

Book review: How terror evolves: the emergence and spread of terrorist techniques by Yannick Veilleux-Lepage

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Keywords: [terrorism](#); [conflict](#); [weapon selection](#); [hijacking](#); [political contention](#); [terrorist innovation](#)

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As the title of Yannick Veilleux-Lepage's book suggests, the conundrum he seeks to resolve is how terrorist techniques emerge and spread. The author explores how terrorist techniques are adopted, changed, adjusted and abandoned over time. He uses the history of aircraft hijacking to illustrate this. The history of hijacking begins in Peru in the 1930s when rebels commandeered government aircraft to drop leaflets and move forces. Hijacking continued throughout the twentieth century with variations in techniques emerging, such as hostage-taking and ransoms, up to its most notorious use in the events of 11 September 2001, when aircraft became themselves weapons of destruction. His main argument for the change in hijacking methods over time reflects evolutionary processes found in nature. Just as certain traits in nature are selected out or adapted as beneficial in certain environments, so certain methods of hijacking are selected out or improved upon when proven to be beneficial. This review covers the content of the book, assesses the strengths of the core argument, and discusses its originality and contribution to the literature in the field of Terrorism Studies.

The author employs a refreshing and original approach to tracking the processes of aircraft hijacking over time, treating the development of terrorist techniques as analogous to Darwinian evolutionary thought (1859). The basis of the argument contained in this book centres on three assumptions drawn from the realm of biology, which can be used to explain the emergence and spread of terrorist techniques based on the propagation of biological traits in nature. These three assumptions include the principles of *variation*, *transmission* and *selection* (Veilleux-

Lepage, 2020, pp. 32–44). *Variation* explains how different techniques emerge, and is akin to random mutations in nature except that, in this argument, they are deliberate decisions made by groups. *Transmission* explains the spread of these techniques. In nature, they would be inherited but for the purposes of this research they are spread through relational or non-relational ties. Finally, *selection* explains which techniques are adopted and which are abandoned. The factors determining this are feasibility, legitimacy and the effectiveness of the method in question.

Veilleux-Lepage (2020) uses these assumptions to explain how aircraft hijacking originally came into being as a means of political contention in 1930s Peru (p. 47) before being selected out and re-emerging during the Cuban Revolution to challenge state authority. Following on from this, there is an examination of the role and influence of “freedom flights”, hijackings undertaken to escape political regimes (p. 61). He then examines how Middle Eastern political hijackings (p. 79) and criminal hijackings for profit (p. 113) forced the development of stronger security measures. These resulted in considerable variation in hijacking attempts, as hijackers and law enforcement engaged in an evolutionary arms race. The author concludes by discussing the 9/11 hijackings and traces the evolutionary history of hijacked aircraft as weapons of destruction (p. 125). The book follows a straightforward chronological structure, allowing the reader to keep up with the author’s tracking of the evolution of aircraft hijacking throughout the twentieth century in a coherent and easy-to-follow fashion. This, combined with Veilleux-Lepage’s writing style and ability to convey information effectively, make the book accessible to readers with varying levels of expertise in the study of terrorism.

While the author explains that there does not seem to be any prior use of evolutionary theory in Terrorism Studies, he does highlight similar ideas put forward by Charles Tilly’s ‘repertoires of contention’ (1995). These reveal the means of political contestation available to a group, such as strikes and protests. Not only does using Tilly and the Social Movement literature give the author a secure and established foundation on which to build his arguments, it also allows him to sidestep neatly the plethora of debates concerning the definitions and understandings of terrorism on which consensus is rarely, if ever, found (pp. 17–20).

One shortcoming, which is also acknowledged by the author, is the research’s main focus on hijackings that have occurred in a Western setting. This has been justified by the linguistic barrier. Given the global nature of terrorism, however, the applicability of the author’s findings could be verified by an exploration of terrorist hijacking in non-Western settings – an idea the author briefly suggests as an avenue for future research (pp. 153–154).

A suitable point for comparison concerning the development of terrorist techniques would be the literature on suicide bombings, which exhibits many of the same themes highlighted by Veilleux-Lepage, except that they often appear as competing ideas or at least treated as separate ones. For instance, the same ideas of *variation*, *transmission* and *selection* appear

in works on the subject of suicide bombings but are not necessarily seen as components of a greater overarching model. The terms themselves (*variation*, *transmission* and *selection*) may not be used in the research, and a biological evolutionary perspective is not present.

Variation can be seen on work looking at the origins of modern suicide bombings, or developments in the use of this technique, such as the engagement of female suicide bombers in Chechnya to evade security measures (Moore, 2012). *Transmission* is evident in how the interlinking between Al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist groups allowed information to be shared and the technique to spread (Horowitz, 2010). *Selection* is the most highly debated area of study. There are numerous arguments as to why terrorist groups may or may not choose to employ suicide attackers. Among the factors put forward are religion, group competition and foreign occupation (for a breakdown of suicide bombing literature see Horowitz, 2015). This illustrates that the individual strands of Veilleux-Lepage's argument are present in the terrorism literature beyond that which solely focuses on hijacking, but that these have not yet been brought together into an interlinked understanding of their development in a manner similar to this book.

Two particular strengths of the text are notable. First, Veilleux-Lepage remains internally consistent in his argument throughout the book, that is to say that even if one were to disagree with his overall perspective on the spread of terrorist techniques it is difficult to find self-contradictory elements in his work. This is a demonstration of how well thought through his argument is, and how strong is the research behind it. Second, the author's incorporation of ideas and notions from other fields, or at the very least the inspiration he draws from them are particularly useful. Any subject would do well to look beyond its own borders, and Terrorism Studies is no different. The book is exemplary of the benefits accrued from drawing on the closely related field of Social Movements and the more removed one of Evolutionary Biology.

How terror evolves, rather unsurprisingly given its subject matter, is very well suited to those in the field of Terrorism Studies. Veilleux-Lepage explores in great depth a relatively under-examined aspect of the decision-making process of terrorist groups, how they select methods from a set of pre-existing options and how they further adapt these depending on circumstance or to suit a particular need. The book provides a novel outlook on the origins of terrorist techniques, their evolution, and development. The argument is convincing and sound throughout, and well-illustrated to ensure that the book is not just a highly informative read but an engaging one too. This book will be refreshing to experts and rewarding for novices in the field, and is certainly worth reading.

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