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SPECIAL SECTION

Rethinking terrorism and countering terrorism from a critical perspective.CTS and normativity

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Acknowledging and drawing from previous literature uncomfortable with mainstream and state-centric approaches to counter-terrorism (Horgan and Boyle 2008; Herman and O'Sullivan 1989; Chomsky 1988; Zulaika and Douglass 1996), the founders of Critical Terrorism Studies put forward the label with the intention to institutionalise a critical stream of thought within Terrorism Studies (Jackson, Breen-Smyth, and Gunning 2009, 1). Their purpose was to create an "umbrella-term" to gather scholars from different backgrounds in an attempt to challenge but also complete and reformulate mainstream approaches to terrorism and counterterrorism. Among critical scholars' efforts there has always been an attempt to be heard and influence academics but also policy-makers – although CTS scholars have not always agreed on practical aspects (see, among others, Fitzgerald, Ali, and Armstrong 2016; Jackson 2016b; Toros 2016; McGowan 2016). Therefore, it is not an overstatement to argue that the issue of normativity has always been central to Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS).

The first works published on the topic already placed ontological, epistemological and *ethical-normative* commitments at the centre of the first CTS' academic – and political – agenda (R. Jackson 2007; Gunning 2007). This concern is somehow not surprising considering that CTS was founded with the intention to deepen and broaden the study of terrorism (Toros and Gunning 2009; Jarvis 2009). From the very beginning, CTS followed the spirit of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory and, of the Aberystwyth School's approach to security, and placed normativity based on emancipation at the centre of its political agenda (McDonald 2007, 2009). Therefore, for its founders, "doing" Critical Terrorism Studies not only implied deconstructing existing understandings of terrorism and resulting counterterrorism – although this was an important "face" of the project (Jarvis 2009). It also meant looking for and formulating new, less violent and more ethical and humane ways of dealing with (and understanding) political violence.

The CTS' agenda was then further formulated in *Critical Terrorism Studies: A new Research Agenda* (R. Jackson, Breen-Smyth, and Gunning 2009a). Here, they argued, critique and the identification of gaps in the literature were not enough. It was also important to provide "a clear and realistic alternative" (R. Jackson, Breen-Smyth, and Gunning 2009, 4). Therefore, the critical-oriented approach to the study of terrorism they formulated in the book was based on new "ontology, epistemology, methodology, normative standpoints, (and) ethics [...]" (R. Jackson, Breen-Smyth, and Gunning

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2009, 3). Again, the editors of the book listed a call for normativity to be among CTS's core commitments. In their view, normativity had to be guided by "an emancipatory commitment to ending avoidable human" (R. Jackson, Breen Smyth, and Gunning 2009, 223–24). Ontological, epistemological, methodological, and ethical-normative commitments centred on emancipation were thus again placed at the centre of the Critical Terrorism Studies project (R. Jackson, Breen-Smyth, and Gunning 2009; see also Jackson et al. 2011, 29–47).

Since its inception, and following these different faces (Jarvis 2009) or core commitments (R. Jackson 2007), Critical Terrorism Studies has so far provided a wide critique and deconstruction of mainstream approaches and discourses to terrorism, extremism and radicalisation from a vast range of perspectives and methodologies (Dixit and Stump 2016; Stump and Dixit 2013). Following these commitments, CTS has broadened the understanding of terrorism to other forms of violence – such as state terrorism (Jackson, Murphy, and Poynting 2011; Blakeley 2009; Stohl 2006; Jackson 2008) – and deepened it through deconstruction. CTS has analysed international (Martini 2019; Baker-Beall 2016; Ditrych 2014, 2013; Brulin 2011) or governmental discourses on terrorism (Tsui 2017; Staun 2010; Bartolucci 2010; Jackson 2005), the (re)formulation of foreign policies in relation to the discursive construction of the threat (Holland 2012), the construction of terrorism in academia (Stampnitzky 2013) but also in popular culture (Pears 2015; Holland 2011; Croft 2006), the media (La and Pickett 2019; Spencer 2010; Hülsse and Spencer 2008; Silberstein 2004), and in its everyday and vernacular formulations (Jackson and Hall 2016; Jarvis and Lister 2015b).

CTS was created to deconstruct these issues and offer a counter-narrative to the dominant, mainstream understanding of terrorism. Therefore, it has brought to the fore the main problems of these conceptualisations of terrorism, not only at an academic and theoretical level but also, and more importantly, at a political and policy-making level (de Mosteyrín and Limón López 2018; Jarvis and Lister 2015a). Scholars have highlighted how countering terrorism, countering radicalisation and countering extremism have created different spaces for intervention in specific social contexts, both at an international and domestic level (Martin 2019; Heath-Kelly 2017; Elshimi 2017; Heath-Kelly 2013, 2012). CTS has looked at the gendered and racial biases involved in this construction (Martini 2018; Martin 2018; Jackson 2017; Ali 2012; Qureshi 2005), at how these played a role in military interventions, the creation of a "suspect community" (Ragazzi 2016; Breen-Smyth 2014), the alienation of specific parts of the population, human rights abuses and so on (Kundnani and Hayes 2018). More recently, CTS has been engaged in deconstructing discourses of extremism (Martini, Ford, and Jackson Forthcoming).

Nevertheless, although a robust critique of the destructive nature and practices of counter-terrorism (CT), counter-radicalisation (CR) and countering (violent) extremism (CVE) has been produced, less attention has been focused on how to rethink these activities, something that the academic community – but, CTS specifically – cannot ignore anymore. As Richard Jackson stated in an interview I did with him, Critical Terrorism Studies has been great in "critiquing and deconstructing current approaches to counterterrorism, but it has been less successful in providing an alternative set of policies which governments could enact instead" (Martini 2017).

This gap in the literature is, if not problematic, at least contradictory for a project that based its research agenda on normativity and, above all, on emancipation (Toros and

Gunning 2009; McDonald 2009, 2007). Critical Theory, on which the Critical Terrorism Studies project is based, calls not only for a deconstruction of interpretations of the world, but for a theory that intervenes on the world itself (Toros and Gunning 2009; Lindahl 2018, 50). While Gunning and Toros already called in 2009 for policy-relevant research which included the spheres of government and engaged policy-makers and policy-takers (Toros and Gunning 2009, 105), work in this area is still scattered. It would be unfair to argue that works on normative formulations of counter-terrorism are absent from the literature (English 2009; Hasting 2004; Ram and Summy 2008), but few of these have been inscribed within Critical Terrorism Studies (Lindahl Forthcoming, 2018; Toros and Tellidis 2014; Toros 2012).

It was in this light that the 2018 Annual Conference of the Critical Terrorism Studies Working Group (BISA) was held. Titled "Critical Terrorism Studies and the Normative Turn", the event brought together scholars to rethink CTS and to formulate ways forward in the field, in the understanding of terrorism and in the formulation of counter-terrorism measures. Having interiorised the critiques CTS has put forward in this last decade, we argued that it was time for a normative turn in our field. The articles included in this special section were first presented in this context. This section thus seeks to answer Richard Jackson's call for CTS to go beyond critique "to a normatively and empirically grounded counterterrorism paradigm of its own – one based on strong ethical, theoretical, and empirical foundations" (Jackson 2016a, 8). The question to be asked would thus be: what does a CTS theory or practice of countering-terrorism, countering radicalisation or countering-extremism look like?

Reflecting the core commitments put forward by the first formulations of the Critical Terrorism Studies' research agenda, the articles published here constitute a modest attempt to answer this call. They seek to be a first step in rethinking and formulating new approaches to theoretical aspects of the understanding of terrorism, theoretical and ethical principles that should guide counter-terrorism, but also more recent approaches such as preventing and countering radicalisation and extremism. Conscious of the fact that normativity can be criticised as a totalising global project, articles in this special section are cautious in formulating contextual and contingent approaches to the ethics of understanding terrorism, practising counterterrorism or preventing violence. Far from wanting to be an all-encompassing section, with the present work we hope to resuscitate the debate on normativity in CTS and to give it a new impetus. Through this modest attempt, it is hoped that the articles published here will spark further debate on one of the core commitments of Critical Terrorism Studies.

Specifically, rethinking CTS' theoretical and philosophical bases, "Make Hegel great again: on Hegel's Epistemological Contribution to Critical Terrorism Studies", by Athanasios Gkoutzioulis, makes a case for the importance of Hegel's philosophy in the understanding of terrorism. Challenging the strong reliance on Foucault in CTS, Gkoutzioulis makes a case for a different and original understanding of terrorism. Reflecting the CTS normative commitment to deepening and broadening the understanding of terrorism, the author formulates a different philosophical approach for the interpretation of political violence. Differently from Foucault, and through an analysis of terrorism as a social fact, Hegel's dialectical approach allows for the historical contextualisation of political violence. This makes possible a comparison, and a different approach to what the author argues may be conceptualised as a dynamic phenomenon,

and which transforms with respect to the environment and the agents' interactions. Here, Gkoutzioulis argues that Hegel's philosophy applied to the study of terrorism permits us to consider this kind of political violence as a "hybrid phenomenon" and its relation to democracy, human and civil rights.

Sondre Lindahl's and Matthew Robson's articles further the ethical debate on counter-terrorism in Critical Terrorism Studies. Drawing from previous studies on this topic, Lindahl's contribution, "The End of Emancipation? CTS and Normativity", is aimed at resuscitating the debate on emancipation. As stated above, among CTS' core normative commitments, debates on emancipation received a strong impetus at the beginning of the project, in its first formulations. These, however, slightly quietened down in the last years, while the field was mainly focusing on the deconstruction of discourses of terrorism and counter-terrorism – although there are some significant exceptions (Toros 2012). Contributing to this debate and aiming to spark the discussion again, Lindahl reinterprets the notion of emancipation in a new light and reconceptualises it as a Weberian value-axiom. As he argues in the last part of his article, this interpretation allows for the retention of emancipation as the basis for normative theorising and action within CTS. As mentioned in its provocative title, it is by "killing" emancipation as known so-far and reconceptualising it, that Lindahl argues that new life can be given to this concept which is central to the CTS agenda, but that recently has been so little discussed.

Robson's contribution, "Re-visioning the 'Eye in the Sky': targeted drone strikes and an ethics of the encounter", is centred on the ethics of counter-terrorism. Here, Robson frames a CTS ethical approach to counter-terrorism by formulating a Levinasian inspired "ethics of the encounter" combined with a Derridean deconstruction approach to state and non-state violence, contributing thus both to the theoretical and ethical debate in CTS. Centring counter-terrorism on a Levinasian responsibility for the Other, he deconstructs drone operations advocating for an approach to this violence based on ethical relations before subjectivity, and, in this case, military operations. To illustrate the ethical dilemmas behind drone strikes operations, Robson analyses how the topic is dealt with in the Hollywood film, *Eye in the Sky*. In doing so, the author also aims at exploring the possibility to problematise official accounts of counter-terrorism practices, thus reflecting Jackson's wider call on the use of popular culture to deconstruct orthodox accounts of terrorism and counter-terrorism (Jackson 2016a; Martini 2017) and put forward a different kind of normativity through it. With the analysis of this movie, Robson illustrates the possibility of popular culture to resist, contest, and deconstruct official accounts of the "war on terror".

Lastly, both Pettinger's article, and the article elaborated by Stephens' and Sieckelinck, focus on the critical appropriation of mainstream pre-emptive and preventive countermeasures. Highlighting the importance of being policy-relevant for Critical Terrorism Studies, both articles bridge CTS with mainstream and governmental counter-terrorism measures. Revisiting the UK government's preemptive and preventive activities, these authors put forward a normative agenda for policy implementers through a critical sensibility. Both works thus highlight not only the importance, but also the desirability for CTS to engage with policy-makers and policy implementers, to bridge and reframe current approaches to counter-terrorism. The authors highlight the possibility for critical scholars to work with mainstream counter-terrorism policies, although

after the deconstruction and reformulation of these. They normatively rethink key concepts to reject them or make them compatible with a critical approach and critical political agenda

Tom Pettinger's article, "CTS and normativity: The essentials of pre-emptive counter-terrorism interventions", dissects the implementation of the UK's Channel and Prevent programme through the inside views of its mentors and implementors. The author identifies and problematizes the two main theoretical principles guiding both approaches – i.e. subjective identity-fixing mechanisms, and suspicion of subjects framed through the rhetoric of safeguarding. Pettinger looks at the possibilities to reform both programmes in a critical light and argues that for this to be achieved, both of these principles should be overcome – a likelihood the author is sceptical about. Eventually, Pettinger reflects on the normative agenda CTS should follow before engaging or working with preemptive counter-terrorism regimes – deconstruction, and the critical analysis of these pivotal aspects being significant in this light.

Stephens and Sieckelinck formulate a CTS normative appropriation of the concept of resilience in "Being Resilient to Radicalisation in PVE policy. A Critical Examination". Inscribing a normative agenda within it, they construct a critically informed concept of resilience. In a CTS light, they argue that this should be based on the reinstatement of agency to actors and communities as political actors. This process would imply rejecting non-agential understandings of actors as in need of being shielded from ideologies. It would also imply acknowledging their potential political agency to challenge discrimination and violence. The authors identify theoretical and practical commitments on which the implementation of resilience and the understanding of resilient citizens should be based, formulating thus a normative agenda for the use of the concept. Rewriting the concept of resilience from a critically engaged point of view, Stephens and Sieckelinck restructure preventive approaches from within and make them compatible with critical sensitivities in the field.

Articles in this special section are brought together by the spirit of rethinking Critical Terrorism Studies – from its philosophical foundations, to its ethical principles, to its appropriation and reformulation of counter-terrorism approaches. Overall, this special section hopes to fulfil two modest aims. Its first goal is to add to the existing critical literature on terrorism and, more broadly, on security, by publishing new and original contributions. The section aims at rethinking and reformulating Critical Terrorism Studies through new philosophical positions, ethical engagements and normative stances. Its second aspiring objective is to give new impetus to a debate that is slightly quieter than other CTS discussions. It aims at putting forward a first, debatable sketch of what CTS' normative action could look like and what it would entail. Hopefully, this special section is a step towards more discussion on that front. Time will tell.

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