
Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented “Terrorism”. By Lisa Stampnitzky. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Mark Roberts
Transportation Security Specialist

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jss>
pp. 134-137

Recommended Citation

Roberts, Mark. "Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented “Terrorism”. By Lisa Stampnitzky. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014.." *Journal of Strategic Security* 9, no. 1 (2016) : 134-137.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.9.1.1516>
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol9/iss1/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Strategic Security by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usf.edu.

Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented “Terrorism”. By Lisa Stampnitzky. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

***Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented "Terrorism"*. By Lisa Stampnitzky. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014. ISBN 978-1-10769734-8. Tables. Index, Sources cited. Pp. xii, 232. \$44.99.**

Lisa Stampnitzky's book *Disciplining Terror* won the 2012 Social Science History Association President's Book Award. It is both challenging and rewarding, but recommended primarily for the student interested in how terrorism came to be a topic of study used for political ends. The book does not study terrorism *per se*, but rather examines how "experts" (real and self-proclaimed) have viewed terrorism over the last fifty years and the various prisms through which terrorism has been viewed in the last fifty years. For one seeking to learn about terrorism, its history, its ideologies, and personalities, this is not the book they seek.

The author discusses the hijackings in the early 1960s that led to changes in aviation security. That activity was from guerrillas, revolutionaries, and insurgents, but not terrorists according to the definitions of the day. The U.S. viewed air piracy as a criminal act falling under the jurisdiction of law enforcement. By the mid-1970s, hijacking came to include hostage taking and was viewed as terrorism. Stampnitzky outlines how political violence became "terrorism" and how this process drove U.S. policy as defined by an ever-evolving cadre of "experts."

The author posits many who analyze terrorism refuse to consider that terrorists are rational actors with reasons for carrying out their activities. In doing so, they miss an opportunity to examine terrorism to better understand the motivations behind their actions. She also indicates that terrorism is difficult to define as there are myriad definitions and points of view (e.g. one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter). In such a quagmire of competing definitions, self-proclaimed "experts" can step in to define the issue in terms of rationality, morality, and politicization. "Terrorism" emerged . . . as an inherently problematic concept – undefinable, infused with moral absolutism, and deeply politicized – leading to persistent difficulties for those who would create national knowledge about it. (9)

The author states terrorism covers several disciplines, and rhetorically ponders if unbiased knowledge of the topic is possible as anyone can self-proclaim as an "expert" with no objective standard against which to be judged.

“Yet terrorism experts have never consolidated control over the production of either experts or knowledge. New “self-proclaimed” experts constantly emerge, no licensing body exists to certify “proper” expertise, and there is no agreement among terrorism experts about what constitutes useful knowledge. In sociological terms, the boundaries of the field are weak and permeable. There is little regulation of who may become an expert, and the key audience for terrorism expertise is not an ideal-typical scientific community of other terrorism experts but, rather, the public and the state.

Rather than a purely political or analytical concept, expert discourse on “terrorism” must be understood as operating at the contested boundary between politics and science, between academic expertise and the state.” (12-13)

In the 1960s and 1970s, terrorism was viewed as a tactic and counterinsurgency (COIN) literature sought to examine motivations and grievances driving the actors. Many who studied the terrorism mindset, mentality, and motives were maligned and “sympathetic” to the terrorists. With over 250 definitions, defining how to examine terrorism was problematic at best. European COIN was a military discipline, whereas the U.S. had a more academic approach. The 1972 Munich attacks, broadcast live, brought terrorism to the fore as a political weapon. A mindset that terrorist acted irrationally and pathologically emerged, ignoring underlying reasons for their actions. Brian Jenkins of RAND (a true expert) advocated that terrorism is a means to an end and its objectives must be understood in a larger political and social context.

The Department of State looked at terrorism as a topic to be handled through diplomatic channels, replete with contingency plans, and qualitative analysis to place it within existing governmental frameworks. RAND built databases of chronological events with specific criteria of what types of incidents to include or exclude (e.g. – an Irish Republican Army {IRA} attack against British forces in Northern Ireland was not terrorism, but an IRA attack in London was).

A new chapter unfolded in the 1980s with the advent of Iranian-sponsored terror and the Reagan Administration. President Reagan favored military retaliation (Libya, April 1986) vice diplomacy and framed anti-terror efforts as a civilizational struggle. The 1979 Jerusalem Conference, Claire Sterling’s

book, *The Terror Network*, and a series of U.S. Senate hearings all pointed to the Soviet Union as a behind the scenes terror sponsor, thus transforming terrorism into an ideologically-driven political issue in the United States.

The end of the Cold War transitioned to a focus on Islamic terror. The publications of Bernard Lewis' article *The Roots of Muslim Rage* and Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* gave grist to a whole new cadre of self-proclaimed "experts" who endlessly discussed and analyzed the ramifications of Lewis' and Huntington's ideas without having to defend or account for their hypotheses in an objective forum.

A spate of attacks in the mid-1990s (World Trade Center in 1993, Tokyo subway and Oklahoma City in 1995, and Hamas against Israel throughout the decade) highlighted ideology and religion as motivations (described as both rational and irrational). The Tokyo attack was carried out by a cult with a fanatical bent towards suicide, while the Oklahoma City attack was carried out by extreme right-wing lone wolves. John Esposito's book *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality* posited that Islam had replaced Communism as the new "threat" to keep the populace fixated on an exaggerated threat. During this time, academics and pundits raged on all sides of the issue, while the true experts tried to keep pace with events as they occurred. Terrorism was viewed in some academic circle as a subset of Low Intensity Conflict (LIC), which hearkened back to COIN studies with its emphasis on small wars. The advent of Usama bin Ladin (UBL) and the East Africa embassy bombings then placed focus on terrorism and its analysis as the act of non-rational actors driven by religion, fears of the new millennium, or nihilism. In fact, we now know that UBL and his organization were rational actors with a means to an end action plan.

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attack, President Bush described terrorism in terms of an "evil" force to be fought in a struggle for civilization. The Global War on Terror (GWOT) and pre-emptive invasion of Iraq due to fears of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) were part of the Bush Administration's so-called "One Percent Doctrine" (if there is even a one percent chance of a terror attack, that is too high a risk). The Bush Administration had staff conduct analysis that did not agree with the Central Intelligence Agency, the Department of Defense, or other governmental entities. To this day, the discrepancies have not been objectively resolved.

"...first, the conceptualization of the terrorist as evil, irrational, and immune to both rational explanation, and second, the emergence of

terrorism as a problem that resists rational techniques of management and governance [have] led to the proposition that terrorists commit terrorism *because* they are terrorists. The identity contains its own explanation: “terrorists” are evil, irrational actors whose action is driven not by normal interests or political motives but, instead, by their very nature as terrorists. According to this framework, terrorists did not necessarily commit acts of violence for any rational political purpose (as they claimed) but, rather, because of their inherently evil nature” (179-180).

The current age has suffered from an “institutionalization” of terrorism expertise, which has led to what the author describes as “anti-knowledge,” which is opinionated screech, difficult to objectively analyze.

“Part of the reason why the politics of anti-knowledge holds such power is the “undisciplined” nature of not just terrorism studies as a field but “terrorism” as an object of knowledge . . . terrorism studies did not take shape as an ideal-typical discipline or intellectual field, the terrorism field remains a relatively weak, “undisciplined” one, and “terrorism” itself remains an unstable, “undisciplined” object of knowledge... Terrorism experts have failed to gain control over either the boundaries of the field or the production and certification of experts. There is little regulation of who may become an expert.” (194-195)

The book outlines the intrinsic difficulties faced by the legitimate terrorism experts faced with self-proclaimed savants. As terrorism will be an existential concern for many years, how it is examined and analyzed will be at the fore of national security topics with no end in sight.

Mark Roberts