

Book Review

Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented Terrorism

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ABSTRACT

In this review, the author places the book *Disciplining terror* under the critical lens of scrutiny. In this work, Lisa Stampnitzky debates the connection of experts and terrorism as well as she pivots a much deeper analysis on political violence. She discusses the role of experts and pundits molding discursively the epistemological borders of terrorism. Her argument traces back how the sense of political violence, which characterized the core of classic debate in social scientist earlier than 70s decade, gradually mutated to other new forms: terrorism whose activities were in hands of new actors, terrorists.

KEYWORDS

Fear, Political Violence, Risk Management, Terrorism, War on Terror

Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented Terrorism

Lisa Stampnitzky

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As noted in earlier studies, the interests of sociologists for terrorism made stronger after the attacks to World Trade Center in September 11 of 2001. Such an event revealed not only a change in the targets and tactics terrorists selected to instill fear in society but the intersection between media and terrorism, a theme that was widely studied in Altheide (2006), Simon (2007), Howie (2012), Eid (2014) and Korstanje (2016) among others. Furthermore, terrorism posed as a great threat for Occident captivating the attention of specialists and scholarship worldwide. Although terrorism served as a main object of the discussion of thousands books, Ph D thesis and TV programs, less is known respecting to experts who are prone to study terrorism issues.

In this book, which is entitled *Disciplining Terror*, Lisa Stampnitzky (2013) discusses the role of experts and pundits molding discursively the epistemological borders of terrorism. Her argument traces back how the sense of political violence, which characterized the core of classic debate in social scientist earlier than 70s decade, gradually mutated to other new forms: terrorism whose activities were in hands of new actors, terrorists.

As the previous backdrop, the introductory chapter presents an all-encompassing view that helps readers to escape from the traditional definitions and derived misconceptions about terrorism. The invention of terrorism as dialectic social issue involves not only terrorists, but also experts who theorize

on the importance for nation-state to anticipate next attacks. Though notably influenced by the legacy of Michel Foucault, she certainly avoids any theoretical dogmatism towards flimsy explanations.

This book traces the creation of terrorism as a problem, and the corresponding emergence of a new set of terrorism experts who aimed to shape this seemingly uncontrollable problem into an object of rational knowledge (p 4).

Over years not only terrorism took different connotations depending on the socio economic context and time, but also the concept seems to be accompanied with the idea of an “illegal violence”, which evokes an incorrect ways of politics. However, by defining terrorism as a causal reaction of frustrated or hate-filled persons seems to be a clear misconception. While some Marxist scholars mistakenly preclude that analysts are prone to status quo, other liberal writers understand that terrorism signals to the rise and evolution of a new type of violence that was articulated as a counter-response to poverty and grievance but as Stampnitzky puts it, neither the economy nor the center-periphery dependency suffices to explain the origin of terrorism in Western civilization. She describes how experts rarely have real connection with authorities, whereas in other cases, the “war on terror” threatens to be a self-perpetuating discourse to justify one-sided decisions which often confronts with the already existent jurisprudence.

The second chapter centers in the emergence and crystallization of terrorism expertise as well as resulted networks, which was founded by the attacks at the Munich Olympic Site in 1972. Based on the study of the evolution of conferences from and the first steps of prominent authoritative voices, Stampnitzky reminds that the marginal positions of first terrorism-researchers was adjoined to the fragmentation of produced-knowledge. In this respect, the field evolved not only with permeable boundaries, as Stampnitzky adds, but it delineated the object of study according to moral concerns. With the knowledge production beyond their control, experts developed a dual interpretation of terrorism, which debated between moral issues or the rational scientific-inquiry, a gap that today remains open.

In what is to our end, one of the best chapters of the book, the distinction between insurgency and terrorism is hotly discussed in the third section. Earlier 1972, the problem of political violence was strongly associated to insurgency, which derived (following analysts) from different socio-economic frustrations and cleavages. No less true was that in Europe many of political experts dedicated to study counter-insurgency were former members of military forces, while in US academicians occupied such a position. It is important not to lose the sight that those experts, who were originally advocated to understand the roots of insurgency, dangled the possibility that violence derives from grievance, or psychological frustrations resulted from uneven wealth distributions. The question of poverty in Third world played a crucial role in delineating the borders of political discourse respecting to the preventive policies state should adopt with “guerrilla”. However, from 70s decade on, the position was radically altered towards a much complex situation, where terrorists were framed as “evil-doers”, insane, or mentally ill. This happens because of two main reasons. First, the multiplication of attacks against defenseless people, but secondly and most important, Americans witnessed how the rise of a new sentiment of hostility fed a radical discourse against them. To put this in bluntly, the United States and its citizens situated as main targets of international terrorism worldwide.

In chapter fourth the author dissects how the techniques of research used by experts attempted to discipline terrorism, constructing a “knowable object” for lay-people. Under three “modes of analysis”, which are legal rationality/diplomacy, risk management/calculability and crisis management/routinization, terrorism cemented a new logic for innovative forms of governance from 80s decade. The fifth and sixth chapters center on what Stampnitzky names “the politicization of expertise”, which consists in blaming others to support terrorist cells. In the middle of Cold War, some voices held the thesis terrorism was organized in the heart of Soviet Union. Originally aimed at disciplining conflict to gain further legitimacy internally but supporting the doctrine of national security within the

sphere of international law, government conducted the first *war on terror* to form a new conceptual framework, where in their irrationality terrorists are situated as the mean threat of West. In the chapter 7, Stampnitzky argues that the reactions to 9/11 stem from the three previous decades, she examined in earlier sections, the rise and crystallization of preemption upsurged. Equally important, the western sense of rationality should be applied over those who not only are irrational, but envisaging terrorism as a potential risks, which can be duly prevented by the adoption of precautionary principle. Lastly, the eight chapter which is entitled the politics of anti-knowledge reveals two important connotations. On one hand, there is a convergence between lay-people a global expert-network that emphasizes on how terrorism operates under the logic of hate, against US, because this country represents all the cultural values as democracy, stability and prosperity, which were negated in underdeveloped nations. On another, she brilliantly stipulates how the demonization of Muslim terrorism, in a post 9/11 context, coincides with the desired consolidation of discipline. This opens the doors for a new problem that remains unresolved up to date. The myopia of terrorist analysts may very well lead to radicalized viewpoints or biased diagnosis of the problem. However, she alerts, knowledge production is far from being monopolized by a rigid academic oligarchy, rather it is subject to constant change.

After further review, I do consider this book as one of the best and pungent argument which escapes from simplistic causal explanations or media misconceptions as a whole portion of literature falls. Truthfully, it represents a first step in order to decipher the complex intersection of the experts and their networks with the constructed fields. The question whether Western civilization rested on the dichotomy between rationalization and its discontents, a point widely discussed throughout *Disciplining Terror*. Hence it exhibits as a helpful book for politicians, social scientists and policy makers interested in understanding terrorism as a cultural phenomenon.

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