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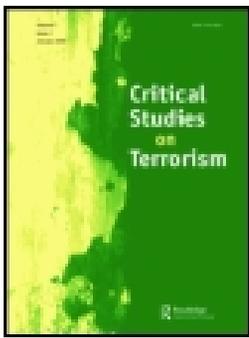
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Historicising “terrorism”: how, and why?

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Temporality and critical terrorism studies

The argument for integrating temporality into the critical study of “terrorism” is well established. As early as 2003, Maja Zehfuss called for critical researchers to “forget 9/11” (2003, 520). Zehfuss’ argument proceeded on the understanding that singularising 9/11, as an exceptional event in the birth of “terrorism”, came at the cost of deeper analyses of power. Subsequent scholars have sustained this critique: calling for a “rediscovery of knowledge” (Walker 2015, 603) about terrorism’s discursive histories, beyond the “almost exclusive focus on the post-9/11 era” (Erlenbusch-Anderson 2012, 161). Most pertinently, Harmonie Toros (2017) invited readers of this journal to revise 9/11’s framing as a temporal discontinuity. Toros found that, in nine years of *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 60% of articles had addressed 9/11 as a “moment of temporal rupture” (2017, 207).

Critical scholars need to move beyond the orbit of 9/11 and address the fullness of terrorism’s historicity. Per Zehfuss and Toros, that means situating 9/11 in the context of terrorism’s wider genealogy – paying closer attention to terrorism’s evolution in periods other than the War on Terror. What is less clear is what benefits might accrue from this historicising programme, and how we might undertake it. In this reflection, I consider one pathway for bringing temporal depth to critical terrorism studies (CTS), and suggest theoretical opportunities which arise from such an exercise.

Genealogy

The genealogical approach outlined in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault presents one route to historicising terrorism. Like CTS, genealogy advances a critical ontology of values. As Nietzsche argued, “only that which is without history can be defined” (1996, 60) – since any concept with a history carries a baggage of conflicting meanings. Genealogy exposes the contingency of concepts’ present operation, by tracing their histories and exploring evolutions in discursive function. The purpose of genealogy is to disrupt the stability of those *idées reçues* which sustain power relations, through recourse to historical flux (Foucault 2020, 383–84): “disturb[ing] what was previously considered immobile . . . fragment[ing] what was thought unified . . . show[ing] the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself” (Foucault 2010, 82). For instance, the heterogeneity of “good” or “evil”: values we absorb as universal or constant, but which are in fact subject to continuous reinvention through political agency

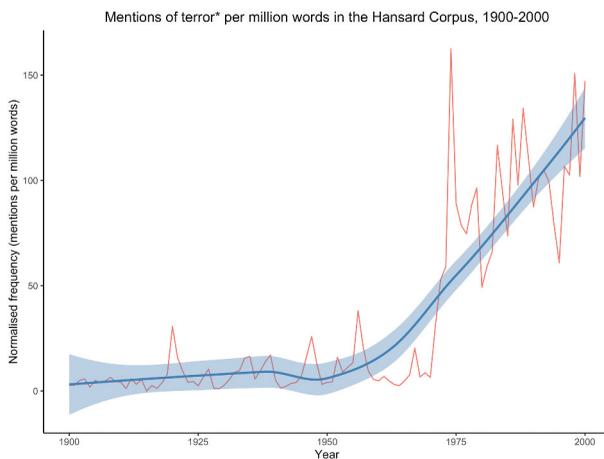
(Geuss 1994, 282). Genealogy's critical thrust synergises suggestively with CTS. Critical scholars have pointed to terrorism's definitional incoherence ("one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter"). Genealogy builds on this critique by elaborating volatility in the terrorism concept's meaning over time.

More than this, genealogy is built on a theoretical premise which adds value to understandings of "terrorism". Genealogy proposes that concepts (like "terrorism") emerge and operate through a discursive *ecosystem*. In Nietzsche's words, "however suddenly or arbitrarily [concepts] appear to emerge in the history of thought, they nonetheless belong just as much to a system as do the members of the fauna of a continent" (Nietzsche 2003, 49–50). Genealogy invites us to explore concepts' function and proliferation by situating them in relation to the wider system: unearthing those "resemblances, repetitions, and natural criss-crossings" (Foucault 1994, 120) which animate any superficially novel idea. Concepts like terrorism don't exist in isolation; they don't emerge independently of wider regimes of thought. Indeed, any concept which did speak in abstraction from the established archive would be incomprehensible, or confused with "madness" (Hook 2007, 101). Genealogical enquiry can build on CTS' assessment of "terrorism", therefore: helping us understand its conceptual purchase by situating that purchase *vis-à-vis* other concepts in the ecosystem.

Localising "terrorism"

Take the British case, for example. In Britain, we can trace terrorism's conceptual purchase to the period of the Northern Ireland conflict. Table 1 tracks growth in mentions of "terror*" ("terrorism", "terrorist", etc.) in UK parliamentary debates, recorded in Hansard. The table evidences an explosion of interest in terrorism around 1974, a year in which "terror*" featured 20 times more per million words of parliamentary debate than the seventy-year average 1900–1970. This explosion was sustained over the 1970s and 1980s,

Table 1. Mentions of "terror*" per million words in the Hansard Corpus, 1900–2000 (data courtesy of Dallachy et al. 2016).



meaning that, when British people speak of “terrorism”, they are speaking of a concept with specific roots in the tumult of the “Troubles”, and in debates around the nature of Troubles violence.

My research genealogises the contemporary British idea of “terrorism” through these roots. I find that the notion of “terrorism” which emerged in the 1970s did not develop in isolation. Rather, it spoke through a long-standing system of rules for thinking about Northern Ireland: framing Northern Ireland in the language of “problem”, “emergency”, and “question”. The 1975 Gardiner Report (a white paper formalising the Wilson Government’s policy to adopt the language of “terrorism” when describing Troubles violence) is illustrative in this respect. The Report’s logic on “terrorism” proceeds according to a set of discursive *prima facie*, operationalising Northern Ireland as a problematic or liminal place, a “disturbed community” (TNA/CJ 4/1038 1975, para. 8) where “normal conditions give way to grave disorder and lawlessness” (TNA/CJ 4/1038 1975, para. 140).

The concept of terrorism which emerges through the Report is one that only makes sense in relation to this familiar conceptual architecture. “Terrorism”, in the Gardiner Report, is an abnormal, extraordinary, troubling form of violence – reflecting Northern Irish society’s equally abnormal, extraordinary, troubling character. When it comes to situating terrorism’s purchase *vis-à-vis* other concepts in the ecosystem, therefore, my research suggests the particular British version of “terrorism” originates from a specific, localised regime of thought (what Nick Vaughan-Williams calls a “frozen regime of thought” (2006, 521)) regulating understandings of Anglo-Irish relations.

Globalising “terrorism”

Elaborating terrorism’s genealogy in this specific, localised ecosystem of concepts raises a number of interesting questions for future research. If “terrorism” emerges and works through local discursive systems (like that regulating thought on Northern Ireland), what problems does this pose for the concept’s global application? This question brings me back to my starting point: 9/11 and the “Global War on Terror”. The period of the War on Terror witnessed the globalisation of a local discourse – and the deracination of “terrorism” beyond its originary genealogy. This deracination begs the question: what does it mean when a concept rooted in British imaginings of Northern Ireland (for instance) is applied to Somalia, or Afghanistan? How do discourses move between local genealogy, and global disciplinarity?

One way of approaching these questions would be in terms of decolonising epistemology. We know there are problems associated with the transference of concepts between temporal/spatial settings. Scholars like Linda Tuhiwai Smith have explored the non-resonance of concepts from a European epistemological tradition, when applied in non-European contexts (Tuhiwai Smith 1999, 42–48). It may be that the tendency to transport the “terrorism” concept beyond its genealogical context, reading it into global conflicts, inhibits our capacity to understand those conflicts on their own terms – through their own genealogy, and according to their own political character. Equally, it may be that, when drawn into the conceptual ecology of “terrorism”, places like Somalia or Afghanistan become tarred by the same epistemological shortcomings that have plagued the Anglo-Irish relationship: namely that, like Northern Ireland, they enter into knowledge

as problematic or disturbing spaces. Historically, Northern Ireland's conceptualisation as a "problem" has not served its people's interests (Zalewski 2006). There is little reason to assume that the problematisation of Somalia would operate differently.

Another way of approaching this challenge of globalised "terrorism" is in terms of an inflection (or inversion?) of Edward Saïd's "orientalism". Saïd operationalises orientalism as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (Saïd 2003, 2). But surely, if when we talk about Somali conflicts we are really talking through the conceptual vocabulary of Anglo-Irish relations, this epistemological distinction collapses? Saïd was interested in "the power to narrate" (Saïd 1994, xiii). Perhaps the story of "terrorism" is one of coercing unfamiliar conflicts into a familiar discursive architecture? In other words, narrating otherness by re-enacting selfhood.

These are tentative hypotheses, not a fully-fledged research programme. Nonetheless, they open a door to further reflection. One conclusion they suggest is that it is not exactly necessary to *forget* 9/11 and the War on Terror. Rather, genealogising terror means placing these events within their temporal context. Not, that is, as moments of "temporal rupture" – the starting point in our analyses of "terrorism" – but as an evolution of terrorism's discursive function, throwing up unexpected questions and problems. Investigating these questions, with full attention paid to the genealogical roots from whence they spring, would represent an interesting contribution to critical understandings of the work the terrorism concept does.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

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