

Researching and understanding terrorism: a role for criminology?

Pete Fussey and Anthony Richards outline the development of terrorism studies as an academic discipline and consider what criminological approaches may have to offer understanding terrorism.

Since 9/11 there has been unprecedented interest in terrorism across political, media and academic discourses. Regarding the latter, earlier this year *The Guardian* (2008) reported a 23-fold increase in academic articles cited 'terrorism' since 2001. Given this major refocusing, it would seem that the conceptual, theoretical and empirical tools available to criminologists leave them particularly well placed to understand this phenomena. However, many of the problems that have continually plagued 'terrorism studies' remain unresolved and, thus, present crucial issues for criminologists to negotiate. This paper assesses where terrorism research goes from here and, crucially, what criminology may have to offer the investigation of such manifestations of violence.

'Orthodox' and 'critical' terrorism studies

Terrorism studies, it seems, has reached an important juncture. In general the field has faced two major criticisms: that its research output rests on sparse empirical and primary evidence and, secondly, that it has been too intertwined with serving the interests of the state. Judging from the surveys of terrorism research, the first criticism certainly appears to be a valid one. Most notably,

the paucity of robust primary research had plagued the discipline during the 1980s and Silke's (2001) comprehensive survey of 1990s research suggested that this situation has not changed. On this latest count, less than 13% of research outputs contained any substantive empirical basis. Of course, access issues have rendered the field notoriously difficult to research. Despite some valuable (though limited) research being carried out on terrorist prisoners and on former terrorists, the field as a whole still suffers from a lack of empiricism and remains too reliant on the regurgitation of existing material.

One connected difficulty has been a recurrent over-reliance on media sources. For example, one of the most commonly used data sets throughout the 1980s and 1990s has been the ITERATE database (comprising publicly available materials documented in global press reports) which has left longitudinal comparisons at the mercy of fluctuating media values. Further problems also afflict terrorism research. Silke, for example, also highlights the narrow Anglophonic domination of the discipline with 73.5% of journal contributors hailing from the United States or United Kingdom. Furthermore, the administrative and policy-orientated basis of much research in this area

has attracted criticisms of short-termism and of a tendency to view terrorism in somewhat monolithic terms, thus masking the variegated nature of the activity.

The second (and linked) criticism forms the basis of a newer perspective – 'critical' terrorism studies emanating from the broader critical security studies (CSS) discourse. This posits a dissatisfaction with the state-centric realist paradigm that has dominated international relations thinking, across academia and policymaking during and after the Cold War. One of their common critiques is that, if we really are concerned about security in *all* its forms (including economic and environmental), then it is no longer helpful to believe that the state can provide the answers (indeed, the state is itself often considered the source of insecurity).

Thus, hitherto insoluble dilemmas in the study of terrorism may be reconsidered, such as the contested discourses surrounding the term and how we might respond to the phenomenon. Such approaches inevitably invite closer examination of the *conditions* from which terrorism emerges including the nature of the state and its policies and impacts on myriad areas of enquiry, particularly in areas such as radicalisation. It is thus a difficult but intriguing time for terrorism studies.

Whilst CSS has opened up critical avenues of enquiry, it remains inferential with little emphasis on empiricism. Together, these opportunities and limitations issues represent a real prospect for criminologists with their attendant conceptual and research tools to take terrorism research forward. Indeed, drawing from critical traditions relating to the social construction of crime, some criminologists have sought to examine the disputed discourses surrounding terrorism and how these affect assembled definitions concerning perpetrators, victims and topographies of risk (*inter alia* Mythen and Walklate, 2006). This would appear to be a particularly important enterprise given the continual dilation of 'terrorism' the 'terrorist' under successive pieces of anti-terrorism legislation.

Contrasting 'crime' and 'terrorism'

Despite such developments, a number of crucial caveats and elements of caution need to be acknowledged when considering how criminology may assist other areas of enquiry, such as understanding the mechanics of terrorist activity. Here, despite some well-documented overlaps, it is important to consider the degree to which 'conventional' criminal and terrorist acts differ.

One useful starting point here may be a crude comparison of the dynamics of a similar offence committed for these differing purposes. For example, in one study of murder in Northern Ireland between 1974-1984, Lyons and Harbinson (1986) identify how 85% of non-political murders occurred in the home, for politically motivated murders, this dropped to 6%. Clearly, numerous circumstances affect the behaviour of those at risk from being victims of the latter, not least the likelihood of greater preparedness (hence senior PIRA members installing steel internal doors and shatterproof glass in their homes). Although the outcome of the offence may be similar, the divergent means of perpetrating them suggests that different approaches are required to understand their dynamics. Furthermore, where elements of commonality exist, these factors may apply in different ways. This may affect the foreground of target attractiveness and displacement issues as well as the background of broader social, political and economic shifts. Indeed, a more comprehensive study of the contrasts between terrorist and more conventional criminal activity may include some of the following features:

- *Ideology*. This has a crucial bearing upon target selection, from right wing groups' preference of fairly indiscriminate targets (within a defined universe) to (often) more selective leftist and ethno-nationalist preferences.
- *Symbolism*. This relates to the various intended audiences of

terrorist attacks beyond actual and potential victims including domestic constituencies, patronage organisations or rival groups – a rarer theme in (often) more materialistically-centred criminality.

- *Process*. Terrorism often entails a more protracted and elaborate planning process. For example, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed has often stated that the 9/11 attacks were planned as far back as the mid-1990s. Hence, terrorist attacks are but one manifestation of a deeper and more enduring set of circumstances.
- *Grievance*. Whilst numerous strands of criminological theory also cite this notion, the acknowledgement of a perceived grievance amongst perpetrators has far greater consensus and centrality within terrorism studies.

Applying criminology?

These issues demonstrate the difficulties of applying criminological approaches to understand terrorism without adequately acknowledging its exceptional and divergent character. One such problematic example is Clarke and Newman's (2006) attempt to apply rational choice theories to the behaviour of terrorists. In doing so, they first address these potential differences by downplaying them, claiming that '[t]he supposed differences between crime and terrorism therefore rarely stand close scrutiny and ... are of marginal importance' (2006: 5-6). Thus, human action is reduced to 'the outcome of an interaction between motivation and opportunity' (*Ibid.*: 7), something primarily stimulated by the manipulation of physical opportunities for offending, not more abstract phenomena such as ideology. Indeed, despite voluminous convincing critical literature arguing otherwise, Clarke and Newman continually relegate more complex motivational aspects by asserting 'understanding the ideologies of terrorist groups will therefore give little insight into their

selection of targets and tactics' (*Ibid.*: 70) and 'the global reach of organisations such as Al Qaeda is achieved more through financial networks than ideological or social networks' (*Ibid.*).

As a convincing analysis of terrorist activity, it falls extremely short. The initial chief difficulty with this is the ready grafting of explanations of, say, burglary, with those carrying out political violence without due consideration to the immense differences influencing, say, the motivation, resilience, operational capacity, strategic decision-making, small group dynamics and impact of macro political contexts on perpetrators. Furthermore, claims regarding the nominal role of ideology and social connectivity, particularly when considering the post-Taliban manifestations of Al Qaeda and affiliates, are extremely difficult to justify.

Nevertheless, in other regards, criminology can clearly offer important direction in examining terrorism. Indeed, some subdisciplines such as victimology and policing may apply more readily than others. Perhaps the greatest scope for criminology is via the application of its advanced qualitative methodologies to understand how actors interpret their own environment. One example of the value of such qualitative approaches can be seen in Hassan's (2001) qualitative study of over 250 potential and failed Palestinian suicide bombers and their handlers just prior to the Al Aqsa Intifada. By applying qualitative methodologies Hassan was able to draw numerous important conclusions concerning the recruitment, selection, preparation and motivation of suicide bombers in this context. Amongst others, these include the role of grievance, a critique of the role of individual poverty, education and pathology, and a revaluation of the association between demographics and motivation. Concerning the latter, owing to the overwhelming supply of volunteers across social groups, Hassan argues that emphasis is better placed on the instrumentality of the

selection process employed by their recruiters. Clearly, building on such processes with robust criminological research methods can only be advantageous.

Conclusions

The study of terrorism, then, is neither new nor free of difficulties. Despite these problems, one of the positive reverberations of its recent growth has been a commensurate rise of interdisciplinary enquiry. It is clear that Criminology has much to offer this endeavour despite the many differences between terrorism and more conventional criminal activity outlined above. Analysing the 'fragmentation of criminology', Ericson and Carriere (1994) outline a future for criminology in developing more interdisciplinary 'mosaics' – an

approach that is clearly available in this context, albeit one which must be approached with some caution for it to be successful. ■

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