

Knowing governance

The making of governance knowledge and the transformation of politics

Berlin Forum Innovation in Governance

19–20 May 2011, Berlin

Paper proposal

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“Constituting terrorism: three attempts at rational governance”

This paper identifies three rationalities through which early terrorism experts attempted to constitute terrorism as a governable problem. Each of these not only implied a different understanding of terrorism as a problem, but also enabled a different mode of governance, or set of practices through which the problem might be managed. The earliest U.S. response to terrorism envisioned international law as one of the primary methods for governing terrorism, reflecting the State Department’s primary role, which saw this as an issue to be handled through diplomatic channels, and indeed, to a certain extent a problem aimed primarily at diplomats. A second approach focused upon developing practical strategies for managing and responding to terrorist events (particularly hijackings, kidnappings, and hostage situations) through routinized responses developed through fantasy scenarios. By developing planned, routine, responses for various potentialities, experts and policymakers sought to tame the frightening and seemingly unpredictable terrorist event. Where the legal approach sought to manage terrorism at the level of the international world-system through legal regulations and treaties, the operational approach focused upon managing terrorism at the level of the *incident*. A third approach sought to rationalize terrorism and make it subject to techniques of risk management, largely through the creation of terrorism event databases. The production of such chronologies, in which counts of terrorist events and deaths/casualties are plotted over time, and databases, in which events are correlated with characteristics of perpetrators, victims, and methods of attack, aimed to make terrorism subject to calculable technologies of risk management such as insurance.

These three modes of governance: through law, through routinization, and through quantification, both stabilized particular understandings of “terrorism” as a problem, and created unintended consequences, including openings for resistance to counter-terrorism concepts and practices. There are implications here for two central sociological concepts: rationalization, and commensuration. Max Weber famously wrote that processes of rationalization may produce unintended consequences, or irrational effects. Yet this seems to be, oddly enough, an observation that often goes by the wayside in more recent discussions of expertise, rationalization, and commensuration. Discussions of commensuration, in particular, often conclude that commensuration and quantification tend to have the effect of narrowing the scope of political and normative debate. Yet, as I will show in the case of terrorism databases, commensuration and other practices of knowledge are productive (in Foucault’s sense of the term): transformations which close some doors and open others.