
Book Review

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Terrorism, Democracy and Human Security: A Communication Model
by: Ronald Crelinsten
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Over recent decades, the question of international terrorism has challenged liberal thinking respecting the role of democracy, as well as the check-and-balance institutions in the so-called War on Terror. In this respect, Bush's administration declared the War on Terror as a counter-strategy that affected (or at least changed) how democracies ultimately deal with *basic human rights*. Reports denouncing torture, violence, or delayed trials are some of the points widely documented by some critical studies. Some scholars have warned that not only have the responses to terrorism on the part of the US been exaggerated, but they have also affected Western democracy from within (Howie, 2012; Skoll, 2016; Korstanje, 2018; Altheide, 2022). This premise is the starting point for Ronald Crelinsten, a senior analyst who needs no introduction. In his new book, *Terrorism, Democracy, and Human Security: A Communication Model*, he discusses some of his previous work that, during his career, has illuminated our paths. The book deals very well with a set of complex dynamics that a review of some 1,600 words cannot fully convey.

The main goal of Crelinsten's new work is to highlight the convergence between terrorism and counter-terrorism, with a strong focus on the communication process. As the author confesses, and probably its main strength, the book is not a vast review of the specialised literature, but a compilation of personal observations and analysis, as well as examples of research findings and expert opinion pieces that assist readers to inquire further into the nature and real effect of terrorism in Western democracies. At first glance, the book is structured in three clear-cut sections (totalling 12 masterfully written chapters), plus a concluding chapter. Although each one can be read separately, they keep a common-thread argumentation: the orchestration of individual security as a buzzword concept alludes to the creation of a specific narrative organised in a broader (political) system, where the security for some means the insecurity of others. Having said this, one might question security for what? From its inception, democracy has – at least conceptually – balanced the dichotomies between security and freedom. As the author brilliantly puts it, in *liberal theory* people may often sacrifice their liberty, endorsing security measures by the state to enhance security from movements they are panicked or afraid of, but paradoxically, in so doing, trust in government then becomes a central element in modern politics. What is more important, echoing the aftermaths of the recent

COVID-19 pandemic, security – and trust – encompass health and economic policy as well.

The introductory chapter explores the convergence between terrorism and counter-terrorism as narrative realities constructed politically and circumstantially manipulated by the context. Both concepts, far from being isolated issues, should be studied in connection with each other – or as the author notes – analysed together. What is equally important, the digital technologies revolution associated with our exposure to media 24/7 has made terrorism not only an object of fear but a commodity exchanged by corporations to captivate a global audience. But this (dual) form of media entertainment creates specific political issues and policies that chiefly affect the lives of some human groups or ethnicities. These radical shifts include the rise of islamophobia or chauvinist expression directed against strangers or ethnic minorities, the increase of fundraising to implement more restrictive surveillance tech, the violation of some human rights in the name of security, and the demonisation of migrants, without mentioning the modification of criminal law, intelligence and border controls.

The first chapter gives a coherent discussion regarding definitions of terrorism, not exactly as political but as a communicative phenomenon. Terrorism, as a main concept, masks the dilemma of violence and how it can be prevented – in some contexts, violence can be legitimated by the state. The chapter tries to address the limitations of modern political science to determine – at least on a conceptual basis – who does protect the citizen when the abuse is exerted by the state. The author takes the premise that terrorism engages directly with the impossibilities of witnesses as well as innocent victims to avoid a much deeper victimisation process. This happens simply because terrorism is semiotic in nature. However, far from being unidimensional, the terrorist message can have multiple meanings. Fear, which creates a sentiment of insecurity for the lay citizen, may very well be combined with a sense of national pride useful for terrorist groups to recruit new members. Whatever the case may be, the semiotic fear embodied in terrorism is invariably associated with counter-terrorism (gut) reactions. At the same time, the victimisation captures the attention of countless audiences making terrorism a type of mediated commodity.

The second chapter analyses with great precision the complex dynamic of political life and different actors in Western democracies. Terrorist attacks elicit different reactions, as the author attests. What is equally important, the socio-cultural context plays a leading role in understanding state terrorism or the abuse of human rights. In sum, the chapter offers a concise yet comprehensive model that explains the dichotomies between the controlled and the controller in six domains which include territorial/environmental, economic, social, political, criminal justice and military force operations. There are grey zones which are discursively manipulated by both the state and terrorist groups. What for one is a criminal act for others is an act of sovereignty. Each zone is discussed in depth chapter by chapter. Needless to say, each grey area reveals a tension between the forces of autonomy and constriction, which, in turn, stem from the dichotomy between terrorism and counter-terrorism at various levels of governance.

In the second part, the third and fourth chapters navigate the domain of borders as well as the semiotics of territories (zones A and B). To put this bluntly, terrorism has tightened border controls while accelerating an anti-migration populism in many Western countries. After 9/11, countries implemented the strictest controls mainly based on obtrusive surveillance systems; at the same time, the budget for the US Department has notably increased, putting the fiscal balance in jeopardy. This creates serious

contradictions between two opposing values, liberty and intervention. While the US government faced serious criticism because of its intervention in the borders, further economic problems occurred during Bush's administration because of intrusion in the real estate market (with the case of subprime loans). As the author brilliantly notes, the situation has led the US towards *an economic security dilemma* where states are pressed to be competitive in global trade while controlling new emerging technologies. The fifth chapter gives a snapshot of the grey area between *social policy concerns* and those which are political. At a closer look, governance often results from the transition from public education, where states use persuasion to control citizens, to regulations which are applied to placate some 'radical' protests (zone C). In the sixth chapter, the author emphasises the grey area between the political and the coercive (zone D). The transition here is marked by *a criminalisation process* where some groups are detected, labelled or demonised as potential threats. In consequence, states deploy reactive policing. The unsettled and often contentious questions on revolution or civil war are reserved for the seventh chapter (zone E) while the problem of nationalism is discussed in the eighth chapter (zone F). Lastly, the radical political transformations where the controlled becomes the controller are explored in the ninth chapter (as the origin of a new regime). The author goes on to write:

"Assuming that the new revolutionary regime or independent state is recognized by the international system and its sovereignty is respected by other states, it still must usually engage in an internal war to establish control, often resorting to martial law to impose order and sliding into a reign of state terrorism to maintain it. Opponents of the regime are arrested without warrant and jailed without trial or, if a trial is held, it is often by military or special courts where cursory attention, if any, is paid to due process. Gross human rights violations are common. Political opposition is eliminated, one-party, authoritarian rule prevails, and the net of oppression often spreads all along the range of oppositional forms to include the whole spectrum of the controlled." (p.212)

Last but not least, part 3, consisting of three finely articulated chapters, offers a fertile ground to study the contradictions in global governance – above all in the constellations of state-to-state dialogue. These tensions underline a clash between politics centralised in a state-centred world and the doctrine of sovereignty and transnational discourses. Transgovernmental relations (among subunits or national agencies) often escape the control of states. These communicative complexities are aggravated by the action of mass media, non-profit organisations and other non-state actors worldwide.

Terrorism, Democracy, and Human Security is a top-quality work that meticulously describes the interactions in a complex net of actors, institutions and regulations, culminating in a fascinating and all-encompassing model of the highest order. It is safe to say the model offered here is aimed at expanding our current understanding of the effects of terrorism at different levels of democracy and governance. Without any doubt, we have here a work which will surely stand the test of time.

References

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