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## bringing the state back into terrorism studies

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### Abstract

Orthodox terrorism studies tend to focus on the activities of illiberal non-state actors against the liberal democratic states in the North. It thus excludes state terrorism, which is one of a number of repressive tools that great powers from the North have used extensively in the global South in the service of foreign policy objectives. I establish the reasons for the absence of state terrorism from orthodox accounts of terrorism and argue that critical-normative approaches could help to overcome this major weakness.

**Keywords** state terrorism; terrorism studies; political violence; torture; repression

State terrorism, along with other forms of repression, has been an ongoing feature of the foreign policies of democratic great powers from the North and the United States (US) in particular. The use of repression by the US was particularly intense during the Cold War, and we are seeing a resurgence of its use in the 'war on terror'. State terrorism, of which torture can sometimes be a tool, is defined as threats or acts of violence carried out by representatives of the state against civilians to instill fear for political purposes. According to dominant views in mainstream policy, media and academic circles, terrorism constitutes the targeting of Northern democratic states and

their allies by non-state groups supplied and controlled by 'rogue' states or elements located in the South. This is only partially accurate. While such groups have carried out attacks against Northern democracies, including the devastating attacks of September 11th, 2001, it is also the case that Northern democracies have condoned and used terrorism, along with other forms of repression, against millions of citizens in the South over many decades.

There are three reasons for the notable absence of state terrorism – particularly that practised by Northern democracies – from scholarly debate within terrorism studies. The first has to do with the

methods deployed by orthodox terrorism scholars. The second relates to their institutional affiliations. The third is connected to the marginalisation of explicitly normative approaches to foreign policy within international relations (IR) scholarship more broadly. I will outline some of the main flaws in the approaches of mainstream terrorism scholarship and show how these are exacerbated by the institutional affiliations of leading experts. I will then map out how this serious omission could be overcome.

## **THE STATE OF CONTEMPORARY TERRORISM STUDIES**

The way in which terrorism is theorised and defined in conventional terrorism studies is one of the main reasons why state terrorism by Northern democracies is largely absent from debate. This is correctly attributed to the way in which 'the term "terrorism" has been virtually appropriated by mainstream political discussion to signify atrocities targeting the West' (George, 1991: 1). It is in turn a consequence of the fact that most scholarship within terrorism studies is grounded in 'problem-solving theory'. As Robert Cox argues, problem-solving theory 'takes the world as it finds it, with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organised, as the given framework for action' (Cox, 1981: 128). For orthodox terrorism scholars, the aim of their work is not to challenge these institutions and power relations, but to consider the problem of terrorism within the context of these existing institutions and power dynamics. Furthermore, the parameters of analysis for most terrorism scholars have been dictated by dominant neo-realist approaches that tend to accept the benign character of the foreign policies of Northern democratic states, and the US in particular. When such states use

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force, it is assumed that this is in response to credible threats or as a means of protecting others. Yet as Alexander George accurately notes, 'on any reasonable definition of terrorism, taken literally, the United States and its friends are the major supporters, sponsors, and perpetrators of terrorist incidents in the world today' (George, 1991: 1).

A 'reasonable definition of terrorism' is offered by leading terrorism expert, Paul Wilkinson. He argues that terrorism has five main characteristics:

*It is premeditated and aims to create a climate of extreme fear or terror; it is directed at a wider audience or target than the immediate victims of the violence; it inherently involves attacks on random and symbolic targets, including civilians; the acts of violence committed are seen by the society in which they occur as extra-normal, in the literal sense that they breach the social norms, thus causing a sense of outrage; and terrorism is used to try to influence political behaviour in some way (Wilkinson, 1992: 228–229).*

Despite this, Wilkinson's only discussion of state terrorism is by Marxist-Leninist regimes and their client insurgencies (Wilkinson, 1992: 232). He makes no mention of the extensive terrorism used by right-wing states that

during the Cold War, sought to repress left-wing movements across Latin America, often with US backing. Underpinning Wilkinson's work is an inbuilt assumption that Northern democracies are primarily victims and not perpetrators of terrorism. Importantly, it is not the content of Wilkinson's definition that precludes a focus on state terrorism by Northern democracies, but simply its inconsistent application in research.

The Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV) at St Andrew's University worked with the RAND Corporation to develop a database of international terrorism incidents between 1968 and 1997; it is widely recognised as the most authoritative source of data on international terrorism. The RAND Corporation is a non-profit-making research foundation with close links to the Pentagon. The largest private research centre in the world with an estimated annual budget of \$160 million, it maintains close ties to the US government (Burnett and Whyte, 2005: 8). The RAND–St Andrew's data set defines international terrorism as 'incidents in which the perpetrators go abroad to strike their targets, select domestic targets associated with a foreign state, or create an international incident by attacking airline passengers or equipment'. From 1998, the data set was extended to include acts of domestic terrorism, which it defines as 'incidents perpetrated by local nationals against a purely domestic target' (RAND, 2007). Under both of these definitions, the assumption is that the perpetrators will not be the state itself, but sub-national individuals or groups acting against foreign or local interests. This is a crucial flaw. Explicitly excluded are acts of state terror committed by governments against their own citizens or acts of violence in warlike situations, even though such acts clearly fit Wilkinson's definition.

Terrorism is defined by the US State Department's Office of the Coordinator for

Counterterrorism as 'premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience'. This means that rather than taking a literal approach to the study of terrorism, by which we determine what constitutes terrorism and then seek instances of the phenomenon to try and determine causes and remedies, the US government takes a propagandistic approach that focuses solely on actors seen as antithetical to US interests (Chomsky, 1991: 12). Importantly, the RAND–St Andrew's database also follows this pattern: the designated enemies are those non-state 'rogue' groups that seek to target foreign or domestic interests, and terrorist acts are those perpetrated by such groups against those targets. In this sense, the 'terrorist' label is used as a political tool to de-legitimise certain groups, rather than as an analytical category.

The selective ways in which terrorism is conceived and studied comes as no surprise considering the close connections between, first, RAND and the successive US administrations, and, second, between RAND and supposedly independent academic experts on terrorism, including Paul Wilkinson. Other leading academics associated with both RAND and the CSTPV are Bruce Hoffman who temporarily left the RAND Corporation in 1993 to found the CSTPV at St Andrew's and who remains an honorary senior researcher there, and Brian Jenkins, a senior analyst with RAND who is also a member of the CSTPV's advisory council (Burnett and Whyte, 2005: 8). Individuals associated with the CSTPV and RAND also retain key editorial positions in the two most prominent English language journals in the field of terrorism and political violence: Wilkinson as co-editor of *Terrorism and Political Violence*; Hoffman and Jenkins as members of its editorial Board and Hoffman as editor-in-chief of *Studies in Conflict and*

*Terrorism*, a journal originally founded and editorially managed by RAND (Burnett and Whyte, 2005: 9). Burnett and Whyte correctly note that this means 'peer reviewed publications are dominated by academics connected with this nexus of influence', and while they are not in any way suggesting that the system of peer review is corrupt or less rigorous than it is in other publications, 'if we consider that two of the key journals are dominated by scholars from the RAND–St Andrew's nexus, then this does say something about their ability to impose their influence upon the field' (2005: 9). This may explain why there is so little scholarly literature published in the key journals that discusses the use of state terrorism by Northern democracies: it simply does not fit within the established frame of reference of dominant scholarship on terrorism.

## **NORTHERN DEMOCRACIES AND COMPLICITY IN REPRESSION**

Northern democracies have a long history of complicity in repression, including state terrorism, often through providing military and financial support to highly repressive governments or to terrorist groups. For example, the US, Britain and Australia all backed Indonesia while it engaged in widespread repression against the people of East Timor (Chomsky, 2000: 51–61). Similarly, in Northern Ireland, British forces made extensive use of repression and torture and tacitly supported acts of Loyalist violence. For a long period, official British policy was to intern, without charge or trial, the suspected members of paramilitary groups. The British army also used torture as part of its interrogation of suspected Republican terrorists, as documented by Amnesty International (1972), which concluded that the British government had violated national and international law in relation to its treatment of fourteen

Northern Irish men in 1972. These men were subjected to beatings with batons and kicking, often until they passed out; hooding; stripping; sensory assault, including being subject for a whole week to constant noise at various levels of intensity; food, water and sleep deprivation, and prolonged stress positions (Conroy, 2001: 5–11). It can be argued that these counter-terrorism measures themselves constituted a form of state terrorism.

The French also made extensive use of torture against large sectors of the Algerian population, both in Algeria itself by police forces and in France (Vidal-Naquet, 1963: 40–44). General Jacques Massu, Commander of the Tenth Parachute Division responsible for policing in Algiers from 1957, justified the use of torture on the grounds that the circumstances demanded its use and military necessity dictated it (Massu, 1997). The context of the counter-insurgency (CI) campaign saw French troops employing torture not simply as a means to secure intelligence about imminent threats to French forces, although this was the justification used by Massu, but as an attempt to undermine the morale of the leaders and supporters of the Algerian insurgency. Used in this manner, torture is a tool of state terrorism.

## **US REPRESSION IN CONTEXT**

The primary aims of US foreign policy are to maintain the dominant global position of the US and to ensure access to resources and markets in the South; these priorities are enshrined most openly in the Monroe doctrine, pronounced by US President James Monroe in 1923, when he declared the US the protector of the nations of the Americas from European states, whose efforts to extend their territory could undermine the security and the dominant position of the US in the Western Hemisphere

(see Perkins, 1927; Shoup and Minter, 1977). During the Cold War, US foreign policy strategy was dominated by the use of repression (see Blum, 2003; Blakeley, 2006). As Chomsky and Herman (1979) demonstrated in their study of US relations with the South, the US was organising under its sponsorship a system of allied states, which ruled their populations primarily by terror.

US repression in the South has involved orchestrating or backing coups, as in Guatemala, Chile, Indonesia, Haiti and elsewhere, and in direct military intervention, such as in the Dominican Republic, Indochina, Panama and others (see Blum, 2003). One of the most significant ways in which the US has been complicit in repression in the South has been through the provision of training for military forces from the area, something that has had far-reaching consequences, not only in terms of human rights, but also in terms of the capacity of the US to achieve its foreign policy objectives. US military training of forces from the South since World War II has steadily increased and is now given to military personnel from over 150 countries each year. This has been most intense in Latin America: between 1950 and 1993, the US trained over 100,000 Latin American military and police personnel. A significant reason for the training is that the US prefers local elites to carry out its objectives in the South (Blakeley, 2006). This was particularly the case following the failure of the US in the Vietnam War, after which the American public had little sympathy for further US activities overseas (Klare, 1989: 97). As a consequence, during the Cold War the US provided covert military and intelligence assistance to elites from many Latin American states. Much of this involved support for CI operations and CI training, which advocated repression, including torture, of anyone suspected of being involved in or considered likely to become involved in

activities that would threaten US interests (Blakeley, 2006). The forces trained would thereby act as US allies in pursuit of US objectives.

US involvement in state terrorism also included the use of torture as part of its CI strategy during the war with Vietnam. This occurred primarily through the Phoenix Program that was intended to improve intelligence and wipe out what was known among the CIA as the Vietcong Infrastructure (VCI). Valentine's (2000) definitive account shows that Phoenix had the effect not simply of destroying the VCI, but also of instilling terror among Vietnamese civilians. Large numbers of civilians, often not even members of the VCI but simply family members or neighbours of suspected members, were killed in their sleep by US and South Vietnamese military personnel:

*Phoenix was, among other things, an instrument of counter-terror – the psychological warfare tactic in which VCI members were brutally murdered along with their families or neighbours as a means of terrorising the neighbouring population into a state of submission. Such horrendous acts were, for propaganda purposes, often made to look as if they had been committed by the enemy (Valentine, 2000: 13).*

As well as murder, torture was also widely practised, often at Province Interrogation Centres (PICs). Some of the documented atrocities included:

*Rape, gang rape, rape using eels, snakes, or hard objects, and rape followed by murder; electrical shock ('the Bell Telephone Hour') rendered by attaching wires to the genitals or other sensitive parts of the body, like the tongue; the 'water treatment'; the 'airplane', in which a prisoner's arms were tied behind the back and the rope looped over a hook on the ceiling, suspending the prisoner in midair, after*

*which he or she was beaten; beatings with rubber hoses and whips; the use of police dogs to maul prisoners (Valentine, 2000: 85).*

According to CIA officer William Colby, who directed Phoenix between 1968 and May 1971, 20,587 alleged Vietcong cadres died as a result of Phoenix. The South Vietnam government places the number at 40,994. The true number will never be known, neither will the number of those killed under the programme's forerunners, operational from 1965 (Blum, 2003: 324).

### **THE WAY FORWARD: CRITICAL APPROACHES TO STATE VIOLENCE**

In this article, I have tried to show that two main factors have contributed to the silence on state terrorism by Northern democracies from orthodox terrorism studies. The first relates to the theoretical framework of most terrorism scholarship and the way in which definitions of terrorism are applied in practice. Accepting an orthodoxy within IR that characterises the foreign policies of Northern democracies as largely benign, terrorism is understood to mean activities by non-state actors, often located in the South, against Northern democracies and their interests; state terrorism, when it is discussed, is assumed to constitute support for terrorists by 'rogue' states. The reality is that Northern democracies have been responsible for widespread terrorism against populations in the South. The second reason lies in the institutional affiliations of leading academic experts who are frequently tied to the institutions of state power. The exclusion of state terrorism from current usage of the term 'terrorism' means that terrorism studies scholars function to promote particular political agendas, such as those of the current US administration and its allies in

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the 'war on terror'. More specifically, by reinforcing certain political assumptions about what constitutes terrorism, they reinforce the false notion that Northern democracies, especially the US, simply act to uphold liberal values and protect their populations from threats. In this sense, the approach taken by many terrorism studies scholars tends to serve particular national, sectional or class interests, which, as Cox notes, are comfortable within the given order (Cox, 1981: 129).

For these reasons, critically oriented scholars need to reclaim the term 'terrorism' and use it as an analytical tool, rather than a political tool in the service of elite power. There are several necessary steps in this reclaiming process. First, as Cox notes, critical approaches need to challenge institutions and approaches:

*Critical theory does not take institutions and social and power relations for granted but calls them into question by concerning itself with their origins and how and whether they might be in the process of changing. It is directed towards an appraisal of the very framework for action, or problematic, which problem-solving theory accepts as its parameters (Cox, 1981: 129).*

This article has questioned the dominant interpretation of the foreign policies of the great powers – that it is benign in character – and has analysed the actual practices of those states and their

outcomes. This has been with the specific, normative aim of offering suggestions for the emancipation of people in the South from the oppressive practices of Northern powers. Normative approaches of this kind are necessary for two main reasons. First, they enable us to overcome certain biases in the field, including the selective application of terms such as 'terrorism' that serves to fortify rather than confront illiberal practices. Second, they help to diversify and broaden debate beyond the narrow parameters set by the dominant, neo-realist and liberal approaches within IR.

It is also obvious that there is a pressing need to bring the state back into terrorism studies. Because terrorism is a tactic and not an ideology, states of any kind can be perpetrators of terrorism. Equally, the tactics that states use to combat terrorism can themselves resemble terrorism, as the cases of British, US and French counter-terror and CI efforts show. The field of terrorism studies therefore needs to reintegrate the state, as a potential instigator of terrorism, into the debate. This does not simply mean examining the role of the so-called 'rogue' states, but also that of states normally considered to be engaged in combating rather than perpetrating terrorism. Importantly, we

must not focus solely on state terrorism by Northern powers; this would itself lead to a further biasing of the debate. While the US was one of the greatest perpetrators of state terrorism in Latin America during the Cold War, it did not act alone, collaborating instead with authoritarian regimes which were themselves implementing state terror complexes before the provision of US support. In other words, the agency of other actors should not be ignored. We can better understand state terrorism when we examine the collaborations that are established between elites across state boundaries.

A number of issues present themselves as areas in need of further examination as part of the project to integrate state terrorism into critical terrorism studies. These include, among others: analysing the relationships between state terrorism and the use of torture; the nature of state responses to terrorism, including counter-terrorism and CI operations; the role of state military forces and, given their recent growth and increased use by states, private military companies, as potential agents of state terrorism; and finally, the degree to which the curtailments of civil liberties in the 'war on terror' may themselves run the risk of constituting state terrorism.

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**Ruth Blakeley** is Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Kent, Canterbury. She has published articles on repression and state terrorism in *Third World Quarterly* and the *Review of International Studies* (forthcoming). Her research interests include US foreign policy, US-Latin American relations, state terrorism, political violence, torture and North-South relations.