

What place for 9/11 in critical terrorism studies?

Special issue introduction

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As critical terrorism scholars and editors of this journal, we approached the 20th anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks with considerable ambivalence. Conscious that many journals in our field would mark the two decades since those dramatic events, we debated what adopting a “critical approach” demanded of us. As a journal, and specifically as editors of this special issue, we had at least two – potentially conflicting – aspirations for this moment. First, to take the opportunity to (once again) recognise and reflect on the duration, consequences, and costs of 9/11’s aftermath; an aftermath characterised by a war on terror that has stretched not only across continents and policy domains, but across decades too now. And, second, explicitly to call into question the widespread framing of those attacks as a powerful temporal marker complicit not only in contemporary responses to political resistance and violence but also in the understanding, research and teaching of the politics of counter-terrorism (Jarvis, 2009; Holland and Jarvis 2014; Toros, 2017). Such aspirations compel critical engagement with technologies of “commemoration” and “remembrance” including through ceremonies, monuments, and practices (Jarvis 2010; Heath-Kelly 2016, 2018). They compel engagement too, though, with decisions, demands and structures

of forgetting, with many critically-inclined scholars sympathetic to Maya Zeyfuss's (2003) urging that we might "forget September 11".

Given these aspirations, this issue represents our attempt to reflect on the remembrance, commemoration and forgetting of events, such as 9/11, and the importance thereof for knowledge, power and practice. To help, we invited friends, colleagues and others to remember and commemorate other events, other temporal markers, relating to political violence and terror. Indeed, we lamented in our original call for papers that "the focus on 9/11 as a temporal marker serves to singularise this event at the expense of others important to critical terrorism studies. 2021 marks 20 years since the start of the war on terror, but also 49 years since the Bloody Sunday massacre, 48 years since the Pinochet coup, 42 years since the Iranian Revolution, 32 years since the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, 21 years since the start of the Al Aqsa Intifada, 18 years since the war in Iraq, and 11 years since the start of the Arab Spring uprisings, among others."

To address these concerns, we thus invited scholars and practitioners to contribute short pieces (up to 1,000 eventually expanded to 1,500 words) receiving over twenty contributions in total. Those contributions demonstrate the extraordinary imagination and breadth that has always and continues to characterize CTS. Some writers specifically spoke of events that are not commemorated – such as Emma Leonard Boyle in her piece "Eleven Years since the Kampala World Cup Bombings: What We Remember and Why." Others used poetry to express their relationship to 9/11 and temporality as in the contribution of Jamie Johnson and Victoria Basham. Many drew on their personal experiences of watching, remembering, and researching 9/11. Others used the moment as an opportunity to push the critical terrorism studies agenda (if that's what it is) forward, not least

by forcing further reckoning with its own relationship to the attacks. The authors do not all agree with one another. Nor do we - nor should we – agree with all that is written in the pages that follow. Together, though, the contributions generate a vibrant, critical and multidisciplinary engagement with the politics of 9/11 twenty years on. An engagement we have organized around three themes.

First, several pieces urge us to attend to the impacts of 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror. As Johnson and Basham note, the attacks initiated ‘dangerous times,’ but the many violences subsequently brought into being were (and are) unevenly experienced by marginalized groups, including Muslims (Abbas), those perceived as Muslim (Dmello), and women (Jackson). Contending with the lasting impacts of 9/11 also requires us to notice and contend with how the ‘new normal’ of the war on terror was institutionalized by states in their expansion of counterterrorism powers and technologies (Legrand; Chukwuma; Amore and De Goede) and in the development of new international norms (Bugarin).

Second, these pieces ask us to reflect on the power of the spectacle as a visual and exceptional event that professes to create a unified experience (Grennan and Toros). The role of images as they come to stand in for events are discussed by both Holland and Hoffmann Pfrimer in the context of 9/11 and Brazil respectively. But, as others note, cultural sites including the media (Merrin), films (Mahon), and video games (Robinson), may also serve both as reproducers of hegemonic discourse and as sites of counterhegemonic narratives, drawing on the universalizing power of the spectacle at the same time as opening avenues for critical intervention (Wibben). Disrupting the singularity of 9/11 as a temporal marker constitutes a key element of the critical project, and several pieces argue for the importance of recognizing and contending with other

critical junctures for terrorism studies, including the Terreur of the French Revolution (Sire), the European almost-revolutions of 1968 (Morales), and the Arab Spring (Schumacher).

Third, these reflections renew the demand that we critically consider not only *what*, *who* and *how* we remember, but also the forgettings that these choices entail. Some, drawing on this theme, ask us to resist altogether the urge to remember 9/11, arguing that it represents an epistemological black hole (Fitzgerald) and that consistently returning to it as a pivotal moment serves only to reproduce coloniality within the discipline (Khan; Njoku). Others focus on the role its constructed singularity has played in globalizing the local through universalizing discourses (Livesey) and in demarcating what ‘counts’ as global terrorism (Leonard Boyle). The subjugation of other rememberings, and the forgetting of other violences, are also highlighted in several pieces, including in Brown’s discussion of the genderings implicit within the 9/11 event narrative and in Ahmad and Monaghan’s reflections on state-led memorialization practices in Canada. How critical terrorism scholars might negotiate the multiple implications of temporality are taken up by Pettinger in his discussion of the promise of postcolonial approaches for engaging with the living past and in Jarvis’s reflection on how we might critique, (re)interpret and respond to the violences engendered by and since the events of September 11, 2001.

As we write this introduction, the chaos and insecurity devastating Afghanistan as the Taliban regime consolidates its return to power offers but the most recent and most visible reminder of the continuing importance of these discussions. That many of today’s students were not yet born on 11 September 2001 should not blind us to the resonance of these attacks beyond the pages of history books or seminar debates. Indeed, the very scheduling of the US withdrawal to coincide

with the attacks' twentieth anniversary demonstrates both the significance and the danger of temporal imaginaries and calendars that are contingent, contestable, and subject to critique. As one moment in an evolving discussion with its own pasts, presents and futures, this special issue stands as one attempt to do precisely this. Our hope, of course, is that more work in this vein follows, and the insight and provocations contained in the following pages in turn generate future research and pedagogical initiatives. Such work could hardly be more pressing, more timely.

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