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Introduction  The ‘Terrorist’: Words, Labels and Definitions

‘[W]hat one calls things matters. There are few neutral terms in politics, because political language affects the perceptions of protagonists and audiences, and such effect acquires a greater urgency in the drama of terrorism’ (Crenshaw 1995)

Struggling with words and definitions has tradition in terrorism research. If people know anything about the field of Terrorism Studies it is most probably that it has failed to find a definition of its own subject. All interested in the issue of terrorism are fully aware of the age old definitional problems and the debate about what terrorism ‘really’ is and whether or not a definition is something worth worrying about. So, ‘terrorism’ is a one of the many essentially contested concepts (Gallie 1956) and some may ask: So what? We are all pretty much aware of what constituted terrorism, even if we are unable to phrase a suitable three-line dictionary style definition. In general most would agree on many of the central aspects of what terrorism is. Similar to pornography, you know it when you see it (Der Derian 2005: 25; Richardson 2006: 19). So, some may argue that it does not really matter what we call it. They are only words. This book would disagree. Although striving for exact definitions may be overrated, language and words do matter as they are the only way of making sense of the world and assigning meaning to it. Words do not only describe reality, but they actively take part in the construction of the world as we see, talk, hear, imagine and ultimately react to it. It is the phenomenon of reality construction and it is our reaction to such constructions this book is interested in. It hopes to make two contributions. Firstly and more generally it wants to outline the importance of language in the study of terrorists and indicate a constructivist theoretical understanding of terrorism research. Secondly, and
more particularly, it wants to do so by examining how certain con-
structions of ‘the terrorist’ in discourse make certain counter-terrorism
policies possible, logical and seemingly appropriate. Thereby it wants
to demonstrate that constructivist (terrorism) studies can be policy rel-
vant and that such research can breakout of what has been called the
‘discursive echo chamber where discourses constitute other discourses
that in turn constitute other discourses’ (Stokes 2009: 89). The book is
therefore not only of interest to Terrorism Research but also to Inter-
national Relations (IR) more generally, as it provides an example of
empirical constructivist research of international political phenomena.

Terrorism research and its fascination with definitions

Terrorism research used to be a fairly small operation with only a handful
of academics around the world. However, since 9/11 the amount of liter-
ature on terrorism has exploded as there are thousands of books and
articles written on the subject every year. In fact, they say that one book
on terrorism is published every six hours (Silke 2008) and the subject area
of terrorism research is one of the ‘fastest expanding areas of research in
the English-speaking academic world’ (Jackson 2008a: 377). It has its own
dedicated peer-reviewed journals,1 its own conferences, university courses,2
research centres3 and academics4 (Jackson 2009: 66). And many now
consider terrorism research to be its own ‘stand-alone subject entering
a golden age of research’ (Shepherd 2007; Attwood 2007). Although ter-
rorism research may have become Terrorism Research and despite this
large increase in the literature, the subject has consistently suffered, among
other things, from a concrete lack of theory. While few would refute that
terrorism is a subject of international politics, international political
theory does not seem interested in the subject nor does terrorism research
seem particularly bothered about IR theory (Ranstorp 2009). As David
Leheny (2002: 58) points out: ‘The literature on terrorism has largely
developed independent of international relations theory’. Some even go
as far as claiming the existence of a ‘theoretical vacuum’ at the very heart
of terrorism research (Wight 2009: 100). This is particularly apparent
when considering the non-realist theoretical perspectives. As one of the
early constructivist in IR, Nicholas Onuf, has only recently pointed out,
IR theory in general has paid little attention to the field of terrorism and
in particular ‘constructivists are notably missing from discussions of ter-
rorism’ (Onuf 2009: 54).5

This is really quite surprising considering that words have always
played a huge role in the debate about terrorism. For one, this is visible
in the difficulty of finding the right words to accurately describe the ‘reality’ of terrorism. This definitional problem has been at the center stage of terrorism studies from the very start and even prior to 9/11 there was disagreement about almost all elements which may or may not constitute terrorism. While most definition attempts by academics as well as governments included the notion of force or violence and the idea of terrorism being something political, there were vast disagreements over the means and goals of the violence, the nature of the targets and the status of the victims and the perpetrators. While some stressed that terrorism could only be perpetrated by sub-state groups and that this was vital for terrorism, others believed that the state could also be a terrorist. Similarly, there was disagreement whether the victims of terrorism had to be civilian and whether attacks on the police or the military should also be considered a terrorist act. Parallel, there was no agreement on whether targets of terrorism were carefully chosen due to their symbolic character or whether in fact there were elements of indiscriminate random-like violence which was supposed to be the basis of creating widespread fear and terror. At the same time nobody was sure whether the intent of provoking an overreaction, the seeking of publicity or the idea of a communication strategy should be included into a definition.

This argument about what terrorism is resulted in three kinds of perspectives on the definitional debate (Daase and Spencer 2010). The first kind of scholars became exceedingly bored with the topic and believed that the definitional problem could not be solved and that the issue was beyond any solution (Malik 2001). For example, one of the leading terrorism researchers Walter Laqueur (1977: 5) believes that ‘a comprehensive definition of terrorism [...] does not exist nor will it be found in the foreseeable future’. Although they have seemingly surrendered their quest for the holy grail known as ‘The Definition of Terrorism’, they nevertheless have a specific understanding of what terrorism is which implicitly finds its way back into their work. For example, despite Walter Laqueur’s earlier relaxed attitude towards a definition, his later work does not get by without defining the all so illusive term (c.f. Laqueur 1987, 1998). In contrast to the first batch of scholars the second type simply continued counting definitions and was content with discussing the strengths and weaknesses of different wordings. For example Jeffrey Simon (1994: 29) in the early 1990s claimed that there were at least 212 different definitions of terrorism in use throughout the world, with 90 of them used by governments and other institutions. Finally, a third type struggled on in the hope of finding a truly
universally accepted definition of terrorism. Most notably among these were Alex Schmid and Albert Jongman who in 1988 gathered 109 different definitions, identified 22 key elements within these definitions and combined them into the following consensus definition:

Terrorism is an anxiety-inspired method of repeated violent action, employed by (semi-)clandestine individuals, groups, or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal, or political reasons, whereby – in contrast to assassination – the direct targets of violence are not the main targets. The immediate human victims of violence are generally chosen randomly (targets of opportunity) or selectively (representative or symbolic targets) from a target population, and serve as message generators. Threat- and violence-based communication processes between terrorist (organization), (imperilled) victims, and the main targets are used to manipulate the main target (audience(s)), turning it into a target of terror, a target of demands, or a target of attention, depending on whether intimidation, coercion, or propaganda is primarily sought (Schmid and Jongman 1988: 28).

So while this academic exchange flourished in the 1970s and 80s between a handful of scholars about what the true characteristics of terrorism were and how to neatly combine them into a short but concise definition, the debate at the end of the Cold War seems to have collapsed into an exhausted heap of indifference. Yet, following 9/11 the debate reignited as once again the search for a universally accepted definition began anew (Ganor 2002; Schmid 2004; Weinberg et al. 2004).

The ‘terrorist’ label and the role of the media

So one part of the definitional problem is finding the ‘correct’ words to accurately describe the reality of terrorism and differentiate it from other things such as guerrilla warfare, crime or mad serial killers. There is, however, a second maybe more important aspect to the difficulty of establishing what terrorism is, namely the notion of legitimacy. Ultimately the idea of legitimacy has been at the centre of the debate of what makes terrorism terrorism from the very beginning. Here the well-known phrase ‘one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter’, is often used to highlight the problem of implying a moral judgement when classifying the term ‘terrorism’. If one identifies with the victim of the attack, then it is considered terrorism, but if one can
identify with the perpetrator it is not. No matter how hideous and revolting a ‘terrorist’ act may be there will always be some who will not share this interpretation of the act as something terroristic. And although this well-worn statement seems hackneyed and dated, it holds within it an essence which seems to have been forgotten and which will be vital for the rest of this book. To qualify as terrorism a certain act has to be recognised, interpreted and ultimately named as such. The label ‘terrorism’ does not reflect reality but rather our interpretations of reality. In other words, ‘the terrorist’ is a social construction rather than natural fact. So the early understanding inherent in the age old statement ‘one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter’ may indicate that terrorism research was one of the first branches in political science to unwittingly realise the social construction of political phenomena.

Apart from words the use of language and discourse has also played a fairly substantial role in the study of terrorism when we consider the relationship between terrorism and the media (Paletz and Schmid 1992; Weimann and Winn 1994; Nacos 1994). Traditionally terrorism research considered the media to be vital for a terrorist group as they provide the means of attracting attention and spreading the message of the group. Considering terrorism as a communications strategy, the media have often been considered the terrorist’s ‘accomplices’ (Schmid 1989: 540) or even their ‘best friend’ (Hoffman 2006: 183) as it appears to provide the ‘oxygen of publicity’ (Thatcher cited in Wilkinson 2000: 175). As one of the leading terrorism scholars Bruce Hoffman points out:

The modern news media, as the principal conduit of information about such acts, thus play a vital part in the terrorists’ calculus. Indeed, without the media’s coverage the act’s impact is arguably wasted, remaining narrowly confined to the immediate victim(s) of the attack rather than reaching the wider “target audience” at whom the terrorists’ violence is actually aimed. Only by spreading the terror and outrage to a much larger audience can the terrorists gain the maximum potential leverage that they need to effect fundamental political change (Hoffman 2006: 174).

At the same time it has been noted that terrorists provide the media with emotional, exciting and bloody news which helps them sell their product (Ganor 2005: 231). Therefore there are mutual benefits for both and the relationship could be described as ‘symbiotic’ (Schmid 1989). So while terrorism research predominantly focused on this
relationship and its effects and implications for counter-terrorism, there was unfortunately very little interest in the perception of terrorism and the role of language and discourse in the construction of ‘the terrorist’. Although others, especially in media and communication studies, have been interested in the media’s influence of public opinion with regards to terrorism (Woods 2007; Herron and Jenkins-Smith 2006) or the role of media framing theory on public perceptions (Norris et al. 2003; Craft and Wanta 2004; Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2008), the theoretical notion of a constructivist terrorism research has until very recently been nonexistent.

The structure of the book

Unfortunately, despite this early potential and its interested in words, definitions and the media, terrorism studies has not become a bastion of constructivist theoretical thought. This book wants to reflect on this situation and illustrate how constructivist terrorism research could look like. It thereby stresses the importance of language and the role of discourse in the perception of terrorism and it ultimately hopes to show that this constitution greatly influences the practical reaction to ‘the terrorist’. In pursuit of this, Chapter 2 will investigate the notion of ‘new terrorism’. Thereby it will illustrate what many terrorism scholars and politicians consider as ‘new’ characteristics of terrorism and contrast this to traditional or ‘old’ terrorism. In a second step the chapter will critique many of the established characteristics of ‘new terrorism’ as fundamentally new and thereby openly question the predication of ‘newness’. Ultimately the aim of this chapter is not to establish a true or correct understanding of current terrorism but to question the dominant interpretations and thereby show the inherently contested nature of the ‘new terrorism’ discourse. Chapter 3 will follow this style of critique and examine what kind of anti-terrorism measures are considered sensible to counter the threat or ‘new terrorism’. This includes a critique of military and judicial responses to terrorism and investigates the seemingly absurd notion engagement and negotiation with ‘new terrorists’. Chapter 4 will bring together the first two chapters by asking how one can assess the effectiveness of these counter-measures against ‘new terrorism’. This question serves to illustrate some of the difficulties materialist terrorism studies has when investigating its research subject. Chapter 5 hopes to offer an alternative to the materialist understanding of terrorism by outlining what constructivist terrorism studies may look like. This section of the book will emphasise the socially con-
structured nature of ‘new terrorism’, highlight the vital role of discourse and thereby question the fundamental importance of ‘primary sources’ considered vital to ‘traditional’ and even more ‘critical’ terrorism research. The chapter will here outline the discourse analytical methodology of metaphor analysis as a means of gaining insight into the construction of terrorism in language. Chapter 6 will apply this constructivist theoretical and methodological framework and analyse the predication of ‘new terrorism’ in the media in Germany and the United Kingdom through metaphors. It will therefore focus on the tabloid newspapers the Bild and The Sun and examine how the terrorist and his act of terrorism are constructed in discourse by illustrating the metaphorical expressions found in the text. The expressions found indicate a total of five conceptual metaphors which underlie the construction of ‘new terrorism’ and constitute the act as a war; a crime; something natural; something uncivilised and evil and as a disease. Chapter 7 will then investigate what these five conceptual metaphors do and how they make certain counter-terrorism policies in Germany and the United Kingdom possible, while at the same time excluding other counter-measures from the options considered appropriate as they do not fit the constructed understanding of what this ‘new terrorism’ is like. The policy option considered will include military and judicial responses, disaster management and immigration policies and ultimately the constructed impossibility of dialogue and negotiation with ‘new terrorists’. Finally the Conclusion will summarise the main arguments of the book and outline areas of potential future research which naturally arise out of the constructivist approach to terrorism research presented in this book.
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