

ENEMY CONSTRUCTION:  
THE LANGUAGE OF POLITICAL MORALITY

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Political Science literature abounds in debates revolving around notions of morality in relation to international affairs.<sup>1</sup> While some authors argue that America is the world's hegemon and is therefore obligated to develop policies based on a consistent liberal morality, others counter that policy decisions based on a rigid morality are dangerous because they lead to blind justification of the hegemon's actions. In other words, some argue that a hegemonic ideology reduces issues down to minute details in an attempt to project an image that encompasses all aspects of a particular issue. In reality, however, the hegemon is pursuing self-interested policies under the veil of claims that it holds the key to what benefits everyone.

Recent terrorist acts (namely, the 9/11 attacks on the United States) have intensified the rhetoric of political action based on a rigid morality. In fact, one could argue that the Bush administration's arsenal of sound bites describing the "evil ones" harkens back to the confidence some of our founders had that America is a special nation chosen as a model for all other nations. Indeed, recent statements by Bush such as: "history has called this nation to act"; "the axis of evil"; and "either you're with us or you're against us," thrust us back to the Cold War era when the international arena appeared simple because alliances were clear – one side or another. Simplifying a complex international realm by clearly demarcating between good and evil may go a long way toward satisfying people's need for "justice" and security, but whether it does much to eliminate the causes of terrorism is another issue.

Key to the language of political morality from a foreign policy perspective is projecting evil as lying outside of domestic affairs. The notion of enemy construction is useful in understanding how the mobilization of signifiers works to construct the threat as lying outside and to justify its elimination for the good of all. The enemy must first be dehumanized before it can be eliminated without regret. Indeed, before we can make war we must make the enemy. In this sense, the

priority of symbolic violence is essential in the process of enemy construction. That is, the other must first be defined as evil before killing the other can be morally justified.<sup>ii</sup>

Many theorists have pointed out that the United States is often blind to moral causes behind political violence.<sup>iii</sup> In other words, terrorist acts are quickly identified as only being criminal activities and thus those behind them are demonized. Or, government officials perpetuate myths about “good terrorists” and label our support of groups who use terror to accomplish political goals as “freedom fighters,” “democratic fronts,” “counter terrorists,” etc. In this sense, behavioral changes which work to prevent terrorism around the world need to begin at home. Some scholars go as far as suggesting that “the refusal of the U.S. government to credit the underlying causes of terrorism actually constitutes the greatest escalation of terrorist violence in the world today.<sup>iv</sup> This is true, some argue, because it implies that the situation of peoples such as those in occupied Palestinian territories, the landless peasants in Latin America, etc., will never be changed. In effect, refusing to acknowledge identifiable causes behind certain terrorist activities delegitimizes the terrible conditions in which certain peoples of the world live.

Before continuing with an analysis of the rhetoric surrounding, specifically, the current Bush administration’s “War against Terror,” it is helpful to consider some possible causes of terrorism. That is, do remedies for terrorism lie in structural transformations of world politics and/or in pertinent behavioral transformations? Certainly, the United States would do well to broaden its understanding of what is behind terrorism and to also turn the gaze of identifying terrorist acts in an outside other, inward on its own activities in various parts of the world. Additionally, preventive and situation-management measures cannot be carried out only through the transformation of one aspect of international politics.

Indeed, there are times when responding to “root-causes” explanations for terrorism can go a long way toward satisfying the demands of terrorists, but there are also times when behavioral explanations provide the best insight into acts of terrorism.

## I. A Brief Overview of Explanations for Terrorism

The study of terrorists among anthropologists has been on the increase. Some argue that the institutionalization of terrorism should be a key concern of those who study the phenomenon. In other words, terrorism is becoming a normal feature of human life and, indeed, the post-World War II period has been characterized not by conventional warfare but by terrorism.<sup>v</sup>

Anthropologists who study terrorism usually offer optimistic diagnoses of the ability to curtail terrorist activities if governments of the world will turn their attention not only toward criminalizing terrorist behavior, but also more deeply toward identifying its root causes.<sup>vi</sup> In other words, more research on disaffected groups is necessary in order to understand the dynamics of terrorism. In this sense, terrorism is seen as a “social pathology that is community based arising in communities which find themselves under extreme pressure.”<sup>vii</sup> For them, terrorism is the last resort in dealing with social difficulties and it becomes an expression of the fact that they feel ignored by the international community as well as at home. Indeed, for those who feel oppressed, violence offers them a chance to realize their own power. It becomes a cleansing force and relieves despair and inaction making them feel fearless while, at the same time, restoring their self-respect.<sup>viii</sup>

Behind anthropologically based explorations of terrorism is the notion that

nothing will stop terrorism until the perceived grievances of a group are addressed. It is here where theorists work to reveal the myth behind state-based terrorism. That is, a common idea projected by many governments is that terrorism would cease to exist if states such as Iran, Syria, or Libya refused to support it. This notion is, however, dangerously naïve because if terrorism is community based then state sponsorship of it is largely irrelevant. The example of Libya is often raised to argue that terrorism would neither cease to exist nor would the use of terrorist tactics stop if the government stopped supporting groups of people who commit terrorist acts. Support in the form of money is easily found from other nations and/or through activities such as gunrunning and smuggling. U.S. government sanctions are also seen as an ineffective measure for curtailing terrorism. And when considering U.S. attacks on Qaddafi through military exercises of the kind carried out in the Gulf of Sidra in 1981, '83, and '86, the argument seems quite compelling.<sup>ix</sup> These attacks gave Qaddafi greater political strength (just as those by Israel have done for Arafat) as the Arab world rallied around him in opposition to the United States.

On the other side of the spectrum are theorists who are less sympathetic to the notion that "root-causes" for terrorism can be identified and addressed. They view the quest to relieve pressure on oppressed groups through the identification of root-causes as an idealistic dream, especially in the Middle East.<sup>x</sup> From this angle, the major practitioners of Middle-East sponsored terrorism are Islamic fundamentalists, pro-Syrian nationalists, and Palestinian extremists who have as their end not peace with Israel, but peace with no Israel. And when the terrorist acts are pointed at the United States, they are less directed toward Israel than toward anti-West and anti-modern sentiments. Anti-imperialist sentiments also factor into the equation because the Arab world has been subordinated by the West

both through direct colonialism and, more recently, through neocolonialism.<sup>xi</sup> It is here where the West needs to turn the gaze inward and review its own uses of terror(ism) to dominate the (outside) other.

For those who oppose the “root-causes” explanation of terrorism it is a dangerous mistake to speak of solving the problems of terrorism through legitimizing terrorists’ demands. Rather, the issue of terrorism is best addressed through restraining it with political, economic, and military pressure. At the same time, however, it can be equally dangerous to continue to demonize terrorists as a way of locating evil outside of our own questionable activities in many parts of the world. Declarations denying possible root causes behind terrorist activities such as poverty in South and Central America, for example, are ways of avoiding change on the part of wealthy nations, thus buffering them from any implication in the causes of terrorism and long-lasting solutions to the growing menace. It is toward this point that we turn our focus.

## II. The Language of Morality in International Affairs

To say that President Bush’s rhetoric around the war against terrorism is highly moral is quite an understatement. Indeed, after listening to him one might conclude that the United States stands for all that is good and just while our enemies are the manifestation of all that is evil and unjust. The debate around the primacy of morality in international affairs has a long history. Today, we most commonly find issues of morality arising in the context of a liberal democratic (quasi-Christian) perspective. What is often left unsaid, however, is the issue of power and its relationship to defining what is moral. The question that begs to be answered is: Can power and morality be considered independent of one another?

Said in another way, can a liberal morality be what guides a hegemon's actions most of the time? Furthermore, should that morality be imposed on others so as to suggest that those who choose not to adopt such a framework are our enemies who need to be contained?

Some key questions arise when considering hegemony, power, and morality in an international context. Is hegemony justifiable? If it is, is it justified on the basis of power and/or morality? Realists argue that the basis of a continued hegemony is, and always should be, power. Morality, in general, should not play a part in a hegemon's actions because others can make claims to moral rights to have their policies held as binding if they have enough power to enforce them over others. In other words, power justifies hierarchy in the international arena simply because it can—it provides the “clean” way to make claims to a justified hierarchy. From this perspective, arguing for hegemony based on notions of right and wrong is, at best, misleading.

Additionally, implying that domestic political values can be transferred onto the international scene (i.e., all countries should become democratic because democracy and authoritarianism are polar opposites) is naïve.<sup>xiii</sup> In the international sphere, there are no credible institutions to filter differing interpretations of morality as there are in the domestic sphere. Furthermore, there is a shallow assumption that U.S.-led hegemony will result in an ordered international environment as long as the U.S. applies its domestic-liberal values to the “outside.” The fact that hegemony does not necessarily result in order and the absence of hegemony does not have to bring about chaos, is never really considered by policymakers who argue for an aggressive foreign policy against those who do not adhere to liberal democratic principles.

The case of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991 is often referred to when arguing for a legitimate hegemon-led intervention involving subordinate states. Unfortunately, it is most often looked at in isolation. Historical facts such as Iraq's claim to Kuwait as its 19<sup>th</sup> province in disregard of the Treaty of Versailles after World War I, are ignored. To Hussein, his actions were moral and what was immoral was the arbitrary division of much of the Middle East after the war. The same can certainly be illustrated in the 1884 Berlin Conference when Africa was divided into spheres of influence not with the interests of local inhabitants in mind, but in order to prevent an intra-European conflict between France, Germany, and England. I am not suggesting that world powers should have ignored Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, but the historical context is much more complex than most policymakers care to admit. In short, the issue becomes one of who has the power to back their concepts of morality.

Similarly, we must question whether the rhetoric of moral policies masks a more fundamental condition. That is, that states act according to their capacity and not always in relation to morality. In other words, morality may follow their actions but it does not always precede actions unless one argues that a hegemon has a margin of invulnerability that allows it to act in consideration of morality first. The concept of invulnerability is indeed questionable, but even when it does exist power is still the underlying factor that allows for the "moral" action. Additionally, as E.H. Carr has pointed out, just because a hegemon can act over others does not mean that its actions are inherently moral. Morality is always already "historically conditioned."<sup>xiii</sup>

In short, it is one thing to contend that a hegemon's function in the international system carries with it obligations to act morally even though its

morals may be imposed on the other and are not “consensual.” It is, however, quite another thing to assume that liberalism is inherently moral regardless of notions of self-interest and that we are therefore lucky that a liberal state such as the United States is the hegemon because it is more inclined to do what is right. In this case, we simply return to the word games of idealists who claim privileged readings to what is moral and what is immoral.

An additional issue that some liberal theorists fail to address is whether or not the ends justify the means when a hegemon acts. Furthermore, how do we judge this? Do we judge it primarily on notions of morality or on notions of power such as maintaining a certain status-quo order? The two are certainly not mutually exclusive, but an analysis of which fuels which certainly adds clarity to what motivates policies. Does power feed moral claims to action? Or, is acting morally possible because of power irrespective of a desire to maintain a certain power base? The difference is substantial. What is at issue is whether decisions deemed moral are made “to protect the rights of innocent persons.”<sup>xiv</sup> Or, are they made with the goal of suspending a certain power structure which does not always determine relations within that structure, but which certainly influences the relations and maintains normative concepts of what is right and wrong and, more importantly, who is given the privileged interpretation of deciding between right and wrong? States simply do not act in a “moral vacuum” separated from issues of power.<sup>xv</sup>

It is also important to note that weaker states exist in the international system of the hegemon and not vice-versa. Therefore, more often than not, consensus and even cooperation mean that the weak become more like the strong. For the strong usually construct the field on which policy debates take place. In



this sense, unless a hegemon is willing to accept varying interpretations of morality from weaker states on a level that challenges their own conceptualizations of morality and how it acts on those images, issues of morality remain somewhat existential. This is because they will always be filtered through a hegemonic power that has a vested interest in maintaining its position. Indeed, perhaps further consideration should even be given to the possibility that the “norm” that is suspended by the hegemon contributes to various crises that arise in the international realm.

### III. Living in Terror

Americans now know what many around the world have known for quite some time: it is becoming more and more likely that terrorists will exploit the destructive potential of easily obtainable weapons. Addressing the issue of remedies for terrorism is certainly not an easy task. In an age where controls on weapons are less stringent, monitoring into whose hands they fall becomes more difficult. Ultimately, if we want to end terrorism, we must stop practicing it “in our lives, in our families, in everything we do.”<sup>xvi</sup> States continually glorify violence and its destructive consequences, and until this stops it is unlikely that terrorism will stop. Indeed, when killing serves our purposes we are too quick to justify it in the name of justice, freedom, and democracy.

I am not suggesting that countries should compromise with terrorists or attempt to account for all of their actions as a function of oppression, for that would be a dangerous move. It is, however, equally dangerous to label people who we don't like as terrorists, thus clearing the way to go after them. The Bush administration's recent attempts to link drug cartels to terrorism is a case in point.

Although drug sales may account for large sums of money falling into the hands of terrorists, the problem of drug addiction lies at home. Using this sort of metonymy (part-for-the-whole substitute) to justify an aggressive foreign policy against those whom we do not like is not only a misuse of citizens' tax money, but it is also a dangerously misguided foreign policy. Indeed, it appears that America has found its new Cold War enemy in terrorism.<sup>xvii</sup>

Considering the intensified moral tone of Bush's war against terror (i.e., "history has called this nation to act"), it is even more important to examine whether we can justify molding state actions around our conceptualization of what works best for all. We certainly do not want to let terrorist acts go unpunished, but we also should not ignore possible root-causes of terrorism. Combining liberal and realist approaches to terrorism offers one possible avenue to follow. That is, states can act to punish terrorism through the use of economic sanctions and other political and, as a last resort, military means, while, at the same time, work to establish a forum from which legitimate claims behind terrorist acts can be addressed.<sup>xviii</sup> Indeed, whenever possible it is important to act in ways that demonstrate how non-terrorist approaches to settling community-based grievances can be effective. This kind of approach, tempered with punishing individual acts of terrorism when they can be identified, could work to address terrorism on a variety of fronts. Lastly, the United States should reexamine its own behavior and how its institutional structures can work to hide questionable activities behind the guise of national security issues.

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- i See, for example, Lea Brilmayer, American Hegemony: Political Morality in a One-SuperPower World. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994; or David Halloran Lumsdaine, Moral Vision in International Politics: The Foreign Aid Regime, 1949-1989. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- ii The execution of Timothy McVeigh is a perfect illustration of this process ... it wasn't, one could argue, really another human who was being killed, but evil itself. For more on the notion of symbolic violence, refer to Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings, ed. Mark Poster. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988, 13, 143; Fatal Strategies, trans. Philip Beitchman. New York: Semiotext(e), 1990.
- iii Maurice Berger. "Visual terrorism." In Violent Persuasions: The Politics and Imagery of Terrorism, ed. David J. Brown and Robert Merrill. Seattle: Bay Press, 1993, 18. Also refer to Eric Willeng. "U.S. Policy on Terrorism: In Search of an Answer," Terrorism 9, no. 3 (1987) 225-239.
- iv Robert Merrill. "Case Studies in Terrorism: A Symposium." Ibid., 123.
- v Herbert M. Levine. World Politics Debated: A Reader in Contemporary Issues. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992, 312.
- vi William O. Beemen. "Terrorism: Community Based or State Supported?" American Arab Affairs, 16 (Spring 1986). Reprinted in Levine. Ibid., 318.
- vii Beeman, Reprinted in Levine. Ibid., 318.
- viii See Franz Fanon. The Wretched of the Earth. New York: Grove Press, 1963, 35-106.
- ix Indeed, it can be argued that economic sanctions against Iraq are destroying the civilian population while having little impact on Saddam Hussein.
- x Charles Krauthammer. "Terror and Peace: The 'Root Cause' Fallacy." Time, 128 (Sept. 28, 1986) 97.
- xi David C. Gordon. Images of the West: Third World Perspectives. New York and London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1989, 15-27; 87-91.
- xii Refer to Brilmayer, 47.
- xiii E. H. Carr. The Twenty Years Crisis, 1919-1939. New York: Harper and Row, 1949, 68.
- xiv Brilmayer, 56.
- xv It could be argued, for example, that the U.S. intervention in Somalia was a moral move independent of power issues. Without getting into arguments revolving around imposing a particular order onto Somalia, however, it eventually became clear that people like Aidid forced power issues into the forefront when he got in the way of the moral and powerful steamroller called Liberalism.
- xvi Ramsey Clark. "Beyond Terrorism." In Violent Persuasions: The Politics and Imagery of Terrorism. Ibid., 84.
- xvii Refer to [www.theantidrug.com](http://www.theantidrug.com) for more on the Bush administration's efforts to link terrorism to drugs.
- xviii Jerrold M. Post. "Current Understanding of Terrorist Motivation and Psychology: Implications for a Differentiated Antiterrorist policy." Terrorism 13 (1990) 65.