

Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Dresser, Paul (2021) Book review of avoiding the terrorist trap: why respect for human rights is the key to defeating terrorism. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 14 (2). pp. 286-289. ISSN 1753-9153

Published by: Taylor & Francis

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2021.1903680>
<<https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2021.1903680>>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:
<https://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/45816/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)

Book Review of *Avoiding the Terrorist Trap: Why Respect for Human Rights is the Key to Defeating Terrorism* by Tom Parker, (hardback), World Scientific Publishing Europe Ltd: London, 2019, pp. 893.

Avoiding the Terrorist Trap is an ambitious text that situates terrorism within a broad spectrum of temporal and geographical activity. The author posits terrorism as a modern phenomenon from the get-go (p.1), attributing transnational terrorism to two interconnected conditions: technological advancement of weaponry (p 5); and developments in communication technology through macro social change (p. 6) (this includes globalisation, mass movement, and political participation as empowerment). That said, the extensive historiography presented casts light on the invariable nature of terrorism rather than conceptualising terrorist violence as a typology that emerges and recedes in mutually exclusive 'waves'. Thus, the author does much to address historical amnesia that hinders scholarship in this area. A further strength of this text is the author's meticulous knowledge of the vast gamut of terrorist organisations, ideologies, fractions and groups; from *Hamas* to *Hezbollah*; Marxism to Jihadism; *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA) to the Irish Republican Army (IRA); the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) to *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), to name a few. In doing so the text moves beyond a saturated focus on a narrow spectrum of terrorism threats (i.e. Islamist terrorism and right-wing terrorism) that have dominated academic discourse over the last two decades. This has been labelled a 'critical blind spot' in terms of understanding terrorism and extremism (NAEF 2021)

The premise of the book rests on the importance of respecting human rights in the fight against terrorism. To suggest its contribution is limited to advocating such on moral and ethical grounds would do the author a disservice, however. Connected to the aforementioned objective is how greater observance to human rights has a bearing on counter-terrorism efficacy. This is an important undertaking which differentiates the work from many of its predecessors. Broadly speaking, while terrorism, Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), and Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) scholarship is particularly astute at offering critical commentary, it is far less forthcoming with practical solutions and resolves. The UK PREVENT programme is a pertinent example. Parker attends to this gap by proposing operational benefits and alternative ways forward which should appeal to law, intelligence and counter-terrorism practitioners, in particular.

The text is dissected into three parts with each section considered synoptically. Part I examines the myriad of terrorist groups and terrorists' perspectives in terms of means, methods and principles. Of particular attention are the central tenets of terrorists' doctrine encompassing: asymmetrical warfare; attrition; propaganda by deed; revolutionary prototype; contesting legitimacy; and provoking state overreaction. Exploring the interplay between these core concepts is important for reasons twofold: first, they provide a framework to explore terrorism in terrorists' terms and think including: humanitarianism; matryology; (de)legitimising narratives; social injustice; and altruism, etc. Second,

these concepts reveal a ‘not-so-secret formula’; that is, how terrorist organisations use violence against civilians for political gain across time, place and space (the author extrapolates the contested, multifaceted nature of ‘terrorism’ in such pejorative terms). Taken together they provide the very conditions for the ‘terrorist trap’ that is juxtaposed in Part III. While the author acknowledges the shape-shifting nature of terrorist groups and threats (p. 25), what becomes clear are convergences and commonalities between, for example, anarchism, socialism, and populism. This is situated in terms of how ideologies, materials and technological knowledge transmit and translate. As just one example, the construction and curation of self-serving imagery demonstrates fluidity and contagion. Terrorists’ personal testimonies add support (and are used throughout the whole book for that matter) which, not only provide a nuanced account of a more often than not clandestine world, but evidence the sobering reality of terrorism and extremism *in situ*.

Part II explores the expansion of terrorism literature post- 9/11 across five explanatory frameworks: empathy; self-actualisation; social networks; poverty; and government aggression. To be clear, while this section is titled *Social Science and Violent Extremism*, it will appeal to scholars and practitioners that are more familiar with *non-violent* forms of extremism, even if the term is not used. Parker is careful to eschew linear “conveyor belt” theorising thus avoiding unsubstantiated claims by analysing the complex, varying motivations for terrorism. Gravitation towards terrorism, as well as exit velocity from terrorism, are examined through explanatory variables that can be categorised across three domains: structural; institutional; and personal. These include – though are not limited to: psychology; socialisation; attitudinal affinity; self-actualisation (as identity construction); precipitating incidents; socio-economic disadvantage; relative deprivation; and government aggression. As well as this, retrospective case studies that meld theoretical perspectives to real world examples are particularly informative as they explicate several inconvenient truths regarding agency/structure. As just one example, prior to partaking in terrorism, a cult member of *Aum Shinrikyo* had been a cardiovascular surgeon, no less (p. 216). While this may read as an uncomfortable truth, the inclusion of terrorists’ biographies challenges a conventional truism evident in various counter-terrorism policy tools: those who choose terrorism must be, by default, socially, politically, culturally and/or epidemiologically defective. As this book highlights, it is a fallacy to assume terrorist violence is the *direct* result of personal suffering and/or socio-economic disadvantage (though clearly certain individuals will be drawn to terrorism for these very reasons). That said, a balanced critique is presented which delves into the psychology and sociology of terrorism. Here it is worth noting that the exploration of psychological, environmental, and cultural dispositions is centred on individuals who seemingly occupy marginal positions on the periphery of society in contrast to case examples covered in the opening subchapter of Part II. Overall, through the collation of social science evidence, the author suggests reasonable conclusions can be drawn: first, the aforementioned factors accentuate individuals’ motivations to join

terrorist groups; second, this is amplified where there is synergy across factors; third, and crucially, this is fuelled further by excessive coercion on the part of the state.

The culmination of the preceding two chapters, Part III examines how terrorist threats are responded to by a constellation of actors and agencies within and beyond the state. It begins with a historiography of international human rights laws embedded in the jurisdictions of democracies. With this serving as a backdrop the author describes five counter-terrorism tactics at states' disposal: community engagement; special investigation techniques; investigative interviewing; detention regimes; and the use of force. Each section is considered in detail though taken together they formulate a consistent narrative: rather than compromising states' ability to effectively address terrorist activity, operating in full compliance with international human rights laws proffers pragmatic benefits for the governance of counter-terrorism. While the author is not naive to the challenge from practical, social, and political standpoints, it is argued there are imaginative ways to (re)consider effective counter-terrorism and human rights constraints. As Parker reiterates throughout, it is not a dichotomous trade-off. This section also illuminates the implications of, to quote Louise Richardson, the 'pathology of state overreaction' (p. 26). Through trawling archival evidence, Parker informs us that contravening human rights norms exacerbates terrorists' 'not-so-secret formula'; for example, narrative opportunities, grievance frameworks, and notions of 'victimhood' that terrorists purport. Simply put: 'hypocrisy acts like kryptonite on legitimising narratives' (p. 786). This is just one aspect of the 'terrorist trap' the author suggests lessons can be derived.

Overall, the dexterity to which this book is crafted is undeniable: it is as persuasive as it is meticulous. Though it lacks its own empirical data, the author's vast experience as a practitioner in the field offers the ideal platform to bridge experiential knowledge and academic insight. It should therefore be taken seriously by a wide audience including practitioners, policymakers and academics alike. A further strength – to add to those outlined in the introduction of this review – is its avoidance of disciplinary solipsism, instead cutting across history, law, anthropology, political science, criminology, and sociology. Furthermore, and by no means a criticism of the central arguments put forth, as a reader you are left pondering how greater respect for human rights might come to fruition in increasingly individualistic, capitalist, and polarised societies; societies that are democratic, arguably, only in name. That challenge can be offset by the evidential basis the author posits, though pessimistically, if the 'long war doctrine' teaches us anything, it's that time and patience are the virtue of terrorists (p. 56-57).

The text also induces a sense of frustration given terrorists' axiomatic formula. Historically falling into the trap Parker describes – and resource issues notwithstanding – I could not help but make comparisons to the symbolism of the surveillance fruit-machine: invest enough time and money and the machine will eventually pay out. Perhaps more than anything else, Parker's usage of the *war of the flea* metaphor (p. 53-54, 769-770) to describe the asymmetrical challenge of terrorism fuse the 798 pages of analysis

together. It is not the perseverance of the flea's bite that leads to the dog's demise but how the host retaliates that ultimately prove its downfall.

References

NAEF, (2021). '*How a Full Spectrum of Approach Will Address Critical Gaps in Countering and Preventing Extremist Terrorist Threats*'. Strategies Against Violent Extremism (SAVE) Team. Online: available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/561bf3b7e4b0ef27704bd70c/t/5ffe17448c2fc07a70e49bd0/1610487625623/SAVE+-+Whitepaper+-+Jan+2021.pdf> Accessed: 01/03/2021.

Richardson, L. (2006). *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat*. Random House: United States.

Dr. Paul Dresser

Senior Lecturer in Criminology

Department of Social Sciences, Northumbria University, Newcastle, UK

paul2.dresser@northumbria.ac.uk