

CRITICAL TERRORISM STUDIES: A BRIEF STUDY

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Abstract:

This article focuses on the general understanding and stand points of the Critical Terrorism School which emerged with a view to understanding terrorism from a different perspective partially denying the traditional concepts and explanations of the Orthodox Terrorism Schools. This article attempts to critically examine the arguments of the Critical Terrorism Schools and the feasibility of their key arguments. In addition, a key discussion has focused on the debate whether state should be categorised as terrorist. In this article, it has been argued that state should not be categorised as terrorist and crimes committed by states should be studied as state violence. But this study corresponds to the position of the school to discuss terrorism from a critical lens. Finally, a set of interventions have been proposed for bridging the gaps between the Orthodox and Critical Terrorism Schools.

Key words: terrorism, critical, violence, state, orthodox,

Introduction

Critical Terrorism studies (CTS) is a new discipline of academic study of terrorism (Jackson, 2008a) that aims at introducing critical study of terrorism and counterterrorism from multi-disciplinary perspectives. CTS, according to Jackson (2009, p.3) is a ‘critical orientation’, a ‘sceptical attitude’, a ‘challenge’ against the Orthodox Terrorism Studies (OTS). This article mainly attempts to evaluate the contribution of the CTS in the academic study of terrorism. It is evident that CTS have brought some new dynamics in this terrorism study especially from ontological, epistemological and methodological perspectives. Their core centre of study seems to be focused on the inclusion of ‘state’ in the definition of terrorism rather than studying state violence separately in the traditional framework. They ruminate state as more destructive than non-state terrorism what Jackson (2008, pp. 377-78) calls the “ghost” of state terror. In this article, it has been said that Critical Terrorism Studies do not need a

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new academic discipline separated from the orthodox one. But this article thinks that the presence of critical dimensions in terrorism study brought by the CTS scholars will be immensely obliging for the entire circle. This paper maintains that 'state' cannot be a 'terrorist' for numerous reasons, but people who run the state can be. If 'state' is categorised under the definition of terrorism based on the characteristics of terrorist violence, then state will lose hegemony over public and state will lose the moral legitimacy to uphold law and order. Besides examining the arguments of CTS in terms of state terrorism, dilemmas of defining terrorism, their ontological, epistemological and methodological arguments will also be evaluated. This paper answers two research questions. Firstly, to what extent CTS has brought new light in the discussion of terrorism studies in compare to OTS. Secondly, how CTS has been trying to concentrate on state terrorism.

Methodology

Methodology of any study follows the objectives and nature of any particular research (Creswell 2014, Bryman 2012). Since this research is focused on a relatively new approach of study, Critical Terrorism School, therefore this research has attempted to employ a method that best suits to unearth different aspects of CTS for the wider reader. Since this research was designed solely on secondary data, a careful design was necessary, otherwise the research could have been ended as a failure (Blaikie 2014). Unlike statistical data analysis, this article has been written based on qualitative research approaches, literature review in particular. Because this genre of research requires critical analysis instead of mathematical or statistical data calculation. For the completion of research, data have been collected from various secondary sources like books, journal articles and internet sources. No primary source such as elite interview was used in this study for the researcher's convenience and minimising risks associated with interviewing individuals on terrorism studies. This research has been designed based on flexible research design so that the scope of the research gets a convenient position to understand the desired modes of research

Conceptual Framework

What constitutes terrorism and what are its traits, what are the common questions asked in terrorism studies. To illuminate diverse ideas linked to it, thousands of academic literature has been produced over the years. But

still, there is no mutually agreed definition of terrorism in either academic literature or policy circle. This is why, developing an exclusive conceptual framework is difficult. This difficulty has opened the scope for the CTS scholars where they have stepped up to defy the traditional discourse of terrorism studies. Martini writes (2021, p. 3): “as a kind of political violence that is discursively constructed as such through processes of interpretation. This construction is historically, socially, and politically contingent – and thus highly dependent on discourses and the knowledge created about it.” According to Martini, terrorism is not something of its own, instead it’s constructed by powers. In line with such construction, it can be said that such hegemony, construction, power and discourse paves the long-time traditional debate in terrorism studies- one man’s terrorist another man’s freedom fighter. So, at the centre of terrorism studies, there lies problems and it depends on who and how the knowledge on terrorism is produced.

The study of Onuf (2009) is a work that can be consulted. Onuf (2009) contends that terrorism is something that we ascribe that phenomenon. Terrorism is produced and reproduced through our language, power and discourses. Onuf (2009) is also cited often in the seminal study of Martini (2021, p. 5) as: “This means not only that terrorism cannot be stated *a priori*, but also that diverse meanings attributed to political violence would make different actors’ behaviours possible. Importantly, this understanding does not reject the reality of violence, but it focuses on the politically, historically, and socially contingent interpretations of political violence. Here, among others, Onuf underlined the critical role language and discourses play in the construction of threats and, for example, in constructing political violence as terrorism (Onuf 2013; 2009).

One of the key agendas of CTS is to draw an exclusive definition of terrorism as they blame Orthodox Terrorism Studies (OTS) for failing to develop a unanimous definition. According to Jackson, one of the reasons behind the development of CTS is absence of unanimous definition of terrorism (Jackson, 2008b). Defining terrorism exclusively is problematic and there is no consensus regarding the definition of terrorism (Jackson 2009, Silk 2004,). It is problematic because of three reasons. Firstly, different terrorist organizations have different aims. For instance, aim of LTTE is not identical to ISIS. Secondly, there is a debate over the components and strategy of terrorist violence that what are the main components that will designate a certain action as terrorist violence.

Finally, a certain act of violence is viewed from its own perspectives as either terrorism or violence or patriotism. This makes the contextual study more difficult.

Richard Jackson (2009, p.11) focused on four main problems in defining terrorism. Firstly, just war concept is one of the key reasons that creates a problem to define who a terrorist is. For instance, many of the Palestinians don't think that attack on Israel is a terrorist act. Secondly, there is a misconception that terrorism always wants publicity. CTS argue that terrorist activities have target audience. It is not publicity. Thirdly, there is a customary idea that terrorism is a violence that is caused to randomly chosen victims. Finally, there is a misconception that an act can be categorised under terrorism if it is done by non-state agencies what they call illegitimate political violence.

Wilkinson (2012, p. 15) opines that terrorism should be viewed from multi-dimensional perspectives. That is why a typological analysis is required rather than 'one size fits all' trend. Based on boundary, terrorism can be of two kinds, domestic and international. For instance, Hijbut Tahrir is a local terrorist organization in Bangladesh while Al Qaida is an international terrorist organization (Islam and Siddika 2020). On the other hand, based on political orientation, terrorism can be of four kinds; ethno-separatist terrorism (IRA), ideological terrorism (Hijbut Tahrir in Bangladesh), religio-political terrorism (ISIS) and single issue terrorism (LTTE). In this respect, CTS are quite contradictory. In one hand, they want a solution of defining terrorism exclusively. On the other hand, they believe in contextual analysis of terrorism which cannot give an exclusive definition of terrorism. But over the years, CTS has also become flexible to some extent in augmenting any rigid claims. Instead they are introducing more research based on facts nowadays.

So, conceptually I understand terrorism as a form of political violence that threatens the national and global peace as non-exclusive act. Terrorism is not mutually exclusive and highly context specific. The hegemony of the state and the hegemony of the international system defines who is a terrorist. This definition has a self-contradiction- allowing a traditional space and critical space to merge together. My definition of terrorism says that state has the sovereign power who is a terrorist and from international perspective, I understand the UN has the power to define terrorism. But at the same time, I also understand that states or even the UN defines

terrorism sometimes arbitrary. Thus my definition (not exclusive) of terrorism stands as: “Terrorism is a form of political violence and legal crime that threatens the national and global peace and violates states’ or the UN’s binding laws”.

Findings: The findings of this research have been presented below based on the available literary arguments.

Problems of defining terrorism:

There is also a debate on which component will constitute a terror incident. According to Victor Walter (1969, as cited in Blakley 2010, p.13), terrorism has three major features; violence directed at a victim, violence will induce terror and fear in the witness and the violent actor expects that the witness will change their behaviour. These features emphasise on the merit of action, not the actor exclusively. On the other hand, Blackley (2010, p. 15) seemed to be more biased in defining terrorism as he mentioned violent activities need to be committed by state or state agents. Their standpoint is largely dependent on inclusion of state in the category of terrorism. He proposed four elements of for being a terrorist act.

- a. Deliberate act of violence against individuals that state has the duty to protect or a threat of fear that already exists through prior activities
- b. The act must be perpetrated on behalf of state or with state apparatus like paramilitaries or security agents
- c. To induce extreme fear in the public
- d. The target audience is forced to consider their behaviour

Walter Laqueur (2003, p. 238) identified terrorism as “the systematic use of murder, injury, and destruction, or the threat of such acts, aimed at achieving political ends.” His concept of political aim is also supported by Hoffman (2006). In addition, considering five features of terrorism including political aim, violence, far reaching psychological repercussions, ideological motive and non-state actors’ penetration Hoffman (2006) defined terrorism as “the deliberate creation of exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change (Hoffman, 2006, p. 40).

Thus, Hoffman conceives terrorism as solely non-state actions. But his ideological-driven terrorism concept raises the question of state repression

based on any ideology. For instance, if any political party, driven by a specific ideology conducts massive violence, then will this be brought under the definition of terrorism? In this case, Hoffman did not answer whether all these five features are mandatory for claiming a violence as terrorism. Moreover, if ideological debate comes to in front against state, where will the political party be placed? This ideological debate over terrorism caused by political parties keeps a new dimension of further research.

Based on the above characteristics, it can be said that it is not possible to define 'terrorism' exclusively. Critical Terrorism Studies brings a major agenda regarding the actors of terrorism. It cannot be denied that state sometimes uses its 'legitimate' force on the public for political gain. However, if state is included in the definition of terrorism according to the general characteristics, then every state is a terrorist state in a historical process. Every state had to adopt in its entire historical advancement what CTS call "terrorist" strategies. Thus, the primary claim to develop CTS in absence of a definition of the CTS academics seem to be less logical. Meanwhile they accuse OTS for not being self-critical that triggered a new way of terrorism study. Horgan & Boyle refuted this stating that OTS academics have been critical to themselves in many respects ranging from ontological positions to placing state violence in terrorism studies. They have been trying to find multiple ways to reduce conflicts within the own scholarship arena and to solve the problems (Horgan and Boyle, p.53).

Ontological, Epistemological and Methodological arguments of the Critical Terrorism School:

CTS accuse OTS of not being self-critical in ontological, epistemological and methodological grounds. Horgan & Boyle refuted this stating that OTS academics have been critical to themselves in many respects ranging from ontological positions to placing state violence in terrorism studies. They have been trying to find multiple ways to reduce conflicts within the own scholarship arena and to solve the problems (Horgan and Boyle, p.53). Considering terrorism as a 'social fact' (Jackson, 2009, p. 3), CTS bring few ontological, epistemological and methodological arguments where they differ with the Orthodox Terrorism studies (Bunyavechewin, 2010, p.5).

Bunyavechewin (2010, p.5) described this ontological approach of

CTS as social constructivism arguing that there are differences in viewing a social fact as it is seen from various contexts. This difference determines how to view a social phenomenon. Thus, a societal construction determines who a terrorist is. CTS bring at least two strong arguments from ontological stand point.

Firstly, CTS deny deliberate labelling of 'terrorist' based on western orientation. Being a contextual aspect, some violence what the western people deliberately describe as terrorism are the result of social construction. For instance, Nelson Mandela was a terrorist in his early days according to the then South African government. On the contrary, he was a humanitarian leader to many people of the world including the West (Jackson, 2009, p.5). Secondly, based on the Welsh critical school of security studies, CTS argue that human security is prior to state security. As human being is the centre of the state mechanism, therefore state must prioritize human security. If state becomes a threat to its people, the state must be brought under the category of terrorism (Jackson 2009, p. 6).

In response to the Welsh school model, it can be argued that security comes first for people instead of state because people constitute state. If the security of people is under threat, the security of state automatically becomes weak. But it is not true that OTS academics are not concerned about people's security. At the same time, state does not mean only the government. The Welsh model seems to be considering government as state. Government is only an element of state.

In case of epistemological debates (Jackson, 2009, p.6), on one hand, CTS argue that knowledge can be used as political instrument by the elites especially the Western elites to continue their hegemony. Thus, 'terrorism' is an attributive term that requires more contextual analysis rather than blindly following the orthodox dichotomy of terrorism studies. On the other hand, CTS bring state violence in the definition of terrorism. If certain types of violence is caused by either state actor or non-state actor, these types of violence should be brought under the category of terrorism. State should not be exempted for Weberian model of state legitimacy over all.

From methodological perspectives, CTS focus on two main aspects; transparency of the researcher and methodological pluralism (Jackson, 2009, pp. 8-9). According to the advocates of CTS, orthodox terrorism researchers are biased with the western constructed mentality and arbitrary definition of terrorism. Researchers should be very careful about 'subjective'

and ‘objective’ analysis without any biasness. On the other hand, orthodox researchers do not conduct participatory research interviewing the accused ‘terrorists’. They mainly rely on the secondary source of terrorism studies. In this case, CTS advocate for a methodological pluralism where terrorism should be studied from multidimensional points including anthropological, historical, sociological, economic and psychological study.

To some extent it is true that OTS are in many cases reluctant to conduct a research on terrorism by interviewing the terrorists. There are different practical issues behind this. Firstly, it is not so easy to access to the terrorists. Secondly, interviewing a terrorist might increase the chance of risk of the researcher’s life. Considering these practical threats, a new dimension can be considered. Researchers can introduce their primary research interviewing the terrorists who have been arrested or in jail. On the other hand, it is not acceptable when CTS generally designate all OTS academics and researchers as ‘biased’. Different academics have different attitude and focus on terrorism studies. If the ‘contextual’ thesis of Jackson (2008a) is considered, then it needs to be admitted that to define terrorism is a relative thing and the lack of unanimous definition cannot be called as ‘non-transparent’.

Can state be ‘terrorist’?

As stated earlier that CTS mainly try to include state violence in the definition of Terrorism. Martin (2003) argued that the emergence of state sponsored terrorism has a loose connection with state terrorism. In this case terrorist groups get state support to function terror activities. This assistance can be of ideological, financial, military and operational (Martin, 2003, p. 91 as cited in Jackson, 2008, p. 381). Jackson (2008) criticised the silence of the traditional terrorism scholars when states are engaged in far destructive violence and western (the US, Germany, Great Britain, Denmark and Portugal) involvement in terrorism during colonial period (Jackson, 2008a, p. 385). Byman (2005) also categorised state’s passive attitude or tolerance towards terrorist organizations as state terrorism. A blind eye to a terrorist organization by the state can give any terror group huge velocity in their work (Byman, 2005, p. III in Jackson, 2008a, p. 381). They have tried to develop theories and arguments mainly from four points of view regarding state terrorism: *etymological argument, actor based definition debate, state legitimacy and theory of different aims-structure*. In the following sections, a conscious attempt has been made to analyse those points critically.

Etymological argument

From an etymological stand point, Stohl (2010, p. 43) argued that the term 'terror' was first used to denote counter violence by France during French revolution. This was used to describe the action of the Nazi government in Germany by the Nuremberg prosecutions and repressive actions of Stalin on the counter revolutionaries after the Bolshevik revolution. Thus, from an etymological ground, state can be terrorist.

In bringing etymological argument, CTS academics pay less attention to contextual analysis which is their own strategy. Firstly, since the formal institutionalization of the terrorism studies in late 1960s and early 1970s, academics used to keep state violence or oppression aside from their definition of terrorism. Secondly, every term has contextual meaning and represents different perspectives. But this does not mean that OTS academics are not aware of state violence or state repression.

Actor based definition debate

Goodin (2006) suggests that terrorism caused by either state or non-state actors is a moral wrong that instrumentalised suffering, fear, betrayal of duty towards fellow citizens (2006, p.102). Jackson (2008a) criticised actor-based definition of terrorism describing it as 'intellectually untenable' and 'absurd'. Firstly, he argued that none can be excluded from the category of terrorism who create similar kind of violence. Justifying factor is not the actor, rather the act is itself justifying factor. State can induce terror bombing or other violence like extensive torture by security agencies to terrify people and to bring a change in the political behaviour of the opposition and the civilians. Jackson categorised the doctrine of 'shock and own' in case of strategic bombing like Israel's 2006 bombing in South Lebanon NATO's bombing on the civilians during Kosovo campaign in 1999 (Jackson, 2008a, pp. 383-84).

Secondly, exclusion of state from the definition of terrorism gives the western power a long historical political advantage not accusing the western involvement in the historical violence including conspiracy against government, supporting coup, helping to plot destabilize government, giving money to extremist groups and historical tyranny of the state over public (Jackson, 2008a, p. 387).

Here, CTS advocates are mistaken in the sense that exclusion of state from the definition of terrorism does not imply that OTS are reluctant

about state violence and they support western involvement in violence in the world. The study of Lutz (2015) confirms that political violence induced or perpetrated by state has been studied by OTS scholars for over the decades. Lutz (2015) argued that everything evil is not terrorism and equating state repression or illegal activities can hardly be called state terrorism.

State legitimacy theory

According to Jackson et al (2010, p.3), if a state engages in a similar strategy followed by non-state terrorists then these must be brought under the definition of terrorism. CTS argued that an example like Lockerby bombing where state plotted to bomb the civilians or the Lavon affair (putting series of bombs in public places) cannot be exempted from the definition of terrorism. Though state has legitimacy, this legitimacy does not mean that state will cause violence to the civilians indiscriminately.

From two grounds, the stand-point of Jackson et al (2010) can be refuted. Firstly, state has monopoly of power and supremacy over everything. Hoffman (1998, p. 34 as cited in Blackley, 2010, p.12) argued that the violence created by the state and non-state actors has ‘fundamental qualitative difference’. According to him, state has historical legitimacy of rule and accepted norms to outlaw specific targets and terrorists violated these laws. Blackley (2010, p.12) argued that though the condition where according to international laws, states belong to legitimate authority to use violence (*jus ad bellum*), not in every case their act is justifiable by legitimacy (*jus in bello*). Laqueur (2003, p.237) also writes: ‘The very existence of state is based on its monopoly of power. If it were different, states would not have the right, nor be in a position, to maintain that minimum of order on which all civilised lives rests’.

Secondly, if state violence is studied under terrorism, who will possess the moral and legal authority to formulate law against terrorism? If we have prior stand point that a ‘state’ is a ‘terrorist state’, the legitimacy of the state will be questioned.

Theory of different aims and nature

To the Orthodox academics of terrorism studies, state violence is different in nature to the nature of terrorists because victims are not chosen randomly which is a strategy of the terrorists. Walter Laqueur (2003) writes: “There are differences in motives, function and effect between

oppression by the state (or society or religion) and political terrorism. To equate them, to obliterate them is to spread confusion” (p.140). He argued that the study of terrorism will be impossible if state repression is labelled as terrorism where US policy or Hitler or Stalin will be in same category.

One of the aims of terrorism is achieving political gain. Jackson et al. (2010, p. 1) blamed Mao, Stalin and many authoritarians in Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Argentina, Somalia, Uganda causing millions of lives for their political gains what they described as state terrorism. They argued that the number of victims caused by state apparatus is much more than the victims caused by non-state actors. Even the ongoing global war on terrorism has caused higher number of casualties because of indiscriminate counter terrorism strategy by the western countries (Goodin, 2006, pp.69-73). To some extent, it can be visible that state violence has similar aim and nature to the non-state terrorism in terms of achieving political gains. But fundamentally the nature and aim of state violence are different from the non-state terrorism.

Conclusion and recommendations

In this article, it has been argued that CTS have contributed in the academic study of terrorism significantly by developing an easy framework for studying terrorism. They accuse OTS academics for being reluctant towards state violence or repression . But OTS scholars have long history of studying state violence and they study this violence in different categories like repression, human rights violation, crime against humanity. This analytical standpoint is also supported by international law regarding the states’ behaviour towards citizen and inter-state relation among the states. It is evident that in many cases, state violates international laws engaging in crime like human rights violation. State sometimes engages in proxy wars and helps the labelled ‘terrorists’. This behaviour of the state must require rigorous study. But this does not necessarily mean that it must be studied under the category of terrorism, but the urge of the CTS will keep the states alarmed. OTS argues that if state is brought under the definition of terrorism, this will bring the end of the legitimate supremacy of state over everything. State violence has significant difference in their aims, methodology and nature. Based on this research, a few recommendations can be proposed for study of state violence and to bridge the gaps between the Critical Terrorism School and the Orthodox Terrorism School. Firstly, state should not be reluctant over the violence caused by the state agencies.

The state must bring the perpetrators under trial. If the government itself is engaged in such crimes, the judiciary should play a role. These crimes should be studied as ‘state violence’. But when it will be matter of individual, then state can sue him/her for terrorism irrespective of his nature- be that person a security service personal or a military personal. Secondly, the Critical Terrorism School academics should understand that if the legitimacy of the state itself is brought under question, then the state will lose the moral legitimacy of punishing the state perpetrators as well. The situation will be more complicated. Thirdly, OTS scholars must incorporate critical lens to study terrorism so that governments or military governments are not given extra leverage (though they have a long history of studying such issues). Finally, academics from both groups should arrange a series of talks among them so that they can conclude regarding the academic study of terrorism for the betterment of the world. But all words both written or verbal will keep impact if and only if we incorporate policy actors who make policy on terrorism, counterterrorism and security.

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