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Introduction: The case for critical terrorism studies

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introduction: the case for critical terrorism studies

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This symposium emerged as a response to three recent developments in the field of terrorism studies. The first development has been the tremendous growth in terrorism-related research and teaching activities since the attacks of 11 September 2001. Since then, terrorism studies has been transformed from a minor subfield of security studies to a large stand-alone field with its own dedicated journals, research centres, leading scholars and experts, research funding opportunities, conferences and university study programmes. As a consequence, it is now one of the fastest expanding areas of research in the Western academic world, with literally thousands of new books and articles published over the past few years, significant investment in terrorism-related research projects and increasing numbers of postgraduate dissertations and undergraduate students.

A second concurrent development has been a growing dissatisfaction with the state of the field and its voluminous output by senior scholars, security practitioners and sections of the public. As detailed in the papers that follow, a number of authoritative scholarly reviews

have noted that much of what passes for terrorism research lacks rigorous theories and concepts, is based primarily on secondary information, lacks historical context and is heavily biased towards Western and state-centric perspectives. Related to this, it is possible to discern a growing and deep-seated unease about the overall lack of progress in the 'war on terror' and the direction of domestic counter-terrorism policies – policies that are to a large degree based on orthodox terrorism studies research.

The third development has been the increased visibility of a coterie of explicitly 'critical' terrorism studies scholars, publications, doctoral research projects and teaching programmes. The growing level of organisation and activity of this movement can be seen in a number of specific events. In early 2006, a working group on Critical Studies on Terrorism (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; by 2007, it had more than sixty members from half a dozen countries. In October 2006, a conference entitled 'Is it Time for a Critical Terrorism Studies?' was

held in Manchester; jointly sponsored by CSTWG and the Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Contemporary Political Violence (CSRV), the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, the meeting brought together around fifty scholars from the UK, Europe and North America. Panels on a similar theme were held at the December 2006 annual BISA conference and the March 2007 International Studies Association (ISA) annual convention in Chicago; further panels and papers on critical terrorism studies are being prepared for the 2007 American Political Science Association (APSA) annual convention and the 2007 BISA conference. Lastly, in 2007 a new international, peer-reviewed academic journal called *Critical Studies on Terrorism* was established. Based in CSRV at Aberystwyth and published by Routledge, the journal aims to publish original articles on all aspects of terrorism, counter-terrorism and state terror that adopt a critical-normative perspective and challenge accepted orthodoxy.

Within the broader context of these activities, this symposium has two modest aims. First and most simply it aims to add to the growing profile of research activities that herald the emergence of the critical terrorism studies subfield. A sufficiently large and significant body of publications is crucial to the success of establishing critical terrorism studies as a recognised area of research and teaching. More importantly however, the symposium aims to set out the intellectual case for critical terrorism studies as a means of both consolidation and provocation. In terms of consolidation, there is a clear need to map out and articulate its main justifications and central commitments, as well as to begin to differentiate it from the existing orthodox terrorism studies field. That is, although critical terrorism studies already exists through the scholars and activities described above, it can be argued that the intellectual case has yet to be fully made. Consequently, there

is an urgent need to provoke sustained debate and discussion about the underlying assumptions, focus, scope, research agenda, ethics and future trajectory of an explicitly critical terrorism studies. We believe that this symposium will go some way to fulfilling both of these aims.

Turning directly to the subject of the symposium, we argue that making the case for critical terrorism studies depends in the first instance on a credible and compelling critique of the current state of orthodox terrorism studies. As the articles that follow demonstrate, such a critique has been firmly established, both by respected scholars from within the field and by longstanding critics of the so-called 'terrorism industry'. One of the most fundamental problems is that the central concept of the field – 'terrorism' – remains essentially contested; in practice, its use is always highly subjective and politically stigmatising. To avoid legitimising or naturalising the 'terrorism' label, many scholars, including some of the contributors to this symposium, use scare marks to denote its inherent artificiality. Second, and more importantly, the case for critical terrorism studies relies on the articulation of a relatively coherent and consistent set of epistemological, ontological and ethical normative commitments, as well as a clear research programme and future trajectory. It is in this respect that the papers in this symposium will, we believe, make their greatest contribution.

It is important to note that the purpose of this symposium was not to prescriptively establish a new orthodoxy or rigid set of disciplinary boundaries; rather, its aim was to articulate the contours of a broad church in which 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 was it meant to create division or provoke unnecessary conflict between orthodox

and critical approaches to terrorism. Critically oriented scholars such as those represented here are arguing for open, respectful but rigorous intellectual engagement with traditional terrorism studies scholars. One of the key stimulants to scholarly innovation and development comes from disagreement and challenge

to established orthodoxies. We hope that this symposium will go some small way towards opening up new avenues for debate and research, even if the more ambitious aim of establishing a new subfield of research eventually comes to nought.

About the Author

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