1. Introduction: The Shaping Power of Language

What power does extreme speech have to incite violence? Do people simply imbibe it and march according to its orders? In this chapter we argue that a confluence of social and psychological factors affecting young Muslims living in the West can augment the persuasiveness of radical Islamist discourse in such a way that the discourse is taken to describe ‘how things really are’. We argue that actions (such as religiously motivated violence or civic non-participation) are not automatically sparked by extreme religious speech, but rather these actions ‘make sense’ and become more likely if its hearers possess a social construction of reality to which the ‘story’ of radical Islamism readily connects.

Foucault argues that ways people use language form the building blocks of social reality. Discourses, that is, any socially shared body of speech or text, are understood as ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’.¹ By virtue of the way language selects some features of reality, and rejects others, a particular version of reality is constructed. A category, word, or sentence inevitably points to ‘this’, and not ‘that’. Language therefore cannot provide a neutral one-to-one correspondence with infinitely complex reality. Rather, it plays an active role in selectively constructing that reality. Accordingly, Foucault asserts that the one who defines the world, controls it. For example, by studying the history of madness, Foucault identified the power of psychiatric labels to define and control those to whom they were applied. A diagnosis of ‘schizophrenia’ is likely to shape the entire life of the person so labelled, whether that label is warranted or not.² Language is therefore a terrain for power struggles.

Whereas clearly discourses are not neutral, we argue that Foucault’s ‘hard’ archaeological approach to discourse tends to reify language, as if language itself is

the agent acting in society. In reality, humans are the agents. Our approach in this chapter is to explore the cognitive and social processes that operate upon and through extreme religious discourse, thus activating its latent potential. Discourses only have power when they speak to a given construction of reality that people already possess. A discourse which fails to connect with listeners’ own experience and construction of reality will appear bizarre and irrelevant, but speech that conveys a worldview that makes sense of listener’s experience will be absorbed into the already existing framework of beliefs, altering, over time, that framework.

Three main concerns are addressed in this chapter. In Section 2, we examine the key structural features of Islamist radical religious speech and their likely cognitive consequences. Key structural features considered here are: the three-part narrative echoing primitive and dualist world views resulting in low levels of complexity, rhetorical strategies, the ‘rationalistic’ word-based emphasis that avoids the nuancing influence of symbolic aspects of the sacred text, the closed way in which the belief system is organized, and the mutual misrepresentation afflicting both Islamists and the West through the ‘myth of pure evil’. In Section 3, we explore the need for a positive social identity to which extreme religious discourse appeals, particularly among second and third generation young Muslims living in Europe and Britain. The authors’ current work is to design and test de-radicalizing educational resources for young Muslims in Britain and Europe, and our expertise lies with this population. The Muslim diaspora in Britain and Europe share certain historical and cultural factors that are distinct from Muslim populations in other parts of the world. Thus, section 3, pertaining to identity issues, describes in particular the experience of young Muslims in Britain and Europe. Extreme speech is most powerfully ‘activated’ under totalist group conditions. A totalist group seeks to become a members’ main social and cognitive universe, thus amplifying the group’s influence. Totalist groups intensify group-based identity at the expense of individual identity. In Section 4, we explore the implications for policy-makers of the now widespread Islamist discourse. Do-it-yourself assembly kits of this binary vision are now widely available at thousands of radicalizing websites. By flooding the marketplace of ideas, this particular version of social reality is gaining the ‘of course’ status of the everyday among many young Muslims. Thus, while sacrificing its revolutionary patina as ‘extreme’ speech, it extends its reach.

2. Structural Features of Islamist Radical Religious Discourse

(i) Narrative

A basic narrative, or story, has become widespread, encouraging and legitimating the new pattern of religiously motivated violence. Terrorism in previous decades has aimed at achieving concrete, political goals. The recent pattern of terrorism, as
in the attack on the Twin Towers, differs in its absence of prior bargaining, the suicide of the terrorists, and the goal of maximum loss of life and damage to social structures (as symbolized by the destruction of the World Trade Centre). These features suggest that the main goal of current terrorism perpetrated against western targets is to achieve a sweeping revision concerning which groups have most status and influence on the world stage, well beyond immediate, practical gains.

What kind of story can make sense of such actions? Stories are a major cognitive tool that people use to make sense of the world. Stories account for the links between events (causation) and provide a sense concerning the way life should unfold (teleology). Children (of all ages) are gripped by a good story and are frustrated if the ending is missed out, or is somehow incongruent. Stories work by building up a dramatic tension, and providing a resolution. The power of story is subtle, but all the more influential for being less than explicit. According to Griemas, all basic stories, such as folk tales or fairy tales, comprise three parts: (1) an initial sequence; (2) the obstacle and the help; and (3) the resolution. Versions of reality that take this three-part structure make sense to people; such accounts already have 'a foot in the door' in common-sense understanding. A thumbnail sketch of the 3-part storyline, following the contours of radical Islamist thought (deriving from the writings of Maududi and Murad, Qutb, and Nabhani in combination with Saudi Salafi literalism), is as follows:

(1) The initial sequence:
There once was a golden age of Islam.

(2) The obstacle and the help:
The West intervened through colonization, the imposition of secular states, support of Israel, and a host of illegitimate wars. The purity of Islam was compromised within the Muslim world and Muslims are now oppressed around the world by the secular and godless West. There is one solution, enshrined (purportedly) as the centrepiece of the Qur'an: it is the duty of all Muslims to struggle for the institution of Sharia law and to reinstate the Caliphate in order to usher in the perfect Islamic society.

(3) The resolution:
The prestige, power, and purity of Islam vis-à-vis the West is a zero-sum game that Islam will win. The perfect Islamic society is the will of Allah; martyrs will be rewarded. Both internal (compromised Muslims) and external (Western) enemies are fair game.

Thus, the traditional, socially conservative, and peaceful role of religion in Muslim societies has been turned into a mobilizing narrative and this has been

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exported worldwide thanks to the Internet and an avalanche of Saudi-backed resources. This mobilizing narrative serves several important goals. First, it deflects attention from the internal troubles within Islamic countries by concentrating on both real and perceived harm caused by past and present Western policies. Secondly, by finding a scapegoat outside itself, the cohesion of Muslim society and its religious worldview is saved. Thirdly, diaspora Muslims are given a rallying call to identify with, and defend, the transnational umma (the worldwide community of Muslim believers).

A number of scholars argue that this narrative structure fosters a psychological state of ‘splitting’ where the in-group is seen as all good and the out-group as all bad. The term ‘splitting’ is rooted in the post-Freudian work of Klein, who theorized that infants typically deal with their experience of frustration (and terror) in response to mothering that fails to meet their needs by ‘splitting’. In this defensive position, the infant’s concept of the ‘good’, caring mother (or breast) is split off from the ‘bad’, uncaring mother. This is a split that preserves the fantasy of the all-good, all-caring mother upon whom the infant so literally depends (although a separate, all-bad mother now also ‘exists’). A similarly binary vision is evidenced in various ancient narrative structures such as ‘the myth of redemptive violence’ identified by Ricoeur. In this narrative structure, based in primitive myths preceding the monotheisms, violence is seen as necessary and redemptive. It is necessary to exterminate the bad in order to preserve the good. The myth of redemptive violence first appeared in the ancient Babylonian myth of creation: the Enuma Elish. In this myth, chaos and evil are seen as primordial and absolute and must be continually conquered by force, lest they overwhelm the given order. This myth voices the struggle of the ancient empires to impose their control. All crimes against the polity are thus crimes against heaven and are violently crushed for threatening the cosmic order. As chaos and evil are understood as the basic substratum of reality, pre-emptive force is continually required to keep it at bay. Violence is redemptive: it is the only way that good can be maintained.

Our argument is that, when activated in contemporary discourse, the basic story-line of ‘redemptive violence’ screens out the more peaceful, integratively complex and universalizing aspects of Islam. A number of religious scholars concur that the theological world views of all three monotheisms (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam), each with their own particular, yet internally heterogeneous and often nuanced approaches to the problem of evil, can be collapsed into primitive states of splitting. This is particularly the case when people feel they

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are under threat. Violence against the ‘evil’ that threatens is then seen to be ‘good’.

Another ancient narrative structure is described by Girard, who argues that the myth of ‘the violent sacred’ has surfaced at times of crisis throughout the process of hominization, the long journey of early humans towards a shared, humanizing culture. In the myth of the violent sacred, the substitutionary death of a scapegoat is required in order to save the social group. Girard argues that this scapegoating narrative underlies the three monotheisms and can be activated in times of threat. This narrative, along with its urge towards a violent resolution, comes into play in times of extreme rivalrous crisis between social groups. It is arguable that globalization and immigration patterns are having the effect of ‘shrinking’ geographic space and increasing competition between groups for the available social resources (such as status and prestige) and physical resources (shrinking also due to global warming). When groups become locked in a rivalry so advanced that the existence of all is threatened, if a scapegoat can be found (usually randomly selected but having some odd or distinctive features) and violence enacted upon it, the ensuing catharsis saves the wider society from self-destruction. ‘Evil’ is externalized as outside the group and then expunged. Both the powerful drive to kill the enemy and preserve the group are fulfilled through scapegoating.

Scholars agree that the initial goal of Islamism was to subvert and overthrow compromised Muslim regimes, such as in Egypt or Saudi Arabia. These attempts failed, and only secondly has attention has been turned to an external (Western) enemy. In Islamist extreme speech, suicide bombers are exhorted to expunge evil through the killing of random civilian targets, thus winning for themselves a ‘heroic’ martyrdom. The terrible logic of these otherwise incomprehensible acts is clarified to some degree when seen through the lens of the redemptive violence and scapegoating narratives, with their fantasy, cathartic resolutions to highly threatened states.

Our argument here is that although awareness of primitive narratives underlying an ideology is usually less than conscious, such narrative forms present deeply familiar ways of making sense of powerful emotions and conflicts in daily life. They secretly add their weight to contemporary Islamist discourse. Mythical narratives functioned similarly in the case of Nazi ideology. Such narratives, we argue, invite ‘regression’ to more constricted psychological states.

(ii) Rhetorical Strategies

Whenever people use language, they do so to accomplish certain aims: to persuade, to accuse, to justify, to encourage, to control. Islamist discourse is no exception in

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this respect. It is fair game that most speakers employ rhetorical strategies to achieve their goals and that they seek to present their version of reality as self-evidently correct. Religious and political discourses are typically heavily laden with rhetorical strategies. There are five distinct stages of classical rhetoric: *inventio* (invention); *dispositio* (arrangement); *elocutio* (style); *memoria* (memorization); and *pronuntiatio* (delivery). Seven strategies, described below, largely fall into the third stage of style (*elocutio*).  

(a) ‘Us’ and ‘Them’

Cognitively, people tend to think in simple contrasts, in binaries. Indeed, all mental activity, including visual perception, proceeds on the basis of contrast; neurons have only one ‘word’. They either fire (‘on’) or they do not fire (‘off’). These ‘words’ have the job of conveying a rich, subjectively experienced reality. Reality is so complex, and yet short-term memory and attentional capacities are so restricted, that it is necessary for humans to impose simplifying categories upon the incessant flow of stimuli. Categories are the building block of our cognitive system. The most basic categorical distinctions people make involve the categorization of something into two parts: the good and the bad, us and them, in-groups and out-groups. The primitive archaic narratives and infant states of splitting (into good/bad) described above illustrate this tendency.

An analysis of the communications of Osama Bin Laden, illustrates the way Bin Laden employs splitting in his depictions of Muslims versus Westerners. Presented as polar opposites, Muslims are categorized as all good; Westerners as all bad. The West is presented as the antithesis of the perfection Bin Laden preaches: pious, moral, chaste, ascetic, disciplined. The achievements of the West are ignored or downplayed, whereas its flaws and problems are highlighted. Labels such as ‘infidels,’ routinely used of Westerners, insinuate a sense of threat to the Islamic religious worldview, thus increasing the likelihood of splitting into a binary vision. In a state of threat, cognitive constriction occurs, critical reasoning is restricted, and blind, uncritical acceptance of a discourse can readily ensue.

(b) Caricatures

Caricatures operate like ‘straw men’. Instead of responding to a real person or a fair portrayal of a differing viewpoint, this rhetorical strategy exaggerates features

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that can be exploited, and downplays other aspects that would counteract the exaggeration. A caricature, for example, of George Bush as a Zionist, Crusader, and murderer, is a way of maintaining clear in-group/out-group category boundaries, as the leader is held to be a prototype of the group. In Bin Laden’s communications, he routinely attributes the responsibility for every negative aspect of Muslim experience to the ‘Jewish-Crusader alliance’. Shorthand terms such as ‘Great Satan’ encapsulate the caricature and its underlying arguments. As discourses are shared and reinforced by a social group, to disagree with, or even to modify, a prevailing caricature is to set oneself outside the boundaries of the moral community.

(c) Foot in the Door
The author or speaker draws you in just enough to get your attention and sympathy, and gets his foot in the door through a shared interest. By selectively quoting from the Qur’an, radical Islamist discourse presents itself as a valid, pious interpretation of Islam. This strategy is most successful among secularized young Muslims who lack the in-depth knowledge of Islam that could enable them to critique the radical discourse. This strategy is particularly effective among ‘bad’ Muslims, those in prison or otherwise excluded from the Muslim community. Prison populations offer rich recruiting grounds, as the radical discourse gets a ‘foot in the door’ by offering an opportunity for shamed young men to atone for their otherwise unforgivable sins. By taking up the call to join a training camp or terrorist cell, the new adherent can atone for his sin and return to the umma as a hero.

(d) Thin Edge of the Wedge
If we allow x, then y will happen. This rhetorical strategy is not really arguing against x, but against y. If, for example, European Muslims were to vote in Western democracies (x), then the will of Allah (the ideal Islamic society) will be prevented (y). Those who use this rhetorical strategy are linking something that they oppose (non-violent methods of civic protest, voting and civic participation in democratic societies) to something that most ‘right thinking people’ oppose (the will of Allah), claiming that support of one entails support of the other.

(e) Domino Reasoning
As an extension of the ‘thin edge of the wedge’, not only y will happen, but x, z, q, w will happen, and then everything will collapse. The end-point is catastrophic. For example, if women are allowed to be unveiled, their honour is tainted, then the honour of their families will be degraded, the men will be shamed, resulting in the breakdown in the family, eventually leading to a total loss of moral and spiritual values. This rhetorical strategy links the initial focus of opposition with a loss so
huge that any other viewpoint is overwhelmed. The predicted outcome is so disastrous that it must be avoided at all costs.18

(f) Emotional Tone, Flow, Rhythm and Metaphor
Unrath describes the style of language used by Bin Laden when addressing a Muslim audience as emotive, duty-oriented, and poetic in a style very reminiscent of the sacred texts of Islam. Bin Laden’s phraseology, word choice, and the short rhythmic sentences echo the sacred texts in such a way as to suggest to followers that his words are the only true and correct tradition dating back to Mohammad himself. His style of language is reinforced by the visual symbolism of Bin Laden’s dress, manner, and ascetic (cave) habitation, all of which emulate the Prophet’s manner of living. As all Muslims are enjoined to emulate the Prophet’s way of life, Bin Laden provides a potent visual and verbal reminder of this injunction.19

(g) Appearance of Rationality
In sharp contrast, when addressing the West, Bin Laden uses clear reason and logic. He speaks very plainly and matter-of-factly.

...[his words] are carefully chosen, plainly spoken, and precise. He has set out the Muslim world’s problems as he sees them; determined that they are caused by the United States; explained why they must be remedied; and outlined how he will try to do so.20

However, Unrath argues that even though he uses a more logical rhetoric when addressing a Western audience, Bin Laden relies mainly on “if...then” statements and absolutist demands which are conceptually simple.21

An appearance of rationality marks even the most basic tracts and pamphlets produced by radical Islamists. Rightly acknowledging the pivotal role Islamic scholars played in philosophy, mathematics, and science during Islam’s Golden Age (while Europe lagged behind during the Dark and Middle Ages), the appearance of rationality evokes a (historically-based) positive, distinctive sense of Islamic identity, while at the same time giving a legitimating ‘nod’ in the direction of the current prestige of contemporary scientific rationality. While radical Islamist discourse is, in fact, heavily ladened with emotional tone and rhetorical strategies (as are most political discourses), this is cloaked with an appearance of rationality.

(iii) Propositional, Word-Based Processing
We have just argued that radical Islamist discourse seeks to present purportedly correct religious knowing in terms of word-based, rationalistic assertions. The

19 See n. 17 above. 20 See n. 17 above, 5. 21 See n. 17 above.
claim that the highest purpose of a Muslim is to struggle for the Caliphate is well-
served by demoting non-political, symbolic, devotional, or mystical aspects of
Islam. The symbolic aspects of traditional Islam that could nuance and broaden
this message are thereby obscured.

Watts argues that religious knowing entails two distinct kinds of processing: a
word-based (propositional) knowing (as in doctrine) and a dense, implicational,
symbolic, metaphorical knowing too deep for words. Implicational knowing
layers and integrates input from ritual, emotions, and bodily states. These two
distinct ways of processing ideally function as a holistic system: propositional
statements are best served when understood in a rich implicational context and
ritual practices are enriched by the rational understanding provided by the
tradition. Religious devotees normally possess a reservoir of word-based and
implicational knowledge with which to understand the multiple meanings of
religious content. Under these ideal conditions, polarized conclusions from
religious discourse are usually avoided. However, Islamist radical discourse
appears to isolate implicational from propositional (word-based) content, thus
destroying the polyvalent nature of religious knowing. Clear-cut, extreme con-
clusions are thereby promoted.

A degree of doublespeak is afoot. While extreme speech gives the appearance of
rationality concerning its belief tenets and the obligations it lays on its hearers, it
simultaneously seeks to evoke intense emotion, not least through the rapid fire,
arousing, intense delivery of a number of high-profile radical preachers. Basic
emotions like shame, rage, and fear are evoked as listeners are invited to identify
with the injustices and sufferings of Muslims worldwide. Shame is a highly
aversive emotional state and is likely to be even more so in an honour culture,
where to fail to take up the invitation to right the wrongs of injustice is to remain
in an intolerably shamed state.

(iv) Intratextuality

Another feature of extreme speech concerns its logical structure, a feature that
would fall under classical rhetoric’s *dispositio* (arrangement). Hood, Hill, and
Williamson argue that fundamentalist belief systems (whether Christian, Islamic,
Jewish, or other) are typically organized as a closed system: in their parlance, as an
intra-textual system. Whether a belief system is organized in a closed or open
way has systematic cognitive consequences. A closed belief system is one that is
organized around a central authority belief. The validity of all other beliefs
logically descends from the inviolate, sacred authority belief. Beliefs are true

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22 F. N. Watts, ‘Implicational and propositional religious meanings’ *Int'l J. Psychology of Relig*
(submitted 2007).
24 M. Rokeach, *The Open and Closed Mind: Investigations into the Nature of Belief Systems and
because, for example, ‘the Bible tells me so’ or ‘the Qur’an says’. Disconfirming evidence is not allowed to modify the authority belief, and is systematically screened out. As conflicting perspectives are routinely excluded, arguments within a closed belief system show lower integrative complexity. Islamist speech is organized in this way, intra-textually, around a central authority belief (the Qur’anic message, but highly selectively interpreted by radical discourse). All other beliefs must be validated in a one-way direction from the authority belief to peripheral beliefs (such as dress, diet, family structure, political allegiances). What the Qur’an says (as interpreted by radicalizers) is what ordinary people must believe and do. Never do the peripheral beliefs or practices of ordinary believers modify the authority belief. It is a one-way direction of validation, and this protects the authority belief from reality-testing. It is convenient that authority beliefs (concerning God) are usually of an abstract, unfalsifiable nature, whereas peripheral beliefs (‘voting is unIslamic’), are somewhat more vulnerable to reality-testing. It is a malign coincidence that a closed system is precisely what a recruiter could wish for in a successful, obedient terrorist who does not ask questions or entertain alternate perspectives.

On the positive side, intra-textual systems have the capacity to provide adherents, in the face of secular culture, with a robust sense of meaning and purpose. They provide a coherent religious discipline through which people can seek to transform their lives. Whereas the creators and disseminators of radical Islamist discourse appear to be transparently motivated towards political ends, we argue that followers of the discourse become genuinely religiously motivated. Their intensified religiosity, often sincerely motivated, takes on a life of its own, innocent, to some degree, of the ultimate aims of the discourse creators. It is not incidental that Islamist extreme speech purports to connect young Muslims to God. If you are seeking to mobilize people to kill themselves and others, people are reluctant to venture into that territory unless they believe they have God on their side, and that they are fighting ‘evil’. The complex reality is that sincere, devotional motives become enmeshed with the pleasure that a sense of certainty, group superiority and the promise of vindication (or revenge) supply. The rhetorical strategies described thus far are well designed to achieve that powerful mixture.

(v) Integrative Complexity
The ‘us’ and ‘them’ rhetorical strategy described above is typical of low integrative complexity. What characterizes extreme religious speech is its lack of complexity: an all-good, in-group is pitted against a dominant, all-bad, illegitimate out-group. The complexity of information processing is a powerful predictor of inter-group confrontation. Integratively complex thinking recognizes the legitimacy of

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25 See n. 23 above.
different evaluative viewpoints and is capable of higher-order synthesis of these viewpoints. Low integrative complexity thinks in terms of, for example, binary, black, and white contrasts with little or no integration of the perspectives. In previous research, IC analysis—the coding of complexity in verbal material on a 1 to 7 scale—has predicted the course of major international crises leading to either the outbreak of war or to peaceful compromise. Dozens of studies on the IC of communications delivered by decision-making elites show that when international crises ensue and IC maintains peacetime baseline levels, conflict is resolved without recourse to violence. However, when IC plummets, war typically follows.

Unrath’s examination of the integrative complexity of Bin Laden’s speeches and sermons, using IC analysis, provides evidence that Bin Laden’s speeches and sermons significantly dropped to very levels of integrative complexity directly before 9/11, and again just before the foiled attempt to blow up aeroplanes in June 2006. These findings are in line with predictions that drops in IC predict violent confrontation and lends further support the evidence that Bin Laden was planning both those attacks. The research, prevention, and conflict resolution potential of examining the IC of extreme Islamist speech are discussed in Section 4.

(vi) Thinking as Arguing

Any discourse is part of an ongoing ‘conversation’ within a particular zeitgeist. In line with Gadamer’s hermeneutic principle, a statement (or argument) only makes sense when the underlying question that it addresses is understood. Thus any discourse is part of a ‘conversation’ involving the discourse speakers and the discourse audience (or adversaries). Billig argues that the form of argument (for example, the statement of a proposition and its antithesis) characterizes much social dialogue. It is characteristic of most dyadic arguments that one person will take a somewhat extreme position on an issue (thesis), ‘in order to make a point’, expecting that the counter argument (antithesis) will be provided by the other person. It is understood that the caveats and qualifications omitted from the thesis will be duly mopped up by the antithesis. Typically, both parties involved in an argument will take extreme positions (with their consequently lower IC) implicitly knowing that both contributions are needed to provide the bigger

29 See n. 17 above.
picture (with the potential for higher integrative complexity if opposing perspectives are integrated). Billig has further pointed out that much of our thinking follows this rhetorical ‘arguing’ form. Following this, much of our intra-individual ‘inner speech’ may lack the qualifying arguments that would be presented by the implied conversational partner, or ‘adversary’, which then tends to be marked by low IC.

Radical Islamist discourse is no exception. The discourse is an argument that locates the causes of problems within Islamic societies (and diaspora) squarely on the shoulders of the secular West. In diagnosing the problem in this way, this solution logically follows: a return to an intensified, literalist, politicized Islam. How the Western media represents this discourse is not irrelevant to the unfolding of the drama being played out.

(vii) The Myth of Pure Evil

When Western media covers the activities inspired by radical Islamic discourse, the accounts are often clothed within the ‘myth of pure evil’. This story line, so prevalent in the popular media accounts of violence (for example, tabloid press, horror films, and TV news coverage of crime, terrorism, and violence) replays, in simplified form, features of the myth of redemptive violence:

- a thoroughly evil actor perpetrates violence
- against a completely innocent victim
- for no reason other than the selfish gain of the perpetrator/s, and/or his/their sadistic pleasure in harming others.

When a crime of violence is portrayed in this binary, good versus evil manner, the required response is clear: fight back furiously. The myth of pure evil serves a number of purposes: it inspires sympathy for the victims by portraying the violence as sheer evil; it galvanizes action against the outrage; and it counters the subtle bias to ‘blame the victim’ (a function of the widely held ‘Just World theory’ in which victims are believed to get what they deserve). Many people, victims and audience alike, report that they ‘feel better’ when the world is portrayed in the simplified terms of the myth of pure evil. It is comforting when evil is viewed as entirely ‘other’.

The myth of pure evil also resonates with the memory bias of victims. This binary account will appear intuitively correct, as well, to those who side with the victims of an outrage. Baumeister describes the bias that regularly attends the thinking and perception of victims and contrasts this with the bias of perpetrators. Not surprisingly, both biases show some self-serving elements. Victims of violent crime regularly (and understandably) see the harm caused by the offence as

extreme, long-lasting (if not permanent), completely unwarranted, unprovoked, and undeserved. Perpetrators of violent crime regularly minimize the damage they cause, argue that they ‘didn’t mean it’, or that the harm inflicted could not have been ‘that bad’, or that they were acting in self-defence, or that there were other mitigating factors. In fact, violent people often view themselves in the role of the victim: they simply were finally reacting to the party who they feel has victimized them for so long.33

Baumeister’s research into the thinking and selective memories of both victims and perpetrators presents us with some uncomfortable truths. While not minimizing the incalculable harm resulting from violent crime, most often, in reality, both perspectives have some validity. Most acts of violence are embedded within a spiral of increasing mutual harm that leads up to the final violent drama that publicly cements the roles of victim and perpetrator. The mutual aggression mounts throughout the spiral of mutual harm (verbal, physical, economic, or military); it rarely appears out of nowhere. Based on criminal records and trial proceedings, statistically, this is almost always so in the case of domestic violence, and collective or state violence usually follows the same pattern. Rarely is the victim victimized entirely out of the blue.34

In the ‘War on Terror’, the myth of pure evil, as advanced both by the victims of religious violence (the West and other victims of recent terrorism) and its perpetrators (Islamists who consider themselves in the role of victims reacting to long term damage), obfuscates the complexity of this social reality. The act of terrorism is a violent punctuation mark to a spiral of mutual harm. This in turn perpetuates the cycle of violence as the new victim now has a reason to retaliate with an even higher level of violence. Offences that publicly shame or damage an inflated ego are especially likely to provoke extreme retaliation as the perpetrator seeks to restore a desired superior social status. Thus, efforts at de-radicalizing young Muslims need to take this wider picture into account and the systematic mutual misrepresentation in the worldwide media.

3. The Appeal of Islamist Extreme Speech

We now discuss the social psychological needs to which Islamist extreme speech appeals, particularly among young British and European Muslims. Why would British and European Muslims turn against the society that has offered them education, social welfare, and employment prospects? Our argument is that the erosion of the traditional religious world in these western countries leads to self-definitional uncertainty among young Muslims. This is particularly the case with second or third generation Muslims who imbibe two cultures (communally-based Muslim and individualistic Western culture), in contrast to their parents who are

33 Ibid. 34 Ibid.
often firmly embedded within their own ethnic community of origin. This is internalized as self-definitional uncertainty: the ‘Who am I?’ question so vital for young people. Uncertain identities (and related underachievement) create an opening which can be filled by a new Islamist group identity robust enough to withstand identity threat.

This aversive state of identity uncertainty, along with threats to their religious/cultural world view, motivates young people to gain a new group identity to withstand identity uncertainty and dissonance experienced within the host society. Totalist, radical groups re- evoke the collective, communal nature of Muslim traditional culture, and provide an opportunity to belong to, and merge with, a valued group. Uncertainty Reduction Theory demonstrates that group identity is better able to defend against uncertainty than are individual identities. Tightly boundaried groups requiring high levels of conformity and obedience are particularly effective at warding off feelings of uncertainty. In the case of Islamist radical groups, the extremist, totalist group leader (usually male) becomes the prototype around which vulnerable identities can model themselves.

It so happens that into this context of identity uncertainty, an abundance of Saudi Salafist Islamist discourse has arrived, employing a mobilizing narrative in which the prestige of Islam vis-à-vis the West is the central concern. Groups are formed through adhering to the discourse. Once Islamist group identity becomes a salient way to deal with self-definitional uncertainty, thinking and problem-solving shift from individual-based strategies to group-based strategies. Given that upward mobility for individual young Muslims is often not very likely (for example, due to widespread educational underachievement of British Muslims), a group strategy, rather than an individual attempt at raising one’s status, is often adopted. If individual upward mobility were more readily available, individuals perhaps would be more likely to take that path instead.

The argument here is that salience of group identity is the ‘pull’ factor. Those who are eager to define themselves through a group identity are primed for Islamist discourse; there is a ready match between their construction of social reality and that of Islamist discourse.

A robust body of literature shows that humans have a cognitive mechanism to impose order on chaotic aggregates of people and transform them into orderly groups. These groups share commonalities, and are distinct from others. People categorize the disorderly perceptual field into meaningful perceivable groups with incredible ease. Controlled experiments show that, even in randomly allocated groups of people, once people categorize others into groups, they will automatically show biased preference towards the group of inclusion. The extent and ease with which this evidence can be replicated across cultures has made scientists

think that this mechanism might have given early hominids a survival advantage in that it made it possible to identify individuals that would be good reciprocators versus groups that would not, thus maximizing the investment/return ratio for societal exchange.\textsuperscript{36}

The process of categorizing people into meaningful groups to which one belongs, and to prefer those groups over others, is a powerful cognitive mechanism. Once categorization takes place and meaningful groups are perceived, individuals will selectively perceive the information that confirms that members of the in-group share prototypical characteristics that distinguish them from out-group members who are equally perceived as homogeneous (but less good) entities. This reinforces the tendency for people to accept group-based attitudes and behaviours. By selecting the information that confirms a particular perception of the group, individuals unconsciously suppress the attitudes and thinking that differs from the group prototype.\textsuperscript{37}

Besides perceiving groups as homogeneous, experiments show that once categorization takes place, people treat the groups to which they belong in such a way as to ensure their supremacy over other groups. Even if there are no ‘realistic’ goods which are available, individuals will invest in having their group fair better than other perceived groups. It seems that individuals build their self-concept partly from the information attached to their membership groups. The need for positive self-evaluation exerts an important motive to compare positively to other membership groups. Therefore, understanding the group with which an individual identifies and the perception of that group’s status versus other groups in the theatre of social-hierarchies, is important for understanding how individuals will respond to speech directed at advancing their group-based positive self-evaluation.\textsuperscript{38}

Although individuals identify with many groups and there is flexibility to their self-concept and allegiances, perceptual parsimony, culture, historical fact, experience, and active elite communications restrict the fluidity of identities and determine the pool of possible identities. Highly visible characteristics will be hard to resist as bases of identity and differentiation. Furthermore, the more a socially-constructed group category maps onto perceived reality and is useful for people to parsimoniously explain experience, the more that particular category will be used by people and will form the basis of group-based solidarity and conflict.

Political leaders as well as extremists intuitively tap into the propensity of categorization into an in-group and an out-group. They consciously exploit identity cleavages based on shared narratives and symbols. The confluence of identity, status, and the legitimacy of prevailing group hierarchies are key in fostering support for collective causes. In fact, it could be argued that without


\textsuperscript{37} See n. 35 above.

catalysing a group identity and pitting it against an out-group, mobilization is unlikely to occur.

Even though members of groups (such as European Muslims) that compare negatively to other more dominant groups (such as Western nations) find that this impacts on their self-concept negatively, it is only when other alternatives are subjectively entertained and deemed possible that group members will venture to try to achieve a revision of the hierarchy. When groups see the status relationship situation as non-permanent and unstable, together with the perception that the current situation is illegitimate and unfair, these perceptions combine to catalyse collective mobilization to bring about change. In this vein, we posit that for many of the disaffected, 9/11 introduced new possibilities for a revision of group status hierarchies.

Thus, when a group stops seeing itself as inevitably subordinate to another and when altering its inferior status becomes a realistic possibility, a radical shift in ideology typically ensues in order to challenge the hierarchy of the dominant group. Ideologies arising for this task will include a justification for using various means of challenging the status quo, whether peaceful resistance (as in Gandhi’s satyagraha) or terrorism (distorting and over-extending concepts of jihad).

Radical Islamist discourse in Europe is a current exemplar of framing a social problem, diagnosing it, and offering a solution in a way that intensifies categorization. For example, radical Islamic discourse tries to displace local and national identities by a transnational ummah and pit it against an undifferentiated, morally decadent, and oppressing West. By having the West stand for exploitative capitalism, decadent morality, and a host of Islamophobic conspiracy theories, the problems afflicting Muslims are framed in a language of ‘clash of civilisations’ that reifies the ummah and the West as tangible groups to identify/disidentify with. Individuals’ dissatisfaction with race relations, diminishing development opportunities, and identity crises play into a narrative of the West’s global war on Islam and Muslims. The solution to problems then prescribed is the religious duty to struggle for the re-institution of the perfect Islamic society.

Taking a social movement, theoretical approach (sociology) to Islamic radicalization in the UK, fieldwork on al-Muhajiroun shows how dissatisfaction with unfulfilled economic expectations and race relations provide openings for radicalizers to pitch their take on things. Once the basic philosophy that radicalizers offer becomes credible, recruitment into a group is easily facilitated. Once recruited into the group, a gradual process that allows normal individuals to

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40 See n. 38 above.
44 See n. 42 above.
become indiscriminate killers can take place over time. Uncertainty reduction research might partly hold the key for understanding how this unfolds. Through controlled experiments and survey research, studies show how individuals afflicted by ambivalence towards self-defining issues can be particularly vulnerable to recruitment by totalist groups. Through a process in which individuals resolve internal ambivalence by fully identifying with a leader, group members become depersonalized. Depersonalization seems to erode socially acquired inhibitions to attack others. Psychological assessment of incarcerated Islamic terrorists confirms that, although psychologically normal in every sense, their individual sense of self has been completely overtaken by the aims and ideology of the group. In other words, their individual identity has been replaced by a prototypical shared identity, which both incites them to commit violent acts and absolves them from the normal guilt that would accompany such acts.

To recap, we suggest that a pathway towards receptivity to the ideology of radicalizers follows this kind of process: the erosion of traditional religious and communal world views in Europe leads to self-definitional uncertainty among young Muslims. Uncertain identities are subsumed into a radical Islamist group identity that is well-defended from identity threat. Once group thinking is in place, religious speech intensifies perceptions of in-group and out-groups, in which the in-group is viewed as illegitimately subordinate to the oppressive out-group, yet in a status hierarchy that is deemed unstable and liable to change (post-9/11). Extreme speech is most powerfully ‘activated’ under totalist group conditions, although do-it-yourself assembly kits for this binary vision are now widely available at thousands of radicalizing web-sites.

4. Implications

We have argued that discourses only have power when they ‘speak’ to a given construction of reality that people already have. Section 3 argues that there is a degree of match between radical Islamist speech and some young, Western Muslim’s construction of social reality. This final section deals with implications for policy-makers concerned with racial and religious hatred or incitement to terrorism legislation and prevention.

Speech that explicitly incites racial or religious hatred or glorifies or incites to terrorism rightly comes under the authority of government, policing, and legislative bodies. Extreme speech that does not explicitly cross this line, yet presents a social construction of reality that could pave the way for religious/racial hatred or terrorism, presents a grey area. We suggest that, while this grey area of speech

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45 See n. 35 above.
should not be ignored, nor should it be suppressed. It offers researchers working in tandem with terrorism-prevention strategies a key opportunity to detect and identify budding ‘hot spots’.

The first level of analysis is the discourse itself. Speech can be analysed for the markers of the archaic narrative structures and rhetorical strategies, discussed in Section 2. The more these features are present, the more likely that the discourse will have the effect of constricting cognitive processes (shutting down critical reasoning) for those who the discourse connects. ‘Splitting’ into the all-good in-group and the all-bad out-group, along with an unquestioned acceptance of the discourse, are the two likely consequences.

A second level of analysis following identification of the discourse features is the level of integrative complexity (IC) of the discourse (communicated by elites) and of those using the discourse (followers). The implications of IC research for extreme religious speech are worth considering. IC can provide a reliable scientific measurement of the simplification of religiosity akin to fundamentalism and post-modern religious fanaticism. Moreover, IC coding can provide insight into the possibilities of negotiation and compromise between parties and the type of resolution (peaceful or otherwise) that religious conflicts engender.

More than being simply epiphenomenal to the direction of conflict, manipulation of IC levels might help induce higher complexity in a negotiation or conflict atmosphere and help resolve crises through compromise. Evidence from Tetlock and Liht et al. points out that a rise in IC by one of the parties in a conflict might produce greater IC reciprocity in the counterpart, thus helping to foster conflict resolution through mutual concession. Through the use of time series, Tetlock analysed UN ambassadors’ communications by the US and the Soviet Union in a period of three decades. He found that the IC level of communications of both governments depended to an important degree on the IC level of the last thing their opponent had said. Moreover, in a study examining the IC of face-to-face peace negotiations between the Mexican Government and the Zapatista peasant insurgency, Liht et al. found a similar effect, but running in a single direction. When the IC of government representatives elevated, both the mediator’s and the insurgents’ levels rose. Nevertheless, neither the mediator nor the insurgents had the capacity to influence the government or each other. Although the level of IC per day was significantly associated to the degree of advance made in the negotiations as reported in the press (high IC being coterminous with advance and concession in the negotiations for peace, land, and regional autonomy from the federal government), Liht et al. concluded that the asymmetric status and prestige of a party to a conflict might determine who has the power to influence who.

Although IC research seems central to public speech, including extreme religious speech, it is not clear if IC can be manipulated wilfully to induce a beneficent disposition towards the other party. While some studies point out that people can be guided to think in more complex terms than they would usually do through prompts,\(^49\) it is not clear if this could be done in a purely strategic way (apart from the authentic views and attitudes of the party to the conflict) in a conflict or negotiation. It might be hard consciously to manipulate the complexity of one’s communications without having achieved a change of attitudes through the negotiation process itself or from some external change in circumstances. Extremely low IC in deceptive UN-delivered communications during the planning phases of surprise attacks show that IC is resistant to deception and conveys the real intentions of communicators. The IC of speeches of Arab and Israeli representatives to the UN across several wars show that whilst the content of communications was trying to hide and misinform about true intentions to attack, IC levels reflected true intentions by plummeting to negligible levels.\(^50\)

Pending further research on the pragmatic application of IC, the strategic manipulation of IC in key communications might help induce more propitious conditions for negotiation and compromise between parties. Although high IC might entail an openness to compromise with immoral positions, the tactical delivery of well-planned communications that evoke a softening of the opposition might be used in conjunction with deterrents as part of an integrated approach to diplomacy and containment of religiously fuelled sectarianism.

A third line of research concerns those who are the hearers and users of extreme speech. The question to ask is how people are constructing the social world around them. In section 3, we have argued that people who are primed to mobilize show a particular way of perceiving the social world. It is as if the complex social world is now seen through a ‘lens’ that organizes perception of human groupings in the following way:

1. The social world is chopped up into a sharply demarcated, impermeable in-group (‘my group’) and out-group (the ‘other’, ‘enemy’ group). For example, radical Islamism depicts the world in terms of two camps: Muslims versus the West.
2. The in-group is viewed as subordinate to the out-group.
3. The higher status of the out-group is considered illegitimate (morally or politically).
4. Further, if there is a perception that the given social hierarchy has become unstable, the opportunity for radical change now appears.

An analysis of these social/cognitive templates can provide insight into which social niches in a population will most readily connect with the Islamist narrative. These two influence each other in an increasing spiral; distinguishing ‘chicken’


\(^{50}\) P. Suedfeld and S. Bluck, ‘Changes in Integrative Complexity Prior to Surprise Attacks’ (1988) 32 J. Conflict Resolution 626.
from ‘egg’ may not be possible. The authors are currently researching this double line of enquiry with the aim of: (a) systematically identifying the meaningful social niches (through clustering analysis) that comprise the Muslim community of UK young people (ages 18–35); (b) assessing niches’ socio-cognitive processes that predict mobilizations aimed at contesting the social hierarchy of groups (making them vulnerable to being groomed for religiously motivated violence); and (c) through in-depth group interviewing, exploring niches’ immersion in radical discourse and examining the role of extreme religious discourse in legitimating or weakening the polity and of violent versus civic activism to produce social change. This project provides just one example of research on the trail of extreme speech, with the aim of identifying points of access where specifically tailored community and educational programmes can be effective for long-term terrorism prevention.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter we have outlined key ingredients of Islamist radical religious speech, and the social psychological needs to which they appeal, particularly among second and third generation young Muslims living in Europe. Key structural features of Islamist radical religious speech include: a three-part narrative, echoing primitive and dualist world views resulting in low levels of complexity, rhetorical strategies, the closed way in which the belief system is organized, and the ‘rationalistic’ word-based emphasis that avoids the nuancing influence of symbolic aspects of religious knowing. In Section 3, we discussed the social psychological needs to which the extreme speech appeals. A pathway through these elements is as follows: the erosion of traditional religious worldviews in Europe leads to self-definitional uncertainty among young Muslims. Uncertain identities are subsumed into a radical Islamic group identity that is well-defended from identity threat. Once group thinking is in place, religious speech intensifies perceptions of in-group and out-groups, in which the in-group is viewed as illegitimately subordinate to the oppressive out-group, yet in a status hierarchy that is deemed unstable and liable to change (post-9/11). Extreme speech is most powerfully ‘activated’ under totalist group conditions, although do-it-yourself assembly kits for this binary vision are now widely available at thousands of radicalizing websites. Research on the trail of extreme speech can help identify those social niches most likely to mobilize (based on IC and SIT indicators) and are well-placed to inform societally based long-term terrorism prevention programmes.