



## Book Review

Sociology

1-3

© The Author(s) 2015

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0038038514566844

soc.sagepub.com



Lisa Stampnitzky

*Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented 'Terrorism'*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, £18.99 pbk (ISBN: 9781107697348), 246 pp.

**Reviewed by:** David Miller, *University of Bath, UK* and Tom Mills, *University of Bath, UK*

Lisa Stampnitzky has produced the first book length treatment of the phenomenon of 'terror expertise' since Ed Herman and Gerry O'Sullivan's *The 'Terrorism' Industry*, published in 1989. Like that book, it focuses on the processes that lead certain persons to be designated as 'terrorism experts'. Stampnitzky's book, though, is no reprise of that earlier offering. Whilst agreeing that the rise in 'terrorism expertise' cannot be attributed to a concurrent rise in political violence, Stampnitzky rejects Herman and O'Sullivan's contention that (in her summation) 'terrorism experts constitute an "industry," funded and organized by the state and other elite interests' (p. 10).

*Disciplining Terror* argues that terrorism was socially constructed as a problem in the 1970s and that experts henceforth attempted to build up a body of knowledge about the problem; attempting to 'discipline' the concept of terrorism and 'enrol' it into their 'knowledge project'. Central to this project was the formation of a dispersed community of experts (the 'terrorism mafia' as they reportedly call themselves) who convened conferences, wrote academic papers and sought to rationalize 'terrorism', notably through the development of several databases. Stampnitzky suggests that 'terrorism studies', like other burgeoning disciplines, should subsequently have crystallized into a well-defined and demarcated field of expertise. But this did not occur. An agreed definition of terrorism remained elusive, the concept became (or remained) hopelessly politicized and terrorism expertise remained unregulated, leaving the field open to charlatans and chancers. This apparent failure is central to Stampnitzky's account.

The book achieves some notable successes. It is well written, historically informed and the author generally avoids functionalism/reductionism through her attention to experts' agency. It draws on a range of new data including 32 interviews with prominent experts, hitherto unutilized archives and a new dataset of speakers at conferences. The latter contains biographical data on over 2,000 individuals who participated in 150 conferences between 1972 and 2001 and marks a new departure for work in this area. Stampnitzky makes good use of the data in social network analysis early on in the book and, overall, the empirical material is the book's greatest strength.

Stampnitzky sets out a distinctive theoretical approach to analysing the rise of ‘terrorism expertise’. The notion of enrolment and the reference to ‘disciplining’ in the book’s title both indicate the theoretical resources on which she (rather loosely) draws: principally the work of Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and leading ‘actor-network’ theorists Bruno Latour and Michel Callon. From Foucault Stampnitzky takes the concept of ‘eventalization’ and ‘problematization’, said to be the process that makes events ‘subject to thought’, whilst from Bourdieu she borrows the concept of the ‘field’, a site of classification and credibility struggles between actors (pp. 8, 11). Actor network theory, meanwhile, seems to occupy a similar position in her theoretical framework to Foucault, but serves to remind us of the capacity for phenomena – in this case terrorism – to resist ‘techniques of knowledge’ (p. 6). These distinct theoretical approaches are said to point the way to a research strategy that focuses on the inter-relations of three sets of ‘actants’: experts, events and ‘practices of knowledge and governance’ (p. 5). The approach in *Disciplining Terror* is advanced in contradistinction to power-centric accounts (like Herman and O’Sullivan’s) which, it is argued, are unable to explain the degree of independence terrorism experts have from the state, the divisions between experts and differences in their relative impact (pp. 10–11).

The focus on the agency of terrorism experts in *Disciplining Terror* is a welcome corrective to accounts which see them as straightforward mouthpieces of the state. But in the attempt to avoid this kind of reductionism, *Disciplining Terror* offers what we consider an ineffectually narrow framework of analysis. Rather than offer a more detailed, agent-centred exploration of experts’ interaction and relationship with the state and other elite interests – which to our mind the critique of Herman, Chomsky and others invites – Stampnitzky takes a step back from the controversies surrounding ‘terrorism studies’ and treats the claims and counterclaims about its politics and politicization as little more than currency in credibility struggles between experts in their efforts to construct ‘terrorism’ as a legitimate object of knowledge:

When terrorism experts level charges of politicized knowledge against each other, they are attempting to manage both the field of expertise and the proper definition of terrorism itself. (p. 8)

In its attempt to circumvent the debates over the meaning of terrorism and the functional role of terrorism experts, *Disciplining Terror* tends to reduce the world beyond the field of terrorism expertise to struggles within it. This leads to some analytical confusion, empirical oversights and a rather decontextualized account. So whilst offering an engaging and illuminating account of the emergence and evolution of terrorism expertise, *Disciplining Terror* gives little attention to the broader social and geopolitical context. The proliferation of independence movements in the global south, the rise of radical protest movements throughout the world from the late 1960s and the subsequent emergence of countervailing conservative social movements and elite strategies – these hugely significant developments are given scant attention. On the face of it, such struggles would seem to have some relationship to the emergence of terrorism expertise, and if they are considered a relatively minor or subsidiary factor, should surely not be neglected without any explicit argumentation? Yet in *Disciplining Terror*, they feature only as faint echoes in the shifting discourses of the nascent terrorism experts.

The decision to focus more or less exclusively on the ‘field’ to the detriment of the wider social context is particularly surprising given that the evidence presented in *Disciplining Terror* seems to point in the opposite direction. Indeed, Stampnitzky calls into question the notion that terrorism expertise should be considered a field at all. One of her key findings is that unlike other experts, terrorism experts tend to ‘cross multiple institutional fields’ or ‘operate on the boundaries of fields’; a fact which she notes, makes terrorism expertise ‘appear puzzling or hard to understand’ within a Bourdieusian framework (pp. 11–12). Elsewhere it is noted that ‘the key audience for terrorism expertise is not an ideal-typical scientific community of other terrorism experts but, rather, the public and the state’ (p. 13) and later astutely observed that

terrorism studies researchers needed to maintain boundaries around their field sufficient to maintain the appearance of autonomy and yet simultaneously keep these boundaries flexible enough to maintain engagement with both academia and the state. (p. 133)

This surely calls for the broader political questions to be brought back in. Certainly terrorism experts engage in credibility struggles. But to whom do they wish to appear credible, and why? If they engage simultaneously with academia, the public, the state, and indeed with each other, how have these different aspects shaped their field? The narrow framework of analysis Stampnitzky adopts – centred as it is on the interactions of experts, events and ‘practices of knowledge and governance’ – seems to preclude any further exploration of the complexities and contradictions she details.

The inadequacies of the broadly constructivist position taken in *Disciplining Terror* most come to the fore in the chapter on the neoconservatives. Here Stampnitzky implicitly seems to backpeddle on her earlier commitment to eschew the debate over the definition of ‘terrorism’. On the one hand she makes a reasonable attempt to argue that the neocons wanted to politicize expertise. She says they developed a sort of ‘anti-knowledge’ where ‘knowledge and enquiry that entail knowing the terrorist are proscribed’ (p. 189). But the consequence of this is that she implicitly contrasts the ‘expertise’ used in the neocon push to invade Iraq, with that developed by the ‘terrorism mafia’. At one point she refers to the latter as fighting a battle to bring ‘rational explanation to bear’, as if their own commitments and connections to the state and other elites can be ignored. To implicitly treat one group as more authentically expert than another betrays the theoretical approach she adopts at the beginning. Moreover, it reveals her commitment to, at least the idea of, the project of ‘disciplining terror’. For all the critical awareness and theoretical flourishes, Stampnitzky seems disappointed in the failure of the ‘terrorism mafia’ to build a respected field of expertise.