The Ghosts of State Terror: Knowledge, Politics and Terrorism Studies

Richard Jackson
Aberystwyth University

Abstract

Employing a discourse analytic approach, this paper examines the silence on state terrorism within the mainstream terrorism studies literature. An analysis of more than a hundred academic texts on terrorism, many by established 'terrorism experts', reveals that state terrorism is noticeable mainly for its absence. In some cases, state terrorism is simply defined out of the analysis by the employment of an actor-based definition: terrorism, it is argued, is a kind of violence performed solely by non-state actors. In other cases, the possibility of state terrorism is acknowledged but is then given a cursory treatment or simply ignored as a serious subject of research. Following this textual analysis, the main finding – the silence on state terrorism within terrorism studies – is subjected to both a first and second order critique. A first order or immanent critique uses a discourse's internal contradictions, mistakes and misconceptions to criticise it on its own terms and expose the events and perspectives that the discourse fails to acknowledge or address. In this case, the absence of state terrorism is criticized for its illogical actor-based definition of terrorism, its politically biased research focus and its failure to acknowledge the empirical evidence of the extent and nature of state terrorism, particularly that practiced by Western liberal states and their allies. A second order critique entails reflecting on the broader political and ethical consequences – the ideological effects – of the representations enabled by the discourse, and the ways in which the discourse functions as a political technology. It is argued that the absence of state terrorism from academic discourse functions to promote particular kinds of state hegemonic projects, construct a legitimizing public discourse for foreign and domestic policy, and deflect attention from the terroristic practices by Western states and their allies. Importantly, the exposure and destabilisation of this dominant terrorism knowledge opens up critical space for the articulation of alternative and potentially emancipatory forms of knowledge and practice.

Introduction

Terrorism studies, once a fairly minor sub-field of security studies, has now expanded to become a stand-alone field with its own dedicated journals, research centres, leading scholars and experts, research funding opportunities, conferences, seminars, and study programmes. It is in fact, one of the fastest expanding areas of research in the English-speaking academic world, with literally thousands of new books and articles published over the past few years,[1] significant investment in terrorism-related research projects, and increasing numbers of postgraduate dissertations and

---

[1] Andrew Silke has claimed that if current trends continue, more than 90 percent of all terrorism studies literature will have been published since 2001, and that a new book on terrorism is published every six hours in the English language. See Jessica Shepherd, 'The Rise and Rise of Terrorism Studies', *The Guardian*, July 3, 2007. In fact, research using publishing databases found that even before 2001, terrorism publications had grown over 234 percent on average between 1988-2001 in fields like terrorism studies, communication studies, comparative politics, peace studies, economics and psychology. Avishag Gordon, 2004. 'Terrorism and Knowledge Growth: A Databases and Internet Analysis', in Andrew Silke, ed., *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements and Failures*, London: Frank Cass, p.109.

undergraduate students.[2] A perennial criticism of this voluminous output however, has been the neglect of 'state terrorism' as a subject for systematic and sustained research, a problem noted during the Cold War but which seems to have become even more acute since September, 2001.[3] To many observers this neglect is somewhat puzzling given that the genealogy of the term 'terrorism' has its earliest roots in the deployment of violence by states to terrify and intimidate civilian populations, states have employed terrorism far more extensively than non-state actors over the past two centuries, state terrorism is far more lethal and destructive than non-state terrorism and the employment of terror against civilians by states continues unabated in a great many countries today.

The purpose of this paper is to explore this puzzle through the prism of discourse analysis, a form of critical theorising aimed in part at understanding and describing the relationship between knowledge, power, and politics. Taking as its starting point that knowledge and its production is never a purely neutral exercise but always works for someone and for something, this paper seeks to excavate the ideological effects of the discourse on state terrorism (or, more accurately, the silence within the discourse) in the terrorism studies field. It argues that the way in which state terrorism is constructed as a (non)subject both distorts the field as an area of scholarly research, and more importantly, reifies dominant structures of power and enables particular kinds of elite and state hegemonic projects.

The argument proceeds in three sections. In the first section, I briefly outline the methodological approach employed in the analysis. This is followed by a discussion of the main findings of the discourse analysis – a description of the ways in which the subject of state terrorism is (and is not) discursively constructed and deployed within the broader terrorism studies literature. The third section subjects these findings to a first and second order critique as a means of exploring the effects of the discourse on knowledge, power and politics. Specifically, I deconstruct and dismiss the most common arguments for not including state terrorism as a valid object of study within the field of study, as well as illuminate and describe the political and ideological effects of its non-inclusion. Finally, in the conclusion to the paper, I argue that there are important analytical and normative reasons for taking state terrorism seriously and incorporating its systematic analysis into existing research programmes.

Analysing the Discourse of State Terrorism
As stated above, the analytical approach employed in this study falls broadly under the mantle of discourse analysis.[4] A form of critical theorising, discourse analysis aims primarily to illustrate and

---

[2] Research by Avishag Gordon found that in the ten years from 1990-1999 at least 160 research dissertations on terrorism-related subjects had been carried out. It can reasonably be assumed that this number has further increased since 2001. Avishag Gordon, 1999. 'Terrorism Dissertations and the Evolution of a Speciality: An Analysis of Meta-Information', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol.11, no.2, pp.141-50.

[3] A number of reviews of the field have noted the failure to study state terrorism, including among others: Ruth Blakeley, 2007. 'Bringing the State Back Into Terrorism Studies', *European Political Science*, vol. 6, no. 3; Silke, *Research on Terrorism*; Joseba Zulaika and William Douglass, 1996. *Terror and Taboo: The Follies, Fables, and Faces of Terrorism*, London: Routledge; Alexander George, 1991. 'The Discipline of Terrorology', in Alexander George, (ed.) *Western State Terrorism*, Polity Press; Edward Herman and Gerry O'Sullivan, 1989. *The 'Terrorism' Industry: The Experts and Institutions that Shape our View of Terror*, Pantheon Books; and Edward Herman, 1982. *The Real Terror Network: Terrorism in Fact and Propaganda*, South End Press.

[4] For an insightful discussion of discourse analytic approaches in international relations, see: Jennifer Milliken, 1999. 'The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods', *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 225-54. Other studies which have informed the approach I have taken in this paper include: Mark Laffey and Jutta Weldes, 1997. 'Beyond Belief: Ideas and Symbolic Technologies in the Study of International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 193-237; Trevor Purvis and Alan Hunt, 1993. 'Discourse, Ideology, Discourse, Ideology, Discourse,

describe the relationship between textual and social and political processes. In particular, it is concerned with the politics of representation – the manifest political or ideological consequences of adopting one mode of representation over another. In this case, I am concerned with the ways in which state terrorism is represented – or not represented, which is itself a kind of representation – as a subject within the field of terrorism studies. Although discourse theorising is employed within a range of different epistemological paradigms – poststructuralist, postmodernist, feminist, and social constructivist – it is predicated on a shared set of theoretical commitments. Broadly speaking, these include:[5] an understanding of language as constitutive or productive of meaning; an understanding of discourse as structures of signification which construct social realities, particularly in terms of defining subjects and establishing their relational positions within a system of signification;[6] an understanding of discourse as being productive of subjects authorised to speak and act, legitimate forms of knowledge and political practices and importantly, common sense within particular social groups and historical settings; an understanding of discourse as necessarily exclusionary and silencing of other modes of representation; and an understanding of discourse as historically and culturally contingent, inter-textual, open-ended, requiring continuous articulation and re-articulation and therefore, open to destabilisation and counter-hegemonic struggle.

On this epistemological foundation and adopting an interpretive logic rather than a causal logic, the discourse analytic technique employed in this paper proceeded in two main stages. The first stage entailed an examination of a large number of texts from within the terrorism studies field.[7] As such, the primary units of analysis or 'data' for this research were more than 100 mainstream academic books, articles in the main terrorism studies and international relations journals, conference papers presented at ISA and APSA, and reports and websites from think-tanks and research institutions. Each text was examined initially to see if it contained the terms 'state terrorism' or 'state terror'. Texts that did contain these terms were then examined to see how they were constructed as a discursive formation and subject of knowledge, how they were deployed within broader narratives, and how state terrorism was positioned as a subject in relation to non-state terrorism. Employing a 'grounded theory' approach, the analysis was considered complete when the addition of new texts did not yield any new insights or categories.

The second stage of the research involved subjecting the findings of the textual analysis to both a first and second order critique. A first order or immanent critique uses a discourse's internal contradictions, mistakes, misconceptions, and omissions to criticise it on its own terms and expose the events and perspectives that the discourse fails to acknowledge or address. The point of this form of internal critique is not necessarily to establish the 'correct' or 'real truth' of the subject beyond doubt, but rather to destabilise dominant interpretations and demonstrate the inherently contested and political nature of the discourse.

Ideology…', *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 44, no. 3, pp. 473-99; and Albert Yee, 1996. 'The Causal Effects of Ideas on Politics', *International Organization*, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 69-108.

[5] These shared commitments are explored in greater detail in Milliken, 'The Study of Discourse'.

[6] For an excellent study on subject positioning and its political consequences, see Roxanne Doty, 1993. 'Foreign Policy as Social Construction: A Post-Positivist Analysis of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy in the Philippines', *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 37, pp. 297-320.

[7] A great deal of my previous research has involved a discourse analysis of texts from the terrorism studies field. For this paper, I re-examined many of these texts, as well as a number of new texts. Previous discourse analytic studies which broadly support the findings in this paper include, among others: Richard Jackson, 2007. 'Constructing Enemies: "Islamic Terrorism" in Political and Academic Discourse', *Government & Opposition*, vol. 42, no. 3, pp. 394-426; Richard Jackson, 2007. 'Critical Reflection on Counter-sanctuary Discourse', in Michael Innes, (ed), *Denial of Sanctuary: Understanding Terrorist Safe Havens*, Westport, CT: Praeger Security International; Richard Jackson, 2007. 'Playing the Politics of Fear: Writing the Terrorist Threat in the War on Terrorism', in George Kassimeris, (ed), *Playing Politics With Terrorism: A User's Guide*, New York: Columbia University Press; and Richard Jackson, 2005. *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counterterrorism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

A second order critique entails reflecting on the broader political and ethical consequences – the ideological effects – of the representations and more importantly in this case, the silences, enabled by the discourse. Specifically, it involves an exploration of the ways in which the discourse functions as a 'symbolic technology'[8] that can be wielded by particular elites and institutions, to: structure the primary subject positions, accepted knowledge, commonsense and legitimate policy responses to the actors and events being described; exclude and de-legitimise alternative knowledge and practice; naturalise a particular political and social order; and construct and sustain a hegemonic regime of truth. A range of specific discourse analytic techniques are useful in second order critique: genealogical analysis, predicate analysis, narrative analysis, and deconstructive analysis.[9]

It is crucial to recognise that discourses are significant not just for what they say but also for what they do not say; the silences in a discourse can be as important, or even more important at times, than what is openly stated. This is because silence can function ideologically in any number of ways. For example, silence can be a deliberate means of distraction or misdirection from uncomfortable subjects or contrasting viewpoints, the suppression or de-legitimisation of alternative forms of knowledge or values, the tacit endorsement of particular kinds of practices, setting the boundaries of legitimate knowledge, or as a kind of disciplining process directed against certain actors – among others. In other words, the silences within a text often function as an exercise in power; revealing and interrogating those silences therefore, is an important part of first and second order critique.

Lastly, it is important to note that when we examine a discourse as a broad form of knowledge and practice, it is never completely uniform, coherent, or consistent; it always has porous borders and often contains multiple exceptions, inconsistencies, and contradictions by different speakers and texts. Many of the terrorism scholars discussed in this paper for example, upon a close reading of their individual texts, often express more nuanced arguments than are necessarily presented here. The important point is not that each text or scholar can be characterised in the same uniform way, or even that these scholars agree on a broad set of knowledge claims. It is rather, that taken together as a broader discourse and a body of work that has political and cultural currency, the narratives and forms of the discourse function to construct and maintain a specific understanding of, and approach to, 'terrorism' and 'state terrorism' and that this knowledge has certain political and social effects.

The Ghosts of State Terror in Terrorism Studies

I refer to the 'ghosts' of state terrorism because even though the main finding of my discourse analysis is that state terrorism is largely missing as a subject from the broader terrorism literature, as I demonstrate below, its ghostly outline can still be detected in a variety of ways. For example, it is something of a cliché to note that the term 'terror' from which 'terrorism' derives was first used to describe revolutionary counter-violence by the French state, was employed by the Nuremberg prosecutors to condemn Nazi actions and forms of rule in Europe, and was used by historians to describe Soviet governance during the reign of Joseph Stalin. It has also been noted that the term shares the same Latin root as the term 'territory' and that the fear (terror) of state violence has a central place in the emergence and dominance of the modern state and Western political theory.[10] The term therefore contains within itself the echoes of state violence, despite its more recently constructed meaning as a description for non-state actions and behaviour.

---

[8] See Laffey and Weldes, 'Beyond Belief'.
[9] For explanation of these techniques, see: Milliken, 'The Study of Discourse'; and Doty, 'Foreign Policy as Social Construction', p. 306.
[10] See Barry Hindess, 2006. 'Terrortory', *Alternatives*, vo. 31, pp. 243-57; and Corey Robin, 2004. *Fear: The History of a Political Idea*, Oxford University Press.

In addition to this genealogical trace, the discourse analysis of the field in this paper reveals that there are a great many prominent scholars who acknowledge in passing that terrorism is a strategy of political violence which any actor can employ, including states, but then do not examine cases of state terrorism in any systematic or sustained manner in their research. Walter Laqueur, arguably one of the founders of terrorism studies, is emblematic of this practice: he openly accepts that states have killed many more people and caused far more material and social destruction than 'terrorism from below', but then argues that this is simply not the terrorism he wishes to examine.[11] Similarly, Paul Wilkinson, perhaps the most well-known scholar in the field notes: 'if we are to gain an adequate understanding of the broader historical and international trends we need to recognize throughout history it is regimes and states, with their overwhelming propensity of coercive power, which have shown the greatest propensity for terror on a mass scale, both as an instrument of internal repression and control, and as a weapon of aggression and subjugation.'[12] However, like Laqueur, Brian Jenkins, and the vast majority of terrorism studies scholars, Wilkinson has never studied state terrorism systematically, but instead focused the vast majority of his work on non-state forms of terrorism. As Sam Raphael has recently demonstrated, this same approach characterises a significant proportion of the most widely cited and well-known terrorism scholars.[13]

This is not to say that state terrorism is not studied at all in the broader literature; there is a relatively small but important body of research on the subject.[14] However, this literature is numerically tiny (perhaps as few as a hundred or so books and articles) compared to the many thousands of publications on non-state terrorism. More importantly, analyses of author affiliation and the political-scholarly epistemic networks they work within[15] demonstrates that the vast majority of state terrorism scholars come from disciplines outside of international relations and political science such as anthropology, sociology, and criminology, most are not recognised as 'terrorism experts' by the media or political establishment (few are asked to appear in the media or provide expert testimony to political bodies, for example), few publish in the recognised terrorism studies journals, and their work is rarely cited in the mainstream terrorism studies literature. In other words, these scholars and this literature exist somewhat on the periphery of the field.

Related to this very small and often invisible section of the broader discourse, there are a similarly small number of texts in which state terrorism is given a reasonably systematic treatment

---

[11] Walter Laqueur, 1977, *Terrorism*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, p. 6.

[12] Paul Wilkinson, 2001. *Terrorism vs Democracy: The Liberal State Response*, London: Frank Cass, p. 41.

[13] Sam Raphael, 2007. 'Putting the State Back In: The Orthodox Definition of Terrorism and the Critical Need to Address State Terrorism', Paper Prepared for British International Studies Association (BISA) Annual Conference, 17-19 December, 2007, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom, available online at: http://www.bisa.ac.uk/2007/tuesday.htm.

[14] There has been some outstanding research on state terrorism, including among others: Michael Stohl, 2006. 'The State as Terrorist: Insights and Implications', *Democracy and Security,* vol. 2, pp. 1-25; Tal Becker, 2006. *Terrorism and the State: Rethinking the Rules of State Responsibility*, Oxford and Portland, Oregon: Hart Publishing; Ruth Blakeley, 2006. 'Still Training to Torture? US Training of Military Forces from Latin America', *Third World Quarterly,* vol. 27, no. 8, pp. 1439-61; Beau Grosscup, 2006. *Strategic Terror: The Politics and Ethics of Aerial Bombardment*, London: Zed Books; Frederick Gareau, 2004. *State Terrorism and the United States: From Counterinsurgency to the War on Terrorism*, London: Zed Books; Jeffrey Sluka, ed., 2000. *Death Squad: An Anthropology of State Terror*, Penn: University of Pennsylvania Press; Alexander George, 1991. *Western State Terrorism*, Cambridge: Polity Press; Michael Stohl and George Lopez, eds., 1986. *Government Violence and Repression: An Agenda for Research*, ed. Bernard Johnpoll, Contributions in Political Science, New York: Greenwood; Michale Stohl and George Lopez, eds., 1984. *The State as Terrorist: The Dynamics of Governmental Violence and Repression*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press; and Herman, *The Real Terror Network*.

[15] For a revealing analysis of the terrorism researcher network and epistemic community, see Edna Reid, 1997. 'Evolution of a Body of Knowledge: An Analysis of Terrorism Research', *Information Processing & Management*, vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 91-106.

within the context of a broader treatment of terrorism. For example, there are a number of introductory texts in which state terrorism is analysed within a stand-alone chapter or section.[16] However, the important point to note about these texts is that they are mainly introductory in nature, they are based on a description of secondary materials rather than the presentation of any original research, many of them are written by scholars outside of the terrorism studies field, and the discussion of state terrorism is most often restricted to a single chapter in an entire book. In addition, the subject matter of these introductory chapters is frequently restricted to topics such as the original terror of the French revolutionary state, state sponsorship of non-state terrorist groups, genocide, and case studies of Nazi, Soviet, and Latin American state terror.[17] Importantly, a discourse analysis of these texts reveals that there are other forms of silence within them, in particular, a deep and pervasive silence on Western democratic state terrorism and Israeli state terrorism. It is also important to note that a great many more such introductory texts do not give any systematic attention to state terrorism at all.[18]

There is one more ghostly outline of state terrorism within the broader field, namely, a small but growing literature on so-called 'state sponsored terrorism'. I have analysed aspects of this literature in more detail elsewhere.[19] Within these texts, one of the most common narratives is that terrorist groups depend upon significant state support to survive and active 'sponsors' provide a range of positive and permissive forms of assistance. Gus Martin's popular textbook for example, suggests that the state sponsorship of terrorism frequently consists of: 'ideological support', 'financial support', 'military support', operational support', 'initiating terrorist attacks', or 'direct involvement in terrorist attacks.'[20] Additionally, it is commonly argued that weak, totalitarian, or so-called 'rogue states' are predisposed to sponsoring terrorism because:

> [F]or aggressive regimes, state terrorism in the international domain is advantageous in several respects: *State terrorism is inexpensive*… Even poor nations can strike at and injure a prosperous adversary… *State terrorism has limited consequences*. State assisters that are clever can distance themselves from culpability for a terrorist incident… and thereby escape possible reprisals or other penalties. *State terrorism can be successful*. Weaker states can raise the stakes beyond what a stronger adversary is willing to bear… [and] successfully destabilize an adversary through the use of a proxy movement.[21]

In fact, much of the 'state sponsorship' literature is devoted to analysing and describing those states viewed as the main sponsors of terrorism, the groups they support, and the kinds of assistance they provide. The state sponsors identified in the literature more often than not coincide with the U.S. State Department's annual list of 'state sponsors of international terrorism,' which typically includes countries with which the U.S. has previously had serious conflicts, such as Iran, Syria, Cuba, North Korea, Sudan, Libya, and Iraq.

---

[16] Examples of introductory texts which include chapters or sections on state terrorism include, among others: Gus Martin, 2003. *Understanding Terrorism: Challenges, Perspectives, and Issues*, Thousand Oaks: Sage; Robert Goodin, 2006. *What's Wrong with Terrorism?* Cambridge: Polity Press 2006; Jonathan Barker, 2002. *The No-Nonsense Guide to Terrorism*, New Internationalist; and Charles Townsend, 2002. *Terrorism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press.

[17] For an example, see the chapter on 'Terror from Above: State Terrorism' in Martin, *Understanding Terrorism*.

[18] For a typical example of a book which purports to provide an overview of the terrorism field but which does not discuss state terrorism in any form, see Stephen Sloan, 2006. *Terrorism: The Present Threat in Context*, Oxford: Berg.

[19] See Jackson, 'Critical Reflection on Counter-sanctuary Discourse'.

[20] Martin, *Understanding Terrorism*, p. 91.

[21] Ibid, pp. 90-91.

Another more recent narrative within this literature is that 'passive state sponsorship' provides support for terrorists – that inaction is just as significant as action. Daniel Byman for example, argues that 'For many terrorist groups, a state's tolerance of or passivity towards their activities is often as important to their success as any deliberate assistance they receive', and that 'At times, the greatest contribution a state can make to a terrorist's cause is by not policing a border, turning a blind eye to fundraising, or even tolerating terrorist efforts to build their organizations, conduct operations, and survive.'[22] One of the most important aspects of this discourse is the way in which the key narratives still focus on non-state groups and actions as primary and states as secondary sponsors and supporters. In other words, there is an implicit sense that states do not commit terrorism directly, but they may support non-state groups that do. Certainly, there is little acknowledgement that state actions such as the use of strategic bombing, particular forms of governance, repression, and counter-terrorism, or the practice of torture for example, can sometimes constitute acts of terrorism. Moreover, within this literature there is another important silence, namely, the silence on Western democratic sponsorship of non-state terrorism: out of dozens of books and papers which discussed the state sponsorship of terrorism, I found only one or two acknowledgements of US sponsorship of anti-Castro or Contra terrorism, British sponsorship of loyalist terrorism in Northern Ireland, Italian sponsorship of right-wing terrorism, Israeli sponsorship of Christian militia terrorism in Lebanon, and the like.

Beyond these ghostly traces of state terror however, a discourse analysis of the field reveals that the most notable aspect of the state terrorism discourse is its near complete absence; there is almost a total silence on the subject within most books, articles, papers, and writings in the terrorism studies field today. In the vast majority of the more than 100 texts I examined, the terms 'state terrorism' or 'state terror' did not even appear, much less form the basis for any kind of sustained analyses or discussion. This basic finding, that there is a profound silence on state terrorism within the field, is supported by a broader set of findings. Andrew Silke for example, found that only 12 or less than two percent of articles from 1990 to 1999 in the core terrorism studies journals focused on state terrorism,[23] a finding that echoes Schmid and Jongman's authoritative survey of the field which concluded that 'There is a conspicuous absence of literature that addresses itself to the much more serious problem of state terrorism'.[24] Similarly, it has been noted that only 12 of the 768 pages in the *Encyclopaedia of World Terrorism* (1997) examined state terrorism in any form.[25] Along the same lines, an analysis of John Thakrah's popular *Dictionary of Terrorism* demonstrates that reference to, and discussion of, state terrorism makes up less than 8 out of 308 pages.[26] Extraordinarily, Thakrah's entry on 'History of Terrorism' does not mention a single example of state terrorism.[27] My own examination of conference paper titles and abstracts found that of 113 papers related to terrorism presented at the 2007 ISA annual convention, only one focused on any aspect of state terrorism; and of 95 papers on terrorism at the 2007 APSA annual convention, only 4 focused on aspects of state terrorism. We might also note that the wider terrorism studies field does not include statistics on state terrorism in any of its recognised data bases, most notably the highly influential RAND database.[28]

---

[22] Daniel Byman, *Confronting Passive Sponsors of Terrorism* Analysis Paper, No. 4 (The Saban Center for Middle East Policy, The Brookings Institution, February 2005), III.

[23] Andrew Silke, 2004. 'The Road Less Travelled', in Silke, ed., *Research on Terrorism,* p. 206.

[24] Alex Schmid and Albert Jongman, 1988. *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Databases, Theories and Literature*, Oxford: North Holland, pp. 179-80.

[25] Quoted in Goodin, *What's Wrong with Terrorism?*, p. 55.

[26] John Thakrah, 2004. *Dictionary of Terrorism*, 2nd edition, London: Routledge.

[27] Ibid, pp. 114-120.

[28] See Jonny Burnett and Dave Whyte, 2005. 'Embedded Expertise and the New Terrorism', *Journal for Crime, Conflict and the Media*, vol. 1, no.4, pp. 1-18; and RAND, 2006. 'RAND-MIP Terrorism Incident Database Project', available online at: http://www.rand.org/ise/projects/terrorismdatabase/index.html, accessed 16 March, 2008.

In addition to this silence on the broader subject of state terrorism, we can detect a series of other silences. In particular, there is within the terrorism literature virtually no mention or discussion of Western state terrorism, the terror of strategic bombing, the terror of democratic state torture, Western sponsorship of mostly right-wing terrorist groups, Israeli state terrorism, and the terrorism of Western allies during the Cold War and the war on terror – among others. At present, there is an ongoing silence on the terrorism of state-sponsored death squads in Iraq, the terrorism of Western-backed warlords in Afghanistan, and the state terror of Western allies such as Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Egypt and the like.

In large part, the silence on state terrorism in the discourse is due to the frequent practice by terrorism scholars of defining terrorism exclusively as a form of non-state violence, thereby excluding states a priori from being able to employ terrorism at all. Bruce Hoffman, for example, argues that terrorism involves violence 'perpetrated by a subnational group or non-state entity.'[29] This is in keeping with the U.S. State Department's highly influential definition of terrorism, a definition employed by a significant proportion of terrorism scholars today, which conceives of terrorism as 'premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetuated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.'[30] For scholars who adopt this definition, terrorism is both largely indistinguishable from insurgency, militancy, guerrilla warfare, and the like, and more importantly, states are *a priori* and by definition excluded as actors who can practice terrorism. For these scholars, state violence that is intended to cause terror and intimidate may be described as repression, oppression, human rights abuses, war crimes and the like, but never as acts of 'terrorism'.

A related strategy has been to try and exclude state terrorism from research by arguing that even if state terrorism does exist, state 'terror' is qualitatively different from (non-state) 'terrorism' because it has different aims, different means, and it is employed by an actor which has the legitimate right to use violence and who is bound by established rules and norms relating to the use of such violence. Bruce Hoffman for example, makes the terror-terrorism distinction, arguing that there 'is a fundamental qualitative difference between the two types of violence'.[31] This approach characterises a number of key terrorism scholars, including the paradoxical figure Walter Laqueur, whose work subsequently treats state terrorism as largely irrelevant to the study of terrorism as a phenomenon. Such treatment within the field functions in part to make state terrorism appear as less significant or important than non-state terrorism.

In sum, a discourse analysis of the terrorism studies field demonstrates that as a subject of discussion and analysis, state terrorism appears most often as a powerful and notable silence, but also at times as a ghostly, indistinct outline. Within that broader silence, moreover, there are other silences too, most notably on cases of Western involvement in and practices of terrorism.

Critical Reflections on the Ghosts of State Terror

The relative silence on state terrorism within the broader terrorism studies discourse is susceptible to both a first and second order critique. A first order critique reveals that the discourse is predicated on a number of highly problematic and contestable set of assumptions and knowledge practices, while a second order critique exposes the ways in which the discourse functions politically to naturalise and legitimise particular forms of knowledge and political practices.

First Order Critique

---

[29] Bruce Hoffman, 1998. *Inside Terrorism*, New York: Columbia University Press, p.43.
[30] Quoted in Martin, *Understanding* Terrorism, p. 33.
[31] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, p. 34.

Employing the same social scientific modes of analysis, terminology, and empirical categories used by terrorism studies scholars, there are a number of important criticisms to be made against the silence on state terrorism within the broader terrorism studies discourse. In the first place, the actor-based definition of terrorism which excludes states from employing terrorism is not only intellectually untenable, it is absurd. Given that terrorism is a violent tactic in the same way that ambushes are a tactic, it makes no sense to argue that certain actors are precluded by their identity from employing the tactic of terrorism (or ambushes). A bomb planted in a public place where civilians are likely to be randomly killed and that is aimed at causing widespread terror in an audience is an act of terrorism regardless of whether it is planted by non-state actors or agents acting on behalf of the state.

However, it is not the many obvious cases of civilian-directed bombings, kidnappings, or assassinations by state agents which are most hotly disputed, although it is still puzzling how little studied such events are in the literature, and how they are considered to be examples of 'repression' by many scholars and not 'terrorism' despite their identical characteristics to non-state acts of terror.[32] Rather, the question is whether or not certain broader state actions and modes of governance can or should be called 'terrorism'. I would argue that if terrorism refers to violence directed towards or threatened against civilians which is designed to instil terror or intimidate a population for political reasons – a broadly consensual definition of terrorism in the literature – then states can clearly be terrorists too. For example, when government agents attempt to cause fear and intimidation to sectors of their own population in order to undermine support for an opposition movement through a violent campaign that involves random murder, kidnapping and torture, assassination, and bombs planted in public places (the very same acts that non-state terrorists commit), there is no doubt that this constitutes terrorism. It is similarly terrorism if they attempt to intimidate the population of another state through the same means.

More importantly, employing this understanding of terrorism - as the threat or use of violence against one group of people in order to terrify or intimidate another group of people as a means of preventing or changing their political behaviour – it becomes clear that a number of other state actions can also qualify as 'terrorism'. For example, when torture is widely employed by the state not simply as a means to secure intelligence about imminent threats, but also as a means of undermining the morale of the leaders and supporters of oppositional groups by spreading widespread fear, then torture clearly becomes a tool of state terrorism. It is important to note that even when states try to hide their involvement in civilian-directed violence such as torture from external audiences, they are still sending a powerful message to the local society or social groups they wish to intimidate. In the use of torture, this is achieved in part by transforming damaged victims into a symbolic message for the target group[33] - a case of instrumentalising individuals for the purposes of intimidating an audience. The use of disappearances as a strategy of terrorism similarly sends a symbolic message that the state is omnipotent, omnipresent, and utterly ruthless in dealing with its opponents. Crucially, in terms of determining intent, it is important to note that state terrorism may have both instrumental (terroristic) and strategic intentions: killing a popular and effective union organiser for example, both weakens the union and sends a message to other potential union leaders and the social groups they come from.

Other state practices which fall under the definition of terrorism include the 'terror bombing' of civilian areas during wartime to intimidate the population into submission or terrify

---

[32] There are numerous examples of state agents being directly involved in bombings, assassinations, kidnappings, and the like. Obvious cases include the bomb placed on a Korean Airlines flight from Baghdad to Seoul in 1987 by two North Korean agents that killed all 115 persons on board, and the Lockerbie bombing in 1988 by Libyan agents. See Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, p. 190. In other cases, state agents have planted bombs in so-called 'black flag operations' which aim to implicate non-state groups as the perpetrators.

[33] Irwin Cohen and Raymond Corrado, 2005. 'State Torture in the Contemporary World', *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, vol. 46, no.1-2, p.107.

them into putting pressure on their leaders, particularly when the city is chosen randomly (as a result of favourable weather conditions on the day, for example) and the bombing itself brings no discernible strategic advantage. Under this understanding, certain doctrines of strategic bombing, such as 'shock and awe', as well as certain contemporary practices such as the widespread targeting of civilian areas in Israel's 2006 bombing of South Lebanon and NATO's bombing of civilian targets in the 1999 Kosovo campaign, clearly fall within the definition of terrorism.[34] These are all cases of frightening one group of people in order to produce a political change in another, which is the essence of the terrorism tactic. State counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency can also become terrorism when it fails to distinguish between the innocent and the guilty, it is highly disproportionate, and it aims to terrify or intimidate the wider population or a particular community into submission.[35] Lastly, it can be argued quite persuasively that state doctrines and practices of 'nuclear deterrence', 'coercive diplomacy',[36] 'constructive engagement',[37] sanctions,[38] and certain peace settlements involving making pacts with groups who have engaged in the widespread use of terror,[39] can also constitute state terrorism.

As mentioned, the counter-argument by terrorism scholars is that state uses of terror may have some similarities to non-state terrorism but is fundamentally different because states have different aims and methods. This is an unconvincing argument, however. In the first place, terrorism has always been used to pursue a range of different aims, both revolutionary and conservative. State terrorism may be aimed at engendering a political and social revolution, such as the terror employed by the Pol Pot, Stalinist, and Nazi regimes; alternately, it may be aimed at preserving the power of the regime and ensuring a continuation of the status quo, such as the terror of many Latin American dictatorships during the cold war. In most cases, state terrorism is aimed at terrorising the

---

[34] Beau Grosscup provides a thoroughly convincing and eloquent argument about why the doctrine and practice of strategic bombing is a form of state terrorism – not least because its original formulation was as '*terror* bombing' aimed at civilians and intended 'to create such terror, destruction and misery as to undermine civilians' morale and in swift order break their fragile will to resist' (p. 24). He goes on to document the use of 'terror bombing' against civilian populations in numerous European colonies, in the Spanish Civil War and during World War II, and then in its new formulation as 'strategic bombing' in numerous conflicts since such as Korea, Cambodia, Vietnam, Lebanon, Chechnya, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq. Along the way, Grosscup demonstrates that the two most common justifications for strategic bombing – that unlike non-state terrorism it does not deliberately target civilians and that when large numbers of civilians are killed it is not intentional – are in fact, highly specious. Grosscup, *Strategic Terror*, p. 179.

[35] Goodin, 2006, pp. 69-73).

[36] See Michael Stohl, 'States, Terrorism and State Terrorism: The Role of the Superpowers', in Robert Slater and Michael Stohl, (eds.), *Current Perspectives on International Terrorism* (Macmillan, 1988). See also, Alexander George, 1971. 'The Development of Doctrine and Strategy', in Alexander George, D. Hall and W. R. Simons, eds., *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*, Little Brown.

[37] This doctrine guided U.S. policy towards South Africa at a time when it directly sponsored and supported massive civilian-directed proinsurgency terror by Renamo in Mozambique and Unita in Angola. It can be argued that South Africa could not have continued to prop up Renamo terror with impunity for more than a decade without U.S. support. Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (Three Leaves Press, 2004), 87-95.

[38] It can be argued that the imposition of sanctions, particularly when the effects of such sanctions result in extensive civilian deaths and appear to be directed at intimidating the entire society (as occurred in Iraq where as many as half a million excess deaths were recorded), constitutes a form of terror.

[39] Mamdani makes the pertinent point that in places like Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Angola, Mozambique, and Congo governments were compelled to reconcile with terrorist movements who had committed massive civilian-directed terror. In this sense, reconciliation became a codeword for impunity and the lack of justice functioned to sustain an international atmosphere of tolerance towards terror. Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, 250-51. Such an approach would be akin to compelling the U.S. and its allies today to accept amnesty for the Taliban in Afghanistan and the various Iraqi insurgent groups in power-sharing settlements, including those that used terrorism against US civilians.

population in the short-term in order to ensure continued political control in the long-term. States often employ terrorism when they lack the normative political means of ensuring control.[40] In the same way, non-state terrorist groups may have either revolutionary or conservative aims. Second, states may have access to more destructive means of violence, but this does not means that the violence is qualitatively different; it is still directed at civilians and employed symbolically to influence an audience. In any case, the empirical record demonstrates that state terrorism most often employs exactly the same methods – bombings, assassinations, kidnap, torture and the like – as non-state terrorist groups, even if they can be used more widely and frequently by state actors.

A second important criticism that can be levelled at the field for upholding its silences on state terrorism is that by any empirical measure, states have engaged in far more terrorism than non-state terrorists, and their terrorism has been far more serious and destructive. This is not surprising, as states possess far more destructive power than non-state actors and the use of terrorism can become institutionalised in permanent state structures. In addition, there is a great deal of evidence of Western state involvement in terrorism. As a very crude comparison, non-state terrorism is responsible for between a few hundred and a few thousand deaths annually over the entire world, depending upon which data set or measures are employed. By contrast, states have killed, tortured, and intimidated hundreds of millions of people[41] over the past century or so, and a great many states continue to do so today in places like Colombia, Haiti, Algeria, Zimbabwe, Myanmar, Uzbekistan,[42] Kashmir, Palestine, Chechnya, Tibet, North Korea, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sudan, and elsewhere. Many of these states regularly employ extensive state torture, extra-judicial killings, disappearances, collective punishments, and daily forms of violent intimidation to terrorise opponents and enforce compliance to the state; human rights groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch provide meticulous and continual documentation of these violations. The point is that even if only a small fraction of these murders and acts of civilian-directed violence can be clearly identified as acts of state terrorism, they would still vastly outnumber the annual acts of non-state terrorism.

Similarly, Western involvement in terrorism has a long but generally ignored history, which includes: the extensive use of official terror by Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, the U.S. and other colonial powers as a form of governance and social control in numerous countries throughout the colonial period;[43] the 'terror bombings' of civilians during World War II; U.S. and Western support and sanctuary for a range of right-wing insurgent groups during the cold war such as anti-Castro groups, the Contras, Unita, the Mujahideen, and others – groups which regularly committed terrorist acts including planting car bombs in markets, kidnappings, assassinations, civilian massacres, and

---

[40] Jack Gibbs, 1989. 'Conceptualization of Terrorism', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 54, no. 3, pp. 338-9.

[41] A conservative estimate of state-instigated mass murder, forcible starvations and genocide against civilians suggests that states have been responsible for 170-200 millions deaths in the twentieth century alone – more than all other forms of deadly conflict, including war, combined. See R.J. Rummel, *Death by Government* (Transaction Books, 1994). Over the past two decades, up to 300,000 people have been 'disappeared' worldwide. See Jeffrey Sluka, 2000. 'Introduction: State Terror and Anthropology', in Sluka, (ed.), *Death Squad*. See also, Carole Nagengast, 1994. 'Violence, Terror, and the Crisis of the State', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 23, pp. 109-136.

[42] The former British ambassador to Uzbekistan reveals the nature and extent of Uzbek state terror and Western complicity in it in Craig Murray, 2006. *Murder in Samarkland: A British Ambassador's Controversial Defiance of Tyranny in the War on Terror*, Mainstream Publishing.

[43] Evidence of the use of terror by the colonial authorities is contained in an extremely large literature on the history and nature of colonialism, as well as the large post-colonialism literature. For more immediately accessible summaries of colonial terror, see among others: Ian Beckett, 2001. *Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies: Guerrillas and their Opponents since 1750*, London: Routledge; Barker, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Terrorism*, 61-86; and Herman and O'Sullivan, *The 'Terrorism' Industry*, 3-7. Other examples of British state terrorism are discussed in Mark Curtis, 2004. 'Britain's Real Foreign Policy and the Failure of British Academia', *International Relations*, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 275-87.

blowing up civilian airliners;[44] Israel's extensive use of state terrorism in the form of torture, assassination, and collective punishments against Palestinian populations in surrounding countries and within the occupied territories; Israeli sponsorship of Christian militia groups in Lebanon who engaged in numerous acts of terror during the 1980s, including the notorious Sabra and Shatilla refugee camp massacres; U.S. tolerance of Irish Republican terrorist activity in the U.S.;[45] U.S. and Western support for systematic state terror by numerous right-wing regimes across the world, perhaps most notoriously El Salvador, Chile, Guatemala, Indonesia, and Iran;[46] U.S. use of terrorism during counter-insurgency operations such as 'Operation Phoenix' in Vietnam, and in counter-revolutionary campaigns in Latin America such as 'Operation Condor';[47] British support for Loyalist terrorism in Northern Ireland[48] and various other 'Islamist' groups in Libya and Bosnia, among others;[49] Spanish state terror during the so-called 'dirty war' against ETA;[50] French terror in Algeria and against Greenpeace in the *Rainbow Warrior* bombing; Italian state sponsorship of right-wing terrorists who carried out so-called 'black flag operations', such as terrorist bombings, designed to implicate left-wing groups from the late 1960s to the early 1980s; Western support for Afghan[51] and Somali warlords today; the provision of continuing sanctuary to anti-Castro terrorists,[52] former Latin

---

[44] U.S. officials admitted as early as 1983 that the Contras were engaged in the killing of civilians, kidnapping, torture, and indiscriminate attacks. It later emerged that a CIA Contra training manual, *Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare*, advocated exactly these kinds of civilian-directed proinsurgency tactics. Similar forms of training were provided through proxies to the Afghan insurgents. Similarly, Michael Stohl quotes CIA data that shows that Cuban exile groups engaged in 89 separate terrorist incidents from 1969-79 alone. See Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, 102, 116; Livingston, *The Terrorism Spectacle*, 48-58; Stohl, 'States, Terrorism and State Terrorism', 189; Herman, *The Real Terror Network*, 63; Warren Hinckle and W. W. Turner, 1981. *The Fish is Red: The Story of the Secret War Against Castro*, Harper and Row; Herman and O'Sullivan, *The 'Terrorism' Industry*; and Gareau, *State Terrorism and the United States* – among others.

[45] U.S. official toleration of IRA activity is described in Byman, *Confronting Passive Sponsors of Terrorism*, 21-7.

[46] Ironically, and in a deliberate attempt to subvert the idea of U.S. support for state terror, many of these regimes received U.S. military assistance under the auspices of 'counter-terrorism' programmes. See among others: George, *Western State Terrorism*; Herman, *The Real Terror Network*; Herman and O'Sullivan, *The 'Terrorism' Industry*; and Gareau, *State Terrorism and the United States*.

[47] The use of state terrorism in Operations Phoenix and Condor are discussed in J. Patrice McSherry, 2002. 'Tracking the Origins of a State Terror Network: Operation Condor', *Latin American Perspectives*, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 38-60.

[48] See Jeffrey Sluka, '"For God and Ulster": The Culture of Terror and Loyalist Death Squads in Northern Ireland', in Sluka, *Death Squad*.

[49] For example, evidence from former British and French intelligence officers suggests that MI6 paid large sums of money to the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, a terrorist group associated with al Qaeda, to assassinate Colonel Gadafy in 1996. It is alleged that British intelligence provided sanctuary to members of the group in Britain and subsequently thwarted attempts by Libya to bring Osama bin Laden to justice. See 'MI6 "halted" Bin Laden Arrest', *Guardian Weekly* November 14-20, 2002. There is also evidence that British and American intelligence agencies provided a green light to various 'Islamist' groups training insurgents to fight in Bosnia. See Michael Meacher, 'Britain now faces its own blowback. Intelligence interests may thwart the July bombings investigation', *The Guardian* September 10, 2005.

[50] See Begona Aretxaga, 'A Fictional Reality: Paramilitary Death Squads and the Construction of State Terror in Spain', in Sluka, *Death Squad*; Zulaika and Douglass, *Terror and Taboo*.

[51] For a discussion of terror by the Afghan warlord, General Dostum, see Gareau, *State Terrorism and the United States*, 199-200. Gareau cites a number of reports by the UN and several human rights organisations documenting the use of violence against prisoners and civilians. Disturbingly, military scholars accept that the Afghan warlords employ 'violent operating methods', but argue that 'antagonizing them or calling them to account under Western legal structures is completely counterproductive to the reconstitution of Afghanistan. We must resist the inclination to be judgemental.' Sean Maloney, 'Afghanistan: From here to Eternity?', *Parameters* (Spring 2004), 13.

[52] U.S. sanctuary for anti-Castro terrorists goes back to before the Bay of Pigs and continues today. See Barker, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Terrorism*, 75; and Marcela Sanchez, 'Moral Misstep: Some Terrorists Get a Hero's

American state terrorists,[53] and various Asian anti-communist terrorist groups[54] in the U.S. today; toleration and support for Pakistan, despite its continued sponsorship of Kashmiri terrorist groups;[55] continuing U.S. and Western support for Colombian state terrorism;[56] the extensive use of, and sponsorship of, torture and extraordinary rendition[57] in the war on terror today; the toleration (or passive sponsorship) of death squad activity in occupied Iraq today;[58] among many other examples.

The most important point to note about this extensive list of examples is that even if we were to restrict our understanding of terrorism to the actions typically used by non-state actors and we did not include broader forms of governance or state practices during war, we would still have to conclude that states engage in a tremendous amount of terrorism, most of which is never subject to systematic evaluation in the literature. Similarly, even by Western democratic measures and understandings of 'state sponsorship of terrorism', it is clear that Western sponsorship of terrorism is as long-running and extensive as many of the cases described in the U.S. State Department's annual list of offending nations. In short, using the very same social scientific modes of analysis, terminology, and empirical categories that are employed by terrorism studies scholars reveals that states, including Western democratic states, employ terrorism too. The puzzle therefore is why are such obvious cases of terrorism so rarely studied by terrorism scholars?

The purpose of a first order critique is not necessarily to establish the full and final truth about terrorism and the role of states. Rather, first order critique aims to destabilise dominant understandings and accepted knowledge, expose the biases and imbalances in the field, and suggest that other ways of understanding, conceptualising, and studying the subject – other ways of knowing – are possible. In this case, I have attempted to destabilise dominant understandings of terrorism as solely an activity of non-state actors and reveal how states, including Western democratic states currently involved in fighting a war on terrorism, regularly employ the tactic of terrorism themselves. This critique destabilises the dominant knowledge and practice of terrorism scholars who primarily focus on examples of non-state terrorism as an object of study or limit their analysis of state sponsors of terrorism to non-Western states. This kind of critical destabilisation is crucial for opening up the space needed to ask new kinds of questions and seek new forms of knowledge, and for promoting particular kinds of normative projects, including those that extend beyond the project of 'national security'.

Welcome', *Washington Post* September 3, 2004, available online at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A57838-2004Sept2.html.

[53] For example, Emmanuel 'Toto' Constant, a notorious former death squad commander from Haiti with suspected links to the CIA, has been given sanctuary in the U.S. since the 1994 invasion. See David Grann, 'Giving "The Devil" His Due', *The Atlantic Monthly* Vol. 287, No. 6 (June 2001), 55-75.

[54] The U.S. continues to harbour groups such as Government of Free Vietnam (GFVN), the Cambodian Freedom Fighters (CFF) and other Vietnamese and Laotian dissident groups who have been involved in a number of terrorist attacks over the past few years. See Joshua Kurlantzick, 'Guerillas in Our Midst: Is the United States harbouring terrorists?', *The American Prospect* June 3, 2002, 14-16.

[55] For analysis of Pakistan's continued engagement in 'state-sanctioned terrorism in the Kashmir region', see Melissa Dell, 'Learning Curve: The United States and the Future of Pakistan', *Harvard International Review* (Spring 2002), 37.

[56] Continued U.S. support for state terrorism in Colombia is detailed in Doug Stokes, *America's Other War: Terrorizing Colombia* (Zed Books, 2004).

[57] See Stephen Grey, 2006. *Ghost Plane: The Inside Story of the CIA's Secret Rendition Programme*, Hurst/ St Martin's Press.

[58] US complicity in death-squad activity in Iraq, which has disconcerting similarities to US involvement in death squad activities in Latin America during the cold war, is discussed in the following sources: Robert Dreyfus, 'Our Monsters in Iraq', *TomPaine.com*, November 18, 2005, available online at: http://www.tompaine.com/articles/2005/11/18/our_monsters_in_iraq.php, accessed March 16, 2008; Seymour Hersh, 'Up in the Air', *New Yorker*, December 2005.

Second Order Critique

In contrast to first order critique, second order critique involves the adoption of a critical standpoint outside of the discourse. In this case, based on an understanding of discourse as socially productive or constitutive, and fully cognisant of the knowledge-power nexus, a second order critique attempts to expose the political functions and ideological consequences of the particular forms of representation enunciated by the discourse. In this case, we want to try and understand what some of the political effects and consequences of the silences of state terrorism are. A number of such effects can be identified.

First, the discourse naturalises a particular understanding of what terrorism is, namely, a form of illegitimate non-state violence. Such an understanding of terrorism functions to restrict the scholarly viewpoint to one set of actors and to particular kinds of actions, and functions to distract and obscure other actors and actions which should be named and studied as 'terrorism'. It also narrows the possibilities for understanding terrorism within alternative paradigms, such as from the perspective of gender terrorism.[59] In other words, it has a restrictive and distorting effect within the field of knowledge which gives the impression that terrorism studies is more of a narrow extension of counter-insurgency or national security studies than an open and inclusive domain of research into all forms and aspects of terrorism.[60]

In addition, the broader academic, social, and cultural influence of terrorism studies (through the authority and legitimacy provided by 'terrorism experts' to the media and as policy advisers, for example), means that this restrictive viewpoint is diffused to the broader society, which in turn generates its own ideological effects. Specifically, the distorted focus on non-state terrorism functions to reify state perspectives and priorities, and reinforce a state-centric, problem-solving paradigm of politics in which 'terrorism' is viewed as an identifiable social or individual problem in need of solving by the state, and not as a practice of state power, for example. From this perspective, it functions to maintain the legitimacy of state uses of violence and delegitimize all forms of non-state violence, which has its own ideological effects and is problematic in a number of obvious ways. This fundamental belief in the instrumental rationality of political violence as an effective and legitimate tool of statecraft is open to a great many criticisms, not least that it provides the normative basis from which non-state terrorist groups frequently justify their own (often well-intentioned) violence.[61] There is from this viewpoint an ethical imperative to try and undermine the widespread acceptance that political violence is a mostly legitimate and effective option in resolving conflict – for either state or non-state actors. Political violence is in fact, a moral and physical disaster in the vast majority of cases.

From an ethical-normative perspective, such a restricted understanding of terrorism also functions to obscure and silence the voices and perspectives of those who live in conditions of daily terror from the random and arbitrary violence of their own governments, some of whom are supported by Western states. At the present juncture, it also functions to silence the voices of those who experience Western policies – directly, as in those tortured in the war on terror, and indirectly, as in those suffering under Western-supported regimes – as a form of terrorism. That is, it deflects and diverts attention from the much greater state terrorism which blights the lives of tens of millions of people around the world today.

---

[59] See Lisa Sharlach, 2008. 'Veil and Four Walls: A State of Terror in Pakistan', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 95-110.

[60] Andrew Silke's research concludes that terrorism studies 'is largely driven by policy concerns' and 'largely limited to government agendas'. Andrew Silke, 2001. 'The Devil You Know: Continuing Problems with Research on Terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 13, no. 4, p. 2.

[61] See Anthony Burke, 2008. 'The End of Terrorism Studies', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 37-49; and Annamarie Oliverio and Pat Lauderdale, 2005. 'Terrorism as Deviance or Social Control: Suggestions for Future Research', *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, vol. 46, no. 1-2, pp. 153-169.

Related to these broader normative and ideological effects, the treatment of state terrorism within the discourse – the silences on it and the narrow construction of 'state-sponsored terrorism' – also functions to position state terrorism (should it even exist within the dominant framework) as seemingly less important than non-state terrorism, and as confined to the actions that states take in support of non-state terrorism. This also distorts the field of knowledge and political practice by suggesting that the sponsorship of Palestinian groups by Iran for example, is an infinitely more serious and dangerous problem than the fact that millions of Colombians, Uzbeks, Zimbabweans, and so on, are daily terrorised by death squads, state torture, and human rights abuses. Within this discursive terrain, it can also function to provide legitimacy to Western policies such as sanctions, coercive diplomacy, and pre-emptive war against politically determined 'state-sponsors of terrorism' which may be terroristic themselves, and which ignore the involvement in state-sponsorship by Western states themselves.

From a political-normative viewpoint, the silence on state terrorism, and in particular the argument of many terrorism scholars that state actions can never be defined as 'terrorism', actually functions to furnish states with a rhetorical justification for using what may actually be terroristic forms of violence against their opponents and citizens without fear of condemnation. In effect, it provides them with greater leeway for applying terror-based forms of violence against civilians, a leeway exploited by many states such as Israel, Russia, China, Uzbekistan, Zimbabwe, and others who try to intimidate groups with the application of massive and disproportionate state violence. From this perspective, a discourse which occludes and obscures the very possibility of state terrorism can be considered part of the conditions that actually makes state terrorism possible. In addition, the silence on state terrorism within the field also functions to undermine the political struggle of human rights activists against the use of terror by states by disallowing the delegitimizing power and resources that come from describing state actions as 'terrorism'. It is pertinent to note in this context that the world's leading states have continually rejected any and all attempts to legally define and proscribe a category of actions which would be called 'state terrorism', arguing instead that such actions are already covered by other laws such as the laws of war.[62]

The silence on state terrorism has another political effect, namely, the way in which it has functioned, and continues to function, to distract from and deny the long history of Western involvement in terrorism, thereby constructing Western foreign policy as essentially benign – rather than aimed at reifying existing structures of power and domination in the international system, for example. That is, by preventing the effective criticism of particular Western policies it works to maintain the dangerous myth of Western exceptionalism. This sense of exceptionalism and the supportive discourse of terrorism studies permits Western states and their allies to pursue a range of discrete political projects and partisan interests aimed at maintaining dominance in the international system. For example, by reinforcing that non-state terrorism is a much greater threat and problem than state terrorism and by obscuring the ways in which counter-terrorism can morph into state terrorism, the discourse functions to legitimise the current war on terror and its associated policies of military intervention, extraordinary rendition, reinforcement of the national security state, and the like. More specifically, the discourse can provide legitimacy to broader counter-insurgency or counter-terrorism programmes where the actual aims lie in the maintenance of a particular political-economic order such as is occurring in Colombia at present.[63] Importantly, the silence on state terrorism also functions to de-legitimise all forms of violent counter-hegemonic or

---

[62] See Tal Becker, 2006. *Terrorism and the State: Rethinking the Rules of State Responsibility*, Oxford: Hart; and Nesi, G. (ed) (2006) *International Cooperation in Counter-terrorism: The United Nations and Regional Organizations in the Fight Against Terrorism*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

[63] This argument is powerfully made in relation to Colombia, where the U.S. has long employed counter-insurgency warfare to preserve social formations conducive to its political and economic interests, in Doug Stokes, '"Iron Fists in Iron Gloves": The Political Economy of US Terrorocracy Promotion in Colombia', *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations* Vol.8, No.3 (2006), 368-87.

revolutionary struggle (by maintaining the notion that state violence is automatically legitimate and all non-state violence is illegitimate), thereby maintaining the liberal international order[64] and many oppressive international power structures. Lastly, the discourse can be used to selectively justify particular projects of regime change,[65] economic sanctions, military base expansion, military occupation, military assistance for strategic partners, and the isolation of disapproved political movements such as Hamas or Hezbollah.

In the end, the discourse functions to permit the reification and extension of state hegemony both internationally and domestically, and perhaps more importantly, the belief in the instrumental rationality of violence as an effective tool of politics. Despite the intentions of terrorism scholars therefore, who may feel that they engage in objective academic analysis of a clearly defined phenomenon, the discourse actually serves a number of distinctly political purposes and has several important ideological consequences for society.

Conclusion

As noted above, there is a real puzzle revealed through this analysis, namely, why there is such a deep and pervasive silence on state terrorism within the discourse, especially given the genealogical origins of the term and the mountain of empirical examples of the phenomenon? There are a number of likely answers to this puzzle. In the first place, there may be cases in which scholars have been co-opted through various means into state perspectives and projects. Given the benefits that can accrue from close association with state power, it is not surprising that some scholars choose to participate directly in such projects. Related to this, some scholars may be intimidated by state power, fearing the ways in which state officials and state apologists can punish and harm scholars who apply the term 'terrorism' to state actions. This could be a major reason why the silence on Israeli state terrorism is so pervasive. In the U.S. at least, scholars who criticise Israeli policies in public are regularly attacked and intimidated as anti-Semitic. Alternately, many scholars who joined the field following the terrorist attacks in 2001 did so out of a genuine desire to work with the U.S. government to prevent further occurrences of such atrocities. Another reason is likely to be simply the failure of academic procedure and scholarly reflection – the failure to interrogate and question the assumptions and accepted knowledge of the field. This is related to a broader process of socialisation into the accepted discourse and practices of the field; scholars are trained into viewing terrorism a particular way. Related to this, most scholars feel an inherent affinity to the values and interests of their own societies, which may make facing the reality of their government's involvement in terrorist atrocities extremely difficult. Finally, it may be related to the inherent difficulties involved in studying state terrorism: not only is obtaining primary data a challenging exercise, especially in cases where state agents may want to prevent potentially damaging international publicity, but a great deal of conceptual and theoretical work often has to be done to determine which acts constitute state terrorism.[66]

---

[64] Mark Duffield has argued more broadly that the securitisation of development and humanitarian intervention has functioned to de-legitimise all forms of violent revolutionary activity and counter-hegemonic struggle, as a means of maintaining a dominant, but ultimately unjust liberal order. A terrorism studies discourse which assumes that all non-state violence is illegitimate clearly functions in a similar manner. See Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security* (Zed Books, 2001).

[65] As Carol Winkler has noted, official claims that the target state provides support for non-state terrorism has preceded virtually every U.S. military intervention since the Reagan era. See Carol Winkler, 2006. *In the Name of Terrorism: Presidents on Political Violence in the Post-World War II Era*, Albany, NY, State University of New York Press.

[66] Ruth Blakeley, forthcoming. *State Terrorism in the Global South: Foreign Policy, Neoliberalism and Human Rights*, London: Routledge.

In the end however, the puzzle of why state terrorism has been so neglected in the field is less important than recognising that there are important reasons for bringing the state back into terrorism studies. First, there are obvious analytical reasons for taking state terrorism seriously, including the imbalances and distortions which a narrow focus on non-state terrorism introduces. Second, there are normative reasons for studying state terrorism in a rigorous and systematic manner, notably that such knowledge furnishes a powerful means of holding states to account for their actions and reinforcing norms of behaviour that exclude the use of violence to intimidate and terrorise civilians. By any measure, states have been responsible for infinitely more human suffering and terror than any other actor; the promotion of human security therefore depends on protecting citizens from the abuses and predations of states.

In conclusion, exposing the ideological effects and political technologies of the discourse has the potential to open up critical space for the articulation of alternative and potentially emancipatory forms of knowledge and practice. The good news is that discourses are never completely hegemonic; there is always room for counter-hegemonic struggle and subversive forms of knowledge. In this case, not only is the discourse inherently unstable and vulnerable to different forms of critique, but the continual setbacks in Iraq and Afghanistan, ongoing revelations of state torture and rendition by Western forces, and increasing resistance to government attempts to restrict civil liberties suggest that the present juncture provides an opportune moment to engage in deliberate and sustained critique of a dominant discourse which focuses on non-state actors and obscures the much greater terrorism of state actors.