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Chapter 1

The Orthodox Study of Terrorism

Chapter Contents

- Introduction
- Terrorology and the terrorism industry
- The limitations of orthodox approaches to terrorism
- Knowledge, power and problem-solving theory
- The myths of political terrorism
- Conclusion

Reader's Guide

In this chapter we examine the nature and origins of the orthodox terrorism studies field, the way its evolution and practices have shaped our understanding of terrorism, and some of its main weaknesses and failings. We start by describing how terrorism research emerged as a branch of counter-insurgency studies and soon established itself as an influential epistemic community centred on the work and activities of a key set of scholars and research institutions. We then go on to examine in detail some of the main problems and limitations of the orthodox study of terrorism in relation to definition and theory, methodology and research practice, the politics of researching terrorism, and the impact of the war on terror. In the following section we examine how orthodox accounts of terrorism are rooted in a classic problem-solving approach that is insufficiently sensitive to the ways in which knowledge and power are connected. The final section explores some of the popular myths of terrorism, the ways in which they have been propagated by the terrorism industry, and how and why they have dominated policy and public debate for so long. In the conclusion, we reflect on the implications of this analysis of the orthodox field. We describe how its origins in counter-insurgency studies shaped its evolution and character, and suggest that the time is ripe for an explicitly critical approach to terrorism.

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Introduction

The study of terrorism as a separate and distinct subject began in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Before this time, political violence by state or non-state actors was studied as part of war, insurgency, repression, revolution and the like, and acts of terrorism were most often described simply as bombings, kidnappings, hijackings, assassinations and so on (Zulaika and Douglass 1996). During the 1960s at the height of the cold war, Western states and their allies were battling anti-colonial movements, left-wing guerrilla groups and revolutionary insurgencies in Indochina, Africa, Latin America and many other parts of the world. As part of the broader struggle against communism and decolonization, they began to refer to such groups as ‘terrorists’ (see Winkler 2006). In the Malayan insurgency for example, the British forces called their opponents ‘communist terrorists’ or ‘CTs’ as a way of delegitimizing them and undermining the community support they enjoyed. At the same time, some of these revolutionary groups started to adapt their strategies towards urban guerrilla warfare, with bombings, assassinations and military assaults in towns and cities. The Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) in Algeria, for example, planted bombs at cafes and other public places where French settlers gathered and assassinated soldiers and officials, while the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) began to hijack international airliners to publicize the Palestinian cause.

In this situation, a number of scholars and analysts who had previously been studying counter-insurgency in order to help Western militaries fight communist insurgencies better began to turn their attention specifically to acts of terrorism and the non-state groups who committed them. A key purpose of this initial research was to bolster Western counter-insurgency efforts more broadly and to help design counter-terrorism measures specifically. As a consequence, much of the terrorism field’s early output has been described as ‘counterinsurgency masquerading as political science’ (Schmid and Jongman 1988: 182; see also Raphael 2010). From the 1970s onwards, the field quickly began to grow and establish itself. A group of recognized scholars soon emerged as ‘**terrorism experts**’, conferences were held, new research centres were established, specialized academic journals on terrorism were founded, and a body of literature was published. The field received another important boost in a second wave of research following the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, when many hundreds of scholars turned their attention to the study of terrorism as a way of aiding efforts to try and prevent further such attacks (see Ranstorp 2006), including hundreds of new doctoral research students (see Price 2010).

That the orthodox study of terrorism emerged in the context of state-based attempts to defeat challengers, and has since worked primarily in

the service of Western states, is not at all surprising. This is because the production of knowledge, particularly knowledge *for* policy, is never a neutral process but is intimately connected to structures of power in society (Foucault 1991). In this case, the study of non-state terrorism and ways to defeat it was part of a broader strategy by powerful Western states to maintain their dominance of the international system and defeat groups which sought to challenge Western **hegemony** (see Raphael 2009; Blakeley 2009). Moreover, the context in which the field of terrorism studies emerged – as part of the West’s counter-insurgency efforts during the cold war and later as a response to 9/11 – is crucial to understanding its evolution and its fundamental characteristics today.

Terrorology and the terrorism industry

The orthodox study of terrorism – sometimes termed the discipline of ‘**terrorology**’ by critics (George 1991b) – began to coalesce into a recognizable field from the early 1970s. From this time, a core group of academics and terrorism experts could be identified as the leading scholars in the field (Herman and O’Sullivan 1991; Reid 1997; Raphael 2009; Miller and Mills 2009). Key figures in this group (see for example Box 1.1) were influential in establishing the field’s two main scholarly journals, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* and *Terrorism and Political Violence*, and in organizing important conferences and seminars on terrorism. They also published the most widely cited and authoritative books and articles on the subject, established the parameters for its study and set the terms for key debates (Ranstorp 2009; Jackson 2009a; Raphael 2010). Important terrorism research centres were also established at this time, such as the St Andrews Centre for Studies in Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV). The Research and Development Corporation (RAND), a non-profit research foundation established by the United States Air Force with ties to the American military and political establishments, as well as private security and military companies, was also highly influential in consolidating the terrorism field (Burnett and Whyte 2005). By the 1980s, therefore, terrorism studies possessed all the characteristics of a stand-alone academic field: a core group of leading experts, a corpus of published work on the subject, a body of accepted knowledge, scholarly journals, research institutions and a set of regular scholarly activities such as conferences and seminars.

However, terrorism studies has always been more than just an academic field of research. In its make-up and knowledge production practices, it shows all the characteristics of an ‘**invisible college**’, which is a group of scholars who exchange ideas, share each other’s work,

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Box 1.1 Influential terrorism experts

Yonah Alexander
J. B. Bell
Ray Cline
Richard Clutterbuck
Martha Crenshaw
Michael Crozier
Rohan Gunaratna
Ted Robert Gurr
Bruce Hoffman
I. L. Horowitz
Brian Jenkins
Walter Laqueur
Neil Livingstone
Robert Kupperman
Ariel Merari
Alexander Schmid
Stephen Sloan
Claire Sterling
Graham Wardlaw
Paul Wilkinson

Sources: Compiled from Herman and O'Sullivan 1991; Reid 1997; Miller and Mills 2009; Raphael 2010.

present at the same conferences, use the same information channels and maintain informal links (Reid 1997: 92, 97). From another perspective, it can also be described as an '**epistemic community**' or a network of 'specialists with a common world view about cause and effect relationships which relate to their domain of expertise, and common political values about the type of policies to which they should be applied' (Stone 1996: 86). Crucially, a great many of the leading experts in the field and several of the central research institutions have demonstrable links to the state through funding sources, institutional positions, interlocking personnel and policy advice channels. Some of the leading scholars at the RAND Corporation for example, have previously served as senior officials in several US administrations. Their positions within state-linked institutions and their role in providing counter-terrorism advice to the government has led some observers to describe them as '**embedded experts**' (Burnett and Whyte 2005), similar in function to the embedded journalists in the US military. From a Gramscian perspective, some scholars of terrorism studies could be described as '**organic intellectuals**' because they are institutionally, financially, politically and ideologically tied to the state and

function as an integral part of the state's apparatus of power – even if they do not always necessarily agree on what causes terrorism or how it should be dealt with and sometimes criticize state actions and policies.

Although the terrorism field was relatively small until 2001, it has arguably wielded a significant level of political and social-cultural influence in Western societies. This is partly because the leading terrorism scholars have frequently had access to state power through their institutional positions and links to officials. As a consequence of their positional influence and recognized expertise, they have also been regularly called on to provide policy advice to counter-terrorism officials (Reid 1997). In addition, they frequently appear in the media to provide commentary and explanation of terrorism-related stories to the wider public (Miller and Mills 2009). As we have shown, they also lead and dominate the scholarly study and teaching of terrorism. In effect, through these processes the leading terrorism scholars ensure that their perspectives and approaches – their 'knowledge' of terrorism – remain influential among politicians, scholars, the media and the wider public.

As a consequence of these processes, it can be argued that the orthodox terrorism field has developed a long-term material interest in the maintenance of terrorism as a major public policy concern: the funding, prestige, careers and ongoing influence of scholars within the field depends on it (see also the analysis of the broader **terrorism industry** in Chapter 6). As a number of studies have documented (Ilardi 2004: 222; Reid 1997), in order to protect its privileged position, the field has developed a number of subtle gate-keeping procedures which function to ensure that scholars or critics who do not share dominant views and beliefs are marginalized and denied access to policymakers and the main forums for discussion. In these myriad ways, as well as through their links to centres of power in the state, media and society, it has been argued that the orthodox terrorism studies field has become something of a 'terrorism industry' which generates a great deal of intellectual, cultural and political activity and wields genuine influence (Herman and O'Sullivan 1989; Mueller 2006). As we will demonstrate later, the broader terrorism industry helps to construct terrorism as a popularly understood subject (see Chapter 3) and, through counter-terrorism theory and practice, it functions to help maintain the dominance of powerful Western states in the international system (see Chapters 6 and 11).

It is important to recognize that the terrorism industry and the scholarly field of terrorism studies are neither monolithic nor completely hegemonic; they have their share of critical voices, rebels, factions and internal disputes. Nor do their deep ties to the state preclude them from criticizing the government on aspects of counter-terrorism policy. Moreover, this understanding of the terrorism industry does not imply

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Key Points

- By the 1980s, terrorism research had emerged as a stand-alone field with its own recognized experts, an authoritative body of work, academic journals, research centres and scholarly activities.
- The terrorism field showed all the characteristics of being an invisible college, an epistemic community and an influential terrorism industry.
- The terrorism industry has maintained its power and influence through gate-keeping and links to the media and the state.
- The concept of the terrorism industry is not a bad faith model relating to individual terrorism scholars, but rather an attempt to understand the wider processes of knowledge production and the ways in which knowledge intersects with the wielding of power in society.

a ‘bad faith’ model in which individual scholars deliberately try to work on behalf of state power or pursue their own interests. All scholarly fields develop their own material interests that they must maintain, and all scholars are embedded within historical–political structures which shape their values. Neither does it necessarily mean that more orthodox scholars cannot produce accurate explanations or even predictions of particular types of political violence. Instead, it is simply, but importantly, an attempt to understand how the production of terrorism knowledge – and forms of academic and scientific knowledge more broadly – functions at a broader societal level, intersecting with the ways power is wielded in modern society. It is about recognizing that the study of terrorism does not proceed in a vacuum or in an objective, wholly scientific manner. Rather, knowledge is produced within particular contexts and power relationships which then shape it in important ways.

The limitations of orthodox approaches to terrorism

The orthodox field of terrorism research – the terrorism industry – has faced serious criticisms over the years from three different groups. First, a number of left-wing scholars have argued that the terrorism industry has often acted as an arm of Western state policy and an apologist for state terrorism carried out by Western states and its allies (see for example Chomsky and Herman 1979; Herman 1982; Herman and O’Sullivan 1989; George 1991a; Burnett and Whyte 2005). Second, anthropologists and area studies specialists have criticized the orthodox field for taking a restrictive view on what constitutes terrorism, for not engaging directly with their subject, for lacking in-depth contextual knowledge and for failing to study the more serious

issue of state terrorism (see, for example, Zulaika 1984; Zulaika and Douglass 1996; Sluka 2009). Third, as we discuss in Chapter 2, a number of openly ‘critical’ scholars have in recent years started to question and challenge a number of the most fundamental assumptions underpinning this orthodox research, such as its **ontology**, its **epistemology** and its **normative** orientation (see Gold-Biss 1994; Gunning 2007a; Hulsse and Spencer 2008; Jackson *et al.* 2009a; Jarvis 2009a).

In addition to these external criticisms, a number of orthodox terrorism scholars, as well as some sociologists, have sought to review the state of the field in mapping and assessment exercises to determine where gaps and weaknesses are and to suggest ways forward (see Schmid and Jongman 1988; Reid 1993, 1997; Silke 2004b; Ranstorp 2006). Together, these critiques and mapping exercises suggest that orthodox terrorism studies has a number of serious problems and weaknesses related to the broad areas of: (1) definition and theory; (2) methods and research; (3) the politics of researching terrorism; and (4) the impact of the war on terrorism.

Definition and theory

The orthodox field has tended on the whole to treat terrorism as a free-standing, ontologically stable phenomenon which can be objectively identified and studied using traditional social scientific methods. As Chapter 5 shows, this is a highly simplistic and problematic assumption on which to base the field. The failure to recognize that ‘terrorism’ is a label given to acts of political violence by outside observers, and that the designation of what constitutes terrorism has historically changed according to political context, is a serious problem for the field. A related problem is that a great many leading terrorism scholars have employed an *actor-based* definition of terrorism, describing it as illegitimate violence by non-state actors, rather than as a *strategy* of political violence which any type of actor can employ.

A consequence of these weaknesses is that the field has largely failed to develop sophisticated theories of terrorism to help us understand the ways in which this strategy has been employed by different political groups and actors. In part, this is also because the field has until recently been dominated by IR and political science scholars, and has lacked input from other disciplines and approaches such as anthropology, criminology, sociology and the like.

Methods and research

The field has been greatly criticized by both orthodox and critical scholars for its generally poor research practices and methods. Terrorism scholars have, with few notable exceptions and particularly

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before the second wave of terrorism studies after 9/11, relied primarily on secondary sources like the media for information about terrorism; and most have never met or spoken to any ‘terrorists’ – the people they are studying (Gunning 2007a). In part, it has been argued that this could be related to the **taboo** of ‘talking to terrorists’ (Zulaika and Douglass 1996), in which experts fear that doing so would risk contaminating their work with sympathy for their actions or causes. A related research failure has been a tendency to accept information from state sources such as the security services without question (Raphael 2010), leading in some notorious cases to the inadvertent publishing of disinformation and propaganda (see for example Zulaika and Douglass’s 1996 discussion of Claire Sterling). These broader failings have led to research that is often descriptive, narrative-based and propagandistic, rather than analytical in nature (Schmid and Jongman 1988; Silke 2004a; Ranstorp 2006; Gunning 2007a). It has also resulted in a restricted research focus on groups and events that receive major media coverage, rather than systematic analyses of all relevant cases. Finally, terrorism scholars have often fallen into the temptation of thinking that the current wave of terrorism is entirely new and unprecedented (see Lesser *et al.* 1999; Simon and Benjamin 2000; Neumann 2009). The tendency to ignore history has been particularly noticeable following the 9/11 attacks when a new generation of scholars emerged who tended to treat terrorism as an entirely novel phenomenon and who appeared to believe that the attacks on America were entirely without precedent.

The politics of terrorism research

As a number of studies have shown, orthodox terrorism research has in a number of important ways revealed a distinct political and ideological bias (see Herman and O’Sullivan 1989; George 1991b; Gold-Biss 1994; Miller and Mills 2009; Raphael 2010). In terms of its focus, for example, the orthodox field has tended to concentrate primarily on those groups and states that are in direct conflict with Western states and their allies (Herman and O’Sullivan 1989; Raphael 2010). Thus, during the cold war, the vast majority of terrorism research focused on left-wing groups such as the Italian **Red Brigades** and German **Red Army Faction** that could be identified – however tangentially – with the spectre of a threatening Soviet Union. After 9/11, on the other hand, the vast majority of research has focused on so-called ‘Islamist terrorism’ (Silke 2009). This failure to study – or what can be described as a ‘silence’ on – right-wing terrorism, state terrorism (including that committed by Western states) or the terrorism of Western-supported groups like the Nicaraguan Contras expresses an underlying ideological bias: a bias that risks replicating

official, state-based accounts of danger and threat (see Raphael 2009, 2010).

More broadly, the adoption of research agendas based on state counter-terrorism priorities, or the **securitization** of academic research, reveals that the field is oriented towards helping Western governments in their short-term and immediate struggles against perceived enemies. At the same time, the claim to academic objectivity and the failure to acknowledge the politics involved in determining which groups are considered 'terrorist' functions as a deeper kind of ideological bias because it obscures the political values which determine who to study and how to study them. Finally, it has long been acknowledged that there is a real danger of bias creeping in when terrorism scholars receive most of their funding from state sources (Ranstorp 2006). As occurred with tobacco-industry-funded research on the effects of smoking, scholars researching terrorism face both overt and subtle forms of pressure to produce results and advice which will satisfy their (government) donors. As before, this is not a bad faith argument which questions the integrity of individual scholars; rather, it is simply to highlight the kinds of relationships and practices which impact upon the way the broader field conceives of, and studies, its primary subject.

The impact of the war on terrorism

The war on terrorism launched after 2001 has had a noticeably chilling effect on terrorism research. This is due in large part to the disciplinary nature of the 'either for us or against us' rhetoric of political elites such as President George W. Bush, the political demands for displaying national unity in the fight against terrorism, and the co-option of researchers into government research programmes on radicalization, for example. In some cases, censorship and self-censorship appear to have led some scholars to alter the focus of their research and downplay findings which are critical of state policies or which challenge widely accepted knowledge. Importantly, the war on terrorism has also created a legal environment which means that scholars who withhold information about informants, or who possess certain kinds of widely available materials, or who speak directly with terrorist groups, can be charged under anti-terrorism laws. There has also been pressure from security services on academics in the UK and elsewhere to inform on their students and report suspicious behaviour or the expression of extremist views (see Breen Smyth 2009). An effect of these types of pressure has been to further focus and channel terrorism research in particular directions, such as towards state priorities, and close down other areas of research.

To conclude, as we noted above, it is important to recognize that not all orthodox terrorism research is necessarily poor or politically biased

Key Points

- Orthodox terrorism research has come in for criticism over the years by left-wing scholars, anthropologists and area study specialists, orthodox scholars themselves and, more recently, critical scholars.
- A key problem for orthodox terrorism research has been its tendency to treat terrorism as an objective phenomenon which is defined by the actor rather than the act.
- Orthodox terrorism research has often relied on poor and secondary research methods, and has limited itself to a narrow set of research questions.
- Orthodox terrorism research has frequently been politically and ideologically biased towards Western governments and their security agendas.
- The war on terrorism has had politicizing and chilling effects on terrorism research in recent years.
- While not all orthodox terrorism research is necessarily poor, a great deal of the voluminous literature in the field is overly descriptive, condemnatory and biased.

in the ways we have described here, nor do all orthodox terrorism scholars act solely in the state's interests. Some important and rigorous analyses based on primary research by orthodox scholars have challenged existing understandings of terrorism and made a real contribution to knowledge (see, for example, Gurr 1970; Crenshaw 1981, 1995, 2008; Porta 1992, 1995b; Pape 2005). However, such rigorous non-traditional work has been relatively rare and unrepresentative of the field as a whole, much of whose research can be described as overly descriptive, theoretically unsophisticated, condemnatory and ideologically biased. The situation has improved somewhat in the years since 9/11 (Silke 2004a; Ranstorp 2006), but many of the major problems we have described remain.

Knowledge, power and problem-solving theory

Another important means of assessing the field of terrorism studies lies in understanding the difference between **traditional** or **problem-solving theory** and **critical theory** (Cox 1981). This distinction is an important one because it encourages us to think rather more carefully about the purposes or functions of knowledge claims, as well as their accuracy. It encourages us to question, in other words, *why* particular understandings of our social and political existence become popular when others

do not – how specific models and frameworks of our world come to dominate certain historical moments.

For a very long time, social scientists across the disciplines have laboured under the belief that an objective and value-free understanding of the social world is achievable. This approach – often referred to as **positivism** – views the study of social problems and issues as a practice that is essentially identical to the study of scientific questions. Knowledge here is seen as something that is neutral and independent from its creator, something unaffected by the researcher's own interests, status or background. The Truth (with a capital T), in other words, is out there simply waiting to be discovered by the scientific observer.

This traditional approach to theory suffers from a number of problems. In the first instance, it fails to recognize the ways in which all theorists and analysts are submerged within particular social worlds, histories and practices (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 9). Yet, as we have already seen in this chapter, many of the most influential experts on terrorism are thoroughly embedded in a range of state institutions and interests – as well as in their Western cultural and historical contexts. Second, because traditional theory takes the world 'out there' as its point of departure, it tends to focus on attempting to resolve problems as they arise in this world without questioning how and why this status quo came into being. In the words of Robert Cox (1981: 128–9), this problem-solving approach to theoretical knowledge 'takes the world as it finds it, with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organised, as the given framework for action', and then tries to 'make these relationships and institutions work smoothly by dealing effectively with particular sources of trouble'. This rather conservative stance means that problem-solving approaches do not seek to challenge the status quo with all of its hierarchies, inequalities and injustices. Instead, they tend to serve it by assuming that existing power structures are natural and immutable and then attempt to ally or control challenges to that existing order. Finally, by adopting what appear to be scientific language and methods, with their impression of accuracy, traditional theory also transforms the management of social conflict into a series of technical problems, thereby obscuring the deeper political and ethical questions at the heart of managing social conflict.

Although this traditional approach to knowledge has historically dominated all areas of the social sciences, there has been a number of prominent efforts at challenging its assumptions. Some of these challenges are based on the recognition that **knowledge and power** are intimately connected – that 'theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose' (ibid.: 128; see also Gunning 2007a; Toros and Gunning 2009). From this standpoint, all efforts to explain the social world are

Box 1.2 Problem-solving and critical theory: some key quotations

The critical theory of society ... has for its object men as producers of their own historical way of life in its totality. The real situations which are the starting-point of science are not regarded simply as data to be verified and to be predicted according to the laws of probability. Every datum depends not on nature alone but also on the power man has over it. Objects, the kind of perception, the questions asked, and the meaning of the answers all bear witness to human activity and the degree of man's power.

(Horkheimer 1972: 244)

Theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose.

(Cox 1981: 128)

A critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest.

(Foucault 1988: 155)

Adopting a Critical Theory approach to the study of terrorism first of all means uncovering the ideological, conceptual and institutional underpinnings of terrorism studies.

(Toros and Gunning 2009: 90)

tied up with the interests and perspectives of their creators (Held 1990: 192), and, just as importantly, they all have consequences for the worlds that are being explained. For example, the IR theory of political realism, which argues that states are the main legitimate unit within global politics and that national interests are more important than transnational moral concerns, clearly works *for* the interests of states and their ruling elites. The knowledge of realist-based IR, therefore, is part of the structures and processes that consolidate state power. More than this, however, critical approaches also acknowledge that theory and knowledge always comes *from* somewhere; that is, it is located in, and reflects, the values and assumptions of the particular historical and social context in which it emerges. Critical theorists thus not only question whether completely objective knowledge and theory is possible; they also question who benefits by claiming that it is (see Box 1.2).

Applying this framework to the field of terrorism studies, it appears obvious that orthodox terrorism research is an example of traditional

Key Points

- Traditional or problem-solving theory takes existing power structures for granted and attempts to solve the ‘problems’ which threaten the status quo.
- Critical theory acknowledges the power–knowledge connection and argues that theory always works for someone and for some purpose.
- The orthodox terrorism studies field is an example of problem-solving theory which treats terrorism primarily as a problem to be solved.
- Studying terrorism from a problem-solving perspective has led to a number of serious weaknesses and problems, such as lack of context, equating state security with human security, ignoring state violence and working to maintain Western hegemony.

or problem-solving theory (Gunning 2007a). From its origins in counterinsurgency studies, it has always proceeded on the basis that the status quo needs protection from the ‘problem’ of terrorism, and it has sought to help the state deal more effectively with that problem. It has also largely ignored historical and political contexts, particularly in terms of examining whether the state itself and its repressive apparatus might have played a role in creating an environment in which terrorism may seem desirable (and even legitimate) to some actors. This **state-centric** and status quo-oriented nature of orthodox terrorism research has resulted in a series of important weaknesses and problems. For example, the field has tended to equate human security with state security, ignored numerous instances of state terrorism, marginalized and excluded alternative perspectives and explanations, and, as we have already described, worked to uphold Western hegemony and dominance (Toros and Gunning 2009).

The myths of political terrorism

A common criticism of the orthodox terrorism studies field is that it has long maintained and propagated a number of dubious knowledge claims or myths of terrorism (Gold-Biss 1994; Stohl 1979, 2008; Jackson 2009a). That is, over time, a number of key assumptions and arguments about the nature, causes and responses to terrorism have become accepted as common knowledge. While there is no hard and fast agreement on which knowledge claims are myths – Stohl’s myths of terrorism (see Box 1.3) include the statement that one person’s terrorist may be someone else’s freedom fighter, which we argue is a useful expression of the subjectivity involved in defining terrorism – it

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Box 1.3 Michael Stohl's ten myths of political terrorism

According to Michael Stohl (1979, 2008), ten common myths of terrorism are:

1. Political terrorism is exclusively the activity of non-governmental actors.
2. All terrorists are madmen.
3. All terrorists are criminals.
4. One person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter.
5. All insurgent violence is political terrorism.
6. The purpose of terrorism is the production of chaos.
7. Governments always oppose non-governmental terrorism.
8. Political terrorism is exclusively a problem relating to internal political conditions.
9. The source of contemporary political terrorism may be found in the evil of one or two major actors.
10. Political terrorism is a strategy of futility.

is possible to identify a number of frequently expressed claims which make up the accepted myths of terrorism.

First, as we have already argued (see also Chapter 5), much orthodox terrorism research assumes that terrorism exists as an ontologically stable, identifiable phenomenon which can be understood and studied objectively and scientifically, and without any obvious political bias. Related to this, it is commonly believed that terrorism refers solely to forms of illegitimate violence committed by non-state actors like rebel groups and insurgents, although **rogue states** might sometimes sponsor the terrorism of non-state groups. In other words, while states do commit violence, it is commonly believed that this particular type of violence is essentially different to the terrorism committed by non-state actors. Another widely accepted myth about terrorism is that liberal democratic (mainly Western) states never engage in terrorism as a matter of policy, only in error or misjudgement. Instead, they are always implacably opposed to the use of terrorism.

However, as Chapter 6 demonstrates, the core sustaining myth of the field is that non-state terrorism poses such an urgent and existential threat to modern societies that, without significant investment in counter-terrorism, could be catastrophic to Western states and the international system. A related myth is the belief that the world now faces a 'new terrorism' which is religiously motivated, willing to employ weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and aimed primarily at causing mass casualties (see Chapter 7). Other popular myths of ter-

rorism include: terrorism aims primarily to cause destruction and chaos; terrorism is futile and irrational because it is rarely if ever successful; the roots of terrorism lie in poverty, religious extremism and individual psychology, and not necessarily in state policies, occupation or legitimate grievances (see Chapter 9); individuals become involved in terrorism through personality defects, deviance, criminal tendencies, religious radicalization or psychological abnormalities; democratic states are more vulnerable to terrorism because of their inherent rights and freedoms; the media often aids terrorism by providing it with the oxygen of publicity; force-based counter-terrorism is legitimate and effective as a response to terrorist campaigns; because terrorism represents an extraordinary threat, sometimes extraordinary measures are required to deal with it, such as employing torture or restricting civil liberties (see Chapter 10).

While not every one of these myths is necessarily accepted or repeated by all orthodox terrorism scholars (there is a growing consensus that terrorists are not psychologically abnormal, for example, and a great many orthodox scholars oppose torture), collectively they make up the common knowledge of terrorism which is generally accepted by politicians, the media, a great many scholars and the wider society. They are continuously reproduced in articles in the main terrorism studies and IR journals, at conferences and seminars, in the media, in official government reports and statements, and in hundreds of publications every year by academics, terrorism experts and think-tanks. They are also reproduced culturally and socially through teaching in schools and universities, and through popular entertainment and the arts (see Chapter 3). There are literally hundreds of films and television shows such as *Die Hard*, *The Kingdom* and *24* which show deranged or fanatical religious terrorists threatening to attack Western cities with WMD, for example. In these processes of knowledge diffusion, the terrorism industry has played an important role by providing academic and scientific authority to the main claims. More directly, a number of the core terrorism experts regularly appear in the media and provide advice to politicians (see Miller and Mills 2009).

As will become obvious over the course of this book, virtually all of these assumptions and arguments about terrorism are contestable and open to question. For example, in Chapter 5 we show that terrorism is a social fact which cannot be defined or studied objectively, while Chapter 6 demonstrates that terrorism is by any measure actually a fairly minor threat to society. In Chapter 7, we debunk the idea of a 'new terrorism' and 'religious terrorism', while Chapter 8 clearly shows that states can be terrorists too, *including* Western states. Chapter 9 demonstrates that the causes of terrorism do not necessarily lie in poverty, psychopathy or religion, while Chapter 10 questions

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whether countering terrorism ever requires extraordinary methods like suspending civil liberties. A key question, therefore, is: How are these myths maintained as widely accepted knowledge in society if they are so easily refuted and open to challenge? How does dubious and biased knowledge such as this maintain its influence in society? Who gains power and benefits from this knowledge?

There are different perspectives we can use to try and answer these types of question. First, at the level of the terrorism industry itself, it can be argued that its poor theories and research methods – and in particular its lack of primary research – mean that it rarely questions its primary findings or asks the kinds of challenging questions which might raise doubts about its knowledge. A detailed study of prominent scholars of terrorism studies found that the research process among these intellectuals was a closed, circular and static system of information which tended to accept dominant myths about terrorism without strong empirical investigation for long periods of time before research later disproved them (Reid 1993: 28). In Thomas Kuhn's (1996) language, these researchers were working within a particular form of intellectual **paradigm** based on a shared understanding of terrorism itself, and of the ways in which knowledge about terrorism could be acquired. Under such circumstances, it is very difficult indeed for an individual scholar to challenge commonly held assumptions and beliefs.

It is also important to ask for whom this knowledge works and who benefits from its wide acceptance. There are a range of powerful actors in society who directly benefit from the maintenance of these myths and who therefore have a vested interest in their continuation – not least, the terrorism industry itself which depends on them for its funding, influence, prestige and careers (Chapter 6). The state for example, benefits from the extra powers it can claim in the fight against terrorism, while the media benefits from the never-ending supply of dramatic stories and sensational scenarios (Chapter 3). Materially, a whole range of government departments and private companies benefit from the myths of terrorism, such as the police and security services who receive increased funding and extra powers to fight the 'new terrorism', and the private security firms contracted to provide screening services at airports and other protection services (Chapter 11).

Importantly, those that seek to question these established understandings can often be targeted not only with criticism but also hostility for their views (see, for example, Der Derian 2009: xx–xxi). A well known public report in the USA from the immediate post-9/11 period, for example, picked out a number of American academics by name in order to decry their lack of patriotism, arguing: 'rarely did professors publicly mention heroism, rarely did they discuss the difference between good

and evil, the nature of Western political order or the virtue of a free society. Indeed, the message of many in academe was clear: **BLAME AMERICA FIRST**' (ACTA 2001). As this suggests, there are a range of powerful social actors who would not want the myths of terrorism to be disproved or questioned because they are tied to important material, political and ideological interests. In other words, the terrorism industry itself has an incentive to maintain these myths.

A final perspective on the question of how the myths of terrorism are maintained is the notion that these myths have become, and now function as, a dominant **discourse** or a **regime of truth** in Western societies. In other words, the myths and **narratives** about terrorism have been repeated so many times by so many authoritative actors in society, and have then been acted upon as if they were indeed true (through counter-terrorism practices, for example), that they have taken on a sense of external reality which in turn seems to confirm the myths. For example, through the daily counter-terrorism actions of the police, security services, airline officials and others, the 'truth' of the great threat posed by terrorism has become a concrete, living reality which seems intuitively commonsensical to most people. In part, this is because people are inclined to assume that the government would not expend so much money, effort and intellectual capital trying to counter something that was not demonstrably threatening and not in any way exaggerated.

At the same time, the terrorism discourse is functional to the state because it can be employed as a way of directly exercising power: the state can use the terrorist threat as an excuse to crack down on dissent and protest, for example. More prosaically, the state needs to be seen to be protecting its citizens from threats in order to legitimize its continued authority. The discourse can also be directly employed to reinforce and bolster a sense of national identity (see Campbell 1998): the

Key Points

- There is a series of myths that collectively make up commonly accepted knowledge about terrorism, such as the notion that terrorism is a major threat, that it is caused by radicalization and that countering it with force is effective and legitimate.
- These myths have spread across society, with the terrorism industry playing a key role in their dissemination.
- Virtually all the myths of terrorism are questionable and open to challenge.
- The myths of terrorism are maintained as accepted knowledge in society because of the closed knowledge system of the terrorism industry, the vested interests in maintaining such knowledge and the operation of the terrorism truth regime.

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state can claim that terrorists are attacking us because of our values and who we are, for example. One of the consequences of the established truth regime about terrorism is that it is extremely difficult to oppose or counter, because alternative arguments both contradict accepted commonsense and seem disloyal to the nation, even when they are based on concrete evidence and arguments. This is why the publicly available evidence and arguments which we have marshalled in the following chapters is often not widely known or publicly discussed.

Conclusion

It is important to reiterate that not all orthodox terrorism research is beset by the problems and weaknesses we have described in this chapter; nor are all orthodox scholars implicated in the political relationships we have outlined. A number of terrorism scholars working within the problem-solving framework have produced outstanding research which to this day informs our understanding of terrorism (see for example Gurr 1970; Crenshaw 1995; Pape 2005). Moreover, terrorism research has greatly improved in recent years following the 9/11 attacks. Nonetheless, the broader field continues to be characterized by some serious weaknesses and problems which continue to taint its output and hamper its progress (see Burnett and Whyte 2005; Gunning 2007a; Jackson 2008, 2009a; Jackson *et al.* 2009b).

The origins of the field in counter-insurgency studies and its subsequent evolution into a powerful terrorism industry has profoundly shaped the nature and characteristics of terrorism studies to this day. Among others, there are four important legacies of these early developments. First, the field has focused almost entirely on the issue of non-state terrorism, with the much greater and more endemic terrorism perpetuated by states (Chapter 8), and the more costly and damaging results of state counter-terrorism (Chapters 10 and 11), having remained largely unstudied within its confines. Second, the field has concentrated largely on anti-Western revolutionary groups, whether communist or Islamist, and largely ignored pro-state terrorism and the experience of terrorism in the developing world. Third, the field has adopted a problem-solving orientation and allowed the imperatives of state counter-terrorism largely to determine the research agenda. As a consequence, the vast majority of studies on terrorism aim to provide specific advice for state counter-terrorism policy, rather than, say, improving the lives of ordinary people (although the two are not mutually exclusive). Lastly, the field has largely studied terrorism as a separate, stand-alone phenomenon, rather than in the context of broader conflicts, forms of structural violence, social movements and history.

In summary, the field's origins in cold war counter-insurgency efforts, as well as the impact of 9/11, have left a lasting legacy of state-centrism and **Eurocentrism** in which the study of terrorism functions largely as an effort to find effective means for countering perceived anti-Western terrorism. This is not at all surprising. In fact, it is indicative of the way in which power and knowledge functions in the maintenance of hegemony in modern states.

Despite, and perhaps because of, this situation, a number of openly critical scholars of terrorism have put forward the argument that the time is now ripe for a new, openly critical approach to the study of terrorism – one which is theoretically and methodologically rigorous, sensitive to the politics of labelling, self-reflective about issues of knowledge and power, and committed to conflict resolution and human security (Gunning 2007a; Jackson *et al.* 2009a; Jarvis 2009b). Moreover, these scholars suggest that the failures in counter-terrorism strategy shown up in Iraq and Afghanistan, the revelations of torture and abuse in the war on terrorism and the election of President Barack Obama in 2008 have created an openness by officials and scholars towards alternative approaches and ideas. The present historical juncture, in other words, seems ripe for CTS.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the origins of terrorism studies and how did these roots affect its evolution as a field?
2. In what ways does the orthodox terrorism studies field constitute an epistemic community or terrorism industry?
3. How does the terrorism industry wield influence?
4. What main problems of definition and theory does the orthodox field face?
5. What main problems of methodology and approach does the orthodox field face?
6. In what ways is the orthodox field politically biased?
7. What have been some of the effects of the war on terrorism on terrorism research?
8. What are some of the main terrorism myths maintained by the terrorism industry?
9. Who benefits from the commonly accepted knowledge about terrorism?
10. How is the terrorism truth regime maintained in society?
11. What makes the current historical juncture a ripe moment for the adoption of a more critical approach to the study of terrorism?

Recommended Reading

- George, A., ed., 1991. *Western State Terrorism*, Cambridge: Polity Press. An edited collection of articles examining the terrorism industry and its role in concealing Western state terrorism across the world.
- Herman, E., 1982. *The Real Terror Network: Terrorism in Fact and Propaganda*, Cambridge, MA: South End Press. A critical analysis of the terrorism industry and its assistance to Western-supported anti-communist state terror in many developing nations allied to the West.
- Herman, E. and O'Sullivan, G., 1989. *The 'Terrorism' Industry: The Experts and Institutions that Shape our View of Terror*, New York: Pantheon Books. The classic critical analysis of the terrorism industry, its central scholars and its political bias towards Western geostrategic interests.
- Ranstorp, M., ed., 2006. *Mapping Terrorism Research: State of the Art, Gaps and Future Direction*, London: Routledge. An edited collection of articles analysing the state of the art in contemporary terrorism research, particularly as it relates to the post-9/11 period.
- Silke, A., ed., 2004. *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements and Failures*, London: Frank Cass. An edited collection which examines some of the most important trends in the study of terrorism over the past few decades.

Web Resources

The Terrorism Expertise Portal: www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Terrorism_Expertise_Portal

A portal with a wide range of links and articles about the role of terrorism experts in shaping the views of the public, policy-makers and the academy.

The Consortium for Research on Terrorology and Political Violence (CRTPV): www.publicinterest.ac.uk/working-groups/40-consortium-for-research-on-terrorology-and-political-violence-crtpv

CRTPV is a consortium of academics operating under the auspices of the Network of Activist Scholars of Politics and International Relations (NASPIR) and the Public Interest Research Network (PIRN) on issues surrounding terrorism experts and counter-terrorism. The website has links to numerous articles analysing the personnel and practices of terrorology.

The RAND Corporation: www.rand.org/research_areas/terrorism/

The RAND Corporation is one of the most important security think-tanks in the USA. This webpage provides information about its counter-terrorism research.

The Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence: www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~wwwir/research/cstpv/

The CSTPV at the University of St Andrews is one of the oldest and most important research centres on the study of terrorism.

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