

Traces of Terror

Victoria Sentas (2014)

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Reviewed by Neil Stone

In Australia, the aftermath of the 9/11 bombings in New York in 2001 and the 2002 Bali bombing produced a state response of police targeting males of ‘Middle Eastern appearance,’ later followed by ‘a dense regime of counter terrorism laws introduced at pace over a short period’. The outcome, Victoria Sentas argues, is that the contemporary Australian counter-terrorism stance has become specifically for Muslims and targeted ethnic minorities (for the purposes of this study Turkish, Kurds, Somalis and Tamils). Ergo, acts of terrorism are committed by Muslims and targeted ethnic minorities and these are the communities which require state attention. They then become what Sentas refers to as ‘suspect communities.’

State counter-terrorism regulates these suspect communities who are subject to it through a number of different strategies that can be either coercive or consensual, formal or informal, through law and police practices, community-government relations and community-police partnerships and expectations. Although the research undertaken for this book took place in Australia, there are a number of international links that can be made from its conclusions.

The most obvious link is that, although terrorist research is thin on the ground, the prevailing trends in state-centric research positions Muslims both as the subjects of future dangerousness, and at the same time responsible for preventing terrorism through civic participation, including interaction with state agencies and programmes. Anyone familiar with the Prevent strategy launched in the UK by the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism (OSCT) will recognise the alleged duality of its purpose. Echoing earlier criticism from Liberty that Prevent was seen as: ‘domestic spying programme collecting intelligence about the beliefs of British Muslims not involved in criminal activity’, the UN’s special rapporteur on the right to freedom and expression, Maina Kiai, expressed the view that the strategy was actually negatively affecting the discussion of terrorism. It did this by creating unease and uncertainty around what can be discussed in public. Kai went further saying: ‘By dividing, stigmatising and alienating segments of the population, Prevent could end up promoting extremism rather than countering it.’

The Home Office, the government department responsible for Prevent, counter that Prevent deals with all forms of extremism including that of the far-right whilst at the same time acknowledging that the current threat is greatest from terrorist recruiters inspired by Daesh

and that in 2013 some 500 potential fighters were stopped from travelling to Syria as potential fighters. Sentas argues that the policing of community engagement is race-neutral and invokes a common sense view that policing can be race-neutral because it is 'trust enhancing.' However, with echoes of Prevent criticism, Sentas also puts forward the argument that instead of relying on categories or indicators of risk, counter-radicalisation strategies are indeterminate and contingent. Factors taken into consideration include associations, speech acts, or religious and ethnic identity, all have the potential to constitute a potential threat. The common sense of policing then says that in order to protect society, the 'Other', (individuals owning these factors) need to be brought in and included to ensure they do not become extremists. In London, the Mayor, Sadiq Khan, has appointed the first Deputy Mayor for Social Integration, Social Mobility and Community Engagement. The task, according to the Mayor's office, is to ensure that the diverse community of London: 'don't just live side by side, but truly interconnected lives.' It is arguably possible to extrapolate the aims of this appointment to some of those articulated by Sentas in her research.

Drawing on perceptions and experiences of the police and the policed, *Traces of Terror* concerns itself with the question of counter-terrorism as a mode of racial subjection. It seeks to demonstrate counter-terrorism's role in reproducing the racial dynamics of modern day state power. The research does not provide us with recommendations in the conventional sense on how to make counter-terrorism law and policing more democratic and more accountable and less racist. However, what it does do is attempt an understanding of how counter-terrorism law and policing is underpinned by what Sentas refers to as the shifting social relations of race. It aims to provoke a debate in the criminological and socio-legal study of counter-terrorism about the presence and persistence of race in and through the operations of state power.

Within this hegemony any perceived disproportionate targeting or profiling of target communities or groups is not about racialization but about common sense (in Gramscian terms). What is critical, and what *Traces of Terror*, succeeds in doing, is gaining a better understanding of those individuals and communities who are subject to counter-terrorism policing that is generated by a common sense narrative and how this contributes to the production of hegemonic social relations of race. Equally critical is the message that comes out of this book, and which has international resonance, is that the designation of 'Terrorist' has profound and serious consequences for many diasporas who have fled conflict and yet remain connected to them. With many communities on the move and with the threat of further diaspora then the debate highlighted by *Traces of Terror* becomes an even more important for everyone to be aware of and to which all can contribute.