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Building "Terrorism Studies" as an Interdisciplinary Space: Addressing Recurring Issues in the Study of Terrorism

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ABSTRACT

Over the years, there have been many debates regarding the state of research into terrorism and whether "terrorism studies" constitutes an academic discipline in its own right. Such reflections, coupled with the natural evolution of what is still a relatively new area of research, have arguably led to significant improvements in quality and rigour. At the same time, the status of terrorism studies itself remains somewhat ambiguous: it is both discussed as a distinct field and simultaneously evades criticism by pointing to the difficulties of defining its boundaries. There are undoubtedly a number of advantages to forming a separate discipline, which would go some way to helping the field address some of the recurring problems that terrorism research faces. However, this article ultimately argues that scholars are better served by deliberately moving in the other direction and developing the field as a space for interdisciplinary engagement.
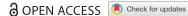
To some degree, a distinct discipline devoted to the study of terrorism already exists. The Economic and Social Research Council's National Centre for Research Methods (UK) identifies several characteristics of academic disciplines: a particular object of research; an accumulated body of specialised knowledge; theories and concepts for organising that knowledge; specific research methods matching their requirements; and some form of institutional manifestation.[1] Terrorism studies clearly displays some of these characteristics. There is a clear object of study and a body of knowledge dedicated to it, and there are certainly distinct requirements that necessitate the development of specific research methods. For other characteristics, the case is not necessarily more debatable than it is for other fields that are universally recognised as disciplines. Theories and concepts for organising knowledge have, for example, clearly been imported from other disciplines, but so too have many of the theories and concepts that constitute political science. There is, moreover, a community of academics who self-identify as terrorism scholars, and several peer-reviewed journals that take terrorism as their primary point of enquiry. It is largely on the question of institutionalisation (at least at the undergraduate level) that terrorism studies falls short of the status of a recognised discipline. In the following discussion, I will identify several advantages of taking this final step and establishing terrorism studies as a formal discipline. However, I ultimately seek to argue that some of the recurring issues faced in the study of terrorism are best addressed not merely by

resisting this temptation, but by actively encouraging movement in the other direction and developing terrorism studies more explicitly as a space for interdisciplinary engagement.

The case for accommodating unique challenges and opportunities

Disciplines encourage cross-fertilisation of knowledge and historical awareness

Although some scholars have seen the development of terrorism studies as intrinsically linked to the need to legitimise state agendas,[2] there are less nefarious reasons why a distinct scholarly community devoted to the phenomenon of terrorism has emerged. Primary among these is the same reason that lies behind the emergence of most disciplines: it allows like-minded scholars to come together, share ideas, and develop a multi-faceted understanding of the object of study. Disciplines are better positioned to reproduce and build upon their own knowledge, especially when institutionalisation encourages such knowledge to pass from one generation to the next.[3] A recurring criticism within terrorism studies is that new scholarship often displays a lack of awareness of earlier research, particularly that conducted before 9/11. The establishment of a dedicated discipline would, at least in theory, therefore allow for the development of a more standardised and historically rooted foundation for the field. Moreover, common foundations make it easier for scholars to identify opportunities for the transferring of ideas and approaches from the study of one geographic area or group to another, as well as to build collaborative partnerships. This is not to argue that these are not possible without the establishment of distinct disciplines, merely that such establishment improves the chances of positive outcomes and can facilitate the development of necessary support structures.

In justifying the establishment of new journals devoted to the study of terrorism, scholars have argued that terrorism is a phenomenon distinct from other forms of political violence, in terms of the intentions and motivations of its perpetrators and its capacity to influence political agendas.[4] Many of the arguments used to justify the establishment of these dedicated journals and research agendas support the establishment of a separate discipline. Certainly, a precise focus offers certain advantages: cross case comparison is much easier when we focus on a narrow set of behaviours rather than trying to capture a broad spectrum of activities that may be highly context-specific. Datasets on terrorism are arguably able to be more precise because of this narrow focus, achieving depth where other fields may prioritise breadth. Moreover, the study of terrorism poses methodological challenges that may be distinct from those of its current parent disciplines. To cite just one example, there are constraints on data availability that exceed those faced in many types of political science research focused on other phenomena. Realistically, we are not likely to ever be in a position to acquire enough data to satisfy requirements of random sampling, controls, etc., nor are we likely to acquire consistently high data across cases. Indeed, it is often hard enough to find single data points, much less triangulate information through genuinely independent sources. Paying lip service to broader disciplinary standards that are unachievable in practice creates a disconnect between research theory and practice and distracts from the need to develop alternative approaches, such as a greater emphasis on methodological rather than data triangulation.

Universities need to offer better protection for those researching terrorism

The establishment of a distinct discipline should, at least in theory, lead to significant improvements in institutional support mechanisms for terrorism researchers. One area where this need is particularly pressing is the conduct of fieldwork, particularly at the doctoral level. Interviews with those directly engaged in political violence are sometimes held up as something of a gold standard for primary data. In other words, there is a culture of encouraging scholars to conduct research into a highly sensitive subject, often in areas currently or recently affected by conflict. At the same time, there is a chronic lack of institutional support for such research. As an early career researcher (ECR) who has undertaken research in this area, I want to express my opinion unambiguously: Many universities are negligent in their responsibilities to their researchers. The default position appears to be to leave researchers to source their own training (and structured and affordable training opportunities related to conducting interviews and mitigating risks are limited) and to learn from trial and error, with everyone reinventing the wheel. Applied to high-risk research and conflict zones, this approach will eventually lead to researchers being killed. Moreover, the precarious career positions of ECRs means they are incentivised not to draw attention to problematic practices at their own institutions for fear of damaging their career prospects. Standard practices among government agencies, private businesses, and non-governmental and media organisations show that they take their duty of care to employees far more seriously than do some higher education establishments.

At the same time, institutions adopt risk-averse strategies that simply defer to, for example, foreign ministry travel guidance (which does not necessarily correspond to potential risk, which is why both approaches can be adopted simultaneously). They therefore make much of the field inaccessible anyway—with huge consequences for what we can know about our subject of study. Some senior researchers get around this by going to higher-risk areas as personal travel or by bypassing or being less than transparent with their ethical review boards. This approach is neither available to nor desirable for junior researchers, and it contributes to a disregard for researcher safety. Those who take decisions on granting ethical approval often have no directly relevant experience, and the application of standards relevant to other disciplines—such as signed consent forms—can directly increase the risks faced by researchers.

Institutional support is lacking in other ways, too, and the costs of making field research the gold standard need to be acknowledged. Some of these are financial: universities are, at the best of times, wealth-privileging institutions, and existing mechanisms of support often do not fully cover the considerable costs of fieldwork—particularly for those who, for whatever reason, cannot fully uproot to their field of study for lengthy periods. Fieldwork, therefore, becomes impossible for poorer students. Others relate to the welfare of researchers: fieldwork places immense strain on the mental well-being of the researcher, and it is harder to build up friend and other support networks when researching clandestine violent groups in low-trust areas. In recent years, there appears to have been considerable progress in recognising the importance of the mental health of researchers. But the networks and mechanisms of support need to be in place *before* researchers are encouraged to enter the field. Institutionalisation could help address these issues by bringing them into sharper focus and ensuring the development of directly relevant research practices and support systems.

Terrorism studies offers unique opportunities for engagement beyond the academy

Terrorism attracts attention and directly shapes policy to a greater degree than is true of many other social phenomena; indeed, its ability to do so is embedded in many definitions of the term. As such, terrorism researchers enjoy clear opportunities for engagement with both the media and policymaking communities. These opportunities, however, carry risks, and the creation of a distinct discipline could be seen as a means of better mitigating them, promoting best practice, and highlighting problematic behaviours. Consider, for example, the question of engagement with the media. Having chosen a resonant form of violent activity as the community's foundation, such engagement is often highly event-driven. Unfortunately, this often translates into a culture of commenting on all manifestations of terrorism, regardless of context and the existence of an evidence base to support assertions. In the absence of dedicated research, a person who has focused exclusively on Northern Ireland is poorly placed to comment on the significance of an IS-inspired attack in New York, just as someone who has concentrated on the Middle East lacks the knowledge base to offer judgements about the insurgency in Russia's North Caucasus. Of course, researchers can draw meaningful insights from their broader reading of the literature. But if a person is appearing on TV in the aftermath of a major attack and presented as a terrorism expert, then the audience can reasonably expect their expertise to be directly relevant to that specific incident. If their comments are not related to the research they have conducted, it is hard to see how this could be the case—and it encourages the spread of unsubstantiated myths.

It may be objected that other disciplines face the same problem of academics presuming that the title of Dr or Professor entitles them to comment on subjects that have nothing to do with their expertise. This is true, but we should not be blind to the fact that terrorism studies has a persistent and not always undeserved reputational problem. The media and political attention that accompanies terrorism has always made it an attractive target for charlatans and self-appointed experts. Moreover, some think tanks and individuals attempt to borrow the authority of academia, be it through the use of academic titles, the employment or partnership with those with academic qualifications and reputations, or co-location with academic institutions. At the same time, they often produce work that is not methodologically rigorous; has not been through peer review; does not demonstrate a detailed understanding of the literature; does not contribute original data; and/or does not conform to the relevant ethical standards. Consequently, poor practices by the few carry greater reputational risks for the many than may be the case elsewhere. Institutionalisation may help to encourage the development of stronger safeguards against poor quality research—for example, through more judicious citation practices or the creation of guidelines for media engagement—and make it easier for outsiders to identify genuine expertise.

As regards policy engagement, this remains highly controversial, even within the Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) community. Jackson, for example, claims,

> Policymakers are, for the most part, uninterested in evidence-based policy, or in the rigorous evaluation of counterterrorism policy, or in listening to reasonable, evidence-based suggestions about how to more effectively, and more ethically, respond to acts of terrorism.[5]

Toros, by contrast, justifies dialogue with policymakers on the same grounds as dialogue with violent political actors, namely "all agents are capable of change and transformation."[6] The question of how one can inform policy and practice without becoming complicit in it is a serious ethical dilemma in the study of political violence, and one to which there are no simple answers. At the very least, academics can risk legitimising state practices. There also needs to be an acknowledgement that "impact" is not always positive:[7] if research findings, for example, were to demonstrate that killing the leaders of groups engaged in terrorism is more effective in reducing violence than arresting them, this has a logical consequence when translated into practice, regardless of the rigour and validity of the findings.

In my experience, however, Jackson's characterisation of policymakers is a sweeping generalisation. Many of the people working on these issues appear to be sincerely trying to do their best, even if they—like the rest of us—often do not succeed and produce results diametrically opposed to those intended. In reaching out for academic expertise, it is not the case that they are all looking for a cloak of legitimacy to justify their decisions, even if we need to be aware that some are doing precisely that. Instead, many are genuinely seeking to better understand and address the underlying problems. We cannot criticise state policies for being ill-informed and at the same time turn away those who seek to make them better informed. I would also suggest that condemning your interlocutor as implicated in a "monstrous global machine" is not a constructive starting point for debate. What matters in such engagement is that it is conducted in good faith and undertaken by researchers with adequate consideration of the merits and disadvantages. The decision about whether to engage may therefore vary not only by state, but also by institution—and researchers need to be aware of how organisational cultures may impact the subject-matter expertise within them and the possible outcomes of such engagement. Researchers need to move beyond engagement as a general abstraction, and instead take into account the practicalities and implications of engaging with specific partners.

At the same time, we need to maintain our autonomy in interactions, and be conscious of how policy-driven research can prejudice the questions that are asked[8]—and this is an area where a stronger institutional presence could help. At present, too many scholars are willing to adopt the voice of the state as their own. The use of the pronoun "we" has no place in discussing state policies and reactions: it signifies an over-identification with one of the subjects of study. Moreover, we need to critically analyse information produced by all states. If the U.S. government issues a statement on an issue, or designates an actor in a certain way, this does not constitute evidence that the underlying claim is true or the designation accurate, any more than if it came from the Russian state. There may be valid intelligence behind a claim, but if we cannot see the evidence, we should not take it as a given. Instead, we should critically assess such information as we have and acknowledge its limitations. To take information from the state on faith and use it to support recommendations given to the state is poor analytic practice. At the same time, there are no simple answers to the question of autonomy: there is simply no escaping the fact that most research funding comes, in one way or another, from the state. Establishing a distinct discipline, however, could lead to greater financial support from institutions, and thus reduce (although certainly not eliminate) the reliance on direct funding for projects. This, in turn, would ensure that more controversial topics whose findings may not be beneficial to the state can still be researched.

Although it does not directly impinge on the question of whether to establish a discipline, there is a broader philosophical tension that should be acknowledged in considering engagement with specific actors: that between activist and observer. Jackson has called for scholars to side with "oppressed" groups and adopt a "new aspirational gold standard" based on "how useful our research was to ongoing struggles for social justice."[9] Others propose specific policy recommendations in order to effect change on the part of the state. In both cases, researchers seek to actively shape the processes they are studying. At the same time, this carries with it the dangers of partisanship and politicising research. CTS, for example, has too often served as a highly politicised means for criticising Western policy and practices. A third category of researchers see themselves more as neutral observers, and consequently identify more with Schmid and Jongman's famous assertion that we should not confuse the roles of firefighter and student of combustion.[10] There are valid concerns over whether aligning with counterterrorism practitioners jeopardises our ability to understand those they are seeking, in one way or another, to eliminate. The tensions between these positions may be unresolvable. My own position on this question has shifted from the latter towards a more activist position: Ultimately, I struggle to see the merits of an academy that talks only to itself and does not try to effect positive change in some way (not necessarily to the benefit of the state). One of the advantages enjoyed by terrorism as a field is that some of the opportunities for achieving such change are more evident than might be the case for other disciplines. However, whatever position one adopts, one needs to be explicit about it and its potential consequences, and this is as true for those advocating for the state as for its opponents.

The case against recurring issues in the study of "terrorism"

The very name of the field is misleading

A major challenge in assessing the state of research into "terrorism" lies in determining what qualifies as such. It is a challenge of definition—not of the term itself, debates around which manage to be simultaneously important and tedious—but of the boundaries of the "field." Contributors come from a range of disciplines, and many do not self-identify as being engaged in the study of "terrorism"—not least because of the field's aforementioned reputational problems. This arguably makes the blurring of boundaries inevitable. Equally significant, however, is one of the reasons why this is so: the primary focus of much "terrorism" research—even by those who would self-identify as terrorism scholars or publish in core terrorism journals—is not terrorism at all. Insurgency, for example, is at least as significant an activity as terrorism for many of the groups studied. Despite the lack of consensus over the term, most rigorous definitions of terrorism incorporate a requirement that it include political violence targeting civilians. Yet there are very few groups that engage exclusively, or even predominantly, in this type of activity. To demonstrate this, one need look no further than the focal point of many contemporary debates: the Syrian conflict. The Islamic State, for example, targets civilians, but it also fights Syrian government forces and other rebel groups, engages in various forms of economic activity, and undertakes governance functions. Some of the groups seeking to overthrow the Syrian government arguably do not target civilians at all. The field of "terrorism studies" is thus mislabelled from the outset.

Does this matter, given that most analyses would nevertheless acknowledge these activities? It is no accident that several of the dedicated "terrorism" journals nod in the direction of other activities in their titles: "conflict," "political violence," "political aggression," and so forth. However, I would argue that viewing them through the lens of terrorism prejudices debate in important ways—and thus raises the question of what we would call the discipline. Consider, for example, the question of legitimacy. The legitimacy of political violence is not binary; instead, it operates along a spectrum. The designation of an act as illegal may constitute a state's or a society's verdict on its legitimacy, but even the state differentiates between illegal actions. Terrorism "refers to cases that have crossed a moral line *within* the category of nonstate political violence, [implying] the possibility (*a contrario*) that nonstate political violence might also take forms that are *not* wrongful."[11] Attacks on civilians occupy a different position on the spectrum than, for example, attacks on security services engaged in predatory practices—in the eyes of the perpetrators, of the communities affected by their actions, and often even of their state opponents. It is precisely for this reason that the label "terrorism" is able to serve a delegitimising function. By taking an action from the far end of the legitimacy spectrum as a starting point, we hinder our own ability to accurately understand such important questions as motivation and societal reactions.

There are at least two potential objections to this point. First, there are already many fields that don't adopt the terrorism lens in considering violent political actors. This is perfectly true, but does little to resolve the problem for those who do. Instead, it creates an artificial and unhelpful barrier between scholars studying the same phenomenon—a barrier that would only become greater with the establishment of a distinct discipline. Amongst the work produced by those who adopt the terrorism perspective, there is much of value to those who don't, and vice versa. Second, those who adopt a Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) perspective would argue that this prejudicing of the debate is not accidental. CTS from the outset positioned itself as seeking "to challenge dominant knowledge and understandings of terrorism [...and as being] sensitive to the politics of labelling in the terrorism field." The positive and negative consequences of CTS's emergence will be addressed shortly. The CTS perspective, however, does nothing to address the problems stemming from the mislabelling of the field. It remains focused on a single type of political violence at the far end of the legitimacy spectrum; rather than expanding the behaviours under consideration, it seeks to expand the categories of actors that can be accused of undertaking the original subset. How we frame a debate affects the questions that we ask and the research agendas that we set, and a narrow "terrorism" framing discourages researchers from asking questions that may be pertinent to understanding other forms of political violence, but not terrorism. It is not that terrorism is not an important subset of political violence, but that it is only a subset—and we must look beyond if we are to understand it. Taking the actor, rather than the action, as the starting point for analysis opens up avenues for better understanding both.[12]

Many of the terms used to discuss political violence are problematic

Directly related to the mislabelling of the field, many of the terms used to discuss political violence are misleading or inappropriate. Labelling an actor as a "terrorist" reproduces many of the problems outlined above, obscuring the range of other equally significant

activities they may be involved in. For those who seek to define terrorism in neutral rather than pejorative terms and according to clearly defined criteria, the term may serve as convenient shorthand. Such a use, however, contributes little by way of insight, any more than the repeated use of the term "criminal" would. At the same time, such scholars cannot ignore the pejorative connotations associated with the label "terrorist" in public discourse. Ultimately, I find it hard to refute Stampnitzky's argument that "those who would address terrorism as a rational object, subject to scientific analysis and manipulation, produce a discourse that they are unable to control."[13] If we want to use a term that has moved beyond the academy into the public discourse, we need to reconcile ourselves to the baggage that comes with it—and its consequences—rather than trying to define that baggage out of existence.

Scholars engaged in the study of all forms of political violence also need to continually remind themselves and be critical of the dehumanizing way in which such violence is often discussed. I have seen the North Caucasus described as "an ideal laboratory to study insurgent behavior."[14] Some people talk of "battlefields" and "battlefield losses."[15] And it is all too easy—and I do not exclude myself from this criticism—to slip into the euphemistic language of conflict, where insurgencies are "decapitated" and "collateral damage" is inflicted. Lost behind this language are the real human lives that are affected. The people of the North Caucasus, or any other area affected by conflict, are not rats in an experiment. The "battlefield" in question is, more often than not—particularly given that much substate conflict occurs in urban areas—a place where people live.

The perpetrators of political violence are people too. When stated directly, few serious scholars are likely to take issue with this assertion. Yet adequate recognition of the fact is one of several areas where problems existing across disciplines—of complex behaviours reduced to overly simplistic or monocausal explanations, or of people reduced to variables—become exacerbated in terrorism studies. For example, Hegghammer justified a recent edited volume on jihadist culture by arguing: "The cultural practices of rebel groups pose a social scientific puzzle in that they defy expectations of utility-maximizing behavior… . We should expect them to spend all their time honing their bomb-making skills, raising funds, or studying the enemy's weaknesses."[16] Yet why should we expect this? There is no field of human activity where we would expect actors to devote all of their waking hours to work-related activities. We do not (or should not) expect it of doctors, soldiers, or politicians—all of whom may be involved in making life-defining decisions.

In reality, this "puzzle" is an illustration of one of the limitations of the rational actor model, and is not peculiar to the study of terrorism. Yet the impact is greater in a research area where there is typically considerable distance between researcher and research subject; where the "utility-maximizing" behaviour is fundamentally threatening; where there is sometimes a pressure to offer moral condemnation and demonstrate that understanding is not the same as condoning; and where other actors may be deliberately seeking to dehumanize their opponents to justify certain behaviours. Wilhelmsen's case study of the Chechen conflict shows how linguistic representations can legitimize real-world policies and feed into real-world practices.[17] Again, this is an area where scholars need to be aware of the broader public discourses they may, however unwillingly, be contributing to. Bringing the terrorism literature into closer dialogue with, for example, that on

civil wars—where there appears to be a greater emphasis on the victims and social consequences of violence—could help partially mitigate this issue.

Sometimes, however, the solution is not so simple as finding other words. Take "terrorism," for example. Even if one agrees with Stampnitzky about the impossibility of controlling the discourse around the term, it is hard to avoid it entirely. This is because it is precisely this term that signals to audiences interested in the range of subjects covered by "terrorism studies" that one is talking about a topic of interest to them. The same is true of the term "foreign fighters." It is an imperfect term because it obscures the degrees of foreignness that can apply to a person and the various forms of non-combat activities that they can engage in. At the same time, if one starts off by talking about "transnational activists," there is a good chance that audiences (particularly non-academic ones) won't know that this also covers the foreign fighters they are interested in. If we choose to abandon terms entirely, we also sacrifice to a certain degree our ability to engage with those outside the academy.

Terrorism studies remains an echo chamber

Although the self-representation of academia is largely one of an entirely meritocratic enterprise, it is probably the case for all disciplines that structural factors and networks play an equally important role as the quality of ideas in shaping the disciplinary space for research. The smaller the field, however, the greater the role of influential networks. Terrorism studies, in so far as it exists as a discrete community, is both small and new relative to other disciplines, and there have historically been a large number of one-time contributors.[18] As such, influential academic and policy networks—especially those with long-standing links or which are close to seats of power—have a particularly outsized impact. Having personal ties to an influential node within the "terrorism studies" or CTS networks has a major influence on the impact a person's work has.

It also seems reasonable to assume that a reluctance to offend influential nodes has resulted in a reduced willingness to critically engage with work produced by them. It is naive or dishonest to expect entrants to a field to be unaware of the risks of offending those who act as institutional gatekeepers or editorial board members—and who are therefore in a position to influence not only specific career trajectories, but even the possibility of having a career in the first place. Consequently, some work with significant methodological short-comings has achieved the status of seminality within the field. The perpetual insecurity of the ECR position has a particularly corrosive effect in smaller disciplines. Here, I may be challenged to provide an example—for which I cite this text itself. As an ECR with an insecure position, I have made a conscious calculation that the potential costs of identifying specific individuals here outweigh any negligible benefits I can imagine (in addition to requiring a significant detour for such criticisms to be fair). This is not cowardice, but rational calculation as to which battles are worth fighting. Self-censorship isn't something that just happens somewhere else—it is something we all practice in certain circumstances.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that it is not simply a matter of blaming those who happen to be members of influential networks. In a competitive environ-ment, only the exceptionally privileged can afford not to exploit any advantage they may have, and we can never be aware of the full extent of the privileges that we do enjoy. We all wish to believe that we achieve on our own merits. We can only cite work

we are familiar with—and we are more likely to be aware of work produced by those with whom we have a personal relationship. And the nature of privilege is such that it does not have to be exercised for those who do not hold it to be aware of it. Even a conscious effort at objectivity and neutrality changes behaviours by virtue of that consciousness. Yet just because a problem is intractable does not make it less of a problem.

Arguably, this is one area where the splitting of the field into "orthodox" and CTS strands is particularly regrettable, and where the erection of further disciplinary boundaries would only exacerbate the situation. CTS's emergence stimulated important debates about the state of existing research,[19] and its stated goal of encouraging greater reflexivity from the field was (and remains) a commendable one. Among its contributions, it has generated valuable insights into how knowledge is constructed and how the media shapes perceptions, debates, and practices. For example, Campana's and Wilhelmsen's works help us better understand the content and consequences of counterterrorism framing and securitisation.[20] Gunning's critical reflections on ideology have problematized several issues and demonstrated the need for contextualised, sophisticated approaches.[21] Stampnitzky's study of the construction of knowledge and expertise in terrorism studies is essential reading for anyone concerned with the state of the field.[22] Yet the creation of CTS has largely resulted in the creation of a separate "echo chamber," with a recent review of 10 years of its existence acknowledging there has been "too little subsequent dialogue" between "critical" and "orthodox" scholars.[23] Thus an opportunity to create alternative networks of influence and provide balance in a diverse intellectual ecosystem has been lost. However contentious the distinction may be in reality, the fracturing of the field into rival camps has arguably worked to its overall impoverishment.

Here, it is also worthwhile reflecting more broadly on the problem of insularity, of communities that talk largely to themselves. Again, this is a problem that is exacerbated by the erection of disciplinary boundaries. Academia needs to do a much better job of communicating its findings beyond the academy and helping those who are interested in rigorous, evidence-based research to access findings. Universities are public institutions, and much of their funding comes, in one way or another, from taxpayers. Yet, for the most part, neither government employees nor members of the public can access the research they fund. Indeed, publications are sometimes difficult to access even for those within academia. Researchers are effectively punished for making their material accessible, in that publication with prohibitively expensive leading journals and academic publishers improves career prospects. It may be objected that these are broader problems, rather than discipline specific. This is true, but change will only occur when a groundswell is achieved *within* disciplines and influential figures who have already achieved secure positions use their influence to effect change. If you are a major name within your field, if you hold editorial positions, if you win major grants for your institution, then you occupy a position of privilege that can be used to achieve such change. It may be more than likely that you will never succeed, but that does not free you from the obligation to try. And one of the reasons why charlatans and low-quality think tanks are able to influence public debates about terrorism to the degree that they do is that this is often the only work that people can find and access.

Too many methodologies are insufficiently sophisticated

Methodologically, terrorism studies has a long way to go. One of its strengths is that it draws on insights from a range of established disciplines, including political science, criminology, psychology, language-based area studies, history, and sociology. This, however, is also one of its weaknesses, because it has led to a tendency to borrow rather than critically engage. Too often, researchers display only a cursory knowledge of the rich literatures relevant to a given theory, and therefore present findings as novel that are far from it. Much of the terrorism studies literature to employ Social Network Analysis (SNA), for example, will readily cite Sageman but make very little reference to the rich SNA debates in sociology, including that of direct relevance to political violence—such as the work of Crossley and Edwards at the University of Manchester.[24] Instead, terrorism studies can be overly self-referential, citing the same small body of literature over and over again and exacerbating the aforementioned problems of an echo chamber.

Such methodological shortcomings have been recognised by a number of prominent scholars. In 2004, Silke criticised terrorism studies for existing "on a diet of fast-food research: quick, cheap, ready-to-hand and nutritionally dubious," with a preference for methodologies that are not overly time-consuming.[25] Schuurman's update indicates significant progress in the use of primary source material[26]—although even primary data, such as an overreliance on social media platforms, can be nutritionally dubious. At the same time, the problem is not limited to the use of such sources or even methodological transparency: it is also about sophistication and how methodologies are applied and adapted to suit the subject of study. As someone who studies ideology, I have lost count of the number of times people have gone into battle against the straw man of "it's not all about ideology." This is true: ideology is insufficient as a sole explanation, and in many cases, it may not be the primary explanation. But this does not mean that ideology does not play a role. Too often, studies of terrorism take as their starting or finishing points overly simplistic or monocausal explanations, where other disciplines have developed much more sophisticated approaches. Debating the state of the field a decade after Silke's assessment, Taylor acknowledged that "we do seem to have absorbed too often an ethos of research and investigation that doesn't value methodology to the extent that other more empirical disciplines might."[27] Yet, while some may find methodological issues uninspiring, they are the foundation for the theoretical houses we seek to build.

One area where problems of data and methodology are particularly evident is that of field research. As already mentioned, interviewees with those directly engaged in political violence are sometimes held up as something of a gold standard for primary data. At the same time, Horgan has noted that many researchers who conduct such interviews "appear reluctant to share information on the process of that enquiry (i.e. how to get access), the subsequent methodological issues underpinning their enquiries (i.e. what kind of interviewing etc.) as well as the immediate outcomes."[28] Field data is of limited value without such information. Furthermore, there has been relatively little reflection—beyond the edited volume to which Horgan was contributing—on the methodological *differences* in conducting such research compared to that on non-violent movements and the implications they have for findings. Whereas scholars of non-violent social movements might, for example, embed themselves in movements, this is not viable (practically and legally) for the study of violent illegal groups. This, in turn, impacts the quality of available data and

the conclusions that can be drawn. This is not to argue against field research, because this helps to contextualise the work—which is about more than a superficial recognition of the importance of context and requires knowledge of languages and cultures, particularly when looking beyond a Western context. I would entirely agree with Dolnik that field research is about more than data collection and can play an important role in educating the researcher.[29] Instead, it is to argue that we should be clear on why we are conducting field research, and view interview data as a means, rather than an end—and as only one possible means of reducing the distance between the researcher and their subject. Furthermore, we should forefront methodological considerations, and do more to challenge the prevailing tendency to be seduced by conclusions without concern for how they are reached. Increased engagement with more methodologically robust disciplines offers one way of doing this.

Conclusion: developing "terrorism studies" as an interdisciplinary space

The aim of the preceding discussion has not been to set up a straw man, where the move to establish an independent discipline is seen as something imminent. To the best of my knowledge, it is not. However, a distinct community of scholars devoted to the study of terrorism already exists, and it faces a number of recurring problems. The question of whether to formalise terrorism studies as a discipline serves as a useful means of shedding light on these problems and developing constructive solutions to them. The preceding discussion is by no means comprehensive: there are many other issues that I have not addressed, and my perspective as an ECR may differ significantly from that of a more established scholar. Moreover, many of these issues are not unique to the topic; rather, they are exacerbated by its particularities and the broader context in which research occurs. Many of them have been recognised at various points by existing scholars—and yet there is value in periodically revisiting challenges, both to be clear that the issues have yet to be resolved and to stimulate debates about ways of doing so. Often, as in the titles of the dedicated journals, such recognition is implicit or buried deep in texts, whereas it needs to be made more prominent if it is to be properly addressed. In other words, for all the progress that has been made in improving the field, much remains to be done.

Establishing a discipline of terrorism studies would arguably help address some of the issues that the field faces. The case is strongest in regards to the provision of institutional support and facilitating the transfer of knowledge. If the issues of fieldwork support are to be properly addressed across institutions, this would require some form of organisational restructuring: ad hoc, institution-specific changes are unlikely to achieve much. One way in which the problem of ethical review could be addressed, for example, is through the establishment of a formalised, cross-institutional advisory mechanism that ethics committees can consult in considering ethical approval. The stronger intra-institutional presence afforded by the establishment of a discipline could potentially make that easier to support. A discipline would also presumably be much better placed to agree on what the foundations of its knowledge are. This would help address the all-too-frequent problem of a lack of historical awareness and reduce the ability of newcomers with limited awareness of previous research to guide debates.

In other regards, however, it is hard to argue that the establishment of a discipline would achieve what it should in theory. Stampnitzky, for example, points to academics'

lack of "power to regulate who is treated as an expert in the wider world" as a limitation on their ability to control and rationalise terrorism.[30] Yet it is hard to see where such a power would come from—and how it would not simply exacerbate other problems, such as that of self-serving, closed intellectual elites who deny a voice to those less privileged. Moreover, as one of the reviewers of this paper has pointed out, the status of a discipline has done little to guard against fraud and low quality work elsewhere. Nor does peer review guarantee rigour: although its impact is positive when it works as intended, a lack of transparency to the system means that it is all too easily gamed, such as through the process of recommending one's own reviewers or the difficulty of achieving true anonymity. The erection of disciplinary boundaries will only exacerbate the problems of an overly self-referential community. For many of the issues facing the study of terrorism, if the establishment of a discipline does not make the situation worse, it is difficult to see how it would make it better.

Developing terrorism studies as a space for interdisciplinary engagement, by contrast, would allow us to move some of the issues from the margins to the forefront of our thinking. Some of the most important findings about political violence come from those who do not identify as terrorism scholars. Della Porta's work has advanced our understanding of the role of social networks and the importance of situating violence within broader social contexts.[31] Sanín and Wood have made a significant theoretical contribution to the role of ideology in insurgencies.[32] Staniland has contributed a detailed study of the role of pre-conflict networks in insurgent organizations.[33] There are many reasons why these scholars would not identify themselves as "terrorism" scholars. As someone who belongs to the "field" of terrorism studies almost by default—by virtue of the subject I study and being a poor fit with the international relations field I am departmentally situated within—I would suggest two potential factors. One is that some of the recurring issues and the broader debates around terrorism make such an association unattractive. Another is a desire to avoid limiting one's contribution to the study of terrorism and instead contribute to the core disciplines from which theoretical frameworks originate.

Rather than erecting artificial barriers by creating separate echo chambers, we should look to build bridges to those working elsewhere. First and foremost, this is about a shift in philosophy. It requires not merely borrowing from different disciplines, but critically engaging with them, and moving beyond the big names in a field to immerse ourselves in their debates. By engaging more reviewers from those fields, it may become easier to identify the poor interdisciplinary practice and weak methodologies that sometimes slip through the net. At the same time, scholars of terrorism should be confident of the contribution we can make to those disciplines. The study of social movements, for example, has historically been heavily biased towards progressive, left-wing groups in the West.[34] Scholars like Marsden and Holbrook not only demonstrate an in-depth understanding of the relevant social movement literature, but they use them to not only expand our understandings of political violence, but to develop and expand social movement theory.[35] Where we are unable to make a contribution to the literatures that we borrow from, it may be that our conclusions are not quite as original as we would like to think.

Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

Funding

Notes on contributor

Mark Youngman is an ESRC-funded doctoral student in POLSIS/CREES, University of Birmingham

Notes

1. Armin Krishnan, "What Are Academic Disciplines? Some Observations on the Disciplinarity vs. Interdisciplinarity Debate," ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Working Paper Series 03/09 (2009), http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/783/1/what_are_academic_disciplines.pdf (accessed August 18, 2018).
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