

Culture, Conflict, and Death

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ABSTRACT: By the end of the 20th century, culture and cultural identity became key elements in ethno-political conflicts. In traditional scholarship the origins of conflicts were located in the unequal distribution of wealth, unequal access to resources, status and power. The roots of ethnic violence and acts of terrorism, however, can only partly be explained in terms of external conditions. Traditional theories have neglected the importance of culture for human existence and threat towards cultural identity in ethnic conflicts. The major premise of my talk is the assumption that culture is more than a system of shared meaning and practices. Rather, as pointed out by the German sociologist Max Weber, culture provides meaning and importance to our lives in an otherwise meaningless universe. According to new theorizing in social psychology, the main function of culture is to alleviate anxiety caused by the awareness of our eventual death. In this framework, culture and religion offer answers to the meaning of life in the face of our mortality. Faith in ones own cultural world-view provides protection from the fear of death. If people feel that their religion or other cultural world-views are threatened by other religions or conceptions of culture they can be mobilized and seem to be ready to fight or even die for their beliefs.

You may be wondering about the title of this little essay. Perhaps the connection of the first two concepts - “culture” and “conflict” - makes sense to you. The third concept - “death” - in connection with “culture” may surprise you. In the following I will focus on the intricate relationship between culture and death. By this, I refer to new theoretical developments in psychology known as “Terror Management Theory” that elucidates the relationship between culture and death.

First, I shall speak about the traditional understanding of culture and how culture became a key element in current ethno-political conflicts. I shall argue that the dynamics of these conflicts cannot be understood without the role that culture plays in our attempts to understand the meaning of our lives and death.

Culture and conflict

By the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century culture and cultural identity became key elements in ethno-political conflicts. By ethno-political conflicts I mean all forms of aggression, in particular genocide, which are carried out against other groups because they are perceived to be different in terms of their ethnicity or cultural or religious beliefs.

News about ethnic massacres and suicide bombers who sacrifice their lives in the name of Allah has become a daily routine. Gradually, we are becoming insensitive to the repeating terror. The daily victims both in Iraq, Israel and Palestine are only a very small fraction of what the world has on its conscience. The conservative estimates begin at 100 million non-military casualties in the last century alone, this is an average of about 3000 a day (Dutton, Boyanowsky & Bond, 2005).

In the 20th century, the numbers of human victims of mass slaughter burgeoned. According to Gilbert (1994) in 1914, over one million Armenians were massacred or died from brutalities inflicted upon them by the Turks. In addition to 20 million Eastern European war dead, the Nazis systematically eliminated about six million Jews, five million gypsies and civilians in Eastern Europe, and others between 1933 and 1945. Stalin masterminded the killing or starvation of up to 30 million “dissenters” in the Soviet Union. In 1945, on entering the eastern part of Germany, the Russian army killed 2.5 million civilians. Mao Zhe Dung oversaw the killing of up to 20 million in China. The Khmer Rouge led by Pol Pot killed 2.5 million “educated people” in Cambodia between 1974 and 1978. Hutus killed approximately 800.000 people, most of them Tutsis, in just 100 days. Sadam Hussein orchestrated the killing of Kurds and “dissenters,” while in Bosnia, the Serbs under Slobodan Milosevic carried out “ethnic cleansing” of non-Serbs.

The unspeakable horrors of these events and of many other collective atrocities such as in Sudan, Somalia, Angola, Lidice, Malmedy, Oradour-surj-Glane, Babi Yar and too many others, leave us mute as we are unable to comprehend why human beings mass murder their fellow humans apparently without any remorse or feelings of guilt or shame.

The question of why these mass killings happen has two families of answers. One answer is given in terms of geo-political antecedents such as contending nations or governments fighting because of territorial aspirations. These were the causes of major wars in the past. This, however, does not tell us why violence and atrocity emerges as part of ethnic or ideological conflicts most often within and much less between countries. Nor does it tell us under what circumstances ordinary members of otherwise peaceful collectivities come to take part in massive slaughter and unspeakable atrocities. The second answer - and the answer to this question - is traditionally given in terms of men's human nature (Bierbrauer, 2003).

What is Human Nature?

Since massacres have occurred in all parts of the world, in nearly all cultures and religions, we are tempted to believe that they are part of "human nature". And indeed biological and evolutionary explanations are becoming increasingly popular in the scientific community. Since we share 98.5 % of genes with chimpanzees, we humans can be considered as simply another ape. The importance of biological factors in aggression is affirmed by the argument that evolution worked for tens of millions of years, whereas civilization had only a few thousand years to overcome its influence. So we had better look at our animal part. The traditional focus of evolutionary theory of aggression is best represented by Konrad Lorenz. Aggression is in our genes and humans are endowed with the instincts for aggression so the stories go.

Another extremely popular explanation why human beings mass kill their fellow humans goes back to Freud. In 1932 Freud and Einstein exchanged a number of letters concerning the question: "Why war?" Freud's answer became very popular – even outside the academic world. Freud was very sceptical about men's destructive impulses as part of his human nature. Wars, he wrote, are the result of men's destructive impulses and he even argued that it would be illusory to get rid of aggressive tendencies. War, says Freud, is part of men's

nature because of his biological roots and therefore not avoidable. This argument in some way does not legitimize war, but Freud's ideas dominated much of our thinking in the last century and still prevail today. Because of my limited space I cannot discuss the complexity of these and other arguments concerning Freud's notion of human aggression. I can only mention that there is no empirical evidence that humans function like steam engines which need to release aggressive impulses in order to restore a kind of equilibrium – no matter how popular this belief may be.

What about the socio-biological accounts of human nature? As mentioned, we share 98.5 % of our DNA with chimpanzees. The simple fact that animals - at least most species - do not kill members of their own species makes these explanations dubious. But more important is the argument that there is no animal species that kills on principles and on a mass scale.

Nevertheless, biological explanations of ethnic, religious and ideological massacres are very popular not only because they are simple, but also, because they discount our culpability. Massacres, however, are the products of human creativity, not of instinctual forces. They are uniquely human and fundamentally social. All massacres are justified by the perpetrators, such as the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo or Hitler who called for the destruction of “inferior” humans. Nazi propaganda fostered antagonistic attitudes towards the “enemies” of Germany, namely Jews and idealized the Aryan race as superior to all others. Germans, as the Nazis propagated, were to become the Kulturträger (“carriers of culture”) of Europe, destined to impose their way of life on all others who deserved it and to eliminate those groups that were beneath the acceptable threshold.

Individual based theories, on the other hand, that search for some unique internal processes, structure or personality dispositions ignore the solid social psychological findings showing that situational circumstances far outweigh personality dispositions (Bierbrauer, 2005). The well-known studies by Stanley Milgram (1974), on obedience, for example, demonstrate that all sorts of individuals will administer harmful shocks to innocent others on simple commands of an experimenter. This is Milgram's legacy: How can ordinary men transform

into extra-ordinary murderers? As I said, no animal kills on purpose and massacres are not the product of instinctual forces nor caused by internal structures or individual dispositions. Massacres as collective violence must be understood in terms of cultural processes which are the result of a combination of individual values and collective forces. What is common in all forms of collective violence is an appeal to a higher purpose which mobilizes masses of ordinary people, often having no evil motives to begin with. In the context of mass propaganda ordinary men feel like heroes of their country or their religion.

In the view of Hannah Arendt (1963), Daniel Goldhagen (1996) and Christopher Browning (1993), the Holocaust was the product of ordinary minds like yours and mine. The main question is: how can ordinary men transform into extra-ordinary murderers? There is one common observation I have already mentioned: The perpetrators carry out their slaughter in the service at what is seen as a higher purpose. Their deeds are unquestionably “right”, “necessary”, and “good”. When they fully accept a higher purpose dictated by their deep conviction that their deed serves this higher purpose, ordinary people can be mobilized to kill other human beings.

As I mentioned earlier on, the account of collective violence in terms of innate aggressions or our biological heritage has many difficulties. Collective phenomena are foremost the province of social psychology and also of sociology, anthropology, and political science. We still do not understand how it is possible for an otherwise peaceful collectivity to engage in mass murder. As I said there is one common denominator: They do it for a higher purpose; they do it in order to protect their culture against enemies; they are even willing to sacrifice their own lives if it serves a higher purpose. But why is culture so important that it needs to be protected?

What is Culture?

The authors of Terror Management Theory provide a simple answer which may surprise you: “Cultures provide ways that ‘solve’ the existential crises engendered by the awareness of death” (Pyszczynsky, Solomon, and Greenberg, 2003, 16).

In this context, culture functions to provide meaning to life and death. This is also contained in Max Weber’s (1904) definition of culture. He pointed out that culture provides meaning and importance to our lives in an otherwise meaningless universe.

In the following I will bring together some arguments that shed new light on the relationship between culture and death and its role in ethno-political, religious or ideological conflicts. Culture is generally understood as a broad and multifaceted concept in the social sciences, but there is no common definition of culture that is shared in the academic world. In our common-sense understanding we see culture as embodied in art, literature or even in food habits which are characteristic for a country or region. In Germany and many other countries, someone is regarded as a person without culture if he or she does not adhere to what is considered proper and decent. For the present purpose, culture can be conceived as a system of beliefs (what is true), of values (what is important) and of expectations (what happens when we engage in certain behaviors) developed by and for a group of people (countries, regions, social groups) to provide the requirements of living (food, water, security, social belonging, respect and meaning).

What do I mean by the phrase “culture gives meaning to our lives”? For human beings meaning refers to their understanding of how events fit into the larger scheme of things and, in particular, how their lives fit into an order of things beyond what they can observe. “Where do I come from?” and more importantly “What happens to me after my death?” or “What is the meaning of my suffering?” are the central questions of our lives. Especially in moments of crises or tragedy we feel an almost existential urge to put our lives in a broader perspective that is beyond our current existence. From where do we derive meaning?

First of all, it seems religion is the most potent source of meaning as most religions provide answers for these questions. Religion can be conceived as a major belief system. Other belief systems are “Weltanschauung or worldview or ideologies. All belief systems can be seen as part of culture as they indicate what, for instance, is important, valued, and expected. In this way culture and belief systems provide answers about meaning. But this does not answer our central question: Why do men wage wars, destroy others who have a different cultural background or pray to another God? Why do some people find more meaning in the sacrifice of their own lives than in carrying on here on earth?

The authors of Terror Management Theory (eg., Greenberg, Pyszczynski and Solomon, 2003) provide an answer to this question. They combine their insights of existential philosophy, psychoanalytic theorizing, anthropology and social psychology to develop a rather broad psychological theory that provides a new understanding of the relationship between culture and death. They draw heavily on the work of Ernest Becker (1973) who has written extensively on the role of culture in providing a sense of meaning, value and security in a threatening, indeterminate universe. Becker again synthesized ideas developed by Freud, Lifton, Rank, Berger, Luckmann and others (see Pyszczynski et al., 2003). They argue that all organisms — humans and animals alike — are instinctively driven toward self-preservation and continued experience. Unlike animals, human beings because of their highly sophisticated cognitive abilities, can reflect upon themselves. This means they can even reflect upon their own non-existence; or in other words, they have an awareness that they will eventually die.

Because of their capacity to reflect upon their own death and eventual annihilation, human beings experience a constant source of existential threat and anxiety called “terror” by the authors of this theory. The constant reminder of our own mortality and eventual death would paralyze us and we would not be able to function. But this does not happen. We do function and we are not paralyzed simply because we do not constantly think about our own death. What is the mechanism that minimizes - at least most of the time — this paralyzing terror?

There must be a psychological mechanism that protects us from this terror. According to Pyszczynski et al. (2003) this terror is kept under control by means of a so called “cultural anxiety buffer“. This cultural anxiety buffer consists of two components: (1) Self-esteem and (2) cultural worldview.

The Basic Tenets of Terror Management Theory:

- (1) Because of their capacity to reflect upon their own death and possible annihilation, human beings experience a constant source of existential threat and anxiety.
- (2) There must be some kind of psychological buffer which protects us from this awareness; otherwise we would not be able to function.
- (3) According to Terror Management Theory, a dual component cultural anxiety buffer has evolved to fulfill this function. The two components of this buffer are self-esteem and the particular world view to which we are socialized. Pursuit of self-esteem and faith in the cultural world provide protection from the fear of death.
- (4) The anxiety buffer is activated when people experience a threat to their cultural world view or their self-esteem, in other words, the encounter with death-related stimuli leads people to increased pursuit of self-esteem and faith in their cultural world view. When people are asked to think about their own death they tend to rigidly defend or protect their world view.

Self-esteem refers to the belief that we are worthy and valued in a world of meaning. Individuals must perceive themselves as valuable and significant participants in the cultural drama. Low self-esteem, for instance, is associated with poor physical and mental health and threats to self engenders anxiety and a host of psychological defenses. The primary function of self-esteem, however, is to buffer anxiety, especially anxiety associated with vulnerability and death. The need for self-esteem is most likely universal, although the specific ways in

which self is acquired and maintained varies across culture and historical eras. No one obtains self-esteem through the self because self-esteem is a cultural product because the standards by which we judge ourselves to be persons of value is invariably derived for the cultural milieu each of us inhabits.

And each cultural milieu has its own standards from which we derive our self-esteem. Cultural standards are particular world-views which we acquire during socialization. Socialization is the process of learning and practicing the culture in which we are born and raised. The cultural worldview provides a conception of what is true, valued and accepted in our culture. It encompasses our central beliefs and attitudes about the world and, what is most important in this context, it imbues the universe with meaning and stability. The major sources of worldviews can be found in religions, ideologies or in transcendental belief systems.

From this perspective any particular worldview is a symbolic construction that provides a meaningful context in which an anxiety-free action is possible. Religious belief systems provide perhaps the most extensive source of worldviews. Those who live up to the religious standards are promised literal immortality, or an afterlife or oneness with the universe depending on the religious orientation. However, other activities of life have the potential to provide meaning or even symbolic immortality. Thus, children can be seen as a source of continuity, exceptional achievements in the arts, in music or even sport can be regarded as means to raise self-esteem through social admiration. Striving for wealth or other forms of material success can be seen as an indirect way to achieve admiration and respect. Most of us, however, never become famous or immortal because we do not stand out. We nevertheless aspire to be recognized as a valued individual.

All these processes are social constructions because they exist only by the endorsement of other social actors who share the same beliefs and values. Social constructions are therefore fragile in the sense they can be challenged and threatened by individuals or groups who subscribe to another worldview because they are socialized in another culture or belong to

another religion. However, when my worldview is threatened by other worldviews my anxiety buffer – as I mentioned before – is activated to defend and maintain my worldview in the form of negative reactions toward those who subscribe to another worldview because they challenge our worldviews.

Any challenges to my worldview, self-esteem and death-related thoughts activate the anxiety buffer, because its main function is to control anxiety concerning our vulnerability and mortality. In other words, the encounter with death-related stimuli lead people to increased pursuit of self-esteem and faith in their cultural worldview. When this happens the anxiety buffer is activated in the form of negative reactions toward those who are different because they challenge our worldviews.

Terror Management Theory opened a new understanding of the intricate relationship between culture and death. Threats to our cultural worldviews can mobilize individuals and groups to fight and even die when certain additional conditions are met: These are low self-esteem and death-related thoughts in conjunction with a promise of immortality (Pyszczynski, et al., 2003).

These conditions are almost perfectly met in the case of Islamic or other forms of religious fundamentalism (Bierbrauer, 2003). Large parts of the Islamic world are in contrast to the West economically underdeveloped. Whereas the Islamic civilization was on the same level as the occidental world until the middle ages, ever since then the Islamic world has lagged behind. The domination of the West both culturally and economically is perceived as humiliating and disgracing. In particular, Western liberalism is seen as corrupt and immoral, and a world wherein God the Almighty is only one among several other “Gods” is unacceptable. Even more important is the promise of immortality for those who fight and die in the jihad.

The most influential thinker of modern Islam Sayyid Qutb writes in his commentary the Surah 2:

“Those who risk their lives and go out to fight, and who are prepared to lay down their lives for the cause of God are honorable people, pure of heart and blessed of soul ... But the great surprise is that those among them who are killed in the struggle must not be considered or described as dead. They continue to live, as God Himself clearly states ... It is in this sense that such people, having sacrificed their lives for the sake of God, retain their active existence in everyday life ... There is no real sense of loss in their death, since they continue to live (quote from “Terror and Liberalism” by Berman; 2004).

The core ideals of Western civilization are human equality irrespective of heritage, creed or color, and respect for life. However, respect for different worldviews does not come about through mere appeals to human unity or moral values. In order to make a multicultural world or society work, we have to understand the forces which prevent multicultural tolerance. The research in the context of Terror Management Theory seems to suggest that we have to better understand the dynamics of the potential threat that other worldviews can provide. In particular, individuals and groups who feel marginalized and disrespected often harbor deep resentment against the Western mode of living and find in the political-religious ideology of their leaders moral justification for their violent behavior.

If we want to achieve a world free of terrorism, much effort will have to be directed at educating our children and students about the core of Western civilization, which includes individual rights, tolerance and skills for conflict resolution.

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