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Language Power and Politics: Critical Discourse Analysis and the War on Terrorism

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'It does not matter whether the war is actually happening, and, since no decisive victory is possible, it does not matter whether the war is going well or badly. All that is needed is that a state of war should exist.'

George Orwell, *1984*

The 'war on terrorism' is both a set of institutional practices (military and intelligence operations, diplomatic initiatives, special government departments and security bodies, standard operating procedures), as well as an accompanying discursive project. That is, it is simultaneously a limited range of possible statements which promote a limited range of meaning[2]; or, a special political language of counter-terrorism with its own assumptions, symbolic system, rhetorical modes and tropes, metaphors, narratives and meanings, and its own exclusive forms of knowledge. While studies on the practice of America's post-September 11, 2001 counter-terrorism campaign are numerous[3], apart from a few notable exceptions,[4] studies on the discourse of counter-terrorism are few and far between.

There are both ontological and normative reasons why a critical analysis of the discourse of the 'war on terrorism' is urgently called for. Ontologically, as a number of important works have reminded us,[5] political reality is a social construct, manufactured through discursive practices and shared systems of meaning. Language does not simply reflect reality, it actually co-constitutes it. As a consequence, a fully informed understanding of the current global 'war on terrorism' is unattainable in the absence of a critical deconstruction of the official language of counter-terrorism.

From a normative viewpoint, the enactment of any large-scale project of political violence—such as war or counter-terrorism—requires a significant degree of political and social consensus and consensus is not possible without language. The process of inducing consent—of normalising the practice of counter-terrorist war—requires more than just propaganda or so-called 'public

diplomacy'; it actually requires the construction of a whole new language, or a kind of public narrative, that manufactures approval while simultaneously suppressing individual doubts and wider political protest. To put it another way, power is a social phenomenon and constantly needs to be legitimated; language is the medium of legitimation.[6] Thus, the deployment of language by politicians is an exercise of power and without rigorous public interrogation and critical examination, unchecked power inevitably becomes abusive. This is never truer than during times of national crisis when the authorities assume enhanced powers to deal with perceived threats. Academics that live within a relatively open society have a normative responsibility to act as constructive critics and to challenge the lies and obfuscations of government; this is critical for the strengthening of civil society.[7]

Alarmingly, the abuse of state power under the banner of the 'war on terrorism' is already well advanced—from the unconstitutional powers to try 'enemy combatants' in secret trials to the manipulation of intelligence information about Iraq and the unconstitutional violation of civil liberties in America, Britain and elsewhere. The systematic and institutionalised abuse of Iraqi prisoners first exposed in April 2004 is a direct consequence of the language used by senior administration officials: conceiving of terrorist suspects as 'evil', 'inhuman' and 'faceless enemies of freedom' (and with hoods on they really are faceless) creates an atmosphere where abuses become normalised and tolerated. There is therefore, an ethical duty to cross examine and scrutinise the language of political leaders, to challenge what they say, rather than just passively and uncritically absorb it or reproduce it in academic discourse.

This paper is divided into three parts. In the initial section, the methodological parameters of applying a critical analysis to political language are discussed. The second section then applies a critical discourse analysis to aspects of the official language of the 'war on terrorism', focusing primarily on the ways in which identity and the threat of terrorism are discursively constructed. The final section reflects on some of the ethical and normative issues confronting societies in the midst of a massive counter-terrorist campaign. The overall argument is simple: as responsible academics and concerned citizens, we have an ethical duty to challenge and resist the official language of counter-terrorism because it is an abusive exercise of hegemonic power. Critical discourse analysis provides a useful methodological approach for such a task.

Language and Politics: Why Words Matter

How does language co-constitute reality? Why are words so important to political analysis? The answer can be simply stated: language is never neutral; words don't just describe the world, they actually help to make it. As such, language can never be employed in a purely objective sense. There are several reasons for this.

In the first place, as linguists and anthropologists have discovered, all language has a basic binary structure such that almost every noun, adjective and verb has its direct opposite. It is a feature of the underlying architecture of language. Critically, this opposition between terms usually implies a 'devaluation of one term and a favoring of the other.'[8] The natural inequality where one term is lacking something the opposite embodies is rarely questioned or challenged. Some of the well-known examples of the way the binary system works include: good/evil, love/hate, new/old, normal/deviant, primitive/modern, native/foreigner, and west/east. Speaking about 'civilisation' for example (as in 'terrorism threatens our civilisation'), is impossible without bringing to mind the concept of 'barbarism' as its negative opposite.

Second, language plays an active role in creating and changing perceptions, cognition and emotions. As something particularly human, language moulds how we see the world; it is the main determinant of our perceptions and our access to concrete reality. From knowing the difference between an apple and a hand grenade, to knowing what to do with each in relevant

situations, language shapes our understanding of the world around us.[9] More than affecting perceptions, language also structures cognition—it affects the way we think, and particularly how we make strategic choices. By using a restricted set of words and word formations, some choices can appear perfectly reasonable and commonsensical while others appear absurd. Expressed another way, the language we use at any given moment privileges one viewpoint over others, naturalising some understandings as rational and others as nonsensical.[10] As a consequence, language also affects our emotions. It is in an important sense, the place where our psychic and social lives intersect. Certain words or combinations of words can make us feel anxious, fearful, angry or joyful. This generates immense power for those that deploy them. Politicians, propagandists and advertisers have known this for a long time, and in fact, we see it almost every day in people's reactions to the use of certain words in the media, such as 'paedophile', 'AIDS', 'humanitarian disaster', 'murder', 'weapons of mass destruction' and 'terrorist'.

A third reason why words cannot be considered neutral is because words have histories. In themselves, words have no inherent meaning; rather, they have to acquire meaning in their own discursive setting.[11] The process by which words obtain meaning is often lengthy and takes place through repetition and their careful and selective use in specific contexts. For example, the use of the terms 'civilised' and 'barbarous' cannot avoid invoking the history of these words as they were applied by Christian Europe in the Middle Ages, and by imperialists and colonists in the nineteenth century. There is a history to their meaning that affects their usage in a contemporary context. In other cases, words can take on new meanings through specific forms of usage.[12] Because words have histories, the act of naming things is always a highly charged process that can have serious political and social consequences. This effect of naming is especially powerful in terms of political violence because, for example, to 'call an act of political violence terrorist is not merely to describe it but to judge it.'[13] Consider the difference between calling the killing of an abortion doctor 'a murder' and calling it 'an act of terrorism'; the two names for the same act have very contrasting meanings and would likely elicit very different responses from both the public and the authorities.

The methodological approach I have employed to examine the official language of the 'war on terrorism' is known broadly as critical discourse analysis. This approach is at once both a technique for analysing specific texts or speech acts, and a way of understanding the relationship between discourse and social and political phenomena. By engaging in concrete, linguistic textual analysis—that is, by doing systematic analyses of spoken and written language —critical discourse analysis aims to shed light on the links between texts and societal practices and structures, or, the linguistic-discursive dimension of social action.[14]

The approach is based on a number of crucial assumptions. It assumes that discourse is a form of social practice which both makes or constitutes the social world, and is at the same time constituted by other social practices. Discourses both contribute to the shaping of social structures and are also shaped by them; there is a dialectical relationship between the two. Of even greater import, critical discourse analysis assumes that discursive practices are never neutral, but rather they contribute to the creation and reproduction of unequal power relations between social groups. That is, discourses possess a clear ideological character; they are the construction and deployment of 'meaning in the service of power.'[15] Or, more specifically, discourses act as constructions of meaning that contribute to the production, reproduction and transformation of relations of domination in society.[16] Thus, a central aim of critical discourse analysis lies in revealing the means by which language is deployed to maintain power. What makes critical discourse analysis 'critical' is its normative commitment to positive social change.

In terms of studying the role and use of language, there are two levels at which critical discourse analysis functions. First, it engages directly with specific texts in an effort to discover how discursive practices operate linguistically within those texts. Second, because individual

text analysis is not sufficient on its own to shed light on the relationship between discourse and social processes, critical discourse analysis adds a wider interdisciplinary perspective which combines textual and social analysis.[17] In essence, critical discourse analysis involves carefully reading a specific text—such as a speech, interview, radio address or report—and employing a series of analytical questions: What assumptions, beliefs and values underlie the language in the text? How does the grammar, syntax and sentence construction reinforce the meanings and effects of the discursive constructions contained in the text? What are the histories and embedded meanings of the important words in the text? What patterns can be observed in the language, and how do different parts of the text relate to each other? What knowledge or practices are normalised by the language in the text? How does the language create, reinforce or challenge power relations in society? Finding answers to these questions goes some way towards understanding how discourses work to construct social processes and structures in ways that reproduce power relations.

In my analysis of the language of the 'war on terrorism' I chose to focus mainly on the speeches, interviews and public addresses given by senior members of the Bush administration.[18] I examined over 100 speeches, interviews, radio broadcasts and reports to Congress between September 11, 2001 and January 31, 2004; these texts were a representative sample of more than 6,000 such texts on the subject of America's 'war on terrorism' for that period. I began by examining all the important speeches that garnered major public attention or were of great symbolic importance, such as the September 11 and September 20, 2001 addresses to the American people, the State of the Union addresses and anniversary and commemorative speeches. Lastly, I tried to ensure a selection of different speakers, from the president to senior ambassadors, as well as texts from the entire period.

Writing the War on Terrorism

The discourse of the 'war on terrorism' comprises a vast corpus of texts (speeches, laws, reports, policy documents, operating manuals, memos, letters, emails, and websites— among others), and draws on a great many assumptions, beliefs, myths, tropes and narratives. It also employs a variety of rhetorical and discursive strategies. John Murphy argues that President Bush, for example, almost solely employed an epideictic rhetorical mode in his 'war on terrorism' texts. That is, Bush's epideictic rhetoric 'shapes the world that provides the backdrop of values and beliefs, heroes and villains, triumphs and tragedies against which and through which deliberative and forensic judgments are made in a ceaseless swirl of discourse.'[19] In keeping with this primary genre, the discourse relies on a powerful mix of analogy ('Al Qaeda is to terrorism what the mafia is to crime'), amplification (Al Qaeda wanted to 'kill *all* Americans'), use of visual imagery (Bush carrying the 'police shield of a man named George Howard who died at the World Trade Center trying to save others'), popular entertainment tropes (the 'American hero'), foundational meta-narratives (Pearl Harbor and World War II, the fight for Civilization), and a ubiquitous over-arching Manichean frame (good versus evil, 'either you are with us or you are with the terrorists').

The following critical discourse analysis can only provide a brief survey of some of the ways in which the official language of the 'war on terrorism' seeks to normalize and institutionalize the Bush administration's counter-terrorism policies; a more in-depth treatment of the discourse can be found elsewhere.[20] Specifically, I focus on the ways in which the language of Administration officials attempts to construct identity and the nature of the terrorist threat. For the sake of clarity, some words in the texts of official speeches have been highlighted to indicate the basis of claims and analyses.

Writing Identities: Evil Terrorists and Good Americans

The realm of foreign policy, and particularly foreign adversaries, is enormously significant for 'writing' identities.[21] Foreign policy is critical for maintaining internal/external boundaries, and war (as a special form of foreign policy) plays a central role in maintaining the domains of inside/outside, foreign/domestic, self/other. This is no less true for the 'war on terrorism', which

is constructed largely in an epideictic rhetorical mode, rather than a deliberative mode.[22] Bush makes appeals that attempt to unify the community and amplify its virtues; national character rather than national deliberation determine its actions. In fact, it has been argued that the very concept of the political itself is based on the identification of the 'enemy'; in other words, the enemy terrorist in the 'war on terrorism' acts as the 'enabling other' of the state—its negative justification.[23] More than just identity maintenance then, the discourse of self and other in the rhetoric of counter-terrorism co-constitutes the political; it permits the state as practice.

Perhaps the most important feature of the construction of identity in this discourse is the ubiquitous use of a rhetorical trope of 'good and evil'. Deeply embedded in American rhetorical traditions and religious life (as well as being a sub-plot of the 'civilization-barbarism' meta-narrative that the administration is so fond of), this language essentializes the terrorists as both satanic and morally corrupt. On September 11, Bush stated that 'Today, our nation saw *evil*, the very worst of human nature';[24] in subsequent texts, he frequently refers to terrorists as 'the evil ones', and 'evildoers'. These are theological terms, deployed largely for a Southern conservative audience, but also appealing to popular entertainment understandings of 'good guys' and 'bad guys'. As such, it is a demonological move in which the terrorists are individually and collectively marked as 'cruel', 'mad' and driven by 'hate'; perhaps inadvertently, it also supernaturalizes them. In this agent/act ratio, the character of the terrorists precedes their actions: the terrorists did what they did because it is in their nature to do so—they murdered because that is what evil, demonic terrorists do.[25] It is a powerful discourse, and an act of demagoguery, which de-contextualizes and de-historicizes the actions of the terrorists, emptying them of any political content, while simultaneously de-humanizing them. After all, there can be no deeper explanation for such acts, and there can be no reasoning or compromising with evil; the only right response is exorcism and purification. At the same time, the radical evil argument[26] is a long used strategy of silencing liberal dissent: from Leo Strauss and Reinhold Neibuhr to Ronald Reagan, liberals have been charged with lacking both a realistic sense of human evil and the moral courage to confront it.

In an extension of re-making the attackers as demons, they are also scripted as inhuman or non-human. Bush speaks of the '*curse* of terrorism that is upon the face of the earth',[27] while Colin Powell refers to 'the *scourge* of terrorism'.[28] This medical metaphor is restated more explicitly by Rumsfeld: 'We share the belief that terrorism is a *cancer* on the human condition'.[29] Bush in turn, speaks of the danger to the body politic posed by 'terrorist *parasites* who threaten their countries and our own'.[30] In this construction, the terrorist is re-made as a dangerous organism that makes its host ill; they hide interiorly, drawing on the lifeblood of their unsuspecting hosts and spreading poison. This particular language is actually a precursor to the disciplinary idea of 'the enemy within'; they are the new 'reds under the bed'. Of course, such 'an evil and *inhuman* group of men'[31]—these '*faceless* enemies of human dignity'[32]—are undeserving of our sympathy or protection. While it would be wrong to treat an enemy soldier inhumanely, or torture a criminal suspect, the same cannot be said for a parasite, a cancer, a curse. If the enemy is removed from the moral realm of human community, then by extension, actions towards them cannot be judged on moral terms. This is extremely liberating for a government fighting a hidden enemy, as it means that those government agencies that practice the 'black arts' can be unleashed with impunity.

However, as if it were not enough to strip the enemy of all human features, the discourse also goes on to write them as fundamentally 'alien' and 'foreign'. As John Ashcroft states:

Today I'm announcing several steps that we're taking to enhance our ability to protect the United States from the threat of *terrorist aliens*. […] The Foreign Terrorist Tracking Task Force that Mr. McCraw will lead will ensure that federal agencies coordinate their efforts to bar from the United States all *aliens* who meet any of the following criteria: *aliens* who are representatives, members or

supporters of terrorist organizations; *aliens* who are suspected of engaging in terrorist activity; or *aliens* who provide material support to terrorist activity.[33]

This designation of 'alien terrorists' in particular, is the ultimate expression of 'otherness' and is designed to clearly demarcate the boundaries between the inside and the outside, between those who belong to the community and those outside of it. In other words, not only are the terrorists disqualified from the domain of our community, they are disqualified from humanity itself. In a society immersed in the movie mythology of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Alien*, *Independence Day*, and *The X-Files*, the meanings of the term 'alien terrorist' oscillate between 'extra-terrestrial parasite' and 'foreign enemy' without a hint of irony. After all, alien invasion movies are simply metaphors for the fear of foreign invasion. Anthropologically, the trope of the evil/cancerous/alien terrorist 'monster'—the mode of composing social relations among terms—is actually the cultural projection of the tabooed 'wild man' figure of the Western imagination.[34] That is, rooted in the fundamental need to control dangerous behavior, taboos function to locate, identify and segregate transgressions and dangers. In the absence of the (old) barbarians and the 'red menace', terrorism now fulfills these functions to a tee.

On the other side of the identity coin, Americans are simultaneously constructed as being the polar opposite of the terrorist nature. The first major discursive inscription of the American character comes early on at the Prayer and Remembrance Day service on September 14, 2001 . At this symbolically charged and constitutive pageant, Bush says:

> In this trial, we have been reminded, and the world has seen, that our fellow Americans are *generous* and *kind*, *resourceful* and *brave*. We see our national character in rescuers working past exhaustion; in long lines of blood donors; in thousands of citizens who have asked to work and serve in any way possible. And we have seen our national character in eloquent acts of *sacrifice*. […] In these acts, and in many others, Americans showed a deep commitment to one another, and an abiding *love* for our country. Today, we feel what Franklin Roosevelt called the warm courage of national *unity*. This is a unity of every faith, and every background.[35]

Bush is constructing a new world of clearly demarcated characters: where terrorists are cruel, 'the American people' are generous and kind; where terrorists are hateful, Americans are loving; where terrorists are cowardly, Americans are brave and heroic; and where terrorists hide and run, Americans are united. This highlighting and amplification is necessary to inscribe the essential qualities of insiders and outsiders, and plays through a movie-based mode of the simple opposites of 'good guys and bad guys'.

Another ubiquitous motif in the discourse is the 'hero' narrative, which again, is modelled on popular entertainment scripts. Every story in American popular culture has a cast of heroes and villains. The 'war on terrorism' is no different: every EMS worker on September 11 is Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*; every member of the armed forces in Afghanistan and Iraq is Tom Hanks in *Saving Private Ryan*; every ordinary citizen is Mel Gibson in *The Patriot*. Rumsfeld, in a memorial service the Pentagon victims, constructs these all-American heroes:

> We remember them as *heroes*. And we are right to do so. […] 'He was a *hero* long before the eleventh of September,' said a friend of one of those we have lost—'a *hero* every single day, a *hero*

to his family, to his friends and to his professional peers.' […] About him and those who served with him, his wife said: 'It's not just when a plane hits their building. They are *heroes* every day.' '*Heroes* every day.' We are here to affirm that.[36]

In one sense, this could be seen simply national therapy—a way of giving meaning and respect to the lives lost. However, in its discursive function, it is also the inscription of the heroic Americans who are the opposite of the cowardly terrorists; it is the rendering of America 's soldiers who are risking their lives to fight for the Homeland, freedom, and the safety of decent folk. Elevation to the status of hero is more than just leading by example, however; heroes are above criticism or moral judgment. Heroes are free to act as they see fit, even if it sometimes involves crossing the lines of public morality, and their shortcomings are quickly forgiven because by definition their motives are honest.

In summary, destroying the face of the terrorist, removing all traces of their personality or humanity, is essential to constructing the massive counter-violence of the 'war on terrorism'. After all, it would be far more difficult to bomb, torture, or hold in prison camps 'enemy combatants' that were simply misguided, or psychologically ill, or commonly criminal. Simultaneously, the scripting of Americans as essentially 'good' (and heroic, peaceful, innocent) is a means of reassurance: whatever Americans do is good and right, because it is their nature to be good—even if on the face of it, the victims of September 11, 2001 look strikingly similar to the victims of October 7, 2001.

Writing Threat and Danger

Another ubiquitous feature of the discourse of the 'war on terrorism' is the scripting of a perpetual state of threat and danger. As David Campbell has eloquently shown, discourses of danger and foreign threat have been integral in constituting and disciplining American identity as practiced through its foreign policy.[37] Collectivities, especially those as disparate and diverse as America , are often only unified by an external threat or danger; in this sense, threat creation can be functional to political life. Historically, the American government has relied on the discourse of threat and danger on numerous occasions: the 'red scares' of the native Americans who threatened the spread of peaceful civilization along the Western frontier, the workers' unrest at the time of the Bolshevik Revolution, and the threat to the American way of life during the cold war; the threat of 'rogue states' like Libya, Panama, Iran, North Korea, and Iraq; and the threats posed by the drug trade, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and now of course, terrorism. These discourses of danger are scripted for the purposes of maintaining inside/outside, self/other boundaries—they write American identity—and for enforcing unity on an unruly and (dis) United States .

Of course, there are other more mundane political functions for constructing fear and moral panic: provoking and allaying anxiety to maintain quiescence, de-legitimizing dissent, elevating the status of security actors, diverting scarce resources into ideologically driven political projects, and distracting the public from more complex and pressing social ills.[38] This is not to say that terrorism poses no real threat; the dangers can plainly be seen in the images of falling bodies and the piles of rubble at 'Ground Zero'. Rather, it is to point out that dangers are those facets of social life *interpreted* as threats (in one sense, dangers do not exist objectively, independent of perception), and what is interpreted as posing a threat may not always correspond to the realities of the actual risk of harm. Illegal narcotics, for example, pose less of a risk than the abuse of legal drugs, but a 'war on drugs' makes it otherwise. Similarly, the 'war on terrorism' is a multi-billion dollar exercise to protect Americans from a danger that, excluding the September 11, 2001 attacks, killed less people per year over several decades than bee stings and lightening strikes. Even in 2001, America 's worst year of terrorist deaths, the casualties from terrorism were still vastly outnumbered by deaths from auto-related accidents, gun crimes, alcohol and tobacco-related illnesses, suicides, and a large number of diseases like influenza, cancer, and heart disease. Globally, terrorism, which kills a few thousand per year, pales into insignificance next to the 40,000 people who die every day from hunger, the half a million people who die every year from small wars, the 150,000 annual deaths from increased

diseases caused by global warming,[39] and the millions who die from AIDS. And yet, the whole world is caught up in the global 'war on terrorism' whose costs so far run into the hundreds of billions of dollars. In other words, in a world of multiple threats, many of which pose a far greater risk to individual safety (according to Dr David King, Britain's chief scientist, global warming is a greater threat to humanity than terrorism), the fact that terrorism is widely seen as posing the greatest and most immediate threat is due to the deliberate construction of a discourse of danger.

The initial construction of the threat of terrorism involved fixing the attacks of 9/11 as the start of a whole new 'age of terror', rather than as an extraordinary event, or an aberration (out of 18,000 terrorist attacks since 1968 only a dozen or so have caused more than 100 deaths; high-casualty terrorist attacks are extremely rare and 9/11 was the rarest of the rare). Instead, the attacks were interpreted as the dawning of a new era of terrorist violence that knew no bounds. As Bush stated, 'All of this was brought upon us in a single day—and night fell on a different world'.[40] Vice-President Dick Cheney made it even clearer:

> Today, we are not just looking at a *new era in national security policy*, we are actually living through it. The exact nature of *the new dangers* revealed themselves on September 11, 2001 , with the murder of 3,000 innocent, unsuspecting men, women and children right here at home.[41]

This construct was only possible by severing all links between this act of terrorism and countless others that had preceded it, and by de-contextualizing it from the history of al Qaeda's previous attacks. In effect, the events of '9/11' were constructed without a pre-history; they stand alone as a defining day of cruelty and evil ('infamy'). This break with the past makes it possible to assign it future significance as the start of 'super-terrorism', 'catastrophic terrorism', or simply 'the new terrorism'. Logically, if there's a new super-terrorism, then a new super-war-on-terrorism seems reasonable.

A second feature of this discourse of danger is the hyperbolic language of threat. It is not just a threat of sudden violent death, it is actually a 'threat to civilization', a 'threat to the very essence of what you do',[42] a 'threat to our way of life',[43] and a threat to 'the peace of the world'.[44] The notion of a 'threat to our way of life' is a Cold War expression that vastly inflates the danger: instead of a tiny group of dissidents with resources that do not even begin to rival that of the smallest states, it implies that they are as powerful as the Soviet empire was once thought to be with its tens of thousands of missiles and its massive conventional army. Moreover, as Cheney reminds us, the threat of terrorism, like the threat of Soviet nuclear weapons, is supremely catastrophic:

> The attack on our country forced us to come to grips with the possibility that the next time terrorists strike, they may well be armed with more than just plane tickets and box cutters. The next time they might direct chemical agents or diseases at our population, or attempt to detonate a nuclear weapon in one of our cities. […] *no rational person can doubt* that terrorists would use such weapons of mass murder the moment they are able to do so. […] we are dealing with terrorists […] who are willing to sacrifice their own lives in order to *kill millions* of others.[45]

In other words, not only are we threatened by evil terrorists eager to kill millions (not to mention civilization itself, the peace of the world, and the American way of life), but this is a rational and reasonable fear to have. We should be afraid, very afraid: 'If they had the capability to *kill millions* of innocent civilians, do any of us believe they would hesitate to do so?'.[46]

As if this was not enough to spread panic throughout the community, officials then go to great lengths to explain how these same terrorists (who are eager to kill millions of us) are actually highly sophisticated, cunning, and extremely dangerous. As John Ashcroft put it: 'The highly coordinated attacks of September 11 make it clear that terrorism is the activity of *expertly organized*, *highly coordinated* and *well financed* organizations and networks'.[47] Moreover, this is not a tiny and isolated group of dissidents, but 'there are *thousands of these terrorists* in more than 60 countries' and they 'hide in countries around the world to plot evil and destruction';[48] or, like the plot of a popular novel: 'Thousands of dangerous killers, schooled in the methods of murder, often supported by outlaw regimes, are now spread throughout the world *like ticking time bombs*, set to go off without warning'.[49] In other speeches, officials inflate the numbers of the terrorists to '*tens* of thousands' of killers spread throughout the world.

The next layer of fear is the notion that the threat resides within; that it is no longer confined outside the borders of the community, but that it is inside of us and all around us. As Ashcroft constructs it:

> The attacks of September 11 were acts of terrorism against America orchestrated and carried out by individuals *living within our borders*. Today's terrorists enjoy the benefits of our free society even as they commit themselves to our destruction. *They live in our communities*—plotting, planning and waiting to kill Americans again […] a conspiracy of evil.[50]

Like the 'red scares' of the past, the discourse of danger is deployed in this mode to enforce social discipline, mute dissent, and increase the powers of the national security state. It is designed to bring the war home, or, as Bush puts it: 'And make no mistake about it, we've got a war *here* just like we've got a war abroad'.[51]

In another genealogical link to previous American foreign policy, the threat of terrorism is from a very early stage reflexively conflated with the threat of 'weapons of mass destruction' and the 'rogue states' who might hand them on to terrorists. According to the discourse, rogue states are apparently eager to assist terrorists in killing millions of Americans. As Bush stated in his now infamous 'axis of evil' speech,

> States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking *weapons of mass destruction*, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. *They could provide these arms to terrorists*, giving them the means to match their hatred.[52]

This is actually an ingenious discursive slight of hand which allows America to re-target its military from a war against a tiny group of individual dissidents scattered across the globe (surely an unwinnable war), to territorially defined states who also happen to be the target of American foreign policy. It transforms the 'war against terrorism' from a largely hidden and unspectacular intelligence gathering and criminal apprehension program, to a flag-waving public display of awesome military firepower that re-builds a rather dented American self-confidence. Dick Cheney explained it to his colleagues thus: 'To the extent we define our task broadly, including those who support terrorism, then we get at states. And *it's easier* to find them that it

is to find bin Laden.'[53] Perhaps more importantly, it also allows for the simultaneous pursuit of geo-strategic objectives in crucial regions such as the Middle East under the banner of the 'war on terrorism'.[54]

Instead of reassuring the nation that the attacks were an exceptional and a unique event in a long line of terrorist attacks against America (that have thus far failed to overthrow freedom), the Bush administration chose instead to construct them as the start of a whole new age of terror—the start of a deadly new form of violence directed at Americans, civilized people all over the world, freedom and democracy. The Bush administration could have chosen to publicize the conclusions of the Gilmore Commission in 1999, a Clinton-appointed advisory panel on the threat of WMD falling into the hands of terrorists. Its final report concluded that 'rogue states would hesitate to entrust such weapons to terrorists because of the likelihood that such a group's actions might be unpredictable even to the point of using the weapon against its sponsor', and they would be reluctant to use such weapons themselves due to 'the prospect of significant reprisals'.[55] Condoleeza Rice herself wrote in 2000 that there was no need to panic about rogue states, because 'if they do acquire WMD—their weapons will be unusable because any attempt to use them will bring national obliteration'.[56] Instead, officials engaged in the deliberate construction of a world of unimaginable dangers and unspeakable threats; they encouraged social fear and moral panic. Within the suffocating confines of such an emergency, where Americans measure their daily safety by the color of a national terrorist alert scale (reflected in the glow of every traffic light), it seems perfectly reasonable that the entire resources of the state be mobilized in defense of the homeland, and that pre-emptive war should be pursued. It also seems reasonable that national unity be maintained and expressions of dissent curtailed.

The reality effect of scripting such a powerful danger moreover, can be seen in the two major wars fought in two years (followed by costly ongoing 'security operations' in each of those states to root out the terrorists), the arrest of thousands of suspects in America and around the world, and the vast sums spent unquestioningly (even by the Democrats) on domestic security, border control and the expansion of the military. Only the 'reality' of the threat of terrorism allows such extravagance; in fact, the manner in which the threat has been constructed -catastrophic, ubiquitous and ongoing- normalizes the entire effort. If an alternative interpretation of the threat emerged to challenge the dominant orthodoxy (that it was vastly over-blown, or misdirected, for example), support for the consumption of such massive amounts of resources might be questioned and the political order destabilized. A massive threat of terrorism then, is necessary for the continued viability of the 'war on terrorism'; writing the threat of terrorism is co-constitutive of the practice of counter-terrorism.

Conclusion: Language, Politics, and Resistance

Applying a 'critical' perspective to the language of counter-terrorism, it can be argued that the 'war on terrorism' and its domination of public political discourse in America and Britain poses several dangers to the functioning of political life and democratic civil society. At the most fundamental level, the construction of large-scale political violence of any kind entails the destruction of the moral consensus and the collapse of the moral community—and its replacement with discourses of victim-hood, hatred of the 'other', fear and counter-violence. Once a society embraces these new political narratives, once it venerates its grievances and truly hates and fears an enemy 'other', public and political morality is quickly lost in the maze of national security expediencies. There is no starker illustration of society's current moral vacuity than the serious public debate about torturing terrorist suspects—not to mention its all too common practice by America and its allies. This is the moral mathematics of Hiroshima , where '9-11' (the new 'Ground Zero') represents Pearl Harbor . According to this logic, if the torture/nuclear incineration of thousands of evil terrorists/treacherous Japanese people will save American lives by preventing another 9-11/Pearl Harbor, then it is morally acceptable. As Slavenka Drakulic expresses it, 'once the concept of "otherness" takes root, the unimaginable becomes possible.'[57] The once unimaginable has in fact, become normal in our societies and we see it all around: in the failure to demand investigation into documented war crimes and

atrocities committed by Coalition forces in Afghanistan and Iraq; in the muted criticism of gross mistreatment of terrorist suspects, especially the legal minors (children) or those who are interrogated and tortured for years and then released without charge; in the broadening victimisation and discrimination against the Muslim/Arab 'other' by the authorities and society at large; in the lack of protest at the policies of assassination and extra-judicial killing, or the brutality of the occupation of Iraq; and in the widespread acquiescence to the insidious erosion of long held political and civil rights.

The simple reason for this tacit complicity is that these kinds of all encompassing and smothering discourses destabilise the moral community and replace non-violent political interaction with suspicion, fear, hatred, chauvinism and an impulse to violently defend the 'imagined community'. In addition, they automatically foreclose certain kinds of thought, simply because the language with which to frame doubts or question official justifications no longer exists or is inaccessible. While some individuals may initially feel unease at pictures of abused and humiliated 'terrorist' suspects at Camp Delta , of tortured Iraqi prisoners or dead Afghan civilians, they have no language or frame of reference in which to articulate those doubts. As time goes by, and when the discourse has been effectively absorbed by society, they may jettison such feelings altogether and consider the harsh treatment of suspects or the 'collateral damage' from bombing campaigns to be both justified and morally acceptable. Certainly, this process of destabilising the moral codes of individuals has already taken place among many in the armed forces. The pictures of abused Iraqi prisoners in April 2004 which sent shockwaves around the world were in this regard, not unexpected; they were the direct consequence of a discourse that constructs the enemy 'other' as inhuman and evil.

This is also an example of the well-known mimetic nature of violence—the instinctual psychological tendency to respond to an act of violence with identical or greater violence, to mimic the attacker—which has been a feature of virtually every war and counter-terrorist campaign. Charles Townshend argues that, 'Probably the biggest hazard inherent in reactions to terrorism is the impulse towards imitation.'[58] History is replete with examples of just such mimetic counter-terrorist violence: Israel's targeted killings and assassinations mimic Palestinian attacks on Israelis; in Northern Ireland the British security services mimicked the IRA when it too began killing members of the para-militaries extra-judicially; and during Reagan's war against terrorism, CIA officers in Beirut tortured suspects to death during interrogation and then sponsored a car bomb aimed at Sheik Fadlallah in revenge for the Marine barracks bombing—it missed the Sheik but killed 92 bystanders and injured more than 250 others.[59] Within the atmosphere created by the present discourse of counter-terrorism it passes almost unnoticed that both sides (America and al Qaeda) are employing exactly the same discursive strategies—both appeal to victim-hood and grievance, both enlist religion as supreme justification, both frame the struggle as one of good versus evil, both demonise and dehumanise the other and both claim the mantle of a just/holy war/jihad.[60] The result of this discursive mirroring is predictable: the killing of civilians without pity or remorse, whether by suicide bombers hoping to force the American military out of Iraq and Saudi Arabia or by Apache helicopters hoping to suppress the rebellion in Fallujah.

There is no escape from the fact that in American and Britain discrimination and the abuse of human rights has now been normalised and is considered an inevitable if regrettable part of the counter-terrorist effort, including judicial abuse, torture and war crimes; we are now firmly ensconced in a '*dirty* war on terrorism' both at home and abroad. This is a perilous position for a society supposedly built on the belief in human dignity, human rights and democratic participation. It implies that we have retreated from a universal and cosmopolitan vision of society to a particularistic, tribal vision; that we have bankrupted our moral vision of universal human rights and social inclusion in favour of a dubious sense of 'national' security. In the past, such narrow communitarian formulations of political life have led to debilitating cycles of inter-national violence, or at the very least, long periods of institutional and cultural racism against an 'enemy within'. The greatest danger of the current discourse is that we too become terrorists; and that as we demonise, dehumanise and brutalise the enemy 'other' it becomes a war *of* terrorisms, rather than a war *on* terrorism.

The corrosive effects of the discourse are already plain to see: anti-globalisation protesters, academics, postmodernists, liberals, pro-choice activists, environmentalists and gay liberationists are accused of being aligned with the evil of terrorism and of undermining the nation's struggle against terrorism;[61] arms trade protesters are arrested under anti-terrorism legislation; blacklists of 'disloyal' professors, university departments, journalists, writers and commentators are posted on the internet and smear campaigns are launched against them; anti-administration voices are kept away from speaking at public events or in the media; and political opponents of government policy are accused of being traitors. There is a real danger that the 'war on terrorism' is expanding to become a 'war on dissent' or a 'war on politics'. Such a war, of course, can only result in the eventual death of participatory democracy and the decay of civil society, not in the destruction of terrorism.

Another danger is that the discursive straightjacket of the 'war on terrorism' prevents clear and creative thinking about alternative strategies and approaches to sub-state violence; instead, it institutionalises an approach to counter-terrorism which has already proved to be counterproductive and damaging to the very institutions and values America and its allies are purportedly trying to protect. There is a genuine risk that the moral absolutism of the discourse induces political amnesia about the failures and lessons from other counter-terrorist campaigns.[62] For example, a clear lesson from other campaigns is that terrorism can never be defeated by military force or coercion alone; it only eases when political compromise takes place on the issues that instigated it. At the very least, the discourse is actually misconceiving and misunderstanding the nature of the threat and the strategies required to deal with it—it is poor 'threat assessment' and poor 'mission definition', to use military parlance. By deliberately obfuscating the underlying history and context of terrorism, the actual nature and causes of terrorism and the real motivations and aims of the terrorists (who are most certainly not sacrificing their lives in suicidal attacks simply for the sake of 'evil'), the search for more effective and long-term policy solutions is cauterised.

Given the intellectual cul-de-sac of the 'war on terrorism', it is not surprising that the Bush administration's present policies are actually making terrorism worse and are intensifying those global conditions that encourage, nurture and sustain endemic violence.[63] It now seems clear that the 'war on terrorism' is already entrenching an ever deepening cycle of violence and counter-violence similar to that which has already occurred at a micro-level in Israel, Chechnya, Kashmir, Colombia and Spain (to name a few), where neither side can win decisively but no party is willing to abandon the military option. In strategic terms, there are good reasons for thinking that American actions in Afghanistan and Iraq have created a whole new generation of terrorists and made terrorism an even greater international problem by scattering terrorist networks across many more countries and further decentralising their operations. There is also little doubt that these two wars have turned many moderate Muslims towards the extremist camp, fuelling anti-Americanism and providing potential terrorists with an even bigger sea in which to swim; they have also provided a new focus for terrorist activity and new zones of lawlessness and chaos where terrorists can operate more freely.

In large part, it was (and still is) the nature of the political discourse that has prevented the consideration of alternative paradigms and approaches to counter-terrorism; the inbuilt logic of the language, and the privileging of only certain kinds of knowledge, has circumvented the kind of in-depth, rigorous and informed debate that a complex political challenge such as terrorism requires. Unless we break out of the stultifying confines of the discourse, more effective policies will continue to prove elusive; unless or until both politicians and the wider public learn to speak and think in a language outside of the official rhetoric, we are condemned to live under an endless spiral of terrorist violence and state counter-violence. In a sense, the only hope of ever winning the 'war on terrorism' lies in ceasing to invest in its bankrupt philosophy.

Beyond this self-interested concern for greater security however, there is another reason for resisting the language of counter-terrorism: it is damaging to our moral values and to our political life, and in the process, people are being violated, abused and killed. We are implicated in this monstrosity as citizens, and fail in our academic responsibilities, if we sit back and do nothing. As David Campbell expressed it, 'to live ethically, we must think and act politically.'[64] For this reason, we have an ethical duty to resist the discourse, to deconstruct it at every opportunity and to continually interrogate the exercise of power masquerading as the 'war on terrorism'.

Proceed to: A Response from Jonathan Rodwell

Notes

[1] This paper draws mainly on my forthcoming book, *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counter-Terrorism* (Manchester : Manchester University Press).

[2] Marianne Jorgensen and Louise Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London : Sage, 2002), p. 157.

[3] See for example, Rahul Mahajan, *Full Spectrum Dominance: U.S. power in Iraq and beyond* (New York : Seven Stories Press, 2003); Alex Callinicos, *The New Mandarins of American Power* (Cambridge : Polity Press, 2003); Carl Boggs, ed., *Masters of War: Militarism and Blowback in the Era of American Empire* (New York and London : Routledge, 2003). Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* (London: Penguin Books, 2003); Dilip Hiro, *War Without End: The Rise of Islamic Terrorism and Global Response* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); Aftab A. Malik, ed., *Shattered Illusions: Analyzing the War on Terrorism* (Bristol: Amal Press, 2002); Kenneth Booth and Timothy Dunne, eds., *Worlds in Collision: Terror and the Future of Global Order* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); R Burbach and B. Clarke, eds., *September 11 and the U.S.: Beyond the Curtain of Smoke* (San Francisco: City Lights Books and Freedom Voices Press, 2002).

[4] See John Collins and Ross Glover, eds., *Collateral Language: A User's Guide to America's New War* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Sandra Silberstein, *War of Words: Language, Politics and 9/11* (London: Routledge, 2002); John Murphy, '"Our mission and our moment": George W. Bush and September 11', *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 6, vol. 4 (2003); Joseba Zulaika and William Douglass, *Terror and Taboo: The Follies, Fables, and Faces of Terrorism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996).

[5] See Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is What States Make of it', *International Organization* 46 (1992), pp. 391-425; David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, Revised edition, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

[6] Martin Wight, *Power Politics*, edited by H. Bull and C. Holbraad, (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1978); see also Hurrell, '"There are no Rules" (George W. Bush): International Order after September 11', *International Relations* 16, vol.2 (2002), pp. 185-204.

[7] See William Wallace, 'Truth and Power, Monks and Technocrats: Theory and Practice in International Relations', *Review of International Studies* 22 (1996), pp. 301-321.

[8] Marina Llorente, 'Civilization versus barbarism', in Collins and Glover, eds., *Collateral Language*, p. 39.

[9] John Collins and Ross Glover, 'Introduction', in Collins and Glover, eds., *Collateral Language*, p. 4.

[10] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1977).

[11] Collins and Glover, 'Introduction', pp. 9-10.

[12] The history of the word 'terrorist' or 'terrorism' is a pertinent example of this process. Initially, the word was used to describe the actions of states against their own people: the Great Terror of the French Revolution; Stalin's purges; the Nazi terror state. To a lesser extent, it was also used to describe the actions of some anarchists of the late nineteenth century. Since the 1960s however, government officials, the media and many academics have used the term to characterise the use of violence by small groups of dissidents or revolutionaries to intimidate or influence the state. This strategic and repetitious usage has given the term a new popular meaning: the word 'terrorist' is hardly ever used now to describe state policies of repression or intimidation, but instead is almost exclusively used to describe the illegitimate acts of individuals or small groups of dissidents.

[13] R. Rubenstein, *Alchemists of Revolution: Terrorism in the Modern World* (New York: Basic books, 1987).

[14] Jorgensen and Louise Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, pp. 60-71.

[15] N. Fairclough, *Media Discourse* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), p. 14.

[16] N. Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p. 87.

[17] *Ibid*.

[18] The reason for focusing on these particular texts and not the documents of law enforcement officials or the content of websites, for example, is that these speeches represent the source of the discourse. The 'war on terrorism' is an elite led project and these elites have provided the primary justifications and overall vision.

[19] Murphy, '"Our Mission and Our Moment", p. 610.

[20] See Jackson , *Writing the War on Terrorism*.

[21] See Campbell , *Writing Security*.

[22] See Murphy, '"Our Mission and Our Moment"' p. 609.

[23] See Samuel Weber, 'War, Terrorism, and Spectacle: On Towers and Caves', The South Atlantic Quarterly 101, vol. 3 (2002), p. 452.

[24] President George W. Bush, Address to the Nation, 11 September, 2001 .

[25] See Murphy, '"Our Mission and Our Moment"', p. 616.

[26] James Aune, 'The Argument from Evil in the Rhetoric of Reaction', Rhetoric and Public Affairs 6, vol. 3 (2003), pp. 518-522.

[27] President George W. Bush, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and Attorney General John Ashcroft, Remarks at Camp David , September 15, 2001 .

[28] Colin L. Powell, Remarks by the Secretary of State to the National Foreign Policy Conference for Leaders of Nongovernmental Organisations (NGO), October 26, 2001 , Loy Henderson Conference Room , U.S. Department of State, Washington , D.C.

[29] Donald H. Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense, and Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Richard Myers, Briefing on Enduring Freedom, The Pentagon, October 7, 2001 .

[30] President George W. Bush, The State of the Union Address, Washington , January 29, 2002 .

[31] Howard H. Baker Jr., U.S. Ambassador, Japanese Observance Ceremony for Victims of Terrorism in the U.S. , September 23, 2001 , Tokyo .

[32] President George W. Bush, Remarks in Commencement Address To United States Coast Guard Academy , Nitchman Field, New London , Connecticut , May 21, 2003 .

[33] Attorney General John Ashcroft, News Conference with Immigration and Naturalization Service Commissioner James Ziglar, and Steve McCraw, newly appointed director Foreign Terrorist Tracking Task Force, Department of Justice Conference Center, October 31, 2001 .

[34] See Zulaika and Douglass, Terror and Taboo.

[35] President George W. Bush, President's Remarks at National Day of Prayer and Remembrance, the National Cathedral, Washington, D.C., September 14, 2001.

[36] Donald H. Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense, Remarks at a Memorial Service in Remembrance of Those Lost on September 11th, The Pentagon, Arlington , VA Thursday, October 11, 2001 .

[37] Campbell , Writing Security.

[38] See Robert Hariman, 'Speaking of Evil', *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 6, vol. 3 (2003), pp. 511-517; Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois press, 1964); Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

[39] See Mark Lynas 'Essay: The Sixth Mass Extinction', *New Statesman*, 23 February, 2004 .

[40] George W. Bush, Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, September 20, 2001 .

[41] Dick Cheney, Vice-President, Remarks to the American Society of News Editors, The Fairmont Hotel, New Orleans , April 9, 2003 .

[42] Powell, Remarks to the National Foreign Policy Conference, 26 October, 2001 .

[43] Bush, Address to a Joint Session, 20 September, 2001 .

[44] Bush, State of the Union Address, 29 January, 2002 .

[45] Cheney, Remarks to the American Society of News Editors, 9 April, 2003 .

[46] Paul Wolfowitz, Deputy Secretary of Defense, Prepared Testimony: 'Building a military for the 21st century', To the Senate Armed Services Committee, October 4, 2001 .

[47] John Ashcroft, Attorney General, Testimony to House Committee on the Judiciary, September 24, 2001 .

[48] Bush, Address to a Joint Session, 20 September, 2001 .

[49] Bush, State of the Union Address, 29 January, 2002 .

[50] John Ashcroft, Attorney General, Prepared Remarks for the US Mayors Conference October 25, 2001 .

[51] George W. Bush, Presidential Remarks to U.S. Attorneys Conference, Dwight David Eisenhower Office Building , November 29, 2001 .

[52] Bush, State of the Union Address, 29 January, 2002 .

[53] Quoted in John Kampfner, *Blair's Wars* (London : The Free Press, 2003), p. 156.

[54] See Mahajan, *Full Spectrum Dominance*; Callinicos, *The New Mandarins of American Power*; Boggs, 'Introduction: Empire and Globalization', in Boggs, ed., *Masters of War*.

[55] Quoted in Hiro, *War Without End*, p. 391.

[56] Quoted in Callinicos, *The New Mandarins*, p. 44.

[57] Drakulic quoted in E. Neuffer, *The Key to My Neighbor's House: Seeking Justice in Bosnia and Rwanda* (London : Bloomsbury , 2001).

[58] Charles Townshend, *Terrorism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 114.

[59] David Wills, *The First War on Terrorism: Counter-terrorism Policy During the Reagan Administration* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), pp. 56, 87.

[60] See Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11* (Chicago : The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[61] See David Campbell, 'Time is Broken: The Return of the Past in the Response to September 11', *Theory & Event*, 5, vol. 4 (2002).

[62] *Ibid*.

[63] See Boggs, *Masters of War*; Callinicos, *The New Mandarins*; Mahajan, *Full Spectrum Dominance*; Malik, *Shattered Illusions*.

[64] David Campbell, 'Why Fight: Humanitarianism, Principles and Post-Structuralism', *Millennium* 27 vol.3, (1998), p. 519.

PDF | This article is a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the discursive strategies employed by Mahathir Mohamed, former Prime Minister of Malaysia, in 10 of his speeches that express resistance and challenge to the former U.S. President, George W. Bush's military ideology of...Â power struggle that are manifested in language. On speaking against terrorism, Mahathir's dislike for the Bush administration's handling of the issue is viewed. as a platform to further his own ideology.Â a critical discourse analysis of Mahathir's speeches on the "war on. terror", comprising his reconstruction of 9/11 and terrorism, and his. positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. A critical discourse analysis approach.