A Socio-Psychoanalytic Perspective On Group Dynamics, Cults and Terrorism: The Context of Terrorism*

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Abstract.
In this article, some aspects of the social crucible for terrorism are outlined with identification of several factors suggesting social antidotes. Traditional conceptualizations of terrorism as the actions of psychiatrically disturbed individuals, or as deliberately planned, politically motivated manipulations are called into question. Instead it is proposed that several social factors, particularly coercion and social isolation and marginalisation, create a potent social crucible for the making of a terrorist. From this socio-psychoanalytic perspective, the social role of terrorist is seen as the preventable endpoint of a continuum beginning with the committed social activist.

Introduction
Listen children, your father is dead. From his old coats I will make you little jackets. I’ll make you little trousers from his old pants. There’ll be in his pockets, things he used to put there. Keys and pennies covered with tobacco. Dan shall have the pennies to save in his bank. Ann shall have the keys to make a pretty noise with. Life must go on and the dead be forgotten. Life must go on, though good men die. Ann eat your breakfast, Dan take your medicine. Life must go on. I forgot just why.

“Lament” Edna St. Vincent Millay
Keeping life going on somehow and wondering what happened and why, preoccupies the minds of virtually every American since September 11th, when more people died in a single incident than in any other non-wartime period in U.S. history and still countless others continue to lament the loss of loved ones. In this paper, we will outline a socio-psychoanalytic theory of the etiology of terrorism suggesting a continuum from social activism, fanaticism and its potential progression to martyrdom and terrorism. We focus particularly on the conscious and unconscious dynamics of small and large groups, and the role of cults as these forces influence and are influenced by the social and cultural context.

We begin with observations that the collective mindset of many living in the US has been impaired by the trauma of September 11th with damage to collective self-esteem and narcissism like that done to Goliath, brought to his knees by a tiny, almost invisible human being with a well placed slingshot made from his own loincloth. We examine a few, certainly not all, of the irrational reactions to this serious narcissistic injury done to a powerful nation, including the decision to “declare war” on Osama bin Laden. Thus, unwittingly, the traumatized avenging victim collective mind set can reactively create a response which itself paradoxically promotes terrorism. However, whether the reactions to the events of September 11th described throughout this paper are uniquely American, or would obtain across cultures, is a matter of speculation.

Often terrorists began their idealism during adolescent years since adolescents experience a normative crisis in which all aspects of their being and values are questioned. We hypothesize that while some adolescents align themselves with the mores of what Spiro Agnew called the ‘silent majority’ others may become committed social activists. A culture such as the United States of America’s, by it’s extensive freedoms of self-expression, protected through the Constitution, is a potential breeding ground for terrorism if certain
conditions are not met. Our speculation is that if a culture does not accept, or more actively rejects and demeans the ideals of the committed social activist, then the nascent fanatic can be driven to extremism and cult formation. From another perspective the issue is how social aggression is directed, controlled, and modulated. This paper gives an example of the social impact of committed social activists who are not marginalized and do find a place within their culture. We further propose that cults are one possible outcome of this complex social equation, resulting from large and small group dynamics. Indeed they are quite commonly seen in their early stages in business and clinical settings dominated by fantasies of specialness created by a rejecting social context. Such early stage cults demonstrate a specific form of pathological collusion between leader and group members. We will describe this with a case example.

The primary energy that drives the terrorist and fanatic is aggression. We refer in a later section of this paper to work we have done with homicidal children in school settings in the USA with analogous fanatical and terrorist mindsets and actions. In these instances, the coercive power dynamics that seem to motivate such killers appear to be mainly a product of a social context in which human relationships have become devalued. Such dynamics involve a complicated dialectical relationship between the victim of coercion, the victimizer, and the audience of bystanders, resulting in collusive murderousness.

**A Social Crucible for Terrorism : September 11th**

Immediately after the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, there was outrage. Irrational fears, rituals, and poorly thought-through reactions became rampant. US citizens became afraid of traveling, of investing, and of strangers, to name only three major and obvious reactions. A memo distributed in October 2001 by the administration of Stuyvesant High School in New York City to students, parents and staff exemplified these responses in stark terms. This school is located a few blocks from the World Trade Center.
Q: Why do we need to wear ID cards in school?

A: Because every fanatic and every nut in North America has seen/heard/read about Stuyvesant since the WTC attack. We are THE high-profile school in America. We need to be able to identify who does not belong here at a glance.

Q: But we are students. We don’t look like terrorists. Why do you have to wear ID cards in school?

A: All terrorists do not look like Osama bin Laden. Let me repeat, every nut and fanatic has heard of Stuyvesant. Everyone who didn’t make the cutoff on the test, everyone who is angry with his teacher, everyone who hates. Everyone. There are about a quarter of a billion people in this country alone. (Comment: so now every angry rebel fits into the category of potential terrorist).

Q: You fascist pigs with your Big Brother mentality are just trying to scare us. There’s no real danger.

A: Are you for real? There are bad people out there who believe that they will spend all eternity in heaven with seventy-two virgins if they can kill some of us while killing themselves. They really believe that. There are nuts who see Satan, there are an infinite variety of other kinds of nuts and wackos, and you think that you are above wearing an ID card while in school? We are in a war and this is a potential front.

This outraged sarcasm and defensive-aggressive posturing contrasts with the helpful efforts of many psychoanalytically trained individuals in the immediate New York area who volunteered their services free of charge, initially, to all citizens and then, specifically, to fire and police department personnel who had suffered a high loss of life during rescue attempts. A number of national associations of psychoanalysts, psychologists, and psychiatrists created volunteer service organizations which were also joined by professionals from all over the country who traveled to New York City, some closing their practices to volunteer their services to the needy. It became apparent in working with survivors and rescuers that, along with the individual reactions to trauma and loss, there was a destruction of the invulnerable, omnipotent American cultural identity that was felt as a pervasive ‘existential’ depression difficult to process. A more cognitive perspective of the same phenomenon would hold that the collectively traumatized mindset has stimulated narrow, uncreative, oversimplified and perseverative responses to the terroristic attacks that reflect trauma, but does little to learn lessons and repair damage. Fonagy (1999) refers to such phenomena as the collapse of mentalising, where shocking trauma impairs the individual’s capacity to reflect, abstract, and
most importantly, accurately assess their own mental states and the mental states of others. Coercion and humiliation especially promote the collapse of mentalising.

**The Progression from Social Activism to Terrorism**

Scholars like Haynal (2000), Haldane (1932), and Haynal et al. (1983) take an historical perspective on fanaticism and its role in human cultures. It certainly has not always been a pejorative term: the soothsayers in ancient Rome were called fanatics, a word derived from “fanum”, a temple where the oracles were pronounced. The mystical and more gentle and committed qualities of fanaticism do not linger as clearly today. Over the centuries since the age of enlightenment, fanatics became distinguishable from the reasonable man, soothsayer, and priest by their destructiveness. However, some (Haynal et al., p. 243) note that the fanatic’s refusal of ‘what is’ in society by no means always implies illness or immaturity, but can stem from an individual’s stand against the inadmissible perversion of a whole society.

It is our observation that the emergence of ‘fanatical man’ is the potential outcome of any intensely held human belief, and that there is a continuum from normal, intense conviction to terrorism. It is also our opinion that the pathologizing of fanaticism results from a failure to recognize the potential for such behavior in all human beings, and especially, for the responsibility of us all for the social context and conditions which can sometimes convert intense social commitment into martyrdom and destructive terrorism. Writers like Colvard (2002) suggest similarly that terrorists are not inherently violent, but are victims of a network of psychological and ideological legitimacy.

The Greek root *Martyrs* defines a martyr as a witness, perhaps related to the Greek Gk. ‘mermera’, meaning a thoughtful witness who voluntarily suffers death as the penalty for
knowing. Further, to be martyred means to renounce one’s religion, tenet, practice or principle (extended later to one’s sacrifice of a life station or what is of great value) for the sake of a principle or to sustain a cause. This idealistic definition has shifted in the 20th century to include one who adopts a specious air of suffering or deprivation, especially as a means of attracting sympathy or attention.

Terrorism is a difficult term to universally define since the social and cultural context drives the definition. Terrorism, or the systematic use of terror as a means of coercion, has been adapted by a number of writers including Corrado (1983) to include activities with an exhibitionistic quality used for political objectives with ‘publicity’ as a goal (page 294).

From a social perspective, there is a continuum that ranges from fanaticism, (primarily an internal state) to martyrdom where there is a willingness to sacrifice oneself for a cause. The extreme end of the continuum leads finally to terrorism, where the rage is often homicidally directed towards others in the name of a cause. This can be in the shape of destruction by an individual like the Reverend Jim Jones in Guyana, or more collectively political, like the suicide bombers being trained by the Hamas group in Palestine. Such destructiveness we hypotheize, is based on a buildup of aggressive impulses in a variety of social contexts, ranging from dismissive homes/schools (leading to school shooters), to oppressed or closed cultures or groups (suicide bombers).

The evolution of extremist groups may follow a similar pattern. What starts as a peaceful group of worshippers wishing to develop a new religion, for example, becomes an enraged fanatical religious sect, fanned to flames by marginalisation and humiliating social coerciveness. Eventually as Volkan (1999) has repeatedly emphasized, unconscious forces forge these factors over generations into ethnic beliefs and identities.
The following dimensions characterize the fanatical mindset, whether violent terrorist or blind cult follower:

1) **A coercive narcissism:** where the fanatic is intolerant of differences from his or her opinions and in which there is a denial of personhood with cause taking precedence over person. Envy is prominent since what belongs to others is felt to be ‘mine’.

2) **Pathological certainty:** impervious to reason and for which there is irrational zeal and commitment covering a deeper-seated fear of annihilation.

3) **Contempt for the enemy or for non-believers:** with humiliation being used as the primary tool to coerce compliance.

4) **Oversimplified theories and causal chains:** where the fanatical mindset leads to simplified cognitive processes and exaggerated cathexis of certain ideas. Often, religion creates a fertile medium for fanatical beliefs, with sometimes an implied fanatical adherence to a non-human entity, for example, Saint Augustine’s suggestion that one should only love God. Simplified conditioning techniques used to train suicide bombers in Palestine included assertions that there would be sexual and other favors in heaven as rewards. Thus, depending upon whether the social context accepts and validates elements of the nascent fanatic’s belief, or rejects them, then distinctly different outcomes are possible. Akhtar (1999) usefully classifies extremist groups into (a) cults driven by aggression transformed into coercive and driven spiritual beliefs, (b) terrorists driven by politically motivated aggression and (c) street gangs where aggression is an instrument for survival and dominance. Table 1 lists these possible outcomes.

[Table 1 about here]
The Committed Social Activist

Although the transition from committed social activist to fanatic is not a straightforward one, the socially committed altruistic and politically tough and resilient activist can be a potent agent for social change. (Twemlow & Sacco, 1996, Twemlow, 2001). However, the social context must be receptive and respectful of the activist mission, at least in allowing its exploration and expression. Democracies like the USA in theory provide an accepting, although skeptical, incubator for activist ideas. Although social activists often emerge from adolescent identity diffusion, true social activists consistently find outlets for their beliefs in their cultures and in their social mores over a lifetime. The cause usually becomes less narrowly political and more generally altruistic as the activist grows older.

In another context (Twemlow & Sacco, 1996, Twemlow & Sacco, 1999) we have examined the attributes of committed social activists. Although our researches occurred in Jamaica, the colonial influences suggest some comparability with the USA. The committed social activists were senior police officers who worked under appalling and dangerous conditions and who volunteered to participate in a project to reduce homicide and create a peaceful and safe environment in their city. Characteristics of these individuals were derived empirically and included the following:

1. Being more altruistic than egoistic;
2. Awareness of, and takes responsibility for, community problems;
3. Willingness to take physical risks for peace and not easily frightened;
4. Relationship-oriented and humanistic;
5. Self-motivated and a motivator of others;
6. Alert, strong, and positive;
7. Self-rewarding with low need for praise;
8. Personally well organized;
9. Advocate and protector of the vulnerable and disempowered;
10. Able to see potential in all people;
11. Low in sadism;
12. An enthusiastic advocate, committed and understanding of the ‘cause’.

A case study of social activism also illustrates some of these principles.\(^v\)

The Great Peace March for Global Nuclear Disarmament in 1986 (Folsom & Fledderjohan, 1988) was an example of the impact of the social context for the budding social activist – turned harmless fanatic. It began as PRO Peace: People Reaching Out For Peace with fundraising under the guidance of David Mixner, a public relations consultant and 70’s peace activist with strong political connections. The march to Washington, DC, from California was a carefully planned affair with camping, medical assistance, food and protection organized in meticulous detail along the route. Even before the march began, the venture bankrupted. By then, the followers were ‘socially committed’. They nonetheless marched using what had been previously arranged and making do for the rest. Some 400 people of all ages completed the course from March to November, finishing with a peace rally, which spawned others including a march in the Soviet Union.

However, integration of the social activist’s ideas into the culture does not ensure that he/she will become happy, grateful, and part of that culture. It partly depends on history and how that integration occurs. The French Revolution is an example that created martyrs whose revolutionary ideas were ultimately integrated into a political transformation for the culture. For example, Robespierre was a classic martyr/fanatic who, from his writings, seemed to enjoy and glorify in the role of victim. He insisted on spilling his blood for the good of the revolution saying: ‘We shall trace the road to immortality with our blood. Oh, sublime people! Receive the sacrifice of my entire being: happy is he who is born in your midst! Even happier is he who can die for your happiness!’\(^vi\)

**The Role of Psychopathology**

Undoubtedly, individual psychopathology can make a difference. Charisma, whose etymology means an immediate relationship with the divine without intermediary, may inspire an omnipotently disposed fanatic to behave like God, the Father. However, if the
fanatic becomes a revered figure, there is always ambivalence. Jim Jones was responsible for the mass suicide of over nine hundred individuals in Guyana, which he referred to as revolutionary suicide and insisted that all followers call him ‘The Father.’ Any questioning of his judgment, he said, implied betrayal. In his long sermons he berated his followers in a contemptuous way. Some leaders, such as Robespierre, Churchill, and perhaps Ralph Nader, are eventually vindicated by history. Others, like Hitler and the Bolsheviks are instead eternally damned, while yet others are held more ambivalently, like Napoleon.

Clearly, for an in-depth understanding of the complex interaction between the social activist, fanatic, martyr, terrorist, and the social context, the part played by individual psychopathology is an important issue. By its very nature, there are difficulties in addressing this question. Though valiant attempts have been made to collect information about fanatics and terrorists, often that information is scanty and grossly biased. Even if a psychiatrist has performed an examination, it is fettered by the demand characteristics of the situation, rendering the findings highly suspect. Shaw, (1986), in a telling critique of the psychopathology model of political terrorism, summarizes the scant psychiatric literature, noting that terrorists have been regularly diagnosed with Antisocial Personality Disorder and Narcissistic Personality Disorder. He criticizes these pathologizing approaches as plagued with fundamental attribution errors, i.e. vilifying personalities we don’t like. Although fanaticism may result in behaviors that are pathological, there is clearly no gross disorganization of the capacity to think nor personality distortions that make an individual incapable of perceiving a consensual reality and attempting to destroy that reality.

The Role of Social Trauma

Certain social traumata may be central. For example, Dr. Eyad Sarraj, a psychiatrist and founder of the Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizen’s Rights, reflects that:
‘What propels (Palestinian) people into such action is a long history of humiliation and a desire for revenge that every Arab harbors. Since the establishment of Israel in 1948, and the resultant uprooting of Palestinians, a deep-seated feeling of shame has taken root in the Arab psyche, producing the feeling that one is unworthy to live. The honorable Arab is the one who refuses to suffer shame and dies in dignity. The thirty-five years of Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza strip has served as a continuous reminder of Arab weakness.’ He points out that Palestinians feel that they are restoring their honor by fighting the aggressor and not just being helpless victims. Facing a well-equipped army with stones and suicide bombers reinforces Palestinians’ feelings of strength, courage, and defiance.

Heatherton et al (2000), in a landmark summary of the literature on stigma, provides a clue to some features of the social context from several research perspectives. Evidence suggests that stigma has three primary functions for the stigmatizer: the control of self-esteem, the establishment of control over others, and the buffering of anxiety. All of these functions can be seen as socially mediated mechanisms to control and stabilize the psyche of the stigmatizer.

The Role of the Bystander

In the social crucible for terrorism, the bystander role is also pivotal. What a community does with the fanatic’s ideas has a critical impact on his/her psychopathology, especially if the social rejection from ‘felt important’ peer groups is sufficiently disturbing. It is not always necessary for the bystanding social group to be external. By that we mean that a bystanding social group can be entertained in fantasy only, although the historical roots may have been in a real social group. The Internet offers instant global access to bystanding groups around the world. Our work with fanatical children (Twemlow et al, 2002) and in harassing and bullying workplace settings (Twemlow, 1999) indicates that such social trauma
can create a cast of characters in the internal object field that keeps the pressure of fantasy building in dream-life, daydreams, and in hypnagogic and hypnopompic states.

Individuals and groups with linked interests can become clusters of bully-bystanders (groups or individuals who vicariously enjoy victimization), thus gaining an advantage through projection of their own disavowed fantasies into the fanaticizer, while building the pressure of fantasy and avoiding actual danger themselves. Several Australian colleagues commented that the US often appears to take on the worries of the world, being more than willing to step into the rescuer role. Although it may well be that this role is appropriate and even necessary, group processes of this type can potentiate serious misjudgments. Figure 1 summarizes the social construction of terrorism and its life history.

( Figure 1 about here }

**Cults, Groups, and the Role of the Enemy**

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 there has since been a frantic search for enemies. Biesel (1994), in an informative article, summarizes the news media reaction to super power politics: the *New York Times* commented on March 4, 1990, ‘Democracy is winning, the arms race is over. Villains are friendly now. . . the jackpot so long desired was America’s. So then, why doesn’t it feel better?’ Psychoanalysts like Volkan (1999) have postulated the value of a familiar enemy in containing and holding disavowed self and object representations. He has pointed out the dangers when the enemy is no longer familiar since there is less hope for diplomatic solutions. One reporter for *Newsweek* (Meg Greenfred) observed, ‘Conducting this nation’s business overseas has become more difficult with the disappearance of the unifying, clearly defined and universally understood threat (the Soviet Union). Whose side are we on? And how many sides are there?’—reflecting, somewhat nostalgically, that things were
simpler during the Cold War. Biesel (1994), commented that a Paris intellectual, Bernard-Henri Levi, noted that the western world is having great trouble getting used to the death of communism, which another writer half jokingly called ‘Communostalgia!’.

Newscasters and politicians who have never been near a psychoanalytic couch seem to be missing the familiar enemy. As we make Osama bin Laden into a less familiar enemy, we are unconsciously more controlled by him and enactments abound. In 1994, Newsweek reported how the U.S. and the west were-‘building an Islamic enemy’ and that there was a Muslim sect with a dirty agenda preparing for a holy war ix.

In contrast with this demonic depiction of the unfamiliar enemy, Russell and Miller (1983) compiled a demographic profile of 350 known terrorists deriving information from many news sources. The profile of a terrorist is a single male, 22-24 years of age with a university education. Backgrounds include doctors, lawyers, journalists, and teachers except in the Middle East where technical training prevails. Terrorists generally have come from affluent middle to upper middle class families who have had enjoyed social prestige. Osama bin Laden left his wealthy, politically influential family as a young man to fight against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan with the assistance of the CIA and the blessing of several governments including those of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. It was only after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan that he turned against the U.S. and its allies. He never lost his revolutionary interests in spite of a brief attempt to return to the family construction business. His university and family background included early idealistic religious interests from when he was quite young.

Terror can provoke unthinking counterattack because it impacts what Elliott Jacques has called basic mutual trust in organizations, mobilizing paranoid and other
regressive defensive postures. As pointed out by Bion (1967), groups often behave like individuals, and individuals like groups, each trying to make up their minds about something. His basic assumptions were based on a psychology embodying the need of the individual in the group to relate to others (valency) and to seek support in the group mentality. Thus, the group (society), in this instance, becomes a container ‘for unthought elements in the psyche,’ (Godwin; p. 80). Miller (1998) in a sophisticated revisiting of Bion’s assumptions, proposes that they delineate a biogenetic formation, a mobilizing of instinctive survival urges; pleasure seeking, pain avoidance, and sexual reproduction. Additionally, Miller proposes that primitive defenses, like splitting and projection, are defenses manifesting ‘an inbuilt classificatory system’ (p. 1506) that enables the infant (group/society) to respond instantaneously to danger. Such a suggestion is helpful to explain why so many different individuals with vastly different post-natal backgrounds can have the same ‘groupishness’. For example, the fight-flight assumption united Americans behind a president who was highly unpopular before September 11th.

The leader of the group can become an embodiment and a ‘victim’ of the group’s basic assumptions about what he/she will do. When that leader fails to fulfill those unconscious demands, he may be ejected or rudely deposed. In Bion’s sense, the leader and the actions of the leader can be actualized in dramatic social behavior like warfare representing a social enactment of the primitive internal object relations of the group as a whole. Thus, there is a reductionistic danger and error in assuming that group members are mindless suggestible victims of the cult leader’s pathology. The complex interaction of the social context and social traumas with group dynamics provides some clues about the makings of cults and terrorists, and can suggest some prevention strategies:
Case Example

An economically successful East Coast Financial Services Company asked for a group consultation because of a chronic pattern of high turnover in senior staff in spite of the company boasting excellent returns for their clients and an overall positive bottom line with high morale in middle management and frontline workers. The Board questioned the slow decreases in earnings and the steady loss of senior level managers. The company’s CEO was resistant to the intervention, believing that he had created an ideal work environment by taking care of his employees with excellent salaries and benefits. His management system was innovative and had saved the organization from bankruptcy reorganization.

This laudable, but idealistic view contrasted strikingly with the experience of staff working in that setting. There were complaints of harassment, victimization, and retaliation against any staff member who deviated from the narrow philosophy of this CEO. Observation and interviews of staff revealed other manifestations of a regressive group mentality. Staff loved to hate the leader in private but turned into seething sycophants in his presence. Nobody dared to disagree substantially with any of the leader’s perceptions, analysis, nor formulation of problems. The leader’s tactics were mainly, to benevolently let staff know the error of their independent-thinking ways. This approach worked for the lowest level of employee, but was a major deterrent in attracting and keeping senior staff members who would challenge the leader’s autocratic management style and then were consequently asked to resign.

The consultant initiated a series of intensive interviews with the leader and found a cold, paranoid man with a clear narcissistic personality disorder. He had left his previous employ because his boss felt he was too idealistic, and out of touch with the needs of the organization. He had been a party to a messy divorce and was tussling with many existential issues relating to a marked mid-life crisis characterized by a lifelong feeling of not having his true worth recognized, even by his parents. He was recruited to save the organization from inevitable bankruptcy. The professionals in the organization obviously recognized the CEO’s narcissistic and sadistic management style, but still maintained that he could actualize their fantasies of final recognition of the unique and highly successful business methods of the company that, however, were considered out of date by business competitors.

He did not dominate the group with his own fantasies. In fact, he was considered to be somebody who always reacted to others’ ideas saying that he didn’t like to initiate things, but worked better reacting to the ideas of others. This leader conceptualized and articulated the group’s fantasies of omnipotence but left everyone guessing about what he thought, demanding instead that they continue guessing until he had acknowledged them as having made the correct guess. Newly hired staff members or those with more independent mindsets encountered problems if they were not willing to guess the thoughts of the leader, since they did not understand the fantasy of the group as a whole nor had joined the pairing assumption. The leader’s role in articulating and organizing the thoughts of the members of the group enabled staff to feel secure and to function well as long as the leader patrolled the external boundary and reassured them that he could do all of the necessary thinking about that external boundary.
The CEO resisted the consultation and continued to manage as he saw fit, although revenues continued to fall and the company began to run in a deficit again. The Board now faces dealing with a CEO who has a long-term contract and a history of success that is now sorely dated. The board and staff are trapped in these unconscious dynamics. The loyalty and cohesion of the members for the hated/idealized leader belies an unusual fusion of sadism with love. When senior staff openly criticized the leader, he reacted in a martyred, victimized way becoming sad and injured by the ‘attacks’ which he would usually dismiss as projections. The intervention strategy was complicated by a passive Board with few checks and balances in the company either from a business-organizational perspective or through peer review. The office of the CEO became a well-defended fortress with a personal style and corporate practices that demanded submissiveness. When the Board retreated, the staff became the pawns of the leader’s paranoid projections.

The staff group became dedicated to their own survival by reinforcing the paranoid fantasies of the CEO, who struck an unconscious deal with the employees, viz. submit to my view, collect information on our (my) enemies, and I will allow you to be secure in an easy job. This proved to be the most difficult obstacle. The consultant was patronized, given false access, and ultimately used to set up senior management in the eyes of the Board, i.e. the intervention became a part of the CEO’s sophisticated strategy for misinforming the Board and displacing blame for poor management decisions that resulted in declining revenues, increased litigation for arrogant management decisions, and senior staff turnover. The consultation process never was designed to solve a problem but to create a distraction.

When the consultant questioned the CEO’s approach, he became incorporated into the paranoid fantasy and projected, like other disavowed elements in the group, into an object class of ‘other’. The consultant’s ideas were dismissed in a very polite manner and the consultant was thanked for his input. The Board heard that the CEO had chosen a consultant who did not understand the needs and special mission of the organization. The CEO presented the image of someone victimized by poor advice from a senior staff group who chose the consultant.

In our opinion, the distribution of coercive power is what makes the difference between healthy, biogenetically determined basic assumptions in Miller’s (1998) sense and those malignant permutations which evolve into cult-forming pathological destructive ones. The dynamics of cult formation are also well described in Singer’s (1995) study of American cults and deprogramming techniques.

Power Dynamics refers to the conscious and unconscious use of aggression by an individual or group to coerce others. The amount of unmetabolized aggression can
pathologize the basic assumptions. For example, in a Dependency assumption with conscious aggression (+aggression) group members may adopt a victimizer role with resultant hostile idealization of the leader. If the aggression is unconscious (aggression) hostile expectations of the leader are less overt and are expressed in more passive aggressive ways; for example, forgetting important business meetings. If the power dynamics are non-coercive, the leader is seen as reliable, trusted and functioning with realistic expectations by group members. Figure 2 illustrates, in a tabular form, this point of view

{ Table 2 about here }

In summary, the genesis of early cult dynamics is illustrated by the above case, and the early precursors necessary for the development of a fanatical mindset in a group would include:

1. A pathological fusion of sadism and love with a masochistic victim-martyr defensive response to criticism in the leader, and sometimes in the followers who alternate between identifying euphorically with the leader’s philosophy, and degrading it.

2. The leader closely monitors the external boundary of the cult (organization), in the guise of protecting the mission of the group and freeing up the disciples (staff) to do their work. Members become isolated from reality and from diverse viewpoints. This retreat from reality and the outer boundary evolves into greater passivity and child-like dependence upon the leader. As the distinction between the in-group versus all those in the out-group are
heightened and polarized, the out-group is perceived in an increasingly vigilant and paranoid manner.

3. A sense of mission and personal needs are shared by leaders and followers so that the cult or organization will protect/provide something needed for the world culture as well as indirectly for the cult member’s anxiety. A new member of the group, especially one with an established reputation and character structure, will tend not to remain with this nascent cult. New staff instead, will tend to be recruited from trainees, ‘grown’ so to speak, by the firm itself. In fact, for the past ten years, the previously mentioned company had not recruited any permanent members from the outside. Instead they hired only trainees who had been in field placements with them from a nearby business school.

4. The fusion of sadism and love in the leader is magnified by the group fantasy and projections into the receptive leader and reflected in a greedy, voracious enviousness and anxiousness in the leader. The group fantasy becomes that the group has a special pseudo- speciated (E. Erikson, 1985; K. Erikson, 1996) attitude towards its own role vis a vis other groups, with the group leader embodying its cannibalistic envy. The fantasy of superiority and domination causes new ideas to be ridiculed by the leader and the group, which are often dismissed in such organisations as ‘a passion for the old way’.
Group influences on Young People: School Terrorists and Suicide Bombers

Young people are prone to fanatical beliefs. Adolescence with its social and physiological demands for unprecedented growth and separation from the nuclear family is a natural incubator for extremism, as many parents and therapists have experienced. International terrorism may also have its roots in separation/individuation dynamics, since it is during adolescence that idealistic/altruistic/fanatical beliefs often first emerge. We speculate that an understanding of extremist children, exemplified in the ‘school shooters’ in the U.S. may provide understanding both of a developmental perspective on terrorism, and the unique vulnerabilities of growing adolescents to the pressures of peer and adult groups. Even in the U.S., with arguably more freedoms than in any other democracy, this form of fanaticism usually emerges in its own closed peer-focused culture, which is felt by the adolescent to be of prime importance, and preferable to any other social norm.

Eissler (2000) elegantly outlines a theory of hatred as a force for social change. The cause can be subjugated to destructive impulses and personal vendettas as is seen in school shooters, or personal motives and impulses can be suppressed and manipulated by the cause as in the case of Palestinian suicide bombers\(^{x}\) and Japanese kamikaze pilots\(^{xi}\) (Taylor & Ryan, 1988), where the fanatic/terrorist is created and used by political forces in the name of a cause.

Terror, from the Latin *terrere*, to induce intense fear, apprehension, or dread often renders the targets overwhelmed and under-prepared, such as were schools in the homicides in the US.\(^{xii}\) In Jonesboro, Arkansas, an eleven and a thirteen year-old team turned into snipers firing on students exiting a school building, killing and wounding
children they did not know. The local community experienced this as a terrorist act against the school. There is a process propelling these children to act like extremists rather than to act out their adolescent angst in less violent ways. In some ways they are like suicide bombers who instead kill themselves at school as a symbolic act of revenge and retaliation for what is perceived as a source of great personal humiliation and shame. Unlike idealist Palestinian teens exploding themselves for a political cause, these young school shooters end their lives to end their psychological pain, in a megalomaniacal spree of revenge.

The Case of Columbine:

Dylan Klebold, voDKa to his friends, a 17 year-old boy who on April 20, 1999 with his 18 year-old colleague and friend Eric Harris, on the anniversary of Adolf Hitler’s birthday and that of the David Koresh cult shootout in Waco, Texas, actualized a carefully engineered, premeditated plot with the ultimate goal to destroy their high school as well as the community of Littleton, CO around it. There had been detailed planning for more than a year with maps and notes being made not only on weaponry used but also on strategies to maximize the kill. The social climate of the high school was extraordinarily coercive and unfriendly especially to those outside the social pecking order. By chance, SWT happened to be treating a man whose son had gone to stay with his mother in Littleton, and had spent some three months at Columbine High School, six months before the shootings occurred. Although the boy wanted to stay with his mother, he found the school climate intolerable, indicating that the bullying was overt. Any children who were not sexually active and strong members of the athletic teams were overtly and regularly, physically bullied and sexually humiliated in front of girls. My
patient’s son would be classified as a ‘nerd’, a US idiom for children who are bookish, not gifted athletically, and who are somewhat sexually and socially shy.

The fanatical hatred of Klebold and Harris which flourished in their strange dehumanized bond based on alienation and a common external enemy was revealed in their numerous notes and diaries. In one of them, Dylan Klebold said simply, ‘The lonely man strikes with absolute rage.’ Although many of their writings and videotapes explaining their crimes are still not available to the general public, what is available reflects an uncontrolled chaotic hatred of the existing social order. On the tapes they spoke of how easy it was to make other people believe what they wanted them to, how evolved they felt, and how dying was something they looked forward to. Harris said, ‘I’m full of hate and I love it. God, I can’t wait till they die. I can taste the blood now,’ calling themselves NBK’s (natural born killers). ‘You know what I hate?’ Klebold said, ‘Mankind. Kill everything. Kill everything.’ The fragments of their diaries are full of vitriol but it is not discriminatory; the railing is against almost every conceivable group. Harris said, ‘We hate Niggers, Spics, let’s not forget you white POS (pieces of shit) also.’ Included among the hated also were: the rich, the white, the poor, all races and racism, what Harris called ‘fitness fuckheads,’ martial arts experts, people who try to impress others by bragging about their cars, Star Wars fans, people who mispronounce words, people who drive slow in a fast lane, along with several named television channels. Hatred was a common bond inspiring, energizing and invigorating these boys with the attendant mindset, making the world simple enough to cope with, and with an end in sight for their misery and alienation.
The school shooter, unlike the political fanatic, is not bred to be part of a larger political movement. Hamas begins training young Palestinian minds from pre-school, and there is community and family involvement in the ‘growth’ of the suicide bomber. In contrast, the school shooter evolves in isolation from his family, although goes through many of the same steps. He becomes zealous about personal grievances, while the political fanatic fights for a collective cause. He may be part of a cult, as was the case in Pearl, Mississippi, where the shooter was trained by a group of peers called ‘Kroth.’

Retaliation is the school shooter’s motive, whereas the political terrorist is sending somebody else’s message about perceived collective oppression. The fantasy of future reward or vindication creates part of the necessary mindset to carry out the political act. Both the bombers and the shooters fantasize some relief for themselves or their culture after the completion of their lethal rampage with suicide. Klebold and Harris felt like revolutionaries fighting for the socially oppressed at Columbine High in the same way as a suicide bomber is engulfed in the promised reward of an afterlife full of status and sensual reward.

Adolescents, who are suicidal from other causes, experience a very similar transition in their mindsets before they take lethal actions. A key element of this self-destructive mindset is a narrowing of perspective creating a feeling of intolerable mental pressure and need to act. The suicidal adolescent and the school shooter both despair whether their humiliated existence will ever change, and that their future consists only of unendurable psychological pain. The suicide bomber in contrast is selected for a mission and thinks of being a religious hero. Both begin their lethal countdown isolated from the reality-based social supports that could offer another perspective on life.
A Secret Service study (Vossekuil et al, 2000) found that in 75% of the 37 school shooting incidents they studied, the children communicated their lethal plans indirectly, mostly to peers in the immediate 72 hours before the actual attack. In contrast, when Hamas chooses a young Palestinian martyr, they do not tell the parents or friends. Instead, when the mission is to occur, they take the young person into seclusion.\textsuperscript{xv} The 72-hour period before the school shooter attacks is a critical point in this cycle for potential intervention. The targets of school shooters are selected based on a personal grievance, while the young martyrs’ targets are selected for them for a strategic political purpose. Both school shooters and suicide bombers seek public places of significance for their lethal attacks. The school shooter’s mindset shifts to a ‘ready’ mode that sets the stage for the final act, while the suicide bombers see themselves as one in a series of chosen martyrs in a holy war.

There was clearly a strong copycat effect noticed by the FBI in school shootings.\textsuperscript{xvi} Many of the school shooters had a morbid fascination with prior school shootings. Both the school shooters and the suicide bombers appear to be looking at themselves as messengers seeking a form of redemption or justice. Whether the style is symbolic or political, there is a contagious element to these lethal acts. Suicide bombers are viewed as heroes in their oppressed and wounded cultures. School shooters are reviled and either commit suicide after the attack or spend their lives in prison, and the families of school shooters are often sued and viciously criticized.\textsuperscript{xvii} In contrast, suicide bombers’ families are often held in great esteem and are compensated financially after the attack.
The critical role of shame (Gilligan, 2001) for these young US school terrorists is cited by the FBI (O’Toole, 2000) and Secret Service (Vossekuiil, et al. 2000) as being rooted in bullying or the repeated use of shaming, exclusion, rumors, targeted dirty tricks, and other language-based, social aggression. There are many opportunities for the world powers to be aware of social injustices leading to shame in various ethnic and religious groups. Just like school shooters who cannot refrain from telling their friends about their plan, fanatical groups also send signals to any containing authority that a group of people is being oppressed and on the road to terrorism. For example, it is reported in Jane’s Terrorism & Security Monitor (Sept. 17, 2001), that Abdel-Bari Atwan, editor of London’s al-Quds-al-Arabi newspaper, told Reuters that bin Ladin warned three weeks prior to September 11th, that he would attack American interests in an unprecedented way.

In summary, there are several clues that can perhaps inform prevention strategies. Shaming and a dismissive home and social environment promotes social isolation and disconnection from peer and community group objectives. As these factors percolate, the dialogue between the container (school or nation) and the oppressed (child or political factions) stops and fantasy takes over. Fantasy is made easier by modern technology. The anonymity of the Internet allows a violent retaliatory fantasy to be fueled. Many of the school shooters attached themselves to cyber images masquerading as aggression containing father figures, e.g., Adolph Hitler and Stalin (Twemlow et al., 2002). The Internet provides information and connections to hate or similarly oppressed views, international news, and plans and ingredients for making destructive devices, together with oversimplified formulae for success that reinforces enraged grandiose fantasies.
Ichimura et al (2001) describes an excellent example of a young man who hijacked a plane and then tried to fly the plane after years of practice on a homemade flight simulator designed from internet information. He had failed in a competitive university and in spite of a fanatical interest in flying planes, was never accepted for pilot training. In tape recordings of conversations in the cockpit of the plane with the captain, the cyber criminal found it quite perplexing that he was unable to really fly the plane, commenting that it surprised him since he was so good on his home flight simulator!

At home the school shooters were allowed a great deal of freedom to plan and to prepare attacks. This dismissive and permissive environment may have also been a fundamental ingredient in the evolution of this cycle of violence. None of the school shooters were ever stopped at the source (in their own homes and at school) since their containers of aggression were not functional. If a school container (teachers, administration and peer group) dismisses the social pressure and pain experienced by the prospective school shooter, the young shooter is cut off from sources of acceptance and protection, and the psychological pain is no longer endurable. Parents in a dismissive social environment act in ways that seem to dismiss human relationships as a viable means of problem solving, and are dismissed by the budding terrorist (their child) as a source of support and containment, particularly of aggression.

Conclusion

Terrorism is seen as a result of developmental processes with certain social dynamics. School shooters in the US can be compared to Palestinian teens using this socio-psychoanalytic approach. The intermingling of humiliation, dismissive social contexts, pathological certainty and grandiosity, and coercive narcissism are seen as
common ingredients for the evolution of symbolic terrorist acts designed to be social vengeance for often personally perceived oppression and humiliation. Terrorism is not seen as psychopathological in a strictly psychiatric sense. Normal adolescent rebelliousness can be harnessed and positively sublimated through participation in social activism. This same adolescent alienation and passion can also evolve into terrorism or lethal explosive violence in US schools, in children who are by no means sick in any medical sense of the word.

Our proposal strives to break the fear-driven approach to understanding terrorism, with potentially serious misjudgements of the terrorist by the terrorised being very possible (Twemlow, In Press). The terrorist is a human being living in a social context, and using this combination of social and psychoanalytic theories can we hope, contribute to a deeper understanding of the human dynamics of this tragic process of socio-symbolic violence.
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Russell, C., Miller, B. (1983). *Profile of a Terrorist*. In L.Friedman & Y. Alexander (Eds.), *Perspectives on Terrorism* (pp 45-60), Wilmington DE, Scholarly resources.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>fanatical ideas integrated into the culture</th>
<th>fanatical ideas not integrated into the culture</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>purity of the believer</td>
<td>sickness of the believer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>charisma</td>
<td>insanity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God inspired wisdom</td>
<td>Satanic beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vindication of the just</td>
<td>judgment of the damned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inspiring or revolutionary idea</td>
<td>omnipotent self-inflation</td>
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<td>seen as honest and committed</td>
<td>a hypocrite and criminal</td>
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<td>social acceptance</td>
<td>social isolation</td>
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### Table 2

**Power dynamics of group members**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic Group Assumption</th>
<th>Victimizer role (+ aggression)</th>
<th>Victim role (- aggression)</th>
<th>Flexible role</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dependency</td>
<td>Hostile Idealization</td>
<td>Passive-aggressive idealization</td>
<td>Reliable trusted leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fight-Flight</td>
<td>Paranoid</td>
<td>Pollyanna</td>
<td>“Get it done,” efficient leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pairing</td>
<td>Messianic</td>
<td>Dependent mimicry</td>
<td>Hopeful, Future Directed leader</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Social Isolation & Disconnection

MARTYR

Corporateism

Violent Fragmented Communities

FANATIC

Intolerance of Diversity

Coercive Humiliating Power Dynamics

DISMISSIVE HOME & SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS

TERRORIST

Coercive Humiliating Power Dynamics

Dismissive Home & Social Environments

Non-Coercive Respectful Power Dynamics

Social Acceptance: “Connected People Make Safe Communities”

Figure 1
i Edna St. Vincent Millay in “Second April,” 1921, New York, Mitchell Kennedy, pp 64-65


iv USA Today, 07-05-01
v A documentary was made of the march: “People Reaching Out” by Cathy Zeutlin
vi Speech given Session Septidi, 7. Prairial, Year II of the One and Indivisible French Republic
vii Personal Communication, Peter Olsson, MD, 2001
viii Time Magazine, April 8, 2002, p. 39
ix Personal Communication, 2002
x Jack Kelly, USA Today, 7/5/01

xi The word terrorist first appeared in English in 1795, in reference to the Jacobins of France, who ruled France from 1793 till 1794 in what was called the Reign of Terror. www.wordorigins.org

xii The word terrorist first appeared in English in 1795, in reference to the Jacobins of France, who ruled France from 1793 till 1794 in what was called the Reign of Terror. www.wordorigins.org

xiii In July 1999, the FBI, and US Attorney General Janet Reno convened a think tank with the authors and other experts on violence from around the world, together with staff from 18 school districts where there had been killings or killings avoided and police, district attorneys, and FBI profilers. A publication summarized the findings; O’Toole (2000).


xv Suicide Terrorism: a An Overview: Boaz Ganor, ICT Executive Director – 2-15-2000

xvi Personal communication, SSA Dr. Mary Ellen O’Toole, Critical Incident Response Group, Federal Bureau of Investigation

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