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Criminology Theory and Terrorism: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Criminology Theory and Terrorism: Introduction to the Special Issue

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*In this short essay, we introduce readers to a special issue of *Terrorism and Political Violence* on criminological approaches to the study of terrorism. In addition to summarizing the eight articles in the issue, we outline some general points about the relationship between criminological thinking and our understanding of terrorism. Our goal is to place the special issue's contributions in context and highlight under-explored issues that future research could address.*

Keywords criminology theory, etiology of terrorism and radicalization, measurement issues

This special issue of *Terrorism and Political Violence* focuses on criminological approaches to the study of terrorism. Although there has been an explosive growth in research on terrorism across the social and behavioral sciences in the past two decades, much of this work has originated in political science, psychology, and economics. Reviews of criminology and criminal justice research reveal that until recently there have been few empirical tests of the major criminological theories in a terrorism context.¹ This is surprising because terrorism clearly falls within the domain of criminology that has been defined as encompassing research on “the breaking of laws and reactions to the breaking of laws.”² As Clarke and Newman put it, “Terrorism is a

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form of crime in all essential respects.”³ This special issue’s focus on criminological theory and terrorism is unique. We begin by outlining some general points about the relationship between criminological thinking and our understanding of terrorism. The goal is to place the special issue’s contributions in context and highlight under-explored issues that future research could address.

Although recently there has been an increase in studies that apply criminological theories to terrorism (or test them in a terrorism context), not all of criminology’s major theories have been equally engaged. Most criminological terrorism studies to date have focused on neoclassical models like routine activities,⁴ rational choice,⁵ and situational crime prevention (SCP).⁶ For example, past studies have examined whether target hardening, such as metal detectors and increased inspections at airports, or the use of statutes decrease terrorism through deterrence or incapacitation or instead lead to increased terrorism through backlash effects.⁷

There is thus a need for criminologists to broaden their inquiry to include criminology’s other major frameworks like social learning, classic strain theories, social control, life course, and psychological and biological perspectives. This special issue takes a step in this direction and includes studies that focus on anomie/strain, social disorganization, and routine activities frameworks that have rarely been applied to terrorism.

Pisoiu’s qualitative study of seven jihadi and far-right case studies in Germany, for instance, tests elements of criminology’s strain and sub-cultural perspectives. She finds little support for the strain-based status frustration hypothesis. But her findings do support the illegitimate opportunity structure thesis and certain sub-cultural claims such as resistance, bricolage, homology, agency, and cultural cross-fertilization. Pisoiu concludes that the violent extremists in her study were assertive and purposive agents who strategically used the cultural arsenal available in the mainstream and/or other subcultures, while at the same time being themselves influenced by contemporary style preferences. She calls for a greater focus on individual agency and the (sub-)cultural to improve understanding of individual involvement in political violence.

Chermak and Gruenewald use data from the United States Extremist Crime Database to compare individual and contextual socio-demographic characteristics across far-right, far-left, and jihadi extremists who committed violent crimes. They identify similarities, but also many differences across these violent extremists on both the individual and county levels. Importantly, Chermak and Gruenewald consider whether these violent extremists, similar to more typical non-extremist offenders, experience an identity crisis caused by the strain of wanting to achieve the goals of society but having inadequate means to achieve them. Far-rightists were less educated and less successful in the labor market, while jihadis may have been unable to integrate fully into American communities. By contrast, Chermak and Gruenewald find that members of far-left groups have the means to achieve the goals of American society but conclude that the “American Dream” is dubious and harmful, especially to the environment and/or other species. Chermak and Gruenewald highlight the importance of considering the macro contexts in which terrorists choose to act. They assert that future research would benefit from using criminological theories like social disorganization to further explain the differences they observed.

Fahey and LaFree’s study addresses Chermak and Gruenewald’s last point by examining the effects of a measure of country-level social disorganization on levels of terrorist attacks and fatalities in 101 countries from 1981 to 2010. The authors conceive of social disorganization as the presence of state instability: revolutionary

and ethnic war, adverse regime change, and genocide. The classic social disorganization perspective posits that individuals experiencing these types of rapid social changes will be freed from the institutional and informal restraints that bind them to society and keep them conforming to social norms and laws. The authors examine the extent to which this reasoning applies to the number of terrorist attacks and fatalities occurring in countries. Fahey and LaFree find that controlling for state capacity and a wide variety of other variables, social disorganization is consistently associated with increases in terrorist attacks and fatalities.

Meanwhile, Parkin and Freilich provide one of the few empirical studies on the victims of terrorist attacks.⁸ Most prior terrorism studies examine incidents or perpetrators and ignore victims, assuming that they are a random selection of the population and that there is no variation to explain. Using data from the Extremist Crime Database, Parkin and Freilich compare the victims of two sets of homicides committed by far-rightists: ideologically motivated homicides committed to further far-right ideology (closely related to terrorism) and homicides committed for personal reasons by far-rightists (ordinary crime). To explain this variation in victimization, they apply and test several hypotheses from criminology's routine activities and lifestyle perspectives. Parkin and Freilich's findings support their prediction that the two victims groups' routine activities differ, thus varying their exposure to dangerous places and people.

More in keeping with past research, the other four studies in this special issue examine aspects of deterrence and rational choice theory and situational crime prevention perspectives. These studies engage a wide range of issues and also address important gaps in the literature. Using data on six major initiatives meant to reduce terrorist attacks by the *Euzkadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA) in Spain, Argomaniz and Vidal-Diez replicate earlier research by LaFree, Dugan, and Korte that tested deterrence (based upon a rational choice model) and backlash frameworks applied to attacks by the IRA in Northern Ireland.⁹ Argomaniz and Vidal-Diez used survival analysis to analyze data from the Global Terrorism Database and the Spanish Ministry of the Interior. Similar to the LaFree, Dugan, and Korte study, their findings mostly supported backlash interpretations.

Perry and Hasisi use criminology's rational choice theory to analyze the motivations of jihadist suicide attackers. They argue that while suicide attackers engage in self-destructive behavior, they are mostly driven not by altruistic motivation but by the anticipation of future self-gratifying benefits. Perry and Hasisi conclude that there is no fundamental difference between terrorist perpetrators' motivations and those of more ordinary criminals. Consistent with rational choice perspectives, both sets of offenders are committed to maximizing self-gratifying, beneficial behavior.

Hsu and Apel extend the Perry and Hasisi analysis by empirically examining a common critique of the SCP argument that we can reduce terrorism by manipulating the opportunities that allow terrorist acts to succeed. The key criticism of SCP interventions is that they are ineffective because they only displace attacks to other locations, crime types, or perpetrators. Terrorism researchers refer to this displacement critique as the "substitution effect."¹⁰ Hsu and Apel investigate various forms of displacement among terrorist groups that had been involved in aviation attacks prior to the installation of airport metal detectors. Using data from the Global Terrorism Database, their findings from interrupted time series models partially support SCP claims and suggest a complex set of displacement and diffusion effects with respect to alternative attack modes, target types, and weapon usage. Hsu and Apel's study

has important implications for policy makers as well as the conceptual literature in criminology and terrorism studies.

Braithwaite and Johnson test three criminological perspectives to shed light on the observed patterns of the incidence and contagion of recent insurgent attacks in Baghdad, Iraq. Their analysis shows that risk heterogeneity arguments provide the most compelling and consistent account of the location of insurgency. In particular, violence is most likely at locations with higher population levels and density of roads and more military garrisons.

Collectively the eight studies in this special issue break new ground by empirically testing criminological perspectives like social disorganization, routine activities, and classic strain that have rarely been examined in a terrorism context. They also address gaps in the examination of neo-classical approaches. These are important steps but more needs to be done. Criminologists should empirically examine other influential criminological theories like social learning, general strain, life course, biological, and psychological approaches in a terrorism context.

And indeed some earlier work by criminologists suggests some promising theoretical possibilities. Akers and Silverman crafted a conceptual piece extending social learning theory to terrorism;¹¹ Black applied his theory of social control to explain terrorism;¹² Hamm used social learning theory (and routine activities theory) to understand the criminal successes and failures of terrorists;¹³ Bouhana and Wikstrom developed a situational action theory that they apply to both terrorist attacks and ordinary crimes;¹⁴ and Agnew extended his general strain theory to explain terrorism.¹⁵ However, with rare exceptions,¹⁶ thus far there have been few efforts to apply systematic empirical methods to test these theories with data on terrorism.

One reason for this lack of research could be due to data availability. In criminology, data on illegal behavior come traditionally from three sources, corresponding to the major social roles connected to criminal events: “official” data collected by legal agents, especially the police; “victimization” data collected from the general population of victims and non-victims; and “self-report” data collected from offenders (see also Parkin and Freilich in this issue).¹⁷ All three of these sources are problematic when it comes to collecting data on terrorism. While police departments and other criminal justice agencies gather vast amounts of detailed official data on common crimes in most countries, this is rarely the case for terrorism. Part of the difficulty is differing definitions of terrorism across countries and even between different agencies in the same country. Moreover, terrorist acts often cut across several more common types of criminal categories. Thus, an assassination might be included in police data as a homicide but not as terrorism while destruction of a building might be included in a police report as arson but not as terrorism.

Victimization surveys have been of little use in the study of terrorism. Despite the attention it gets in the media, terrorism is much rarer than more ordinary violent crime. This means that even with extremely large sample sizes, few individuals in most countries will have been victimized by terrorists. Frequently, victims of terrorism have no direct contact with perpetrators (e.g., in many bombings). And in many cases, terrorism victims are killed by their attackers.

Self-report data on terrorists have been more important than victimization data, but they also face serious limitations. Most active terrorists are unwilling to participate in interviews. And even if willing to participate, getting access to known terrorists for research purposes raises obvious challenges. Although there has been important research based on self-reported behavior of terrorists or ex-terrorists,¹⁸ this

methodology is unlikely to ever be robust enough to provide global or even national estimates.

However, as this special issue demonstrates, criminologists have gradually developed creative new data sources for studying terrorism. Brent Smith¹⁹ was an early pioneer and his American Terrorism Study (ATS) database²⁰ provides a detailed quantitative analysis of federal FBI terrorism cases. Three of the articles in this special volume are based on the Global Terrorism Database, an open source database on terrorist attacks drawn from the print and electronic media and originally collected by criminologists LaFree, Dugan, and Miller.²¹ And two of the articles in this special volume are based on the Extremist Crime Database, an open source database on extremist crime and terrorism in the United States originally collected by criminologists Freilich, Chermak, Belli, Gruenewald, and Parkin.²² The growing availability of data resources like these make it much more feasible for criminologists to provide theoretical contributions to the literature on terrorism. Moreover, these efforts will no doubt be aided by several years of support for research on radicalization to extremist crime and terrorism by the U.S. National Institute of Justice.²³ As new data sources are collected and made available, the ability of researchers to apply and test traditional criminological theories is likely to grow as well.

As the number of empirical tests of criminological theories in a terrorism context increases, criminologists should consider how to introduce their theories to the wider audience of terrorism scholars. As noted, scholars from political science, psychology, and economics have long engaged terrorism issues and have, not surprisingly, relied upon conceptual models from their home disciplines. Some of the key constructs in major terrorism and radicalization frameworks also appear in criminological theories. Criminologists may thus want to begin synthesizing their frameworks with other well-established radicalization and terrorism perspectives.

For example, McCauley and Moskalkenko's important radicalization theory sets forth 12 mechanisms of radicalization operating at three levels: individual, small group, and mass public.²⁴ They argue that these mechanisms are more likely to be present in extremists who commit violent acts to further their ideology compared to non-violent extremists who subscribe to the same ideology but do not engage in crimes and instead only participate in legal acts. Two of the individual mechanisms identified by McCauley and Moskalkenko are personal and group grievances. Personal grievances refer to individuals angered by government actions that harmed them or their loved ones. Group grievances arise when an individual identifies with a group that has been harmed by the government. Other prominent terrorist scholars argue that humiliation and similar experiences lead to radicalization and violent acts.²⁵ Interestingly though, these emotions of anger and humiliation also play a major role in criminology's anomie and strain models such as Agnew's general strain theory which argues that stressed/strained individuals are more likely to offend.²⁶

Other mechanisms identified by McCauley and Moskalkenko include "unfreezing," which encompass life changes that cut individuals' social connections and everyday routines and leave them open to new connections.²⁷ Sageman's study on individuals who joined the global jihad similarly concludes that these Muslim migrants initially felt unwelcome and disconnected to European societies.²⁸ They therefore sought out mosques for companionship and acceptance. Subsequently, they met others like them and together they joined the jihad and only then were taught and subscribed to extremist jihadist ideologies. Criminologists will recognize that some of these arguments converge with control theories, emphasizing that individuals are more open to commit

crime when they are less integrated into society.²⁹ Another mechanism highlighted by McCauley and Moskaleiko is thrill-seeking,³⁰ a concept that also appears in arguments made by criminologist Jack Katz³¹ and others³² to explain more ordinary crime.

This discussion is not meant to be exhaustive and there are other examples of the same or similar concepts playing a role in both criminological and terrorism or radicalization frameworks. To date though, there have been few attempts to integrate these theories that share concepts into a single model that uses the same measures and applies them to terrorism. As research increases in this area, it will also be important to pay close attention to measurement issues to ensure that these theories are properly tested. Similar to criminological research on regular crime and delinquency, efforts must be made to operationalize the concepts from competing theories in different ways. To take one example, various past terrorism studies (again similar to prior criminological studies) have used the attribute of divorce as a measure of both stress and a lack of social integration. Unless distinct measures are used to operationalize these competing concepts, it will be impossible to draw any conclusions about which if any of these models are supported.

A separate but related issue is that collectively these models argue that the same factor—be it strain, thrill, or lack of integration—is associated with both regular crime and political violence. It is therefore important for future research to begin clearly specifying why the same condition in some contexts results in terrorism, while in others it is associated with regular crime. Past research has not entirely ignored this issue but has only focused on it in passing.³³ In this regard the point resonates with a classic of criminology history: Robert Merton's anomie theory. According to Merton, both deviant and non-deviant behavior can be predicted by examining whether individuals accept or reject cultural goals and the institutionalized means of achieving them.³⁴ These two dimensions can be used to distinguish ordinary criminals (who accept cultural goals but reject legitimate means to obtaining them) from those who retreat into drugs (rejecting both cultural goals and legitimate means) and those who commit terrorism or politically motivated violence (who are highly committed to both cultural goals and legitimate means but not the goals and means of the existing society).

A fundamental assumption of this volume is that both terrorism studies and criminology benefit from a closer association between the two. While we readily acknowledge important differences between common crime and terrorism, the similarities in theoretical conceptualization, data collection, and research methods suggest that both fields can advance by examining the theories and methods of the other. In general, many of the differences between terrorism and common crime are no more challenging than differences between common crime and more specialized forms of deviance, such as organized crime, hate crime, or gang violence. Each has distinctive features that require an investment of time and effort to better understand the substantive dynamics. By focusing on the obvious connections between terrorism and crime, we may be able not only to contribute to a better understanding of terrorism, but also to help formulate more rational policies for combating it.

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