

## SPECIAL SECTION

### **Introduction: teaching and researching terrorism – pressures and practice**

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This special section has come about as a result of a series of activities convened by the Teaching about Terrorism Working Group. The group was established in 2008 and held its first meeting at Strathclyde University in September of that year. The group focused on pedagogical issues faced by academics engaged in the delivery of courses on ‘terrorism’, political violence and associated subjects. The group offered a forum for discussion of these contested issues and encouraged a wide participation from academics and teachers in this area. After securing some support from the Centre for Sociology, Anthropology and Politics (C-SAP) of the UK Higher Education Academy, the group held a series of further meetings, including a seminar in Manchester in 2010, and hosted a panel at the British International Studies Association (BISA) conference in April 2011.

The group was originally founded following the arrests of Rizwaan Sabir and Hicham Yezza in Nottingham in May 2008. The founding statement noted the issues that the group felt to be of note:

The arrest of Nottingham University postgraduate student Rizwaan Sabir and a Nottingham administrator Hicham Yezza in relation to the downloading of an ‘Al Qaeda’ manual for Rizwaan’s dissertation research has highlighted the emerging and ongoing difficulties of teaching about ‘terrorism’ and political violence in the current climate . . . .

The aim of this initiative is to explore how the subject of terrorism which is inherently sensitive and subject to contest can and should be approached. The subject is sensitive for at least four reasons:

- (1) The definition of terrorism or how to apply it are contested as expressed in the phrase one person’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter.
- (2) Recent developments in official counter terrorism have identified the ways in which terrorism is handled in education as a potential area for concern in relation to ‘radicalisation’.
- (3) The war on terror and official counter terror activities have put pressure on the space for independent and objective study of political violence.
- (4) Many of the ‘expert’ sources available through the media, policy and other arenas particularly but not exclusively from outside the academy have a questionable evidential basis. (Teaching about Terrorism 2009).

The papers presented in this special section have emerged from these meetings and highlight the various issues that have been discussed and deliberated on. In particular, we

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note the importance of seeing the issues surrounding teaching about terrorism in the wider context of pressure on the universities from state counterterrorism strategies as well as on the ongoing reform of the higher education system in the United Kingdom, which is producing both increasing managerialism and increasing commercialisation of the university (Callinicos 2006, Canaan and Shumar 2008).

The first paper by José Atilés-Osoria and David Whyte examines the case of the 2010–2011 Puerto Rico student strikes in opposition to neo-liberal structural reforms, and the response to them by the state, particularly in terms of counterinsurgency. The paper thus ties together the question of reform of higher education and the use of counterinsurgency doctrine on campus. The case of Puerto Rico, though obviously with its own specificities, highlights the connection between seemingly abstract neo-liberal reforms and repressive activities by the state.

The next paper by David Miller, Tom Mills and Steven Harkins gives an overview of the responses of UK universities to the counterterrorism policy of the British government and increased pressure from conservative think-tanks and journalists. The data, derived from Freedom of Information requests to every UK higher education institution, indicate that whilst only a minority of universities have developed systems, policies or procedures for ‘preventing violent extremism’, a significant number have developed close cooperation and collaboration with state counterterrorism policies. The article also presents three case studies of the pressures that universities have faced, including a discussion of the events at the University of Nottingham.

Rod Thornton’s paper is an account from the field of his own experiences at the University of Nottingham. His case exemplifies the difficulties of separating questions of pedagogy from wider questions of counterterrorism and ‘radicalisation’ on campus. The arrests of Rizwaan Sabir and Hicham Yezza were followed by the creation of a system of ‘vetting’ of reading lists in the School of Politics & International Relations (Thornton 2009). Then in 2011, a paper written by Thornton for a panel at an academic conference convened by the Teaching about Terrorism Group led to his suspension by the University of Nottingham, a move denounced by more than 60 scholars, including Noam Chomsky (Chomsky *et al.* 2011). The case thus also illustrates the need to see the question of pedagogy in the wider context of university managerial practice in the current historical period.

We note that the paper by Thornton in this special section is a shortened version of the much longer version that Rod presented at the Teaching about Terrorism panel at the Annual Conference of BISA in April 2011, which was organised by the Critical Studies on Terrorism Working Group. The publication of that paper on the BISA website (along with many of the other papers presented at the conference) was the immediate trigger for Thornton’s suspension from duty at Nottingham. The paper was subsequently removed from the BISA website, ‘pending legal advice’ after ‘academic members of staff at the University of Nottingham’ contacted BISA about its ‘alleged “defamatory” content’ (BISA 2011). The approach, though, was not officially from the university itself. As BISA also stated: ‘*At no point did The University of Nottingham, or anyone claiming to represent it, contact BISA about this issue let alone threaten legal action*’ (emphasis in original) (BISA 2011).

BISA (2011) stated that later ‘Legal opinion and advice received from our solicitors and a barrister . . . indicated that some of the paper’s content was potentially defamatory and could make us vulnerable to legal action.’ Though the BISA website does not note this, defences against a charge of defamation can, in principle, include that the statements are true, in the public interest or a matter of fair comment. In summary, it seems to be the

position of BISA that the paper was removed as a result of an allegation by a member of staff at the University of Nottingham and not as a result of any legal threat by anybody at all. It can be noted, however, that the official view of the University of Nottingham on the paper was similar to the complaint made to BISA. It used the phrase 'highly defamatory' (Vasagar 2011).

Rod Thornton has played an active role in the Teaching about Terrorism Group that we established and had presented his latest work at several of the meetings, leading him to submit this paper as part of this special section of *Critical Studies on Terrorism*. As can be seen by comparison with the original version, which is available on the Internet, this piece is a lot shorter and has been through a review process. This may not guarantee that interested parties will not seek to raise concerns about what Thornton says, though we are not of the opinion that suppression of his testimony is conducive to academic freedom.

Thornton's article examines the Nottingham case and the role of the university in responding to it. In doing so, he raises wider issues about how universities and indeed academics and others could or should respond to pressure from government or from the police and intelligence services. It is not clear in the Nottingham case that either the university or the authorities conducted themselves in an exemplary fashion and the Nottingham case stands as a warning to us all of the dangers of knee-jerk response to the apparently irresistible pressure of counterterrorism.

The massive expansion of academic interest in terrorism (Miller and Mills 2009) has probably led to an increase in the number of courses on terrorism taught at universities in the English-speaking world at least. While the Nottingham case stands out as a cause célèbre, it is plain that others too have felt under pressure in their research and teaching. While the vetting of reading lists or the surveillance of student bibliographies may not be common, there are still serious issues to face in the attempt to adequately navigate the pedagogical terrain. The last three contributions in this special section are shorter papers providing case reports of how four university lecturers have done so. We include them here as a contribution to the ongoing debate on how to teach controversial or contested subjects.

Ayla Göl, noting the increased popularity of courses on Islam and the Middle East post-11 September 2001, suggested that a key difficulty is the rise in misinformation and misunderstandings of Islam in the Western media. As a result a 'critical pedagogy' requires teachers to find a way to help students to interrogate popular assumptions, and perhaps their own misconceptions, about the role of Islam in society.

James Fitzgerald and Anthony F. Lemieux present what they call a reflective account of their course on terrorism, which is unusual in a number of ways, chiefly because of its international nature, taught as it is in Ireland and the United States. Their use of blended learning and collaborative approaches – utilising wiki software, for example – is intended to engage and activate students more than traditional lecture and seminar approaches. Conceiving their own role as facilitators of student learning, Fitzgerald and Lemieux provide crucial pointers on engaging with critique and encouraging students to take control of their own learning process.

Elaine Martin provides an account of her own course on cultural representations of terrorism. She tackles questions about the ethics of teaching about terrorism and the difficulties of widening perspectives in the context of greater pressures on academic freedom and the freedom of speech in the post-September 11 world. Her approach involves encounters with a varied selection of cultural representations of terrorism and she defends this, challenging though it may be, as essential in defending the possibility of the university as a public space where facts can be pursued and ideas can be debated. The alternative is that

research and questioning are curtailed and adequate and informed teaching becomes more difficult, perhaps impossible.

### Acknowledgements

Our thanks to all the authors of the papers published here and to all those who participated in the Teaching about Terrorism Working Group events. Thanks also to Richard Jackson, Piers Robinson and Helen Dexter of the *Critical Studies in Terrorism* Working Group of BISA.

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