

## Interview - Richard English

Written by E-International Relations

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# Interview - Richard English

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Richard English is Wardlaw Professor of Politics in the School of International Relations, and Director of the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV), at the University of St Andrews. In 2009, he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy (FBA) and a Member of the Royal Irish Academy (MRIA). He is a frequent media commentator on terrorism and political violence, and on Irish politics and history, including work for the BBC, ITN, Sky News, NPR, RTE, *The Irish Times*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Newsweek*, and *Financial Times*. He is the author of seven books, including the award-winning studies *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (2003) and *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland* (2006). In 2012, Pan Macmillan published an updated version of *Armed Struggle*, in which Professor English analysed recent developments, including the growth of Irish Dissident Republicanism. His most recent book, *Modern War: A Very Short Introduction*, was published in 2013 by Oxford University Press.

In this interview, Professor English discusses the difficulties of defining terrorism and establishing a clear response to its threat, the ongoing troubles in Northern Ireland, and the importance of identifying your passion within IR when studying and researching.

### **Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in contemporary IR?**

I think that the most innovative work often occurs where there is debate involving scholars from other disciplines or traditions. One conspicuous example of that in IR in recent years has been the debate on terrorism and state responses to it. Post-9/11, some scholars who had worked on other areas, across a variety of disciplines, engaged with the terrorism problem and have produced some provocative work which has affected debates in IR. If I had to mention a few extremely able scholars as examples, then Bob Pape at Chicago and Eli Berman at UC San Diego would come to mind. Berman's use of economic theory in regard to how groups avoid defection and Pape's focus on strategic logic in terrorist activity have both been particularly notable.

### **What are the most important/interesting areas of Terrorism and Political Violence that are underdeveloped today or understudied at the moment? Where is there most need and scope for new thinking?**

Though rarely mentioned, the key gap is that most of the leading terrorism scholarship occurs in countries where there is comparatively little terrorism (USA, UK), while countries where there is far more experience of it have either generated less powerful work, or people in the UK and USA tend not to notice that work. Proper dialogue with, for example, scholars in India or Pakistan (and more sustained and honest debate between UK/US scholars and scholars from Israel/Palestine) could transform the discussion. The work done by, for example, scholars at places like Jadavpur University in Kolkata all too rarely gets noted in the US or UK.

### **How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?**

It changes all the time! The most significant shifts tend to occur when major issues arise to which there are exciting intellectual responses (my PhD supervisor Charles Townshend's work on the UK state's responses to political

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violence influenced how I thought). Historians' work has shaped much of my thinking, whether that by those I have known (Roy Foster, David Eastwood) or that by people whom I hardly knew or knew not at all (Eric Hobsbawm took on world-historical themes in a vastly impressive manner). Historians' emphasis on a mutually interrogative and very wide range of original sources, their emphasis on change over lengthy periods of time, and their attention to unique context all make the historical approach of high value, I believe.

### **What would you say is your definition of Terrorism?**

It's in my book on the subject (*Terrorism: How to Respond*, chapter one!). From memory: 'Terrorism involves heterogeneous violence used or threatened with a political aim; it can involve a variety of acts, of targets and of actors; it embodies an important psychological dimension, producing terror or fear among a directly threatened group, and also a wider implied audience in the hope of maximizing political communication and achievement; it embodies the exerting and implementing of power, and the attempted redressing of power relations; it represents a sub-species of warfare, and as such it can form part of a wider campaign of violent and non-violent attempts at political leverage.'

### **Do you feel there can ever be a single definition of Terrorism? If so, what would it look like? Is it useful to have a definition of Terrorism?**

All major subjects have terms which tend to be contested (empire, nationalism, the state, imperialism, Marxism). Yes, all scholars should be precise. Decide on a definition which seems most compelling to you, and stick with it and defend it robustly and work within it coherently. Terrorism will never be defined in a way that all agree on. But we should all be clear what we mean by the term.

### **Your book, *Terrorism: How to Respond* (2010), calls for a new response to how we are currently tackling the threat from Terrorism. What do you feel this new response needs to involve, and do you feel there is an opening in policy for this type of response?**

There's an opening, but it's difficult to implement in practice. The things that make sense in limiting terrorism might not seem to make sense in making a politician seem electable or popular, for instance. I argue for a patient, liberal-democratic, non-militaristic, intelligence-led, politically credible, coordinated response, which recognizes root causes behind terrorism. But it's easier to argue for this as a University Professor than it is, say, to get the FBI and CIA and others to liaise harmoniously. In the run-up to 9/11, for example, the lack of communication between different US agencies helped make that atrocity more likely to escape attention in its planning phase.

### **What were the changes that you felt needed to be discussed in the political struggle of Northern Ireland that led to you recently republishing your book *Armed Struggle*?**

Since the book first appeared, there have been divergent developments: the mainstream IRA has shifted more emphatically towards being political rather than violent, partly because their terroristic violence was not achieving the goals they had thought it would gain them. However, there are those who dissent from this approach who have become more actively violent and strong, partly because the compromise in Northern Ireland now seems more lastingly unionist than it perhaps seemed to some in 1998, and partly because of the difficulties that the economy has recently faced. I wanted to try to examine and explain those paradoxical and recent developments.

### **What do you think the political future looks like for Northern Ireland, given the possible influence of the Scottish vote on independence? How do you feel the 'decade of centenaries' (commemorating the formations of the UVF and the IRA, the Easter Rising, WWI, the Anglo-Irish War, the Irish Civil War, and the partition of the island, all occurring between 1912-1923) will play out?**

Scottish independence would shake the Ulster unionist community: the UK as they know it would be ruptured and the part of the UK with which they feel most allegiance (after Northern Ireland itself) would be gone. This would be a huge blow to unionists, for whom Scotland is the other part of the UK with which they tend most to identify. The

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100-year centenaries make things more interesting for scholars, since there is increased public interest, but more volatile in divided societies. There will be some sharp-edged debates and some increasing of political temperature. For example, there will be personalised arguments and abuse at public commemorations, rallies, and meetings.

### **What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?**

Read from as many disciplines as you can, while remaining clear about what attracted you to IR and what makes IR so distinctively important in your own intellectual opinion. For IR scholars who want to engage with powerful and provocative work on terrorism, I'd suggest maybe that work by people like Alan Krueger at Princeton (*What Makes A Terrorist*) highlights some of what we think we know, but also some of what might be researched in the next generation.

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The interview was conducted by Rachel Denison. She is Deputy Features Editor at E-IR, and has a Masters degree in International Relations from the University of Sussex.