Identity/identification post 9/11: The enemy within, the enemy without

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Abstract:
This paper argues that the advent of the suicide bomber as the *leit motif* of terrorism in the first part of the 21st century has had a substantial impact on the process of identity formation throughout the world. The attacks of 9/11, Bali, 2002, Madrid, 2004 and London, 2005 have seen the citizens of these countries, and all those that viewed these attacks as a spectacle, dragged into a fight for identity: you are with us or you are against us. This paper will argue that the ‘forced choice’ of the polarity also capitalizes on the individual’s phobias and fears which become manifested as racism and intolerance of difference. Drawing on psychoanalytic concepts this paper identifies and analyses the processes at work, both at the individual and collective levels of identity, that can lead to the fundamentalist claims to ‘rightness’. Psychoanalysis offers much for this discussion by dispelling the myth of psychopathology or ‘pure evil’ in the attempt to understand the motives of those that count suicide bombers in their arsenal. It further identifies both the collective and individual need to expel the ‘enemy within’ and project it on to the ‘enemy without’.

Introduction

This paper argues that the advent of the suicide bomber as the *leit motif* of terrorism in the first part of the 21st century has had a substantial impact on the process of identity formation throughout the world. The attacks of 9/11, Bali, 2002, Madrid, 2004, Bali, 2005 and London, 2005 have seen the citizens of these countries, and all those that viewed these attacks as a spectacle, dragged into a fight for identity: you are with us or you are against us. This paper will argue that the ‘forced choice’ of the polarity
also capitalizes on the individual’s phobias and fears which become manifested as racism and intolerance of difference.

The impact of external threat does not just create external terror – it unleashes repressed or denied internal or intrapsychic fear, which becomes intolerable for the individual to bear (Nosek 2003; Volkan 2006). Psychoanalytic concepts of projection, splitting and projective identification provide an explanation of the mechanisms used unconsciously to restore the mind to a status of psychic equilibrium – one that reduces the anxiety for the individual to a level that can be tolerated.

**The Suicide Bomber as the Leit Motif of Terror as Spectacle**

The visual spectacular of watching two planes slice through the monolithic structures of the twin towers in New York on September 11, 2001 caught the world’s attention. The enormity of the devastation was transported into the lounge rooms and over the breakfast tables throughout the world. But apart from heralding a new era of terrorist methodology the impact was to see people struggle to make sense of not only the event itself, but those who orchestrated it, those that committed it, and those that responded to it. The atrocity also produced a media montage of cheering in certain Arabic countries and of ghostly encrusted individuals emerging from the wreckage. It was as if the whole world had been instantly divided into two seemingly irreconcilable camps – those that wept and those that cheered. This was certainly the language that U.S.A. President George Bush and his administration adopted – “You are either with us or you are with the terrorists” (2001). Not since the Cold War has such a global and all encompassing line been drawn in the sand coupled with such a blatant challenge to choose sides. The Islamist organization, Al Qaeda, claimed responsibility in the name of Islam and promised more attacks. They too had drawn a line in the sand. It can be argued that the world is struggling with the limited options of identity that both sides are proffering – are you with us or are you with them?

Terrorism, by definition, is targeted against a group or society’s sense of safety and well being (Bandura 1998; Volkan 2006). It is not the devastation of the attack itself but the heightened insecurity and helplessness that follow from the unpredictability promised by the threat that has caused concern (Nosek 2003).

How does one minimise the sense of vulnerability and uncertainty engendered by the threat of terrorist attack? One way would be to make as many variables as ‘certain’ as
possible, to build an illusion of control and manageability. Having a sense of ‘knowing’ the enemy, of putting a ‘face’ to they that wield the threat allows those who feel threatened to at least ‘know’ who it is that threatens them.

In the wake of 9/11, the Bali bombings, the bombings in Madrid, and most recently in London the world has been grappling to identify these ‘terrorists’. The profile that has been constructed is certainly different to the profile of the suicide bomber of the Middle East (Pape 2005). The suicide bombers of New York and Washington were educated, and had lived within American shores. They were adults, as opposed to teenagers, and the attack was meticulously planned over months of preparation.

The use of so-called ‘clean skins’ in the London bombings created further disbelief amongst the population. Clean skins are locally born and raised individuals with no prior attachment to a political group. “They were like us…they played cricket…” were statements echoed throughout the media (Sydney Morning Herald 2005; Daily Mail 2005). The use of clean skins adds a dimension to the terror – the terrorists could be ‘among us’ and we would not even know. The need to be able to identify and recognise those who wish to do harm becomes urgent. The border that separates ‘Us’ from the ‘Other’ is no longer obvious when we are unable to recognise the ‘Other’ that is possibly in our midst. The unfortunate corollary of this is the suspicion that is then directed at all Muslims within our communities.

Karen Horney’s (1945) concept of arbitrary rightness points to the attempts by individuals to reduce the potentially destabilising impact of doubt and unpredictability. Horney explains that the individual tries to impose order and control on that which provokes conscious anxiety and unconscious psychic conflict. Horney states that “[d]oubt and indecision are invariable concomitants of unresolved conflict and can reach intensity powerful enough to paralyse all action” (1945:137). The anxiety provoked by fear of uncertainty needs to be reduced to a tolerable level. This is facilitated by dispelling doubt and uncertainty and replacing it with the belief in an infallible certainty as certainty and doubt are mutually exclusive phenomenon. Horney further explains that arbitrary rightness is a “rigid rightness [which]…constitutes attempts to settle conflicts once and for all by declaring arbitrarily and dogmatically that one is invariably right” (1945:138) thus dispelling the anxiety that uncertainty and doubt may generate.
The need to impose order on that which is disordered, certainty on that which is uncertain, and security on that which is insecure, are also arbitrary in nature. It can be argued that the greater the inability to tolerate uncertainty, the greater the need to arbitrarily construct certainty. This may be done by imposing arbitrary rightness on ambiguous situations or by arbitrarily ‘ignoring’ risks or difficulties associated with a given situation. The interruption of this arbitrary and artificial control may then be experienced as traumatic and destabilising. It can render the individual incapacitated on two levels – the conscious level of the interruption and the unconscious level of what the interruption symbolically represents.

In this discussion it is suggested that the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Bali and London have brought the repressed fear of uncertainty to consciousness in the guise of the fear of terrorism. The reason this technique is so effective is that it strips away the arbitrary constructs designed to conceal the uncertainty that cannot be tolerated. What the terrorists in effect are saying is “You do not control your fate – it is in our hands; you can be certain of nothing for we control your future”. The counter response, as mentioned previously, is twofold – the reaction to the threat of a terrorist attack and the response to having the initial repressed fear of uncertainty exposed. The counter response is vested with the need to shore up the arbitrary structures in order to reduce that which is intolerable. The terrorist becomes responsible for the two levels of disruption – the known and the unknown.

It is at times of threat and destabilisation, both from without and within, that intolerance to difference becomes blatant. In situations that do not present threat fear of difference is tolerable; in the tempest of uncertainty the need to ‘manage’ difference becomes acute. It is part of the process of re-establishing the arbitrarily defined equilibrium. It is suggested that as an individual’s fear of uncertainty increases his/her ability to tolerate difference decreases.

In February, 2006, an Australian newspaper, ‘The Age’, cited a recent survey by Melbourne academic, Abe Ata, that found that “[m]ost Victorian schoolchildren view Muslims as terrorists, and two out five students agree that Muslims are unclean”. Children too have fantastic wishes to destroy uncertainty by projecting into the ‘other’ – it’s just that the ‘bogeyman’ of old has a new religion.
You, Me, Us and Them: The Hijab, Cronulla and the Legacy of Terror

The impact of this struggle has seen people fighting for identity, religious freedom, democracy, theocracy, jihad, counter-terrorism, pro-war, anti-war, as if polarity should be the natural order. We should be ‘one or the other’. The psychological impact has been to magnify the differences between cultures, religions, national identities and the result appears to be destabilisation. Difference is psychologically being linked with fear, fear with anger, and anger with racism, even violence. Politicians are crossing ‘politically correct boundaries’ linking potential terrorism with Islamic dress, the hijab with defiance, and the abortion pill with a threat that Australia will be overrun by Muslims in 50 years (AAP Bulletin Wire 2006). Political correctness has given way to permission to vent previously hidden prejudices and intolerance. But is this prejudice new? Or is it a manifestation of a malady of the psyche? This paper investigates the process of individual and social identities with particular reference to the tendency of the individual to project into the ‘other’ that which cannot be tolerated by the self, particularly that which provokes fear and anxiety. A link will be made between the real occurrences of terrorist acts with the phantasmic fear of annihilation central to psychoanalytic thought.

Allport (1979) recognised prejudice as the fundamental problem of relationships between different social groups. Stereotypes become the tool we use to ‘justify’ our treatment and behaviour toward people of a ‘different’ group. Stereotypes ignore intragroup variability and the individuality of those who make up the ‘group’. This imposes a ‘shorthand’ tool for dismissal and vitriol. The stereotype itself is often biased and prejudiced in its construction, is borne from a place of prejudice, and then is used to propagate and rationalise prejudice. This stereotype is likely to be based on a prejudiced and erroneous exaggeration of a perceived difference; it will then be indiscriminately ascribed to the entire group; and be seen to occur with exaggerated frequency in the group (Judd and Park 2005). The ‘need’ for this mechanism – prejudice – is to cope with the psychic anxiety that fear of the unknown can engender.

Against this background in which the suicide bomber is a recurring, the debate over the decision by France to ban the wearing of Islamic headscarves by Muslim women has also made its way to Australian shores. The French ban prohibits the wearing of hijab, and other forms of visible religious symbols, in the country’s state-run schools. Although the symbols of all religions are included here some see it as a ‘veiled’
attempt to associate the wearing of hijab as a direct representation of a political as well as religious agenda and persuasion (Khan 2004; Renteln 2004).

The rhetoric that is used to justify the ban is the concern for the laicite – the separation of state and religion – the compromise of which “will put the French identity in peril” (Coq, 2004). French secularism is being touted as the mainstay of French identity but the timing is problematic. Secularism has been around since the French Revolution so it is not new, and Muslims have been emigrating to France for decades, so this is not new either. So what has tipped the status quo? New York and Washington, 2001; Bali, 2002; Madrid, 2004; Bali, 2005; London, 2005; the “War on Terror” and the identification of terrorists as Muslim extremists has disturbed the equilibrium. It now seems, by extension, that any who dress in traditional Islamic dress are linked to the images of Osama bin Laden and other jihadi extremists that are circulated around the globe. Now the once non-threatening headscarf signals not only a Muslim woman, but also a devout Muslim woman – and if she is devout, then how can we tell if she is extreme? And if she is extreme, can we be sure she is not part of a jihadi terrorist cell? Such is the progression of guilt by association that a piece of cloth can be turned into a symbol of terror. Thus, part of the agenda in the banning of hijab is the wish to be able to identify terror and banish it. It can be argued that the helplessness to do so makes the symbolic gesture all the more pertinent and understandable but illogical.

The hijab debate was also evidenced in Australia, where, during 2005, two prominent Members of Parliament, Senator Bronwyn Bishop and Sophie Panopoulos, voiced the call to ban hijab in Australian state-run schools. Bronwyn Bishop, a Senator and a Liberal Party Backbencher, has described the hijab as “an iconic act of defiance” and symbolizes “a clash of cultures” (AAP General News Wire 2005). It is hard to not read in the Bushesque rhetoric of “you are with us or you are with terrorists” here. According to a report submitted by two Australian academics to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, the incidence of anti-Muslim attacks since 9/11 have increased (Poynting and Noble 2004) and it appears that some Australians are responding to the perceived threat of terror by targeting a group of people that are indiscriminately associated with the perpetrators.

It can be argued that the urgency to dispel anxiety, to shore up the bastions of internal security and minimize perceived potential external threat excites the individual to find
‘safety in numbers’. This may help to dispel the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness that the individual experiences when fear and terror are exposed. Turning the ‘Me’ into ‘Us’ may give the individual the ‘Dutch courage’ to turn impotent fear into bravado for action – action inspired by rage may seem more tolerable than impotence from fear.

The riots in the Sydney suburb of Cronulla in December, 2005, serve to demonstrate what can happen when fear, anxiety and tensions escalate the need to claim what is one’s own. An incident occurred where 2 Surf lifesavers were beaten by a group of young men of Lebanese ancestry after some sort of verbal altercation. The response was swift and furious between those identifying with the white Aussie lifeguards and those identifying with the young men vowing for revenge. The violence that ensued was “racist mob hysteria” (Sheahan 2005). Members of the media did their bit to stir the pot with Alan Jones, a radio talk-back host, stating on air “What kind of grubs? Well, I'll tell you what kind of grubs this lot were. This lot were Middle Eastern grubs. And you're not allowed to say it. But I'm saying it” (Mediawatch 2006).

Reports suggest that tensions had been building in the Sydney suburb for some time with a senior police officer warning “of escalating antisocial behaviour between local youths and visitors from outside the [suburb]” (Bissett 2006). It seems that Cronulla was a tinderbox waiting to be lit and the altercation on the beach was the match. For many who participated in the Cronulla riot it was an act of solidarity – each side flexing muscle to establish ownership and entitlement. Whilst the object of ownership and entitlement was represented by the beach, the metaphor stood for much more than that – it was about establishing who has the right to call themselves one of ‘Us’.

The ‘driving force’ behind anger and hatred can be argued to be a way of transposing intolerable levels of fear into something potent. Fear can leave the individual helpless; intolerable fear can lead to a terror of the end of existence. Anger and hatred can be seen as attempts not only to eradicate the primary emotion, fear, but as an attempt to mobilize against that which provoked the primary fear. This paper argues that the primary emotion of fear is part of the psyche of the individual and is tolerated by maintaining a delusional sense of control and safety. When an external threat, such as a terrorist attack, smashes through this delusion the individual is left to deal with the ever-present primary fear at an intolerable level. Mechanisms are engaged to restore
the delusion as quickly as possible and make ‘safe’ the environment that has been disturbed.

**Conclusion**

This paper has argued that the need to clearly identify the ‘us’ and the ‘other’ has become a matter of urgency. Identification of the other is an attempt to replace the order lost. The greater the fear uncovered the more desperate the need to ‘identify’ that which is responsible – the ‘other’. What is unearthed, however, is not just the fear of uncertainty but the degree to which the individual can tolerate difference. Statements that in times of perceived safety would be condemned as racist, bigoted and xenophobic become rationalised as reasonable responses to threats in perceived unsafe times. The perceived external insecurity is used as a projection of internal neurosis. Behind the veil of rationalisations to ban rites of religious expression or to attack a group because of appearance lays an inability to tolerate difference. This criticism can of course be leveled at the Islamic fundamentalists who declare jihad on the West. But in both cases the wrong person is being identified as responsible. It is the problem of the person who cannot tolerate difference who is responsible, not the person who is different, no matter whether “you are with us or with the terrorists”.

In this respect we may, indeed, be witness to a ‘clash of fundamentalism' (Ali 2003) in which the suicide bomber is a recurring, frightening motif.

**References**


