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The Construction of the Discourse on “Terrorism”

Alice Martini

Alice Martini is a PhD student at the Sant’Anna School of Advanced Studies and, jointly, at the Autonomous University of Madrid. She specializes especially on international "terrorism" from a theoretical point of view in the MENA region.

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to run a critical analysis – at a theoretical level – of the production of knowledge, specifically, the one on “terrorism”. The main argumentation is that the way this is created resembles in many ways the way scientific knowledge is produced in a society. In this sense, this paper seeks to draw a reflection on the creation of the discourse that constructs “terrorism”. The starting point is, hence, the fact that, as the creation of scientific truths is never neutral, so is the one related to this kind of specific violence. As a matter of fact, as other ones, this “regime of truth” on terrorism is created through specific processes that reify certain relations of powers. It is because of this reason that the “knowledge on terrorism” should not be accepted uncritically but analyzed and questioned.

Keywords

discourse, epistemic communities, power/knowledge nexus, production of knowledge, terrorism

Introduction

This paper starts from a reflection on science, or more generally, on the production of the scientific knowledge and aims at discussing theoretically how the mainstream and accepted knowledge on “terrorism” a society has is produced. In this sense, a comparison can almost be drawn between the creation of both truths since the discourse on “terrorism” is, at least in part, a fruit of the way scientific production is considered in the Western world. It is because of this reason that the first inspiration for this paper has been the philosophical reflection of Thomas Kuhn on the need to use a pluralist approach to (do) science in order to change the way societies look at it. This is because there is not only one Truth but many truths that are created and reproduced. Therefore, starting from the idea that science has become to be considered as the greatest and the only way of producing knowledge in the world, this paper will reflect critically on how the knowledge on “terrorism” is constructed.

The main problem this paper wants to highlight is that, in general terms, science – both “hard” and light” - is considered to produce the Truth, a knowledge that cannot be disputed and that is universally valid and recognized. However, on the contrary, knowledge is always a social product, the result of a specific historical context and of specific power relations. And whereas scientific knowledge is believed to be universal, they are social constructions and thus historically and contextually contingent. In other words, “sciences produce specific master narratives, and shape continuously by means of them new relationships between knowledge and power, between ‘ontological’ landscape and cognitive structure” (Henry, 2015: 223).

Considered these processes of construction of truth, what will be discussed is how there is, in fact, no neutrality of science/knowledge. In other words, knowledge is always related to power and it can even be seen as an expression of it. This does not only happen with “hard” sciences but also in a field like the one of “terrorism studies”, as it will be argued in this paper. As a matter of fact, here the epistemic community produces a certain kind of paradigm – or discourse – which dominates the way a society think about, act on, understands and deals with terrorism, etc. They produce the discourse that constructs the way “terrorism” is understood, made sense of and dealt with in a society.

Therefore, in broader terms, what this paper wants to carry out is a theoretical reflection on the process of the production of this knowledge. This can be achieved by “‘putting on a different kind of thinking-cap’, one that renders the anomalous lawlike but that, in the process, also transforms the order exhibited by some other phenomena, previously unproblematic” (Kuhn, 1977: XVII). Or, in other words, through the deconstruction and unmasking of these processes. In this sense, this article

wants to be an overview of one of the main issues the critical terrorism scholars (CTS) have highlighted in the production of knowledge of the mainstream terrorism studies (also named as “orthodox” terrorism studies). To this denounce, I add a deeper reflection on the processes of discourses production and a comparison with the creation of scientific knowledge in society.

It also has to be highlighted that CTS analysis – and, as a consequence, this article - finds its roots in Robert Cox’s distinction between “problem solving theory”, which takes for granted power relations and “solves” problems that may jeopardize them, and “critical theory” which, on the contrary, criticizes and questions these structures and the status quo they create and deconstructs the discourses that maintain specific power relations in society (Cox, 1981: 128 – 129). Clearly, it is the latter theoretical framework that wants to be adopted in this paper.

The production of knowledge

Usually, at least in the Western world - because this is from where these lines have been written –, knowledge(s) is produced by scientific (or epistemic) communities and the resulting paradigms are never put into question until some new data is found. This depends on the fact that, as Kuhn argued, normal science is based on the idea that the scientific community knows (and has access to) how the world is (Kuhn, 1996: 5). Because of this, the knowledge they produce is always the “Truth”. Scientific communities thus have a central role in a society because “every society, or at least every society characterized by division of labor, must include groups of people and institutions whose task it is to cultivate – to gather and transmit - knowledge” (Amsterdamski, 1992: 9).

Nevertheless, there are two main theoretical problems with the kind of truth the epistemic communities produce. In the first place, it is a truth that is supposed to be universal but that, in reality, is very contingent and contextual since it is produced from a specific position within a certain society and in a particular historical moment. And this is an important fact to take into account, since there is no knowledge out of the knowing possibility of the subject and, consequently, there is no science out of the cultural environment this is entwined with. As a matter of fact, it is impossible to have a production of a universal knowledge since this will always be naturally and contextually embedded. There is no possibility of saying something that can be considered objective *a priori* because objectivity is not understandable without (and not in the light of) the specific scientific community this “truth” is a product of. And this, as it will be argued, is something to take into account also when considering the current production of the knowledge on “terrorism”.

Related to this, there is a second point that has to be highlighted: the nexus between the production of scientific knowledge and power. The possibility to produce knowledge is a role of absolute power on the definition of the state of the art of a certain object of reference, in the construction of how certain things are, how should be considered, understood and dealt with and so on. In this sense, the access to the creation of knowledge confers the power on the decision of which paradigm should be the main one and which one is not since the process of rejecting one paradigm and of accepting another one are simultaneous (Kuhn, 1996: 77). This process of a paradigm imposing itself on another one works in a way that “each paradigm will be shown to satisfy more or less the criteria that it dictates for itself and to fall short of a few of those dictated by its opponent” (Kuhn, 1996: 109 – 110), signing its final “victory” on the other ones.

Historically speaking, this process is cyclical since scientific knowledge is always constituted by ideals accepted at a given historical time and “some of these ideals might be socially accepted and institutionalized at a given time, and direct the cognitive activities of scientists; while others might exist as individual or group ideas which enjoy no such social approval and, at least for a while, might not be considered historically productive” (Amsterdamski, 1992: 12). Since the scientific communities are considered as the unique sources of knowledge, to have access to the production of the latter means to have power on it and thus to decide – or at least, be able to influence – how certain topics should be understood, dealt with, and so on. Consequently, science should be considered also in respect to the role it has in shaping a society and in creating and destroying its values (Amsterdamski, 1992: 4).

The relationship between power and discourse

Before focusing on the creation of knowledge in the terrorism studies field, it is important to try to understand what power is and how discourses, which are the “paradigms” in the case of a more “qualitative” knowledge, work in our reality. Power can be defined as the capacity of an entity to control the behavior of others without a physical force or threat of force. This is a basic constituent of our reality, especially because, as Michel Foucault argued, power not only encompasses everything but also comes from everywhere (Foucault, 1980a: 93). As a matter of fact, it is present in our everyday routine, in the way we speak, in what we read, in the way we dress and so on.

Power and power relationships perpetuate themselves through the transmission of knowledge and culture. In this sense, power is a productive force that creates discourses, knowledge, regimes of truth but also objects and identities: in other words, it is about creating and recreating the world in a specific way (Longhurst, 2008: 64). Power is productive since it is related to the construction of

things, ideas, and identities but also because it produces classifications in our knowledge, which create our understanding of the surrounding world and society. And it is in this relationship between power and knowledge, already mentioned above, that lies what Michel Foucault defines as “discourse”.

Power circulates in the society through discourses, a system of ideas and narratives that characterize a certain – material or abstract – object (Anderson and Schlunke, 2008). Therefore, a discourse is “a cohesive ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations about a specific object that frame that object in a certain way and, therefore, delimit the possibilities for action in relation to it.” (Epstein, 2008: 2). They create and influence the way we think, talk and behave through the configuration of power. In other words, they are networks that construct the structures of understanding and knowing the world itself or a specific issue (Longhurst, 2008: 21). Consequently, everything we know is learned through discourses: social groups, identities, and positions within society such as gender or race are not pre-existing concepts but the products of a discourse that defines them in terms of what they are and how they operate. As Charlotte Epstein highlights, discourses “do” two things: they create “space of objects”, by making specific things matter in a different way they were meaningful before, and they constitute new identities for the social actors through the creation of new subject-positions (Epstein, 2008: 6). This way, discourses create new realities, new identities and new common senses that are experienced as obvious and evident; they incline agents to think and act in a certain way, they generate what will be considered as “normal” practices, perceptions and attitudes in reference to a specific object. Furthermore, these will not be consciously perceived but will be put into action without being dictated by any apparent norm (Bourdieu, 1991: 12).

Therefore, people become both enabled and constrained to think in particular ways through the assimilation of discourses. This happens because “in any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse.” (Foucault, 1980b). And, recalling the reflection on science and on truth mentioned above, it can be added that what we know about the world is a product of different discourses and it is exactly in these ones that power and knowledge merge (Foucault, 1994). Another important thing that has to be taken into consideration is that discourses emerge when they “can”, when they have the possibility when they are not prevented by a set of material interests against them. This does not mean that one kind of interest prevails over

other ones, on the contrary, discourses can appear when the material conditions allow them to bloom and impose themselves on others.

Furthermore, different discourses give rise to different narratives that can change our interpretations of reality and events. However, not all of them have the same power. In fact, different discourses can achieve a different degree of success. When one of them is really successful it becomes institutionalized and normalized and starts being incorporated in the political institutions. This because discourses, as Jennifer Milliken remarks, are constitutive of the social world and are thus “systems of signification” (1999: 229). In this sense, things do not have a meaning *per se*, rather people construct this meaning using systems of signs which are usually – but not exclusively – linguistic. Furthermore, following Jacques Derrida's view, discourses are systematically structured on (and create structures of) binary oppositions that create a relation of hierarchy – and therefore of power – of one element over the other one (Milliken, 1999: 229). Discourses create and give a meaning to these binaries that construct reality. In other words, they establish a relation of power and authority of one over the other one. For example, in some binaries such as male/female, civilization/barbarism or developed/undeveloped, there is the establishment of a relation of power with certain preconceptions, feelings, and ideas attached to them.

Discourses have a specific productivity: they produce knowledge about a phenomenon, a specific language to speak about it, behaviors in reference to it and towards the world. They constitute a “regime of truth”, eliminating other possible ways of interpretation of the phenomenon. Moreover, discourses define “subject authorized to speak and act” and “knowledgeable practices by these subjects towards the object” (Milliken, 1999: 229). In more general terms, hence, what discourses produce is a “common sense” about a phenomenon, since they create ideas, behaviors and ways of thinking about it that exclude other possible options; all these elements that make discourses extremely useful, for example, in a field like politics.

However they do not just exist in the vacuum: they have to be created, maintained and constantly rearticulated since they are historically dependent – even if to individuals’ eyes they appear as an ahistorical truth –. It is also very common for a discourse to contain many exceptions, inconsistencies or even contradictions. However, these do not usually become central or disruptive of it since they do not usually question the core ontological or epistemological core of the discourse (Jackson, 2009: 69). This also because they are reflexive and have the capacity to “continuously reconstruct and reinvent earlier discursive formations in order to maintain coherence in the face of internal and external contradictions and challenges” (Jackson, 2011: 156). And this process is endless

since all discourses try to become – or continue being – hegemonic by discrediting rival ones and by presenting themselves as ahistorical truths, recalling Kuhn’s quotation above. The process of the creation of meaning is not a lineal one, with a clear starting and an ending point, but it is a contingent one, constantly moving and changing because of the constant struggle of different ideas and interests that try to reformulate the “regime of truth” and reach, this way, their legitimization. As a matter of fact, all discourses try to become – or continue being – hegemonic by discrediting rival discourses. And they need to present themselves as the only truth about the referent object in order to maintain their legitimacy. Consequently, the struggle among adversary discourses is always present, even if individuals do not perceive it since they are under the sphere of influence of the dominant one.

Eventually, discourses tend to create a gnoseological order that gives meaning to the world (Foucault, 2002). Relations of power can be thus said to be relations of meaning: in fact, discursive formations are “made possible by a group of relations established between authorities of emergence, delimitation, and specification” (Foucault, 2002). Therefore, considered their characteristics and their power, discourses can result very useful in politics to achieve specific political goals since they can be used to affect the way individuals act and think in the social world. The knowledge that is constructed through discourses is presented as an ahistorical, neutral and objective tool and it is exactly in observing how discourses work that the nexus power-knowledge can be observed. Discourses create what should count as knowledge and what does not and define what should be produced, communicated, legitimated and resisted (Stump and Dixit, 2013: 117).

The elements of a discourse

Powerful discourses can only be created by powerful actors. In fact, in order to create a powerful discourse “those who speak must ensure that they are entitled to speak in the circumstances, and those who listen must reckon that those who speak are worthy of attention” (Bourdieu, 1991: 8). Actors, in order to create powerful discourses, should have the authority that allows them to do so which is conferred by the rest of the individuals that listen and accept the “truth” that they create. Consequently, they receive the authority from the same individuals on which they are going to impose it. In this sense, a discourse gets its power from the same specific audience it creates (Foucault, 1981: 52).

Therefore, the speaker has to have the authority to speak but s/he also has to do it in a place where his/her authority has a value. In Bourdieu's words, it can be said that the actor’s power to create a powerful discourse depends on her/his “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu, 1991: 107). If a performative utterance is pronounced by someone who does not possess enough symbolic capital, or pronounces it

in the wrong circumstances or with a wrong procedure, the discourse will be destined to fail (Bourdieu, 1991: 111). On the contrary, a hegemonic – and thus successful – discourse is “one where the public debate uses mainly the language, terms, ideas and ‘knowledge’ of the dominant discourse, and where alternative words and meanings are rarely found and dissenting voices are almost never heard” (Jackson, 2011: 19).

Another reason of possible failure/success of a discourse resides in its “conditions of existence”. Discourses cannot just emerge and take on a life on their own, but, in order to gain power and result successful, they have to emerge under specific rules of formation which are their conditions of existence and, as Foucault remarks, also their conditions of maintenance, modification, and disappearance (Foucault, 2002). More specifically, their success depends firstly on the historical conditions: since objects do not exist on their own, but they exist only as conglomerates of relations. This means that the preexisting conditions have to be favorable for the emergence of a discourse since they are created in relations to outside factors and are not preexistent objects that just emerge in the world. In addition to this, their emergence must not be restrained by contrasting power.

To recognize the link between power and discourses – and therefore, knowledge – is of extreme importance because it helps highlighting how knowledge may always be used by political actors or by power in general as a tool of domination. In fact, a specific discourse may help in legitimize elites in the eyes of a broader public, for example in implementing extreme exceptional measures of security, and thus creating relations of dominations which seem to be justified and reasonable. This is a normal process since “all efforts to explain the social world are tied up with the interests and perspectives of their creators, and, just as importantly, they all have consequences for the worlds that are being explained” (Jackson, 2011: 19 – 20). However, by analyzing them and their formation, by showing that discourses are in fact historical formations and context dependent it is possible to denaturalize their power and to question the practices that created them. It is because of this reason that in the next part of this paper, I am going to analyze how the theories on the creation of discourses can help in the task of making sense of how the meaning of “terrorism” is created.

Power-knowledge in the production of “terrorism”

As it has been seen, all the knowledge(s) produced in a specific society are a social product and so is the “knowledge on terrorism”. As a matter of fact, in every society – historically and politically – there are specific ways in which this phenomenon is conceptualized, thought about, acted on and so on. This depends on the fact that a specific model and framework of knowledge on terrorism came to dominate over the other possible ones, excluding them. This, that encompasses “everything” is

known about terrorism including how (not) to make sense of it, is the result of specific processes of power that have interacted to achieve its creation. In this sense, it is the fruit of a specific historical and political conjuncture, as every other knowledge is, that gave rise to particular ideals and material interests and it is aimed at making sense of terrorism in a certain way also because, as already seen, “theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose” (Cox 1981: 128).

As a matter of fact, the studies on terrorism have their own specific “epistemic community”, with leading scholars that share a common world view and common political values and whose production of knowledge is made sense from within it. Considered that all efforts that are done to try to explain the world are always intertwined with the situatedness, the perspectives (and thus the interests) of their creators (Held, as in Jackson, 2011: 20), the first thing to highlight when analyzing the production of knowledge about terrorism is that many analysts and academics are part of state institutions and end up formulating biased analysis (Jackson, 2001: 19). Because of these reasons, the theories they produce will – in general terms – tend to serve the status quo by assuming that existing power structures are natural and immutable and will not question how this came to be. As a matter of fact, many scholars, especially those belonging to the critical turn in terrorism studies (for example, see Jackson et al. 2011; Jackson et al, 2009; Gunning, 2007), have denounced that these theories have always focused more on a state-centric approach and on a status-quo security, instead of focusing more on human security, ignoring largely “whether the state itself and its repressive apparatus might have played a role in creating an environment in which terrorism may seem desirable (and even legitimate) to some actors” (Jackson, 2011: 21).

The theories elaborated in the field of terrorism studies do not question the extent to which the status quo, the imposition of certain relations of power and the dominant actors may have played a role in the emergence of the terrorist violence (Jackson, 2009: 67). In this sense, what is important to notice is that the discourse that has been created on “terrorism” and that dictates how “terrorism” should be understood is politically biased and it is used to reify specific positions status and hierarchies (Ibid., 77). A clear example of this is that usually “state terrorism” is not studied – nor more than sometimes recognized – by analysts. The bias is visible when taking into consideration that many analysts use databases that only enlist attacks committed by non-statal actors as “terrorism”.

In addition to this, the access to the creation of knowledge on terrorism gives, at a domestic level, the power to implement specific measures that could not be applied if this knowledge was created in a different way. An example of this may be the “state of exception” governments implement in case

of an emergency and that allows them to derogate from specific human rights and civil liberties in the name of security and protection from terrorism: the citizens, in this case, would be the specific receivers of the knowledge that has been constructed. Therefore, more in general terms, it can be said that “traditional terrorism studies has essentially served to sustain the status quo, reducing politics to the management of social order without much thought for emancipation – internal critics and dissenters notwithstanding” (Gunning and Toros, 2009: 91).

At the same time, these theories are deeply embedded in the context they come from: not only the institutional/governmental environment, but also, the Western world with its philosophical traditions, and thus reflect the values and the assumptions of this specific cultural context in a specific historical moment, that work to maintain a specific Western hegemonic and dominant position. As a matter of fact, not only the interpretation of the terrorist violence is given from this specific point of view, but the knowledge created around terrorism “works to maintain the potentially dangerous myth [...] of Western exceptionalism [...] (which) in turn permits Western states and their allies to pursue a range of discrete and often illiberal political projects and partisan interests aimed at maintaining dominance in a hegemonic liberal international order” (Jackson, 2009: 79).

The discourse constructing “terrorism”

The knowledge on terrorism is constructed through a very strong discourse that “helps” a society in making sense of it, that shapes the things that are thought about it, the reactions individuals should have, how they should about it, what they should (not) say about it and so on. This happens because everything that is known about terrorism is the result of a social and political construction which indicates that the current interpretation that a society gives of this phenomenon is the only correct one: the discourse thus “help constitute a grid of intelligibility through which other events, risks and threats are interpreted” (Jackson, 2011: 71). However, on the contrary, this knowledge – as other “knowledges” –, is a social construction, it is contingent, highly historically and culturally dependent. Clearly, this is usually not openly recognized and the discourse is constructed through many narratives that protect its legitimacy by presenting it as the unique, ahistorical and only plausible way of interpreting terrorism.

Analyzing the terrorism discourse from a more theoretical point of view, we can see how Milliken's claims about discursive formations are satisfied. As a matter of fact, the terrorism discourse has become a system of signification since it gives meanings to everything within the discourse itself. Moreover, it can be argued that the discourse productivity is very high and there is a whole set of common sense ideas and behaviors in relation to this phenomenon that emerged through the

discourse and that nowadays constitute the regime of truth. This may be for example the idea that terrorism is such a bigger threat than it actually is, that terrorists are irrational and crazy actors, that their actions are not political and so on (for further details, see Stohl, 2008). Therefore, the terrorism one is a well-established discourse in our world that fills with meaning and provides us with a specific interpretation of this specific political kind of violence.

However, it has to be recognized that not all the agents have the power to “speak” within the terrorist discourse and some actors are more powerful than others. Undoubtedly, there are many actors that have a certain amount of symbolic power in the field of terrorism: the single States, international organizations, NGOs, governments, eminent political figures, the epistemic community, and so on are all figures that are entitled to talk about terrorism. In fact, the common sense created by the discourse is that any of these agents are capable of discussing the issue and has thus the power to create new truths about it and to reinforce the ones already existing. However, the most powerful actors within this discourse are the states – supported by the epistemic community, as mentioned before – since they are the ones that decide on what terrorism actually means in their territories and on what counter-terrorism measures to deploy. In this sense, the discourse may be used in order to maintain power, discredit oppositional groups and justify state policies (Hülse and Spencer, 2008: 577). And this is possible because “external threats do not necessarily exist independently of states; rather, states deliberately construct them for the purposes of disciplining the domestic sphere” (Jackson, 2011: 116). Giving a meaning to “terrorism” through a discourse can thus become a very powerful tool in politics.

On the contrary, who usually has no symbolic power at all – from the point of view of the Western state-centric discourse as analyzed so far – are the terrorist agents: they are usually not given the capacity to talk, being them the mere object/receptors of the discourse. In this sense, the terrorist identity is a product of a Western discourse and so are the dynamics that surround him/her, his/her the motivations and goals (Hülse and Spencer, 2008: 571). This happens because, as Sandra Silberstein explains, “the power to shape perceptions of violent events and their principal actors (both perpetrators and victims) usually rests not with the terrorist but with government officials. Who the terrorists are in the first place is a question largely determined by these officials” (Silberstein, 2002: 3). This is possible because, as we have seen, the language that constructs the terrorism discourse is extremely opaque: the only thing clear of the discourse is that “terrorist” is always the enemy, the dangerous opposition (Jackson, 2011: 157).

Therefore, discourses create what should count as knowledge on terrorism and define what should be produced, communicated, legitimated and resisted (Stump, 2013: 117). To achieve this goal, the discourse of terrorism needs a new language, new narratives, and new authorities. Therefore, “it requires the remaking of the world and the creation of a new and unquestioned reality in which the application of state violence appears normal and reasonable” (Jackson, 2011: 1). This because the language that surrounds terrorism normalizes and reifies the practice through which societies deal with terrorism.

Conclusion

This paper aimed at carrying out a theoretical and critical reflection on the concept of (scientific) knowledge. It also drew a reflection on the creation of a certain knowledge on “terrorism” starting from elements referring to the production of scientific knowledge. As argued, this, as the other “knowledges”, is a social product constructed through specific discourses in society. What has been shown in this paper is how in the production of this knowledge on terrorism, the nexus power-knowledge is specially relevant, being “terrorism” a highly politicized topic and being the epistemic community related to power and decision making, influencing thus the production of this knowledge.

This construction of terrorism through a specific discourse, as I mentioned before, should not be surprising. Knowledge is always created for some reasons and in the case of terrorism, the discourse that defines it has the clear goal of maintaining a specific status quo in the international system. As a matter of fact, as it has been argued, it empowers the authorities that created it, protects them from dissent and critiques and discipline society under a powerful set of norms and ideas which enables them, for example, to apply extreme measures. In this sense, it works “as a kind of disciplinary and hegemonic truth regime designed to reify existing structures of power and dominance” (Jackson, 2009: 80).

It is because of this reason that the discourse on “terrorism” needs to be analyzed and its biases need to be recognized – if not eliminated –. In this sense, the practices that gave rise and brought to the creation of this discourse need to be reconsidered and reframed (Henry, 2015: 223) in order to eliminate these biases and make the analysis more inclusive and complete. Therefore, it is important to analyze the production of this knowledge from a critical point of view. This way, a deconstruction can be carried out in order to highlight not only of the way this is created but, above all, of the hidden interests behind this construction. In other words, to analyze the production of knowledge on “terrorism” allows to denouncing the power relations beyond this discourse.

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