

# Researching Terrorism and Political Violence – An Interview with Louise Richardson

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## Abstract

*Professor Louise Richardson is a political scientist focusing on terrorism and political violence. She became Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford in January 2016, having previously served at the Universities of St. Andrews and Harvard. She has written widely on international terrorism, British foreign and defence policy, security, and international relations. Professor Richardson holds a BA in History from Trinity College Dublin, an MA in Political Science from UCLA as well as an MA and PhD in Government from Harvard University. She visited the University of Warwick in November 2017 to deliver a talk on her career and being a female leader, as part of the University's 'Inspiring Women' series. In this interview, she speaks about research on terrorism and political violence; how approaches to terrorism studies differ between the US and Europe; how the discipline has changed since the 1970s; the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to the study of terrorism and political violence; whether terrorism studies are a distinct discipline; differences between terrorism and conflict studies; and what makes a good university teacher.*

Keywords: Terrorism, political violence, interdisciplinary, political science, historical approaches

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## Introduction

Few topics have received as much attention as terrorism and political violence have since the terror attacks of 11 September 2001. What was previously a relatively neglected area of studies where only a few academics worked, all of a sudden received an exorbitant amount of attention. Terrorism turned into a new trend topic. This was reflected in the number of publications, study programmes and (sometimes self-proclaimed) experts on terrorism that mushroomed after September 2001 (**Gunning 2007: 363; Horgan and Boyle, 2008: 58**). More than fifteen years after the attacks of 11 September 2001, terrorism studies have come a

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long way. Theoretical, methodological, ontological and conceptual issues the area of studies has been plagued with in recent years are increasingly being addressed, even if numerous problems remain (**Dolnik, 2013**).

Professor Louise Richardson from the University of Oxford is one of the few academics who were working on terrorism and political violence before it became a trend to do so. In addition to having forty years of experience working on terrorism and political violence, having studied and worked in the US, the UK and Ireland, Professor Richardson is familiar with academic approaches to the topic on both sides of the Atlantic. She has written widely on international terrorism, British foreign and defence policy, security, and international relations,<sup>i</sup> and holds a BA in History from Trinity College Dublin, an MA in Political Science from UCLA as well as an MA and PhD in Government from Harvard University. She became Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford in January 2016, having previously served at the Universities of St. Andrews and Harvard (**Warrell and Payton, 2015**).

Professor Richardson visited the University of Warwick in November 2017 to deliver a talk in front of Warwick students and staff members on female leadership and her career, as part of Warwick's 'Inspiring Women' series, which features speakers from the Academy and the Administration. The talk was held as a conversation between Professor Richardson and Professor Christine Ennew, the Provost of the University of Warwick.<sup>ii</sup> Following the talk, Jennifer Philippa Eggert from the University of Warwick conducted the interview. The interview focuses on Professor Richardson's views on how academic approaches to the study of terrorism and political violence have changed since the 1970s; how approaches to terrorism studies differ between the US and Europe; the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to the study of terrorism and political violence; whether terrorism studies are a distinct discipline; and what makes a good teacher.

## **Interview**

*Jennifer Eggert (JE): Thank you so much for taking the time.*

Louise Richardson (LR): My pleasure!

*JE: The first question I have is regarding your area of expertise. You have focused on terrorism and political violence since the 1970s. You are actually one of the very few people who have been studying terrorism before it became fashionable to do so. Could you speak a little bit about what are some of the major differences between how we view terrorism now and how we did before, in the '70s, '80s, '90s...?*

LR: Well, if you go back to the late '60s and the '70s there was huge concern around terrorism around the world. In fact, more people were being killed by terrorism in Europe and America than now. In the '80s and '90s, on the other hand, people forgot about terrorism and it became marginalised. Post-9/11, the whole world changed – so I think it has gone in waves, depending on the incidences of violence. In the '70s, it was the social revolutionary movements in Europe, groups like the Red Brigades in Italy, the Bader Meinhof group in Germany, Action Direct in France, CCC [Communist Combatant Cells] in Belgium, and so on. I think these groups have a lot in common actually with some of the groups we see today, insofar as they are quite transformational in their aspirations. They wanted to overthrow capitalism – which is not too dissimilar from trying to overthrow secular law or introduce the caliphate. Throughout this period, we have had the consistency of nationalist movements, groups like the PLO, the ETA, the IRA and so on. They are a different kind of terrorist groups, and they differ in the nature of their aspirations – they have a defined political goal. In terms of how you counter them, there are also differences, because those goals are subject to negotiation ... whereas the transformational one is not. So there was lots of interest in the '70s, lots of interest today, much less so in the late '70s, '80s and '90s.

*JE: You started your academic career and training in Europe. You first studied in Ireland, then you went to the US, then you came back here, went back to the US, and then back to Europe again. Do you see any differences in how the topics of terrorism and political violence are being approached on both sides of the Atlantic?*

LR: Oh yes, certainly. Post-9/11 the US, you had all the people who had worked on the Cold War and all the security experts who tended to be very conservative and quite militarist in their approach – they all then turned their attention to counterterrorism - whereas the European approach, which is essentially the approach I had, is a much broader, more political, more historical approach to terrorism, seeing it less as a military threat and more of a political issue. I think the dominant perspective in the US today is this much more militarist approach. The people who had spent their careers waging the Cold War against Russia simply then turned their attention to waging war against terrorism, which I think is a futile endeavour - whereas in Europe they were considered more “wet”, more liberal... People like me who worked on terrorism before 9/11 in the US were severely scrutinised for not predicting 9/11, for being too “wet” as they say. So yes, there is this difference in perspective.

*JE: To a certain extent, there is also a divide on a methodological level, isn't there? In the US, people tend to take more quantitative approaches...*

LR: Certainly, political science is much more quantitative there. My first degree was in history, and I have always taken a more historical approach to political science. The English School, the Hedley Bull School [of International Relations theory] – that was the school that has influenced me. My mentor was Stanley Hoffman<sup>iii</sup> who took a very historical approach. Today, political science in America is much more quantitative, much more similar to economic approaches – and it's not the approach with which I am most comfortable.

*JE: That actually links quite nicely to the next question I was going to ask – and that's your interdisciplinary background. You have a Bachelor in history, later you studied politics. Do you think the fact that you approached the subject of terrorism and political violence from a different disciplinary perspective made you a better terrorism scholar?*

LR: Well, I think so... but of course many people think it makes me a worse one! My approach to everything is to try to understand the other, and to do that you need history, anthropology and sociology. The counter approach, the more quantitative or military approach would be: 'we don't need to know that, we need to know what their capacities are, because we need to neutralise their capacity'. I am much more interested in understanding the underlying roots, because I see it essentially as a political rather than a military problem. Which came first – my orientation or my subject matter? I think... they are one and the same.

*JE: Do you see terrorism studies as a distinct discipline? Do you see yourself as a terrorism researcher or as a political scientist first?*

LR: I think one of the reasons terrorism studies was so marginalised was precisely because it was not at the cutting edge of any discipline. Of course, I do see myself as a political scientist – but in the historical tradition rather than the quantitative tradition. And I think that's been because terrorism studies for so long was not addressing any of the cutting edge disciplinary issues in sociology, in psychology, in political science. It tended to be marginalised. I think still there is not a disciplinary basis, but I don't see that as a problem. I think you bring in insights from different disciplines on a shared problem. It is necessarily interdisciplinary – why should that be a problem? It is more likely to be richer – I think there are so many areas in which you should identify the problem and then bring all the disciplines who can provide insight into it.

*JE: Speaking about interdisciplinary and methodological divides – I find quite striking that you have this very strong divide also between terrorism studies on the one hand and conflict studies on the other. So here in the UK, for example, we have the Conflict Research Society – but we also have a Society for Terrorism Research. I attend events organised by both, but I actually know a lot of people who don't. And even on the level of the literature – they often work on the same conflicts, the same non-state violent groups, but they do not actually quote each other. So there really seems to be this strong divide.*

LR: That's really counterproductive. I'm all for breaking down these barriers and bringing, from every disciplinary background you have, to bear on the shared problem. I think it's a real shame if we divide ourselves up in a kind of sectarian way – it would be a real shame.

*JE: I had one more question regarding teaching. During your time at Harvard you won several prestigious prizes for your commitment to teaching, including the Joseph R Levenson Memorial Teaching Prize. If you were to give advice to early career researchers like myself – what do you think makes a good teacher?*

LR: You know, it is really hard. The problem starts with the TEF – how do you evaluate good teaching? For me, it is just all about human relations. If you are interested in your students – if you are in a place like Warwick or a place like Harvard, you got really smart students. They are in your class because they want to be. Just engage with them, and draw them out. Let them see how you really care about what you are doing and that you are interested in their ideas. That brings out the best in them and then it is really fun to engage with them.

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<sup>i</sup> Major publications of hers include Richardson, 1996, 2006a, 2006b, Richardson and Art, 2007.

<sup>ii</sup> A brief summary of the talk can be found at <https://warwick.ac.uk/insite/news/intnews2/inspiring-women-lr/> (accessed 27 February 2018).

<sup>iii</sup> Stanley Hoffman (1928-2015) was a US-Austrian professor at Harvard University (Grimes, 2015).