



# **Blood, Shit, and Tears<sup>1</sup>:**

*The “Terrorist” as Abject Other*

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<sup>1</sup> Title suggested by Professor Steven R. Corman, Director of the Consortium for Strategic Communication, Arizona State University. The title is meant to reflect both Winston Churchill’s “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat” in 1940 as well as Julia Kristeva’s thesis concerning the abject, namely, that it refers both stigmatized or marginalized groups as well as to our reaction to them (horror), a reaction that is grounded in situations or images where “the real” interjects itself into everyday life. The author also wishes to acknowledge the help of Professor Angela Trethewey in the preparation of this paper, particularly her keen sense of how abjection and alterity “work” in relation to terrorism and terrorists.

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## **Abstract**

This paper asks whether there are ways and means available in cultural narratives to get beyond simplistic binary opposites that, as Kenneth Burke puts it, “divide the world where the world does not.” Specifically, I explore the image and symbol of “terrorist” as abject and Other. Using an analytical pathway provided by the anthropologist Gert Baumann, I review ethnographic evidence of contested cultural systems that manage to transcend binary oppositions, at least until the real issue becomes one of power. To resolve these narrative tensions I weave into the text an example of a complex narrative of post-9/11 cultural identities found in Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. I derive lessons from that text that may be of practical use to global leaders and managers.

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*“We divide the world where the world does not ...”*  
Kenneth Burke

*“Faith in a holy cause is to a considerable extent a substitute  
for the lost faith in ourselves.”*  
Eric Hoffer

*“Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America. I noticed you were looking for something; more than looking, in fact you seemed to be on a mission, and since I am both a native of this city and a speaker of your language, I thought I might offer you my services.”<sup>2</sup>*

These words, spoken by the narrator of a marvelous novel called *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, are key to what I want to offer you today. Read closely—and admittedly from hindsight—they offer us insight into the world of the Other, a potential Abject, a person struggling with multiple identities and a deep historical narrative. A person offering us the opportunity to understand his life, his worldview, his city. A polite man. Educated. Sensitive.

A man who may, depending on how he is treated by us, become a terrorist. Or not.

We’ll see.

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<sup>2</sup> Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Orlando, FL: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007, p. 1.

The subject of my talk is “the terrorist as abject and other.” The argument of this paper is quite simple yet I doubt it will be easily accepted as a guide to policy. The reason for this advanced notice of my presumed failure has little to do with what I’m sure you will find to be a completely reasonable thesis, nor does it have to do with the persuasiveness of my case.

Nor will it be rejected because of a lack of clear examples.

Nor because it is too abstract to be useful.

No. Those won’t be the reasons at all. They may be what *you* offer to others after you reject it, but that will be because you *know* that the others that you will be talking to already feel the same way you do—they have been reared on the same historical narratives as you—and their familiar reasons for rejecting an argument for a fundamental change in the way we think about this issue operates among you as a sort of secret code of privilege. Or, barring a cheerful identification and clubby sense of membership afforded and enabled by that secret code of privilege, you will, of course, recognize that there is no place outside of language to go to, no metric of fair or even standard evaluation of “the facts,” that will determine the truth or value of my argument today, or yours tomorrow.

That is because my subject is the “terrorist.” The blood, shit, tears, and fact of him or her as a symbol, as well as the accompanying destruction of the symbolic order she or he or they or we create or make narratively as well as physically possible, a profane ability to confront us as well as them with the horror of a cruel, violent, and unnatural death—our end as a disfigured corpse. As Julia Kristeva puts it and I quoted

the earlier slide: "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject."<sup>3</sup>

For the symbol—and/or its visual counterpart, the image—to have abject power we must combine the agent with the victim, the act with the outcome, the blood and shit with the horror and tears. This is why terrorists, or suspected terrorists and their victims, are among the most—if not *the* most—abject populations on the planet Earth. When we utter or hear the term “terrorist” we tap into a powerful mediated image; in fact, the very term “terrorist” has come to stand—at last for those of us who don’t claim to *be* terrorists—for all of the world’s injustice, absurdity, unfairness, and pain—extreme violence, ultimate evil, torture and brutality, unyielding patriarchy, the lopping off of heads, the spread of extremist ideologies, the poisoning of the minds of youth, suicide bombs, unquestioning fundamentalism, and, in the case of radical doctrine among the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and others of their ilk—at least viewed from a liberal Western perspective—the absolute repression of women.

This all-encompassing uncompromising collectivity of madness and horror that is summed by the union of terrorist and victim(s) further reproduces their abject status, even when we use the symbol in the rather clean well-lit spaces of academic terrorism studies or, most especially, when otherwise well-intentioned leaders attempt to make anti-terrorism policies or create campaigns to win “the hearts and minds” of others.

Yet, as the ultimate abject symbol, “terrorist/terrorism” is highly problematic. Throughout the world, and without respect for race, creed, color, language, geographical

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<sup>3</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, p. 4.

region, or religion, the word “terrorist” produces and reproduces a seemingly natural bifurcation: good/evil; us/them; self/other; etc. In America, for example, and indeed throughout the West, we cleave to Bush era rhetorical legacies of terrorists as “evil doers” and ourselves as, well, warrior angels or avenging saints—so much so that even in our more enlightened Obama administration we still find a seeming inability to articulate anti-terrorism or counter-terrorism policies that differ significantly from those of the previous administration, despite the obvious fact that the previous administration was itself, at least from the perspective of a plurality of voters, an abject failure.<sup>4</sup> Nor are we able to reconcile vile images and “dark side” stories of our *far* less than angelic treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo or Abu Ghrab,<sup>5</sup> or the “collateral human damage” of our weapons on civilian populations—acts of abjection that are rightly denounced by our enemies and our friends as acts of “terrorism”—with our professed mission “to bring the evil doers to justice.” When I see Dick Cheney hauled into court in a handcuff, I’ll believe in the truth of that mission.

At the heart of our inability to win the war of ideas is a failure of more than message, or credibility, or even good will. In the first place, wars of ideas are seldom

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the statement by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, “Strategic Communication – Getting Back to Basics,” available at: <http://www.jcs.mil/newsarticle.aspx?ID=142>. Mullen is to be commended—cheered even—for his forthright assessment of US arrogance, lack of credibility, and need to listen. But throughout the statement there is a chilling binary opposition clearly in play: it is “us” versus “them,” “they,” and “the Muslim world.” While Admiral Mullen is right to say our failure to listen, to develop meaningful relationships, and to keep our promises is a major problem—and that launching “message bombs” won’t solve the problem—the depth of the binary opposition still gets in the way of creative thinking. Where is the “we” that includes the Other?

<sup>5</sup> For a fuller discussion of the “dark side” of leadership and its attendant fundamentalist view of communication, see Trethewey, A., & Goodall, H. L., Jr. Leadership reconsidered as historical subject: Sketches from the Cold War to Post-9/11. *Leadership*, 3, 457-477

won, as any academic will readily admit. Ideas are not nation-states. They are narratives, deeply rooted in histories, which are believed by some tribal units and disputed by others. For still others, the outer others beyond our eyes and ears, the narratives are either not relevant to their hunger or only the playful word pasture of the truly blessed and privileged. In other words—and to quote Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff and someone who in my humble opinion “gets it”—we cannot “capture the hearts and minds” of others; we must “engage them.”

That is a lesson learned of the first order. And following from that I offer these observations.

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The twin concepts of abjection and its end, alterity, help us make sense of more than just policy debates and research relating to terrorism. They help us understand the narrative world of terrorists, potential terrorists, and our relationship to them. They also help us understand the goal of “engagement” by opening a language window on the way in which the terms “terrorist” and “terrorism” collaborate with radical extremist communication practices to underscore a fundamental binary opposition that, in the words of Kenneth Burke, “divides the world where the world does not.”

The result is a radical fundamentalism made to legitimize a narrative of holy war through extreme bifurcation of the known world into two, and only two, camps—one made up of true believers and an “other” of infidels; one made up of “us” and another

made up of “them.” Jihadists versus Crusaders.<sup>6</sup> This unfortunate and unrealistic bifurcation serves to simplify a complex world that is otherwise threatening, unknown, ambiguous, different, and often unfair, so much so that it becomes the duty of all true believers—or all of “us,” whichever “us” you be—to rid the world of “them”—by force, a force, itself extreme, that often means a truck bomb when it doesn’t mean a flurry of bullets and hand grenades, purposefully targeted at civilians. It is a force so visually and physically repellent that it renders real the final horror we all have come to fear, the death-to-life of *us*, and, in proper binary response, what we want is the death-to-life for the terrorist, all of them, and by rude extension, anyone who looks like them, all of “them,” all of the Other and the abject.

And why not? What other narrative choice do we have? When we are complicit in the construction of a binary world, we are always bound to speak on one side or on the other; we are told there is no in-between. And from each opposing position, armed with opposing historical narratives and sense of purpose, we say we “made the only decision possible.” But as Kenneth Burke has pointed out, “if decisions were a choice between [two] alternatives, decisions would come easy. Decision is the selection and formulation of alternatives.”<sup>7</sup> By which Burke means that there are no easy decisions when language is the method of arriving at them, because at the core of any decision about symbolic action is a tension between our ability to imagine possibilities—that better narrative world we want to enter—and the inherent ambiguity and partisanship of any symbols selected to do that job.

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<sup>6</sup> See Jeff Sharlet, “Jesus Killed Mohammed,” *Harper’s*, May 2009, pp. 31-43.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Here & Elsewhere: The Collected Fiction of Kenneth Burke*. Jaffrey, New Hampshire: Black Sparrow Books/David Godine, 2005, p. 146.

Language is never neutral nor is the history that language narrates ever anything but partial, partisan, and problematic.<sup>8</sup> Our choices should not be merely to choose between opposing alternatives, but instead to understand competing narrative trajectories and, if we can manage it, to find creative alternatives by opposing any strong articulation of “inevitable” ends. Ends are *not* inevitable unless the trajectories that set them up fail to be understood or are not caught in time. And that set-up is made up of two easily accessible things: the larger historical narratives of a culture and people as well as how those narratives inform smaller units of perceived meanings in everyday circumstances. For example, it seems a small thing the difference between “you” and “them” *versus* “we” and “us,” but it is a difference that speaks volumes to the world. As does the tone in which the utterance is made.

Consider this passage from *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as Erica’s father, an American, tries to engage the narrator, Changez, about life in Pakistan:

*“...I like Pakistanis. But the elite has raped that place well and good, right? And fundamentalism. You guys have got some serious problems with fundamentalism.”*

*I felt myself bridle. There was nothing overtly objectionable in what he had said; indeed, his was a summary with some knowledge, much like the short news items on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*, which I had recently begun to read. But his tone—with, if you will forgive me, its typically American undercurrent of condescension—struck a negative chord with me, and it was only*

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<sup>8</sup> See Eric M. Eisenberg, H. L. Goodall, Jr., and Angela Trethewey, *Organizational Communication: Balancing Creativity and Constraint*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Bedford/ St. Martin's Press, 2010.

*out of politeness that I limited my response to ‘Yes, there are challenges, sir, but my family is there, and I can assure you it is not as bad as that.’*<sup>9</sup>

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But the arrogance of tone and the failure to understand cultural histories of the Other is not the only Beowulf out there.

The larger and far more powerful enemy, Grendel’s mother, if you will, is the way historical narratives, and the trajectories they represent or evoke, reproduce themselves, particularly in our global, hypermediated environment.<sup>10</sup> Once born into the world, these narratives have powerful lives that cannot be “taken back,” “redacted,” or denied.

Sometimes historical narratives are foundational: Consider the Pharaoh versus Moses, an Old Testament tale based on a binary opposition that “proves” divine intervention in human affairs.<sup>11</sup> The Pharaoh narrative has been appropriated for a variety of political and religious campaigns, each one designed to associate “us” with the righteous Moses and “them” with a powerful tyrant who disobeys God or Allah. For example, when Khalid Islambouli assassinated Anwar Sadat in Cairo in 1981, he cried, “I have killed the Pharaoh!” Today, in al-Qaeda transcripts and broadcasts, Osama bin

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<sup>9</sup> Hamid, p. 55.

<sup>10</sup> Pauline Cheong and Jeffrey Halverson, “Youths of Islam: Mediated identifications and interventions for violent extremism,” unpublished white paper.

<sup>11</sup> I am indebted to Jeff Halverson for this insight. See his *Theology and Creed in Sunni Islam* (New York: Palgrave, 2010).

Laden and other violent extremist leaders routinely refer to the U.S. and Western allies as “tyrants” and President Obama as the Pharaoh.

Powerful historical narratives that reproduce themselves do not have to be derived from sacred texts. Often they exist only in language fragments that serve to trigger historical events: Crusaders. Evil-doers. Holy war. Jews. Jihad. And lately popular culture offers icons and transmediation of images and symbols that affords those who counter their narratives with new materials. Consider the comic association of Indonesian terrorist Mas Selamat Kastari, the head of the Singapore branch of militant group *Jemaah Islamiah* (JI), to the hero of the popular television series, *Prison Break*.<sup>12</sup>

As a strategic communication practice, such iconic binary simplicity at the core of a terrorist or counter-terrorist message is the business equivalent of a particularly effective and efficient form of branding. But for the terrorist organization and those who oppose them, the true power of this form of ideological branding works beneath the surfaces, as an archetype, as a germinal narrative, that keeps getting repeated, and in its repetition, the binary worldview is thereby reinforced. The abject call born of the symbol of the “terrorist” creates the need to respond, to oppose, to negate. The result is that binary narratives are cyclical: the production of an extremist narrative by the Other then *reproduces* the need to create extremist narratives of our own; to oppose them, if you will, with *opposites*. Hence, as Dexter Felkins has named it, “the forever war.”<sup>13</sup>

Where do terrorist organizations and those who oppose them go to get the resources to create these narratives and counter-narratives?

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<sup>12</sup> I am indebted to Chris Lundry for this insight.

<sup>13</sup> Dexter Filkins, *The Forever War*. New York: Knopf 2008.

Once again, Kenneth Burke is helpful. He writes: “Man is the symbol-using animal, inventor of the negative, separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making, goaded by the spirit of hierarchy, and rotten with perfection.”<sup>14</sup>

In other words, we construct the abject “other” out of the dark stuff of ourselves—out of the negative symbols—of our culture, our values, our mission, our sense of Self. And then we work to perfect it. The abject, perfect Other than it is, is what we would prefer *not* to have to deal with or even admit that is within us. The abject is a potential terrorist strike, lying in narrative wait. To borrow a term and a notion from Freud, the abject represents the Id to our Ego.<sup>15</sup>

Back to Beowulf and Grendel.

Renee Trilling explains this relationship of the abject to the self in her study of the horror represented by the idea and cultural figure of Grendel’s mother in the *Beowulf* narrative:

“The abject, after all, originates within the culture from which it is expunged; its ‘powers of horror’ stem from precisely the originary unity that precedes abjection, and the abject terrifies us because we recognize that it is really a part of us. ... She has the power to horrify modern readers because she reminds us that there is no such thing as a unified, coherent identity, effecting a critique of culture that

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<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Language as symbolic action*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966, p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> The Pulitzer prize winning author Thomas Powers argues that the clandestine intelligence services function this way within American culture – as the Id to our culture’s Ego. See his *Intelligence Wars: American Secret History from Hitler to al-Qaeda*.

bridges the historical divide between the Anglo-Saxon text and its modern audiences.”<sup>16</sup>

So as we “expunge” the terrorist from civilized culture by creating an abject symbol of ultimate otherness, we rhetorically and narratively—and falsely—remove any trace of potential evil, and of evil doing, from ourselves. We deny that the capacity for evil, at least this terrorist form of evil, exists within us. We align ourselves with a avenging righteousness that would make any fundamentalist tremble with joy. And, at the same time, we learn to *fear* that which we have created in a way that would make that same fundamentalist rise up and cheer Amen.<sup>17</sup>

What we have done—and this is all we have done—is to decide to create two opposing camps of fundamentalists. What we have done is to make abject and Other, *each other*.

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Gerd Baumann is an anthropologist who has done a lot of excellent work on the problem of binary oppositions and national, ethnic, and religious identities.<sup>18</sup> He calls this binary language classification of identity and alterity “reverse mirror-imaging,” or

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<sup>16</sup> Renée R. Trilling, *Beyond Abjection: The Problem with Grendel’s Mother Again*, *Parergon* 24.1 (2007) p. 4, 20.

<sup>17</sup> For further explication of the role of cultural narratives and fear during times of war, please see H. L. Goodall, Jr., “Twice Betrayed by the Truth: A Narrative About the Cultural Similarities Between the Cold War and the Global War on Terror,” *Cultural Studies—Critical Methodologies*, 8 (August, 2008), 353-368.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Gerd Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle: Rethinking National, Ethnic, and Religious Identities*. London: Routledge, 1999. For an earlier study of the process of Islamism, see his *National Integration and Local Integrity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

“baby grammar.”<sup>19</sup> Elsewhere he calls it an “anti-grammar” because it essentially disallows any solution that doesn’t end the life of the binary Other, either through genocide, ethnocide, political, racial, or religious extermination.

What we have here, at the level of cultural grammar, is not so much a clash of civilizations, but more a clash of *binary cultural narratives*, two opposing ways of connecting ourselves, and our stories, to that understanding which provides meaning and purpose for our lives.

Baumann provides two intriguing possibilities for how cultures have transcended such binary oppositions. He begins by pointing out that Claude Levi-Straus understood that such binary constructions were not only limiting,<sup>20</sup> neither were they ethnographically correct.

For example, E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s classic study of the Nuer in the southern Sudan revealed that their notion of identity was far more complex. It was likely that tribal, clan, and familial identities segmented over four or five generations spawned personal allegiances and resources for tribal fealty that may lay dormant until called upon in particular situations. In other words, identities *and* alterities were not absolute, but *contextual*.<sup>21</sup> In Bauman’s terms, the Nuer could, and did, “selve themselves.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See Gerd Baumann, “Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach,” in G. Baumann and A. Gingrich (eds.), *Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2005, pp. 18-48. Much of the following discussion of three grammars is drawn from this chapter.

<sup>20</sup> See his *Structural Anthropology*. Trans. Claire Jacobson. New York: Basic Books, 1963 and *The Raw and the Cooked*. Trans. John and Doreen Weightman. New York: Harper & Row, 1970.

<sup>21</sup> E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940.

<sup>22</sup> Bauman, p. 23.

One result of this segmented self was that “the Other may be my foe in a context placed at a lower level of segmentation but may simultaneously be my ally in a context placed at a higher level of segmentation.”<sup>23</sup> In fact, it wasn’t until the Nuer, as a people, were organized against British colonial rule that tribal and clan “small wars” ended, at least temporarily. That was because until that time, the British—from a binary perspective a clear and present Other—were seen as such by the clans and tribes and families that made up the Nuer. They were too busy protecting their families and businesses and fighting each other in tribal and clan wars.

This historical example is useful for three reasons. First, it provides a way of thinking about identities in the plural, thus adding a level of complexity and realism to the binary oppositions that are so much a part of the abject status of terrorists and terrorism. Second, it provides an analogy to the present mess in the Middle East and Indonesia and elsewhere that allows tribes and clans and families to provide contexts for interpreting motives and behaviors.<sup>24</sup> In this way, a “terrorist” who may also be a brother, a Sunni, and a small businessman, can best be understood not solely through the symbolic end of his abject act of violence, but in accord with a variety of tensions and everyday concerns that we all share—the safety and security of our family, the relationship we have to our brethren, how we feel about our country, whether we are treated with respect, and the ability to earn a decent living in uncertain times. Like Changez, we are, all of us, complex. Third, “selving the self” into segments provides

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<sup>23</sup> Baumann, p. 24.

<sup>24</sup> See Kilcullen, D. *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*. Oxford University Press, 2009 for a nuanced discussion how local concerns are differentially connected to broad, global “terrorist” agendas among various (potential) insurgency populations.

openings for conversations and discourse that otherwise could not exist if all we have is fear of the abject Other.<sup>25</sup> How we behave in that conversation, as well as how our actions and intentions are interpreted, will be as much a by-product of our appreciation of culture and history as it will reflect a desire to move from a binary to a ternary position. And with that possibility comes the opportunity for cooperation.

Of course, academic postmodern theorists have, for a long time now, been claiming that our selves are fragmented, multiple, and no longer anchored by some foundational grand narrative of truth.<sup>26</sup> We have at our disposal many theoretical and conceptual tools to explain how our selves are “served.” And yet, those ideas have not found any real purchase in the world of policy debates, leadership studies, or in our daily conversations about issues like terrorism.<sup>27</sup>

One site where these theoretical ideas are made meaningful is in the context of *stories* about experience rendered in interesting and intelligible ways. For example, one

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<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of the communicative construction of a multiple and fractured self, see Tracy, S. J. & Trethewey, A. Fracturing the real-self ← → fake-self dichotomy: Moving toward “crystallized” organizational discourses and identities. *Communication Theory*, 15 (2005) 168-195.

<sup>26</sup> This could be a long footnote full of postmodern references, but suffice it to say that Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1984, defined a critique of metanarratives or “grand narratives” of progress derived from (a) *Enlightenment-inspired* accounts of technological innovation fueled by scientific breakthroughs and discoveries, and/or (b) *ideologically-inspired* Marxist histories based on the politics of social class and economic divisions or *capitalist-inspired* histories based on the politics of free markets, opportunity, and individual “luck and pluck.” A third grand narrative about “progress” is one long associated the human struggle to live in accord with the teachings—the stories—of God/Jesus/Allah and therefore to earn an afterlife. Although postmodernists see *religious narratives* as decidedly pre-modern, or informing a largely mythic view of life prior to the Enlightenment, there can be no doubt that these powerful explanatory narratives provide millions of people with defining resources for individual beliefs as well as entire cultures.

<sup>27</sup> Thanks to Angela Trethewey, for encouraging my inclusion of the modern/postmodern framework in this paper.

sterling example of how such a discourse may be constructed is evident in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Changez, who you've already met, is a Pakistani living in New York City, educated at Princeton, and in love with an American beauty named Erica, is a character drawn from a *nexus* of loyalties, including those of being a rising star in the Manhattan financial world, an immigrant with deep family ties back home, a lover and friend, proud of his country and his adopted country, and, at heart a deeply spiritual person.

But it is in his mixed emotional reaction to the narrative “triggering events” of 9/11 and the resulting symbolic suicide of Erica, that he discovers a self within the self that he shows to the world, and it is at once a source of personal alterity *and* identity. That Changez must learn to manage *the internal struggle of the self within his own Other* is what leads him to become “a reluctant fundamentalist.” An interlocutor whom, depending on how he is treated in this conversation with one of “us,” could turn either way. This remarkable novel, perhaps more than most official reports and studies I've read, offers to those of us who study terrorists and terrorism is a clear and present example of segmented identities and historical narratives at work in what President Obama calls the current “overseas contingency operation.”<sup>28</sup>

Baumann also brings into the discussion of ternary grammar two other intriguing possibilities for complicating our understanding of alterity: Louis Dumont's notion of “homo hierarchicus”<sup>29</sup> and Lech Mroz's application of Emile Benveniste's notion of

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<sup>28</sup> See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/5050429/War-on-terror-rebranded-as-overseas-contingency-operation.html>

<sup>29</sup> Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

“us,” “you,” and “them.”<sup>30</sup> Baumann separates the two concepts—one as a further example of segmentation, the other a third grammar of identity he calls “encompassment.”<sup>31</sup> For my purposes, they both represent ways in which people differentiate between and among others in ways that simultaneously allows for “one-up” and “one-down” positions to be relationally maintained, depending on the context and the resources brought to the interpretation of local (or expedient) meaning.

For Dumont, the caste system in India provides a perfect canvas from which to explore this thesis, a place where status is highly relational and *situationally* dependent, and where local interpretations can be highly ironic, or seemingly nonsensical, as in: “Sikhs are Hindus ... but the trouble is they don’t know it.”<sup>32</sup> Baumann points out that this sort of organization of identities is also prevalent in Africa, where everyday management of multiple and even conflicting sources of status, identity, and alterity provide different ways to see how a non-binary identity/alterity is practically constructed, and how a lower level of diversity segmentation may be accommodated under a more universal identity.

For Mroz, it is the Gypsies in Poland who have created a language system of otherness capable of distinguishing among (1) “us”—the inner circle of ourselves or other Gypsies we consider to be “our own”—(2) “others”—the middle circle composed of Gypsies like us but not us—and (3) an outer circle of “strangers,” or non-Gypsies, with whom we should have neither dialogue nor marriage. By creating a ternary grammar the

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<sup>30</sup> Lech Mroz, “People and Non-People. The Way of Distinguishing One’s Own Group by Gypsies in Poland,” *Ethnologia Polona* 10: 109-128. Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, Mary Elizabeth Meek (trans.), Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971.

<sup>31</sup> Baumann, p. 47.

<sup>32</sup> Baumann, p. 31.

Gypsies in Poland make distinctions between and among varieties of otherness, once again based on relational context but also by geographical region.

Baumann points out that “selfing by appropriating ... or adopting ... or adapting selected kinds of otherness” offers a richer vocabulary to express identities and alterities. Although we may find some hope in the cultural lessons of a ternary system, he warns that ethnographic evidence suggests that accommodations of varieties of otherness work well enough *until the issue is real power*. At that point, all the ternary possibilities collapse back into a fundamentalist binary and, at least as history records it, the extreme violence either renews or begins.

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What makes us behave this way? Notice I am using the ternary “us” because I think we can all identify with multiple crises in our time where bifurcating identities and demonizing the Other were part and parcel of our daily lives. Any war will obviously do it. Any class war will do it as well (e.g. the rich vs. the poor; labor vs. management); any war between the sexes amped up on gender equity and human rights; any racial or ethnic division that causes a sense of injustice or that fuels a sense of entitlement; any contested cause that gets tied to some sacred text (e.g. abortion). While it is true that we can recognize, identify with, and perhaps even participate willingly in these bifurcated worldviews, there is a difference between holding strong opinions and moving from the expression of them to violence.

Although we don't like to think of ourselves in these terms—as someone else's despised Other or as a person who holds rigid political and/or religious views—we have, at least most of us, been “radicalized” by fundamentalist discourses designed to appeal to our deepest fears, our most cherished hopes, and our most profound beliefs. Extremist views are the product of strong narratives, not weak ones. For every academic who has been radicalized by texts, lectures, friends, colleagues, and a personal identification with a discipline or subject there are many more human beings who have undergone a similar process outside the academy, and who have come to accept that their ends are not those of a *theoretical* victory. Even Marx believed that the end of historical analysis was revolutionary action.

That said, the move from strong political views and strong historical narratives to radical extremist violence is less well understood, but as a 2009 study of 117 violent extremists in the UK and the US points out:

“Terrorists do not fall from the sky. They emerge from a set of strongly held beliefs. They are radicalized. Then they become terrorists. ...

Gartenstein-Ross and Grossman identify six indicators of jihadist radicalization. The first three of these have to do with how rigidly (or legalistically) one may interpret one's religion, who he comes to trust or not trust, and how he views the relationship between the West and Islam. These indicators are observable only through the statements made by subjects themselves or what they have related to others. The second three indicators, which comprise

manifesting a low tolerance for religious deviance, attempting to impose one's beliefs on others, and expressing radical views, are more easily observable.

Gartenstein-Ross and Grossman find evidence among their subjects of all six indicators, some more powerful than others. Interestingly, the sixth indicator—the expression of radical political views—was found in most of the terrorists in the study, regardless of whether the other indicators were present. This suggests that religious faith alone does not propel one into terrorism—radical political views are prerequisite. We still need to know more about how radicalized persons ultimately are recruited or recruit themselves into terrorism—the second part of the arc. Is it a matter of heightened anger or of whom they happen to encounter, a natural leader committed to violence or someone who steers them to a terrorist recruiter?”<sup>33</sup>

What this study suggests is that there must be some kind of “triggering device” that leads an otherwise ordinary person with strong convictions and a particular understanding of history and religion to become a terrorist. Certainly a trigger makes a kind of common sense. All of us can think of a situation in which we, or someone we know was moved to violence. The triggering device may have been a harsh word, an untoward look, unrequited love, a sense of betrayal, a sense of loyalty to a friend or cause, a book that romanticized violence, a book that romanticized obedience to God, a book that challenged your worldview, a situation that got out of control, a speech that

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<sup>33</sup> The full report is available in pdf format from this blog site, which provides an overview: [http://counterterrorismblog.org/2009/04/an\\_empirical\\_examination\\_of\\_th.php](http://counterterrorismblog.org/2009/04/an_empirical_examination_of_th.php)

moved a crowd into the streets, or, plainly, just a blood lust for a fist fight, mere drunkenness or drug abuse, or, perversely, a desire to commit evil.

That's only a partial list.

Triggering devices are important to study, but the move from conviction to violence is more about the *narrative surround* that loads the gun, points the way, and makes the triggering device work. If that narrative is founded on an historical binary opposition (e.g. the "choice" of good versus evil; Pharaoh or Moses); and if the *form* that narrative takes is one rooted in a desire—a passion—for justice or martyrdom; and if the desire that established that narrative's trajectory must be, or *can only be satisfied* by a violent end, then yes, the trigger matters. But that is *only* because a trigger, some trigger, virtually any trigger is *inevitable*. As Kenneth Burke expresses it, "form *is* the appeal."<sup>34</sup> Or, in more modern terms, for any narrative to be satisfying, every set-up has to have a pay-off and a trajectory to get there.

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The hard question very quickly becomes: Can such a modernist narrative, such a metanarrative trajectory, be interrupted? Can the narrative move from desire to violent satisfaction be stopped?

Allow me to ask this question another way: Can the potential abject—the horror—be countered by engaging his or her alterity?

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<sup>34</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement*. Indianapolis, IN: Bobs-Merrill, 1973, p. 138.

My colleagues and I in the Consortium for Strategic Communication believe the answer to those questions is “yes.” But to do that successfully means first engaging our own alterity by acquiring a deep and appreciative understanding of historical narratives in contested regions, by listening more and speaking less, by learning to see ourselves as Others see us, by living with rather than trying always to resolve the ambiguity of intercultural contact, and by giving up on an antiquated message-based, sender model of persuasion in counter-terrorism and public diplomacy in favor of a new model derived from a systems theory integration of critical and interpretive approaches to communication that we call “pragmatic complexity.”<sup>35</sup>

These steps will contribute to improved engagements with those Others who have not yet been radicalized and perhaps even with Others who have. But we are realistic in our assessment of the power of narrative to counter violent extremism. There will always be those who cannot be reached, cannot be turned around, and cannot be ignored or placated with kind words or humanitarian deeds. I am thinking now of those Others who have already committed not only to the ideology, but to the practices, of violent extremism.

For example, squads of assassins from the Taliban. Their “Night Letters” are a form of communication designed to create terror strong enough to prevent voting in free elections under a very real threat of murder. I add only that these Taliban were very thorough in carrying out their threats, and so that revenge narrative has become a permanent and frightening feature of the Afghanistan political struggle.

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<sup>35</sup> For a fuller account of pragmatic complexity theory, please see Steven R. Corman, Angela Trethewey, and H. L. Goodall, Jr., *Weapons on Mass Persuasion: Strategic Communication to Combat Violent Extremism*. New York: Peter Lang, 2008.

These assassins are murderers. Murders are criminals, who, in this case, just happen also to be terrorists. We have laws to deal with criminals, and it is our hope that the hopeful narrative of a rule of law society can somehow trump the narrative associated with these death threats. But there is clearly a lot of work to do—a lot of “pragmatic complexity” to engage—before that will happen.

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As I said when I began this talk, I doubt that what I’ve shared with you will be easily transferred into new policies. The symbol of the abject is too strong. The binary is too entrenched. The pockets of legislators who could do the job are lined with war profits, and there isn’t any real money in cultural understanding except in trade agreements or preventing insurable damages. Besides, there *are* “bad guys” out there calling for a new Caliphate, calling for death to apostate intellectuals, and actively recruiting youth to their violent extremist cause.

See, I told you so. We understand each other. We share the same privilege and belong to the same club. You can dismiss my arguments and we can still remain friends. Or you can agree with me in principal but also agree with me that there is little that can be done because the system is corrupt.

But I don’t want to end on a down note.

So let me sum up what my talk offers to management. After all, someone ought to get out of this room with something useful and positive. That’s why we do this sort of thing.

One message I hope leaders and managers hear and understand is that defining others by their otherness sets up a binary opposition. The consequences of this binary opposition are profound even if they never violent. First, differences tend to become exaggerated. The more they are exaggerated—in office gossip, in memos, in barroom stories, in intimate narratives—the more likely Beowulf is replaced by Grendel’s mother, which is to say they more likely they will be reproduced, and, in their reproduction, the cultural divide will deepen. Probably you don’t want that. Misunderstandings lead to resentment and resentment leads to anger and frustration and perhaps a desire for revenge.

If you are thinking “revenge for what?” you’ve missed the point. Read *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

The second lesson I’ve derived from our work in the Consortium is something my countryman William Faulkner once said and I thought I understood, but I now understand better: “the past isn’t over; hell, it’s not even *past*.” In the U.S. and indeed throughout the Western world, our concept of time is driven by 24-hour news cycles and an interest in the immediate.<sup>36</sup> It has been this way inching this way since the advent of the term “the news,” which mass communication scholars mark at about the same time as the widespread use of synchronized time for train schedules. Hence, in the West, time always has an *immediate* value and a *future* destination.

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<sup>36</sup> Mary S. Mander, *Framing Friction: Media and Social Conflict*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998.

For others it is opposite. The *past* is of immediate value and it never alters.<sup>37</sup> In fact, as Faulkner says, “it’s not even past.” Historical narratives are not just old stories that shed light on how people used to live; they are powerful resources for interpreting the present and how we must live. They are sources of historical injustice that must yet be made right. They contain ideas that matter, and those ideas have consequences. If you find you have Muslim employees or colleagues who think of you as a tyrant, you may want to give that label some careful thought. It might not mean the same thing to you as it does to them. Similarly, if they call you Moses you should probably reflect on that as well, but admittedly that name comes with a whole different set of expectations and challenges.

Third, rigidity in office status differences often breeds a fundamentalism in office politics. Instead of adhering to the old and in the way organizational adages about the natural separation of species by titles and salaries, consider creating a ternary system of identity segmentation that admits to contextual and situational exigencies and affords new opportunities for shared connection with people other than those of your ilk.

Fourth, remember that communication begins with listening, not speaking. Go quietly down the office corridor and open your mind. Ask others for their views and pay full attention to what they tell you. They may not be right, but they deserve to be respected. If you make a mistake, admit it. If you promise something, deliver it. If the situation becomes intolerable, first think about how you helped make it that way.

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Said Qutb *Milestones (revised ed.)* Burr Ridge, IL: American Trust Publications, 1991, in which the past, specifically the *Jahilliyya*, determines the future.

Fifth, and most importantly, narratives, not “message bombs,”<sup>38</sup> will set us free. As Hamid in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* demonstrates, Changez narrative had experiential anchors but it could well have had an entirely different interpretive frame. I wonder, too, if President Bush and Tony Blair had come at a response to 9/11 differently, how things might well have turned out? If, instead of reverting to binaries and demonization of the Other in the aftermath of the Abject images, they—we—would have used that crisis in meaning to engage rather than to negate, to learn from rather than annihilate.

The challenges borne of not creating those alternatives is what we live with, and worry about today.

So, finally, my last lesson learned is the importance engaging the abject and the alter as if your life and livelihoods depends on it. Because chances are good that it will.

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<sup>38</sup> See Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, news release of August 28, 2009 at: <http://www.jcs.mil/newsarticle.aspx?ID=142> for a critique of the current strategic communication model, and for his dismissal of “message bombs” as effective in engaging “hearts and minds.”