ISSN: 2788-8037
Publication details, including guidelines for submissions:
https://rowaq.cihrs.org/submissions/?lang=en

Knowledge, Truth, and Interest: A Critique of the Political Ontology of 'Terrorism'

Ben Ahmed Hougua

To cite this article: Hougua, Ben Ahmen (2021) 'Knowledge, Truth, and Interest: A Critique of the Political Ontology of "Terrorism"', *Rowaq Arabi* 26 (2), pp. 19-33. DOI: 10.53833/GFCU5034

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.53833/GFCU5034

Knowledge, Truth, and Interest: A Critique of the Political Ontology of 'Terrorism'

Ben Ahmed Hougua

Abstract

Terrorism has increasingly drawn the attention of both the public and scholars since the events of 11 September 2001. While orthodox literature treats 'terrorism' as an objective phenomenon, more critical readings view it as an ideological-power construct that serves states' interests. This study contributes to the critical deconstruction of the concept of terrorism by interrogating the relationship between knowledge and the operation of biopower, and the system of silence surrounding state terrorism. For this, the researcher employs two methodological approaches: a genealogical analysis of terrorism as a technology of power and a critical analysis of the discursive practices and ontological assumptions underpinning conventional scholarship on state terrorism. The study concludes that incidents of 'terrorism' are used by the modern state to justify its reconstitution of sovereign power on the basis of techniques such as prevention, exclusion, control and excision, deploying them against groups characterised as threats. At the same time, the state continues to rain down destruction on what it deems a source of evil, relying on a political ontology that allows it to exercise legitimate violence within or outside its national borders.

Keywords: War on Terror; Political Ontology; Critical Discourse Analysis; State Terrorism

Introduction

Scholarship on terrorism took a new turn after the attacks of 11 September 2001 and the fallout of the so-called war on terror, which continued at full throttle until the Covid-19 pandemic began monopolising the agenda of global decision-makers and public attention. While traditional scholarly approaches have continued to explore the causes of this type of political violence, several critical trends have emerged that reconsider the epistemological and methodological assumptions of conventional terrorism studies. Coming out of different disciplines and adopting divergent critical approaches, these trends differ even in their attitudes toward the very concept of terrorism. Indeed, some studies have begun to place terrorism in 'scare' quotes,[1] an expression of the

categorical rejection of definitive terminology, pushing what Thierry Balzacq calls 'the politics of the concept' to its limits.[2]

Critical studies view the concept of terrorism through a different lens, examining its ambiguous ties to the strategic interests served by scholars associated with orthodox terrorism studies, which has come under much criticism and contention from some researchers.[3] Yet despite the sharp epistemological opposition between orthodox and critical studies, which fundamentally differ when it comes to identifying attributes of a 'terrorist', the concept of terrorism itself implies certain operational elements that do not seem fervently contested among researchers.[4] Terrorism is distinct from other forms of violence in that political motives are paramount.[5] Certainly, the political dimension in terrorism is not limited to motives, but extends to its objectives as well. Every threat or act of violence that inspires fear among civilians in furtherance of political goals linked to religion, race, or interest falls within the operational domain of terrorism. This implicitly means that targeting the physical and psychological safety of civilians is not an end in itself, but rather an attempt to draw attention to the higher political cause of the group.[6]

This study aims to deconstruct the foundations of the political ontology of terrorism, viewing it not as a socio-political phenomenon in which terrorists cross national borders to strike at 'enemies' in their own homes, but as an apparatus of power and security in which knowledge and power overlap in order to more tightly control organisations or groups belonging to despised social strata that official discourse places outside the bounds of citizenship and humanity, imputing to them a natural predilection for political violence.

This perspective approaches terrorism in light of the concepts of truth, power, and interests. It discusses the historical particulars that have allowed the modern state, in the name of a Weberian definition of the monopoly on legitimate violence, to evade accusations of state terrorism, which has been wholly absent from orthodox scholarship on terrorism for a decade.

This study begins by laying out its theoretical and methodological framework (Theoretical and Methodological Framework). This section takes a look at the critical literature on terrorism, reviewing studies that have exposed the flaws and shortcomings of conventional scholarship and then elaborating on the methodology used by the author to critique ontological assumptions underpinning the concept of terrorism. The study then utilises a genealogical-critical method to examine the discourse of knowledge about terrorism, approaching it as an apparatus of power that seeks to control national or transnational social undesirables (Terrorism Between Power and Knowledge: The Genealogy of Policing Configurations). It concludes by taking up the issue of state terrorism and the state's deployment of its technological, military, and security apparatuses to make the lives of these outcasts a living hell (State Terrorism and the Gates of Hell).

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Terrorism is a type of political violence[7] whose precise features and components, and the epistemological identity of parties who engage in it, are much disputed by researchers. The critical literature has reconsidered numerous assumptions underlying conventional scholarship on

terrorism, which will be discussed in the coming section. This section also presents the author's approach in his critique of the political ontology of terrorism.

Critical studies of terrorism: Resisting the politics of the signifier

Terrorism studies exploded in the wake of 9/11 and the so-called war on terror.[8] Critical trends emerged as part of this discursive formation, some of them growing out of a symposium organised at Manchester University in 2006, titled 'Is It Time for a Critical Terrorism Studies?' Led by Richard Jackson and Jeroen Gunning, this intellectual movement launched a journal (*Critical Studies on Terrorism*) and produced a number of monographs and a series of edited volumes approaching terrorism from a critical perspective. Critical studies of terrorism are of course not confined to this school, as developments within this sub-field of knowledge date back to the 1970s and 80s[9] and are associated with a variety of disciplines, from sociology, anthropology, politics, and international relations to feminist and postcolonial studies.[10]

Drawing heavily on the Marxist tradition and the Frankfurt School, as well as on critical security studies at Aberystwyth University (Wales), critical studies attempt to formulate a different approach to the study of terrorism as a socio-political construct and to lay bare its political use as a slogan in discursive practices through various levels of political, legal, and scholarly operations. Methodologically, critical studies of terrorism uniformly critique positivist approaches and reject their analytical conclusions and epistemological foundations, tending instead to adopt qualitative approaches such as critical discourse analysis, content analysis, and other qualitative data analysis techniques.[11]

Critical studies, especially those associated with Manchester University, proceed from a rejection of the idea of objective reality independent of social cognition and question the concept of truth by embedding scientific knowledge in its social and cultural contexts. Scientific efficacy, as Marx says, remains dependent on lived social conditions.[12]

Critical studies view the concept of terrorism as a politically constructed signifier, one that does not necessarily naturally correspond to the signified. On the contrary, terrorism as a signifier arbitrarily refers to a field of action whose description is not without meditations between the will to knowledge and the will to power.[13] Thus, while the empirical non-critical literature trains its sights on variables that may heighten or inhibit the tendency towards terrorism,[14] critical studies tend to address the socio-epistemic construction of the discourse on terrorism. That is, they explore the ontological and epistemological background that allowed the concept to emerge. They similarly ask what leads a polity, with its cognitive and non-cognitive discursive practices, to categorise specific forms of political violence as terrorism rather than war, crime, or other forms of violent behaviour regulated by national laws.

Accordingly, from the critical literature's perspective, the main weakness in conventional knowledge about terrorism is its reluctance to delve into the relationship between the signifier and signified, which has dire consequences for counterterrorism policies. Richard Jackson and his colleagues note that orthodox scholarship's view of terrorism as an ontologically stable, objective

construct that can be studied with the conventional scientific methods and social science approaches is in fact one of the central problems in terrorism studies.[15]

John Mueller[16] observes that the proliferation of political, media, and scholarly discourse around terrorism in the United States does not reflect reality; the death toll from traffic accidents, for example, far exceeds that of 'terrorist' attacks. As such, the politics of the signifier conceals geopolitical purposes, some of which are illustrated in the way the label 'state sponsors of terrorism' is deployed politically to complicate the international relations of some political entities antagonistic to the US. More significant still, in addition to examining the psychology of terrorism, non-critical terrorism studies have begun to look into origins of terrorism in relation to democracy and development—that is, suspecting political systems in developing countries as responsible for terrorism.[17] Stigmatising some states as sponsors of terrorism, or at least authoritarian states that may foster terrorism's emergence, has thus become a justification for the overthrow of oppositional political regimes.

Concepts are not simply articulated; they materialise into tangible consequences or achievements, according to Austin's theory of speech acts. In this context, some critical studies employing discourse analysis of the war on terror have highlighted the dialectical link between words and phenomena,[18] showing that the war could not have been launched by Western democracies without a rhetoric exaggerating the threat posed to Western civilisation by terrorism.[19]

Critical studies have also redefined terrorism to include official actors, criticising the way conventional studies have limited it to non-state actors.[20] Researchers believe that such a reductive categorisation is belied by the realities of international relations. As such, terrorism will remain a biased concept so long as it does not encompass acts of violence—covert and overt—committed by governments against civilians around the world,[21] disrupting the implied parity between the capacities of state terrorism and the degree of violence perpetrated by pariah groups.[22]

Researchers in critical studies have also observed the association between terrorism studies and state interests in counterterrorism strategy.[23] This has led conventional studies to focus on jihad, al-Qaeda, Islamic terrorism, and the Middle East and North Africa region[24] at the expense of theoretical and empirical problems like neoliberal state terrorism,[25] political violence on the far right,[26] and the role of neo-capitalism in the emergence of ideologically motivated political violence.[27]

In terms of method, critical studies have raised numerous issues with the construction of conventional knowledge, for example the lack of primary data, an overreliance on secondary sources, and an overwhelming tendency for generalisation and superficial interpretation.[28] Despite general methodological improvements over the past two decades, documentary studies and literature reviews continue to outweigh other methodologies.[29]

Genealogy of terrorism: Critical-deliberate discourse analysis

This study relies on two complementary critical approaches: a genealogical one, which examines the historical origin of the concept of terrorism in relation to the technology of power, and a deconstructive one, which uses the method of critical discourse analysis as elaborated by Norman

Fairclough,[30] Teun Van Dijk,[31] and Ruth Wodak.[32] Both approaches view terrorism not as the transnational phenomenon commonly depicted in the media, but as a power-knowledge apparatus built on ontological foundations that remain uninterrogated in conventional literature.

The genealogical approach aims to cast light on the machinery implicated in the formation of a particular discourse. Following Michel Foucault, genealogy attempts to grasp the power of affirmation, the power to create domains of subjects, and concepts that allows for epistemic distinction between true and false utterances.[33] Genealogy is an insurrectionary epistemological tactic used against institutions, in the sense of the discourse of knowledge and power they create.[34] In this way, genealogy constitutes a critical resistance to traces of the epistemic institutionalisation of a discourse that has already been recruited to formulate truth and serve legitimate interests. In other words, the genealogical approach raises questions about the political status of knowledge and its ideological functions.

In using this approach, the study seeks to link the discursive practice of terrorism with practices of power. It probes the historical conditions that made it possible to place a particular form of political violence under the rubric of 'terrorism' and then turn it into an apparatus for the control of people consigned to the moral category of social undesirables.

The application of genealogical criticism to the concept of terrorism allows us to bridge the gap between discourse as power-knowledge and politics as policing and surveillance practices. It links the seemingly neutral truth of the text to strategies of control and exclusion from the domain of legitimate citizenship. This methodology is based on the assertion of the historical correlation between the epistemology of terrorism and the exigencies of power as an arena of conflict and social domination in the realm of resources and the management of human beings.

It is no surprise that as the discourse of terrorism has been amplified since the events of 9/11, political rights and freedoms have been on the retreat in many countries. This allows us to formulate the first hypothesis of this study as follows: In the name of defending society and preserving the lives and health of the innocent, the modern state presents acts of terrorism as a threat to security and sovereignty, and then utilises these terrorist acts to justify reconstituting components of sovereign power, which operate using the strategies of prohibition, exclusion, and isolation.

In order to test this hypothesis, I apply a genealogical analysis of the concept of terrorism, to demonstrate that it cannot be separated from the practices of power and that it is implicated in an array of accommodations and apparatuses aimed at tightening political control over social groups stigmatised as dangerous and undesirable.

In using critical discourse analysis, I aim to critique the assumptions on which conventional knowledge of terrorism is based. Originating in the 1990s, this methodology is well known for establishing a dialectical relationship between the linguistic analysis of texts and the social sciences—that is, between the structure of discourse and relationships of power—while showing how these relationships are symbolically embedded in social and political contexts.

Within discourse analysis, a distinction can be made between a textual approach and a social theory approach.[35] I will attempt to combine these two in order to expose the concept of truth

served by conventional knowledge of terrorism. Accordingly, the approach will involve a qualitative analysis of the power of a discourse carried by hegemonic wills towards sites of global scientific knowledge.[36]

Critical discourse analysis proceeds from the assertion that, as social events, texts help to change our knowledge about the world and our beliefs, attitudes, values, and actions. Texts remake meaning and reformulate truth on different foundations. This is what enables them to construct the symbolic world and its attendant institutional interests and public policies, which are rarely visible to the naked eye.

The key justification for critical discourse analysis is that meaning is created not only by what is explicit in the text, but also by its underlying assumptions. The conventional literature on terrorism rests on a pragmatic foundation that makes truth synonymous with what is socially beneficial and politically useful. As William James put it, 'The "true" is only the expedient in our way of thinking, just as the "right" is only the expedient in our way of behaving.'[37]

From the perspective of pragmatism, the separation between knowledge and interests in the study of terrorism seems elusive, despite orthodox studies' veneer of scientific and statistical objectivity. The search for causes of terrorism divorced from the responsibility of Western states and their terrorism-sponsoring political collaborators around the world, and divorced from deep exploration of the political psychology of particular political groups,[38] calls into question the validity of the findings of conventional research.

Indeed, setting aside the responsibility of the main agents in the terrorism and counterterrorism industry is an ontological assumption that guides conventional knowledge in its apprehension of the subject of terrorism. Critical discourse analysis flags this as a self-evident problem. This allows us to formulate the second hypothesis of the study as follows: In its construction of 'terrorism', conventional knowledge rests on existential, normative, and experiential assumptions that lead it to operate within a political ontology governed by the state's monopoly on legitimate violence and its use of such to maintain security and defend society.

In order to verify this hypothesis, the researcher applies deliberative critical discourse analysis to the silence on state terrorism in key texts written by the founders of orthodox terrorism studies, specifically Bruce Hoffman,[39] Walter Laqueur,[40] and Paul Wilkinson.[41]

I have combined a genealogical approach with a critical analysis of terrorism in order to reveal not only the linkages between discursive practices and power in the era of media fluidity, but also the geopolitical paradigms that are mobilised for their benefit through the epistemological-political manipulation of minds. This allows us to study terrorism not as a freestanding objective phenomenon but rather, as a strategic social and political construct that underlies institutional and discursive configurations and constellations.

Power and Knowledge: The Genealogy of Policing Configurations

Terrorism seems to come out of nowhere when seen from the perspective of those who carry out political violence, and this is the thrust of media coverage as well, which targets the core of

common social perception. Nevertheless, things are not always so simple. Shifting one's perspective to the constellations of knowledge, power, logistics, and security mobilised around terrorism reveals another dimension.

After 9/11, terrorism became an industry, giving rise to books, lectures, media programmes, weapons, and commerce.[42] Very few areas of social life remained untouched by the rampage of terrorism, which became an object of complex theatrical debate in electoral battles in most Western countries.[43] Terrorism laws were enacted in most states, under the auspices of the United Nations, and it became open season on suspected terrorists.[44]

On the military front, several wars were launched, in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere, the most recent being the war on the Islamic State (Daesh). That war blurred the lines between subject and object, and was waged against an entity created by Western and Arab governments, as admitted by high-ranking Western officials and rogue elements of American and British intelligence. Counterterrorism military programmes mushroomed, as nations intensified the exchange of expertise, and technical support flowed to allies; cooperative international intelligence networks were launched to hunt down terrorists and suspected terrorists across the world.

Most international organisations adopted normative and security arrangements to confront the emerging threat, and counterterrorism cooperation became a condition for international aid. In this way, the US succeeded in mobilising the world against a handful of 'terrorists' who had turned on the West after it broke political promises made to extremist ideological-religious currents, especially in the Middle East and North Africa.

This period also saw a booming trade in weapons, precision surveillance tools, personal protective equipment against chemical weapons, and vaccines to protect against impending biological attack. The sale and circulation of surveillance technologies to monitor air, land, and sea transport similarly flourished.

The paroxysm was also felt in the film industry, as action films and television news and documentary programmes proliferated. Websites on 'terrorism' multiplied. Terrorism became the most important topic in intersubjective discourse around the world, and an array of academic, political, military, economic, and social activities served to turn it into the most powerful signifier by far. Extensive emotional energies and passions were devoted to these efforts to influence minds.

What is truly striking when one scrutinises this dense process, however, is the relatively narrow scope of the actual political violence committed in relation to the magnitude of the signifier described briefly above. This relationship should shift our view of terrorism away from the perspective of its perpetrators toward the configurations and accommodations arrayed against it. These extend to major global capitals, although only some of them were subjected to terrorist attacks.

Leaving aside any apologetics for terrorist attacks and all forms of violence regardless of its source and target, it seems valid to question the significance of this unparalleled national and international mobilisation in the face of a series of scattered terrorist acts. Shifting the focus from the groups directly or indirectly involved in terrorism to the construction of the epistemic communities and security institutions to which it is subject leads to different analytical findings.

Looking at terrorism from this angle—that is, by linking it to the configurations engendered by counter-strategies—allows us to examine it from the perspective of the technology of power,[45] which renders terrorism an effective tool for controlling certain 'violent' or 'extremist' groups and excluding them from the community of citizenship and humanity. 'Terrorism' has tended toward policing configurations because it is tied to the defence of society,[46] but using means derived from techniques of exclusion distinct to the operation of sovereign power. The modern state marries the biopolitical logic of the defence of the life and health of most citizens with sovereign logic, whose brute force is directed at people suspected of and involved in terrorist attacks.

The relationship between terrorism and the economy of sovereign biopower is grounded in the liberal theory of utilitarianism,[47] which defines 'good' as justice for the majority of citizens, while leaving the minority to its inevitable fate. In orthodox literature on terrorism, this minority is identified with the sources of evil that threaten the lives of the majority. Undergirding the policing configuration is the idea that it is biopolitically beneficial to clamp down on social undesirables by branding them as dangerous. In turn, this requires them to be closely monitored, denied fundamental freedoms and rights, and placed in isolated camps or specially prepared prisons.

As a term, terrorism dates to the French revolution,[48] when it was used to denounce Robespierre's terror against those he deemed enemies of the republic. At that time, the concept was deployed in defence of life, employed as a political denunciation of the machinery of governance. Scholar Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson believes that the rejection of this type of political violence was an expression of the emergent biopolitical rationality at the heart of sovereign power.[49] She classifies the violence used by Robespierre as a type of 'systematic terrorism'.[50]

Terrorism took a different turn in Tsarist Russia as the Bolshevik revolution rose up against repression. The Bolsheviks viewed their violence as a tactic to defend the revolutionary project; their political violence was an indispensable tool against the enemies of the working class and the downtrodden masses. Erlenbusch-Anderson describes this type of political violence as 'strategic terrorism'.[51] It is analogous to the animals' responses to Mr. Jones in George Orwell's Animal Farm.

Under colonialism, acts of resistance striving for political liberation in societies straining under the yoke of invaders brought a brutal response from colonial powers against militants and civilians alike. France described its violence, in both Morocco and Algeria, as a defence of the French Republic and its cultural values, seeing resistance as tantamount to a declaration of war. For France, its violent response was a form of self-defence, but one that took place in colonised territory. The various constellations of power marshalled by France at the time could be described as 'colonial terrorism', which is also based on the distinction between the exercise of biopower to preserve life (that of French citizens) and sovereign power based on the expendability of the life of the colonised native, characterised as a 'violent savage.'

The post-9/11 period, the subsequent global order that took shape under the leadership of the US, and the terrorist blowback in countries like Iraq, Egypt and Morocco can be read against the unprecedented sway of neoliberal capitalism and its contradictions, especially in light of increasing

cultural, economic, and social integration, both local and international. The security and policing configurations embedded everywhere around the world and supported by the US express a fervent desire to defend society in the context of a universal economy of power, which gives the military and intelligence arms of neoliberalism the right to control and kill, within and beyond national borders.[52]

In this stage, one of the characteristics of terrorism as a configuration of power is its association with Western geopolitical interests. This has turned it into a global policing constellation that can now be used against states that support acts of resistance in various parts of the world— a phenomenon previously unknown in international relations. This portends political crises in the foreseeable future between international alliances based on different political cultures.

In the era of hard sovereignty, the mechanisms to control, forbid, exclude, isolate, and remove social undesirables were bound to the national politico-cultural context of each country.[53] No fixed catalogue of mechanisms was used to exclude the idiot, the lunatic, the homosexual, and the murderer across national cultures. In contrast, there has been a convergence around the concept of the 'terrorist', which has been standardised through the discourse of 'international threat.' These arrangements most certainly continue to serve the interests of neoliberal expansion, based on rules of the game imposed in increments.

State Terrorism and the Gates of Hell

The genealogy of terrorism, which has been linked to constellations of power, shows the intimate connection between the state's discourses and the state's acts. Nevertheless, conceptual definitions of terrorism are devoid of any reference to the responsibility of the state, except as a victim of political violence.[54] In the definition of the Council of the European Union, terrorism refers to acts that are intended to seriously harm a country or international organisation.[55] American law defines terrorism as any act intended to intimidate civilians and influence government policy through humiliation, coercion, destruction, assassination, and kidnapping.[56]

Of course, as the formulator of these definitions, we cannot imagine the state turning against itself. Yet what is interesting is researchers' insistence upon aligning terrorism solely with non-state groups and actors, although the definitions apply to the aggressive positions and practices of states across the world. The exclusion of terrorism from the orbit of state actions is fundamentally based on a political ontology consolidated by political and legal thought.

Among the existential premises underlying the state is its monopoly on violence. A hierarchical distinction is made that legitimatises the state's use of force for the purpose of maintaining order while other forms of violence are condemned; terrorism is applied to political violence committed by people not acting in the name of the state and law. This ontological assumption conceals the illegitimate origins of the state's institutional violence as the bastard child of wars, as Charles Tilly holds,[57] casting the state's presence and actions in the public sphere as a socially and politically acceptable and desirable moral imperative (a normative assumption).[58]

The convergence of these three premises—existential, experiential, and normative—produces a system of truth that remains silent on state terrorism. The concept of legitimate violence thwarts all attempts to make the state's use of force a terrorist act.[59] Decision-makers and lawyers often point to legal systems that contain punitive criteria specific to acts of state violence, such as the provisions of international humanitarian law, war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity.

It is therefore widely believed that the concept of state terrorism lacks any legal foundation; it is no more than a tempest in a teacup. This implies that there are fundamental differences in the nature of political violence, not in terms of its substance—the resulting damage and its danger to civil society—but in the identity of its perpetrators.[60] As Richard Jackson says:

> For example, when government agents attempt to cause fear and intimidation to sectors of their own population in order to undermine support for an opposition movement through a violent campaign that involves random murder, kidnapping and torture, assassination, and bombs planted in public places (the very same acts that non-state terrorists commit), there is no doubt that this constitutes terrorism. It is similarly terrorism if they attempt to intimidate the population of another state through the same means.[61]

It follows that the only form of state terrorism which must be recognised is limited specifically to state governments that provide support for terrorist organisations. Across the broad spectrum of state terrorism, this is only type of state terrorist act recognised by orthodox studies.[62]

In such an ontological context, scholars of terrorism fall into a 'problem-solving' epistemology. As Robert Cox famously described it, a problem-solving approach starts from the world as it is, with its prevailing social and power relations and its existing formal and informal institutions. That is, it takes the world as a given without questioning the roots of the political injustice from which it grew.[63]

Using the problem-solving approach to examine terrorism ultimately excludes state accountability, and states have worked diligently to formulate terrorism as a problem meriting study and public debate and requiring surveillance and pre-emptive military and security intervention. Conventional studies have taken this view of terrorism as a problem to be solved by the state as a given reality not subject to critique or reconstruction. In the end, this has led conventional literature to ignore the symbiotic relationship between terrorism and counterterrorism.[64]

Regardless of its political system, the state's monopoly on violence permits it to rain down destruction on stigmatised individuals and groups. To be sure, there is no single spectrum of state terrorism. Peter Alan Sproat notes that its scope ranges from the national to the international level and can take the forms of direct and indirect action.[65]

For example, direct internal state terrorism occurs when the government bypasses national laws and resorts to political violence with the intent to intimidate citizens. Societies under authoritarian

and totalitarian regimes riven by conflict and unrest offer an opportune occasion for the operation of this sort of state terrorism.

Indirect internal state terrorism is seen in a government's deployment of thuggery and loyalist gangs with the aim of undermining opponents and intimidating political minorities demanding their individual, social, and cultural rights. This type of state terrorism is typical in sectarian societies with stark religious and ethnic polarisation that prevents the ethical and civic development necessary for political coexistence. Some developing countries fall in this category.

Indirect external state terrorism corresponds to state-sponsored terrorism, or the provision of material and logistical support to a political group by a government in service of its ideological interests, with the aim of committing acts of violence in the group's country of residence. This type of state terrorism applies to the support provided by some Arab and Western countries to jihadist religious movements for the purpose of destabilising another political regime.

Finally, direct external state terrorism lies at the opposite extreme of the second type. It is naked terrorism with clear and declared aims, and it typically pursues its victims with deliberate intent. Nevertheless, it does not always distinguish between the innocent and its targets, and it arrogates for itself the right of retribution and murder outside the framework of national laws, international covenants, and due process.[66] Drone strikes fall under the category of direct external state terrorism. Despite claims that drone interventions are effective and surgical, on the ground they result in innocent victims, and the killing they do is flagrantly unlawful.

There is a kind of hypocrisy between the cold-blooded killing of hundreds of people and the insistence on denouncing individual, isolated violations of human rights throughout the world. The Western political mind is particularly susceptible to instrumental contradictions incompatible with spontaneous moral sentiment. There is nothing more criminal than arming Daesh and unleashing it on the Levant and Iraq with the ensuing destruction of ancient civilisations. Is the human and cultural damage resulting from the support and sponsorship of terrorism against Syria less criminal than what the al-Assad regime has perpetrated over the course of its rule?

In Western political corridors and orthodox circles of knowledge, problems of political violence are perceived as problems of bigotry and intolerance rather than as a by-product of economic exploitation and disparity. This epistemological bias, which Slavoj Žižek calls the 'Huntington's disease of our time', stems from the culturalisation of politics, which makes culture a stand-in for failed policies. The Slovenian philosopher says:

> Political differences—differences conditioned by political inequality or economic exploitation—are naturalised and neutralised into 'cultural' differences, that is into different 'ways of life' which are something given, something that cannot be overcome. They can only be 'tolerated'…The cause of this culturalisation is the retreat, the failure of direct political solutions…Tolerance is their post-political ersatz.[67]

The pace of political violence and counter-violence cannot be separated from the context of contemporary global politics. The imperial political bent in the era of neo-capitalism is likely to give rise to multiple modes of resistance with varying ideological implications. The Muslim produced by this context is a model of extremist political-theological education, which resumed the 'war' machine outside the House of Islam as a form of open confrontation against global politics. Indian historian Faisal Devji views this type of violence as resistance with its own particular conceptualisation of humanity, which it attempts to transform into a historical agent similar to environmental, human rights, and peace movements.

Indeed, the phenomenological depth of this thesis cannot be grasped by orthodox terrorism studies if violent acts are not viewed from the perspective of the subjective moral economy of the historical struggle against Westernisation.[68] In the shadow of a global politics without institutions capable of expressing the profound concerns of peoples, 'terrorism' becomes an existential expression oblivious of the world. But Islamic violence, which Devji interprets as resistance in the context of the institutional vacuum in global politics, appears to Fathi al-Maskini as an imperial reflection, an entity searching for endless jihadi spaces whose wanderings and quest to impose meaning mirror those of the US.[69]

Conclusion

Terrorism is part of a contemporary understanding of politics that is gradually abandoning debates about overarching ideological questions to focus on regulating, managing, and administering people's security and lives; with experts, technicians, and engineers playing an increasingly visible role. No longer do big ideas and theories about society, politics, and economics inspire popular enthusiasm and unconditional engagement. With the declining effectiveness of ideological mobilisation and the historical exposure of its ersatz function, fear has become one of the most important components of political subjectivity in contemporary societies, which rest on the ambiguous paradigm of biopolitics.

What makes biopower a politics of policing is the way it functions psychologically: to heighten the fear of loss of life in a society of hazardous interactions. It is no surprise that inducing fear through the threat of terrorist attacks is an important mechanism for social and political mobilisation at a time when politics has lost its symbolic lustre and its consensual framework, descending into shameless infighting.

In a period of preoccupation with preserving life, the division of contemporary society into groups without faith in scriptural and ritual meaning and zealots steeped in ethno-religious fanaticism helps to establish the fear of death as the foundation for popular mobilisation and political persuasion. By exposing these contemporary characteristics of political subjectivity, critical terrorism studies undermine this political charade. In critiquing the ontological assumptions of discursive practices on terrorism, critical studies aim to establish a basis from which to begin rebuilding the pluralistic and deliberative aspects of politics. This is precisely the epistemic background of this study.

About the Author

Ben Ahmed Hougua is a Moroccan academic and research professor of political sociology at Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University – Fes, Morocco. His research focusses on topics of political culture, social movements, and political instability in the Middle East and North Africa.

This article is originally written in Arabic for Rowaq Arabi

[1] Gunning, Jeroen (2007) 'A Case for Critical Terrorism Studies?' *Government and Opposition* 42 (3), pp. 363–393; Blakley, Ruth (2012) 'State Violence as State Terrorism', in Marie Breen Smyth (ed.) *The Ashgate Research Companion to Political Violence* (London: Ashgate).
[2] Balzacq, Thierry (2011) 'Violence et rationalité expressive: réflexions sur les etudes critiques du terrorisme', *Les champs des mars* 2 (22), pp. 51–84.
[3] Gunning.
[4] Jackson, Richard (2009) 'Knowledge, Power, and Politics in the Study of Political Terrorism', in Richard Jackson, Marie Breen Smyth, and Jeroen Gunning (eds.) *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda* (London: Routledge).
[5] Hoffman, Bruce (2017) *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press).
[6] Sproat, Peter Alan (1991) 'Can the State Be Terrorist?' *Terrorism* 14 (1), pp. 19–29.
[7] Clément, Pierre-Alain (2014) 'Le terrorisme et une violence politique comme les autres', *Études internationales* 45 (3), pp. 355–378.
[8] Silke, Andrew, and Jennifer Schmidt-Petersen (2017) 'The Golden Age? What the 100 Most Cited Articles in Terrorism Studies Tell Us', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29 (4), pp. 692–712.
[9] Schmid, Alex (1982) *Political Terrorism: A Research Guide to Concepts, Theories, Data Bases and Literature* (Amsterdam: SWIDOC).
[10] Heath-Kelly, Charlotte (2019) 'Critical Approaches to the Study of Terrorism', in Erica Chenoweth, Richard English, Andreas Gofas, and Stathis N. Kalyvas (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Terrorism* (Oxford University Press).
[11] Dixit, Priya, and Jacob L. Stump (eds.) (2015) *Critical Methods in Terrorism Studies* (London: Routledge).
[12] Marx, Karl (2008) *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: Cosimo).
[13] Heath-Kelly.
[14] Horgan, John (2005) *The Psychology of Terrorism* (London: Routledge); Bjørjo, Tore (ed.) (2005) *Root Causes of Terrorism* (London: Routledge).
[15] Jackson, Richard, Lee Jarvis, Jeroen Gunning, and Marie Breen-Smyth (2011) *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan).
[16] Mueller, John (2006) *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them* (New York: Free Press).
[17] Freeman, Michael (2008) 'Democracy, Al Qaeda, and the Causes of Terrorism: A Strategic Analysis of U.S. Policy', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31 (1), pp. 40–59.
[18] Jackson, Richard (2005) *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counter-terrorism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press); Croft, Stuart (2006) *Culture, Crisis and America's War on Terror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
[19] Heath-Kelly, Charlotte (2015) 'Post-structuralism and Constructivism', in Richard Jackson (ed.) *Routledge Handbook of Critical Terrorism Studies* (London: Routledge).
[20] George, Alexander (1991) *Western State Terrorism* (Cambridge: Polity Press); Wight, Colin (2012) 'NO: State Terrorism: Who Needs It?', in Richard Jackson and Samuel Justin Sinclair (eds.) *Contemporary Debates on Terrorism* (London: Routledge).
[21] Sluka, Jeffrey (ed.) (2000) *Death Squad: The Anthropology of State Terror* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).

[22] Chomsky, Noam, and Edward Herman (1979) *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books).
[23] Jackson, Richard (2012) 'The Study of Terrorism 10 Years after 9/11: Successes, Issues, Challenges', *Uluslararasi Iliskiler* 8 (32), pp. 1–16.
[24] Silke, Andrew (2007) 'The Impact of 9/11 on Research on Terrorism', in Magnus Ranstorp (ed.) *Mapping Terrorism Research* (New York: Routledge); Schuurman, Bart (2019) 'Topics in Terrorism Research: Reviewing Trends and Gaps 2007–2016', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 12 (3), pp. 463–480.
[25] Silke, Andrew (2019) 'State Terrorism', in Andrew Silke (ed.) *Routledge Handbook of Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (London: Routledge).
[26] Kearns, Erin, Allison Betus, and Anthony Lemieux (2019) 'Why Do Some Terrorist Attacks Receive More Media Attention Than Others?' *Justice Quarterly* 36 (1), pp. 1–24.
[27] Krieger, Tim, and Daniel Meierrieks (2010) 'Terrorism in the Worlds of Welfare Capitalism' *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54 (6), pp. 902–939.
[28] Silke, Andrew (2009) 'Contemporary Terrorism Studies: Issues in Research', in Richard Jackson, Marie Breen-Smyth, and Jeroen Gunning (eds.) *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda* (London: Routledge).
[29] Schuurman, Bart (2020) 'Research on Terrorism, 2007–2016: A Review of Data, Methods, and Authorship', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32 (5), pp. 1011–1026.
[30] Fairclough, Norman (1989) *Language and Power* (London: Longman).
[31] Van Dijk, Teun (2008) *Discourse and Power* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).
[32] Wodak, Ruth, and Michael Meyer (eds.) (2001) *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: Sage Publications).
[33] Foucault, Michel (1971) *L'ordre du discours* (Paris: Gallimard).
[34] Foucault, Michel (2003) *Society Must Be Defended* (New York: Picador).
[35] Fairclough, Norman (2003) *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (London: Routledge).
[36] Bourdieu, Pierre (2018) 'L'histoire singulière de la raison scientifique', *Zilsel* 2 (4), pp. 281–319.
[37] James, William (2004) *The Meaning of Truth*, accessed 19 August 2021, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5117/5117-h/5117-h.htm#link2H_PREF.
[38] Horgan, John (2017) 'Psychology of Terrorism: Introduction to the Special Issue' *The American Psychologist* 72 (3), pp. 199–204.
[39] Hoffman.
[40] Laqueur, Walter (1987) *The Age of Terrorism* (Boston: Little Brown).
[41] Wilkinson, Paul (2000) *Liberalism versus Democracy: The Liberal State Response* (London: Frank Cass).
[42] Breen-Smyth, Marie, Jeroen Gunning, Richard Jackson, George Kassimeris, and Piers Robinson (2008) 'Critical Terrorism Studies: An Introduction', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 1 (1), pp. 1–4.
[43] Mueller.
[44] Agamben, Giorgio (1997) *Homo sacer: le pouvoir souverain et la vie nue* (Paris: Seuil).
[45] Foucault, Michel (1971) *Histoire de la sexualité: La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard).
[46] Foucault, 2003.
[47] Mill, John Stuart (2002) *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing).
[48] Challand, Gérard, and Arnaud Blin (eds.) (2007) *The History of Terrorism: From Antiquity to al Qaeda* (California: University of California Press).
[49] Erlenbusch-Anderson, Verena (2018) *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press).
[50] Ibid., p. 37.
[51] Ibid., p. 55.
[52] Erlenbusch-Anderson, p. 137.
[53] Foucault, Michel (2006) *History of Madness* (London: Routledge).
[54] Jackson, Richard (2008) 'The Ghost of State Terror: Knowledge, Politics, and Terrorism Studies', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 1 (3), pp. 377–392.
[55] Council framework decision 475/2002/JHA, issued 13 June 2002.
[56] Balzacq.
[57] Tilly, Charles (1985) 'War Making and State Making as Organized Crime', in Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skopal (eds.) *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
[58] Horgan, John (2006) 'Understanding Terrorism: Old Assumptions, New Assertions, and Challenges for Research', in J. Victoroff (ed.) *Tangled Roots: Social and Psychological Factors in the Genesis of Terrorism* (Amsterdam: IOS Press).

[59] Al-Kassimi, Khaled (2019) 'Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS): (State) (Sponsored) Terrorism Identified in the (Militarized) Pedagogy of (U.S.) Law Enforcement Agencies)', *Cogent Social Sciences* 5 (1), pp. 1–27.
[60] Assumpção, Clara (2019) 'A Critical Analysis of the Exclusion of the State in Terrorism Studies', accessed 2 May 2021, https://www.e-ir.info/2019/10/23/a-critical-analysis-of-the-exclusion-of-the-state-in-terrorism-studies/.
[61] Jackson, 2008.
[62] Hoffman.
[63] Cox, Robert (1981) 'Social Forces, States, and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 10 (2).
[64] Breen-Smyth, Marie (2007) 'A Critical Research Agenda for the Study of Political Terror', *European Political Science* 6 (3), pp. 260–267.
[65] Sproat.
[66] Espinoza, Marina (2018) 'State Terrorism Orientalism and the Drone Programme', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 11 (2), pp. 376–393.
[67] Žižek, Slavoj (2008) *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador), p. 140.
[68] Devji, Faisal (2008) *The Terrorist in Search of Humanity: Militant Islam and Global Politics* (London: C. Hurst).
[69] Al-Maskini, Fathi (2016) *Al-Din wa-l-Imburaturiya: Fi Tanwir al-Insan al-Akhir* [Religion and Empire: Enlightenment of the Last Human] (Casablanca: Cultural Centre for Publication and Distribution).