

The Orthodox and the Critical Approach toward Terrorism: An overview

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Abstract

The incident of 11 September 2001 has led to numerous research on terrorism, especially in the United States. Nevertheless, most research tends to adopt the same practices and conclude in the same direction. These have been called orthodox terrorism studies. Recently, a new approach to studies of terrorism has appeared in the form of Welsh School of Security Critical Studies. This short article aims to clarify the main differences between orthodox terrorism studies and critical studies. More specifically, we will examine the differences in their ontology, epistemology, and methodology. The implications of the distinctions will also be discussed.

Keywords: Orthodox Terrorism Studies, Critical Terrorism Studies, Terrorism

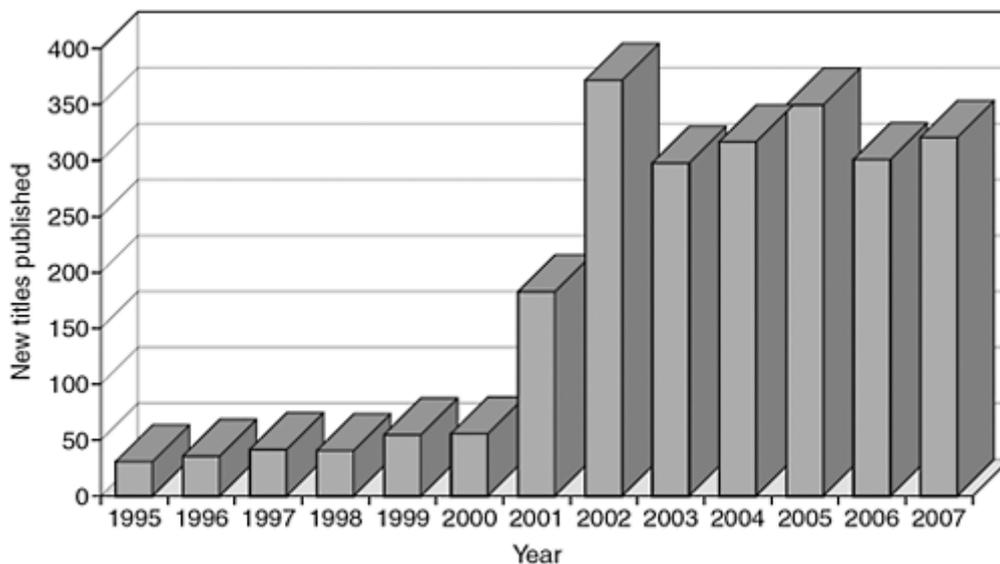
Terrorism is not a new phenomenon to political scientists, since terrorists have become transitional actors since the late 1960s², but during the Cold War era terrorism was deemed more as a local issue and source of conflict, since the main issue of that time was the conflict between the great powers. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, terrorism has gradually come more explicitly to the forefront, although it had previously been neglected by both academics and practitioners in the 1990s, which seemed to be a decade of relative peace and cooperation. Not surprisingly, the incident of 11 September 2001 created a drastic shock for the great powers; especially the US, which was attacked by non-state actors within their country on as scale which had never happened before. This led to demands being made on academics by the US government and many members of American society to find ways of understanding how and why the incident happened, in order to provide practical ways of comprehending such terrorist activities so as to prevent them reoccurring. Consequently, the number of studies of terrorism have increased significantly. Most of these studies, however, have tended to reach conclusions which answer the question of ‘how’ terrorism occurs, rather than ‘why’. These studies can be said to follow the orthodox approach. However,

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² James D. Kiras (2008) ‘Terrorism and globalization’, in J. Baylis, S. Smith and P. Owens, eds., *The Globalization of World Politics: An introduction to international relations*, 4th edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 374-375

there is a smaller group of academics who criticize orthodox explanations as being essentially inadequate for forming an understanding of the nature of the terrorist phenomenon. Their approach can be called the critical approach, and in general they have adopted the concepts developed by the Welsh School of Critical Security Studies.³ This essay aims to examine the main differences between the orthodox and the critical approaches. These differences can be categorized in three main ways: ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Various implications and examples derived from these distinctions will be illustrated here.

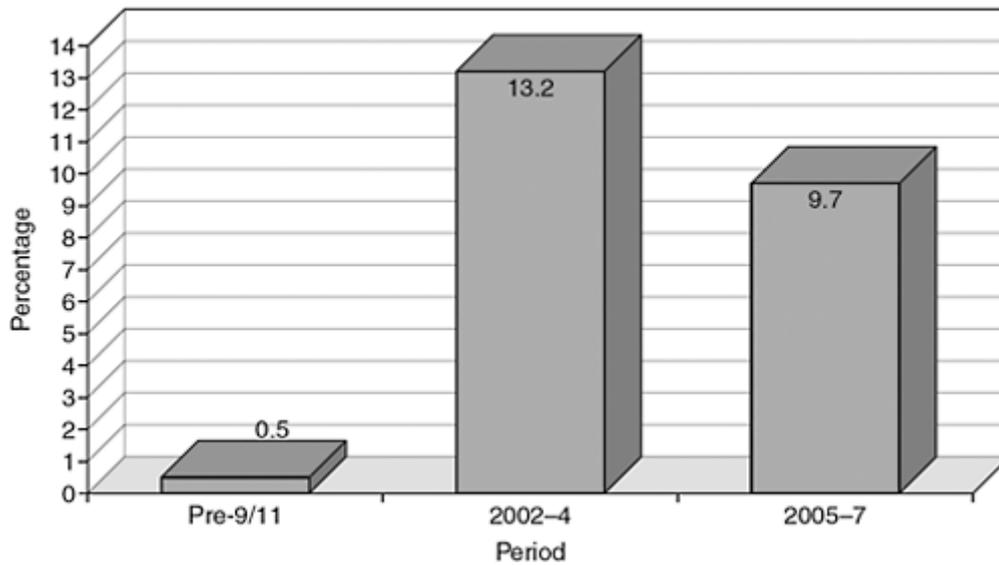
Figure 1 Books published with 'terrorism' in the title, 1995–2007



Source: Andrew Silke (2009) 'Contemporary terrorism studies: issues in research', in R. Jackson, M. B. Smyth and J. Gunning, eds., *Critical Terrorism Studies: A new research agenda* (Abingdon: Routledge), p. 35

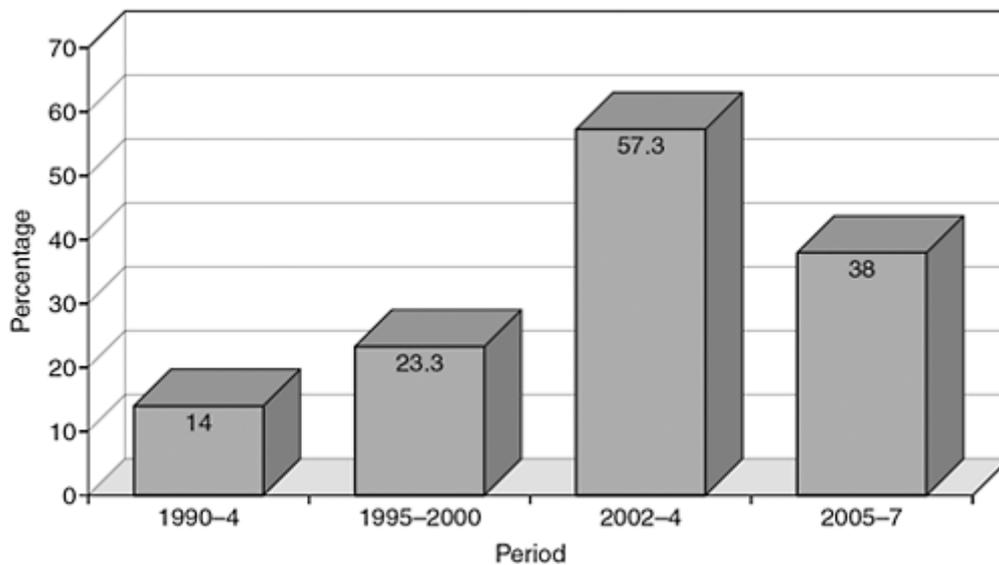
Figure 2 Percentage of research articles focusing on al-Qaeda

³ Harmonie Toros and Jeroen Gunning (2009) 'Exploring a critical theory approach to terrorism studies', in R. Jackson, M. B. Smyth and J. Gunning, eds., *Critical Terrorism Studies: A new research agenda* (Abingdon: Routledge), pp.88-89



Source: Andrew Silke (2009) 'Contemporary terrorism studies: issues in research', in R. Jackson, M. B. Smyth and J. Gunning, eds., *Critical Terrorism Studies: A new research agenda* (Abingdon: Routledge), p.42

Figure 3 Percentage of research articles focusing on militant Islamist terrorist groups



Source: Andrew Silke (2009) 'Contemporary terrorism studies: issues in research', in R. Jackson, M. B. Smyth and J. Gunning, eds., *Critical Terrorism Studies: A new research agenda* (Abingdon: Routledge), p.42

Most of the studies of terrorism which follow the orthodox approach have been influenced by mainstream social science, which asserts that social phenomena as well as their meanings have an independent existence. Thus, a contextual consideration is not essential since the object in question is not related to socio-political actors and contexts. This ontological position can be conceptualized as

objectivism.⁴ Thus, the orthodox approach tends to neglect the importance of time and place as well as socio-political contexts, since it appears to believe that terrorists will exist ‘out there,’ no matter what the historical context may be. As a result, its objectivist ontological position determines its epistemology as well as its methodology.

In contrast, the critical approach does not believe that the object exists autonomously. Rather, object and subject ‘shape each other in a dialectical, never-ceasing dynamic’.⁵ In this sense, their ontological position is based on socio-political interaction, and focuses on both actors and contexts. According to critical theorists on terrorism, they define their ontology as a minimal foundationalism, since the approach does not totally deny the distinction between object and subject.⁶ Consequently, terrorism is ‘fundamentally a social fact rather than a brute fact; that its nature is not inherent to the violent act itself, but is dependent upon context, circumstance, intention, and crucially, social, cultural, legal, and political processes of interpretation, categorisation, and labelling’.⁷ This ontological approach can be conceptualized as social constructivism. It argues that a difference in ways of being leads to different ways of seeing and ideas about how aims will be achieved.

Since the ontology describes what it is out there to know, therefore, the next question is how it can be known. The orthodox approach, as already mentioned above, adopts the mainstream tradition of social science, which has made strong efforts to make social science an objective ‘science’. Therefore, its way of seeing an epistemological position cannot differ from its matrix; hence positivism results. Thus, in order to understand the epistemological position of the critical approach, it is necessary to comprehend its positivist premise. As objectivism is the root of positivist epistemology, positivism stresses the existence of an existing object. In other words, social reality can be understood in the form of data and fact by using the methods of natural science, which claim to be value-free, such as data collection, theoretical deduction, and statistical analysis. Thus, the object must be observable unless the instruments of natural science

⁴ Jonathan Grix (2002) ‘Introducing Students to the Generic Terminology of Social Research’ *Politics*, vol.22, no 3 (September), 177

⁵ Toros and Gunning, *op. cit.*, p.92

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.92-93

⁷ Richard Jackson ‘Critical Terrorism Studies: An Explanation, a Defence and a Way Forward’ *BISA Annual Conference*, 14-16 December 2009, p.4

http://www.bisa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_bisa&task=download_paper&no_html=1&passed_paper_id=54 (accessed on 23 November 2010)

cannot be applied.⁸ From the positivist position, the orthodox approach tends to focus only on what can be empirically verified. Physical violence, for instance, is deemed as main object to be observed since it occurs explicitly and had been paid attention to by the government. An example would be the RAND Database of Worldwide Terrorism Incidents. This project, led by the RAND Corporation, one of the prominent American think tanks, has collected data related to terrorist incidents for over 30 years, and this data has been used in its research.⁹

Nevertheless, it must be mentioned that the positivist epistemology of the orthodox approach is not as neutral as its proponents claim it to be. It could be described as a problem-solving theory, a term first introduced by Robert Cox¹⁰, in that 'it takes the world as it finds it, with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organised, as a given framework for action'.¹¹ From this perspective, the orthodox approach is inclined to presuppose that terrorism must be conducted by non-state actors, and divides the world into the legitimate state and the illegitimate terrorists,¹² since it does not question the existing social and power relations because of its epistemological presuppositions. In this sense, the orthodox approach rejects the concept of state terrorism, since the state has a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Walter Laqueur, for example, insisted that '[including state terror in the study of terrorism] would have made the study of terrorism impossible, for it would have included not only US foreign policy, but also Hitler and Stalin'.¹³ Bruce Hoffman defined terrorism as acts 'perpetrated by a subnational group or non-state entity'.¹⁴ As a consequence, it can be argued that the orthodox approach uses actor-based analysis, focusing entirely on non-state actors. However, an exception tends to be made for state-sponsored terrorism, which is often defined as such by the major powers such as the US.

Research into terrorism has increased significantly since 9/11. Before 2001, around 19 per cent of research papers published in terrorism journals used the descriptive and inferential methods, but this has

⁸ Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldbberg (2009) *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, 2nd edn. (London: Sage), pp.16-17.

⁹ National Security Research Division, *RAND Database of Worldwide Terrorism Incidents*. (RAND Corporation) <http://www.rand.org/nsrd/projects/terrorism-incidents/> (accessed on 23 November 2010)

¹⁰ Robert W. Cox (1981) 'Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory' *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, 128-130

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.128

¹² Jeroen Gunning (2007) 'A Case for Critical Terrorism Studies?' *Government and Opposition*, vol. 42, no. 3 (Summer), 371

¹³ Ruth Blakeley (2009) *State Terrorism and Neoliberalism: The North in the South* (Abingdon: Routledge), p.26.

¹⁴ Bruce Hoffman (1998) *Inside Terrorism* (London : Victor Gollancz), p.43.

since been extended to 26 percent.¹⁵ Thus it can be seen that the increase in orthodox-style research into terrorism derives from a specific place and time as well as context; namely the American experience of what the US has defined as an age of terror. Thus, the orthodox approach can be seen to be a state-centric explanation. Ultimately, the orthodox approach can also be deemed to be a legitimization of elements of US government policy, such as its 'War on Terror', since the epistemology of this concept determines that the bulk of research will be conducted within this government-defined framework.

The critical approach, on the contrary, aims to take into account context, history, specificity, and nuance. It also rejects notions of universalism, essentialism, and exceptionalism.¹⁶ This approach stems from the epistemological positions of those who follow it, which are not static and monolithic. The epistemology of the critical approach is hard to conceptualize, since it adopts various elements from different forms of epistemology, from positivism to ethnography through to post-structuralism. Nevertheless, it can be conceptualized roughly as critical positivism and post-positivism.

The critical approach does not completely reject the idea of positivism, in that it does not completely reject a belief in timeless law and monolithic categories.¹⁷ Thus, it still preserves the usefulness of positivist epistemology for examining some specific contexts. However, it stresses that the context needs to be reviewed in order to enquire about its meaning, since the episteme is not only for someone and some purpose but also must come from somewhere. In this sense, the origin of any use of knowledge must be scrutinized, for otherwise it would not be possible to understand the meanings that terrorists attach to their actions. Suicide bombing, for instance, is generally regarded as irrationality or psychological abnormality according the Western episteme, with its roots in philosophical notions about the fear of painful death. However, if such acts are considered in the context of ethnographic epistemology, they may not seem so irrational. Also, those who follow the critical approach are well aware that the narrative and knowledge of orthodox terrorism studies seem incapable of understanding outside discourse, and that it therefore necessary to reveal clearly what the discourse of orthodox terrorism studies actually consists of. For example, the present discourse around terrorism functions to legitimize US foreign policy on the 'War on Terror', which uses military intervention and regime change as well as extending

¹⁵ Andrew Silke (2007) 'The impact of 9/11 on research on terrorism', in M. Ranstorp, ed., *Mapping Terrorism Research: State of the art, gaps and future direction* (Abingdon: Routledge), p.81

¹⁶ Jackson, *op. cit.*, p.4

¹⁷ Toros and Gunning, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-93

assistance programmes to authoritarian regimes.¹⁸ From this point of view, post-structuralism is one of the epistemologies of the critical approach. Nevertheless, those who follow the critical approach do not adopt post-structural epistemology entirely, in that they do not deny the specific category of terrorist violence as a whole.¹⁹ Due to the epistemologies it uses, however, the critical approach denies the orthodox presupposition that the act of terrorism cannot be perpetrated by states, since it sees terrorism as political and social construct. Consequently, the critical approach is an action-based analysis, which argues that a terrorist act can be perpetrated by anyone, given the existence of a particular context.

Last but not the least, due to its epistemological positions, the critical approach places importance on the notion of emancipation, which is ‘the realisation of greater human freedom and human potential and improvements in individual and social actualisation and well-being’.²⁰ Thus, the critical approach opens a space for silent and marginalized voices, including even those of terrorists. Nevertheless, in contrast to the orthodox approach, the epistemologies of the critical approach lead to critiques of the methodologies which derive from its episteme.

The methodologies of both the orthodox and the critical approach are based on their dissimilar uses of epistemology, and thus they are very different from each other. In the orthodox approach, the applications of scientific methods such as empirical data collection and statistical analysis are employed for the purposes of research. In this sense, the root causes of terrorism can be concluded from empirical evidence and analysis. As a consequence, the orthodox approach is frequently used for policy recommendations, since it can provide verifiable information which appears to provide a credible input into the policy process. The results of its analytical processes are deductions from its research. Thus, the explanations and conclusions of the orthodox approach tend to be narrowly focused due to the methodologies it uses.

In contrast to the orthodox approach, the critical approach casts doubt on the inherent trustworthiness of a statistical language since statistics can easily be manipulated to serve a particular purpose. As a result of the epistemological positions it uses, the critical approach aims to utilize its interdisciplinary methodologies to produce more conclusive explanations.²¹ For example, Foucauldian

¹⁸ Richard Jackson (2009) ‘Knowledge, power and politics in the study of political terrorism’, in R. Jackson, M. B. Smyth and J. Gunning, eds., *Critical Terrorism Studies: A new research agenda* (Abingdon: Routledge), p.79

¹⁹ Toros and Gunning, *op. cit.*, p.93.

²⁰ Richard Jackson (2007) ‘Symposium: The core commitments of critical terrorism studies’ *European Political Science*, vol. 6, no. 3 (September), 249

²¹ Toros and Gunning, *op. cit.*, pp.98-99

genealogy has been adopted by the critical approach,²² in order to reflect an existing understanding of terrorism, since this method ‘analyse(s) the conditions under which we might consider certain utterances or propositions to be agreed to be true... [and] the condition under which we, as individuals, exist and what causes us to exist in the way that we do’.²³ From this point of view, self-reflexivity is a vital methodological notion in the methodologies of the critical approach. Last but not least, it is not only the orthodox approach that can be revised by self-reflexive methodologies. The critical approach can also benefit by carefully examining itself.

In conclusion, both the critical and orthodox approaches have their own strengths and weaknesses. These derive from the main differences between these approaches, namely their ontology, epistemology, and methodology. From this perspective, it is not necessary to conclude which approach is better or more appropriate, since their foundations are so different. Furthermore, both have contributed greatly to the field of terrorism studies. Nevertheless, in order to apply which approach to use in research, the conditions and limitations of each approach need to be understood in depth.

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²² Jackson, *op. cit.*, p.4.

²³ Sarah Mills (2003) *Michel Foucault* (Abingdon: Routledge), p.25.

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