Time, memory, and critical terrorism studies: 9/11 twenty years on[1]

Lee Jarvis

School of Politics, Philosophy, Language and Communication Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK. Email: l.jarvis@uea.ac.uk

Lee Jarvis is Professor of International Politics at the University of East Anglia, UK. He is author or editor of fourteen books and over fifty articles or chapters on the politics of security, including *Times of Terror: Discourse, Temporality and the War on Terror*; *Security: A Critical Introduction* (with Jack Holland); and *Banning Them, Securing Us? Terrorism, Parliament and the Ritual of Proscription* (with Tim Legrand). Lee's work has been funded by the ESRC, the AHRC, the Australian Research Council, NATO and others. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4149-7135 Email: l.jarvis@uea.ac.uk

The centrality of temporality to the meaning and significance of the events of 11 September 2001 became evident very quickly after the attacks. Early analysis from David Campbell (2001) and Jacques Derrida (2003) highlighted the prominence and contestability of specific temporal constructions as '9/11' was rapidly produced as an unforeseen, traumatic, event of universal significance. This sense of event-ness was compounded, of course, in the repeated positioning of the attacks as a moment of temporal rupture – a break in the horizon of the familiar and predictable – including through their naming by their date, their description in the language of 'crisis' (see Hay 1999: 323), and the emergence of now-familiar tropes of historical, discursive and normative disruption: a 'loss of innocence', 'incomprehensible', a 'tragedy', and so on. Such discursive work was evident not only in elite political discourse (Jarvis 2008, 2009), but in vernacular and everyday spaces too (Holland and Jarvis 2014). Subsequent mnemonic projects seeking to preserve the importance of that event and its victims –body art, the Ground Zero memorial, commemorative websites and beyond – indeed seemed to confirm this sense of singular significance (Croft 2006; Jarvis 2010).

It is, however, important to note that such productions of temporal discontinuity also already helped to situate 9/11 within other, quite different, temporal imaginaries by relating the attacks to other events. Accounts of 9/11 as tragedy, for instance, call forth other catastrophes, whether 'real' or encountered in Hollywood movies and the like (Žižek 2013). Commemorative work, similarly, served to link the attacks to other traumas deemed equally worthy of mnemonic activity. And, very quickly, the events were also attached to anticipated *future* attacks such that we are now always expecting future 9/11s; now always 'waiting for terrorism' as Zulaika (2012: 57) nicely put it. In this sense, 9/11's temporal positioning has always been multiple. It has always been *both* a discontinuous event like no other, *as well as* one moment in linear trajectories of terrorism, *and* a repetition or reminder of earlier horrors such as Pearl Harbor (Jarvis 2008, 2009). It has always, I'm sure, been many other things too. What matters, then, is how the attacks are interpreted and situated: what relations of equivalence and difference (Laclau and Mouffe 2001) we choose (or are encouraged, or perhaps coerced) to draw upon in understanding and locating the events.

My suggestion here that 9/11 inhabits – and has always inhabited – multiple temporalities is both an empirical and an ontological one. Empirically, it stands as a straightforward description

of the heterogeneous discursive work undertaken by the George W. Bush administration and others in their articulation of the attacks in the early years of what became known as the 'War on Terror' (Jackson 2005, Jarvis 2008, 2009). Ontologically, it is a claim about the precarity, and perhaps the futility, of efforts to fully or finally fix 9/11's meaning within temporal or other imaginaries, precisely because the meaning of those events (of any event) will always be contingent, and subject to transformation and challenge. And the former empirical observation is, of course, a consequence of the latter. The question, though, with which I want to end is this: what does any of this mean for Critical Terrorism Studies? How should we focus our efforts and attentions when confronted with 9/11's multiple legacies and memories? As a provisional answer to these questions, I want to sketch four research strategies that may be of use to interested, critically-inclined, scholars going forward (see Roe 2004; Sabaratnam 2011; Jarvis 2019a).

A first, broadly constructivist, approach would be to explore *how* 9/11's meaning is produced and remembered through temporal claims: to render visible the discursive work that goes in to positioning the attacks as, say, a harbinger of a 'new normal' or a second 'Pearl Harbor'. Such work might involve tracing the genealogies of the temporal imaginaries within which 9/11 is situated, including their links to historical projects of state-building or colonialism and the implicit assumptions (of gender, of race, and so on) upon which such imaginaries rely. Second, we might choose to go further and actively *contest* hegemonic framings of 9/11 by highlighting their exclusions, limitations, inadequacies, and biases. Rather than unpack 9/11's discursive production, we might prefer instead to contrast dominant constructions with empirical or other realities as Fred Halliday (2002: 235) did so sharply after the attacks:

> September 11 did not 'change everything': the map of the world with its 200 or so states, the global pattern of economic and military power, the relative distribution of democratic, semi-authoritarian and tyrannical states remains much the same. Many of the greatest threats to the world, and many of the problems which are least susceptible to traditional forms of state control (the environment, migration, the drugs trade, AIDS), long pre-dated September 11.

Work in this vein should always be undertaken with care, not least because it risks accusations of trivialisation, moral accounting, or inconsideration. It is, though, likely to appeal to those attracted to critical terrorism studies' emancipatory incarnations, particularly where hegemonic accounts of 9/11's temporal significance are linked to morally pernicious outcomes. One obvious example, here, is the frequent tying of 9/11's historical exceptionalism to similarly exceptional forms of counter-terrorism response such as torture, rendition, or military activities risking 'collateral damage'.

Third, we might attempt to uncover hidden, forgotten, or subjugated interpretations of 9/11 that work to position the attacks within other conceptions of temporality. Doing this, helps order to pluralise knowledge of those events, their implications, and their importance (e.g. Wibben 2010). And, in the process, such work enables us to connect acts of terror to vernacular experiences of (in)security, shedding light on the resonance of established discourses and potentially – though not necessarily – highlighting opportunities for critique or resistance grounded in everyday life (Jarvis 2019b). Fourth, we might ask the very explicitly political question: whose interests are served – or, perhaps, who benefits – from dominant temporal constructions of attacks such as 9/11 (see Toros 2017). How do such constructions enable or militate against particular ways of knowing and responding to terrorism? How do they contribute to the (re)production of identities, institutions, discourses and constellations of power that appear natural, inevitable, or commonsensical?

These four options are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, although they imply different epistemological, methodological and political commitments. That is, for me, as it should be given the vibrancy of contemporary debate within Critical Terrorism Studies (see Jackson 2016). For Critical Terrorism Studies, at least in my view, is far more powerful, and far more exciting, as a plural and open orientation toward the politics of (counter-)terrorism than when it is conceived as a singular project, theory, or 'school' (see Krause and Williams 1997: x-xi). That openness and pluralism should, therefore, run through our theoretical, methodological and empirical engagements with temporality and productions thereof, as much as it should through our engagement with (counter-)terrorism discourse, strategy and politics more broadly. Indeed, as this Special Issue so clearly indicates, we can be optimistic that this is already happening.

References

Campbell, D. (2001). Time is broken: The return of the past in the response to September 11. *Theory & Event*, 5(4).

Croft, S. (2006). *Culture, crisis and America's war on terror*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Derrida, J. (2003) 'Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides' In Borradori, G. *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, pp.85-136.

Halliday, F. (2002) *Two Hours That Shook the World: September 11, 2001: Causes and Consequences*. London: Saqi Books.

Hay, C. (1999). Crisis and the structural transformation of the state: interrogating the process of change. *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 1(3), 317-344.

Holland, J., & Jarvis, L. (2014). "Night fell on a different world": experiencing, constructing and remembering 9/11. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 7(2), 187-204.

Jackson, R. (2005) *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counter-terrorism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Jackson, R. (ed.) (2016) *Routledge Handbook of Critical Terrorism Studies*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Jarvis, L. (2008) Times of terror: Writing temporality into the war on terror. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 1(2), 245-262.

Jarvis, L. (2009) *Times of Terror: discourse, temporality and the War on Terror*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Jarvis, L. (2010) Remember, remember, 11 September: memorializing 9/11 on the Internet. *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 3(1): 69-82.

Jarvis, L. (2019) Terrorism, counter-terrorism, and critique: opportunities, examples, and implications. *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 12(2): 339-358.

Jarvis, L. (2019b) Toward a vernacular security studies: origins, interlocutors, contributions, and challenges. *International Studies Review* 21(1), 107-126.

Krause, K. and Williams, M. (1997) 'Preface: Toward a Critical Security Studies', In K. Krause and M. Williams (eds.) *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Strategies*. London: UCL Press, pp. vii-xxi.

Laclau, E. & Mouffe, C. (2001) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (2nd Ed.). London: Verso.

Roe, P. (2004). Securitization and minority rights: Conditions of desecuritization. *Security Dialogue,* 35(3), 279-294.

Sabaratnam, M. (2011) IR in dialogue… but can we change the subjects? A typology of decolonising strategies for the study of world politics. *Millennium*, 39(3), 781-803.

Toros, H. (2017) "9/11 is alive and well" or how critical terrorism studies has sustained the 9/11 narrative. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 10(2), 203-219.

Wibben, A. T. (2010) *Feminist security studies: A narrative approach*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Žižek, S. (2002). *Welcome to the desert of the real!: Five essays on September 11 and related date*s. London: Verso.