



Reading terrorism and terrorists

Charles Townshend

Terrorism: A Very Short Introduction

New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. 144 pp. \$9.95 (pbk). ISBN 0–19–280168–6.

Simon Reeve

The New Jackals: Ramzi Yousef, Osama Bin Laden and the Future of Terrorism

Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2002. 310 pp. \$18.95 (pbk). ISBN 1–55553–509–7.

Mark S. Hamm

In Bad Company: America's Terrorist Underground

Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2002. 336 pp. \$28.95 (hbk). ISBN 1–55553–492–9.

MATHIEU DEFLEM

University of South Carolina, USA

Books on terrorism and terrorists are not new but, like so many aspects of our society, they have undergone tremendous changes since the tragic events of 11 September 2001. Not only have many new terrorism-related books been published over the past two years, but other works on this topic that were released before 9/11 have been republished in updated editions. Criminologists remain somewhat marginalized within this field. Thus, of the works reviewed here, only one is written by a criminologist even though all three can be relevant for the development of a criminology of terrorism and counter-terrorism.

Terrorism: A Very Short Introduction by Charles Townshend provides a succinct overview of some of the key issues in the study of terrorism. Rather than attempting to offer easy or straightforward answers, this book raises a number of fundamental questions about the definition and goals of

terrorism that, in turn, reveal the complexity of the subject matter at hand.

Townshend breaks terrorism down into a number of relevant components and processes. Starting with a series of definitions, he moves onto the history of terrorism, various types of terror campaign and the dynamics of counter-terrorism. In the history section Townshend describes both the upsurge in violence during the 1970s and 1980s, as well as much earlier manifestations of terrorism, such as the Haymarket riot in 1886 and the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution. He ends this part with an account of the most recent developments of terrorism, including the proliferation of globally organized terrorist organizations and the rise of the so-called super-terrorist groups that are thought capable of employing highly sophisticated technological means and chemical, biological and nuclear weapons.

Moving from the broader definitional and historical contexts to a more specific level of analysis, Townshend discusses three types of terrorism in more detail. First, he considers what he calls 'revolutionary terrorism' that is associated with deliberate attempts to seize political power violently in nation-states. In the West, this form of terrorism has sharply declined since the 19th century. Second, he discusses 'nationalist terrorism' that he relates to the quest of certain groups, who define themselves mostly on the basis of ethnicity as a nation, to establish a new (nation-) state by violent means. In this section, he uses Irish, Basque and Zionist groups as examples. Next, Townshend examines 'religious terrorism' as the form he claims has gained the most importance in recent years. On a global level, Townshend argues, a critical shift has taken place from politically to religiously motivated terrorism as manifested by such groups as Al-Qaeda.

Finally, Townshend examines counter-terrorist measures and policy at various levels of politics, law and crime control. In this section, he argues that a sound counter-terrorist strategy should not only rely on security and intelligence work targeted at tracking down known or suspected terrorist groups. The inevitable limitation of such police activities is that they are reactive and do not target the causes of the formation of terrorist groups. Therefore, the potentials and limits of democratic culture as well as, ironically, the ease with which special intervention measures are sometimes accepted should also be contemplated.

Simon Reeve's book *The New Jackals* is of a very different order. Unlike Townshend's broad overview, it provides an in-depth narrative of the lives of two prominent leaders in the anti-American Islamic terrorist movement, Ramzi Yousef and Osama Bin Laden, as well as the investigations that were and have been launched against them. What is perhaps most striking about the book is that it was originally written before the events of 9/11 (the 2002 paperback edition includes an update) so that its conclusions on the danger posed by the movement led by Yousef and Bin Laden are chilling in retrospect.

Simon Reeve is not an academic scholar but an investigative journalist.

Despite working outside the academy, Reeve has produced a text that may be particularly helpful for criminologists interested in persons who engage in terrorist attacks. Moreover, his investigative talents are a lesson to academics wishing to engage in biographical and narrative reconstructions of the participants of crime. From a theoretical viewpoint, Reeve has offered an excellent example of how valuable it is to step inside the minds of terrorists (and those who police them) to construct an internal account of crime and crime control. Scholars also have much to learn from Reeve's methodological approach and particularly his interviews with those more or less closely involved in anti-terrorist investigations. He combines such first-hand accounts with document analysis and archival research of interrogation files, government sources and intelligence reports.

According to Reeve, the British-educated Ramzi Yousef, who is now serving time in the Federal Correctional Institution Florence in Colorado, was the mastermind behind the bombing of the World Trade Center on 26 February 1993, that was intended to bring down the twin towers. Yousef was also involved in the bombing of an airplane and the destruction of an Iranian shrine, and he further planned a very wide range of other attacks, including assassination plans on then US President Bill Clinton and the Pope. The FBI launched a major investigation against Yousef, tracking him down over a journey from Kuwait to the Philippines and Pakistan, where he was finally arrested.

The connection between the two figures of this study is that Yousef was funded and received assistance from the Saudi-born millionaire Osama Bin Laden who, by the mid-1990s had become a major sponsor of Islamic terrorism, funding campaigns against targets in Africa, the Middle East, the West and elsewhere across the world. The Islamic terrorist groups financed and led by Bin Laden were loosely organized around the Al-Qaeda network that had grown out of a group of Arab volunteers who had joined the Mujahideen resistance during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and who were later organized into the extremist group in Sudan. After the US-led invasion of Kuwait and the Saudi support for the United States, Bin Laden began to call for a broad terrorist front against the USA and sought support in Afghanistan where Al-Qaeda militants aligned with the Taliban religious party that had taken control of the country.

The US government first responded forcefully against Bin Laden's group following the attacks against the US embassies in Africa in 1998, when then President Clinton ordered military air strikes in an attempt to destroy the organization. Despite the fact that then FBI Director Louis Freeh later that year also argued that the terrorist groups funded by Bin Laden continued to pose the most urgent threat among all foreign terrorist organizations against the United States, nobody could foresee the meticulously planned destructive attacks Bin Laden's group launched on 11 September 2001.

Since 9/11, attention has been given almost exclusively to foreign terrorist groups, and it could hardly be expected to be different. Yet it would be unwise to assume that terrorism is solely a foreign problem.

Mark Hamm's *In Bad Company* is therefore an interesting book because it examines the US-based Aryan Republican Army (ARA), and its purported links to Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, the two men convicted of the Oklahoma City Bombing in 1995.

The ARA was active from 1994 to 1996, engaging in some 22 bank robberies intended to gather funds for the overthrow of the 'Zionist occupied' federal government and start a white-supremacist revolution. The two central characters from the ARA discussed in Hamm's book are Peter Kevin Langan, who is now serving a prison sentence for the ARA bank robberies and whom Hamm was able to interview on several occasions, and Richard Guthrie, who killed himself while in prison.

Hamm starts his book by reconstructing the life of Langan, who was born and raised in Vietnam as the son of a father who worked for the CIA. When he came to the United States as a teenager, he fell into a life of alcohol, drugs and crime, eventually landing in prison. There he first developed the white-supremacist philosophy that would later fuel his criminal activities in the Aryan Republican Army.

Hamm asserts that Timothy McVeigh was actively assisted by the Aryan Republican Army in carrying out the bombing in Oklahoma on 19 April. The evidence for this contention is not altogether clear and mostly circumstantial. The bombing itself was a technically complicated act that needed funding, equipment and a systematic planning and execution. Hamm additionally argues that the John Doe #2, whom investigators had initially identified as also being involved in the bombing, was actually a member of the ARA. Members of the ARA and the Aryan Nation, also, would have held joint training sessions, and McVeigh, Langan and Guthrie are reported to have met at some point in the state of Colorado. Ultimately, Hamm contends, some 10 right-wingers were actively involved in the bombing that destroyed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building.

The evidence for Hamm's contention that the Oklahoma City bombing was the result of a wider politically motivated conspiracy is not altogether convincing and has been the source of much debate. Hamm defends the argument that his theory accounts for more of the facts than the competing theory, defended in the law enforcement community, that McVeigh basically acted alone (with some assistance from Nichols). Hamm is correct to employ an important standard of scientific development, but he mistakenly directs it at theories that are not scientific in nature, but mere (false or true) statements of fact that form the basis of a criminal case. The question for Hamm's book should not have been which theory of criminal investigation is true or false, but how to tackle such theorizing at the investigative level in a criminal case in a book written by a university criminologist. Criminologists cannot conduct the same level of analysis as law enforcement personnel. Instead they should describe and explain the structures and processes of crime and crime control, including official government conceptions of criminal acts. They should not speculate, on the basis of less than

clear evidence, on the veracity of a criminal investigation, let alone its reconstruction. Criminologists are not criminalists.

One may wonder if the motives for Hamm's choice of questions in his book relate to a quest to rectify the populist notion that terrorism is always or at least predominantly a problem facing the United States from abroad. Such an endeavor, however, would be misguided, not only because law enforcement officials do conceive of certain domestic criminal acts as terrorism, but most importantly because it rests on a neo-essentialist conception that there is such a thing as 'real' terrorism beyond the definitional powers of authorities, whether they are government officials or criminologists. The important issue today is not only that the average US citizen may continue to attribute terrorist evil primarily to foreign elements, but also that this labeling continues to take place at a time when government and police officials have been broadening the definitional powers of terrorism to include many domestic as well as international criminal activities.

At present, the literature on terrorism and terrorists is wide-ranging in themes and perspectives and has expanded exponentially over the past few years. As an indication of this dramatic increase in attention, the Library of Congress holds some 31 terrorism-related books published every year from 1990 to 2000. In 2001, that number rose to 60, in 2002 it grew to 93 and by August 2003 there were 90 terrorism-related publications. Most of these works come from political scientists and international studies scholars (e.g. Heymann, 2003; Laquer, 2003). Legal scholars, likewise, have a long-standing tradition in discussing aspects of terrorism, many times very closely related to criminological concerns (e.g. Geraghty, 2002).

Criminologists should not be embarrassed to learn from other research domains and disciplines, but they must also seek to provide a distinctive contribution to the scholarship. Some issues, for instance, such as terrorism and the media, terrorism and foreign policy and terrorism and world history, are already explored by social scientists other than criminologists. But the relations between terrorism and counter-terrorism in connection with criminal activity as well as with crime control remain at present underexplored and form a field rich with potential for criminological research and theory. It is the specific province of criminology to study the patterns and dynamics of crime and social control from a social-scientific viewpoint in relation to their conditions and implications at a societal level. These issues are not always in obvious ways related to matters of terrorism and counter-terrorism. Instead, terrorism is often connected more readily with political, legal and military issues, often with deep-seated moral resonance. Counter-terrorism is likewise a complex constellation much broader than police activities alone. However, issues of crime and social control are always and inevitably also present in the reality and discourse on terrorism-related phenomena. The fact that the connection between terrorism and crime, on the one hand, and counter-terrorism and social control, on the other, is not always neatly drawn nor evident does not mean

that criminologists have no legitimate stake in their study. On the contrary, by bridging criminological scholarship with the existing literature on terrorism and counter-terrorism, a criminology of terrorism-related phenomena can be meaningfully connected to what is known from other social sciences and, at the same time, reveal the merits of its unique scientific focus and orientation.

References

- Geraghty, Thomas (2002) 'The Criminal-Enemy Distinction: Prosecuting a Limited War against Terrorism Following the September 11, 2001 Terrorist Attacks', *McGeorge Law Review* 33: 551–91.
- Heymann, Philip B. (2003) *Terrorism, Freedom, and Security: Common Sense for a Democratic Society*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Laquer, Walter (2003) *No End to War: Terrorism in the 21st Century*. New York & London: Continuum.

MATHIEU DEFLEM is Assistant Professor in the sociology department at the University of South Carolina. His current interests include research on the police dimensions of counter-terrorism and a book-length study on the sociology of law. He is the author of *Policing World Society* (2002) and Editor of *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism* (2004) and *Habermas, Modernity and Law* (1996).
