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Book Note

Franks, Jason. 2006. *Rethinking the Roots of Terrorism*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. x + 248 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4039-8718-1 (hb). Price: £52.00 (hb).

Reviewed by Bjørn Møller [2 May 2007]

This work is devoted to the important topic of preventing terrorism, mainly by addressing its root causes. It is organized around the dichotomy of what Franks calls “orthodox terrorism theory” (or discourse) and a more enlightened approach based on conflict theory.

But this may well be a false dichotomy. First, it is quite hard to recognize any real-life representatives of “orthodox terrorism theory,” at least within academia. Most contributors to the two peer-reviewed journals devoted to the study of terrorism (*Terrorism and Political Violence* and *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*) do in fact use at least some of the findings derived from conflict studies. That orthodox theory “is not open to a roots debate and therefore does not engage with or recognise any of the underlying causes” simply is not true (unless, of course, one labels as orthodox whoever ignores root causes, which would, however, make the argument tautological).

Second, the other (and presumably better) theoretical camp may be much more diverse than Franks seems to assume. For instance, in the chapter on “Root Causes,” the author lumps together structuralists, social constructivists, and others with completely different, or even incompatible, meta-theoretical and methodological points of departure, and addressing a wide variety of questions within the general field of conflicts. This accurately reflects the existing field of peace and conflict studies, as the present reviewer – as former Secretary General of the International Peace Research Association – knows all too well. Peace and conflict research is constituted as a discipline (or field) by its object of study rather than by theoretical uniformity, and by the questions asked rather than by the answers found. This also means, unfortunately, that the organizing principle of Franks’ book does not work well.

Nonetheless, the book certainly contains many useful insights, e.g., about possible links between terrorism and poverty, and inequality and similar socio-economic parameters, but they tend to disappear in the far too complex structure of the work – or, perhaps more accurately, its lack of structure. It might have been better to have structured the book around the phenomenon of terrorism and its various characteristics about which various theories might have something to say, regardless of whether they are orthodox or not. Even better, it might have been organized around what is the book’s only case study, the Israel-Palestine conflict. Rather than relegating this to the last half or so of the book, it might have served to structure the presentation of the various approaches, e.g., by looking at socio-economic and other root causes at various levels of analysis: what drives individual (suicide or other) terrorists; what creates or undermines societal support for terrorism; and which factors might make certain societies at certain times more likely to experience terrorism than others.

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