

**Discourses of the War on Terror:  
Constructions of the Islamic Other After 7/7**

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**Abstract**

It is widely agreed that the events which took place on 11 September 2001 have played a large part in reshaping global imaginings about contemporary acts of terrorism and its Islamic perpetrators. Given this transformation in the understanding of terrorism and terrorists our objective in this paper is threefold. First we want to present a discussion of the roots of the kind of neo-liberal politics that has grown up alongside acts of terrorism and its global media coverage which has, we argue, resulted in a politics of fear that acts to legitimate ever increasing legislative controls. In an attempt to reveal how discourse works to support such regulation, in the second part of this paper we offer a qualitative analysis of newspaper articles from the UK about acts of terrorism that have taken place since the suicide bombings on the London transport system on 7 July 2005. Together with an analysis of the political speeches of Bush and Blair, we examine how far these current discourses can be said to have reframed notions of inclusion/exclusion for Muslim populations. Finally we present a discussion of the consequences of such terrorist acts and their varied representations for the future of the British multicultural imaginary.

Global terrorism, war on terror, media representation, British Islam

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**The Political Economy of Global Terrorism**

Although it is possible to argue that transnational terror networks existed in the late 1960s through to the early 1970s, and refer to famous examples such as the siege of Entebbe and groups such as Terror International which comprised terrorist cells from Palestine, Germany, and Italy (Hoffman, 2006), it is our *contention* in this paper that this networked terrorism did not have the same kind of impact on our everyday sense of security as contemporary Islamic terrorism. However, it is difficult to explain why this is the case. It is well recorded that the IRA was supported and funded by international networks. They received financial support from American backers and famously obtained military hardware from Libya in the 1980s. The internationalism of Palestinian terrorists is similarly well known if we consider the events of Munich 1972 when Black September terrorists seized members of the Israeli Olympic team. This episode ended in the massacre of the athletes and prolonged Israeli reprisals against key members of the Palestinian organisation Fatah. But despite the fact that this event took place on the biggest world stage, and transplanted the politics of Israel-Palestine into a European setting, there was little sense that the everyday lives of non-Israeli-Palestinians were under threat from terror networks lurking in our midst. What, then, is new about the new terrorism<sup>1</sup> unleashed by 9/11?

It is our contention that the reason the events of Entebbe and Munich did not strike fear into the hearts of the general populace was because processes of globalisation were not yet in full swing. It would be a mistake to suggest that these processes were not taking place in the 1970s, but what we can say is that there was still a sense in

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the evolution of new terrorism see Laquer (1999), who argues that new terrorism is characterised by a move toward 'fanatical' belief systems and access to weapons of mass destruction. Burnett and Whyte (2005), also provide a useful analysis of trends in new terrorism since 9/11.

which the condition of world shrinking, which David Harvey (1991) discusses in his book on post-modernism, was only just beginning to have an effect on the everyday lives of the general populace. Perhaps what happened in the 1970s – which transformed terrorism from a globalised networked phenomenon that was not understood as such by the masses, to a globalised networked phenomenon, which the masses could not only recognise but actively over-estimate thus boosting the terrorists' project to strike fear into the hearts of the masses – was that political decisions were made in Britain and America that began the process of neo-liberal capitalist globalisation that we live with today. The key term here is neo-liberalism. In his later book, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), Harvey demonstrates how the forerunners of neo-liberalism collapsed the liberal ideas of freedom and democracy into capitalist principles of the freedom to make money without state interference and the democratic right of everybody to pursue whatever means necessary to realise their own life projects inside a capitalist framework.

Further to this, Harvey explains that neo-liberal ideology emerged in response to the crisis of capitalism that took place in the 1970s. On the one hand western leaders felt that they were being held hostage by the OPEC nations who refused to ship oil to supporters of Israel in the Yom Kippur War (Rabinovich, 2005). The effect of the embargo was to cause the price of oil to rise and the western economies, so reliant on oil to maintain capitalism, to begin to slow down<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> In order to situate this idea we can look to Edward Said who, as part of his trilogy on the construction of Islam in western discourse, has demonstrated that the ensuing oil crisis was central to our contemporary understanding of Arabic-Islamic relations with the west:

...before the sudden OPEC price rises in early 1974, 'Islam' as such scarcely figured either in the culture or in the media... But the dramatically higher cost of imported oil soon became associated in the public mind with a cluster of unpleasant things: American dependence on imported oil (which was usually referred to as 'being at the mercy of foreign

This tension exposes the second problem facing western capitalism in the 1970s: the strength of the labour movement and ever-increasing demands for higher wages and better conditions. Together these two conditions – the oil crisis and the strength of labour – undermined capitalism and began to compromise the ability of business to extract profit from the economy. That the oil crisis occurred in response to the Yom Kippur War between Israel and a coalition of Arabic states led by Egypt and Syria, and the core problem of terrorism to this day arguably remains the Israel-Palestine situation, is no coincidence. The connection of these events reveals the complex political economy of contemporary terrorism. That is to say that the political situation of Israel-Palestine was directly linked to both global terrorism – which the western public were not yet aware of as a threat to their everyday life – and the rise of neo-liberal political ideology – which occurred as a result of the Arabic response to the Arab-Israeli Wars in the Middle East and eventually gave rise to a new sensitivity to globalised terrorism.

However, in order to combat the difficult situation in the Middle East the western capitalist economies took steps to radicalise the relationship between business and labour in favour of capitalists. The effect of this process, which developed through the 1970s and 1980s, was to pass the OPEC problem through the western class system so that it was no longer western capitalists who were squeezed by the increased oil price, but rather the western working classes who saw wages cut, job insecurity increase, and social security provisions slashed<sup>3</sup>. The overall effect of the emergence

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oil producers'); the apprehension that intransience was being communicated from the Persian Gulf region to individual Americans; above all a signal – as if from a new, hitherto unidentified force – saying that energy was no longer 'ours' for the taking (1981: 33).

<sup>3</sup> Herein resides the famous triumvirate of reforms usually seen to comprise neo-liberal political-economic programmes (Harvey, 2005; Beck, 2002). First, the state cuts back on public ownership of

of neo-liberalism was to radically alter the balance of power between capitalists and workers in the major western powers. This may then explain why, the other members of the Terror International movement<sup>4</sup>, comprised of German and Italian Marxists, found common cause with the Palestinian radicals. Whereas the latter group were concerned with the political situation in the Middle East, the former group were opposed to the related transformations taking place in the western capitalist economies. That these group's explicit ideology reflected a kind of violent Frankfurt School neo-Marxism set on opposition to soulless western consumerism should not lead us to believe that their connection to the Palestinians was simply a marriage of convenience. On the contrary the two struggles, for Palestinian statehood and workers' freedoms, were intimately linked through the confrontation between the major oil producing countries and the western capitalist economies that remained determined to find ways to make profits despite the crisis of accumulation caused by the rise in the price of oil.

### **Fear, Anxiety, and the Construction of the War on Terror**

What we have here, then, is a discussion of a possible theory of the political-economy of global terrorism in the 1970s. But at this time international terrorism, produced by the complex relationships between Israel, the Arabic states, OPEC, and the western

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infrastructure. Mass privatisation takes place in order to not only place enormously profitable businesses in the hands of private business, but also tip the balance of the capitalist-labour struggle in favour of business by virtue of the fact that the working classes are largely at the mercy of capitalists who own essential infrastructure. Second, the state deregulates capitalism, so that business is able to follow more or less whatever practices it deems necessary in pursuit of private profit. The related effect of this transformation was that western capitalists set about the destruction of unions who might oppose the idea of deregulated business able to hire, fire, and restructure at will. Finally, the western capitalist states pulled the rug out from under the feet of the workers who had previously fought business on the basis that they could fall back on social security if they found themselves out of work.

<sup>4</sup> The notion of 'terror international' was explored on the BBC documentary 'Age of Terror' written by journalist Peter Taylor. For further discussion of the complex relationship between radical terrorist organisations see Hoffman (2006).

capitalisms, was not experienced by the western public as a threat to their everyday lives. At this time suicide bombers and hijacked airplanes remained a remote threat for most people. Instead, terrorism was understood in political terms, rather than as the kind of generalised phenomenon currently spoken about in discourses surrounding the American-led 'War on Terror'. What, then, led to the transformation of terrorism, a phenomenon with political actors and political agendas, into *terror*, a quasi-natural phenomenon, which appears to strike people without warning, explanation, or reason? We think that there are several reasons for this transformation. First, the political-economic transformations of neo-liberalism through the 1970s and 1980s produced a new sense of generalised insecurity in the everyday lives of the masses in the major capitalist states, but more especially Britain and America. Bauman (2006) recently spoke about this generalised sense of uncertainty and insecurity in terms of liquid fear. Following on from Beck's (1992) articulation of the risk society, another term we might use to reflect the new state of uncertainty surrounding the very things of everyday life, such as job security, the ability to maintain a home, and provide for one's family, would be anxiety. Anxiety is a useful term to refer to in this context, because what this concept means is a kind of fluid or ambient sense of uncertainty or unease. The anxious person knows that there is a threat lurking somewhere in the vicinity, but is unable to pin down its exact location (Salecl, 1994). Further to this in his 2007 book on the complex relationship between utopia and dystopia, Featherstone (2007) shows how the term fear extends the idea of anxiety by describing what happens when we attach an object to our sense of uncertainty. We fear a particular object. In this respect what Bauman's term liquid fear refers to is a constantly shifting sense of fear whereby we continually attach new objects to our ambient feelings of uncertainty in order to

cope with them better. It is possible to handle fear. Anxiety is much more difficult to stand.

In this regard we want to suggest that the specific problem of contemporary (Islamicised) global terror emerged in response to the generalised anxieties produced by neo-liberalism and the consequent spread of the precariousness of everyday life through the capitalist economies. Here we argue that the originators of neoliberal ideology, America and Britain, also form the vanguard of the so-called war on terror<sup>5</sup>. The reason for this is that these nations comprise the populations that are most exposed to the vague uncertainties of neo-liberal capitalism and therefore have most need to find objects to carry their sense of anxiety. It is these objects that are conveniently provided by radicalised representatives of populations who have been dispossessed and exploited in far off parts of the world by military neo-liberal interventions into strategic sites of capital importance on the world map. The presence of the ideological short-circuit that occurs in order to screen out neo-liberalism and provide a direct link between anxiety and terror is illustrated by the contemporary American usage of the term 'terror' that has largely been taken up by the western

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<sup>5</sup> Our argument is therefore that these anxieties found face in the Islamic other because it was Radical Islam that most obstinately resisted the drive to globalise and accumulate of the newly neo-liberalised nations, America and Britain, in a part of the world, the Middle East, that was, and remains of enormous strategic importance of the vitality of the capitalist economy. The relationship between neo-liberal capitalism and global terror is, therefore, a complex one that we contend has several inter-linked dimensions. First the neo-liberal political elites' pursuit of a policy of what Retort (2005) call 'military neo-liberalism' in updating Marx's theory of primitive accumulation in order to maintain the vitality of an economic system that always runs on the edge of collapse. Second the emergence of a generalised anxiety in the populations of the neo-liberalised nations as a result of the precariousness of everyday life. Third the promotion of Radical Islam as a terroristic ideology by virtue of the colonialism of western military neo-liberalism. And finally the ideological short-circuit of domestic precariousness and the promotion of radical Islamic terrorism in the notion of apolitical terror that screens out the effects of neo-liberal capitalism on both domestic and foreign populations and transforms the issue of terrorism into a moral battle between good and evil or the believers in progress and development and those fanatics who want to live in the past. For evidence of this thesis, which we can only suggest because we are making a *political* claim, it is clear that the originators of neoliberal ideology, America and Britain, also form the vanguard of the so-called war on terror.



media. The idea of terror is important because it suggests a kind of liminal state. What does terror refer to in real terms? It refers to the feelings of terror experienced by the terrorised person, but it is not immediately clear where these feelings originate. Here we think that one can detect the vague neo-liberal anxiety experienced by the populations of western capitalisms. However, because the real root of these feelings is never properly articulated, or was not properly articulated until the global financial collapse and the onset of global recession, our thesis is that they are projected onto a fearful other, the Islamic terrorist, who happens to be caught up in the same economic complex of dispossession and exploitation.

The problem with the term 'terrorism', then, is that it locates the feelings of terror too concretely in the actions of particular people who one is then compelled to try to understand in relation to one's own actions. Paletz and Vinson (1992) suggested that the effect of this process of politicisation of the actions of terrorists in relation to one's own actions, would be to enable one to better understand the situation at hand in order to try to resolve the conflict. However, this is not an option in the current global situation because it does not serve the interests of those in charge of the major powers to try to resolve the problem of terrorism by addressing its root causes because this would suggest rolling back processes of military neo-liberalism. Furthermore, the result of politicising the war on terror would be to enable the western powers' populations to understand that the real root of their undefined feelings of anxiety is not terror, but rather the generalised insecurity that their own governments have caused them to have to endure in support of neo-liberal capitalism and the demand to produce endless surplus profit. What we have here then is a classic case of ideological diversion or false consciousness. The real problem today is globalised Anglo-American neo-liberal

capitalism, which not only causes massive anxiety amongst the populations of the western capitalist countries causing them to target all outsiders through a form of radical capitalistic nationalism, but also produces massive numbers of terrorists willing to fight and die for their own countries that have been consistently abused by the neo-liberal system. The twist here is that the political leaders of the western capitalist powers have found ways to make use of acts of terrorism to deflect attention from the problem of capitalism and continue to try to employ this strategy less successfully in the face of global economic meltdown that should really reveal the root cause of Islamic terrorism. Herein resides the second reason for the transformation of the terrorist into pure terror. In the politics of fear the enemy is not a political system, but rather terror and the fanatical terrorist, who is presented as a monstrous other incapable of reason. Here we can see that over the past forty years the notion of 'Islamic Fundamentalism' embedded in countless news reports and political rhetoric has provided the perfect foil for the west. Here we can argue that the presentation of a totally non-politicised struggle between good and evil is perfect cover for the generalised insecurity produced by neo-liberalism.

### **Terrorism and Media: A Symbiotic Relationship**

In order to unpack how a non-politicised and individualised discourse on terrorism became the dominant discourse for understanding what we might call neo-colonial war, we need to consider how the spectacular, mass mediated, effects of the new terrorism, which came to public attention on September 11 2001, have impacted upon politics in America and Britain, especially since 7/7. Cementing the notion of a new form of terrorism, for Norris, Kern and Just 'the Al Qaeda operations [brought] a new form of terrorism to the world' (2003: 3). However, the new kind of terrorism that they

refer to here is not the organised, global threat of al Qaeda itself, but rather the extended emotional-political consequence of terrorist attacks: the public perception of threat that in turn evolves into the justification for new restrictive legislation. For example, shortly after the attacks on the Twin Towers, in the US the department for Homeland Security was formed, while the much criticised Patriot Act is a much talked about consequence of the violent destruction of the World Trade Centre (Etzioni, 2004). In the UK we have seen similar legislative changes. Shortly after both 9/11 and the London bombings four years later, the UK Terrorism Bill was revised and there have been waves of legislation since which critics suggest have reduced the liberties of *ordinary* citizens<sup>6</sup>. If this is the case then the real question must be why the public has allowed these political changes to take place? The likely answer to this question resides in our earlier discussion of what Giroux (2004) has called the terroristic nature of the neo-liberal system itself. This idea suggests that given that many people already feel embattled by the insecure nature of everyday life, it is easy for them take the next step and translate those feelings of anxiety into fears about the heinous schemes of particular enemies and reluctantly accept new legislation which will reduce the liberty of every citizen. The standard response to the 'reduction of liberty' argument is to suggest that first such punitive legislation is required to ensure the continuation of 'our way of life' and second that such disciplinary regulation will only impact upon those guilty of terrorism. This view has been only too forthcoming from consecutive

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<sup>6</sup> The Anti-Terrorism Crime and Security Act 2001 quickly introduced after 9/11 controversially saw the use of HM Prison Belmarsh as a 'holding' compound for the lengthy detention of terrorist suspects without trial. While The Prevention of Terrorism Act 2005 sought to deal with the illegality of this previous move, DWT was instead replaced with control orders, which allowed for electronic tagging and house arrest for those suspected of terrorist acts or associations with suspected terrorists. For a discussion of this see Sivanandan (2006). Also on the wider implications of these Acts see Fekete (2006).

governments – left and right – only too happy to respond to the fears of the electorate by offering up a succession of new anti-terrorism / immigration legislation.

What is it, then, that underwrites our willingness to defer to central authority and accept, or even celebrate, the passage of punitive legislation? While there has indeed been a significant minority of UK citizens willing to confront the consequences of terrorism – harsher immigration legislation and the war in Iraq for example - following the arguments of authors like Bauman (2002) and Furedi (2006) we believe that the answer to this question is that the emergence of the new politics of fear has created a situation whereby citizens would consent to almost anything in order to escape the possibility that they will become the next victims of global terror. Here, Bauman tells us that, ‘the dangers we fear most are immediate; understandably, we also wish the remedies to be immediate – ‘quick fixes’, offering relief on the spot, like off-the-shelf painkillers’ (2006: 114). In this respect the constantly looping spectacle of the Twin Towers collapsing on the world’s TV screens has had a profound and sustainable effect, probably far beyond anything the architects of the attacks could have imagined. That is, the spectacle has become embedded in our contemporary collective unconscious.

Again, it is perhaps no coincidence that the effects of this singular event had the most impact in America, the victim of the attack, and Britain, which continues to stand ‘shoulder to shoulder’ with its transatlantic neighbour in the endless war on terror, simply because these two nations are also at the forefront of the neo-liberal revolution. Thus we suggest that what has really taken place in the wake of 9/11 is that new terrorism has become a convenient container for the pre-existing anxieties of the

American and British populations subject to the total instability of the neo-liberal system, one which the political leaders of these two nations have exploited, and expanded, even in the face of financial collapse. As we will show in the sections that follow, the result of the media and political discourse surrounding the terrorist threat has been to focus the populations' anxieties on a more or less identifiable enemy, the Islamic terrorist, the architect of terror (see Morone, 2004).

In this situation it is clear that the mass media plays a central role. There is, of course, nothing new about asserting the relationship between the mass media and terrorism, arguably because the exponents of 'the war of the flea' have become reliant on media spectacle to spread terror beyond the immediate vicinity of their attacks. It is recognition of this symbiotic relationship between media and terror that leads Hoffman (2006) to argue that it was no accident that modern terrorism was born with the first in a series of Palestinian hijackings in 1968, for it was the same year that America launched its first television satellite, able to beam the event around the world. Further to this, Hoffman suggests that following 1968, it was no coincidence that American citizens were targeted by terrorist organisations; for to target US citizens guaranteed mass media exposure. Seeming to support Jenkins' influential idea that 'terrorism is theatre' (Jenkins, 1978), the days and weeks after 9/11 were mapped by what Kellner (2004) has called 'spectacles of terror'. Following the work of Baudrillard (2001), he suggests that the images of the Twin Towers collapsing drew us into a heightened state of emergency readily seized upon by the American media.

In line with such postmodern ideas, the central premise of the contemporary terror network is that it is unofficial, fluid, and impossible to pin down. However, this liquid

form causes problems for processes of the mass mediatisation of terrorism. That is to say that the terrorist needs to remain invisible to the eyes of the world until the correct time to appear occurs, but that the secretive nature of the terrorist cell is always under threat from the glare of the media. In light of this complex, we can see that it is true that even though the terrorist needs to remain secreted and out of sight, they also rely on the media for maximum exposure. In a sense the media coverage validates their actions through the creation of terror in the wider population (Schmid and de Graf, 1982; Paletz and Vinson, 1992). On the mass media's side, it is impossible to consider not providing terrorists with publicity, however clearly one understands that mass mediatisation is part of the terrorists' overall strategy.

In contrast to today's political courting of media / terror publicity, in the 1980s the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher famously talked about 'cutting off the oxygen of the media' in relation to IRA attacks on mainland Britain. Thatcher made this proclamation in 1988 when Home Secretary Douglas Hurd announced the prohibition of publicity for certain Sinn Fein members<sup>7</sup>. But this refusal of publicity would, of course, have been unthinkable, let alone undoable for the British press. It would have been inconceivable to ignore terrorist acts, if not simply because such events sell newspapers, then for the sake of democratic process. The other factor to consider is what the real effect of a ban on the reportage of terrorist acts would have been on the political elites, who as we have already seen, make use of constructions of the other to maintain their ideological power over the masses (Furedi, 2006)<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> This refers to the ban on broadcasting Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams' voice and the controversial (and for those that remember it, somewhat comical) means by which the media got around the ban via the use of voice-over artists. See Irvin (1992) for a discussion of this point.

<sup>8</sup> In the case of Thatcherite Britain, which was in the process of neo-liberal revolution in the 1980s, it is hard to imagine that it would have been a positive move for the supporters of the new capitalism to take terrorism off our screens, because this would have exposed the new capitalism to criticism and

This is perhaps even more relevant to the case of the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, because the enemy in these instances were less identifiable with the core population of British society. In other words, the contemporary terrorist enemy is connected to the explicitly racialised other (Said, 1978). This is quite different from the more complex discursive shift necessary to link IRA terrorism to notions of ethnic otherness through the evasion of the Irish question rooted in the 'troubles' in the *political* history of British colonialism. This new situation plays to both the innate racism of the British press and public (one only has to look at the media coverage of immigration and asylum over recent years<sup>9</sup>) and has the benefit of more or less removing the other from home territories. However, 7/7 changed all that. In this case the suicide bombers were British born – the enemy within, rather than foreign others (where we have been conditioned into seeing images of carnage and destruction). How then are we to reconcile the 7/7 attacks with our usual discursive construction of the terrorist as (foreign) ethnic other?

### **Reporting Islam after 7/7**

Up until this point we have spent some time discussing the historical roots of contemporary terrorism, the politics of fear, and the relationship between terrorism and the media. We now want to turn our attention to recent examples of the British media

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potentially reinvigorated the failing socialist left. Given that terrorism functions as a container for wider anxieties of the populace it is, therefore, difficult to see what cutting off the terrorists' oxygen would have achieved then or would achieve today. As Hoffman (2006) argues, in a slightly different vein, despite the symbiotic relationship between terrorist and media, the publicity they supply is rarely, if ever, positive. What then are the politicians worried about? In fact it would be perhaps more realistic to say that contemporary governments court media coverage of terrorist attacks precisely because they know that the subsequent media discourse is likely to fall on the side of the state by virtue of the kind of connections Chomsky (2002) discusses in his famous theory of propaganda and that they will be able to manipulate the politics of fear in order to subdue their populations struck by anxieties about everyday life under capitalism.

<sup>9</sup> The report by Moore, Mason, and Lewis (2008) at the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, provides an excellent overview and analysis of media representations of Muslims in the UK.

construction of Islam and Muslims in order to unpack some of the debates about what we have described as the neoliberal condition of fear and anxiety. To this end we undertook a qualitative analysis of 61 newspaper articles from *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Sun* and their sister Sunday newspapers to provide a broad range of published opinion from a variety of political positions (and taking account of the readership of these papers). We took a case study approach selecting the trial of British Muslim Mohammed Atif Siddique who was accused and convicted of activities relating to terrorism over the period August – October 2007 (first article 25<sup>th</sup> April, last 8<sup>th</sup> December with most activity taking place in August and September during the trial and conviction). This approach allowed us to include all articles on this case (42 in total) so a comprehensive analysis could be made<sup>10</sup>. However, we also felt it was important to include coverage of some of the most prominent new stories involving terrorist acts post 7/7. We, therefore, gathered further evidence from coverage of the Glasgow airport attack in June 2007 in an attempt to highlight the role that discourse has played in more recent constructions of radical Islamic terrorism (19 articles in total from all papers randomly selected using the search terms Glasgow, bomb and 2007, giving us 61 articles overall).

Previous extensive research into the representations of Muslims/Islam demonstrates how British Muslims have been excluded from definitions of the 'Islamic terrorist' unlike their global counterparts (Poole. 2002, 2006). Further analysis post 9/11 (Poole 2006, 2007) reveals a huge shift toward media constructions that locate the British born Muslim within this conceptualization. Yet until the events of 7/7 that threat had

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<sup>10</sup> We consulted: the Mail and Mail on Sunday, 15 articles, The Sun and News of the World, 10 articles, The Times and Sunday Times, 11 articles, The Guardian and Observer, 6 articles. Pre 9/11 the liberal press reported more on British Muslims, but the increased coverage of terrorism now fits more neatly within a conservative ideological framework.



remained at a distance, on foreign soil. After the London bombings, however, there was a massive increase in coverage of the British born violent extremist, of terrorist ' sleeper' cells linked to al-Qaeda, and of disenchanting British Muslims following the invasion of Iraq (Poole, 2006). News reports following key events after 7/7 illustrate the conflict between an absolutist anti-terrorist discourse and the need to present an idea of inclusion in post-Macpherson Britain<sup>11</sup>. We will elaborate on this argument and how it becomes evident through the analysis of media coverage below.

By looking at previous scholarly work on the construction of the Islamic other (for example Said, 1978; Poole, 2002), we can see that there are a number of characters evident in the construction of Muslims. Whilst drawing on Orientalism, images of British Muslims have been more diverse, perhaps because this was necessary for maintaining harmonious social relations within a specific national context (Poole, 2002). In the media constructions after the 7/7 attacks it has been more necessary to mark out the 'good' and 'bad' Muslims (we will discuss this further later on in the paper) and use alternative strategies for Othering. The central protagonists in this discourse include the respectable Muslim, friends and family of the accused, the misguided loner (the accused), and the evil mentor, all longstanding 'storybook' characters in ideologies of terror. The construction of the evil mentor is straightforward and one-dimensional, continuing the Orientalist discourse of the foreign extremist polluting Britain. While often displayed through a discourse of national security – i.e. controlling immigration and maintaining secure borders – the character assassination of foreign Muslim clerics or imams stepped up a gear post 7/7. The obvious suggestion here was

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<sup>11</sup> The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry by Sir William Macpherson (HMSO, 1999) popularised the concept of institutionalised racism and provided a framework for thinking about the move toward a multicultural legal ethic. See Holohan and Featherstone (2003) for further discussion of this point.

that the practitioners of Islamic faith were also the central source of extremist ideologies. However, we can see complexities in the construction of the other emerging if we consider the inclusive characteristics – i.e. the British citizenship and/or middle-class attributes – of the central actors in the post 7/7 representations examined here. In all UK newspaper coverage that we examined the character of the central actor is developed along the narrative of a previously ordinary, often non-practicing, individual who has lost direction and been misguided by ‘radical ideology’. The previously positive credentials of the protagonist, for example his educational achievements, as coming from a respectable family background, etc, and his subsequent framing as a loner who makes irrational choices has a number of effects. First, it divorces the individual from the collective, the wider Muslim community that expresses despair at the path the individual has taken. We can see this evolutionary process in action if we consider one of the two central actors in the Glasgow Airport attack, Kafeel Ahmed. While born in Bangalore, India and raised in Saudi Arabia, Ahmed’s inclusive status was ensured by his solid middle class background and apparently successful integration into British academia whilst undertaking a postgraduate degree in engineering. To confirm this, after the attack his cousin is quoted in *The Sun* as saying ‘but no one knows how he fell into this’ (Phillips, 4 August 2007). His partner in the attack, Bilal Abdullah, had similarly inclusive traits. Born in the UK, but raised in Baghdad in a well-off medical family, Abdullah trained as a medical doctor before gaining employment in an NHS hospital in Glasgow. Both central actors in this case caused discursive problems for the British press, who were panicked by the prospect of importing terrorists into ‘our’ major institutions. This was articulated, perhaps not surprisingly, by *The Daily Mail* in the article ‘NHS and an Open Door to Terrorism’, where they claim that ‘terrorist organisations could be specifically

recruiting doctors because they are from a trusted profession and could slip under the radar of the security services' (Martin, 3 July 2007). It is the repetition of these two simple ideas – individual pathology and outside influence – across several newspapers that has had the significant effect of allowing both central government and newspapers to dismiss accusations of racism and appease the Muslim community via a discourse of individualism, irrationality, and psychosis.

This is again evident in the post 7/7 narrative which posed the question of why ordinary young men had become radicalized to the extent where they would willingly kill themselves and others. This question, and the inference of outside influence, is repeated across the newspapers despite ideological and high / low brow differences.

For instance:

But what turned a well-educated, hard working, middle-class man from a caring family man into a would-be mass murderer? (Phillips, *The Sun*, 4 August 2007).

What makes someone take that step? What makes someone want to turn themselves into a human fireball and ram a jeep into an airport terminal building? What makes someone want to maim and kill? (Doward, Townsend and McDonald, *The Observer*, 8 July 2007).

How could a Scottish schoolboy be transformed into a dangerous fanatic? (Madeley and Beavan, *The Daily Mail*, 18 September 2007).

While the last in this set of quotes referred to Mohammed Atif Siddique, convicted in a separate incident of actions relating to terrorism from this general post 7/7 discourse

we can identify discursive struggles in the negotiation between the British born Islamist and the foreign other. For example, the development of psychosis becomes a common feature, as the defendant (Mohammed Atif Siddique) is described as 'fixated', 'obsessed', 'fanatical' an 'oddball', a 'loner'. The culprits are said to have 'identity' issues that would give rise to radicalization. This is further highlighted by discursive strategies identifying a lack of direction or individual failings in the perpetrators of the attacks. However, it remains important that the individual can somehow be linked back to the wider 'terror network', thereby legitimating the political discourse of the war on terror. As such, the mosques and their radical foreign clerics step in to make the discursive leap from criminal individual to extremist ideology brought to the UK by the wider terrorist network, 'the vehicle is ideology...You've got to address the ideology' (The Observer 8th July 2007). But in concurrence with our previous analysis of neo-liberalism and new terrorism, this ideology is not represented as a rational political ideology, but as an irrational religious ideology which could potentially render *any* Muslim susceptible to radicalization and therefore terrorism. Not only are acts of terrorism presented as irrational in terms of western liberalism, but also in terms of 'correct' interpretations of the Qur-an within the Muslim community for which it must be accountable. Accordingly an article in *The Guardian* stresses that while in the past Muslim communities had failed to address extremist elements, now 'Britain's Muslims have launched their most concerted attempt yet to win the hearts and minds of the public and distance themselves from the activities of violent extremists who claim to act in the name of their faith' (Bunting, 9 July 2007).

To this extent the suggestion is that the wider Muslim population had also become part of the problem in their blindness and naivety to what had been going on in their own

communities. Whilst primarily having the effect of homogenising Muslims, the secondary effect of this discourse is to place the responsibility for monitoring and tackling the problems of British society within specific communities thus relieving the authorities of blame. Here we can see how a conflict develops between the discourse of integration, which has become central to positioning Muslims within Britishness (and encourages voluntary self monitoring), and the implicit suggestion that the Muslim community is responsible for Britain's problems. Ratifying this point Bechler (2006) argues that it demonstrates a 'tendency to 'Islamicise' problems rather than face up to deep socio-economic challenges'. This framework of representation was evident in coverage of the London attacks and in the later attempted bombing of Glasgow airport. In this case the histories of the protagonists were scrutinised by a British media desperate to locate reasons for internal conflict despite the best efforts of the white majority and multicultural politics to secure cohesion between disparate groups. The fact that the protagonists in the Glasgow airport attack were university educated and some had gone on to work in the NHS, highlights the disjuncture between core Britain's belief in itself as a tolerant, inclusive society and the level of dissatisfaction and anomie clearly felt by some members of this society. Here, the location of extremism in a foreign other is imperative to shore up the cohesion of centre or mainstream politics. For example, while the police and political line on the events was that they were acts of crime perpetrated by misguided individuals:

I wish to make absolutely clear that this investigation has only ever been about one thing – criminality' 'It was not about communities or a particular faith (Assistant Chief Constable Maureen Brown of Central Scotland Police quoted in Goodwin, *The Sun*, 18 September 2007);

the press were keen to make links to the wider 'terrorist network':

The double car bomb plot was not the work of a loner... experts believe those behind the foiled attack belong to one of the loosely interlocking cells (Smith, Townsend and Revill, *The Observer*, 1 July 2007).

With reference to Mohammed Atif Siddique, we were told that the links that he was said to have made with other extremists are numerous. In the media post mortem it is the Internet which is perceived as being most influential in radicalizing the young, described quite poetically in *The Daily Mail* as 'bedroom radicalisation' (Capitanchik, 18 September 2007), and is further reinforced by articles in *The Times* (e.g. Lister, 18 September 2007). The representation of networks linking Islamists to a number of activities, groups and countries internationally extends the idea of a homogenised UK Muslim population into a wider association with Islamic radicals who have the primary motive of destroying the west. Discussing the effect of the wider Muslim network on apparently susceptible young minds, a report from *The Observer* states that 'Ultimately... it seems the suspects' main influences came from overseas groups, the Deobandi and Wahhabi sects that have flourished in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan' (Doward, Townsend, and McDonald, 8 July 2007). Further to this idea it is again suggested that *all* Muslims might be susceptible to radicalisation. If the 7/7 and Glasgow bombers were hard working, well educated and, until the event that took them to notoriety, law abiding, how can we possibly identify potential terrorists without pointing the finger at an entire community? So while the police investigation centred on individual criminality, the wider British press were keen to make links to the wider

terrorist network and if we consider Bunting's comments in *The Guardian*, radicalisation of the younger generation is portrayed as a very real possibility. It is our contention that this discursive tension led the British media to make conflicting statements about the perpetrators and the wider terrorist network to which they appeared to be attached.

### **The Evolution of a Limited Multiculturalism**

In light of our consideration of the mass media representation of 7/7 we believe that the symbolic construction of the bombers has created a difficult situation for supporters of British multiculturalism because the press has struggled to reconcile the need to represent Britain as a unified multicultural imagined community and other the bombers as Islamic radicals who were nonetheless normal British citizens. As a consequence the situation explained by Kellner (2004) in his work on media responses to 9/11 needs to be modified in order to account for the specific circumstances of the post 7/7 attacks. In Kellner's account the American media's response to 9/11 was entirely biased and apolitical. From the point of view of the American media there was no other way to understand the attacks on the Twin Towers, but as an act of irrational madness on the part of the terrorists. In this way politics was bracketed out of its interpretation of the acts. In his view the only real sources of critique came from the internet and marginal press. They not only sought to understand the roots of the event, but also consider Bush's reaction to the attacks and the evolution of the war on terror. By contrast Kellner suggests that the European media provided a more balanced account of the events of 9/11. Although it seems rather simplistic to say that the reason that the American media responded to 9/11 in the ways in which it did was because it was America that was under attack, and that the European media was able to adopt a more considered

approach to events because it had the luxury of a critical, but more essentially emotional, distance from the situation, our analysis of the British media's response to 7/7 shows that it is likely that this was in fact the case. Whilst there had been a clear anti-war movement from the British and European publics, the British media's response to 7/7 was to bypass the politics of the suicide bombers and instead focus on their criminality in an attempt to save some sense of British multiculturalism by repeating the binary form of good Muslim / bad Muslim popularised by Bush / Blair following 9/11<sup>12</sup>.

In this respect we argue that in much the same way that the American response to 9/11 was about uniting a nation of immigrants and refounding an American imagined community in the face of an external enemy, the British media's response to 7/7 was about refounding an idea of Britain as a tolerant multicultural society based on the democratic ideals of freedom and liberalism in the face of attacks by members of British society who were subsequently othered as deviants who had been brainwashed by foreign ideologues, 'the mad mullahs'. In many respect this thesis mirrors suggestions made by Chomsky (1989) twenty years ago about the ways in which the American media controlled the representation of political events to the extent that it had the effect of minimising dissent in the wider population and reflects the kinds of analyses of the mass media offered by Neo-Marxist thinkers since the end of World

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<sup>12</sup> However, as our analysis reveals, the press did at least attempt to evaluate the motivations behind the attacks by asking just how and why inclusive British Muslims could do such a thing. The presentation of this discourse had two functions. First it allowed the press to demonstrate its commitment to the ideals of democratic process: the performance of reasonable liberalism against the irrationality of the Muslim other. The related effect of this was to assure the superiority of the British centre. While these discourses differed by degree between elements of the press, both narratives served to uphold the dominance of mainstream British authority.



War II. Chomsky's sometimes co-writer, Herman further crystallised this idea when he said '...what the general public knows and is interested in is *managed*' (1982: 144).

In this context discourse is always necessarily political in nature. This key point enables us to escape the usual accusation levelled at writers like Chomsky that the mass media intends to deceive the public. Putting aside questions of media ownership, we understand that the mass media is not always conscious of the implicitly political nature of its presentations, but that rather because of the social, political, and cultural location of its producers, there is always an unconscious bias present in its reflections of reality. Influential discourse theorists Foucault (2004) and Said (1978) understood this perfectly well. Even when mass media producers try to present neutral accounts of political situations, they tend towards bias, simply because they cannot lift themselves out of their cultural location or mask their honest sympathies with people more like themselves than others who seem alien by comparison. In this regard the media discourse mirrored the political discourse, which struggled to overcome its imperial ideological roots. It is here, in this more complex understanding of discourse, that we confront the real significance of Foucault's (2004) idea of biopolitics. Biopolitics refers to the ways in which we are governed through subtle control mechanisms, such as the feelings evoked by discourse, rather than the blunt instrument of police power.

Post 7/7, such biopolitical discourse was demonstrated effectively in a number of speeches given by the ally leaders, Bush and Blair. Here we can argue that in many respects the responses to the London bombings were comparable to the rhetoric produced after 9/11. Consider George W. Bush's speech after 7/7:

We don't know who committed the attacks in London, but we do know that terrorists celebrate the suffering of the innocent...murder in the name of a totalitarian ideology that hates freedom, rejects tolerance and despises all dissent' (Bush, 2005).

Quite apart from the rhetorical use of the term 'totalitarian' with all its connotations of Stalinist USSR, we must remember that at this point Bush did not know who had attacked the Britain. How could he be sure it was a totalitarian regime? We would suggest that the answer to this question is that it did not really matter who had attacked Britain because the discursive framework – the us / them structure – was already largely in place post 9/11 and that whoever had eventually been unmasked as the perpetrators of the attacks would have slotted into that previously agreed structure in much the same way. On the rigid, post-political, nature of this discursive framework we can also consider Blair's response to 7/7:

The extremist propaganda is cleverly aimed at their target audience. It plays on our tolerance and good nature. It exploits the tendency to guilt of the developed world, as if it is our behaviour that should change, that if we only tried to work out and act on their grievances, we could lift this evil, that if we changed our behaviour, they would change theirs. This is a misunderstanding of a catastrophic order... In the end, it is by the power of argument, debate, true religious faith and true legitimate politics that we will defeat this threat (Blair, 2005).

In line with the argument that sees terrorism constructed as a problem caused by those outside neo-liberal regimes, here, no political alternative to warfare is presented. *We*

do not need to think about our conduct on the world stage. Rather, it is the terrorist, the unstable, insane, other, who needs to adjust his or her behaviour in order to fit into our society which is always correct. In this context, and as we have shown in our analysis of news reports post 7/7, it was clearly always important that the Islamic terrorist was represented as a deviant, rather than the representative of a particular political point of view, in order to save the possibility of multicultural order. George Bush clearly illustrates this point when he refers to the criminal nature of Islamic fundamentalism:

The terrorists practice a fringe form of Islamic extremism that has been rejected by Muslim scholars and the vast majority of Muslim clerics - a fringe movement that perverts the peaceful teachings of Islam. The terrorists' directive commands them to kill Christians and Jews, to kill all Americans, and make no distinction among military and civilians, including women and children (Bush, 2001).

Given that such references to Islamic fundamentalism never mention the neo-colonial violence of the British and American nation states' in Iraq and Afghanistan, should lead us to question whether these kinds of discursive representations are reflective of the racist core of contemporary British and American politics. In response to the continuing struggles over meaning between western political and media rhetoric and Muslim self-construction, A. Sivanandan asserts:

White racial superiority is back on the agenda – in the guise, this time, not of a super-race but of a super-nation, a super-people, a chosen people on a mission to liberate the world (2006: 1).

Herein resides the key point. The British and American political elites are keen to escape from political debate through the construction of a discourse which presents their cause as *beyond discourse*, driven by right, goodness, justice, and the care for humanity. By contrast, the others' cause is not legitimate. They are evil. They want wickedness, injustice, and have no interest in the lives of other humans. Although there is a lot of talk about the nature of asymmetrical war, it is clear from countless studies that that we must also contend with the asymmetrical nature of discourse. In the context of contemporary discursive constructions surrounding Islamic terrorism there is no political debate. The law is upheld by the British and American *neo-liberal capitalist* states. Those who oppose these regimes are therefore criminal. Following Hall et al (1978) we suggest that this is why the British press has been so keen to present the individuals involved in domestic terrorist attacks since 7/7 in criminal terms. However, unlike the initial reportage surrounding 9/11 which explained the ethnic, un-American, otherness of the bombers, the British media could not easily sustain this practice in the wake of 7/7 because they could not afford to fracture the fragile story of British multiculturalism. The discourse surrounding key events and actors in the post 7/7 media and political deconstruction of terrorism have fixed the image of the disillusioned/extremist young Muslim male. Moving on from Hall et al's framework, however, we must note that although the suicide bombers became criminalised others – bad Muslims – they could not be seen to represent the entire

Muslim population. Here we can again refer to Blair who argued vociferously on behalf of the majority good tolerant Muslims who abide by British law:

...it is not generalised extremism. It is a new and virulent form of ideology associated with a minority of our Muslim community. It is not a problem with Britons of Hindu, Afro-Caribbean, Chinese or Polish origin. Nor is it a problem with the majority of the Muslim community. Most Muslims are proud to be British and Muslim and are thoroughly decent law abiding citizens. But it is a problem with a minority of that community, particularly originating from certain countries (Blair, 2006).

Whilst stressing that *most* Muslims are law abiding citizens, Blair makes a clear connection between Muslims and extremist violence. At once the act of terrorism is divorced from its political root cause and becomes a matter of individual deviance. In order to better understand this as a discursive practice we might once again turn to Foucault (1988). This time we refer to his concept of the 'dangerous individual', which shows how social structures seek to target individual actors in times of crisis in order to secure wider social cohesion. Following this idea it becomes easier to see how post 7/7 Islamist attacks have been subsumed by a narrative of individuation. For while it is convenient to locate some kind of inherent difference in a group of people (i.e. all Muslims), it is also problematic. How do we sustain the idea of multiculturalism if all Muslims are a potential threat to the safety of core Britain? Foucault's (2001) study on madness proves valuable in assessing why the 7/7 suicide bombers were re-ordered as deviant individuals, rather than terrorists with a political agenda. Here it was widely suggested that because of their particular psycho-pathology the bombers were

perhaps more easily led by a manipulative leader – the extremist – who was an agent of the wider international terrorist network. Who, then, is the dangerous individual in this complex? While it is true to say that the suicide bombers actions were dangerous, because they caused the deaths of many people, we are led to the conclusion by the political and media discourse, that they were simply dupes in a more far-reaching and ideologically challenging terror network. While this may in fact be the case, the consequent discourse allows the political authorities to set about trying to undermine any legitimacy their *claims* may bear and put in place measures to combat further insurgence by restricting the freedoms of the wider Muslim and non-Muslim population.

To support claims of the state, while at the same time undermining any real issues that the collective Muslim other might have, in the aftermath of 7/7 many parts of the British mass media adopted Blair's use of the notion of the 'acceptable' Muslim in special reports and commentaries. In his post 7/7 commentary, Modood (2005) called them 'corporate Muslims'. People said to represent the 'real' face of British Islam – liberal, tolerant, peaceful, and most importantly perhaps from an inclusive point of view, critical of fundamentalist readings of the Qur'an. What is clear, however, is that these largely educated, professional, middle-class, and westernised Muslims were allowed space to comment on events only by virtue of their inclusive characteristics and adherence to the dominant ideological discourse. In this respect British Islam was treated as totally inside multicultural society, whereas the deviant radicals were absolutely othered by virtue of their relationship to the international terror network, usually evoked through reference to al Qaeda as evidenced by representations of the Scottish bombers. The general effect of this practice has been to differentiate between

good (liberal) and bad (radical) Muslims in terms of religious practice and theological interpretations. Of course, we understand that the correct interpretation is the one supported by the neo-liberal western ideology. In this sanitised version, Islam is (fundamentally) a peaceful religion. The people who commit violence in its name are not only misinterpreting their religious doctrine, but also violently opposing the teachings of their chosen faith. The same is not true, of course, for those who commit violent acts in the name of Christianity.

Again, the problem here is not that we need to condone violence, or accept that it is somehow justifiable, but rather understand the motivation for violence in political terms rather than simplify it as the actions of insane extremists. We do not believe that it is enough to simply say that the violent other is evil and that we are good. We believe that what is required is a political consideration of the roots of terrorism, the context of its setting, and the development of policy set on addressing those causes. As a consequence the main objective of our discussion of the discursive constructions of the war on terror post 7/7 has been to try to explode some of the representations which block the path to a thorough consideration of the politics of contemporary terrorism and prevent the emergence of proper debate about the roots of this violence.

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