

Critical Terrorism Studies – A Case of Overemphasising the Discursive?

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NIKLAS SENSE, SEP 1 2016

'We are the creatures of words, as well as their creators, and in the study of international relations the medium often becomes the message' (Booth 1991: 314).

Within the study of terrorism in the 21st century, it has been exactly this notion of the power of words formulated by Booth that has given rise to critically assessing the way scholars of terrorism have traditionally conducted their research. Under the umbrella term of Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS), scholars have based their criticism on 'core epistemological, methodological and political-normative problems' that have persisted in traditional terrorism studies, 'ranging from lack of conceptual clarity and theoretical sterility to political bias and a continuing dearth of primary research' (Gunning 2007: 363). As an answer to these problems, CTS 'seeks to offer an epistemological critique of problem-solving terrorism studies' since those are argued to be 'insufficiently sensitive to the discursive practices that both socially construct the "problem" of terrorism and frame social relationships in ways that naturalise coercive state responses to instances of political violence' (Stokes 2009: 87). In their attempt to conduct a critical study of terrorism, CTS scholars have thus pointed at the importance of discourse, understood as a social process that constructs knowledge and power (Jackson 2007c: 246).

In response to this fundamental criticism of traditional terrorism studies, CTS has faced broad criticism itself. While these critiques were formulated from very different academic perspectives, to different degrees, and also with different attitudes (compare, for example, Stokes 2009; Herring 2008; Joseph 2009; Jones and Smith 2009), the claim that Critical Terrorism Studies scholars are overemphasising the discursive element in their analyses seems to be a constantly reoccurring theme.

Since CTS is a rather new and still developing field of research and the criticism these scholars are facing touches on one of their fundamental commitments, the aim of this essay is to address the validity of this criticism. If we take CTS and its claim that its analysis is 'both a theoretical commitment and a political orientation' (Jackson 2007c: 250) seriously, I argue that an evaluation of the two commitments – discourse analysis as a normative tool on the one hand and as an analytical tool on the other – has to be done separately. Thus, the first part of the essay will evaluate the discursive as a normative tool, while the second part will look at CTS' focus on discourse from an analytical perspective. I will present the argument that while the discursive approach cannot be emphasised enough in CTS' normative commitment, there is a trend of overemphasising the discursive in its analytical commitment.

Normative dimension of the discursive

Let us first turn to discourse analysis as a normative tool. When engaging with terrorism – a topic that is being debated in both public and academic spheres to a great extent – everyone involved is dealing with highly political terms and concepts. This becomes very obvious by looking at the apparent disparity between the objectively minimal threat of terrorism in liberal democratic states and the subjectively crucial threat in the eyes of the liberal democratic public (Mueller 2006). Therefore, one of the main aims of CTS is 'a critical and reflexive acknowledgement that there is no escaping the ethno-political content of the subject' (Jackson 2007c: 249) and that the content and realisation of academic research will automatically have crucial implications for the political world.

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As a way of doing so, CTS scholars focus on discourses both within the public and the academic sphere. Regarding the public discourse, CTS is especially interested in its implications for the process of policy-making. To illustrate this, Richard Jackson has shown that in the context of the 'war on terrorism', government officials have been highly involved in processes of formulating, shaping, advocating and also legally defending the so-called 'torture policy' (Jackson 2007b: 353). By shining light on the discourse of the 'war on terror', Jackson shows how this discourse has made the torture policy possible and how it legitimised it: '[...] through the repeated use of highly-charged set of labels, narratives and representations, the torture of terrorist suspects became thinkable to military personnel and the wider public' (Jackson 2007b: 354). For instance, Jackson illustrates how terrorist attacks were represented as 'acts of war' against America or how the actual threat of attacks has been overemphasised and presented as a threat to civilisation and the American way of life (ibid.: 355-359). Thus, through their language and narratives, these officials did not only exceedingly influence the public debate and the framework for possible action, but also set the parameters for socially legitimising these actions. In other words: 'discourses provide the basis on which policy preferences, interests and goals are constructed' and 'help to construct new kinds of social reality' (Jackson 2007b: 355; 359) by implementing these, both politically and culturally.

While raising awareness of these discursive processes is an important contribution in itself, it becomes even more crucial when acknowledging the close ties between government institutions or officials and academics: It has become quite common for academics to be employed by governments, either directly by working for government institutions, think tanks funded by governments, or more indirectly through government funding for individual research projects (Blakeley 2011: 8). While these close ties not necessarily imply a biased and influenced research in general, Miller and Mills (2009) have pointed out that these scholars often represent a traditional or 'orthodox' understanding of terrorism, including a focus on state priorities and counter-terrorism strategies, without 'challeng[ing] the state narrative of the "war on terror"' (p. 422). In addition, this 'invisible college' (Miller and Mills 2009: 417) of traditional scholars of terrorism studies – to whom they count Paul Wilkinson and Bruce Hoffman, both considerably influential within the academic study on terrorism – often play a crucial role as experts in the media. This indicates that the way terrorism scholars conduct their research and address the subject of study does not only influence public discourses indirectly through close ties to government institutions, but also in a very direct manner by appearing in the media and framing the public's understanding (and thus possibly legitimising government actions in regard) of terrorism.

In the light of these close connections between the political and the academic realms, it becomes obvious why CTS scholars' aim to not only critically assess the discourse within the public but within terrorism studies as well seems very legitimate. In doing so, CTS scholars have for one been able to show how an inconsistent use of concepts and labels has led to alienating wide parts of research. To illustrate this, the way traditional terrorism scholars address the state and its behaviour may be helpful. As Ruth Blakeley has pointed out, terrorism scholars have often excluded terrorist acts that have been conducted by liberal democratic states from their research (Blakeley 2011). This can be traced back to terrorism studies' failure to come up with a widely accepted definition of the field's most crucial concept: 'terrorism'. Although a general consensus about act-centric definitions instead of actor-centric ones has developed, these definitions mainly focus on terrorist acts against the state, with consequences for both the academic and the political discourse (failing to conduct rigorous academic research and uncritically legitimising political actions by liberal democracies, respectively). For another, CTS has pointed out that discourses such as the one on 'Islamic Terrorism' have been '[...] profoundly unhelpful, not least because [they are] highly politicised, intellectually contestable [...] and largely counter-productive' (Jackson 2007a: 395). Using a discursive approach, Jackson was able to point out logical and factual flaws in the existing discourse (first-order critique) as well as highlighting implications of this discourse for society as a whole and for the process of policy-making in particular (second-order critique). Additionally, by reformulating 'alternative discourses excluded or silenced by a hegemonic discourse' (Milliken 1999: 230), Jackson acknowledges CTS' normative commitment and offers labels and narratives that 'could provide a more flexible and ethically responsible alternative to the oppressive confines of the discourse of "Islamic Terrorism"' (Jackson 2007a: 426).

To sum up the argument in Gunning's words: 'Terrorism and counter- terrorism measures kill and harm real people in real places. How we understand these phenomena, and how we address them, is too important to be left to chance' (Gunning 2007: 392-393). Thus, acknowledging the implications of academic discourse for the political world (and

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vice versa) and following Critical Terrorism Studies' normative commitment towards its analyses, the discursive approach as a normative tool cannot be emphasised enough.

Analytical Dimension of the Discursive

Does this picture change when we look at Critical Terrorism Studies' discursive approach as an analytical tool? It certainly does when following Jones and Smith's argument, who claim that 'critical terrorologists turn to deconstruction and bring the full force of postmodern obscurantism to bear on its use' (2009: 295). What this use of the rather pejorative and dismissive term 'postmodern' essentially indicates is the notion that CTS does not contribute to a constructive debate because it simply applies a certain degree of 'epistemological scepticism or quietism': 'For postmodernists, all knowledge is situated or perspectival' and 'the assertion of transcendent knowledge claims [...] is, then, dogmatic and, potentially, totalitarian' (Hay 2002: 230). Thus, 'by confining itself to deconstruction post-modernism never risks exposing itself to a similar critique by putting something in place of that it deconstructs' (Hay 2002: 217). While I would certainly not agree with the generalising degree of Jones and Smith's argument (and even less with the way they present it), they do point towards a possible problem for Critical Terrorism Studies, namely that CTS should not only critique the way other scholars conduct research, but that they should also contribute by offering alternatives. In other words: 'Rather than simply critiquing the status quo, or noting the problems that come from an un-problematized acceptance of the state, a critical approach must [...] also concern itself with offering concrete alternatives' in order 'to maximize both the field's rigour and its policy relevance' (Gunning 2007: 387; 389). Therefore, the main question regarding Critical Terrorism Studies' emphasis of the discursive as an analytical tool is whether CTS fulfils this criterion of critical approaches or whether they indeed overemphasise the discursive and thus fail to accomplish its policy relevance.

As has been mentioned above already, many Critical Terrorism Studies scholars have mainly focused on the academic discourse as their subject of critical analysis. Based on the idea that discourses function as a tool for people – both within the academic and the public spheres – to identify and distinguish units of the social world, 'giving them taken-for-granted qualities and attributes, and relating them to other objects' (Milliken 1999: 231), they consider discourse to be crucial for both their epistemological as well as methodological commitments. What this essentially means is that two different types of investigation can be identified: on the one hand, scholars can study 'the facts about which the language is used' – that is, the facts about violence and terrorist acts that can be objectively analysed and studied – and on the other hand, they can study 'the linguistic phenomena themselves' – that is the discourses of these facts as well as their implications and consequences (Jones and Smith 2009: 296). Thus, a major danger for Critical Terrorism Studies – and where CTS faces most of its criticism – is to mix these different levels of investigation or overemphasise one over the other.

By analysing the way terrorism scholars are defining important terms, how rigorously (or imprecisely) they use concepts and how (un)critically they conduct their research, Critical Terrorism Studies has certainly made an important and constructive contribution to the wider field of terrorism studies. If CTS scholars, however, overemphasise this aim of their critical approach, then there emerges the danger that terrorism studies will turn into a self-conscious field of study, exclusively studying itself – its definitions, its concepts, its purpose and so forth (Weinberg and Eubank 2008: 194). This trend implies two major consequences: first of all, by overemphasising the focus on the discourse within academia, Critical Terrorism Studies faces the danger of failing to maintain its policy relevance and to constructively contribute through offering alternatives. Secondly, there is the 'potential danger of making CTS too animated by an internal debate with problem-solving terrorism studies and making them the "other" that defines CTS itself' (Stokes 2009: 87), therefore not allowing the plurality of methods and approaches Critical Terrorism Studies generally claims to aim for.

It should not be forgotten, however, that not all CTS scholars focus exclusively on internal academic discourses in their work. On the one hand, there are scholars who critically assess a certain academic discourse to use their critique of this specific discourse as a starting point for further research that is less discursive in its analysis. One example is the work of Ruth Blakeley mentioned above: Blakeley initially criticises the academic discourse on terrorism for excluding terrorist acts conducted by liberal democracies in order to use this criticism as a starting point for empirically analysing these acts in a wider historical (and economic) context (Blakeley 2009; Blakeley 2011). On

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the other hand, there are scholars who use a discursive approach as their main tool to critically analyse public discourses and their implications for the political (and academic) realm. Richard Jackson's (2007a; 2007b) discourse analyses of 'Islamic Terrorism' and 'torture policy', both mentioned above, may serve as examples for this kind of discursive approach. It is the work of the second type of studies in particular where we should examine whether they overemphasise the discursive in their analyses.

While most certainly acknowledging the contributions made by Jackson and others (see for example Devetak 2005), there seems to be an emphasis on the epistemological aspect regarding discourse. Stokes rightly points out that 'there is a danger of these more culturally oriented CTS studies falling into a discursive echo chamber where discourses constitute other discourses that in turn constitute other discourses and so on without any relationship to other social structures' (Stokes 2009: 89). Therefore, CTS scholars must at some point lay aside the notion that the terrorism discourse constitutes *something* in order to explain what this *something* actually is. What this essentially means is that although it is correct to understand knowledge as being socially constructed through language and discourse, it should also be recognised that knowledge is always equally defined by relating to its object. Therefore, it is only with a referent that discursive and linguistic practices gain meaning (Joseph 2009: 95). Thus, CTS scholars need to acknowledge that a constant emphasis on epistemology over ontology is problematic as it ignores how discourse intersects with other social relations.

For one, this means that CTS scholars should not hesitate to use scientific research methods outside of discursive approaches in order to generate objective knowledge of the kind of violence associated with terrorism. For another, CTS scholars need to acknowledge 'the extra-discursive structures that produce and interact with [a] discourse' (Joseph 2009: 93). Eric Herring, for example, claims that 'the lack of interest in historical materialism is a major weakness and imbalance within critical security studies' (Herring 2008: 199). As he has pointed out, terrorism should be studied within a 'broadly historical materialistic framework' (Herring 2008: 198), in which a focus is placed on both discursive and the material aspects as well as their mutual constitution. Thus, terrorism cannot be explained by discursive factors alone, but by including political, economic, geographic, and social factors as well.

To sum up this argument, Critical Terrorism Studies has indeed overemphasised the discursive in its analytical or theoretical commitment. It seems to have neglected both the referent of the terrorism discourse as well as extra-discursive structures. What is important here is the idea that the discursive and the material aspects are not being privileged over another, but rather that these 'structures may be hierarchically ranked in terms of their explanatory importance' (Stokes 2009: 91).

Conclusion

In the light of continuing criticism CTS scholars are facing for emphasising the discursive in their analyses, this essay set out to examine the validity of this critique. By taking CTS and its claim to be both a 'theoretical commitment and a political orientation' seriously, a distinction has been made between its theoretical focus on the discursive from a normative perspective on the one hand, and on the discursive from an analytical perspective on the other. Given the close connections between academic and public discourses and their reciprocal implications, it has been argued that CTS' focus on the discursive in its analyses cannot be emphasised enough in regard to its normative commitments. Examining CTS' emphasis of the discursive from a purely analytical perspective, however, it has been shown that CTS is facing several limits and dangers. If CTS scholars want to do justice to both of their commitments and prove their relevance for a constructive academic work, extra-discursive structures as well as objectively generated knowledge about terrorism have thus to be taken into account more extensively. In other words, we are indeed the creators of words and by critically assessing academic and public discourses, CTS scholars have pointed to the responsibility to let the medium not become the message. It is, however, equally true that we are not creatures of words alone, but of other social structures as well. It is here where Critical Terrorism Studies should take both its critics and its own approach seriously and in return critically assess its own work.

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