Reassessing terrorism in the South of Thailand: A critical perspective

ข้อทบทวนเกี่ยวกับการก่อการร้ายในภาคใต้ของประเทศไทย: มุมมองแนววิพากษ์

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Abstract

Twelve years after the intense reemergence of terrorist activities in the southernmost provinces, the situation has been worse than ever, and the unusual violence causing heavy casualties becomes usual. The present explanations both by scholars and the government for the causes of terrorism in the Southern Thailand, nevertheless, are not dissimilar to the past in that it has caught up mainly in the points of underdevelopment. This derives from an orthodox understanding of terrorism, which is inadequate to grasp the causes of terrorism. This article, on the contrary, argues that the terrorism roots in the uneven rights and treatments in practice, rather than uneven development. Consequently, it proposes that the critical approach offering broader and fairer explanation be applied to seek the way out from the terrorist plights in the South of Thailand.

Keywords: critical terrorism studies, orthodox terrorism studies, political religion, Southern Thailand, terrorism

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กว่า 12 ปีที่ผ่านมาหลังจากการปรากฏของเหตุการณ์ก่อการร้ายขึ้นใหม่ในจังหวัดภาคใต้ของไทย สถานการณ์ได้แฉ่งออกอย่างไม่เคยปรากฏมาก่อน และความรุนแรงที่ไม่ปกติซึ่งคาดวิวิคูณนักวิชาการกล่าวกลายเป็น เรื่องปกติ คดีทั้งในปัจจุบันที่จับกุมผู้ก่อการขึ้นกับสาเหตุของการก่อการร้ายในภาคใต้จึงไม่ แตกต่างไปจากอดีตที่ให้ความสำคัญไปที่ความไม่พัฒนา แต่เนื่องจากอาการทำความเข้าใจในการก่อการร้ายแบบ ตั้งครั้งขึ้นเพื่อพยายามทำความเข้าใจสาเหตุของการก่อการร้าย ในทางตรงกันข้าม บทความนี้เสนอว่าสาเหตุ รากฐานของการก่อการร้ายอยู่ที่สิทธิที่ไม่เท่าเทียม และการปฏิบัติต่อค้านทางปฏิบัติมักหักข้อความพัฒนาที่ไม่ เท่าเทียม ในส่วนท้าย บทความเสนอแนวการศึกษาเชิงวิพากษ์ที่ให้คำอธิบายที่กว้างและเป็นธรรมกว่าเพื่อ ประยุกต์การแก้ทางก่อต่อความไม่สงบในภาคใต้ของประเทศไทย

คำสำคัญ: การก่อการร้าย, ศึกษาแนววิพากษ์, การก่อการร้ายศึกษาแนวดั้งเดิม, ศาสนาการเมือง, ภาคใต้ของไทย, การก่อการร้าย

Introduction

On 4 January 2004, the Narathiwat Ratchanakarin military camp in Narathiwat, a southern province of Thailand, was attacked by terrorists. They killed a squad of sentries and armaments were found missing. Around the same time, 17 schools and 3 police posts were burned. The incidents caused the government in Bangkok to declare martial law in the peripheral provinces of Narathiwat, Yala, and Pattani, in order to control the unrest (Bangkok Post, 2010). These acts, however, did not come as a surprise, as violence had been occurring regularly in these peripheral districts since the formation of the modern state at the end of nineteenth century. However, the situation has worsened. According to a study by Srisompob Jitpiromsri and Duncan McCargo (2010: 157), there were 9,446 incidents of unrest, approximately 4,100 deaths, and 6,509 injuries between January 2004 and January 2010. More than 50,000 people, including the families of the casualties, felt the impact of the political violence (Jitpiromsri and McCargo, 2010: 157). The true number of losses cannot be known because of the hazardous conditions for conducting fieldwork. As the casualty rate has risen, the number of studies on the causes of terrorism in the South of Thailand, conducted by both academics and state-sponsored agencies, has multiplied in recent years. Most of these have followed an orthodox approach towards the problem of terrorism and thus, have tended to reach similar conclusions to those studies made before the incident of January 2004. The purpose of this article is to construct an argument to demonstrate that explanations deriving from the orthodox approach are inadequate for understanding both the causes of the terrorism and the nature of the current situation. The critical approach developed by the
Welsh School of Critical Security Studies (Toros and Gunning, 2009: 88-89) has been adopted here, in order to examine why the orthodox view of terrorism in Southern Thailand is not satisfactory and to stress the need to scrutinize the grand historical narrative of terrorism in this area. The aim here is also to reassess the causes of terrorism and the myths that have informed the counterterrorism policy. The first section explains the background to the terrorism and the orthodox explanations that have been given for it. The next section lays out the framework of critical terrorism studies, and the final section applies a critical approach towards the situation in order to reassess it in a new and more productive way.

The Burden of History and the Orthodox Explanations

In order to examine the limitations of orthodox explanations, comprehending the social and ethnic makeup of the southern provinces is a prerequisite, since this area differs from other parts of Thailand in many ways. The terrorist violence has occurred in the provinces of Narathiwat, Yala, Pattani, and Satun (Alagappa, 1987: 198) and recently, in some parts of Songkla. Apart from Pattani, these provinces border on the Malaysian states of Perlis, Kedah, Perak, and Kelantan. People living in these areas frequently cross the border to the Malaysian territories (Thomas, 1975: 1-3). This geographical condition has historically been an impediment to a liaison between Bangkok and its peripheral provinces. This is because the distance between Bangkok and the southern provinces is more than 1,000 kilometres and the transportation system is rather inefficient. Also, many local people hold both Thai and Malaysian nationalities, sharing ethnicity, kinship, and religion with the people of the Malaysian areas. However, although Malay-Muslims form a majority in those areas, they have no control of the local economy. They mostly work in the agricultural and fishery sectors or in rubber cultivation, rice farming, and small-scale fishing. In the towns, some run small businesses (Thomas, 1975: 7). Most Malay-Muslims live modestly. In the past, however, they have often been perceived by Thai Buddhists or outsiders as being lazy (Dorairajoo, 2009: 61).

In 1985, 73.2 per cent of the total population of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and Satun were Malay-Muslims (Alagappa, 1987: 200). The Malay language is their mother tongue and, for many of them, the only language they speak (Dorairajoo, 2009: 63-64). They also strongly adhere to the principles of Islam. These dialectal and cultural differences can be a hindrance in communicating and interacting with other Thai citizens. Government officials tend to come mainly from a Thai Buddhist background. They often cannot speak the local dialect fluently and, more importantly, tend to have a lack of understanding of both Malay culture and Islamic doctrine. As M. Ladd Thomas (1975: 6) points out, the lack of social contact between Malay-
Muslims and other groups stems from ‘religious beliefs and practices... which, among other things, prohibit the consumption of alcohol; prevent them from attending those functions involving any kind of non-Muslim religious ceremony or otherwise having religious (non-Muslim) overtones; inhibit them from eating food prepared by non-Muslims... and require Thai Buddhists and Chinese who marry... Muslims to be converted to the Islamic faith’. More significantly, Islamic beliefs and practices tend to clash with Thai national politics, which are centred on ‘nation, religion (Buddhism), and the king’. The faith and lifestyles of Malay-Muslims make it difficult for them to assimilate with the political and religious culture of the Thai state.

These factors tend to mean that the Malay-Muslims of the southern provinces are excluded from the central political life of the country. The argument proposed here is that the terrorism in the area, and the violent reaction towards it by the state, need to be seen in the context of the alienation that has been felt by these people since the formation of the Siamese state in the late nineteenth century. During this period, King Rama V centralized the administrative system so that it was controlled by the central government in Bangkok. His intention was to transform the traditional kingdom into a modern state in reaction against the former control of colonial powers (Pitsuwan, 1985: 29). The Pattani kingdom was one of the many areas affected by the reforms. Local Malay leaders were replaced by members of a Bangkok-appointed bureaucracy. The transfer of legitimate power and status from the local elites to appointees selected by the centre led to discontent among the former leaders and religious elites. The former holders of power made several attempts to establish more autonomy through campaigns of civil disobedience, such as refusing to pay taxes and holding demonstrations. Largely unsuccessful attempts were made to participate in the Thai political process, negotiate with the colonial powers, and even petition the United Nations (Thompson and Adloff, 1955: 158-165; Alagappa, 1987: 200). Various cultural quarrels took place between government officials and the local people. The Malay-Muslims tended to see the authoritative entities and administrative system as representative of the interests of Bangkok and the Buddhist religion (Thomas, 1975: 10). Also, the organizational culture of Thai officialdom tended to clash with the principle and practices of Islam. For example, Thai bureaucrats often expect Muslim bureaucrats, who form only a small proportion of the bureaucrats, to participate in drinking alcohol as a way of paying respect to seniority. Also, Muslim bureaucrats have often been urged to choose a Thai name to use for contact with Thai colleagues (Thomas, 1975: 5). All these factors have contributed to the feelings of alienation that lie behind much of the political violence committed by separatists and terrorists.
After the collapse of absolute monarchy, there was a long period of dictatorship which involved many struggles among the political forces who were attempting to take power. Totalitarian leaders, especially Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsongkram and Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, strived to construct their own version of the Thai political religion in order to sustain their regime. Political religion, according to the Italian historian Emilio Gentile (2001: XV), is ‘the sacralisation of a political system founded on an unchallengeable monopoly of power, ideological monism, and the obligatory and unconditional subordination of the individual and the collectivity to its code of commandments. Consequently, a political religion is intolerant, invasive, and fundamentalist, and it wishes to permeate every aspect of an individual’s life and of a society’s collective life’. This article argues that his concept of political religion is the best way to grasp the central Thai concepts of ‘nation, religion (Buddhism), king’. The overall emphasis of Thai political religion is on the obedience of subordinates to power holders, Buddhism as the focus of national identity, and the nation’s territorial integrity. Although the first two of these elements do not actually appear in the national constitution, under the influence of political religion people tend to be divided into believers and infidels. The marriage between Buddhism and power holders, including political leaders (Suksamran, 1977: 62-64; Mulder, 1969: 13-17), has placed other religions, especially Islam, in an inferior position.

In 1945, the government enacted ‘the Patronage of Islam Act’, which aimed to control Islam by creating the office of the Chularajamontri, a Muslim spiritual leader, whose tasks include giving recommendations to the king and the government about Islamic affairs (Pitsuwan, 1985: 101-104). As Pitsuwan (1985: 107) points out, the Act was ‘...a source of many painful conflicts between the central government, through its bureaucracy, and the Malay-Muslims who still loathe the phrase Thai-Islam’, since it was this unilateral change of designation that first equated the Malay-Muslim minority in the South with the Bangkokian Muslims who had already been associated with the Thai state (Pitsuwan, 1985: 107).

The clash between the Malay-Muslims and the political religion formulated by Bangkok can be seen in the controversies over religious freedom and cultural rights. These have been manifested in the constitutions of the Thai state, through which the office of Chularajamontri was requested to give Islamic legal opinions on a number of controversial issues. These include ‘whether Muslims should stand up during the lighting of incense and candles by the presiding official, whether Muslims students should prostrate themselves to pay respect to teachers, whether Muslims could pay homage to statues of Thai kings’ (Alagappa, 1987: 222). The answers given by the Chularajamontri were, perhaps not surprisingly, in the negative (Alagappa, 1987: 222). From this perspective, the principles and
practices of Islam in general and the Malay-Muslims in particular tend to conflict with the political religion of Bangkok. This implies that any attempt at forced assimilation, as accomplished in other districts, would create a contrary result. Even if the Thai state has used what Louis Althusser (1997) called ‘the ideological state apparatus’ of education, it has failed to produce the intended consequences (Alagappa, 1987: 218-220).

The burden of anxiety, as well as the perception of oppression, among Malay-Muslims has contributed to the conflicts which have remained until the present time. From the beginning of the twentieth century to the end of the Cold War, the Malay-Muslim dissenters perpetrated violence in a way which can be characterized as separatism rather than terrorism, in that its main objective was to achieve independence from the Thai state (Storey, 2008: 34). The separatists formed many small groups rather than a large-sized uniformed one (Thomas, 1975: 17). Their major targets were symbols of the political religion of the Thai state, including schools, police, army officials, and Thai Buddhist settlers, and their tactics included assassinations, burnings, and bombings (Thomas, 1975: 18; Storey, 2008: 34). The most prominent separatist groups were the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) and Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO), which accepted responsibility for many incidents. However, the first decade of the twenty-first century showed that the character of political violence had changed. Jitpiromsri and McCargo (2010: 169-170) argue that what are now referred to as terrorist or insurgent groups are part of a network-based movement with a looser structure and limited control and that, more importantly, the major grievances of the movement are neither economic nor religious, but political. In addition, the linkage between recent terrorists and older organizations like PULO is not provable (Askew 2010: 129). There have been around 4,000 civilian casualties from the violence in the period from January 2004 to January 2010, along with 966 police and 433 soldier casualties (Jitpiromsri and McCargo, 2010: 164). This implies that civilians have become the main targets of the terrorists. However, the responses of the Thai state towards the terrorists have not always followed legal paths. Extrajudicial killing has been carried out by both military and police officials. This has included not only suspected terrorists but also anyone who assists them. Somchai Neelapaijit was a Muslim lawyer specializing in human rights, engaged in defending suspects accused of taking part in terrorist activities, who ‘disappeared’ after he conducted a case in court (Storey, 2008: 41). However, as discussed later, the illegal actions of the Thai state have been ignored by most studies conducted by Thai academics.
As we have seen, the way of life of the Malay-Muslims in Southern Thailand lacks any real integration with that of the adherents of the main political religion, who tend to consider those who live outside Bangkok as poor and under-developed because they still adhere to the ideas of traditional society and religion rather than those of modern society and state political religion. These perceptions have also frequently been applied to the cause of separatism in the past and the more recent terrorism. Most intelligentsia in Thailand are either consciously or unconsciously under the control of the state political religion (Winichakul, 2008: 575-591), since freedom of speech and opinion has not become rooted in Thai culture. Also, Thai academics in general and political scientists in particular have been educated in an empirical and behavioural social science tradition. Most of the country’s leading scholars graduated from universities in the United States during the Cold War (Prasirtsuk, 2009: 83-105). As a result, studies of the political situation in the South of Thailand tend to provide very orthodox explanations of terrorism.

Such orthodox diagnoses of the causes of terrorism were mostly conducted by Thai scholars or reported officially through the state agencies. The lack of socio-economic development has been stressed repeatedly by both the state and scholars from the age of Siamese absolute monarchy onwards as a root cause of terrorism (Alagappa, 1987: 216). During the period of Sarit’s regime (between 1959 and 1963), the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) was set up, and this has initiated the economic development plans which give priority to the southern provinces in attempts to raise standards of living as well as income (Thomas 1975: 25). This socio-economic development paradigm can be seen to have been derived from the international context during the 1950s and 1960s. In that period, developmentalism, an approach which assumes that economic improvements will eventually bring about progressive social and political development, had dominated social science scholarships and had been adopted as a justification of the strategies of US foreign policy, which aimed to contain the expansion of communism (Wiarda, 2000: 42-52). The developmentalist approach implies a belief that the processes of economic and political development can transform a traditional society into a modern one like those in Europe and North America (Wiarda, 2000: 48-50). The American university graduates who served as officials tended to apply this paradigm to the state’s policies towards the South, and the political scientists who graduated in that time tended to diagnose the cause of the unrest in these provinces in terms of the developmentalist perspective.
Many scholars believe that the terrorism in the Thai South has its roots in Islamic fundamentalism and the endeavours of local religious elites to establish an Islamic state based on the Sharia law. This notion still prevails among the military leaders, especially the high-ranking officers (Askew, 2010: 128-129). Also, the leaders of the state agencies, including the military, believe that external actors are the main source of terrorism and that the prime suspects are people from the Islamic states, especially Malaysia (see Funston, 2010: 234-257). Representatives of the Thai state also refer to the international context after the incident of 11 September 2001, as well as the influences of transnational terrorist groups like the al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) (Storey 2008: 40).

Many scholars and influential figures, including former Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont have acknowledged the ignorance of the ruling officials and the mistreatment of local people by the police and soldiers as the root cause of Southern terrorism (Storey, 2008: 44-45). Nevertheless, as Jitpiromsri and McCargo (2010: 168) has pointed out, both government and state-initiated working groups, including the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), have explained ignorance and maltreatment as issues of ‘individual morality rather than structural questions about power, authority, and responsibility’ have ‘served to obfuscate the core issues at stake’.

The Critical and the Orthodox Approach toward Terrorism

Most of the studies of the causes of terrorism in Southern Thailand which follow the orthodox approach have been influenced by mainstream social science, which asserts that social phenomena as well as their meanings have an independent existence. Thus, a contextual consideration is not essential since the object in question is not related to socio-political actors and contexts. This ontological position can be conceptualized as objectivism (Grix, 2002: 177). Thus, the orthodox approach tends to neglect the importance of time and place as well as socio-political contexts, since it appears to believe that terrorists will exist ‘out there,’ no matter what the historical context may be. As a result, its objectivist ontological position determines its epistemology as well as its methodology.

In contrast, the critical approach does not believe that the object exists autonomously. Rather, object and subject ‘shape each other in a dialectical, never-ceasing dynamic’ (Toros and Gunning, 2009: 92). In this sense, their ontological position is based on socio-political interaction, and focuses on both actors and contexts. According to critical theorists on terrorism, they define their ontology as a minimal foundationalism, since the approach does not totally deny the distinction between object and subject (Toros and
Gunning, 2009: 92-93). Consequently, terrorism is ‘fundamentally a social fact rather than a brute fact; that its nature is not inherent to the violent act itself, but is dependent upon context, circumstance, intention, and crucially, social, cultural, legal, and political processes of interpretation, categorisation, and labelling’ (Jackson 2009a: 4). This ontological approach can be conceptualized as social constructivism. It argues that a difference in ways of being leads to different ways of seeing and ideas about how aims will be achieved.

Since the ontology describes what it is out there to know, therefore, the next question is how it can be known. The orthodox approach, as already mentioned above, adopts the mainstream tradition of social science, which has made strong efforts to make social science an objective ‘science’. Therefore, its way of seeing an epistemological position cannot differ from its matrix; hence positivism results. Thus, in order to understand the epistemological position of the critical approach, it is necessary to comprehend its positivist premise. As objectivism is the root of positivist epistemology, positivism stresses the existence of an existing object. In other words, social reality can be understood in the form of data and fact by using the methods of natural science, which claim to be value-free, such as data collection, theoretical deduction, and statistical analysis. Thus, the object must be observable unless the instruments of natural science cannot be applied (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009: 16-17). From the positivist position, the orthodox approach tends to focus only on what can be empirically verified. Physical violence, for instance, is deemed as main object to be observed since it occurs explicitly and had been paid attention to by the government.

Nevertheless, it must be mentioned that the positivist epistemology of the orthodox approach is not as neutral as its proponents claim it to be. It could be described as a problem-solving theory, a term first introduced by Robert Cox (1981: 128), in that ‘it takes the world as it finds it, with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organised, as a given framework for action’. From this perspective, the orthodox approach is inclined to presuppose that terrorism must be conducted by non-state actors, and divides the world into the legitimate state and the illegitimate terrorists (Gunning, 2007: 371), since it does not question the existing social and power relations because of its epistemological presuppositions. In this sense, the orthodox approach rejects the concept of state terrorism, since the state has a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Walter Laqueur, for example, insisted that ‘[including state terror in the study of terrorism] would have made the study of terrorism impossible, for it would have included not only US foreign policy, but also Hitler and Stalin’ (Blakeley 2009: 26). Bruce Hoffman (1998: 43) defined terrorism as acts ‘perpetrated by a subnational group or non-state entity’. As a consequence, it can be argued
that the orthodox approach uses actor-based analysis, focusing entirely on non-state actors. However, an exception tends to be made for state-sponsored terrorism, which is often defined as such by the major powers such as the US.

Research into terrorism has increased significantly since 9/11. Before 2001, around 19 per cent of research papers published in terrorism journals used the descriptive and inferential methods, but this has since been extended to 26 percent (Silke, 2007: 81). Thus it can be seen that the increase in orthodox-style research into terrorism derives from a specific place and time as well as context; namely the American experience of what the US has defined as an age of terror. Thus, the orthodox approach can be seen to be a state-centric explanation. Ultimately, the orthodox approach can also be deemed to be a legitimization of elements of US government policy, such as its ‘War on Terror’, since the epistemology of this concept determines that the bulk of research will be conducted within this government-defined framework.

The critical approach, on the contrary, aims to take into account context, history, specificity, and nuance. It also rejects notions of universalism, essentialism, and exceptionalism (Jackson, 2009a: 4). This approach stems from the epistemological positions of those who follow it, which are not static and monolithic. The epistemology of the critical approach is hard to conceptualize, since it adopts various elements from different forms of epistemology, from positivism to ethnography through to post-structuralism. Nevertheless, it can be conceptualized roughly as critical positivism and post-positivism.

The critical approach does not completely reject the idea of positivism, in that it does not completely reject a belief in timeless law and monolithic categories (Toros and Gunning, 2009: 92-93). Thus, it still preserves the usefulness of positivist epistemology for examining some specific contexts. However, it stresses that the context needs to be reviewed in order to enquire about its meaning, since the episteme is not only for someone and some purpose but also must come from somewhere. In this sense, the origin of any use of knowledge must be scrutinized, for otherwise it would not be possible to understand the meanings that terrorists attach to their actions. Suicide bombing, for instance, is generally regarded as irrationality or psychological abnormality according the Western episteme, with its roots in philosophical notions about the fear of painful death. However, if such acts are considered in the context of ethnographic epistemology, they may not seem so irrational. Also, those who follow the critical approach are well aware that the narrative and knowledge of orthodox terrorism studies seem incapable of understanding outside discourse, and that it therefore necessary to reveal clearly what the discourse of orthodox terrorism studies actually
consists of. For example, the present discourse around terrorism functions to legitimize US foreign policy on the ‘War on Terror’, which uses military intervention and regime change as well as extending assistance programmes to authoritarian regimes (Jackson, 2009b: 79). From this point of view, post-structuralism is one of the epistemologies of the critical approach. Nevertheless, those who follow the critical approach do not adopt post-structural epistemology entirely, in that they do not deny the specific category of terrorist violence as a whole (Toros and Gunning, 2009: 93). Due to the epistemologies it uses, however, the critical approach denies the orthodox presupposition that the act of terrorism cannot be perpetrated by states, since it sees terrorism as political and social construct. Consequently, the critical approach is an action-based analysis, which argues that a terrorist act can be perpetrated by anyone, given the existence of a particular context.

Last but not the least, due to its epistemological positions, the critical approach places importance on the notion of emancipation, which is ‘the realisation of greater human freedom and human potential and improvements in individual and social actualisation and well-being’ (Jackson 2007: 249). Thus, the critical approach opens a space for silent and marginalized voices, including even those of terrorists. Nevertheless, in contrast to the orthodox approach, the epistemologies of the critical approach lead to critiques of the methodologies which derive from its episteme.

The methodologies of both the orthodox and the critical approach are based on their dissimilar uses of epistemology, and thus they are very different from each other. In the orthodox approach, the applications of scientific methods such as empirical data collection and statistical analysis are employed for the purposes of research. In this sense, the root causes of terrorism can be concluded from empirical evidence and analysis. As a consequence, the orthodox approach is frequently used for policy recommendations, since it can provide verifiable information which appears to provide a credible input into the policy process. The results of its analytical processes are deductions from its research. Thus, the explanations and conclusions of the orthodox approach tend to be narrowly focused due to the methodologies it uses.

In contrast to the orthodox approach, the critical approach casts doubt on the inherent trustworthiness of a statistical language since statistics can easily be manipulated to serve a particular purpose. As a result of the epistemological positions it uses, the critical approach aims to utilize its interdisciplinary methodologies to produce more conclusive explanations (Toros and Gunning, 2009: 98-99). For example, Foucauldian genealogy has been adopted by the critical approach (Jackson, 2009a: 4), in order to reflect an existing
understanding of terrorism, since this method ‘analyse(s) the conditions under which we might consider certain utterances or propositions to be agreed to be true... [and] the condition under which we, as individuals, exist and what causes us to exist in the way that we do’ (Mills, 2003: 25). From this point of view, self-reflexivity is a vital methodological notion in the methodologies of the critical approach. Last but not least, it is not only the orthodox approach that can be revised by self-reflexive methodologies. The critical approach can also benefit by carefully examining itself. Thus, this article proposes that a critical approach towards terrorism be applied to the case of Southern Thailand, in order to establish an inclusive grasp of the problem.

Concluding Remarks

The present events in the South of Thailand need to be placed in a historical context which can explicitly demonstrate that socioeconomic factors are not the sole cause of terrorism (Jitpiromsri and McCargo, 2010: 167), bearing in mind the many endeavours of the Thai state over the last hundred years to expand its political religion towards Malay-Muslims in order to make them become more ‘Thai’. Forced modernization, including state-directed education, is one example of how the state has attempted to impose its point of view. Using Ruth Blakeley’s critical definition (Blakeley, 2010: 30), the Thai state can already be considered as a terrorist state, regardless of any physical violence it may have instigated.

Although it is undeniable that violence has been perpetrated by Islamic terrorists, the physical violence perpetrated by the state has equalled it. As with the case of Somchai Neelapaijit, many people have perished as a result of extrajudicial killings (Storey, 2008: 41). Furthermore, many recent studies, mostly conducted by overseas scholars, have revealed the myth of the civil religion of Buddhism, the crucial ingredient of the political religion. According to McCargo, Thai Buddhism is no longer a civil religion. It can, in fact, be more accurately described as ‘uncivil’. He demonstrates that as a response to the death of Buddhist monks and novices in the terrorist assault on a Buddhist temple (McCargo, 2009: 11-32), many high-ranking monks in the South demanded that the constitution be amended to make Buddhism the official national religion. They also demanded the abolition of the National Reconciliation Council.

Since 2004, the number of military monks, soldiers who have been ordained, has increased, in order to protect ‘real monks’ and Buddhist temples in the Malay-Muslim areas. A number of recent studies of the situation in Southern Thailand have revealed details of this endeavour by the Thai state. McCargo (2009) and Jerryson (2009) explain that the orthodox
approach cannot provide an adequate explanation, as the sacred roles of Buddhism are unchallengeable in the context of Thailand. This contextual condition, the article argues, is extremely significant for understanding the roots of terrorism in the South of Thailand.

The well-publicised images of the violence in Southern Thailand since 2004 conceal the long historical context behind the conflict that has sparked the terrorist activity. The power of mourning, as determined by each religion, leads to an asymmetry of grievance that tends to label the non-believer ‘the other’. This has been particularly true in the case of the terrorism in the South, as a result of which the Malay-Muslims have been constructed as the ‘other’ within the Thai state. This article has laid out the inadequacy of the explanations of the orthodox approach towards the terrorism in Southern Thailand. It appears that only by adopting the critical approach can more inclusive and therefore useful explanations of the reality of the area be produced. Despite the critical approach having revealed another reality, the path towards reconciliation is now in question.

References


