A Critical View of Critical Terrorism Studies
by James M. Lutz

Abstract

The Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) approach has appeared as a subfield or alternative perspective in the broader field of Terrorism Studies. This approach has given important attention to the role that states and government agencies can play when using violence against their own citizens or against the citizens of foreign countries. While the CTS approach has been important in terms of the drawing attention to the use of terrorism by states, a certain amount of caution is necessary when evaluating some of the basic claims frequently made by those committed to the CTS approach. Key issues that need to be considered in terms of this approach include the argument that state activities have been widely ignored, the failure to make a distinction between state repression and state terrorism, the failure to make the rather fine distinction between terror and terrorism, and finally—related to the above—the fact that not everything that is violent and evil qualifies as terrorism, including the adoption of counterterrorism techniques that involve excessive use of force or violate civil liberties.

Introduction

Scholars involved in the subfield of Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS), like many others who study terrorism, discuss the issue of definition. In part, they correctly note that many (legal) definitions have been specifically formulated so that they only apply to dissident movements because they only refer to sub-state actors. It is further argued that these types of definitions and others provide criteria that are based on the needs of governments. [1] Of course, definitions created by states need to provide criteria that can be used in a legal system; these definitions are not designed for use by academic analysts. [2] There have been additional definitions of terrorism that rely on similar criteria but which do not automatically exclude actions by governments as is noted below. In any event, it is necessary to provide a basic definition of terrorism that can be used in the discussions to follow. Despite the fact that there are hundreds of such definitions, most analysts agree on something like the following:

Terrorism involves political aims and objectives through the use of violence or the threat of violence. It is intended to generate fear in a target audience that goes beyond the immediate victims. The violence involves an identifiable organization. Finally, the violence is designed to change the balance of power among contestants. The violence is often directed against civilian or non-combatant targets. [3]
This definition does not exclude action by states. It does not even explicitly exclude actions by one state against another during ‘hot’ or cold wars (United States and the Soviet Union, Israel and the Arab countries, India and Pakistan). Such overt or covert conflicts between states might be, and often are, considered special cases or are considered elsewhere within the framework of the study of international relations.

Are State Activities Ignored?

One of the most basic complaints present in the CTS literature is the idea that the violent activities used by governments, especially against their own citizens, have largely been ignored by ‘orthodox’ scholars studying terrorism. The critics further argue that terrorism has only been defined by them as dissident violence from below, thus intentionally excluding state activities. [4] The exclusion of state violence from being considered as terrorism is, in their view, a consequence that flows from viewing terrorism from the perspective of the state and has, they claim, encouraged and created an orthodoxy in dealing with terrorism. [5] One element of this orthodoxy is the focus only on dissident violence – in line with the interest of governments to ignore their own questionable actions (or such actions by allied governments). Further, there have been suggestions by CTS scholars that only dissident violence directed against Western interests is considered under the terrorism label. [6] One consequence of this situation is, in the eyes of CTS scholars, that terrorism “has always been a pejorative rather than analytical term.” [7] Is this true? It can be argued that it is mainly in the period after World War II that the term terrorism actually came to have a mainly negative connotation among its practitioners. Members of the Jewish Irgun, for example, called themselves ‘terrorists’ with little concern about negative connotations associated with the term. Yet even though the terms ‘terrorism’ and ‘terrorist’ have come to have a pejorative connotation in today’s political vocabulary, this does not mean that academic analysts are incapable of dealing with the issue in an unbiased fashion.

While this basic claim that government actions are excluded is overstated in some respects, the CTS argument is based on the fact that many of those who study terrorism do focus on dissident terrorism rather than state violence. The analysts who focus on dissident terrorism take what may be termed a Homeland Security Study approach to the subject. It seeks to provide answers to governments on how they can deal with threats from either domestic groups or international terrorist organisations. Of course, when looking at foreign organisations, some attention will be given to supporters of the dissident groups, including, in some cases, to foreign governments. There is also a tendency within this Homeland Security Study approach to look more at the tactics of terrorist groups (and how to counter them) rather than at the underlying causes the drive individuals and organizations to resort to this specific type of violence.

There is little doubt that one of the reasons for the increase in Homeland Security Studies results from the fact that government grants and contracts are more readily available for these types of analysis since terrorist attacks can be a major threat to the security of states and the safety of
their citizens. The consequent increase in the number of studies that deal with this type of threat obviously does respond to the needs of governments that are attempting to provide better security, even if these studies do not necessarily enhance a more basic understanding of the sources of violence—terrorist and otherwise. Governments, much to the dismay of academics everywhere, are more interested in practical research (often narrowly defined) and not very interested in the pure research that so many academics are particularly fond of. This focus on Homeland Security is therefore a rather natural government response; it does not necessarily constitute proof of any effort to eliminate or prevent any alternative analysis of violence by the state from those interested in Terrorism Studies even if it does lead some more researchers to focus on dissident terrorism. Moreover, the claim that a “terrorism industry” has been established that serves the state [8], appears to be something of an overstatement; it appears to be designed to discredit those who are primarily interested in dissident and insurgent terrorism.

The claim that the study of state uses of terrorism has been ignored predates the emergence of the CTS perspective. One earlier search of the literature in 1987 claimed that there have been virtually no discussions of state uses of terrorism in the social science literature [9], a claim that the CTS perspective has widely accepted. Yet, while political scientists may not have referred to the use of violence by governments as terrorism (see the next section), they actually have a long history of looking at violent state activities in domestic arenas. In the past, political scientists regularly divided forms of government into totalitarian, authoritarian, and democratic regimes. The authoritarian category has perhaps been an overly broad one as it was used to encompass everything not fitting easily in the other two categories. In discussions of totalitarian societies, however, inevitably one criterion among others that was applied was the use of terror as a means of social control, especially through secret police agencies. [10] Stalinist Russia, Nazi Germany, and Mao’s Peoples Republic of China were held up as classic examples of such totalitarian systems. More recent examples would include North Korea and the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, at least before he engaged in a war to ‘liberate’ Kuwait. Many of the authoritarian regimes in a variety of forms also relied on the explicit or implicit use of illegal or illegitimate force against dissenters. Some of the rulers, such as Idi Amin in Uganda or Francois Duvalier in Haiti, were notorious for the level of violence perpetuated by their security forces or (para-)military units. To reiterate the basic point, violence by governments against domestic populations has hardly been ignored by political scientists in academia. The fact that it has not been analyzed under the heading ‘terrorism’ does not mean that it has not been studied. It has, in fact, been studied for long time and in some depth, for instance in the literature on human rights violations.

State reliance on terrorist techniques that is directed against its own citizens, moreover, has also been considered in the ‘orthodox’ terrorist literature. Wilkinson [11] in one of his early works, discussed the differences between revolutionary terrorism and repressive (state) terrorism in a period well before terrorism became a hot topic. Even before him Thornton [12] noted that terrorism could begin with the state and its security forces and not with dissidents.
recently, David Claridge [13] provided not only a very good definition of terrorism covering both dissident and regime terrorism, he also provided a rather compelling argument that some governments could and did indeed engage in campaigns of terrorism. These early references in the literature suggest that the field of Terrorism Studies has not ignored terrorism from above or been pre-empted by Homeland Security analysts or ‘the establishment’ in quite the way that CTS scholars claim. While a majority of those interested in the use of terrorism may not focus on such activities by states, it does not mean that they deny the existence state terrorism as such.

Some direct state-inspired or -supported violent activities utilized in international politics, of course, have not been ignored by social scientists or by government themselves. There has been a great deal of interest in practices that would generally be considered ‘terrorist’. Security agencies such as the CIA, KGB, SIS, PIDES, and a multitude of others have been directly responsible for assassinations, bombings, and other types of unlawful behavior – some more than others. Further, they have provided support for existing violent insurgent groups in other countries. That goes back a long way in history. Bulgarian governments supported the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO) in the 1920s, the Italian OVRA aided Croatian dissidents in Yugoslavia in the 1930s, the East German Democratic Republic (DDR) supported the West German Red Army Faction in the 1970s, the Czech communist regime provided support for the Italian Red Brigades in the same decade, the US Reagan administration States supported the Nicaraguan Contras in the 1980s while Pakistan has provided various types of support for Islamist groups active in Kashmir and Afghanistan for decades. These and other examples are known well enough to suggest that such government activities in the international arena have not been ignored by academia. In fact, these kinds of covert operations, while different than attacks against one’s own citizens, have been quite well studied, most frequently in the context of international relations rather than terrorism studies. This also explains in part why discussions of these type of war by proxy activities have been under-represented in key terrorism journals. [14]

Terrorism versus Repression

A second distinction relevant to a consideration of the claims advanced by CTS scholars about certain state actions involves the essential difference between state repression and state terrorism. All countries and their governments can be considered repressive in the sense that they enforce laws with which some citizens will disagree. Ordinary criminals are naturally also concerned with repression by the police. Repression can also occur in institutional contexts where a particular group in society is disadvantaged. These inequalities can take an institutional form and even be considered structural violence (e.g. if woman are legally prohibited from voting or from engaging in certain occupations or are not allowed to own property). Certain religious or ethnic groups may have fewer rights of face special barriers to social mobility. If a day of worship does not fall on the traditional “weekend,” adherents can perceive themselves as suffering disadvantages. It has been suggested that such inequalities and injustices in the system
have become an underlying cause of terrorism. [15] While all of these situations of
discrimination and unequal treatment are clearly deplorable, they are not necessarily examples of
terrorism. They may not constitute terrorism even in cases of governments that are truly
repressive, regimes that deny or deprive some or all of their citizens of their most basic civil
rights and liberties since there are many other forms of political violence and repression.

Distinguishing between repression and terrorism is important. Sproat made a key distinction
between the two. [16] Repression involves state uses of violence against specific individuals who
have violated the laws of the land, however unfair these laws may be. Any citizen, however, can
avoid such negative actions by state authorities by obeying the laws. Individuals who are
arrested for violating the laws do serve as an example and a deterrent to others, but the persons
who are arrested are chosen because of their individual transgressions. Terrorism by the
government, on the other hand, occurs when a member of a group is selected for victimization,
usually at random, to provide a negative example for others belonging to the same (sub-) group.
The choice of victims does not distinguish between the innocent and the guilty. The key element
is the external audience that is being targeted. [17] In such circumstances, it is not possible for
any individual to avoid the negative state action by obeying the laws of the land. Such exemplary
violence meant to intimidate others qualifies as terrorism and is different from mere repression. It
is important to note that not all repression is terrorism, even though state terrorism in most cases
probably would qualify as repression.

It is also worth noting that a resort to state terrorism or collective repression is usually a sign of
state weakness on the part of government rather than a sign of strength. A strong repressive state
is normally able to control its population through crackdowns on individual dissidents based on
good intelligence. Even the assassination of a leading opponent involves targeting an individual
for his or her specific actions. Weaker states, however, often rely on extra-judicial processes
including attacks against members of ‘suspicous’ groups (ethnic, religious, regional, or
ideological) thereby ignoring individual guilt. When, in 1933, Hitler came to power, the first
attacks on Jewish citizens in Germany were carried out by the paramilitary SA rather than by the
official state security forces. The actions by the paramilitary groups permitted Hitler to at least
make the claim to foreign governments that the attacks were spontaneous actions by private
citizens. Such actions were, however, state-tolerated (and -promoted) terrorism since Jews were
not selected on the basis of their individual behavior but at random. Later, of course, when
Hitler was more firmly in power, he was quite willing and able to use the full weight of a
repressive state apparatus in Germany to turn all Jews first into second class citizens and then
into targets for the ‘final solution’ - genocide.

This distinction between repression and terrorism is important to bear in mind when charges are
made that Western countries have actively supported terrorist regimes. To some extent this claim
would appear to result from confusing repression with terrorism. It loses a great deal of its
salience when it is recognized that it has been repressive states that have been supported by the
West, but not necessarily terrorist regimes. The distinction, of course, may not be important for the citizens who suffer in one form or another at the hands of security forces and secret police agencies. Yet for analytic purposes, it is important to distinguish terrorism as a technique of intimidation and group punishment from repression—or from even harsh repression—as a technique for governing against the will of the population or sectors thereof.

Terrorism versus Terror (Fear)

In addition to the distinction between terrorism and repression, there is also an important difference between ‘terrorism’ and ‘fear’ (or ‘terror’). In many situations, criminals induce fear in their victims, but the goal of that is to reduce resistance in burgleries or extortions, there is no politics involved. The use of fear for financial gain is most obvious in kidnappings for profit or with demands for ‘protection money’ by organized crime groups. Similarly, governments are usually able to induce some fear in criminals due to the prospect of arrest, conviction and punishment. At some level there is also the political objective of enhanced peace and security for citizens. Yet such fear of punishment generally occurs within the rule of law; it is not arbitrary—or at least not consistently arbitrary, certainly in democracies. If normal, everyday activities become crimes, there is fear, but the situation generally reflects one of repression rather than government terrorism. Thus, the presence of fear cannot by itself be used to define the existence of the use of terrorism by the state.

The failure to distinguish between terror and terrorism also occurs when analysts make comparisons with military actions, which normally involve governments. Most generals prefer to find a way to create overwhelming fear or terror among opposing troops. An army that panics and runs away yields an easy victory. Fear is present in these circumstances, but not terrorism. Aerial or artillery bombardment of villages or urban areas will induce fear and terror among local residents. Often the goals of such bombardments are military objectives only distantly related to the political objectives that are inevitably part of any military conflict. If the bombardment occurs on enemy territory during a war, the resulting action may constitute a wartime atrocity or massacre if there was no military necessity but it is a conceptual stretch to call this terrorism even if it creates great fear. [18] The same may be true in domestic military campaigns in circumstances of rebellion or civil war. Civilian areas can become targets as part of efforts to subdue rebellious regions or territories in turmoil, even though, in point of fact, such bombardments are often counterproductive from a political perspective. [19] Military commanders, however, may be more interested in limiting casualties among their own troops than they are in furthering political objectives of their governments. Many military officers are either not interested or not trained to look at the political consequences of their combat decisions; often they hold political goals in some disdain if these interfere with military objectives. Even in circumstances where heavy casualties result, such as the devastation of large sections of the town of Hama in Syria in February 1982 (which cost up to 40,000 lives at the hands of government forces) or, more recently, relatively indiscriminate attacks by Nigerian military forces against
communities in the Niger delta, this might not be best described as terrorism. Rather, such massacres could either been described as gross human rights violations or qualify as war crimes under humanitarian law.

*Everything Evil Is Not Terrorism*

It needs to be recognized that not every form of violence that is evil or reprehensible, when performed by governments, constitutes terrorism. Genocide is far worse than terrorism, but genocide does not primarily seek to create fear in a target audience. In fact governments undertaking genocide may even seek to lull the victims into a false sense of security to make the killing easier. This was the case with the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, the Jews during the Holocaust and, more recently, according to some reports, also with the Tutsi in Rwanda. Similarly, harsh repression of non-violent dissent is evil, but it is usually not terrorism as long as it is not indiscriminate. Slavery is a pernicious attack on human dignity, but it is not terrorism. Institutional violence in which some citizens have fewer rights or situations where equal rights are not equally protected are to be deplored, but it is not terrorism (unless accompanied by government-tolerated vigilante violence intended to enforce the control of particular groups). It is quite legitimate and desirable to focus public and scholarly attention on these issues, but it is not appropriate to consider them to be examples of terrorism. To fault those who study other forms of terrorism than state terrorism, as CTS scholars do, is unjust since these type of situations are actually frequently analyzed in other academic (sub-)disciplines. Therefore, it cannot be said that ‘orthodox’ analysts “refuse to examine cases of state terrorism” (very broadly defined). [20] If almost every example of government use of force to maintain law and order is labeled state terrorism, then the concept of ‘terrorism’ ceases to have any real meaning and simply becomes a polemic term used to apply a negative and pejorative label to a government or states that an observer dislikes.

Supporters of the CTS perspective also argue that the conventional approach to terrorism noticeably ignores the violence involved in the counterterrorism strategies of governments. They further argue that governments take advantage of the presence of dissident terrorist actions to crack down on opponents to the regime in power. It has even been suggested that the recent wave of attacks by dissident groups has led governments “to manufacture” a new concept of terrorism in order to further the interests of the elite. [21] Governments in many circumstances have indeed long used threats and acts of violent protest from dissidents as often not unwelcome pretexts for crackdowns on dissenters or for other political purposes. Such manipulation of public events, however, does not necessarily qualify as terrorism even when it frequently involves manipulation and repression.

The use of dissident actions as an excuse for government repression or the excesses of counterterrorism have also been cited by CT scholars to allege that the conventional ‘orthodox’ terrorism perspective is flawed in another way. They often suggest that the research focus has
been on government reactions while discussing terrorism from the perspective of the terrorists is “a taboo stance within Western scholarship.” [22] While much of the conventional literature on terrorism does not directly address the viewpoint of the terrorists directly, the whole issue of the causes of terrorism (e.g. in studies on radicalisation) does address the perspectives of those involved in terrorist actions. For example, arguments that repression or lack of participation lead to political violence, including acts of terrorism, clearly involves looking at events from the perspective of the dissidents. [23] Admittedly, since it is – at least in Western democracies - much easier to get documentary material on the perspectives of governments and their counterterrorism strategies, greater attention has been given to these. Even so, communiqués and statements by leaders of dissident groups to provide insights into the perspectives of the dissident groups, have been used for analyses of the origins and motives of dissident and insurgent groups using tactics of terrorism. Further, considerations of reform and concessions as counterterrorist strategies implicitly view events also from the perspective of the terrorist groups rather than merely that of the government. [24]

**In Defense of the Critical Terrorism Studies Perspective**

Notwithstanding the above comments, it is important to recognize that the CTS perspective has something valuable to offer to analysts since it reminds everyone that many governments can and do use terrorism (in a narrowly defined sense of the term). Death squads operating with government tolerance or active support are designed to create terror in target audiences. Such para-military squads also provide the state with a shield, however thin, of plausible deniability. [25] When Black Americans were lynched in the American south (and elsewhere) in the years before World War II, local government officials in Southern States of the United States often tolerated such actions. In effect, a number of local governments supported terrorism against a minority population as a form of social control. The support was especially obvious where perpetrators of the lynchings were rarely charged. Moreover, on the rare occasions that they were even brought to trial, they were generally acquitted. When a Black American was accused of a crime or of violating “appropriate” social norms, ideally the real culprit would be punished for the action. If the actual culprit could not be discovered or caught, then any black person could be killed to serve as a message to the entire community to remember each of its members of his or her place in society. [26] Clearly, this type of action goes beyond repression and institutional violence and reaches the level of terrorism.

Other examples of state terrorism have been documented. In Burundi the periodic pogroms against Hutus by the Tutsi elite qualified as terrorism. The targets of the violence were not able to avoid death by individual lawful behaviour. P pogroms against Jews in Central and Eastern Europe that occurred after the 1970s with the tacit or active consent of governments would qualify as terrorism as well. More recently, the government of Sudan has unleashed Arab *janjaweed* militias against its domestic opponents, first in the southern, mainly Christian, part of the country and then in Darfur (which is mainly populated by African Muslims) as part of efforts
to terrify dissident groups into submission. The quasi-governmental ruling groups in the Serbian portions of Bosnia and Herzegovina used in the 1990s terror as part of a very conscious policy of ethnic cleansing. Murder and rape became weapons of choice, convincing Muslims to flee the areas that Serb para-militaries were claiming for their own. The actions of some of the supporters of President Mugabe in Zimbabwe also qualify as state terrorism. There state authorities have consistently ignored violence by the government’s party para-militaries and veterans of the independence struggles when directed against members of the opposition. One circumstance that makes state terrorism so important to study is that it is much more deadly in terms of number of victims than dissident terrorism. [27]

**Conclusions**

To conclude this discussion, first it is worth emphasizing that precision is always important when discussing political and social phenomena. The concept of state terrorism cannot be stretched to include all the forms of political violence and repression that non-democratic but also some democratic states perform. Nor can the term terrorism be allowed to become a negative term to apply to capitalist states only—whether democratic or not. It needs to be defined in a way that has a clear and consistent meaning for everyone. Nor should analysts who choose to focus on dissident terrorism be accused of being pawns of the state. Second, while state terrorism has not received the attention that those in favor of the Critical Terrorism Studies perspective think that it should rightfully have, it clearly has not been ignored by academics. Negative state actions and state repression have been frequently studied, sometimes in great detail. Finally, with a more balanced and limited view of how governments can and do use terrorism, it should be possible for scholars embracing the Critical Terrorism Studies perspective to contribute in a much more constructive way to the analysis of the notion of government terrorism and the techniques that such regimes use.

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**Notes:**


[17] R. Jackson, “An Argument for Terrorism,” pp. 27-8. The definition of terrorism noted above for use in this article also includes the idea that there is an external audience for the violence.


[19] Israeli reprisals against Palestinians in Gaza or the West Bank have led to fear among the Palestinian population, but the attacks have been ineffective in limiting opposition.


