry weapons, such as armed Israeli settlers, for example); the difficulties of determining ‘non-combatants’ (not carrying a weapon does not necessarily imply non-combatant status, as with the government officials directly involved in the organisation of military action, or prison officers, for example); the implicit value-laden consequence of having to determine worthy and unworthy victims of violence; the history of terrorist groups who have limited their targets to police officers, off-duty military personnel, government officials, and the like; and the normative consequence of legitimising and thereby encouraging forms of violence which attempt to avoid ‘innocent civilian’ (however defined) casualties (see Goodin 2006: 15). In sum, including this criterion in any conception of terrorism injects a level of subjective value judgement which impedes transparent and rigorous research.

A second related misconception in many popular definitions is the assertion that terrorism necessarily involves randomly chosen victims. Although many acts of terrorism, such as detonating a bomb in a public place, clearly do involve random targeting, the problem with including this characteristic is that it must be carefully qualified, because many groups and states who employ terrorism carefully select their victims – such as politicians, police officers, off-duty soldiers, union organisers, political opponents, and the like. Thus, while it may be incidental to the terrorists who the actual victims are within the carefully-selected target group, they are not randomly chosen in the broader sense of the word. In addition, targets may be deliberately selected because they are both a randomly chosen representative of a particular group the terrorists wish to send a message to (police officers or political opponents, for example), and at the same time an individual of high symbolic or strategic value (the senior police officer heading the counter-terrorism unit or the leader of the opposition movement, for example). As before then, including this characteristic in definitions of terrorism, without careful qualification, can prove an obstacle to rigorous research.

A third common misconception regarding the defining characteristics of terrorism relates to the role of publicity. Some scholars argue that an essential characteristic of terrorism is that it always seeks publicity, which is why when states seek to hide their involvement in political violence against opponents it cannot be considered ‘terrorism’. The problem with this argument is that it mistakes publicity for communication; it is communication to an audience which is the one of the key elements of terrorist violence, not necessarily publicity (see Duvall and Stohl 1988: 239-40). For non-state actors lacking societal penetration, publicity is obviously the easiest way to communicate, although we have seen a number of non-state terrorist attacks in recent years which remained publically unclaimed by any group. For states however, their violence does not necessarily require publicity to reach its intended audience. In cases of state terrorism for
example, when an individual is kidnapped and then ‘disappeared’, returned following torture, or their corpse is left mutilated in a public place, local observers know exactly who the intended audience is, what the message is intended to convey, and who has sent it. The body with its physical marks of violence – or the absence of their bodily presence – serves as a direct reminder of the presence and power of the state and the need to acquiesce. The lack of publicity and denial by the state is usually for external audiences in order to maintain international assistance or for domestic constituents whom the state relies upon for support. In sum, focusing on publicity – rather than more broadly on communication – in identifying terrorist violence is potentially distorting.

Fourth, it is argued by a surprising number of scholars that one of the defining features of ‘terrorism’ is that it is a form of ‘illegitimate’ political violence practiced solely by non-state actors, and that states cannot engage in terrorism because they have the legitimate right to use violence – in contradistinction to non-state actors who have no such right. This is highly problematic for several obvious reasons, not least because it is clear that ‘terrorism’ is a term for describing a particular act or strategy of political violence. As such, there is no deontological reason which precludes an actor – state or non-state – from engaging in acts of terrorism as part of a broader political strategy. To suggest that when agents representing a state engage in the very same actions as non-state actors, such as when they blow up civilian airliners (the Lockerbie bombing) or a protest ship (the Rainbow Warrior bombing) or plant a series of bombs in public places (the Lavon affair), it automatically ceases to be terrorism is illogical and biased. Furthermore, the argument that states have a legitimate right to use violence while non-state actors do not is also problematic because although states have the legitimate right to use violence, this right is highly circumscribed and does not include the right to use extra-legal violence against its own citizens or the citizens of other states; genocide, ethnic cleansing, assassination, torture, and other such acts are all prohibited in international law. In addition, there is a long-standing moral principle that non-state actors may use violence against highly repressive and genocidal states when other methods have failed or other states fail to intervene. In other words, non-state actors can sometimes legitimately use violence. In short, to circumvent some of these problems, particularly arbitrary selectivity and state-centric bias, the conception of ‘terrorism’ we adopt must avoid actor-centric definitions and focus instead on the nature of the violence itself: if an act of political violence has all the defining characteristics of ‘terrorism’, then it is ‘terrorism’, regardless of its perpetrator.

In sum, I want to suggest a conception of terrorism that understands it to be the intentional use or threat of violence against individuals or groups who are victimized for the purpose of intimidating or frightening a broader audience. The direct victims of the violence are therefore not the main targets, but are instrumental to the primary goal of frightening the watching audience, who are intimidated through the communicative power of violence. The intended effects of the violence are the achievement of specific political or political-economic, as opposed to religious or criminal, goals. Importantly, the notion of intent as it is used here is a ‘soft’ rather than a ‘hard’ one, and is commensurate with the
practices of domestic law rather than just war theory. That is, recognising that intentions can only ever be inferred from the nature of the act, the context in which it occurs, and its outcomes, it nonetheless assumes that if actors undertake actions for which they can be reasonably assured of the outcomes, then they intended those outcomes and can be held responsible for them. This notion of intent negates the claims of both non-state and state actors who engage in violent actions but then later claim that the resulting injuries were unintended – such as Timothy McVeigh’s claim that he did not intend to kill the children in the nursery of the Oklahoma City Building, or Israel’s claims that they do not intend to kill bystanders during targeted killing operations.

The advantages for critical research to this conception is that it avoids the common misperceptions noted above and provides a fairly clear set of characteristics by which to identify acts of political violence which are terroristic in nature. More specifically, it does not impose pre-determined conceptual limits on which acts can qualify as terrorism: an act of terrorism can be perpetrated by state or non-state actors, and can occur during peace and war. Employing this conception, and adhering to the research commitments noted above, it is possible to engage in rigorous, critically-oriented research on acts of ‘terrorism’.

**Research on Terrorism: A Way Forward**

Despite the discernable impact of CTS so far, I remain deeply cognisant that this project may, in the end, fail – and the broader field of Terrorism Studies will remain largely unaffected by the challenges and provocations offered by CTS. After all, as noted earlier, calls for more critical approaches to the study of terrorism have been made many times before and thus far have had little discernible impact on the primary practices and focus of the field. In my view, the success of the CTS endeavour will depend on two factors. First, whether and how it can overcome a number of well sign-posted dangers and future challenges, and second, whether it can articulate a credible new research agenda.

**Avoiding Dangers and Pitfalls**

The first challenge revolves around the perennial thorny issues inherent to the central organising concept of the overall field, ‘terrorism’. The employment of such a politically-charged, culturally-laden, and ontologically ambiguous term clearly does pose challenges for research practice and political praxis and discourages many scholars from cognate fields from engaging with the core issues and concerns of the wider Terrorism Studies field. Scholars who wish to engage in ethnographic studies in communities or groups typically described as ‘terrorists’ in Western discourse, for example, cannot be associated with the use of the term without risking both their personal safety and the integrity of their research (Breen Smyth, 2004). More fundamentally, acts of ‘terrorism’ and even the existence of ‘terrorist’ groups, are typically only one small part of a broader set of contentious political struggles and conflicts. As argued above, a response to this conundrum has been to accept that there are genuine reasons for retaining
the ‘terrorism’ label, whilst arguing that it should always be used and applied with extreme care and sensitivity, with an awareness that its use is inherently political, and with a robust and rigorously applied definition and set of research commitments.

Second, a large proportion of the current research that is associated with CTS has so far been largely focused on critiquing the orthodox field of terrorism studies and deconstructing its discourses and underlying assumptions. There is a danger that critical scholarship, with its understandable concern for interrogating the discursive foundations upon which the study of terrorism is founded, will become so self-conscious that it becomes simply the study of its own (and other) discourses and progressively disengages from the empirical study of political violence and its foundations in the ‘real’ world (Weinberg and Eubank, 2008). A related danger is that CTS will come to be viewed as a largely poststructuralist or constructivist project with their associated ontological and epistemological positions, and other approaches – political-economic and historical materialist, (Frankfurt School) critical theory, sociological, psychological, critical realist, and others, for example – will be discouraged from participating in CTS’s activities and debates.

At one level, the current shape of the CTS project is simply a reflection of the research interests and focus of the particular group of scholars currently driving it forward. At another level, it must be emphasised that, far from being disengaged from the ‘real world’ and lost in discursive critiques, the substantial work of many self-identifying CTS scholars involves empirically-grounded ‘real world’ studies of political violence which adopts historical materialist, ethnographic, and conflict resolution-based approaches, among others (see Gunning, 2007c; Breen Smyth, 2008a, 2008b; Blakeley, 2009; Toros, 2008; Stokes and Raphael, forthcoming). I am confident that as more scholars from different disciplines and approaches start to engage with the issues and perspectives articulated by CTS, the field will begin to evidence more diversity and some of the noted gaps in our research focus will start to be filled. Scholars from cognate disciplines who have thus far shunned the world of Terrorism Studies because of its reputation for being overly state-centric, ideologically biased, and under-theorised, have begun to engage with the field under the more pluralistic umbrella offered by CTS (see, for example, Gunning, 2007c; Booth, 2008; McDonald, 2007, 2009; Dalacoura, 2009; Herring, 2008; Sylvester and Parashar, 2009; Burke, 2008). The challenge remains to increase their number and the methodological and disciplinary diversity of the field.

A third challenge is to avoid becoming too eclectic and breaking down as a result of internal contradictions and lack of an overarching identity (Gunning, 2007b). This is exacerbated by the fact that CTS, at least in the way I have described it, must both be critical in the sense of explicitly challenging the state-centric, problem-solving perspectives that have thus far dominated terrorism research, and be inclusive to enable the convergence of not only explicitly critical perspectives but also the more rigorous traditional, problem-solving perspectives of both traditional Terrorism Studies and cognate fields. Much of interest has been written by, for instance, traditional conflict resolution scholars who have moved beyond a narrow military understanding of security and placed violence
in its wider social context. Similarly, traditional scholars within Terrorism Studies have produced significant research that challenges accepted knowledge, findings which critical scholars ignore at their peril (Gunning, 2007a).

Conversely, traditional terrorism scholars would benefit greatly from exposure to cognate or critical perspectives. However, further complicating this dynamic is that the term ‘critical’ – and what it means to be ‘critical’ in practice – is itself highly contested. I have tried to make the case for an inclusive, eclectic approach, inspired by Williams and Krause’s take on Critical Security Studies (Williams and Krause, 1997). However, I accept that my relatively heavy reliance on Frankfurt School Critical Theory, as mediated through Welsh School Critical Security Studies, may put me closer to Booth’s more structured, less eclectic, and thus more exclusive, approach to Critical Security Studies (Booth, 2004; 2007). This could act as a repellent to those who interpret what it means to be ‘critical’ differently or who reject the notion of ‘emancipation’ or the continued use of the ‘terrorism’ label as hegemonic tools.

A fourth key challenge for CTS is the risk of bifurcating the broader Terrorism Studies field into critical and orthodox intellectual ghettos which then refuse to engage with each other’s concerns or resort to open intellectual warfare of the kind seen in Jones and Smith’s (2009) recent diatribe. For CTS, there is the added danger that such an outcome would likely result in a level of intellectual and political irrelevance, since orthodox approaches currently have, for obvious reasons, stronger institutional links to sources of political and cultural power in society. I believe that such an outcome can be avoided, and that the willingness thus far to engage in rigorous but respectful debate with scholars who disagree with the CTS approach (see Horgan and Boyle, 2008; Weinberg and Eubank, 2008) sends a powerful signal of a genuine readiness to engage in dialogue. CST scholars actually view disagreement as healthy and an important way of stimulating new developments and questions. If terrorism scholars on all sides make a commitment to open, respectful, and principled dialogue, I see no reason why disagreements cannot be a source of progress.

A final set of challenges and dangers lies in the need to continue developing and articulating the CTS normative agenda beyond the initial and necessarily general outline of ‘emancipation’ given here, and within the confines of the need for both critical distance from the status quo and policy relevance. Such a task is crucial because it has important implications for many of the research practices at the heart of terrorism research, as well as for the relationship between scholars, the state, and security practitioners on the one hand, and research subjects, ‘suspect communities’, and those designated ‘terrorist’ on the other. In particular, CTS scholars will need to think through the practicalities, ethics, and modalities of negotiating the delicate balance between normatively-oriented independent scholarship that promotes emancipation and the security of humans in general, and the demands of being ‘policy relevant’ – and law-abiding in the context of increasingly intrusive anti-terrorism legislation – for the purposes of national security. I believe that it is possible to maintain access to power and critical distance at the same time, but it takes a great deal of care, sensitivity, and intellectual struggle. I agree with Weinberg and Eubank (2008) that government funds may be a legitimate source of funding, just as it
has been for research on other pressing social issues, assuming guarantees are in place that the resulting research remains fully independent and that confidentiality clauses are not breached, terrorism laws notwithstanding (see Breen Smyth, 2009). Continuous engagement with policy-takers and ‘suspect communities’ will similarly help in maintaining a critical distance to power. In addition, I feel that the current political and intellectual climate, in which there is growing disappointment with the effects and outcomes to date of the ‘war on terror’, and where security practitioners are actively searching for new ideas and approaches to thinking about counter-terrorism, provides a ripe moment for critically-oriented scholars to offer their knowledge and expertise.

Clearly, each of these challenges requires a further intellectual engagement and ongoing struggle, and some of them may never be fully resolved to everyone’s satisfaction. However, this is normal for any engaged field of research, and I am confident that none of these challenges are in the end, insurmountable.

**A New Research Agenda**

A second necessity if CTS is to make a lasting impact on the future development of Terrorism Studies, is to go beyond critique and deconstruction and articulate an alternative, credible research agenda. As detailed elsewhere (Jackson, Breen Smyth and Gunning, 2009), CTS is a call for: (1) broadening the study of terrorism to include subjects neglected by the leading scholars of the field and in its main journals, including, among other things, the wider social context of political violence, state violence, non-violent practices, and gender aspects of terrorism; (2) deepening terrorism research by uncovering the field’s underlying ideological, institutional, and material interests and make the subjectivities and normative commitments of both researchers and researched more explicit; and (3) making a commitment to emancipatory praxis central to the research enterprise. More specifically, I would suggest that an initial CTS research agenda should include some of the following subjects. I recognise that there is a growing literature on some of these subjects already; however, much of this research occurs largely outside of Terrorism Studies and does not always engage directly with the issues and concerns of the broader terrorism field. Indeed, one of the tasks of a CTS field is to gather in all these fragmented voices and serve as a tent under whose canvas research from cognate disciplines can coalesce and cross-pollinate (Gunning 2007a).

First, I would argue that there is a need to examine more thoroughly and systematically the discourses and representational practices of terrorism, and the ontological-discursive foundations – the ideological, conceptual, and institutional underpinnings – which make both Terrorism Studies, and the practices of terrorism and counter-terrorism, possible in the first place.

Second, in addition to exposing and deconstructing the field’s ‘conditions of possibility’, I would suggest that there is also a need to explore in much more detail the political-economic contexts of both the Terrorism Studies field as a politically-embedded domain of knowledge, and the theory and practice of counter-terrorism. In other words, applying historical materialist approaches
and taking materiality seriously, there is a need for further exploration of how counter-terrorism functions as a form of ideology—how it works to promote certain kinds of material and class interests, maintain political hegemony, and sustain dominant economic relationships. This means rooting critical analyses of the theory and practice of counter-terrorism within theories of class, capitalism, hegemony, and imperialism (see Herring, 2008).

Third, as suggested, there is an urgent need for more systematic research on state terrorism—and state repression more broadly—especially the forms of state terrorism that have remained virtually invisible in terrorism research, such as Western state terrorism (including Israeli state terrorism) and the terrorism practised by Western allies, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Colombia, to name but a few.

Fourth, as suggested above, it is imperative to broaden the research agenda to include the wider social context, other forms of violence, and non-violent behaviour in terrorism research. Too little is understood about the interaction between militants and non-militants, and between militant and non-militant action repertoires, within oppositional social movements—or about the role played by bystander publics, political elites, state forces, and wider ideological debates in the evolution of militancy (Gunning, 2009). Similarly, more research is needed into the effect of movement participation on individual motivation and behaviour, or the effect of the internet and transnational (virtual) networks on militancy, the relationship between political and domestic violence or that between structural and political violence.

Fifth, there is a pressing need to take gender much more seriously in terrorism research. A number of topics seem particularly pertinent here: examining the gendered nature of the Terrorism Studies field itself, the kinds of masculinised forms of knowledge it produces, and the silences it contains about women, gender, and gendered identities; exploring the subjectivities, motivations, ambitions, goals, performativities, and political agency of female participants in terrorism, counter-terrorism, and political violence more broadly; applying a gendered gaze to militant groups and movements and exploring how women join, mediate, subvert, and resist such movements; comparative research on women in different societies who join terrorist and counter-terrorist groups; and the impact of counter-terrorist measures on women and children.

Sixth, I argue that there is a real need to expand the study of terrorism to both address the Euro/Westo-centricity prevalent in terrorism research and include the voices and perspectives of those in the global South who have been the most frequent victims of both terrorism and counter-terrorism. This is part of a critical scholar’s emancipatory mission (see McDonald, 2009). Of particular importance is the need to move beyond culturalist, pathological, or ideological explanations and give non-Western agency and structural explanations an equal place in any research agenda, while at the same time avoiding imposing a universalistic framework which is insensitive to local particularities.

Finally, there is a need to further analyse the ethics, impacts, and efficacy of different approaches to counter-terrorism. In addition to finding more transparent and meaningful ways of evaluating the success of counter-terrorism measures and interrogating accepted wisdoms (such as ‘we do not negotiate with
terrorists’, or ‘decapitation policies are effective’), some of the following subjects urgently need to be explored in greater detail: the impact of counter-terrorism policies on specific communities, individuals, institutions, the legal order, domestic society, and the international system; the effects of counter-terrorism policy on human rights, social trust, community cohesion, democratic culture, the academy and academic research, the media’s role in scrutinising government institutions, and policing culture and practices; the role of civil society and socio-economic change in ending campaigns of political violence; the efficacy or otherwise of dialogue with those designated ‘terrorist’: the precise role and dynamics of demilitarisation strategies, police reform, truth and reconciliation mechanisms, and the like; and the successes and failures of the current war on terror and previous experiences of terrorism. In particular, the final topic listed here – the impact of the war on terror – is in need of much more systematic research. Given its global reach and size, and the vast areas of social and political life it has thus far impacted upon, there are multitudinous subjects requiring detailed, critical analysis.

This brief outline demonstrates that CTS is coalescing around a clear, coherent, and systematic research agenda that is informed by its particular ontology, epistemology, and normative position. Furthermore, as scholars begin to explore and engage with the arguments and questions posed by CTS, and as research gets underway in earnest on some of the topics suggested here, further questions and new research items will arise. More than simply a call for more rigorous research, CTS offers both a way of doing research and a clear research agenda.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to outline the primary approach and commitments of CTS, defend the retention of the term ‘terrorism’ within this project, and suggest a way forward for critical research in this area. It is unarguable that the CTS project is still somewhat in its infancy and there is clearly a great deal of intellectual work left to do at a number of different levels. However, it is my belief that the present interregnum represents a ripe moment for scholars, new and established, to make a genuine contribution to the evolution of this important new field and to the development of new policies and political attitudes. Given the place of ‘terrorism’ in contemporary society and world politics, both as an embedded social and political discourse and as a mode of political violence by state and non-state groups, such a project has tremendous intellectual, normative, and practical importance.

References


