Discursive underpinnings of war and terrorism

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Introduction

War and terrorism are two forms of political violence that are salient to current debates and future challenges faced both by scholars and the wider public. Whether agreeing with von Clausewitz (1976 [1832]) that war is simply the continuation of politics, or preferring Foucault’s (2003, p. 15) suggestion that politics has become ‘the continuation of war by other means’, it is clear that the collective exercise of, and struggle for, power – one element of politics (Chilton 2004, p. 3) – is all too often associated with violence. Moreover, discourse is central to enabling that violence and formulating responses to it. War as a form of organised group behaviour ‘relies upon the organizational capacity of discourse to mobilize forces, direct resources, and legitimize actions’ (Hodges 2013a, p. 3). Terrorism as a conceptual category relies upon the discursive practices that define and label the actors and actions involved. How one characterises forms of violence – for example, as ‘terrorism’ or ‘insurgency’ or ‘guerilla warfare’ or ‘crimes’ – and the actors involved in that violence – for example, as ‘terrorists’ or ‘freedom fighters’ or ‘criminals’ or ‘activists’ – shapes understandings and constrains responses. Therefore, a better understanding of the discursive processes that undergird political violence can inform projects that seek to rescue politics from violence (Arendt 1970) and engage in a more productive politics based on that other element of the craft: co-operation (Chilton 2004, p. 3).

The analysis provided in this chapter starts with the widely recognised premise among discourse scholars that language does not simply mirror a pre-existing world, but rather, actively constructs that world. Discourse shapes meanings and constrains understandings. With this in mind, I aim to make several points about discourse, war and terrorism in the five main sections that follow. First, discourse constructs the normative ethical principles that legitimise certain forms of violence as acceptable or unacceptable. These ways of thinking in turn influence definitions of terrorism that circulate within and between academic communities and the wider public. Second, from an academic perspective, terrorism can be viewed as a form of political communication that uses violence to communicate a message, even though popular conceptualisations may diverge from this understanding out of political expediency. Third, given the definitional issues surrounding terrorism, it is important to
underscore that terrorism is itself a social construct that relies upon the discursive processes that give it meaning. As Jackson (2008, p. 28) notes, ‘In an important sense, terrorism does not exist outside of the definitions and practices that seek to enclose it.’ Conceptualising forms of violence as terrorism draws upon familiar domains of experience (such as ideas about crime, war and ideological movements) to construct understandings and shape/constrain responses. Fourth, justifications for political violence, including the ‘call to arms’ that rallies a nation to war, utilise political narratives that construct understandings of the world. Narrative excels at organising perceptions and drawing causal connections to shape experience; and narrative represents a potent tool in the political domain to shape images of socio-political reality. Finally, central to such narratives is the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ binary that undergirds all forms of political violence. ‘This division of humanity into groups draws from the need to organize and categorize the world around us, but during times of war this process becomes exaggerated to produce invidious distinctions with deadly consequences’ (Hodges 2013a, p. 6). Semiotic processes are central to forming this in-group versus out-group opposition. I develop these points further in the sections that follow.

**Legitimacy and political violence**

As a form of ‘organized, purposeful group action, directed against another group…involving the actual or potential application of lethal force’ (Ferguson 1984, p. 5; 1990, p. 26), the modern view of war prototypically conceptualises it as armed conflict between the military forces of nation-states (interstate war) or between factions within a state (intrastate, or civil war). The centrality of the nation-state within this modern conception of war arises from the political ordering of the world after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which recognised the sovereignty of territorial states. Although the Westphalian system did not eliminate war, it attempted to regulate it as a contest between sovereign states and abolish the type of ideologically driven wars of annihilation experienced during the Holy Roman Empire (Kochi 2007, p. 271). Along with the Westphalian order came recognition of the state’s monopoly on the legitimate use of violence (Weber 2004 [1919]).

Legitimacy in the realm of warfare depends greatly upon a discursive process that positions some forms of political violence as ‘legitimate’ versus other forms as ‘illegitimate.’ Moreover, as van Leeuwen (2007) discusses, legitimisation always occurs within a framework of accepted norms. The legitimisation of the violence associated with modern warfare rests upon the normative philosophical framework of Just War Theory (Moseley 2009; Orend 2005), an ethical doctrine that reaches back to Aristotle, Cicero and Augustine, with contributions by thirteenth-century theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas (Aquinas 1985 [1274]). As the moral justification for war continues to be discussed and debated by contemporary philosophers (Walzer 2000, 2008 *inter alia*), Just War Theory provides a robust scaffold upon which states construct the right to enter into war (*jus ad bellum*), the actions taken during war (*jus in bello*), and the agreements entered into after war (*jus post bellum*). The tenets of Just War Theory are not merely important for understanding the way modern wars are legitimised, but also for understanding the way other forms of political violence, such as terrorism, are conceptualised. Although violent actions are typically legitimised or delegitimised vis-à-vis this normative framework, the outcome of such discursive processes does not necessarily guarantee that a close fit exists between the actions and normative categories in actual fact. In other words, categorising and justifying political violence is very much a political act open to varying degrees of contestation.
The seeds for understanding terrorism as a form of political violence can be seen in Schmitt’s (2004 [1963]) *Theory of the partisan* in which he outlines what he saw as a new type of warfare emerging in the twentieth century. For Schmitt, the partisan refers to an irregular fighter that rises up to defend the homeland from outside attack. The national resistance movements against Nazi Germany during the Second World War provide models for the partisan, with the most effective being the Yugoslav Partisans led by Josip Broz Tito. Although conceptually distinct from regular uniformed troops, and hence lying outside the Westphalian conception of ‘legal’ forms of warfare, partisans are nevertheless afforded legitimacy by Schmitt insofar as they exhibit a defensive and *telluric* (i.e. tied to a specific territory) character. The partisan fights a ‘real enemy’ (e.g. foreign invader) that threatens the territory in which the partisan resides; once that territory is liberated, the fighting ceases. This ‘fundamental restriction of enmity’ (Schmitt 2004, p. 66) to a limited territorial conflict conforms to the Westphalian order, and the defensive posture aligns with Just War Theory, even if the forms of irregular warfare adopted by the partisan do not.

Schmitt contrasts the legitimate ‘true partisan’ with what he describes as the revolutionary fighter – a partisan whose political goals extend beyond the aims of territorial liberation. For the revolutionary ‘terrorist,’ violence is employed for a political cause that reaches beyond spatially limited resistance movements. Unlike the restriction of enmity exhibited by the true partisan, for the revolutionary fighter – modelled after Lenin – the political struggle is taken up against an absolute (even if vague) enemy. Whereas both the true partisan and revolutionary partisan blur the line between civilians and military as they employ irregular and hence illegal tactics, only the true partisan holds legitimacy per the modern conception of warfare. As Schmitt’s discussion implies, it is not so much the tactics or forms of violence employed, but rather who employs those tactics and towards what ends, which determines the legitimacy of the violence. Political violence tied to the state – including irregular forces linked to the state – is often legitimised while political violence practised by non-state actors is delegitimised.

While in theory the revolutionary zeal of the terrorist may be cleanly viewed as conceptually distinct from the ‘true partisan,’ in practice, the legitimacy of political violence exercised by any actor relies upon a discursive process whereby ‘who is considered a civilian, how innocence can be measured, what the real intentions of often clandestine actors might be and what counts as a political aim, are all highly contested and subject to competing claims’ (Jackson 2008, p. 28). As Wodak (2006) shows in her study of the discourse in Austria over the *Wehrmacht’s* role in war crimes during the Second World War, political violence perpetrated by traditional state militaries during times of war is subject to extensive legitimisation strategies to exculpate those involved in actions that violate the norms of modern warfare. Likewise, in a study of Israeli secondary school history textbooks, Peled-Elhanan (2010) shows how excesses carried out by the Israeli Defense Forces during the 1948 war are legitimised as within the acceptable bounds of war. In contrast to legitimisation strategies employed to justify the state’s monopoly on the use of force, political organisations that represent threats to established political orders are often subject to delegitimisation through their labelling as ‘terrorist organisations’. This can be seen in the cases of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation in its struggle for the liberation of Palestine, or the African National Congress during South Africa’s apartheid era, both of which have histories of being discursively dismissed as terrorist organisations.

Crucially, acts of political violence do not contain their own meaning. We must give them meaning by constructing their significance out of frameworks of prior experience, and interpreting the meanings of the contested concepts that are used to categorise certain actions.
as ‘illegitimate’, as targeting ‘innocents’, and so forth. In this way, there is nothing inherent in violent acts labelled ‘terrorism’ that automatically makes them so (Jackson 2008, p. 28; Schmid & Jongman 1988, p. 101). As Jackson (2008, p. 28) argues, ‘The reality is that terrorism is a social fact rather than a brute fact. Although acts of violence are experienced as brute facts, the wider cultural-political meaning of those acts as “terrorism”… is decided through symbolic labelling, social agreement and a range of inter-subjective practices’.

The ontologically unstable and politically malleable status of terrorism as a conceptual category can be seen in the many instances where governments refer to resistance fighters engaged in civil warfare as ‘terrorists’, even if they attack traditional military targets. The ubiquitous and unqualified use of the term ‘terrorists’ by US officials to refer to any fighter engaged in insurgent warfare during the prolonged conflict in Iraq after the 2003 invasion is a case in point. Many of the fighters could just as easily have been characterised as ‘partisans’ in Schmitt’s (2004) terms, engaged in a defensive resistance against the invaders and post-invasion government.

Just as ubiquitous are instances where governments refer to street protestors or oppositional political movements as ‘terrorists’, as they seek to banish the groups from the political process and deny legitimacy to their cause. This can be seen in the political struggles in Egypt after the Arab Spring uprising. As power changed hands over the years that followed, from Hosni Mubarak to Mohamed Morsi to Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the only consistency in the use of the term ‘terrorists’ was the way each government in turn used it as a label against its own domestic political rivals. Through its use to label various actors, from student pro-democracy protestors to ex-President Morsi, who was tried and sentenced to death (later overturned) for conspiring to commit ‘terrorist acts’, the fungibility of terrorism as a political concept becomes evident.

As Jackson (2008, p. 28) emphasises, ‘as a phenomenon, terrorism is constituted by and through the discursive practices which make it a concrete reality for politicians, law enforcement officials, the media, the public, academics and so on’. The next two sections examine some of the practices through which official definitions of terrorism are formulated and, in turn, by which public understandings and government policies are shaped.

**Terrorism as a form of political communication**

As a form of political communication that could be potentially employed by any actor involved in political struggle, terrorism involves ‘the deliberate targeting of innocents in an effort to convey a message to another party’ (Richardson 2000, p. 29). The use of violent acts to convince or persuade audiences stretches back to the invention of modern terrorism in the nineteenth century when, as Schmid (2004, p. 205) points out, it ‘was known as “propaganda by the deed”’ (see also, Schmid & de Graaf 1982). In combining the coercive effects of violence with the persuasive effects of propaganda, terrorism employs violence in an effort to coerce and persuade a wider audience into some type of action. The ultimate addressees of terrorist acts – the ‘overhearers’ in Goffman’s (1976, 1981) terms – are therefore not the directly targeted victims, but a wider audience that simultaneously targets multiple addressees with multiple messages. The addressees may include ‘others from the group of the victim, the public at large, or, more narrowly, members of the constituency of the terrorist’ (Schmid 2004, p. 207). Given the communicative dimension of the violence, the targets and the manner in which they are attacked carry symbolic meaning. Moreover, the responses to the acts – particularly the resulting media coverage – work to generate publicity for the terrorists’ cause and amplify the message.
This perspective on terrorism, widely held among scholars, places a focus on the ‘characteristics of the act itself’ (Jackson 2008, p. 26). Namely, terrorism involves an indirect strategy whereby one entity (the direct victim) is deliberately targeted in an effort to pressure another entity (the wider public or government bodies). In this way, terrorism is defined as a form of violent coercion intended to propagate fear and intimidation beyond the immediate scene of the violence to achieve political aims. The political motives behind the acts distinguish terrorism from other forms of violence (e.g. violence used to commit a crime for monetary gain such as during an armed bank robbery). In addition, the fact ‘that terrorism instrumentalizes its victims’ separates it from the use of violence during war that seeks to directly degrade an opponent’s ability to fight (Jackson 2008, p. 29; see also, Schmid 2004, p. 203). According to this perspective, terrorism could be adopted as a strategy by any type of organisation. Just as it can be used by non-state actors, it could equally be used by states as a strategy against enemies during war (or peacetime) or to quash domestic dissent.

Yet, given the contested nature of what forms of violence constitute legitimate uses of force, labelling acts as terrorism often hinges on how that question of legitimacy is resolved; one way to resolve the question is through the use of actor-based definitions that focus on who carries out the violence. The labelling of certain acts as terrorism therefore comes down to who is afforded political legitimacy. Although such an approach tends to be favoured by politicians and security officials, as Jackson (2008, p. 25) points out, ‘it is not uncommon to see researchers adopt an actor-based definition in the literature’. As a result, the interests of Western states can be ratified by the authoritative pronouncements of academics. Note, in particular, the US Department of State’s definition, which appears in Title 22 of the United States Code, Section 2656f(d): ‘The term “terrorism” means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience’ (US Department of State 2001; see also Federal Bureau of Investigation, ND; National Institute of Justice 2007). Here, acts of terrorism are confined to ‘subnational groups,’ which works to exclude states from consideration as users of terrorism, and thereby preserve the state’s monopoly on the legitimate use of violence (Weber 2004 [1919]).

This definitional move is quite intentional. The Deputy Director of the White House Task Force on Terrorism in 1985, Edward Peck, noted of the working group’s attempts to define terrorism, ‘…they asked us to come up with a definition of terrorism that could be used throughout the government. We produced about six, and each and every case, they were rejected, because careful reading would indicate that our own country had been involved in some of those activities’ (Peck 2006). From an academic perspective, actor-based definitions prove problematic in that they exclude repressive forms of political violence carried out by governments against their own populations as well as violent actions carried out by state militaries against civilian targets in other nations. As Jackson (2008, p. 27) argues, ‘scholars should be highly suspicious of any and all attempts by states to define terrorism in ways that conveniently absolve what they or their agents do from being considered terrorism’. Public conceptions of terrorism ultimately rest upon the outcomes of political debates that call into question the assumptions that undergird officially ratified definitions.

**Conceptualisations of terrorism**

Beyond explicit definitions, the central frameworks that have commonly been invoked in public discourse to make sense of terrorist acts are the war frame, the crime frame, or a
combination of the two. As Lakoff (2001) writes, ‘The crime frame entails law, courts, lawyers, trials, sentencing, appeals, and so on’. Alternatively, the war frame talks of ‘enemies’, ‘battles’, ‘casualties’, and whole nations (rather than just individuals or particular groups) being under attack (Hodges 2011, p. 27). Importantly, the way in which acts of terrorism are conceptualised holds implications for how governments respond. Whereas a violent crime is dealt with through the criminal justice system, an act of war is dealt with on the battlefield. As then-President George W Bush positioned the US response to the events of 9/11 within the framework of war, the resulting ‘war on terror’ discourse effectively erased the criminal justice perspective from consideration in favour of a highly militarised response that led to very real wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The approach, of course, was not without its critics; public discourse sometimes featured explicit debate over how best to make sense of, and respond to, terrorism, as can be seen in the following excerpt from President Bush’s 2004 State of the Union Address (quoted in Hodges 2011, p. 28; the italicised words represent elements that invoke the crime and war frames).

I know that some people question if America is really in a war at all. They view terrorism more as a crime, a problem to be solved mainly with law enforcement and indictments. After the World Trade Center was first attacked in 1993, some of the guilty were indicted, and tried, and convicted, and sent to prison. But the matter was not settled. The terrorists were still training and plotting in other nations, and drawing up more ambitious plans. After the chaos and carnage of September the 11th, it is not enough to serve our enemies with legal papers. The terrorists and their supporters declared war on the United States, and war is what they got.

(George W Bush’s 2004 State of the Union Address, quoted in Hodges 2011, p. 28)

From the perspective of terrorists themselves, the conceptualisation of terrorism as war (rather than as crime) merges well with the political motivations behind the acts. As Schmid (2004, pp. 202–203) notes, ‘terrorists, rather than seeing themselves as criminals, generally prefer to view themselves as “warriors”’. After all, to be viewed as a ‘criminal’ is to be universally condemned as a lawbreaker acting out of selfish motives, but to be viewed as a ‘warrior’ is to be seen as a hero, much like Schmitt’s (2004) ‘partisan’, carrying out brave actions for a shared cause. Likewise, given the widely accepted pejorative connotations of ‘terrorism’ and ‘terrorists’ in contemporary discourse, those engaged in political violence often eschew those labels in favour of the warrior model. As with ‘criminal’, to be branded a ‘terrorist’ is to be stripped of the political legitimacy afforded real soldiers and warriors. Within the framework of war, terrorism implies involvement in the excesses of war – that is, the types of actions routinely condemned by the tenets of jus in bello and codified in The Hague Regulations and Geneva Conventions. Therefore, to be a terrorist is to be denied recognition as a heroic warrior and to be stripped of political legitimacy. In this way, even though governments such as the US government may militarise their response to terrorism and deal with it primarily outside the criminal justice model, the discourse emphasises that the enemy consists of ‘terrorists’ rather than ‘soldiers’.

Yet an imperfect fit exists between terrorism and war; therefore, in President Bush’s ‘war on terror’ narrative, he emphasises that this is ‘a new kind of war’ (Hodges 2011, p. 47), one that is fought against an enemy that represents an ideological movement: ‘Our war against terror is not a war against one terrorist leader, or one terrorist group. Terrorism is a movement, an ideology that respects no boundary of nationality, or decency’ (Hodges 2011, p. 37). In this way, terrorism is conceptualised not only through the war frame, but it is defined as an
ideology or movement. That is, terrorism comes to be seen as the ends rather than the means. The strategy morphs into a creed. This discursive move obscures the perspective discussed earlier that defines terrorism as a strategy with underlying political motivations. It works to erase those motivations along with the socio-historical origins of the acts in favour of viewing them as pure ‘evil’. In turn, this sets up the binary opposition in the war narrative between ‘good’ and ‘evil’, which helps justify a war against a dehumanised enemy.

Although viewing terrorism as an ideology works well from the perspective of politicians seeking to rally a nation to war, it fails to fully grasp the complexities of terrorism as a form of political violence. As Tilly (2004, pp. 11–12) notes, ‘Properly understood, terror is a strategy, not a creed. Terrorists range across a wide spectrum of organizations, circumstances, and beliefs. Terrorism is not a single causally coherent phenomenon. No social scientist can speak responsibly as though it were’. However, as Jackson (2008, p. 25) points out, ‘a surprising number of researchers and pundits’, in addition to ‘political leaders and security officials’, have accepted the conceptualisation of terrorism as a totalising ideology. This merely reinforces the view that to deal with terrorism demands war as the only viable strategy, foreclosing other understandings and approaches to the problem. Moreover, it positions the ‘war on terror’ as a type of war that, as Devji (2005, p. 156) describes, ‘leaves behind all enemies of a traditional kind to contend with something more metaphysical than empirical’. The global scope of such a war against an abstract enemy (i.e. ‘terror’ or ‘terrorism’) is quite similar to the way Schmitt’s revolutionary partisan moves beyond a defensive, telluric position to wage war against an absolute enemy that must not only be defeated, but annihilated (Chandler 2009). In many ways, the ‘war on terror’ does represent a ‘new kind of war’, as Bush exhorts, a war that disrupts traditional conceptions of war, as evidenced from various actions, policies and legal strategies associated with the US response to 9/11, from the use of so-called ‘extraordinary rendition’ (i.e. government-sponsored abduction) to the designation of prisoners as ‘enemy combatants’ to the adoption of torture under the euphemistic label ‘enhanced interrogation methods’.

Ultimately, to recognise terrorism as a discursive construction – as with the justifications of war discussed in the next section – is to recognise that our understandings of the world are very much dependent upon the way language operates in the service of interested positions to construct socio-political reality. The next section elaborates on the way language serves to bring about the reality of war.

**Narrative constructions of war**

Central to political discourse as it relates to war is the need to legitimise the use of force and mobilise group support for any campaign of violence. To build a following, leaders must outline a history and construct an image of events and actors in the world that brings the group to the ‘inevitability’ of conflict. Narrative is a prime means towards those ends. After all, ‘we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative – stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on’ (Bruner 1991, p. 4). With this in mind, van Leeuwen (2007) includes mythopoesis as one of four major legitimisation strategies.

The power of narrative in constructing group understandings of the world comes from the common view of ‘narratives as icons of events’ (Bauman 1986, p. 6). That is, narratives are seen as simply mirroring events as external referents. As Bauman (1986, p. 6) points out, this view that events are ‘somehow antecedent or logically prior to the narratives that recount
them’ holds even for fictional narratives. This view is helped along by the language ideology of referentialism (Silverstein 1979), which maintains that the role of language is simply to convey information. As a result, events are positioned as pre-existing information to ‘report’. Narrative becomes the tool to do the reporting, ostensibly representing the external world in a transparent manner. Yet, as discourse scholars widely recognise, narrative does not merely reflect a pre-existing world, but discursively constructs that world – whether the fictional world of literature or the real world of everyday interaction. In this sense, as Bauman (1986, p. 6) explains, ‘events are not the external raw materials out of which narratives are constructed, but rather the reverse: Events are abstractions from narrative. It is the structures of signification in narrative that give coherence to events in our understanding.’ In other words, through the use of narrative, we give meaning to the people, places and events that surround us by naming protagonists, defining who we are in relation to them, attributing motivations to others, and providing explanations of the world in which we live. Importantly, this narrative process provides an important means for constructing social reality in line with one or another group’s view of the world.

In the ‘call to arms’ rhetoric that operates to manufacture public consent for war in democracies, the ‘justification [for war] is embodied in a dramatic narrative from which, in turn, an argument is extracted’ (Campbell & Jamieson 2008, p. 224). Forming the dramatic starting point for the narrative is what Labov and Waletzky (1967) term a ‘precipitating event’. This event represents a ‘breach’ from the canonical expectations of everyday life (Bruner 1991). In the ‘call to arms’ narratives rehearsed by US presidents, this breach corresponds to what is invariably described as ‘an act of raw aggression’ that is ‘deliberate’ and ‘unprovoked’, coming from an enemy ‘without warning’ (Hodges 2013b, p. 53). The precipitating event forms the casus belli for the impending conflict, setting up a military response as necessary and inevitable, even if it is said to be regrettable. Furthermore, it positions the ‘enemy’ as the aggressor who started the conflict, and thereby positions the narrator’s side as simply acting in self-defence. Any shared culpability for bringing about the conflict is dealt with through the ideological process of erasure whereby ‘[f]acts that are inconsistent with the ideological scheme either go unnoticed or get explained away’ (Irvine & Gal 2000, p. 38). That is, regardless of whether the narrator’s role in the conflict is defensive or offensive in actual fact, the narration works to position it strictly as defensive (Hodges 2013b, p. 56). The construction of the ‘call to arms’ narrative in this manner works to justify subsequent military actions in line with the tenets of jus ad bellum (Hodges 2013b, pp. 51–53).

As seen here, narratives ‘depict a temporal transition from one state of affairs to another’ (Ochs 1997, p. 189). Although this transition entails recounting a series of past events as the basis for the narrative, narratives can also be future orientated. For example, Dunmire examines the narrative of the future in US national security documents, which serves ‘to legitimize US global supremacy as a military power’ (Dunmire 2013, p. 8). The exigency for the future-orientated narrative is the need to convince a US public expectant of a lasting post-Cold War peace of ‘an unprecedented range of threats and actors’ (Dunmire 2013, p. 28; quoting USCNS/21st Century, 1999, p. 46) to justify increased military expenditures and postures.

Notably, ‘the kinds of things people do in narratives seem to repeat themselves over and over again’ across different narratives (Toolan 1988, p. 4). In other words, as Too Lan describes, there is a certain degree of ‘prefabrication’. Another way of discussing this is in terms of genre. As ‘orienting frameworks’ (Hanks 1987, p. 670) or ‘conventional guidelines or schemas’ (Bauman 2004, p. 5), genres aid ‘the hermeneutic task of making sense of human happenings’ (Bruner 1991, p. 5). On top of a pre-fabricated generic framework, the
“particulars” of a given narrative are “filled in” so that the “suggestiveness” of a story lies, then, in the emblematic nature of its particulars, its relevance to a more inclusive narrative type (Bruner 1991, p. 7). This provides for what Chandler (2007, p. 67) terms “generic realism”, where the narrative adheres closely to our expectations (based on generic precedents) for the types of characters we encounter and the actions they undertake. In other words, the more tightly a particular narrative adheres to a widely recognised generic precedent, the easier it is to be taken in by “narrative seduction” (Bruner 1991, p. 7), or to “fall into a “suspension of disbelief” so that alternative scenarios or interpretations fail to be considered or given adequate play” (Hodges 2013b, p. 51).

In constructing understandings of terrorism, narratives have commonly revolved around the “familiar human plights” (Bruner 1991, p. 12) of war and crime. The narrative of the “war on terror” promoted by the Bush administration after the events of 9/11, as discussed earlier, exemplifies the use of the war genre for constructing a war narrative, and thereby building consensus for a response to terrorism in line with that genre’s expectations (Hodges 2011). By adhering to the “generic presidential war narrative” (Hodges 2013b) discussed earlier, President Bush set up a convincing narrative that worked to foreclose all but a single interpretation for the events of 9/11 and the US’s subsequent response to Al Qaeda’s atrocities. The “call to arms” narrative succeeded in garnering public support for, not just a war in Afghanistan, but also a second (and arguably unrelated) war in Iraq.

The power and import of the “war on terror” narrative employed by the Bush administration can be seen in the way it has been taken up and “colonized” (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999) in settings removed from the US response to 9/11. For example, Erjavec (2009) and Erjavec and Volcic (2007) illustrate the way Serbian intellectuals and media appropriated the “war on terror” discourse to recharacterise the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. As one of Erjavec and Volcic’s (2007, p. 196) interviewees describes it, ‘We were fighting the Osama terrorists by ourselves already then’. This illustrates how the “war on terror” narrative, once established and widely circulated around the world, can be appropriated and recontextualised to legitimise divergent political goals.

As van Leeuwen (2007) discusses, there are various ways that narrative can be employed in the process of legitimisation, such as through the telling of moral tales, or cautionary tales. Forchtner (2013) illustrates one type of cautionary tale in his analysis of then-Prime Minister of Denmark Anders Fogh Rasmussen’s speech to justify the Iraq war. In his speech, Rasmussen pointed to Denmark’s past wrongdoing during the Second World War to make the case for justifying its role in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The self-critical stance allowed Rasmussen to claim to have learned the lessons of history and to stake out the moral high ground as he made his case for war.

Clearly, as Foucault (1971) argues, discourse is the power to be seized. In particular, the power of political narratives to construct particular visions of socio-political reality holds real-world consequences in terms of manufacturing consent for war. In this vein, Dunmire (2013) raises an important point relevant to all the examples of political narrative discussed in this section – namely, the issue of “narrative rights”. As Ochs (1997, p. 203) argues of narrative more generally, the ability to “represent and reflect upon events…may be asymmetrically allocated, granting reflective rights to some more than others”. Within the political arena, leaders and official government commissions are imbued with “the delegated power of the spokesperson” (Bourdieu 1991, p. 107). Critically, that power affords such speakers and writers, as Gal (1991, p. 197) says of power more generally, “more than an authoritative voice in decision making”, but also “the ability to define social reality, to impose visions of the world.”
Discourse of us versus them

Central to any narrative are the characters that populate the plotline. Since to wage war requires an ‘enemy’ and a united front to fight against that enemy, political war narratives revolve around the delineation of a clearly defined out-group (qua ‘enemy’) in contradistinction to a united alliance that sets aside internal differences (even if only temporarily) to form a distinct in-group. The constitution of the in-group and out-group relies upon ‘constructive strategies’ in discourse (van Leeuwen & Wodak 1999, p. 92). As socio-cultural linguists emphasise, the identity of groups in times of war (as with identity more generally) ‘is the product rather than the source of linguistic and other semiotic practices’ (Bucholtz & Hall 2005, p. 585). This means that rather than viewing identity as an internal psychological state, or fully formed social position that exists prior to interaction, identity emerges from social and cultural interaction. Within the narrative construction of socio-political reality, the identities that populate that reality are very much a product of semiotic processes that construct the binary of ‘us’ versus ‘them’.

In their discussion of identity construction, Bucholtz and Hall (2004, inter alia) put forth several tactics of intersubjectivity language users adopt to position the self, and others in relation to that self. These tactics revolve around the relations of similarity/difference, genuineness/artifice and authority/delegitimacy (Bucholtz & Hall 2005, p. 598). For example, in the ‘war on terror’ narrative discussed earlier, President Bush employs the tactic of adequation to position Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and the terrorist group Al Qaeda as two faces of the same overarching ‘enemy’ in the ‘war on terror’ (Hodges 2011, p. 64ff). ‘The term adequation emphasizes the fact that in order for groups or individuals to be positioned as alike, they need not – and in any case cannot – be identical, but must merely be understood as sufficiently similar for current interactional purposes’ (Bucholtz & Hall 2005, p. 599). The adequation of Iraq and Al Qaeda is accomplished by placing them in the same conceptual category of ‘terrorists’, equating the otherwise disparate actors in world affairs by imposing upon them a moral and political equivalence (Hodges 2011, p. 71ff). In part, this is accomplished through the incorporation of the lexeme ‘terror’ into alliterative phrases that draw together the two throughout President Bush’s speeches (e.g. ‘terror cells and terror states’, ‘terrorists and tyrants’) and the general characterisation of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in terms of terror (e.g. ‘practices terror’, ‘its drive toward an arsenal of terror’) in reference to his alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction, or WMDs. The historically contingent nature of the ‘enemy’ in times of war is well represented in this example through the effective creation of sufficient sameness between a nation-state governed by a repressive dictatorial regime, but also a non-state terrorist organisation that had openly professed hostility to Saddam’s regime and others like it in the Middle East (Hodges 2011, p. 67).

Van Dijk’s (1998, p. 267) concept of the ‘ideological square’ provides further insight into the ideological underpinnings of the construction of identities in times of war. As narrators set up the binary distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’, they fit either side of the divide into different parts of the square through the common process of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. On one side of the divide, speakers express/emphasise positive aspects and suppress/de-emphasise negative aspects about ‘us’. On the other side of the binary, speakers express/emphasise negative aspects and suppress/de-emphasise positive aspects about ‘them’. Through erasure (Irvine & Gal 2000, p. 38) negative traits about ‘us’ and positive traits about ‘them’ are often concealed through their simple absence in the discourse. In turn, the largest investment of discursive work occurs in the form of expressing and emphasising positive characteristics about ‘us’ and negative characteristics of ‘them’.

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Through this process, the resulting out-group becomes the polar opposite of the in-group. This can be seen in the generic presidential war narrative discussed earlier where the attributes assigned to the out-group – namely, practice aggression and deception, break international agreements, lack legal and moral authority, lack unity – are diametrically opposed to those assigned to the in-group – namely, defend against aggression, follow the rule of law, possess legal and moral authority, possess unity (Hodges 2013b, p. 61). The construction of this dichotomy works to increase the social, political and moral distance between the in-group and the out-group. In particular, the moral distancing is accomplished through the ‘out-casting’ of the enemy (Lazar & Lazar 2004). In this out-casting, the values of the out-group are positioned as wholly other than the values of the in-group. Where in-groups stand for peace and freedom, out-groups become the ‘enemies of freedom’ and ‘enemies of peace’ (Lazar & Lazar 2004, p. 227). Notably, the vilification of the other – which works to strip the enemy of its humanity (a prerequisite for carrying out organised group violence against another group) – contains decidedly religious underpinnings in President Bush’s post-9/11 discourse (Chernus 2006; Silberstein 2002). Such moral evaluation represents one of the four common legitimisation strategies used in discourse (van Leeuwen, 2007; van Leeuwen & Wodak 1999). Lazar and Lazar (2004, p. 236) use the term ‘(e)vilification’ to underscore this type of vilification ‘based upon the spiritual/religious dichotomy between “good” and “evil”’. They note that ‘(e)vilification effectively banishes the other from the moral order that is fundamentally good and godly, and invokes a moral duty to destroy that evil’. In general, the process of out-casting in war discourse creates invidious distinctions and denies the other its humanity, paving the way for war. This is what separates the everyday discursive construction of identities from the process as it is applied in legitimising organised group violence.

Conclusion

As this chapter has illustrated, the forms of political violence encapsulated within the concepts of war and terrorism are very much dependent upon language and social interaction to enable them, to give them meaning, and to shape and constrain understandings and responses. Discourse supplies the socially negotiated frameworks that serve to legitimise certain forms of group violence and delegitimise others. Discourse mobilises polities for war and formulates responses to terrorism. Discourse categorises the world and divides humanity into groups, which can lead to exaggerated distinctions that dehumanise in the service of justifying violent actions against the other. This chapter has aimed to provide greater clarity into the discursive processes that underlie the forms of political violence associated with war and terrorism. In taking a discourse-centred approach, the analysis has sought to disrupt the taken-for-granted assumptions upon which war and terrorism are built and legitimised. What may be taken to be a mere reflection of a pre-existing socio-political reality in political discourse is in fact the product of discursive processes fraught with struggle. To misrecognise those discursive processes as a mirror of ‘the way things simply are’ is to misread the importance of language in constructing war and terrorism as political concepts, and, by implication, to miss the opportunity to critically consider alternatives to the use of violence as a means to solve political disputes.

References

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