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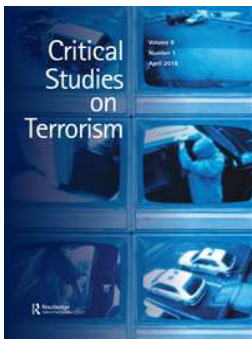
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COMMENT AND DEBATE

Dialogue, praxis and the state: a response to Richard Jackson

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Every time I take my seat on a plane on my way to meeting counterterrorism officials, I convince myself that Richard Jackson is wrong. This is potentially important work, necessary work for critical terrorism scholars if we are to have any hope of transforming current counterterrorism practices from the horrors he so accurately describes in this issue and elsewhere. On my way back, I am less certain. Was I drawn in? Was I seduced by the trappings of power, the flattery of being included into an “inner circle”? Is my work – regardless of its content – only being brought in to legitimise repressive state power? Have I sold out?

I agree with much of Jackson’s diagnosis of the impact agenda in higher education and its particularly nefarious repercussions for those of us working in the field of security. Based in the United Kingdom, where the “impact agenda” has become embedded in our work and, more worryingly, in the institutional evaluation of our work, the famous “so what” question asked about any research has gone from meaning “how does this contribute to knowledge?” to “how does this contribute to knowledge *and* how can it have relevance beyond academia, including in the policy world?” Many of us fear that there may come a dreadful day when the first question is marginalised in favour of the second. Just as worrying is the fact that there is little institutional discussion of the ethics of impact: How can this research hurt people if it is used by states or the private sector?

Unsurprisingly, I also agree with Jackson’s analysis of the “monstrous global machine” of counterterrorism. I have read few things as harrowing as Ruth Blakeley and Sam Raphael’s work on rendition (see www.therenditionproject.org.uk), or the story of Omar Khadr, a Canadian citizen brought to Guantanamo aged 16 and imprisoned there for 10 years (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/10/25/omar-ahmed-khadr>). The state – whether in the Global North, South, East or West – cannot be assumed to be a benevolent agent seeking the security and welfare of its citizens and less still of human beings regardless of their nationality. It very often is not.

I strongly disagree, however, on what we should do about it. That is, I agree that we should resist these logics of brutality, but believe that such resistance can go through an engagement with state power. This belief is based on two main points that I will argue out in this response. First of all, I will argue that there is a difference between policy-relevance and praxis, and that emancipation does not stand in opposition to praxis. Secondly, I have spent the past 10 years arguing in favour of

dialogue with violent actors – mainly non-state armed actors using terrorist violence – in the belief that *all* agents are capable of change and transformation. *State actors are too*; the arguments put forward on the advantages of negotiations and dialogue with non-state armed groups are directly applicable to state actors. There are certainly differences between state and non-state violent actors, differences that have a significant impact on how one should engage with state actors and the dangers of such engagement, but states should not be placed beyond the pale of dialogue. I would thus argue that the emancipatory aim at the heart of Critical Terrorism Studies (henceforth CTS) and the key inclusive practices of CTS make an engagement with the state possible and indeed necessary.

To contextualise my argument, it is important to give a brief account of my dialogue with military and civilian counterterrorism officials, which has focused around my research on negotiations and dialogue with non-state armed groups. Over the past year, it has developed in meetings, lectures on NATO courses on counterterrorism, and in a report I was commissioned by the NATO Centre of Excellence Defence Against Terrorism on the potential advantages for NATO of developing a conflict resolution approach to terrorism (Toros 2015). I have finally met some of the “experts” that CTS has warned me about. Those I have met form a disparate group of people: full-time academics from reputable universities, research fellows in (often state-affiliated) think tanks, retired military, as well as consultants with multiple governmental and non-governmental hats and unclear allegiances.

So why do I believe CTS scholars can pursue their emancipatory agenda by becoming part of this at times dubious group of “experts”?¹ Jackson in his contribution here juxtaposes “the contrasting aspirations for policy relevance and access to power, and CTS’s commitment to emancipation and critical distance.” I would argue that this is setting the question in too stark a manner. If that is indeed the only choice we have, most CTS scholars would no doubt choose emancipation and critical distance. What is missing from this equation however is praxis, which Jackson reserves for his discussion of the need for CTS scholars to engage with resistance movements. But can we not engage in praxis *with* state actors? Would such an attempt automatically fall into the category of “policy relevance” and seeking “access to power” and the mercenary sale of our “expertise” for state interests?

I would argue here that praxis in the form of immanent critique and the search for fissures and internal contradictions is possible *with* state actors and not only in opposition to them. Max Horkheimer (and indeed David Bowie) remind critical theorists that social reality is always pregnant with change: “Man can change reality, and the necessary conditions for such change already exist” (1982, 227 fn 20). Thus, the global counterterrorism regime run by states is “deeply anti-emancipatory, anti-human, and regressive” and certainly does not fit the definition of emancipation adopted by CTS, but this does not exclude states and state actors from having fissures or internal contradictions through which we can foster and promote change.

On the contrary, state violence and the propensity to choose violent responses to what it labels “terrorism” are precisely why we should be seeking the fissures and internal contradictions within state institutions and among state actors. “*Violent actors should not be excluded when seeking the fissures and contradictions that may pave the way for and contribute to transformation,*” I concluded in my book arguing in favour of

dialogue with non-state armed groups using terrorist violence (Toros 2012, 29, emphasis original). Thus, it is our commitment to including *all* actors – even the most violent ones – into a dialogue that should push us towards talking to state actors.

Importantly, many of the arguments used in favour of talking with “terrorists” are relevant to why we should be talking to states (see also Gunning 2004 among others). Three points in particular are worth raising. Firstly, talking to state actors about negotiations and dialogue offers them alternatives away from their current almost exclusive focus on violent responses. Just as the Irish Republican Army or the Palestinian Liberation Organization needed to be offered viable alternatives to violence to achieve their political goals, states need to be offered viable alternatives to achieve their political goals. To counter this, Jackson would likely argue that the political goals of states in the twenty-first century are “deeply anti-emancipatory, anti-human, and regressive.” But is the whole state venture as such? Although I would agree that we can not assume benevolence of the state, should we be assuming malevolence? Are all aspects of the state anti-emancipatory?

States include emancipatory and counter-emancipatory agendas. They are the source of repression and violence but also behind the welfare of millions who are educated, kept healthy, housed and at times fed by state institutions that work for greater social justice. I am employed also thanks to the state (although more and more at the direct expense of students) and, despite increasing pressures, I remain able to pursue an emancipatory agenda in my classes without any direct interference from the state. States are not unitary actors but composed of a multitude of institutions and within these of individuals, some of whom have a strong emancipatory agenda that brought them to work for the state in the first place. If we accept that states are capable of both emancipatory and counter-emancipatory projects, then dialogue can strengthen those emancipatory voices within the state, those arguing that social cleavages at the heart of “terrorism” need to be addressed and arguing against the most violent repressive practices of counterterrorism. So just as CTS argues that dialogue can strengthen the moderates in violent non-state armed groups, dialogue can also strengthen the moderates in violent states.

Finally, Jackson argues that states are at most paying lip service to critical scholars and use them to legitimise and perpetuate the “broader system of counterterrorism.” This is again similar to the arguments put forward against dialogue and engagement with “terrorists,” that they are using interlocutors to gain legitimacy, or to gain breathing space to rearm, etc. However, there are many practices of transformation and some of them can occur even though violent actors undertake a dialogue for strategic and counter-emancipatory aims. Indeed, the work of authors such as Thomas Risse (2000) convincingly argues that states can often become entrapped and eventually socialised into new norms. Jon Elster (1995) calls this the “civilizing process of hypocrisy.”

To give a potential example of this from my work with state actors, I was amused and heartened recently when on a NATO “Defense Against Terrorism” weeklong course for military and civilian counterterrorism officials, the first lecture on approaches to counterterrorism was mine entitled: “Negotiating with Terrorists: A Policy Option?” It was *followed* by a lecture on military responses and one of legal responses. It was purely a scheduling question as I had to leave the little Bavarian village that hosts the NATO School earlier than the other lecturers. But for the 97 course attendees, the first

counterterrorism approach they were introduced to was a potentially emancipatory one. This may have no impact whatsoever, but I was heartened by the attendees' engagement with the possibility for negotiations and by what appeared to be the normalisation of "talking to terrorists" as a potential policy option. This may have been the tiniest of fissures and having an emancipation-oriented scholar present to take advantage of it may be an example of praxis and indeed of resistance.

There are of course important differences between engaging with state and non-state actors. However much CTS insists on the need to recognise the complexity of non-state actors, states are arguably more complex and more bureaucratised than non-state clandestine organisations. It is likely to be more difficult to have a direct impact on policy decisions, and any impact on specific individuals can more easily be lost within a structure like the state that is so attached to its (often violent) practices and intent on pursuing policies primarily aimed at its survival. But despite these caveats, I remain convinced that our commitment to emancipation and to inclusivity make an engagement with state actors an important avenue for praxis and resistance by CTS scholars.

It requires great care and is likely to be a road filled with doubt and outright mistakes. I would venture that it requires a conscious decision from the outset of what one is intent on achieving. In my case, quite quickly I realised that my communication would have to be primarily strategic rather than primarily communicative to use Habermas' (1984) distinction. Even with this knowledge, I had several aims I could choose from. Did I want to present my counterparts with cutting-edge research potentially at the expense of accessibility for this largely non-academic audience? Did I want to have "impact" – as in see my arguments (and my name) be referenced by officials as impacting their policy on counterterrorism? Did this mean I had to make arguments they wanted to hear, or in a language they were willing to take on? Did I want them to "like" me, so that I could be called back? Finally, did I want to use this opportunity to be an advocate for non-violence and dialogue, potentially coming across as the tree-hugging peacenik that they could so easily ignore? Making this choice would affect not only what I said but how I said it.

I chose the position of conflict resolution advocate. I decided that since I had been invited as one, I was most likely to be listened to if I took on this role. I have hesitated when asked to talk about other questions, such as typologies of terrorism and its history but have chosen to use these occasions to push forward the CTS agenda. In typologies, I speak of state terrorism, almost invariably excluded by other presenters I have seen so far. In the history of terrorism, I am encouragingly not alone in pointing out that "terrorism" is a label ascribed to very different types of violence over the past century often to serve political goals of the governing powers.

That being said, I realise that I have modified my language and am not as forceful in my statements as I am in my lectures in university environments. I often stumble when my notes point me towards a strong denunciation of state violence, conscious that those in front of me are those often executing such actions. It is a mix of (no doubt misplaced) politeness, embarrassment, and fear of rejection that leads to this self-censorship but also a calculation that I have to pick my battles if I want to have any chance of being heard. I want them to hear me when I speak of the potential for negotiations. To do this, I have to come across as a "reasonable" person they are willing

to listen to. This is where Jackson is right in saying that in those moments, when I choose to self-censor, I am failing to challenge and thus reinforcing state discourses of violence and repression.

It is an unsavoury calculation, one that makes me uncomfortable about this new direction my professional life has taken. But I am increasingly suspicious of comfort and believe that discomfort is particularly effective in keeping me honest. So I ask Richard Jackson, is it not a little too comfortable to choose to only spend time with those we can more easily identify with, the disenfranchised, the tortured, the marginalised? Is the challenge not precisely that of recognising the humanity and the potential for transformation in all actors, including the top 1 percent, the marginalisers, the torturers?

I have met murderers on all sides and they all look the same to me: Human.

Note

1. To be sure, I am not arguing that we should *all* engage with the state, but believe that as a group of scholars some of us should.

Notes on contributor

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Disclosure statement

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