

DE-CONTEXTUALIZATION IN THE TERRORISM DISCOURSE: A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST VIEW

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ABSTRACT. This essay will analyze how in post 9/11 public discourse “terrorism” is constructed. We use language to structure our world. Language not only determines how we see the world, but also what kinds of actions are possible. It functions as an instrument of power and groups struggling for domination use language to create and maintain a hegemonic regime of truth. Terrorism could be viewed as a “construct” produced by particular social actors to serve their political needs. In dominant terrorism discourse theological language is employed to de-contextualize terrorist’s motives from historical-material settings and construct terrorism as a metaphysical phenomenon.

Key words: *terrorism discourse, de-contextualization, social constructionism, language and politics.*

Introduction

After the terrorist acts of 9/11 the word “terrorism” has been much exploited by politicians. It has become a primary term in central narratives of Western culture like the terms “freedom” and “democracy”.¹ At the same time it is still impossible to define what exactly is meant by this word. There is no official and agreed definition that would accurately describe the phenomena that it designates. Over the years “terrorism” has changed the meaning many times and all attempts to come to a fixed definition have come to no avail. Moreover, it seems that post 9/11 the meaning of the term has become even more abstract and elusive.

In the political discourse it has been used interchangeably with more general “terror”.² Various words have been used to describe those who com-

¹ **Richard Jackson.** Constructing Enemies: “Islamic Terrorism” in Political and Academic Discourse. – Government and Opposition, Vol. 42, No. 3, 2007, p. 394.

² For example George W. Bush in his speeches regularly speaks about war on terror and uses the word ‘terror’ instead of terrorism. See **Bush, George W.** Address to the Nation. Washington, DC. September 20, 2001 (<http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/09.20.01.html>); **George W. Bush.** Homeland Security Act. Washington, DC. November 25, 2002,

mit acts of terrorism. They are radicals, fundamentalists, evil madmen, the enemies of democracy, enemies of civilization, enemies of freedom, insurgents, tyrants, murderers, criminals and killers who operate in shadowy networks. The definition of who is a terrorist has become as elusive as the term terrorism. As these vague categories are used in public discourse it induces a climate of fear and anxiety among Western populations. This climate of fear has had a profound effect on the public discourse, policy and civil liberties. Then the aims of terrorists have become a strategy of scapegoating and attaching negative labels to political dissidents, activists and random people in the name of security and avoidance of radicalization.

As the recent leak of secret US Military documents dubbed the Guantánamo Bay files³ shows, the criteria used to measure who were considered to be terrorists were quite unclear. Guantánamo Bay documents show that in many cases criteria had been arbitrarily defined by military and intelligence institutions. Among those who were captured and imprisoned were children, mentally ill persons, and elderly pensioners, against whom there was no evidence that they were extremists or had committed any terrorist acts.⁴ The reasons for capture varied, and were often based on what a law specialist and prisoners rights campaigner Clive Stafford Smith has described as extraordinarily thin evidence.⁵ People were detained and sent to prison based on vague false accusations, for their expected intelligence value, or barely on prejudice of officials. Even wearing a cheap Casio watch could mark one as terrorist.⁶

<<http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/11.25.02.html>>; **George W. Bush**. Update in the War on Terror. Washington, DC, September 7, 2003 <<http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/09.07.03.html>>.

³ Guardian editor David Leigh writes: “A number of other documents in the cache spell out guidelines for interrogating and deciding the fate of detainees. One, the ‘JTF-GTMO matrix of threat indicators’ details the ‘indicators’ which should be used to ‘determine a detainee’s capabilities and intentions to pose a terrorist threat if the detainee were given the opportunity.’ Another provides a matrix for deciding whether a prisoner should be held or released.” **David Leigh**. What are the Guantánamo Bay files? Understanding the prisoner dossiers. – The Guardian, Monday, April 25, 2011, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/25/what-are-guantanamo-files-explained>>.

⁴ **James Ball**. Guantánamo Bay files: Children and senile old men among detainees. – The Guardian, Monday, April 25, 2011, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/25/guantanamo-files-children-old-men?intcmp=239>>.

⁵ **Clive Stafford Smith**. Guantánamo Bay files: ‘The vast majority were not extremists’. – The Guardian, Monday, April 25, 2011, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/video/2011/apr/25/guantanamo-bay-files-reprieve-video?intcmp=239>>.

⁶ **JTF-GTMO Matrix of Threat Indicators**, published in Guantánamo files: How interrogators were told to spot al-Qaida and Taliban members. – The Guardian, Monday, April 25, 2011, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/interactive/2011/apr/25/guantanamo-files-interrogators-al-qaida-taliban#the-sign-of-al-qaida>>. The original document states: “The possession of a Casio F-91W model watch and the silver-color version of this model, the A159W, is

There is further evidence that same kind of unclear criteria is used by US and UK police and juridical institutions to target people at their homeland.⁷

In this essay I will analyze from the social constructionist perspective the language used to describe terrorists and terrorism in terrorism discourse. The first part of the essay provides a short description of what I consider to be the mainstream view of terrorism. In the post 9/11 terrorism discourse, terrorism is often described as something new and unfamiliar. The word terrorism signifies phenomena perceived as something demonic and ultimately barbaric. It is constantly used to refer to something as inherently evil, irrational and completely unjustified. Terrorism is described as an uncivilized way for some social actors to advance their irrational goals. Terrorism as a tactic is usually described as unsuccessful. As such terrorism is depicted as senseless and irrational use of violence against innocent victims.

I will contest the mainstream view of terrorism from the social constructionist viewpoint. Social constructionism presumes that our reality is constituted by the constant and dynamic interaction between individuals and institutions. Our worldview is “constructed”, that is, determined by the language that we use in the interaction process. Our and our adversaries’ identities are created through the use of language. As language is infused and intermingled with power, and thus, political, social actors who strive for power always try to normalize their worldview at the expense of excluding others’ worldviews. In public discourse the language of terrorism is often utilized to construct the evil “other”. From a social constructionist viewpoint the word “terrorism” is a construction; there are no universal and objective standards of what terrorism is and who terrorists are. Rather the word is often used to delegitimize the position of those who are not part of dominant social groups.

In the final part I will use the concept of de-contextualization from literary theory to describe the discursive strategy used to label enemies. In terrorism discourse terrorists are demonized through the process of de-contextualization. With the help of de-contextualization terrorism is projected in public discourse as a metaphysical phenomenon. The consequences of this process are that when terrorism is perceived as being metaphysical it can generate an atmosphere of anxiety which serves as fertile ground for attempts to de-legitimize political dissent and activism.

an indicator of al-Qaida training in the manufacture of improvised explosive devices. [The informant] identified the watch as a ‘sign of al-Qaida’.”

⁷ **Michael Welch**. *Scapegoats of September 11th: Hate Crimes and State Crimes in the War on Terror*. New Brunswick, NJ, USA: Rutgers University Press, 2006, p. 155; **TRAC**. *Who Is A Terrorist? Government Failure to Define Terrorism Undermines Enforcement, Puts Civil Liberties at Risk*, September 29, 2009, <<http://trac.syr.edu/tracreports/terrorism/215/>>; *Without Suspicion. Stop and Search Under Terrorism Act 2000*. **Human Rights Watch**, 2010, p. 1.

The Orthodox View of Terrorism

“Why do they hate us?” was the questions many were asking in the West, and particularly in US, after the attacks of 9/11. Soon afterward, the consensus was, at first, that it must be because of the failure of the Arab world to come to terms with modernity. As put by one professor of US National War College, the root cause for the anger towards the West was the historic failure of the Arab world to embrace the achievements of modernity: democracy, capitalism and science.⁸ Huntingtonian prophecy had fulfilled itself.⁹ A similar but more generalized idea was aptly put forward by US president George W. Bush.¹⁰ The moral condemnation of the 9/11 terrorist acts was unequivocal in the US. In the post 9/11 public discourse now emerged a dominant understanding that word terrorism designated something inherently evil and morally wrong. It is often argued that terrorism is immoral at all times in all places, and that terrorism is essentially always the same irrespective of the context it emerges from. The consequence of the 9/11 is that the question of “terrorism” is seen in rigid, morally absolute categories. One must condemn terrorism, or it is clear that one embraces it.

In the years following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, in public discourse, the conceptualization of terrorism has taken a specific “common sense” form. There is a general assumption that only one and universal way of conceptualizing terrorism exists. This view has become dominant in western thought. I will call it the orthodox view of terrorism. Over the years the orthodox view of terrorism has shaped both – public discourse and policy – making it perceived as objective and universal. Yet contrary to this mainstream view there are other ways to conceptualize terrorism. What we classify as terrorism, and who we label as terrorists depends largely on the point of view from which we approach the question.

After the attacks on the World Trade Center – but also in response to some earlier attacks – a vivid but very oversimplified conventional wisdom has developed about contemporary terrorism that portrays this threat as both new

⁸ **Marvin Ott**. *Why Do They Hate? Because Modernity Passed Them By*. – New York Times, January 9, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/01/09/opinion/09iht-edott_ed3_.html?scp=8&sq=Why%20do%20they%20hate%20America?&st=cse>.

⁹ I’m referring here to the hypothesis first put forward by **Samuel Huntington** in the *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 72, No. 3, 1993, pp. 22–49.

¹⁰ “Americans are asking, why do they hate us? They hate what we see right here in this chamber – a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms – our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other. /.../ These terrorists kill not merely to end lives, but to disrupt and end a way of life.” **George W. Bush**. *Address to the Nation*. Washington, DC. September 20, 2001.

and unfamiliar.¹¹ In orthodox view, terrorism is broadly defined as the use of violence by non-state actors against innocent non-combatants. Even though there are probably as many definitions of terrorism as there are authors writing about the subject, generally the orthodox view tends to mirror definitions proposed by the US Department of State and US Department of Defense. The US Department of State definition states: “the term terrorism means pre-meditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience”. The Department of State definition has been in use since 1983 and the US Department of Defense has expanded on this with a more recent definition, according to which terrorism is “The unlawful use of – or threatened use of – force or violence against individuals or property to coerce or intimidate governments or societies, often to achieve political, religious, or ideological objectives”.¹² There is a latent presumption in both definitions that it is only non-state actors who can commit acts of terrorism. The latter one also introduces religion and the vague “ideological objectives” as motivators for terrorism. The notion “ideological objectives” is specifically vague and could facilitate a wide range of possible interpretations of motives that cause social actors to commit acts of violence.

The orthodox view describes modern terrorist’s mentality as growing from absolutist and religiously motivated worldview which sees everything in binary categories: either-or, good or evil, us or them. That is why there is no possible way to come to a rational compromise or no possibility of dialogue or mutual bargaining between the sides. Peaceful and civilized dialogue and persuasion of terrorists is not possible because of their absolutist and rigid principles. Thus the proposed solution to deal with the problems that terrorism presents is to implement rigid and absolutist countermeasures against those who are classified as terrorists. Those who commit terrorist acts are, according to orthodox view, enemies of the democratic process and civilized discourse itself. Terrorists are described as inherently evil and uncivilized.¹³ In the orthodox view terrorist mentality is usually portrayed as unwarrantably radical and irrational in its core; terrorists are simply nihilists who are driven by abstract “cruelty and hate, the shedding of all moral restraints, the great

¹¹ **National Research Council.** Terrorism. Perspectives from the Behavioral and Social Sciences. Panel on Behavioral, Social, and Institutional Issues, Committee on Science and Technology for Countering Terrorism. Neil J. Semsler and Faith Mitchell (Eds). The National Academic Press, 2002, p. 10; **Joseba Zulaika.** Terrorism: The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy. Chicago, IL, USA: University of Chicago Press, 2010, p. 23.

¹² Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, cited in **Bruce Hoffman.** Inside Terrorism. Columbia University Press, 2006, p. 31.

¹³ **Tohmas J. Butko.** Four Perspectives on Terrorism: Where They Stand Depends on Where You Sit. – Political Studies Review, Volume 7, 2009, p. 185.

rage about everything and nothing in particular, the joy generated by killing and destruction”¹⁴.

Terrorist acts are described as irrational not only because of their non-sensible motives, but also because their acts are directed against a tendency of rational human beings to strive for order and stability. As terrorists intimidate and destabilize societies by disseminating fear, uncertainty, insecurity and chaos they are described as enemies of the principle of order itself. Their tactics rely on generating shock, fear and surprise in societies, which strive for order and predictability, by indiscriminately attacking innocents. Moreover, according to the orthodox view, modern terrorists show a special kind mercilessness by using any means possible – including the possible use of weapons of mass destruction – to advance their agenda against victimized societies. In the orthodox view the terrorist threat is often portrayed as an amorphous and fluid menace, and terrorists as an invisible a-spatial enemy. Terrorist are stateless and without territory, operating in the form of terrorist networks that transcend the borders of states.¹⁵

A Social Constructionist Critique of Orthodox View

Social constructionism is a theory which studies the genesis of social phenomena in specific social contexts. Its focus is the study of relationship of meaning and power.¹⁶ According to social constructionism our perception of reality – the way we see and make sense of our world is always “constructed” by the social institutions we are participating in. All our knowledge, even our everyday reality is created and maintained through social interaction.¹⁷ Through their social interaction people discover that their overlapping worlds are related and have common aspects. By this process of discovery common knowledge is created and sustained through inter-personal relations. Thus common knowledge takes a crystallized form and is expressed in social institutions, human stereotypes, myths and beliefs which become perceived by social group as an objective reality. The process of maintaining this reality is a

¹⁴ **Walter Laqueur**. *The New Terrorism and the Weapons of Mass Destruction*. Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 231.

¹⁵ **Hoffman** 2006, p. 38, **Helen Dexter**. *New War, Good War and the War on Terror: Explaining, Excusing and Creating Western Neo-interventionism*. – *Development and Change*, 38(6), 2007, p. 1059; **William C. Banks**. *Alternative Views of the Terrorist Threat*. – *International Studies Review*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 2005, pp. 670–671.

¹⁶ **Michael Larkin**. *What is Social Constructionism?* <http://www.psy.dmu.ac.uk/michael/soc_con_disc.htm>, 2004.

¹⁷ With this I do not want to imply that there is no external material reality. On the contrary, I presume that underlying every discourse are complex historical-material settings. There exist multifaceted relations between discourse and material reality and both are mutually influencing each other.

dynamic one; reality needs to be constantly shaped and re-affirmed to persist. Social phenomena are constantly made and institutionalized by social agents that take part in the open-ended process of social interaction.

Norms and institutions are not things existing objectively out there, but are created in and by particular communities that exist in particular contexts. And these institutions again shape those communities. There are no objective measures of good or bad, right or wrong. Rather what is considered to be good or bad, right or wrong depends on what viewpoint one takes. Our perception of reality depends on the community one identifies oneself with. Norms and institutions change with time, taking multiple forms in different contexts. What might seem right in one community might be wrong in another; what is considered normal for one community might be abnormal to another. In sum, different communities have different sets of norms, goals and aspirations.

Language has an important role in creating worlds that communities identify themselves with. Language functions as an instrument for creating, normalizing and reinforcing particular worldviews, affixing certain knowledge and institutions in society; at the same time alternative worldviews and knowledge are excluded and de-legitimized. Through language identities are created and maintained, and as such, language is never neutral. Groups struggling for power and trying to reaffirm their identities use language to create and maintain a hegemonic regime of truth.¹⁸

From the social constructionist viewpoint terrorism could be viewed as a “construct” created by particular social actors to serve their political needs. “Terrorism” in terrorism discourse is created by the process of inter-group communication and interplay of political interests and aspirations for power. Terrorism is politically and socially produced, that is, “a process of communication rooted in language itself and, thus, involves creating or imposing a bridge of shared meanings”¹⁹. What is signified with the word terrorism is not an objective fact, nor is it a universal phenomenon, but rather a product of specific systems of classification. What terrorism means is defined by the framework of signification that particular social actors use to give meaning to the term. Who are terrorists and what acts constitute terrorism is constructed by social actors through the language they use to order the world. “Terrorism” is a result of a terrorism discourse. This discourse is not merely a description or reflection about facts existing in objective reality, it is also a construction and interpretation of those facts.

The concept of terrorism implies a system of categorization that simultaneously describes the world and creates it. Although the history of the word “terrorism” dates back to the 18th century, and has gone through several transformations of meaning, it was not until the 1970s it became a discourse in

¹⁸ Jackson 2007, p. 397.

¹⁹ Butko 2009, p. 191.

itself. It was when such acts of political violence as bombing, kidnappings and assassinations became classified as terrorism, terrorism as independent discourse came into being.²⁰ Terrorism discourse is not just merely a play of language; it creates its own reality with consequences manifest in historical-material settings. Its effects are expressed in politics and legislation that societies implement in response to the discourse. Terrorism discourse is a functional reality of politics that is deployed in the time of seeming crisis.²¹

As pointed out by Jackson, a political project like war on terrorism, that so deeply encompasses the fabric of society, needs a wide-scale social and political consensus, and, that consensus is not available without language.²² Language creates meaning, and this process of meaning-making is political in nature. In the process of meaning-making certain questions are posed and certain answers suggested at the expense of excluding alternative questions and answers, thus leading to the preference of certain meanings over others. Language used to formulate the discourse does not exist as value-neutral; power and language are inseparably interwoven entities in a society as power relations determine what kinds of forms of knowledge are privileged, who are allowed to speak and act and how they are positioned in the discursive field. Due to the inherent political nature of discourses there is a tendency in social actors to reaffirm their own views while at the same time trying to delegitimize alternative views. Discourses are:

“constructed and employed for specific purposes, most importantly, the creation, maintenance, and extension of power. Discourses are an exercise of power; that is they try to become dominant or hegemonic by discrediting alternative or rival discourses, by promoting themselves as the full and final truth and by drowning out the sound of any other discourse”.²³

Terrorism discourse is a system of legitimization/de-legitimization. In the discursive process terrorists identities are constructed, named and opposed to “legitimate” identities. Also ways to confront terrorists are mapped out and legitimized. Terrorism discourse does not only construct the “terrorists”, it also makes certain responses and strategies to deal with the terrorists seem justified. Terrorism discourse creates a new framework through which political power can justify its actions without generating a widespread dissent. It

²⁰ **Zulaika** 2010, p. 17.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²² **Richard Jackson**. Language Power and Politics: Critical Discourse Analysis and the War on Terrorism. – 49th Parallel, Issue 15: Spring 2005, <<http://www.49thparallel.bham.ac.uk/back/issue15/jackson1.htm>>.

²³ **Richard Jackson**. Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics, and Counter-Terrorism. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005, cited in **Butko** 2009, p. 191.

needs to create a legitimizing narrative that manufactures approval while simultaneously suppressing individual doubts.²⁴

The de-contextualization in the terrorism discourse

Language as an instrument of power provides innumerable resources by which honest investigation of phenomena may be evaded by mystifying or “essentializing” actions.²⁵ In orthodox view of terrorism the meaning of terrorist acts are separated from their social and political context and interpreted instead with a reference to religious and political myths. This process of transformation of meaning I will call de-contextualization.

Before I proceed to discuss what I mean by de-contextualization it is in order to clarify what is meant by the term context. We can speak of several types of contexts. First, there is the social context – the socio-political and economic circumstances that surround social agents. We may call it the social agents’ “social reality”, that is, the concrete material-historical settings in which social agents act in. Second, there is the situational context that influences discursive practices of the social agents; it determines the semantic aspects of particular communication acts and texts.²⁶ In other words, it gives meaning to concrete acts of social agents in specific time and place. And third, there is the textual context which consists of narratives, myths, stereotypes and beliefs that a particular group holds. The textual context functions as a wider signification framework in which meanings are created, attributed and preserved. It provides a broad set of cultural narratives like the narrative of war of good and evil, the narrative of civilization-versus-barbarism, and narrative of innocence versus sinfulness, but also more specific narratives such as those surrounding the struggle against fascism or mythologies of the cold war.²⁷ All contexts are interrelated and there are complex and dynamic relationships between them that contribute and influence the discursive process.

The term de-contextualization originates from the literary theory and is used to refer to process of abstraction through which texts are separated from their real world context of their origins. As shown by Hamilton-Wieler the

²⁴ Jackson 2005.

²⁵ Carl Kandutsch. Mechanisms of Power in the Age of Terrorism. *Resetting Theory*. Kroker, Arthur and Marilouise (Ed), 5/18/2010, <<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=646>>.

²⁶ I use the word text here in very broad sense. Text is not limited to written texts, but it also designates a wide variety of other phenomena such as historical events, social agency in concrete historical social reality, institutional practices, myths and beliefs (that often are materialized as written texts) of particular societies.

²⁷ Jackson 2007, p. 401; Joanne Esch. Legitimizing the “War on Terror”: Political Myth in Official-Level Rhetoric. – *Political Psychology*, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2010, p. 365.

term is somewhat imprecise.²⁸ Is it really possible to take something out of context without putting it into another one? She argues that it is not. Analyzing written texts and language she comes to a conclusion that the term certainly does not function on the morphological level as it is impossible to take a text or sentence out of its context without putting it into another one.²⁹ All discourse is contextual and meanings are always created in reference to some context. But this also implies that every text can be read in several contexts. No text is related only to one context; rather it could belong to many contexts and have several meanings.

As a text's meaning is not fixed, it can be read in such a way that reference to its social reality is cut off and the meaning is created in reference to some other more abstract context. With de-contextualization I designate then a discursive practice that obfuscates the motives of particular acts, and changes the meaning of those acts by shifting the center of interpretation in the discourse from the social reality into a more abstract textual context. In the case of terrorism discourse, the meanings of terrorist acts are constructed by interpreters of those acts, not in reference to the social conditions where the perpetrators of terrorist acts originate, but in reference to abstract moral categories that interpreters use to structure their world. Through de-contextualization concrete socio-political causes of problems are transformed "into abstract universalized [moral] notions that we are familiar and comfortable with"³⁰. By this process of reinterpreting the meaning of acts, those acts are legitimized or delegitimized by associating them with generalized moral concepts like "good/evil", "faithful/nihilist", or "civilized/barbarian". By de-contextualization the search for causes of particular acts is shifted away from the concrete political and socioeconomic level into the metaphysical. Zulaika and Douglass describe the re-framing of terrorist acts in the terrorism discourse: "Terrorism discourse singles out and removes from the larger historical and political context a psychological trait (terror), an organizational structure (the terrorist network), and category (terrorism) in order to invent an autonomous and aberrant realm of gratuitous evil"³¹. In the orthodox view acts of political violence are separated from their socio-political context and described in theological terms. The meaning of political violence is reinterpreted in reference to religion and political mythology. De-contextualized acts of terrorism are not seen as instrumental acts of political persuasion but as fundamental confrontation on an absolute scale of good and evil.

²⁸ For a longer discussion about the definition of the term see **Sarah Hamilton-Wieler**. *The Fallacy of Decontextualization*. Indiana University at Indianapolis, 1988.

²⁹ **Hamilton-Wieler** 1988, pp. 4–5.

³⁰ **Dexter** 2007, p. 1062.

³¹ **Joseba Zulaika and William Douglass**. *Terror and Taboo: The Follies, Fables, and Faces of Terrorism*. Routledge, 1996, p. 22.

In the orthodox view terrorist acts are described as unmotivated and irrational acts of pure evil that are directed against everything “we” stand for – the democracy, freedom and our way of life as a whole. The instrumental character of terrorist’s acts is denied. Proponents of the orthodox view separate motives of those who commit acts of violence from their socio-political context and argue that all terrorism is alike. This position is well expressed in the remark of former Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon: “Terrorism is terrorism anywhere in the world”³². Acts of political violence committed by the Palestinians are delegitimized by claiming that there are no difference between the attacks of al-Qaida and those carried out by Palestinians.³³ UK Prime Minister David Cameron presents another example. In his recent speech on the Munich Security Conference he subtly associated Islamic extremism, fascist ideology, recent popular protests against austerity measures in Greece and Italy, and political violence carried out by Red Army Faction in Germany, by combining them under a term “extremist ideology”.³⁴ According to Cameron this ideology needs to be combated by exposing its ideas “for what they are” by arguing that terrorism is wrong in all circumstances.³⁵

In 2004 US Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld told graduates of West Point Military Academy that the civilized world faces adversaries unlike any in the past, “radicals and extremists who have attempted to hijack a religion” and who “have no territory to defend, no public to answer to”, and who are threatening us “with shadowy networks”.³⁶ And despite that “in less than three years, an 80-nation coalition has overthrown two vicious regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, liberated 50 million people... the truth is we are closer to the beginning of this struggle this global insurgency than to its end”³⁷. In the orthodox view both temporal and spatial dimensions are abstracted, and terrorism becomes amorphous threat that could strike at any place anytime. Rumsfeld de-contextualizes terrorist threat by portraying it as a-spatial and a-temporal. Even though we have defeated two terrorist states, the war against terrorism has just begun. As there is no perceivable end to war on terrorism

³² Cited in **Virginia Held**. *How Terrorism is Wrong: Moral and Political Violence*. Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 13.

³³ **Virginia Held**. *How Terrorism is Wrong: Moral and Political Violence*. Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 13

³⁴ **David Cameron**. Speech at Munich Security Conference. February 5, 2011, <<http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speeches-and-transcripts/2011/02/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference-60293>>.

³⁵ *Ibid*.

³⁶ Cited in **Jim Garmone**. Life not Predictable, Rumsfeld Tells New Army Officers. – American Forces Press Service, May 29, 2004, <<http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=26381>>

³⁷ Cited in **Garmone** 2004.

it becomes an ontological state.³⁸ It is also implied that terrorism could not be located in any specific place, but it exists everywhere. It is a global phenomenon, an extremist insurgency against the civilized world. But this threat is imagined not only as emerging from the outside of the civilized world, but also from inside.³⁹

The proponents of the orthodox view assume that terrorists are operating according to some alternative rationality, and this rationality is interpreted and described in theological language. By this in the discourse the possibility that there exists a connection between terrorist's behavior and social relations of interpreters is cut off. By de-contextualization terrorists motives are explained in the language of religious and moral notions rather than as being part of complex, historically based calculus of power and privilege, systems of value exchange and social organization.⁴⁰ By shifting the basis of interpretation of the terrorist's acts from the social reality into the textual context, materiality of the acts is denied. There is a perceived difference in materiality of acts of evil and acts of political adversary or dissident. In the former case the links between the material world that conditions the acts and the perpetrator of those acts are cut off in the mind of the addressee of discourse.⁴¹

Ultimately de-contextualization in public discourse enables casting those who are named as terrorists out of one's moral sphere. By removing social and political factors as possible motivators for an act of terrorism, terrorists are seen as evil by nature. Acts of terrorism are not seen as being caused by oppression and marginalization, but rather as caused by the terrorist's evil

³⁸ Osama Bin Laden, one of the main targets of the war on terrorism, was killed by US special forces during the time I was finishing this article. Only a couple days later when celebrating ended, politicians, intelligence and police executives made clear that it is business as usual, and war on terrorism will continue undisturbed as the terrorist threat remains severe. As aptly expressed by UK Metropolitan Chief Sir Paul Stephenson: "To be blunt it means that an attack is highly likely and could occur without warning at any time". Cited in **Vikram Dodd**. Osama bin Laden death doesn't end terror threat – Met chief. – *The Guardian*, 4 May, 2011, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/may/04/osama-bin-laden-met-chief>>; **Hélène Mulholland**. Cameron says Britain must stay vigilant after Bin Laden death. – *The Guardian*, 3 May, 2011, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/may/03/cameron-britain-vigilant-bin-laden-death>>; **Michael D. Shear**. After Killing of Bin Laden, Official Reaction Pours In. – *The New York Times*, 2 May, 2011, <<http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/05/02/after-killing-of-bin-laden-reaction-pours-in/?scp=13&sq=terrorist%20threat&st=cse>>.

³⁹ **Cameron 2011**; **George W. Bush**. Renewing the Patriot Act. Columbus, Ohio, June 9, 2005, <<http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/06.09.05.html>>.

⁴⁰ **Russell McCutcheon**. Religion and the Domestication of Dissent. *Equinox*, 2008, p. 38.

⁴¹ Evidence suggest that in cases where the same acts of terrorism are described as religiously motivated, people consider the perpetrators of those acts to be more blameworthy than in cases where same acts are described as politically motivated. Also people tend to consider acts to be terrorism when motives of those acts are presented as religious instead of political. See **R. K. Pradhan**. *Terrorism, Rule of Law and Human Rights*. Delhi, IND: Global Media, 2010, pp. 92–99.

and irrational motives, by a logic completely belonging into another moral sphere. In this rhetoric no rational justification for acts of terrorism can exist, as such acts are against humanity and rationality itself. Those who commit acts of terrorism become non-persons, existing outside the civilized world. As pointed out by Kandutsch that in Judeo-Christian morality a principle of reciprocity exists, according to which the sides of moral dispute must accept a resolution of that dispute to the extent they share the underlying norms that constitute possible ways of resolving disputes.⁴² The principle of reciprocity implies that a right for self-defense or counter-challenge exists on the part of the victim. When a victim engages in self-defense or makes a counter-challenge, the other side has no moral ground for objecting these actions. By de-contextualization this principle of moral reciprocity is broken. As terrorists are cast into another moral sphere, there is no common framework which would regulate questions of challenge and response. There exists no possibility that acts of terrorism are a response of the victimized. Bad things that “we” do cannot be compared to the bad things that terrorists do, because terrorists’ acts are profoundly more evil.⁴³

By de-contextualization the presentation of reality in public discourse is reduced to the binary oppositions of “us versus them” where “we” serve as a force of good. This dichotomy appeals to the identity of the group and thus prefers civilizational explanations for conflict over political or economic ones.⁴⁴ De-contextualization functions in a public discourse as an instrument of justification of a particular set of narratives and actions that affirm one groups’ identity at the expense of others. Those who commit acts of terrorism are described as being uncivilized barbarians who are against ‘our’ way of life. By reducing the world to moral absolutes, into categories of us versus them, and by appealing to identity, a possibility for critical analysis of the concept of terrorism is cut off. The word “terrorism” becomes a taboo with super-linguistic power.⁴⁵ Discussion about the alternative causes of terrorism is expelled from public discourse by strategies of labelling and scapegoating. If one does not subscribe to the orthodox view, and tries to find other explanations for terrorist’s acts, one puts himself in danger of being labelled as a supporter of those acts. De-contextualization works as a rhetorical strategy that adverts further analysis of the terrorist’s motives beyond the “because they are evil” explanation. Further, it denies self-critical reflection in public discourse about the possibility that the causes of terrorist’s acts could be related to the structural injustice created by the attacked group itself.

⁴² **Kandutsch** 2010.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ **Esch** 2010, p. 370; **Butko** 2009, p. 186.

⁴⁵ **Kandutsch** 2010.

The consequence of de-contextualisation in the terrorism discourse is that when the enemy is constructed as an abstract evil it creates an atmosphere of public anxiety and fear. For example during the eight years of the US Homeland Security Advisory System – a five-color scheme that indicated the terrorist threat in the US – it was mostly on levels yellow or orange, fluctuating between high and elevated levels of threat. It was never lowered to blue or green.⁴⁶ By de-contextualization an atemporal and omnipresent state of emergency is created that manufactures need to be ever vigilant, and implement ever widening scope of terrorism countermeasures like electronic surveillance, wiretapping, personal information harvesting, border searches and racial profiling.⁴⁷

The image of an invisible and aspatial enemy that poses an omnipresent threat opens up the possibility of resolving arbitrarily the problem of naming the enemy. In the state of public fear scapegoating as enemies those who look different, who have alternative political views, or who constitute marginalized groups in society, could become a normal and tolerated practice. In the state of anxiety the practice of labelling and scapegoating different social actors becomes the means for satisfying certain social and psychological needs, like the need to assign blame or the need to reduce the psychic discomfort of society.⁴⁸

There is a danger that terrorism discourse leads to persecution of political dissent and to the destruction of open civil society. The war on terrorism is not limited to violent extremism, but is fought against “extremist ideology” in general. This “extremist ideology” is shared alike by those who commit acts of violence and those who are called “non-violent extremists”.⁴⁹ When terrorist motives are de-contextualized, those who are blamed for supporting terrorists or sharing a terrorist philosophy are also classified under a category of “terrorist”.⁵⁰ It is not only certain actions but also certain ways of thinking that are delegitimized in the terrorism discourse. There is a growing body of evidence that political activists, animal rights protesters, anti-globalism protesters, liberals, academics, and curiously even photographers are silenced and persecuted under the legislation that has proliferated as a consequence

⁴⁶ **Homeland Security Advisory System Task Force Report and Recommendations**. September 2009, <http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/hsac_final_report_09_15_09.pdf>, p. 12.

⁴⁷ For an overview of measures implemented in response to 9/11 attacks in US and in various European states see **Wolfgang Benedek and Alice Yotopoulos-Marangopoulos** (Eds). *Anti-Terrorist Measures and Human Rights*. Leiden, NLD: Brill Academic Publishers, 2004; **Mark Sidel**. *More Secure, Less Free?: Antiterrorism Policy and Civil Liberties After September 11*. USA: University of Michigan Press, 2007. pp. 31–64; **Michael Welch**. *Scapegoats of September 11th: Hate Crimes and State Crimes in the War on Terror*. pp. 77–78

⁴⁸ **Welch** 2006, p 36.

⁴⁹ **Cameron** 2011.

⁵⁰ **Welch** 2006, pp. 155–156.

of terrorism discourse.⁵¹ The de-contextualization of the enemy leads to the legislation that in broad sweeps makes a large variety of political expression a terrorism related offense. In the US Patriot Act, for example, a new concept of domestic terrorism is coined, that is defined as “acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws” if they “appear to be intended ... to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion”⁵². Such vaguely defined criteria make it possible to classify almost any kind of political expression as terrorism. A similar problem is present in the inclusion of ideological and religious motives in official definitions of terrorism. Communicating one’s political or religious views is part of normal democratic public life. But by making it possible to classify advancing ones religious or political views, and influencing government politics as terrorism-related crime, governments could limit legitimate political action as they see fit. It is not only radical forms of political actions like property damage or civil disobedience that are vilified, but in a state of public fear, any critique of dominant power is dampened.

Conclusions

The language of terrorism discourse obfuscates the structural causes of terrorist motives by de-contextualizing them from their historical-material settings. Instead, abstract and absolute moral notions are employed to describe terrorists and their deeds. Terrorist are seen as inherently evil, and as such they

⁵¹ **Jackson** 2005; **Welch** 2006, p. 147; TRAC. Who Is A Terrorist? Government Failure to Define Terrorism Undermines Enforcement, Puts Civil Liberties at Risk. An analysis of thousands of juridical records of the US federal courts and from two agencies in the US Justice Department by Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) shows that the government institutions have no clear definition what constitutes as terrorism. This has led to the arrest and prosecution of thousands of people under terrorism legislation who had nothing to do with terrorism. A December 2008 manual directive to the U.S. Attorneys stating that federal terrorism cases “may have, but are not required to have, identifiable links to terrorist activity”. This broad classification lets prosecutors bring up almost any federal crime as a terrorism related offense; it has become common in the UK to use anti-terrorist laws to search and arrest people taking pictures in public places, as they are more frequently assumed to be terrorists on reconnaissance missions. **Mark Hughes and Jerome Taylor**. Do not take this picture. The Independent, 3 December, 2009, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/warning-do-not-take-this-picture-1833127.html>>; According to Human Watch report on the use of “stop and search” powers in UK and Ireland between April 2007 and April 2009 police used its right to detain people without suspicion on almost 450 000 occasions. This power is justified by the need to prevent terrorist acts despite the evidence showing that none of those cases led to any successful prevention of terrorist acts not to the prosecution of anyone on the ground of terrorism accusations. Without Suspicion. Stop and Search Under Terrorism Act 2000. **Human Rights Watch**, 2010, p. 1, <<http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/uk0710webwcover.pdf>>; **Sidel** 2007, pp. 127–132.

⁵² US Patriot Act, Section 802. Cited in **Welch** 2006, p. 147; see also **Sidel** 2007, p. 11.

would operate according to some rationality other than that of the describer's. This leads to a depiction of terrorism as a metaphysical phenomenon that is aspatial and omnipresent. There is no clear definition of what terrorism is or who terrorists are, and thus, the war on terrorism becomes a fight against an uncertain imaginable threat.

The use of language also affects the way policies and institutions are developed. In the time of emergency blaming and scapegoating become more prevalent and acceptable practices. As terrorism is pictured as an abstract threat, a need for appropriate countermeasures is manufactured. In the name of security terrorism discourse legitimatizes certain forms of political institutions and actions that serve to fortify the dominant political order. An atmosphere of public fear and anxiety make it easier for dominant powers to find support for implementing sweeping countermeasures that are needed against a vaguely defined enemy.

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