Interpretation, judgement, and dialogue: a hermeneutical recollection of causal analysis in critical terrorism studies

This article problematises Critical Terrorism Studies's (CTS) seeming reluctance to engage in causal explanation. An analysis of the meta-theoretical assumptions on causation in both orthodox as well as critical terrorism studies reveals that the latter's refusal to incorporate causal analysis in its broader research agenda reproduces - despite its commitment to epistemological pluralism - the former's understanding of causation as the only sustainable one. Elemental to this understanding is the idea that causation refers to the regular observation of constant conjunction. Due to the positivist leanings of such a conception, CTS is quick to dismiss it as consolidating Orthodox Terrorism Studies's lack of critical self-reflexivity, responsibility of the researcher, and dedication towards informing state-led policies of counter-terrorism. Drawing on recent work in philosophy of science and International Relations, the article advances an alternative understanding of causation that emphasises its interpretative, normative, and dialogical fabric. It is therefore argued that CTS should reclaim causal analysis as an essential element of its research agenda. This not only facilitates a more robust challenge against orthodox terrorism studies' conventional understanding of causation but also consolidates CTS's endeavour of deepening and broadening our understanding that (re)embeds terrorist violence in its historical and social context.

Keywords: terrorism, causation, orthodox versus critical terrorism studies

Introduction

Examining causation in relation to the turn to political violence has always been a central, though often implicit, concern in the study of terrorism and political violence. Frequently, this boiled down to asking 'what leads a person to turn to political violence?' (Sageman 2014, 565). Whereas many academic disciplines have sought to examine this question in differing ways, it can be seen as constituting the very *raison d'être* of terrorism studies, both in its orthodox and critical manifestation. Indeed, whether engagement with the

causes of terrorism is driven by an agenda to provide more efficacy to policies of prevention (Kydd and Walter 2006) or whether it concerns a more fundamental disposition for alleviating human suffering (Jackson 2012a), teasing out the causes of political violence or terrorism seems to be insurmountable for both the orthodox and critical strand of terrorism studies. Although causation might at first not appear to be an essential concept in the study of terrorism and political violence, substantial reflection on causation is indispensable since every theoretical engagement in this field, both orthodox and critical, is bound to make explicit or implicit assumptions on the causes or conditions of terrorism. Indeed, the very fact that one is to critically interrogate the notion of terrorism as an event and/or process is in itself entangled within causal assumptions.

It goes without saying then, that orthodox and critical terrorism studies greatly differ in their conceptualisation of causation. Despite the fact that Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) has successfully exposed the fundamental shortcomings of its orthodox sibling whilst offering a substantiated and effective alternative to it, the main argument of this article will be that CTS has been rather reluctant to explicitly engage causation when it comes to studying terrorism. The effect of this is that CTS risks being ignored by those interested in and committed to critically probing the causes of terrorism. The reasons for CTS's reluctance to explicitly engage causation can arguably be attributed to the fact that the orthodox understanding of causation, which involves the notion of so-called "root" causes behind terrorism (Bjørgo 2005; Richardson 2006; Campana and Lapointe 2012), is taken to be subscribing to an agenda that involves the very reified conception of terrorism that CTS so fiercely opposes. This concerns the fact that orthodox research tends to decontextualise and dehistoricise the notion of terrorism in an attempt to inform state-led policies of counter-terrorism (Jackson 2012b). For CTS, the engagement with causation in Orthodox Terrorism Studies (OTS) is therefore taken to be grounded in the very critique it has raised against the orthodox study of terrorism (Jackson et al. 2009, 214-221).

The purpose of this article is to assess the costs of CTS's seeming reluctance to examine causation more explicitly as this entails an unwanted reproduction of the deeply problematic understanding of the concept in OTS. This will involve the contention that the latter in fact propels the dehistoricised and decontextualised notion of terrorism that underpins OTS. Yet this is far from the only conception of causation out there. In philosophy of science and the field of International Relations (IR) for instance, causation has undergone considerable critical scrutiny that seeks to move beyond the unhelpful stalemate between either the conventional understanding of causation (as it is produced in OTS) or a reluctance to engage it more critically (as in CTS) (Harré and Madden 1975; Bhaskar 1978; Kurki 2008; Suganami 2013). Drawing on this more nuanced and philosophically grounded understanding of causation, the argument will tease out a conceptualisation of causation that further extends the insights that Critical Realism (CR) brings to the table while further developing the interpretative, normative, and dialogical fabric of causation (Herring and Stokes 2011; Porpora 2011). Accordingly, the argument will essentially contend that CTS can benefit a great deal from reclaiming causation as a more central and explicit element of both its argument and agenda. This involves a historicised and contextualised conception of the causes of terrorism that transforms CTS's rejection of the problematic understanding of causation in OTS into an effective alternative that is instrumental to CTS's fundamental commitment to a more critical understanding of terrorism.

The argument will proceed in three steps. Firstly, a brief overview will be provided of causation in OTS and the way causal explanation is conceptualised in reference to the philosophy of David Hume (1777). Secondly, a contrast will be drawn with CTS and flesh out the reasons why the latter has been reluctant to engage causation more explicitly. Most importantly, it will indicate how CTS, despite its profound commitment to epistemological and methodological pluralism, unknowingly reproduces the hegemony

of the conventional understanding of causation that was analysed in the first section. The final section will then bring in a number of insightful contributions to causation that proliferated in IR over recent years. Drawing on a CR notion of causation that disavows the Humean conception without discarding the ontological quality of causal laws, the contention will be made that the conventional understanding of causes of terrorism - produced in OTS and "reproduced" by CTS - requires an urgent overhaul by highlighting the interpretative, normative, and dialogical fabric of explaining causes. This also requires moving beyond CR's conception of causation as it risks reproducing the subject/object distinction. More so, by emphasising the interpretive and normative character of causation, the elemental claim will be made that the causes of terrorism cannot be divorced from both the historicity and context within which (socially-constructed) acts of terrorism occur as well as the normative and ethical concerns that it invokes. This hermeneutical understanding of causation will then be presented as *the* substantial and necessary contribution that CTS can make to the debate on the causes of terrorism.

Causation in orthodox terrorism studies

Similar to other event-driven disciplines, OTS emerged and developed as an attempt to causally explain events that were depicted as acts of terrorism or political violence. As it emerged out of the broader field of counter-insurgency studies (Stampnitzky 2013), one of the first volumes to systematically engage the causes of political violence was Ted Gurr's *Why Men Rebel* (1970) in which the issue of causal explanation was approached as follows: 'What are the psychological and social sources of the potential for collective violence? […] And what societal conditions affect the magnitude and form, and hence the consequences, of violence?' (1970, 7-8). Although Gurr does not refer to the notion of terrorism explicitly or even accounts for the political nature of the violence he seeks to

explain, it is nonetheless important to understand how he immediately situated one of the main causal conditions in the psychological realm. As such, his argument reflects a strong emphasis on the psychological processes that individuals and collectives undergo as they resort to political violence. This explanation is, following Charles Tilly, not a very novel argument as it concerns the simple idea that when people psychologically perceive a gap between what they have and what they deserve, they will resort to violence when the opportunity presents itself (1971, 417). This emphasis on psychological factors was soon challenged when scholars started to relate political violence to what were described as acts of terrorism. In order to replace Gurr's focus on violence amidst rebellions with an emphasis on the resort to violence itself, David Rapoport for instance argued that terrorism should be understood as an entirely new concept (1971). Subsequently, adopting the nomenclature of terrorism pushed the causal explanation into a more strategy-driven understanding of the concept; something that was further elaborated by Martha Crenshaw who codified some of the key elements in terrorism research. Although she still acknowledged terrorism's roots in civil wars and revolutionary insurgencies, Crenshaw understood that the causes of terrorism have to be found in its strategic efficacy as the 'weapon of the weak' (1981:387).

Accordingly, both these elements (psychological and strategic) were combined in the assumption that the causes for terrorism were to be found in an attempt to install fear in order to produce a political effect (Reich 1990).[i] This remained the dominant understanding of terrorism's causes until the period around the turn of the millennium introduced a supposedly new form of terrorism that was seemingly driven by religious motivations. Tellingly, this new form of terrorism was quickly defined as the "new terrorism" and was held to be distinguished from previous acts of terrorism or political violence by its small number of members, higher degree of radicalisation, lack of a rational agenda (which gave rise to the assumption of fanaticism), and deeper infiltration into society

(Laqueur 1999). Even though the term itself would be widely debated in the field (Kurtulus 2011; Lynch and Ryder 2012), the succession of so-called terrorist attacks in Western cities in the twenty-first century were depicted as supporting some of the key assumptions of "new terrorism" that make it still a noteworthy concept in OTS today (Jäckle and Baumann 2015).

Before we unearth the causal mechanisms that underpin these various causal explanations, it is worth emphasising the catalysing effect that the aforementioned attacks had on the field of OTS. A number of key works that were published in the first decade of the new century would namely consolidate the popular idea that '9/11 changed everything' (Dunmire 2009). Although it is commonly agreed that these attacks also induced a professionalisation of the field (Jackson 2012b), the canonical texts of OTS that appeared around this time subordinated causal explanation to an agenda that was ultimately geared towards policy information, implementation, and improvement (Sageman 2004; Hoffman 2006). No work reflects this catering towards the so-called War on Terror more unambiguously than Robert Pape's *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (2005), which boldly states that 'Our enemies have been studying suicide terrorism for over twenty years. Now is the time to level the playing field' (Pape 2005, 12). It is this automatic deployment of causal explanation in the service of state-led policies of counterterrorism that constitutes a central point of critique for CTS.

The question then is how this taxonomy of causal explanations (psychological, strategic, religious) can be translated into effective causal mechanisms. In other words, how does OTS conceptualises causation? A more elaborate and direct engagement with the causes behind terrorism is given by Louise Richardson (2006), who argues that causes are to be located at the level of the individual (which are willing to join an organisation), the level of the organisation itself (which is willing to resort to violence), and the level of the sponsoring state (which is willing to sponsor organisations that enhance their strategic

and political interests). Additionally, Richardson also refers to societal factors such as degrees of poverty, inequality, and the idea of relative deprivation, yet she designates these as risk factors that may improve the likelihood of terrorism but are not explicit causes (2006, 57). Most importantly however, Richardson highlights that these causes work together, claiming that both individual and organisational motivations as well as external sponsorship are required to induce the occurrence of terrorist violence.

A similar concession to multi-causal explanation is provided in Tore Bjørgo's volume *Root Causes of Terrorism* (2005), which differentiates the following types of causes (3-4): structural (macro-level indicators such as demographic imbalances, globalisation, rapid modernisation), facilitating (causal instruments such as evolution of modern and social media, advanced weapons technology), motivational (people's experiences of grievances and trigger motivations to act), and triggering (direct triggers such as political calamity or an outrageous act committed by a political adversary). Regarding the causal mechanisms that orchestrate the workings of these causes, Bjørgo admits that it is unclear to what extent the concept of "root" cause itself is actually effective terminology as this suggests a process of generalising particularities beyond an immediate efficacy for research.

The main point to draw from this brief overview is that OTS has never produced a substantial and detailed account of how it understands causation in relation to terrorism.[ii] This is problematic since it nonetheless makes a number of implicit yet strong assumptions about the causes of terrorism that are incessantly reproduced throughout its theorising. Indeed, due to OTS's fundamental disposition towards counter-terrorist policy information, discriminatory attention is paid to particular factors (i.e. so-called "root" causes such as individuals, groups, and states) while subjugating other factors that are "merely" facilitating (i.e. societal or communal conditions, the historical context, the effects of counter-terrorist policies, etc.). This hierarchy then creates an epistemological

crisis whereby critical elements are systematically ignored by the epistemic community of OTS in favour of those factors that support prevailing counter-terrorist policies (Jackson 2015). An important criterium that determines how a causal relationship can effectively be established is then the extent to which they can be measured and/or observed. It is for these reasons that OTS's account of causation comfortably falls under a conception of causal analysis that is informed by the philosophy of David Hume. Describing cause as '*an object, followed by another, and where all the object similar to the first are followed by objects similar to the second*' (1962, 76), Hume's understanding of causation largely ascribes to the idea that causal relations can be established by regular occurrence of a correlation between, what is simultaneously established as, cause and effect. Referring to this understanding as "Humeanism", causes are understood as the efficient agent of change, i.e. that which "pulls or pushes" something. This is for instance why Richardson does not consider issues like poverty, inequality, or deprivation as causal factors since they cannot be established as actively "pushing or pulling" terrorism in a regular and observable way. What is interesting then is that, since the aforementioned issues are indeed equally measurable and observable, OTS tends to apply the Humean conception of causation arbitrarily. As such, it actively subjugates factors that are not observed as directly "pushing and pulling" acts of terrorism; which indeed further exacerbates its epistemological crisis.

In summary, OTS makes an implicit yet fundamental assumption about causation that is steeped in empiricism as it solely focusses on causes that can be observed regularly through sensory experience. Whether this can be attributed to broader positivist or behaviourist assumptions is not at stake here (Kurki 2008, 97-105). The important issue is to understand that even though there is no explicit engagement with causation as such, OTS directly mirrors other disciplines in, what can be referred to as, the rationalist mainstream of social sciences, which articulates causes as levers that regularly produce a particular

outcome in a given context and can be observed consistently (King et al. 1994, 75). Important in this regard is that this conception has a discriminatory dynamic, which subjugates historical and contextual factors that are not taken to be actively "pushing and pulling" acts of terrorism and entrenches its epistemic community into an epistemological crisis. I will return to the consequences of these assumptions in the last section yet before this is done, an important contrast needs to be drawn with the way CTS understands causation.

Causation in critical terrorism studies

Ten years ago, a subfield emerged in terrorism studies that sought to achieve two things: highlight the pitfalls and shortcomings of orthodox research on terrorism on the one hand and provide a full-fledged alternative that could successfully move beyond these on the other. In the form of a new academic journal and an edited volume (Jackson et al. 2009), CTS is a broad academic endeavour that presents an alternative study of terrorism and critically probes some of the fundamental assumptions that guide OTS. The quintessential question for the present inquiry then is; to what extent did CTS present an alternative account of causation in relation to studying terrorism? In line with CTS's twofold agenda, this would imply conceptualising the dissatisfaction with the conventional understanding of causation in OTS on the one hand and providing an alternative account that moves beyond these shortcomings on the other. Yet before this question can be addressed directly, a little more needs to be said about CTS's history and its elemental lines of inquiry.

Broadly speaking, CTS's general dissatisfaction with OTS stems from four persistent issues (Jackson et al. 2009, 217-221): an incoherent and depoliticised definition of the term terrorism itself that reflects an intrinsic state-bias and thereby excludes state-led terrorism; an artificial separation of terrorist attacks and the broader social, political, and

economic context within which they occur; the absence of an ethical disposition that dogmatically adheres to state-led practices of counter-terrorism and fails to account for the responsibility the researcher has in this context; and, most importantly, a fundamental lack of a critical reflective attitude that fails to account for the discursive nature within which acts or events are depicted as corresponding to the label "terrorism". As it was mentioned in the previous section, this critique amounts to the fact that OTS subjugates particular knowledges, which entrenches its epistemological crisis and makes its conception of causation deeply problematic.

The theoretical pillars upon which CTS's critique is predicated can be defined as a 'Frankfurt School-inspired critical theory approach' (Toros and Gunning 2009, 87). Although the notion of Critical Theory as such has not received a codified definition, the general assumption is that CTS - much like the other Critical Theory-inspired sub-field of Critical Security Studies (Wyn Jones 1999) - took its conceptual inspiration from two well-known understandings of Critical Theory: on the one hand there is Max Horkheimer's seminal dichotomy between traditional and critical theory (1982) and on the other hand there is Robert Cox's differentiation between problem-solving and critical theory in IR (1981). Whereas the way CTS receives and deploys this conceptual heritage has been put under critical scrutiny elsewhere (Heath-Kelly 2010), the central assumption involves that Critical Theory stands apart from conventional modes of theorising that are impeded by a lack of critical self-reflectivity. In Horkheimer's case, this involves a conception of traditional theory as incorporating an untenable subject-object divide (and the corresponding fact-value distinction) that does not account for the way it continuously reproduces the existing order or status quo. With Cox, there is a similar treatment of the relationship between reality and the researcher as he conceptualises problem-solving theory as a form of theorising that obfuscates its performative character since theory is 'always for someone, and for some purpose' (Cox 1981, 128). In short, Critical Theory operates out of a

fundamental concern with the political (and subsequently ethical) dynamics through which theory is produced and operates. This involves a process of continuously deconstructing the artificial separation of object/subject, reality/researcher, fact/value, etc.

It should be immediately clear that the broader framework of Critical Theory proved to be exceptionally useful for an endeavour that sought to criticise the way OTS has treated its subject matter. Advocating the importance of a critical reflective disposition, Toros and Gunning for instance argue that, in CTS, critical means 'to stand apart from the prevailing order of the world and asking how that order came to be' (1986, 208). This practice of questioning how a prevailing order came to be essentially points towards the shallowness of the orthodox conception of terrorism (see above). CTS therefore emphasises the importance of both deepening and broadening this conception (Toros and Gunning 2009, 89-99). Regarding the former, this involves a process of unearthing the wider power structures within which the orthodox conception of terrorism has emerged. Regarding the later, this involves the inclusion of state responses to violence and other forms of structural violence into a more holistic approach to the notion of terrorism. As such, CTS seeks to de-exceptionalise events depicted as terrorism - which constitute OTS as an event-driven discipline - by embedding them in a broader context of political protest and other forms of contentious politics. As such, CTS is a project of (re)contextualising and (re)historicising the notion of terrorism.

It appears then that CTS's agenda of deepening and broadening the orthodox conception of terrorism has a direct relevance to the concept of causation. If terrorism is namely to be regarded as a discursive label that is produced through a particular nexus of power relations (e.g. conventional assumption that only non-state actors can engage in terrorist attacks, or that negotiations necessarily encourage terrorism, or that counter-terrorist policies necessarily increase citizen's security), the question arises to what extent terrorism as a notion corresponds to a reality "out there". In other words, the emphasis on

the discursive and social construction of terrorism risks of obfuscating the so-called material reality "out there" (i.e. the *event* that is discursively depicted as an *act* of terrorism) into an entangled web of social interactions that tend to obscure the objective existence of that reality. This would then make it virtually impossible to even consider the existence of conditions for causation (i.e. something *causing* something else). The broader debate within which this can be categorised is a long-running one in the social sciences that concerns the relationship between discourse and reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966). In IR, this debate has lead to different positions on our assumptions about reality: from a rationalist affirmation of an objective reality (Keohane 1988), to the fundamental questioning of this seeming objectivity (Ashley 1989), and a middle ground that assumes the existence of a reality that is prone to different interpretations (Kratochwil 1989). Circumventing this unhelpful debate, Toros and Gunning are quick to indicate that the category of violence needs to be retained as a minimal foundation upon which the discourse of terrorism operates (2009, 92). Accordingly, it is the extent to which this category can be defined as "terrorism" that CTS seeks to problematise. So it is not a matter of denying the existence of political violence as such but of interrogating how and why this violence is or can be framed as terrorism. This also prevents CTS from becoming a rigidly codified enterprise since it is predicated on a pluralist 'commitment to encouraging epistemological and methodological diversity' (Jackson 2012, 6). As such, it is geared towards interrogating the notion of terrorism from a multiplicity of critical angles. The fundamental question then is, what role does causation play in this interrogation?

It goes without saying that CTS strongly objects to the understanding of causation that is enhanced in OTS. This is for instance evident in questioning whether focussing on causation itself actually 'has a causal impact on reducing terrorism' (Raphael 2009, 61). The general idea seems to be that terrorism itself 'is not a causally coherent, freestanding phenomenon which can be identified in terms of characteristics inherent to the

violence itself' (Jackson 2009, 75). CTS therefore takes aim with the so-called epistemic community of OTS as one of 'specialists with a common world view about cause and effect relationships which relate to their domain of expertise, and common political values about the type of policies to which they should be applied' (Stone 1996, 86). What is interesting about this objection is that it is directed towards so-called 'mono-causal explanations of terrorism' (Jackson 2009, 7). As such, critiques have been raised against such mono-causal explanations that involve poverty (Huesmann and Huesmann 2012), religion (Goodwin 2012), or democracy (Al-Sumait, Lingle, and Dome 2009).

However, CTS's aversion towards the so-called "covering law" conception of "root" causes of terrorism does not imply that theorists have not engaged with the broader, contextual conditions that facilitate it. In fact, it is precisely the tendency towards decontextualisation in OTS that has urged CTS to bring the socio-cultural context within which terrorism emerges back in. Discussing the social construction of organised political violence, Jackson and Dexter have for instance indicated that there are enabling structures and conditions that facilitate political violence or terrorism (Jackson and Dexter 2014, 2-3). In arguing that that these structures always operate in interplay with agents and processes, they almost echo OTS's earlier mentioned conception of causation that, despite its ultimate subjugation of structural conditions in favour of agential causes, nonetheless sees conditions and causes operating together. Yet for Jackson and Dexter, this interplay is less hierarchical, with both structure and agency considered to be interdependent and co-constitutive: 'structures are the product of social actions; social actions are shaped and made possible by structures' (4). Yet this emphasis on contextual conditions does not make CTS resort to causal discourse. Toros and Gunning for instance do 'not reject the notion of "regularities" (what positivists would call laws)' (2009, 92). Jackson goes even further, arguing that CTS explicitly refuses to abide by the conceptualisation of causation in OTS:

Importantly, CTS refuses to privilege materialist, rationalist, and positivist approaches to social science over interpretive and reflectivist approaches, and seeks to avoid an exclusionary commitment to the narrow logic of traditional social scientific explanation based on linear notions of cause and effect (Jackson et al. 2009, 225-226).

CTS thereby takes aim at OTS's positivist conception of causation that is taken to have discursively produced the decontextualised and dehistoricised conception of terrorism. By (re)contextualising and (re)historicising terrorism back into broader socio-contextual processes - such as for instance democratisation, modernisation, globalisation, and the widening North-South divide - CTS seeks to challenge the idea that there is such a thing as a solid or "root" cause of terrorism.

Even though omitting causation could be potentially defended as a logical element in CTS's research agenda, the implications of this omission are nonetheless detrimental. By refusing to conceptualise the interplay between agents and structure in causal terms on the one hand, and valorising socio-contextual processes and discursive mechanisms over individual and organisational agency on the other, CTS not only allows OTS to monopolise its conception of the causes of terrorism as the only game in town but it also risks of undermining its own critique of the latter's subjugation of knowledge. This is unfortunate as the interplay between different levels of analysis is arguably an element where CTS anticipates or implicates a conception of causation that allows for a more multi-faceted and sophisticated interrogation of the causes of terrorism. It seems then that CTS's emphasis on epistemological plurality also comes at a cost:

Critical approaches to terrorism do not have a unified stance on the causes of terrorism. While some critical scholars are sceptical of the entire notion of causation, regarding it as too embedded in positivist, problem-solving perspectives, others accept it but are wary of mono-causal explanations (Jackson et al. 2011, 199).

Even though this critique of mono-causal explanations could be developed as an effective platform to conceptualise causation more critically, an inherent tendency to depict causal analysis as the very dynamic that has produced a decontextualised and de-historicised conception of terrorism effectively inhibits such an alternative. Accordingly, this has garnered some criticism in recent years where CTS's constructivist/discursive ontology is seen as undermining its overall efficacy as a theory. Following Jonathan Joseph, the most substantial problem with CTS is namely that the social and discursive practices, which are emphasised as determining the orthodox conception of terrorism, only have meaning through the material interests and socio-economic relations it tends to ignore (Joseph 2011, 33). In other words, even though Toros and Gunning were right to retain a minimal foundationalism when it comes to the material reality of political violence, CTS conceptualisation of terrorism as a social fact tends to obscure this material residue. Joseph therefore criticises CTS for being too quick in discarding material reality "out there" by interpreting it in rather crude and physicalist terms. As such, he regards as unhelpful the binary between social intersubjectivity (terrorism is a label given to a particular *event* through discursive practices and contextual conditions) and brute materiality (terrorism refers to specific *acts* of terrorism such as the attacks on 11 September 2001). A way out of this stalemate would be to highlight that, even though terrorism might indeed not constitute a solid and positivist objectivity, there is still something "out there" upon which these discursive practices are constructed without necessitating the assumptions of solid positivism. Joseph considers CTS to be moving too far in the constructivist direction as he argues that terrorism 'is a social relation that is overdetermined by both material and discursive practices' (2011, 34).

A number of arguments have therefore contended that what CTS requires is 'a philosophy of science that stands in between positivism and postmodernism' (Porpora

2011, 40).[iii] As such, it concerns a meta-theoretical orientation that strongly opposes the ultimately flawed positivist conception of causation without relapsing into a radically discursive argument that indirectly accepts or at least reproduces this conception. And this orientation has been presented as a Critical Realist (CR) one (Herring and Stokes 2011). As a so-called "underlabouring meta-theory" 'that informs the construction of specific theories in the course of empirical research' (Cruickshank 2002, 50), CR assumes the existence of structures and causal mechanisms as "real" ontological entities which cannot be directly accessed or known in epistemological terms (Archer et al. 1998, 5). It therefore concerns, in the words of Roy Bhaskar, 'a non-anthropocentric ontology of structures, generative mechanisms, and active things' (2008, 35). Although the scope of the present analysis does not permit a more substantial engagement with CR, what should be taken from Bhaskar's position is a recognition that causation is ontologically real but that we are limited in our capacity to access these causal mechanisms. Not only has this sparked immense interest and debate in philosophy of science (Collier 1994) and International Relations (Kurki 2008; Joseph and Wright 2010), CR has also found its way into CTS as a potential candidate for reclaiming causal analysis. This concerns an endeavour that understands causal analysis as 'identifying and describing the mechanisms through which things work' (Porpora 2011, 42). As such, there is no inherent justification for an 'aversion to causal language' (Kurki 2008, 130) if the latter can be reconceptualised along anti-positivist lines. Applied to the present analysis, the question then is whether CR's conception of causation can provide an alternative understanding of the causes of terrorism that recollects CTS's multiplicity of interplaying conditions on the one hand yet consolidates this into an explicitly causal analysis that constitutes a substantial alternative to OTS on the other. This will be explored in the next and final section, which will indicate that it is specifically a hermeneutical conceptualisation of causation that can introduce the potential of causal analysis to CTS.

A hermeneutical recollection of causation

In an attempt to move beyond the singular and problematic conception of causation that is (re)produced in both positivist and post-positivist philosophies of science, theories of IR, and terrorism studies, CR theorists have argued that this Humean theory is far from the only way of understanding causation. Kurki for instance understands this "pulling and pushing" depiction of causes as merely one of the four Aristotelian causes. These include *material* causes (the matter of an object), *formal* causes (the form of an object), *efficient* causes (the primary source of change, i.e. the agential mover), and *final* causes (that "for the sake of which" something comes to be, i.e. the intention) (Kurki 2008, 25-30). Efficient causes are then the conception of causation that are reproduced by both positivists and post-positivists. What is striking about Kurki's conceptualisation is that, in typical CR fashion, she deploys Aristotle's causal taxonomy in a way that advances an understanding of them as '*ontologically grounded*' (2008, 26). Material causes are for instance ontologically prior to all other causes since nothing in the world (natural and social) can exist without materiality, according to Aristotle. As such, Kurki emphasises the insurmountable role material causes play in order to clarify why post-positivists are wrong to dismiss the role of materiality: material causes remind us that there is a material world "out there" that enables and constrains our actions. So it is possible to retain a minimal foundation in causal analysis.

Yet there is more. As the same ontological quality applies to formal and final causes, the *entire* ontological status of causation is reclaimed as something that exists in the world "out there". This is exactly what Bhaskar had argued above: causation has an ontological quality as opposed to be merely a construction of the mind. The latter can be

understood as the essential assumption on causation that underpins Hume's theory. As mentioned in the first section, the latter understands causation to be the effect of observing regular conjunction. Yet this conception does not ascribe an ontological status to causation as such since it does not account for causal necessity. It merely provides a psychological explanation of causation as something we perceive through impressions. This, however, presented a fundamental problem for Hume himself since he believed that 'all our ideas […] are copies of our impressions' (1962, 19). Yet if this is the case, then how can we have an idea of causal necessity if there is no perceptual impression that can account for it. This obviously implies that Hume himself would not agree with the deterministic interpretation that his work has been subjected to in the positivist, "pushing and pulling" conception of causation that has been discussed throughout this article. A way out of the dichotomy between causation as objective "pushing and pulling" levers or merely an idea in the mind therefore involves the deepening of the concept of causation (with broadening being the inclusion of the other Aristotelian causes). Providing causation with a deep ontology thereby consists of grasping 'the nature of objects through making existential claims about their constituting structures and causal powers, thereby enabling explanations of various 'actual' or empirical processes and tendencies' (Kurki 2008, 198).

However, before one assumes that this conception of causation can be automatically applied to questions on the causes of terrorism, it is worth pointing to Kurki's contention at the end of her analysis that 'the question of causation is not a problem that can be solved: it is merely a problem that can be solved in various different ways' (2008, 307). Not only does this pluralism directly resonates within CTS's commitment to epistemological and methodological diversity, it also reflects an understanding of causal analysis as identifying and describing how things work. Interestingly, Porpora has alternatively referred to this as a 'historical narrative' (2011, 42) that binds together agent and structure

in a historical context and process. He argues that this involves the development of interpretations that can be assessed in their correspondence to the way the world is. This then strikes a subtle balance between discursive interpretation (causation relates to our historical narration of events) and objective reality (the world "out there" operates as a criterion for falsifying these interpretations). The only problem with it, however, is that it covertly reintroduces the subject/object distinction that CTS and other critical theories so fiercely criticised for facilitating the decontextualised and dehistoricised understanding of causation in positivist philosophy of science. Although much can be said about the way CR has been applied to IR and CTS (Brown 2007; Chernoff 2007), it seems that rather than finding a third way between positivism and postmodernism - whose arguments are more nuanced and prone to internal debate than CR theorists imply (Jackson 2011) - this unhelpful binary needs to be dismantled entirely. Indeed, it is the interpretive conception of causation that moves beyond the subject/object distinction by developing the notion of historical narrative as a perspectivism that does not deny the existence of a reality "out there" but merely suggests that there are different interpretations of it. This retains the insightful contributions of CR while nonetheless bridging the subject/object divide by depicting causation as effectively the interpretation of events. Not only does this facilitate CTS's pluralist epistemology, it also allows for a profoundly causal analysis of terrorism that further strengthens CTS's core commitments. This will be developed in the remainder of this section.

Causation as interpretation

Understanding causation as interpretation effectively moves beyond the dichotomy between the aforementioned positions of Hume and Bhaskar (an their relative school's of thought). Following Hidemi Suganami, it can be argued that both thinkers saw 'the world

as an open system, where, by definition, antecedents of causal laws are not followed pre-valently by their consequents' (2016, 13). What this means is that the world is by no means a closed system where causal powers can be known in isolation but an open system where these powers are entangled in a rhizomatic complexity. Yet this complexity does not imply the mere relativity of causation. Richard Feynman has for instance stated that 'the most important things in the real world appear to be a kind of complicated accidental result of a lot of laws' (1992, 122). Indeed, the open-systemic quality of the world implies that it hosts a great number of laws that can be shown but never known in isolation.

Causal analysis then becomes a practice of fleshing out a causal pattern in the midst of an open system that is not as much directed towards predicting the future as it is about explaining the past. In doing so, causation becomes a matter of interpretive historio-graphy: '*IR theorists*, when attempting to explain the occurrence of a particular event, should do what *historians* commonly try to do' (Suganami 2016, 15). Causation is then the establishing of a historical narrative that seeks to explain a particular event by pointing towards a particular causal dynamic or mechanism. Embracing the open-systemic nature of the social world provides causal analysis with a hermeneutic quality whereby a causal pattern is a matter establishing the most effective and probable interpretation of a parti-cular event. What is at stake here then is to account for the complexity and diversity of the social world without relapsing into an anything goes story where *any* causal pattern can be established.

As such, causal interpretation is grounded in historical explanation that is not fabri-cated out of thin air. To understand this, it is important to comprehend that asking a ques-tion on the cause of something is nothing but the presentation of a narrative that seeks to explain that particular event (Suganami 1996, 150). When we ask "what caused this par-ticular act of political violence?" we do not ask what causes political violence in *general* but what causes this *particular* act; i.e. we try to make sense of this event by historically

explaining how it came to be. The reason why history is so important for causal analysis, Suganami argues, is that it does not conflate theorising with generalising (2013, 640). When we understand what caused a particular historical event like a an act of political violence, it does not imply that this causal explanation will capacitate us to explain *all* instances of political violence accordingly.

It is within this conceptualisation of causation as historical interpretation that an effective critique against causation as observed regularity can be found, as it undermines the assumptions OTS has made about causation. As we saw in the first section, the OTS's attempt to valorise particular "root" causes over "mere" conditions (i.e. what in Aristotelian terms implies valorising efficient and final causes over material and formal causes) is not grounded in an endeavour to explain a particular event but to generalise its causes in order to predict other events in the future. Not only does this lead to an epistemological crisis where a particular event is not even adequately explained, it also further deprives the causes of terrorism of their historical context. As Bjørgo himself noted, the assumption of generalising particularity in causal analysis has a tendency of undermining its own efficacy. Explaining a particular event in terrorism studies will therefore need to cease looking for patterns of regularity and start engaging in the historical interpretation of this event. This stems from the fact that there is no singular cause but a plethora of potential causes that need to be subjected to critical interpretation: 'causal powers are *everywhere* - exercised but not always realised' (Suganami 2013, 641). There is in itself nothing wrong with the emphasis on the multi-causal nature of terrorism yet this does not necessitate that all causes are always realised in every case. It is therefore a matter of discriminating among these causes depending on the particular case-at-hand; which is different from OTS's hierarchical discrimination between "root" causes and conditions. This chimes in well with CTS's agenda of deepening and broadening our understanding of terrorism as it exhausts the limited causal explanation of OTS. More so, embedding causal

explanation in this broader web of historical and contextual analysis addresses CTS's concern that OTS is impeded by an 'absence of social theory in terrorism studies, rigid disciplinary boundaries and the lack of theoretical cross-fertilisation, and the tendency to exceptionalise terrorist violence in relation to other forms of violence and political action' (Jackson et al. 2009, 219). Understanding terrorism as entangled in this broader social web that interconnects agents, structures, and processes therefore requires causal interpretation of how this web produced the events that are analysed. In addition, it also firmly embeds the researcher within as opposed to outside the social world: causal interpretation not only involves a discursive practice in which a particular interpretation is critically presented and assessed, it also directly reflects an orientation of self-reflectivity and auto-ethnography on behalf of the researcher (Jackson 2012, 3).

Causation as moral judgement

It appears then that CTS's reluctance to engage in causal analysis has overlooked an interpretative conceptualisation of causation that chimes in well with its critical thematic. Indeed, for Suganami, 'causal explanations have to do with the workings of the world *as understood by us*' (2011, 720). This implies that questions of causation bear an intrinsic vernacular quality that seeks to understand the world from a particular perspective. Further debunking the positivist myth of the fact/value distinction, this entails that the particular questions we ask in causal inquiry are by no means neutral statements about an objective world but stem from a phenomenological disposition that seeks to make sense of the world around us. As Suganami writes, 'it is not possible to have direct access to the world to ascertain what 'really' goes on there and decide whether or not a given scientific representation of it is 'true' in the sense of 'corresponding to it' (2011, 732). What is meant here is that, when we seek to understand what caused a particular event, we

literally attempt to make sense of it. Indeed, interpretation is always tied to a perspective from which the interpreting is done.

Yet what Suganami adds to this is that, in our very questioning of a particular act, we make 'a judgement on the moral quality of the particular act' (2011, 728). He clarifies this by arguing that when we ask a question about the causes of an event, we often ask a fundamental question concerning moral responsibility. If we, for instance, ask what caused a particular act of political violence, we are fundamentally interested in isolating the moral responsibility related to the occurrence of this particular act of political violence. In social sciences the empirical and the moral are often divorced yet the notion of causation clearly exposes the untenability of this separation: 'the values to which we subscribe and the kinds of knowledge claim we produce about the world are interrelated' (Suganami 2011, 732).

Causation as moral judgement then directly resonates within CTS's core commitment dismantling the fact/value distinction but also to self-reflexivity and ethics (Breen Smyth 2009). Yet it also puts extra emphasis on CTS's refusal 'to define terrorism either in ways that de-legitimise some actors while simultaneously according the mantle of legitimate violence to others' (Jackson 2007, 247). More so, it can take a more forceful stance against accusation that CTS's emphasis on discourse effectively legitimates violence (Jones and Smith 2010). By adopting a normative conception of causation, CTS is also better positioned to expose the seemingly neutral questions on causation that constitute OTS as obfuscating both the moral values and judgements that inherently underpin them on the one hand as well as the unreflective catering towards counter-terrorist policies on the other. Moral responsibility therefore resides, among other, within the particular way the researcher has framed the question of research. It goes without saying that this deeply interconnects with CTS's research agenda in its attempt to demand from the researcher a more critical self-reflexive attitude. Causation ultimately amounts to a type

of questioning that seeks to make a particular point about the case at hand and 'this is largely an issue of politics and ethics' (2008, 342). Asking causal question therefore brings both the ethical and the political back in; an endeavour that is central to CTS's agenda of (re)politicisation (Jackson 2009). What this all entails then is that CTS's commitment to a ''do no harm' approach to research [and] taking responsibility for the anticipated impact of [this] research' (Jackson et al. 2009, 226) should no longer be understood as mere critique of OTS. By advancing historically and contextually grounded understandings that explain socially-constructed acts of terrorism in causal terms, CTS can potentially provide a substantial account of these acts that outperforms the orthodox conception of causation in both its efficacy and critical disposition.

Causation as dialogue

A final element of CTS's critical orientation that can be developed as elemental to a causal analysis of terrorism concerns the notion of dialogue. This not only stems from the fundamental role that dialogue plays in the transformation of terrorist violence itself (Toros 2012; Jackson and Hall 2016), it also involves bridging the gap between the OTS and CTS epistemic communities (Horgan and Boyle 2008; Ranstorp 2009; Jackson 2012). Yet the necessity of dialogue also stems from the intrinsically contested character of causal interpretation that undermines the possibility of reified, "root" causes. Causal explanation operates under the assumptions that there can be no 'super-criterion, acceptable to all' (Suganami 2008, 343), which can transform a particular causal interpretation into an objective regularity that allows for future prediction. In other words, the problem of multi-interpretability is intrinsic to causal analysis. Yet, as it was argued above, this should not imply a relapse into causal relativism but rather an open dialogue in which different causal explanations are assessed; something that directly resonates within CTS's commitment to interdisciplinarity and epistemological pluralism. More so, Suganami has argued

that causal explanation should involve this intrinsic openness to conflicting interpretations:

> IR theorists should keep their minds open to a wide range of evidence and possible causal scenarios; they should construct an explanatory narrative and appreciate that any explanation of a historical social process involves a balance of judgement; and any claim to have arrived at a balanced account will remain contested by other interpretations (Suganami 2016, 15).

Although it is not in the interest of this article to codify how dialogue between causal explanations or interpretations of terrorism can be operationalised, this does not discard the necessity of substantiating what a dialogical conception of causation could potentially look like. As mentioned above, dialogue is elemental to practically addressing and transforming terrorism as well as bridging the gap between the different epistemic communities that are engaged in the study of terrorism. More so, CTS as a research agenda is explicitly predicated on the goal 'to generate real dialogue and debate, open up new questions and areas of research, and re-energise, revitalise, and improve the contemporary study of political terrorism' (Jackson et al. 2009, 4). Accordingly, this has fostered a number of relevant articles in the field (Gad 2012; Mac Ginty 2013; Toros 2016). It therefore does not require much elaboration on why dialogical inquiry is important if not essential to the study of terrorism. Yet the fact remains that this systematic focus on dialogue between causal explanations has not been picked up in CTS's lines of inquiry. Incorporating such a dialogical conception of causation would not only embolden CTS to further expose OTS's flawed and problematic understanding of causation but also advance a more inclusive engagement that takes seriously the contextual and historical fabric of the particular case in question without neglecting the agential role. In addition, this would also provide CTS with a full-fledged alternative understanding of causation

that provides a platform for the interpretation of and dialogue about the causes of terrorism.

Conclusion

This paper has revealed how a problematic conception of causation is haunting both orthodox and critical studies of terrorism. The central concern consisted of highlighting how the latter, despite its commitment to epistemological pluralism, has predominantly refused to engage causal analysis on grounds that are increasingly hard to justify. Indeed, CTS unknowingly reproduces a conventional understanding of causation and thereby excludes the possibility of advancing an alternative conceptualisation of the concept. There is a rather simple explanation for this paradox that is to do with the way post-positivist theories more broadly have been affected by an anti-causal agenda. As such, it is not an internal problem to CTS but one related to a lack of critical yet sustained engagement with causation in other social scientific disciplines such as IR (Kurki 2008). It thereby concerns a persistent conflation of the concept of causation with the advancement of a positivist philosophy of science. More so, even though Hume's understanding of causation as grounded in regular observation of constant conjunction does in no discernible way necessitate such an advancement, post-positivist theories have grounded their rejection on the implicit acceptance of this understanding as the only game in town.

If CTS is serious about its commitment to deepening and broadening our understanding of terrorist violence, an engagement with causation is unavoidable. Understanding and explaining terrorism by engaging in causal analysis does not require compromising one's critical orientation. On the contrary, it has been a repeated contention of this article that incorporating causal analysis within the CTS research agenda offers a more

effective and forceful way of criticising the implicit reproduction of the conventional understanding of causation in OTS. Indeed, the latter's problematic understanding of causation tends to confirm some of CTS's primal concerns that have to do with a tendency towards dehistorisation and decontextualisation. Especially in its critique of state-centrism, CTS has made the unfortunate error of taking indiscriminate aim at 'discourses concerning the causes of terrorism' (Heath-Kelly 2010, 236). More importantly then, as long as this pattern is reproduced and no viable alternative is offered, OTS will remain emboldened in its quest for "root" causes in the service of counter-terrorism policies that decontextualise and dehistoricise structural and contextual conditions.

The essential contribution of this article has therefore consisted of conceptualising a different way of understanding causation that draws on a CR philosophy of science yet also moves beyond it to advance a hermeneutical alternative that resonates well within CTS's research agenda. Although CR has made a number of important interventions in CTS's meta-theoretical debates, its unfortunate reproduction of the subject/object divide is incompatible with an understanding of terrorism that is predicated on a discursive and reflective orientation (which emphasises the diversity of epistemological perspectives). The argument provided here therefore recollects the interpretative, normative, and dialogical fabric of causation. Accordingly, causal explanation takes on the form of establishing historical narratives through an interpretation of the open-systemic, social world that allows us to make moral judgements and engage in a more profound dialogue about both the particular context in which debates on terrorism occur on the one hand and between different, historically- and contextually-grounded interpretations of the causes of terrorism on the other. This seamlessly resonates in CTS's commitment to the integration of terrorism studies in a broader context of social theory as well as issues related to empha-

sising the responsibility this research has to its subject matter. More so, it allows for causal explanation to bring the historical and contextual back into the core of the research framework.

In the end, the argument inevitably points towards the necessity of advancing a causal analysis that operates from within the CTS research agenda. Although providing such an analysis exhausts the scope of this inquiry, it is nonetheless worthwhile to explore some of the possible directions this could take. The critical space that is opened by causal analysis would first of all bring an end to the uncontested reproduction of the conventional understanding of causation in OTS. Not only would this expose the problematic of subjugating causal analysis to informing state-led policies of counter-terrorism; it would also challenge the hegemonic position that both this understanding of causation in particular as well as OTS more generally have acquired. Of greater importance however, would be the more grounded and sustained understanding of terrorist violence that the alternative conceptualisation of causation would foster. Indeed, it would provide the important work that CTS has amassed over the last ten years with the strength and efficacy of causal analysis.

Notes

Notes

1. This arguably involved a reinterpretation of the psychological element since it no longer concerned the psychology of the perpetrator but of the psychology of those whom it is perpetrated upon.

2. Porpora also considers interpretivism to be part of post-modern relativism. As this tends to contradict the interpretive and historical conceptualisation of causation that stems from his broader argument, it is not entirely sure what interpretivism exactly stand for in this context.

3. There is of course a tendency to approach OTS as a reified category that no longer corresponds to the heterogenous body of scholarship that it is. Horgan and Boyle for instance argue that such a conception is 'not representative of the existing breadth of research activity' (2008: 51) in the field. The present analysis therefore engages the way that causation has been conceptualised (or not) in this body of scholarship rather than indicating that it represents a homogenous and codified body of scholarship.

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