

Terrorism as a Weapon of the Strong? A Postcolonial Analysis of Terrorism

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GED SHEARER, FEB 25 2020

Terrorism studies and academic interest in terrorism has exploded since the September 11 attacks on the United States. As the terrorism industry has grown, so has Western governments acute interest in the inviable terrorist threat (Gunning 2007, p. 363). Conventional terrorism studies have focused on this Western state centric, problem solving approach, which has severely limited the scope of the field's research and academic interests (Gunning 2007, p. 363). To fill the intellectual gap, critical terrorism studies was developed and popularised by several approaches. This includes feminist, Marxist or political economy based and postcolonial perspectives that have significantly expanded and improved on conventional views (Stump & Dixit 2013, p. 55). Postcolonial theorists emphasise the centrality of race and imperial power in forming normative understandings and meanings of terrorisms particular acts and actions (Stump & Dixit 2013, p. 55). This approach amplifies the voices of those often unheard and unasked, living in colonial dynasties or postcolonial societies. This essay will argue a postcolonial perspective offers a greater understanding of terrorism than the traditional approach. First, the shortcomings of the conventional perspective will be examined, including the problem solving dynamic and the state-centric analysis. The various benefits of postcolonialism will then be studied including, the ability to understand historical continuities, to properly assess Western state terrorism in the past and the current manifestation of counter-terrorism measures. The case study of drone warfare will be used to highlight these points. Finally, the 'othering' process will be analysed and its implications for terrorism studies and the conventional school.

The conventional approach to terrorism has developed several issues that severely limit the school's ability to properly assess terrorisms many co-related aspects. The first problematic aspect of traditional terrorism studies is the problem-solving dynamic central to conventional experts and scholar's approach (Gunning 2007, p. 366). This problem-solving approach is directly associated with another blind spot of conventional terrorism analysts, the closeness to state power and the related state-centric approach (Raphael 2009, p. 49). Analysed together, the state bias and close links to state power and the subsequent policy setting agenda of the conventional approach has led to negative implications for research and knowledge. This dynamic causes an intense focus on the short-term assessment of threats. Often threats labelled such by Western state interests and state elites (Gunning 2007, p. 366). This in turn, leads to a failure to place these apparent threats in a wider social and historical context or questioning the role that western states have played in contributing to these imminent threats (Gunning 2007, p. 366). David Miller and Tom Mills (2009), examined orthodox terrorism experts' writings and media performances and concluded that traditional experts are committed to supporting Western state power (Miller & Mills 2009, p. 415). This apparent Western state bias also plays a role in the conventional school's fundamental understanding of the terrorism phenomenon. For conventional scholars, terrorism is an ontological stable category, meaning that terrorism is an uncontested phenomenon, that society acknowledges as having tangibly occurred (Lutz & Lutz 2013, p.297). Critical and postcolonial theorist disagree with this summation, instead asserting that terrorism is a social construct and assumed conventional knowledge is contestable and can be weaponised to suit state interests (Stump & Dixit 2013, p. 55). These interconnected factors have led to the conventional school developing a Western state bias. Postcolonial theorists are able to avoid this bias by amplifying the voices of those in the Global South, who are often on the receiving end of damaging state decisions and by examining historical factors that contribute to terrorist threats (Stump & Dixit 2013, p. 55).

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Compared to the short-term risk assessment focus of the conventional approach, postcolonialism offers a more nuanced analysis of terrorism through analysing historical and often colonial context (Stump & Dixit 2013, p. 55). There is a clear link between current day terrorist groups and anti-colonial resistance groups. Many of these current day groups began as anti-colonial organisations, and if not, terrorist groups are often formed under the same elements of oppression and inequalities that marginalise groups of people (Stump & Dixit 2013, p. 60). It can be argued that colonial Europe was influential in developing the instruments of political action and control, including genocide, state torture and terrorism (Halliday 2011). However, it was also the Global North who used the label of terrorism as a weapon against anti-colonial movements in the past and the present. Scholars have often wrongfully labelled the armed resistance to oppression by states, especially in situations of domination by Western and colonial powers as terrorist (Halliday 2011). This has included movements such as the Sandinista Front for National Liberation in Nicaragua, the African National Congress' actions against South Africa's apartheid regime and the strikingly reminiscent situation of the ongoing terrorist labelling of Palestinian Liberation Organisation and current efforts against Israel's oppression (Halliday 2011). While the debate of the tactics employed by these organisations as terrorist actions is a different argument, the right to resist oppression and in extreme conditions take up armed resistance is recognised both in international law and political norms and values (Halliday 2011). By avoiding the pitfall of short-term, immediate threat based analysis, postcolonial perspectives have a greater understanding of the historical reasons for the emergence of several terrorist groups (Stump & Dixit 2013, p. 60). The argument that modern terrorist violence first emerged in the colonial control by European colonial powers points to another strength of postcolonial analysis; the ability to properly assess Western state terrorism.

Western state terrorism is one of the greatest contributors to global terrorism. This is due partly to the significant strength of state power compared to non-state actors and the prevalence of this form of terrorism historically and presently. In the conventional school of terrorism studies, a debate has been had for decades about whether or not a state can be considered a terrorist actor (Wilkinson 1981, p. 467). Conventional scholars such as Wright (2014) argue that there is no moral equivalence between non-state actors and state violence, due to states claim to a monopoly of violence. It is contended that those who label states as terrorists are unhelpful in offering solutions to policy problems (Wright 2014, p. 56-57). Other conventional scholars have argued instead that state can be terrorist and that it is important to differentiate between legitimate uses of state power and non-legitimate or terrorist actions (Stohl 2014, p. 50). However, postcolonial scholars avoid this false argument in whole by analysing the historical context of state violence as a form of terrorism. From the European colonial period forwards state terrorism has been used a tool by state elites to further their foreign policy objectives (Blakeley 2009, p. 53). The goals of the colonial powers were to acquire maximum territory in order to increase global presence and dominance. When they achieved their first goal, state violence was deployed to terrorise Indigenous populations under their imperial control (Blakeley 2009, p. 53). Spanish and Portuguese colonial administrations were particularly brutal, Indigenous populations were terrorised into supplying the colonisers with food supplies, with death threats used as negotiating tactics. If the Indigenous tribe was judged to be of no economic use however they would be killed, the survivors would have to endure forced labour often as slaves (Blakeley 2009, p.55). The contemporary northern liberal democracies can be seen to follow this historical practise of deploying state terrorism to achieve access to markets and resources in the Global South (Blakeley 2009, p. 53). Postcolonial theorists are better equipped to properly understand the phenomenon of Western state terrorism, by placing it in the historical context of colonial practices. One such example Western state terrorism is the action of the United States in South and Central America.

The actions of subsequent United States governments in pursuing their foreign policy objectives in the Global South provide a clear example of how a state can be a terrorist actor and deploy terrorist actions in controlling a population and furthering their own goals. The United States' actions in South America during the cold war and beyond provide evidence of the state acting as a terrorist, directly or by funding and politically supporting terrorist regimes (Blakeley & Raphael 2016, p. 350). By the time of the cold war the U.S. and its empire had replaced the European colonial powers as the global hegemonic power and the U.S. successive foreign interventions can be seen as a continuation of the powerful state using hegemonic methods to assert political control (Blakeley & Raphael 2016, p. 350). The U.S. directly intervened to remove leftist regimes in Latin and South America and supported right-wing governments in the name of stopping the spread of communism. However, there was also a clear underlying goal to these actions; to ensure the state elites in Global South states were in favour of allowing the U.S. access to their economic markets and resources (Blakeley & Raphael 2016, p. 352). This can be seen in the CIA being complicit in the military coup

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against the Allende led Chilean government. The U.S. state helped organise and back the state terror campaign that ensured the removal of Allende who was seen as a threat to American interests because of his mild reformist economic agenda (Blakeley & Raphael 2016, p. 352). This model of state terror sponsorship became a blueprint for the U.S. and was used to achieve their material interests across Latin, South America, and the rest of the Global South (Robinson 1996, p. 165-166). It could also be argued that while a more nuanced approach is being deployed in America's attempt to initiate regime change in Venezuela, the material goals and hegemonic power displays are a continuation of this period (Byran 2019). The latest iteration of U.S. state terror can be seen in the global war on terror following the September 11 terrorist attacks.

A postcolonial critique of the American led global war on terror and its related counter-terrorism tactics contends that war on terror is a continuation of past conflicts between the Global North and Global South (Gregory 2004). The response to the September 11 attacks appeared as a turning point in international relations for many academics and policy makers (Barkawi & Laffey 2006, p. 330). However, the global response instigated by the U.S. and supported by Western powers can be seen as a modern continuation of previous colonial powers policies in dealing with discontent in their imperial territories (Barkawi & Laffey 2006, p. 330). For many the global war on terror represents a conflict between the West and the Islamic fundamentalists in the Middle East and Global South – this categorising relies on the othering process and will be examined later in this essay. Noam Chomsky (2002) argued that the global war on terror, constitutes state terrorism in itself but has been excluded from being properly labelled due to the conventional school's limited understanding of terrorism and the field's close ties to the US state elites. Chomsky contends that it is wrong to label terrorism as the weapon of the weak, e.g. the non-state actor, instead it is far more effective when wielded by the strong state power, such as the U. S's counterterrorism policies (Chomsky 2002). The state of exception, which refers to the rule of law being suspended in the war on terror responses, has become the norm for international relations and has led to terroristic tactics such as torture, extraordinary rendition and drone warfare being deployed by Western states (Aradau & Van Muster 2009, p. 697). These tactics are unhelpful in stopping causes of terrorism, reinforce the terrorist threat and can be seen as a continuation of historical actions. As Osama Bin Laden said "The West's occupation of our countries is old, but takes new forms...the struggle between us and them began centuries ago, and will continue" (Barkawi & Laffey 2006, p. 330). One of these new forms of conflict is drone warfare, which highlights key aspects of the postcolonial critique of the war on terror.

A crucial aspect of the global war on terror was the introduction of the use of drone warfare as a method of surveillance and assassination of suspected terror suspects. For the proponents of drone strikes the new technology offered an advanced and humane method of counterterrorism (Obama 2013). In 2013 U.S. President Barack Obama praised drone strikes as the most humane form of warfare, claiming the technology was effective at targeting suspected terrorists and limiting civilian casualties (Obama 2013). This has since been disproven with discrepancies between the Obama administration's official civilian casualties statistics and predictions from journalists reporting on drone strikes (Zenko 2016). Postcolonial theorists view drone warfare as a continuation of the aerial policing of colonial territories by imperial powers. Satia (2014) draws comparisons to current drone warfare to the tactics of the British in their colonial territory of Iraq. The same advantages of the aerial policing then, are still present today, including the cost-effectiveness, discreetness, the omniscience of a land of mystery, and that it was romantic and offered cultural respect (Satia 2014, p. 2). Here lays the key assertion of drone warfare and its proponents in Western state institutions, its civilised aspect (Obama 2013). The apparent precision of drone strikes sets apart Western governments use of force from the barbaric terrorists they are fighting (Espinoza 2018, pp. 377-378). In fact, the drone program relies on Orientalist attitudes. Espinoza applies Edward Said's theory of Orientalism to the drone program, building on the understanding of the program as a form of racialized state terrorism (Espinoza 2018, p. 377). Orientalism refers to the West's tendency to view the East, or Global South as exotic or barbaric. This dynamic relies on the West believing they are more civilised than those in colonial territories (Espinoza 2018, p. 377). The drone program is based on Orientalist attitudes. It acts on a basis that all military aged males in Global South countries such as Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia as enemies and unworthy of life (Espinoza 2018, p. 383). These men are then presented as risks to the Western states that can be legitimately tracked, surveilled and killed (Espinoza 2018, p. 383).

The theories of orientalism and the othering process are key to postcolonial understandings on international relations and are helpful tools in analysing terrorism and terrorism studies. Prominent postcolonial scholar Edward Said

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analysed the practice of imperialism in the Middle East. Developing the terms the orient (the colonised) and the occident (the colonisers) and how these positions shaped relations between the groups (Laffey & Nardarajah 2015, p. 126). The orient was described in opposition to the West as mysterious, emotional, violent, barbaric and ultimately inferior to their occidental counterparts whom in turn were seen as progressive, rational and superior (Laffey & Nardarajah 2015, p. 126). This dynamic is still present in Global North and South relations today and as shown above has serious implications in ordering the way counterterrorism policies are developed and implemented (Espinoza 2018, p. 377). Drawing of the idea of Said, postcolonial theorists developed the 'Other' theory. This is the process of the West constructing the east as the 'Other', and has been used to justify colonialism and Western domination for the last two centuries (Khalid 2011, p. 15). The othering process, constitutes casting a group's identity into the role of the 'Other' and establishing one's own identity in opposition, and is crucial in constructing the West in opposition to the East, for example good vs evil, civilised vs barbaric, rational vs irrational and progressive vs backward (Khalid 2011, p. 15). This has been evident in the U.S. led war on terror as these racialized and often islamophobic ideals have been deployed to harness and manipulate perceived differences between the West and the East along gender, gender roles, sexuality and racial lines (Khalid 2011, p. 15).

As discussed above the response to the September 11 attacks has been inefficient in dealing with the apparent terrorist threat in the Global South. This miscalculated response has been facilitated by conventional scholars and experts and relies on orientalism. Kumar (2012) argues that terrorism has undergone some non-normative mutating and has come to represent a nameless Oriental collective that stretches from North Africa to the Asia Pacific (Kumar 2012, p. 233). He argues that terrorism as a discourse has come to represent a new form of Orientalism. Conventional terrorism studies have enabled the othering process undertaken by Western state elites and have failed to analyse the effectiveness of policies they have helped implement (Miller & Mills 2009, p. 415). The terrorism industry which had already begun to increase, exploded after the 9/11 attacks and many of the experts within the industry developed close links to state and corporate power. This had serious implications for the idea of conventional terrorism studies as objective and independent (Raphael 2009, p. 49-50). These implications include key assumptions and claims by academic relying solely on US state data, the field insulating from critique, including postcolonial critiques and the inability to recognise that counterterrorism campaigns, too often deploy terrorism as a tactic to control violence (Raphael 2009, p. 50). An example of such bias, is the attention state assassinations, a tactic clearly considered terroristic, receives when conducted by American assessed state sponsors of terror such as Iran, Iraq and Libya. Yet when the same practise is used by other states such as apartheid South Africa with little to no discussion (Raphael 2009, p. 58-59). Conventional terrorism studies' closeness to Western state power was not only problematic in limiting the school's ability to properly assess Western state terrorist actions (Raphael 2009, p. 50). It also meant the field was incapable of dealing with the othering process they were helping enable that has had disastrous and often deadly implications for populations in the Global South.

Conventional terrorism studies have numerous flaws. This includes the problem-solving approach, Western state bias and the view of terrorism as an ontologically stable phenomenon (Gunning 2007, p. 363). This has seen the field develop a severely limited analysis of terrorism. In contrast postcolonialism offers a much more nuanced and historically rich account of terrorism. Postcolonial theorists are able to place terrorism in the historical context of political violence which originated in forms of control of colonised peoples (Stump & Dixit 2013, p. 55). They have a greater understanding of terrorist groups born from anti-colonial movements and are properly equipped to assess Western state terrorism (Blakeley 2009, p. 53). This includes the recent and ongoing war on terror and associated counterterrorism operations such as drone strikes (Chomsky 2002). The important postcolonial theories such as orientalism and the othering process are useful tools in understanding the West's approach to terrorism since the 9/11 attacks. These ideas have been underwritten in the Global North's response to the terrorist threat as state power has deemed it necessary to continue the painting of the orient as lesser and barbaric to justify their counterterrorism operations (Khalid 2011, p. 15). The postcolonial perspective on terrorism is important because it breaks from the conventional school's Western state bias. As Chomsky (2002) contends, it is wrong to think of terrorism as the weapon of the weak, it is wielded to far greater effect when deployed by strong Western state interests (Chomsky 2002). Postcolonialism offers the perspective to best understand terrorism as the weapon of the strong throughout history and moving forward.

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