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Winter January 4, 2013

On the future of critical terrorism studies: A response to Richard Jackson's minimal foundationalist redefinition of terrorism

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On the future of critical terrorism studies: A response to Richard Jackson's minimal foundationalist redefinition of terrorism

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Recently, Jackson offered a minimally foundationalist, contingent redefinition of terrorism. This response article raises four main concerns with Jackson's attempted redefinition. The concerns in short are: (1) the redefinition of terrorism is voiced from a narrow methodological perspective that unduly limits the scope of possible ways to study terrorism in a systematic, critical mode; (2) it reifies terrorism as a form of extraordinary violence, which is problematic because it leads researchers to assume what could be explained and it leads researchers to miss salient and significant empirical traces of terrorism and counter-terrorism; (3) the redefinition of terrorism and the particular methodological stance it works from are insufficiently reflexive for a completely constructivist approach to terrorism studies; (4) it is less useful at organizing terrorism studies than a systematic clarification of the ontological and epistemological frameworks available to scholars studying terrorism.

Keywords: critical terrorism studies; constructivism; methodology; reflexivity; terrorism as practice.

Introduction

Jackson has diligently worked to develop, clarify, and advance Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) since 2005. That effort continues in his most recent article, 'In defence of "terrorism": Finding a way through a forest of misconceptions' (Jackson, 2011), which was recently published in this journal.

In that article, Jackson fashions himself as a 'reformer' and not a 'rejectionist' by arguing for a minimally foundationalist, contingent redefinition of terrorism.[1] Against those scholars opposed to the use of the label 'terrorism' because it is ideologically tainted or analytically unnecessary, Jackson justifies the importance of clearly defining terrorism for researchers (pp. 1–2). He also ably argues against four common misconceptions regarding terrorism, including the claim that terrorists target innocent civilians, the claim that terrorists randomly attack victims, the claim that terrorists always seek publicity, and the claim that terrorism is an illegitimate form of violence (pp. 4–7). Against a number of objections voiced by other researchers, Jackson also defends the continued importance of 'state terrorism' for scholars critically studying terrorism (pp. 10–11).

In general, Jackson and I are in agreement: clarify and advance CTS. However, in terms of the specifics, some important differences regarding how to fruitfully develop

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CTS are worth noting. In this response, I indicate four key disagreements that point toward alternative futures for CTS:

- The redefinition of terrorism offered by Jackson is informed by a narrow methodological perspective that unduly limits the scope of possible ways to study terrorism in a systematic, critical mode.
- The redefinition of terrorism offered by Jackson reifies terrorism as a form of extraordinary violence. This reification is problematic for CTS for two reasons: (i) reification leads the researcher to assume what he could be explaining through systematic analysis and (ii) reification leads the researcher to miss salient and significant empirical traces of terrorism and counter-terrorism that litter the flows of everyday life.
- The redefinition of terrorism offered by Jackson and the particular methodological stance it works from are insufficiently reflexive for a completely constructivist approach to CTS, and present a CTS that is unduly narrow in scope.
- The redefinition of terrorism offered by Jackson is less useful at organizing CTS than a systematic clarification of the ontological and epistemological frameworks available to CTS scholars.

Below, I discuss these points in more depth.

Terrorism and methodology

My first criticism of Jackson's redefinition of terrorism is that it presumes a narrow methodological perspective (dualism), which unduly limits the scope of possible ways to critically study terrorism. By methodology I mean an explicit discussion of the 'ontological and epistemological presuppositions undergirding the initial shaping of the research question' (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2006, p. xxi), or, in this case, the presuppositions undergirding this definition of terrorism. Drawing from Patrick Thaddeus Jackson's (2008) discussion of ontology as it is related to International Relations, Stump and Dixit argued that there are two methodologically consistent starting points available for CTS: dualism and monism (Stump & Dixit 2011; Jackson, 2008).[2] Dualism is the methodological presupposition that there is a 'separation between the world and knowledge of the world' (Jackson, 2008, p. 132). Monism is the methodological presupposition that 'there is no gap between the observer and the observed', which 'dissolves the contrast between "reality" and "knowledge of reality"' (Stump & Dixit, 2011; Jackson, 2008, p. 149). Each ontological starting point entails very different ways of producing knowledge of terrorism, which is a line of argument that has been developed in International Relations, but remains to be developed further among CTS scholars.[3]

In contrast with Stump and Dixit's (2011) criticism of Jackson's 'ontological gerrymandering' between monism and dualism, I argue that, in his 'defence of terrorism' article, Jackson backs away from the monist orientation and moves toward a more explicit ontological dualist stance. For instance, he indicates this dualism when he says:

Accepting such a 'minimal foundationalism' in which the *ontological distinction between subject and object is preserved*, and discourse and materiality are conceptualized as shaping each other in a dialectical, never ceasing dynamic (rather than the one being

solely constituted by the other), allows for research on both instances of 'real world' political violence like terrorism, as well as the discursive processes by which such violence is given meaning. (Jackson, 2011, p. 3; emphasis added)

Jackson's dualist methodological stance presented in his 'defence of terrorism' is similar to that advocated by Joseph (2009).[4] Following the pointed critique of Jackson's research by Joseph, both now seem to be advocating a CTS that centers on a single ontological stance: one that asserts or presupposes that terrorism is composed of some recurring and distinct forms of material violence that are then socially constructed and given meaning by various political elites.[5]

To bring this back around to the present criticism, the minimal foundationalist definition of terrorism that Jackson suggests CTS should adopt, in my estimation, presents a methodologically narrow vision for the future. It is a vision rooted in a dualist methodological perspective and begs the question: what about the monists who systematically treat 'terrorism as a metaphor' (Hulse & Spencer, 2009) or a category of practice (Stump & Dixit, 2011; Dixit & Stump, 2011)? Clearly, not all CTS scholars are 'reformists' who advance under the notion that terrorism is an observably distinguishable and regularly occurring mode of political violence that is distinct from war, insurgency, genocide, torture, and so on (Jackson, 2011, p. 3). Other equally legitimate CTS scholars advance from a more methodologically monist perspective; some of them are 'rejectionists', to use Jackson's language. Others are not rejectionists, but they take a completely constructivist approach to the critical study of terrorism (Stump & Dixit 2011; Dixit & Stump, 2011). The point, however, is that the CTS tent is big enough to include all of these approaches. Against Jackson's effort to discipline the boundaries of CTS in unduly narrow terms that excludes a growing field of research, an alternative approach is warranted. What is called for, it seems to me, is a framework that can simultaneously sharpen scholarly rigor and allow for a wider variety of methodological stances to study terrorism.

Terrorism and reification

My second criticism of Jackson's redefinition is that it reifies terrorism as an extraordinary and violent event, which limits the empirical and explanatory scope of CTS. For instance, here is Jackson's redefinition:

> Terrorism is violence or its threat intended as a symbolically communicative act in which direct victims of the action are instrumentalized as a means to creating a psychological effect of intimidation and fear in a target audience for a political objective. (Jackson, 2011, p. 8)

And the definition is restated here:

> I have explained the nature of terrorist violence (symbolically communicative), the intentions of the terrorist act (to communicate a message, intimidate an audience and produce a psychological effect of fear) and the broader aims of the perpetrators in undertaking the violence (the achievement of narrow or broad political goals). (Jackson, 2011, p. 12)

While different in key areas, Jackson's definition of terrorism is very similar to that offered by Laqueur's wording: 'Terrorism is violence, but not every form of violence is terrorism. It is vitally important to recognize that terrorism, although difficult to

define precisely ... is not a synonym for civil war, banditry, or guerrilla warfare' (Laqueur, 1999, p. 8). Both Jackson's and Laqueur's definitions of terrorism are similar to that of Hoffman (2006, p. 40): terrorism is

- ineluctably political in aims and motives;
- violent – or, equally important, threatens violence;
- designed to have far-reaching psychological repercussions beyond the immediate victim or target;
- conducted either by an organization with an identifiable chain of command or conspiratorial cell structure ... or by individuals or a small collection of individuals directly influenced, motivated, or inspired by the ideological aims of example of some existent terrorist movement and/or its leaders; and
- perperated by a subnational group or nonstate entity.

One point that all three of these definitions share is that they reify terrorism as a particular type of violence. In that sense, there is nothing reformed about Jackson's redefinition; it follows in the same line as the 200-plus other definitions of terrorism offered by academics and policymakers.

However, what is the problem with reifying terrorism as a particular form of violence? Again, drawing from Stump and Dixit (2011), who paraphrase Brubaker's (1996, pp. 15–16) analysis of nationalism to critique terrorism studies:

the issue with the dualist treatment of terror, terrorists, and terrorism as real entities is that it adopts *categories of practice as categories of analysis*. It takes a conception inherent in the practice of terrorism and in the workings of the modern state and state-system – namely the realist, reifying conception of terrorists and terrorism as real entities existing independently in the world – and it makes this conception central to the critical study of terrorism. 'Reification is a social process, not only an intellectual practice.' And as analysts 'we should certainly try to *account* for this social process of reification,' which is the process through which terrorism is concretely generated in practice. 'But,' Brubaker says, 'we should avoid unintentionally *reproducing* or *reinforcing* this reification [of terrorism] in practice with a reification of [terrorism] in theory.' That issue of reifying terrorism and the tools we use to study terrorism are precisely the problems that are of concern here.

In other words, instead of reifying terrorism as a form of violence, CTS scholars should (or at least *could*) be asking and explaining: how do certain acts of violence become constituted as 'terrorism' and other acts of violence do not? Under what social conditions can the label 'terrorism' be successfully applied to particular acts – violent or otherwise? What (violent) policies are legitimated and foreclosed by the construction of 'terrorism'? What identity boundaries are produced and reproduced with the invocation of 'terrorism'? And so on. Instead of explaining these processes and answering these types of questions, Jackson's redefinition assumes that some modes of violence *are* terrorism. So, the key problem is that the reifying assumption that terrorism is a particular kind of violence closes down areas of study and explanation that should be open to CTS.

At the same time, by reifying terrorism as a particular kind of extraordinary violence, Jackson's suggested definition misses the many empirical examples of nonviolent, ordinary terrorism that constitutes the flow of everyday life. For instance, drawing from Billig's (1995) notion of banal nationalism, Katz (2006) has written about 'banal terrorism', which she says is 'sutured to – and secured in – the

performance of security in the everyday environment' in a way that 'produces xenophobic discourses around "homeland" that work to narrow the channel of threat and danger'. She is not talking about extraordinary violence in her examples; rather, Katz is talking about the insecurity of terrorism generated around mundane features of everyday life like duct tape, license plates, color-coded alerts, soldiers and police wearing combat fatigues in urban spaces (p. 351). Scholars have looked at ordinary terrorism in the context of the classroom and the ways that teaching–learning processes help give shape to a political culture of fear in places like Guatemala (Salazar, 2008). Others have examined how 'terror talk' is employed by residents living in gated communities to legitimate racialized spatial boundaries in everyday living arrangements (Low, 2008). Still other scholars have looked at ordinary terrorism in the Washington Metropolitan Area Transportation Authority, particularly in terms of the culture of insecurity surrounding various counter-terrorist policies such as chemical detectors, electronic announcements and posters (Stump, 2009a, b). So, my point is that, by reifying terrorism as a particular kind of violence, Jackson misses salient and numerous examples of nonviolent and very ordinary examples of terrorism and counter-terrorism that constitute everyday life.

In short, reifying terrorism as a particular mode of violence is problematic for CTS because (i) it fails to explain how some forms of violence are constituted as 'terrorism' and (ii) it fails to see nonviolent, ordinary examples of terrorism and counter-terrorism that litter everyday life in many urban areas around the world.

Terrorism and reflexivity

My third criticism of Jackson's redefinition of terrorism is that it allows for insufficient reflexivity for a completely constructivist CTS, which again would unduly limits the scope of possible ways to critically study terrorism. Jackson has done a great service for CTS by pushing for greater reflexivity. In this most recent article, he continues in that vein, especially when he says that the meanings given to the 'observable characteristics' of terrorist violence 'are the product of a particular social scientific and broader historical–cultural context' and that 'there will always be cases which do not neatly fit into a single category' (Jackson, 2011, p. 3). When he says that 'scholars must remain sensitive to the ways in which their own values and ideologies – their subjectivity – impact upon the research process' (pp. 3–4), this means that scholars must acknowledge 'that there is a politics involved in labeling a group or an individual as "terrorist", and that such a label has real consequences for their lives and well-being, as well as that of the community from which they emerge" (p. 4).

However, because Jackson's definition of terrorism is informed by a methodological dualism, this level of reflexivity is insufficient for those operating from a monist perspective. In line with Stump and Dixit's argument for a completely constructivist CTS, a more thorough embrace of reflexivity entails an appreciation of the "accomplished" character of all social activity' including 'the basic assumptions, discourse, and practices used in describing the experiential world' (Jackson, 2011; Pollner, 1991, p. 370). This shifts the

researcher's attention to *the very instruments she uses to produce knowledge relating to the discourse of terrorism*. 'Strategy of terrorism' [or 'terrorism'], in a more properly reflexive sense, should be seen as a more or less useful category employed by researchers and other communities of social actors. Current CTS scholarship does not adequately

reflect on the status of the tools used in analysis. Subsequently, there is a methodological taken-for-grantedness among interpretive CTS research: not only is terrorism reified as a real [violent] thing existing independently of researchers, but so are the tools used to study terrorism. (Stump & Dixit 2011; italics in original)

To be clear, this is not a rejectionist argument insofar as I am arguing that terrorism should be treated as an important category that CTS scholars can systematically use, if they so choose. More importantly, I arguing that terrorism can systematically be treated as a *practice* [e.g. category of analytical practice and political practice (Stump & Dixit 2011; Dixit & Stump, 2011; Brubaker, 1996)], which is similar to the Copenhagen School's securitization theory that systematically treats security as a practice (Hansen, 2006; Buzan, Weaver, & de Wilde, 1995). Terrorism as a practice entails that researchers withhold making claims about what counts as 'real' descriptions and characteristics of terrorism and, instead, closely and systematically examine the empirically available practices through which some community of people concretely build up and sustain the danger of terrorism and the various identities and security policies associated with that construction of danger. Treating terrorism as a practice enables researchers to avoid reification and, simultaneously, to systematically study how the practice of terrorism works.

Terrorism and methodological clarification

The final point of criticism that I raise is that it is less useful for CTS to offer yet another definition of terrorism and it is more useful for CTS to clarify its methodological limits. Jackson seems to suggest that a redefinition of terrorism is the starting point for developing and sharpening CTS. As he puts it:

whilst recognizing the inherent ontological instability of the term [terrorism] and its status as a contested concept, it can be argued that, unless scholars converge under a central concept like 'terrorism', however problematic it may be in practice, much research on political violence will remain fragmented, thereby preventing much needed cross-fertilization and standardization between different perspectives. In other words, the organization of research and the development of the field of study requires an agreed concept which can act as a centrifugal force to keep proliferating approaches and questions from dissipating rather than consolidating research findings. (Jackson, 2011, p. 12)

While I agree with Jackson that CTS as a field of study would greatly benefit from organization, development and cross fertilization, I disagree with Jackson's diagnosis of the problem and his proposed remedy.

Jackson's diagnosis is unconvincing. At base, he argued that there is a definitional defect or, more precisely, a mass of definitional misconceptions that can be remedied with a creative redefinition around which students of terrorism can organize. However, over the years, none of the 200 plus definitions of terrorism offered by scholars and policymakers has effectively served to coordinate the various approaches to the study of terrorism – critical or otherwise. Therefore, I remain unconvinced as to why Jackson is convinced that his redefinition will function to coordinate the study of terrorism. Indeed, the pluralization of terrorism studies and CTS occurred as researchers and policymakers vigorously worked to discipline the field and definitively define terrorism. This suggests that one additional definition will have limited impact on organizing the field of study. Moreover, it suggests that an alternative diagnosis and solution are worth exploring.

If the problem is not definitional, then the response cannot alone be a matter of definition. In contrast to the increasing number of definitions of terrorism, there has been very little discussion of methodology among students of terrorism studies (Stump & Dixit, 2011; Dixit & Stump, 2011). Methodology, not definition, may be a more useful way to frame the problem facing the development and refinement of CTS. Instead of redefining terrorism in minimally foundationalist terms, my argument is that it would be more useful to systematically clarify the ontological and epistemological frameworks available to CTS scholars. Some CTS researchers have already started down that path (see Stump & Dixit, 2011; Dixit & Stump, 2011; Stump, 2009a, b), but further development is warranted.

To sum up my response to Jackson, I am arguing for a CTS that (i) is methodologically broad enough to include both dualistic and monistic orientations, that (ii) does not reify terrorism as a form of specific violence, that (iii) can accommodate monist approaches that entail more thorough reflexivity, and that (iv) has clarified ontological and epistemological limits, or analytically delineated methodological possibilities for researchers to systematically employ in the critical study of terrorism.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. 'Rejectionists argue that the term [terrorism] should be abandoned in academic research because it is now too ideologically tainted to be used as the basis for objective or rigorous research ... and in any case, it is not necessary for rigorous research' (Jackson, 2011, p. 2). 'Reformists ... suggest that the term can be retained as a useful analytical concept, but only if a consensus is achieved on its definition, and if the term is applied consistency by scholars, particular in terms of applicability to the actions of states' (Jackson, 2011, pp. 2–3).
2. Following Patrick Thaddeus Jackson (2008) and Stump and Dixit (2011), it is useful to point out that there is a difference between my treatment of ontology and that of critical realist like Jonathan Joseph (2009) and, increasingly it seems, Richard Jackson. As a critical realist, Joseph and apparently Richard Jackson treat ontology as a reference to the nature of the object of study. In contrast, I use ontology to indicate the relation one presumes between their selves and the object of study.
3. Stump and Dixit argued that Joseph's article presented an illustrative example of a dualist methodological stance (2011).
4. Speaking of Jackson's approach to CTS, Joseph suggested that he should 'toughen it up' (Joseph, 2009, p. 97) by toning back the interpretivist, constructivist and poststructuralist emphasis and 'recognizing that what we are trying to understand has a real and meaningful existence that is open to investigation' (Joseph, 2009, p. 95).

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