# POLS 429: International Terrorism
## Lecture 16 (02.19.2020):
## Explaining Terrorism - The Critical Approach

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# Overview

## Review

WHAT WE COVERED LAST MEETING?

- Structural Approach Implications: globalization; US and western dominance; specific economic, social and political grievances; repression; belligerent policy.
- Policy: structural changes within states and across the globe.
- Critiques: non-dynamic factors; environment as a deterministic element; many factors lead to terrorism.

Questions??

# The Critical Approach

INTRODUCTION

- CTS: questioning the empirical study of terrorism.

- Terrorism $\rightarrow$ contested and pejorative concept.

- Exploited by authorities to de-legitimize valid claims by oppressed people.

- Objective: identify and expose existing power structures that "support" the persistence of oppressive systems.

- Different epistemology: the study of knowledge itself (methods and practices in developing knowledge).

# The Critical Approach

ORIGINS

- Cultural hegemony: various institutions elite use to consolidate the state's power.
- Critical race theory, post-colonial theories: race and legacy of colonialism as the central organizing principles of the international system.
- Structural dependencies and divide and conquer strategies.
- Production of knowledge: scholars are isolated from the economic, social and political realities.
- Rejects any opposing view of scholars from the Global south.

# The Critical Approach: Assumptions

*Assumption 1: Terrorism as a subjective, pejorative concept*

- Subjective, socially-constructed device, used selectively.
- Politicians: de-legitimize violence, discredit perpetrators of violence while elevating the state's justification for violent acts.

*Assumption 2: State centrism*

- States 'legitimize' their use of force while challenging nonstate actors who use violence to pursue their own goals.
- *Sovereignty*: state's monopoly on the use of violence, socially constructed and intended to serve the interests of elites.

# The Critical Approach: Assumptions

*Assumption 3: Empirical research serves the state*

- CTS challenge the knowledge produced by the empirical terrorism.
- Empirical scholars are 'cooperating' with the state (START).
- Scholars interested to sustain their influence in the long term.

# The Critical Approach: Assumptions

*Assumption 4: A problem solving approach leads to poor research practices*

- Reject the positivist approach.
- Evidence → no accepted definition of terrorism, demonstrating its inherent subjectivity.
- Oppose using secondary sources, proxies and indirect methods to measure concepts.
- Research must be based on primary and direct sources: interviews, in-depth contextual analysis and other ethno-graphic methods.

# The Critical Approach: Assumptions

*Assumption 5: Empirical studies create destructive myths about terrorism*

- Empirical research led to views of terrorism as an existential threat to western civilization.
- Allowed to mobilize vast popular support for CT and accepting substantial human and financial costs.
- CTS → terrorism is not a central threat (casualties data).
- Unclear how much CT efforts decreased terror incidents (military actions).

## The Critical approach

OBSERVABLE IMPLICATIONS

### (1) Preoccupation with nonstate terrorism

- Empirical research focus on nonstate actors and not the state.

### (2) Preoccupation with terrorism against the West

- Most work address groups that oppose the western, liberal order and avoid from studying groups supported by Western states.
- Today, most studies focus on Islamic groups (not right-wing extremist groups/individuals).

# The Critical approach

**(3) Preoccupation with terrorism should change over time**

- Changes in researchers' focus as other concepts of political violence become more relevant.

- Dominant terms are the ones that mostly concern the state.
  ▸ TermsFreq

**(4) Preoccupation with state-centric approach to address terrorism**

- Solutions designed in a way that preserves the current power structures (sustain state interests).

## The Critical Approach

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

### (1) The human as the subject of security

- Shift emphasis to the security of the human and her/his well-being, rather than the state and its interests.

- Use of violence by individuals is legitimate if it is intended to secure or improve her/his security versus any threat.

### (2) Terrorism as a tactic

- Terrorism $\rightarrow$ tactic used by **states and nonstate actors** to instill fear in the broader population.

# The Critical Approach

## (3) Pluralistic research methods

- We cannot study and interpret human behavior like physical elements in the natural world.

- We cannot generalize any insight about terrorism (different historical, political and cultural contexts).

- Research methods $\rightarrow$ rely on primary sources and use tools as discourse and narrative analysis, interviews, and critical theory to create a complete understanding of political violence.

- Example: interviews with perpetrators to learn of the problems that motivate these individuals and devise solutions.

- Diversity: gender, race and national origin of the scholars.

## The Critical Approach

**(4) Embrace and accept the subjectivity of our perspectives**

- Recognize the effects of identities, values and worldviews in shaping attitudes about terrorism (instead of attempting to be impartial).

- Understand how our national origin, race, class, gender, and ethnicity shape our worldview of terrorism.

# The Critical Approach

*Critique 1: Ill-defined concepts and overly complex language*

- What is CTS? Only an adversarial approach? (limiting framework as a research program).
- Unnecessary complex language that is vastly inaccessible (Epistemology, neoliberalism, post-modernism).
- These practices increase objection of this approach.

## The Critical Approach

*Critique 2: Overgeneralize and exaggerate the pitfalls of empirical research*

- Despite CTS arguments, many empirical research studies challenge the existing structures.

- George (1991) demonstrates the many instances Western states used terrorism to advance their goals in various conflicts.

- Research of state terrorism: France, Nazi Germany.

- Mueller (2006): criticize the state for exaggerating the threat of terrorism for its own gains while using positivist methodologies.

# The Critical Approach

*Critique 3: Redundancy*

- CTS $\rightarrow$ not a research program that promotes new knowledge.
- Focus on deconstructing existing work and offering arguments that most empirical researchers recognize.
- Non-objective research (or value neutral research).
- Empirical research limitations: definitions, existing data, data collection methods, selection of methods, variables used, and more.

# The Critical Approach

*Critique 4: Further segmentation of the field*

- Adversarial position prevents focus on the justified criticism.
- CTS stay "detached" from political circles and have no effect on policymaking or public opinion.
- Abstract arguments that are not supported by practical suggestions for solutions.
- Marginalized from a scientific standpoint since it is less rigid with respect to academic rigor in order to promote its view of pluralism in methods and research.

# The Critical Approach

*Critique 5: Hypocrisy*

- CTS scholars adopt some of the practices that they criticize others for using:

  1. Guided by certain norms and ideas it wishes to advance in research (more explicit about these choices).
  2. Call for using primary sources may be justified, yet it is not operationalized and rarely applied.
  3. Criticize the use of term "Terrorism", but many still use it (*Critical Studies of Terrorism* journal).
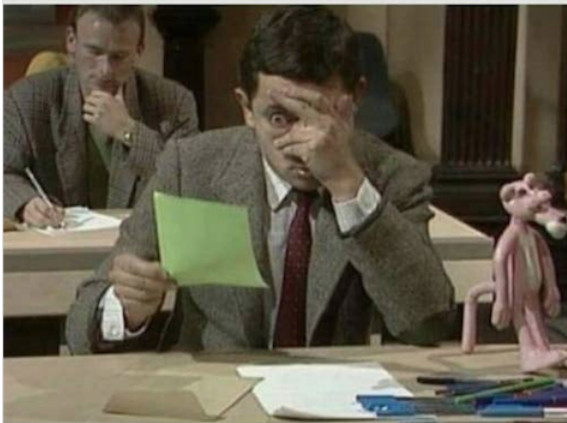
## Recommended readings

More studies on the critical approach to terrorism:

1. Richard Jackson, "The Study of Political Terror after September 11, 2001: Problems, Challenges, and Future Developments," *Political Studies*, Vol. 7, no. 2 (May 2009), pp. 171 - 184.

2. John Horgan and Michael Boyle,"The Case Against Critical Terrorism Studies," *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, Vol. 1, no. 1 (April 2008), pp. 51-64.

3. Richard Jackson, "The Core Commitments of Critical Terrorism Studies," *European Political Science*, Vol. 6, no. 3 (September 2007): 244-232.

## Terrorism: changes in usage of terms



**Figure 7.1** Frequency of Mentions of "Terrorist," "Rebel," "Guerrilla," and "Insurgent" in English Language Book Titles from 1800–2008