

# Critical Terrorism Studies Today: Where Have We Been and Where Are We Going?

Written by Lee Jarvis

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LEE JARVIS, JUN 13 2024

Critical terrorism studies (CTS) has become an increasingly prominent and important fixture within contemporary debate on political violence. Its contributions – in my view – have been significant, not least in encouraging us to think more carefully about the nature of terrorism and the purposes of terrorism scholarship. CTS' accomplishments include (amongst many others) documenting how 'terrorism' is constructed in various sites of official and 'everyday' discourse; charting the genealogies of contemporary understandings of terrorism; forcing attention to traditionally neglected forms of terrorist violence (typically conducted by the state); demonstrating how dominant understandings of terrorism are intrinsically political, not least because of their gendered and racialised construction; encouraging more careful analysis of the threat posed by non-state terrorism which is typically presented to publics via exceptionalist language; and, subjecting a wide range of counterterrorism practices and violences to sustained critique. Moreover, where much of the earliest work in this area drew upon discursive techniques to analyse the terrorism talk of privileged actors, CTS' analytical focus and methodological toolkit have both expanded dramatically in the past twenty years, as demonstrated by important recent collections.

In a new article published in the journal *Critical Studies on Terrorism* – I try to take stock of some of the key ways in which CTS has evolved across the past twenty years or so. My reasons for doing so were twofold. First, I wanted to highlight the pluralism that exists in this area and to demonstrate, or perhaps argue, that CTS is a much broader entity than is sometimes assumed. Although contributors to this work all share an interest in approaching (counter-)terrorism critically, they do not (necessarily) share an understanding of terrorism itself or, indeed, of what it means to be critical! CTS – I think – houses a diverse, and growing, range of political commitments, conceptual frameworks, methodological tools, and so on. And, although pluralism has its downsides, this heterogeneity is one of the reasons CTS has continued to maintain its relevance in the face of friendly (and sometimes far less than friendly!) criticism.

My second broad motivation was to connect CTS' pluralism to important wider contexts within academia and the 'real world' of global politics, and to reflect on the stakes of different visions for CTS' future. Particularly important here is an emerging body of broadly sympathetic work that pulls real attention to CTS' own biases, omissions, and exclusions, often in relation to issues of race and colonialism. Such work raises profound questions about the future viability of CTS – with some authors even going so far as to argue for the abolition of the wider field of terrorism research.

My own argument, in a nutshell, is that critical terrorism studies has evolved around three identifiable stages or 'waves'. Each of these waves has their own ambitions, foci, and contexts, and each has also tended to draw from different theoretical and normative inspirations. CTS' first wave – which emerged in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks – focused its efforts on establishing the foundations for a new and overtly critical approach to terrorism research. As a result, this – *agenda-setting* – work concentrated on tasks such as critiquing so-called 'traditional' terrorism studies, delineating the core conceptual commitments of CTS, and articulating its normative vision. Despite some internal disagreement especially around the meaning of 'critique', CTS' first wave, with hindsight, was relatively coherent and did significant ground-clearing for subsequent scholarship in this area.

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The second wave of critical terrorism studies built on earlier work through the *elaboration* of what CTS might mean and might do. With the entrenchment of the global war on terror, and the emergence of new forms of (counter-)terrorism, this wave mobilised an expansive energy, taking CTS into new empirical, theoretical, and methodological directions. Part of this move involved concerted efforts to introduce CTS to new students and scholars through textbooks, edited collections, and special issues. It also incorporated new analysis of hitherto overlooked contexts and examples, and the building of new interdisciplinary connections with other academic disciplines or projects. Important debates in this wave included around the utility of the term 'state terrorism', and the extent to which CTS should seek to be policy relevant. The outcome of this work – collectively – was a truly vibrant, plural, and ambitious body of work with real attention to its nuances.

Critical terrorism studies' third wave comprises more recent scholarship that is broadly sympathetic to the ambitions of earlier waves, yet concerned to unpack CTS' limitations and silences. Underpinning much of this work – with its efforts at *problematization* – is an argument that CTS is yet fully to grapple with its own racialised, gendered and other roots and inheritances. Because of this, there are real risks that CTS will reproduce the various forms of violence that earlier waves set out to apprehend. The stakes here, therefore, are profoundly political – and perhaps existential – for CTS, with third wave work returning us, interestingly, to the politics of critique which was so important for CTS' first wave work.

My understanding of CTS as evolving through these waves – agenda-setting, elaboration, problematisation – is, of course, slightly artificial in that it omits (by necessity) important work in this area, and because it imposes coherence upon diverse authors and scholarships at each of these three moments. It does, though, help us to grapple with different approaches to, and ambitions for, critical terrorism research and the emergence of these at particular historical moments. Looking forwards, then, it is likely that events within and beyond academia in the next twenty years will be crucial for the future of CTS. Will third wave work render CTS unnecessary or too politically compromised for future relevance? Will wider academic developments introduce new techniques, tools, or theories that migrate into critical terrorism research? Will 'terrorism' rise or fall in its global political prominence with implications for its status within the academy? Will we see a fourth wave of CTS emerge, and, if so, what might that wave look like? We can, of course, only answer such questions through speculation at this point. My own hope, though, is that CTS' past evolution through an embrace of pluralism and internal disagreement has equipped it with both the tools and the appetite to stay resilient and relevant for some time to come.

This article draws on Lee Jarvis' new piece, 'Three waves of critical terrorism studies: agenda-setting, elaboration, problematisation', first published *Critical Studies on Terrorism* on 23 May 2024.

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## About the author:

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