6032: Defining the Self by Identifying the “Other”

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1. This paper was a submission for CISA Master of Arts in Strategic Security Studies course 6032: Terrorism, Counterterrorism, Insecurity: the B-Sides. The assignment was to write a 700-word narrative self-reflection on national identity through analysis of cultural artefacts and story telling.
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Constructivism in international relations theory and critical security studies posits that human reality is socially constructed, meaning our identities, feelings of security, and position on the global stage are products of “pre-existing social conventions and institutions and [are] filtered and mediated by pre-existing frameworks for learning and understanding” (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2015, 16). In America, we are taught to define ourselves in terms of moral superiority and a sense of divine purpose, whether we realize it or not. Our worldview becomes very ethnocentric and, although we publicly congratulate ourselves on cultural diversity and inclusion, our actions often tell a different story.

America is the “land of the free and the home of the brave,” a place that stands for “truth, justice, and the American way.” Of course any nation benefits from a healthy sense of patriotism among its citizenry, but the American version, complete with a mythos of righteousness, comes at a cost. Our social institutions and societal norms teach us that faith in our way of life is a virtue, to gloss over the realities of our racist past, and to frown upon questioning our moral high ground. From an early age Americans construct a Manichean view of reality and cast ourselves into the role of the protagonist – but every hero needs a villain. Since the anti-communism hysteria of the early Cold war, Americans have created nefarious enemies to serve as the moral opposite of whatever we believe ourselves to be. In the late 20th century that enemy was blatantly Communism. Today it is what we call “terrorism,” but perhaps what we really mean is “Muslims.”

Despite being the largest superpower in the world – and with every reason to feel a real sense of security – America remains a culture of fear (Skoll and Korstanje 2013), and much of that fear seems to spawn from our own creations. Our socially constructed
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identity simply forces us to label someone else as the “other,” which Sigmund Freud described as a projection of one’s own negative aspects onto other individuals or groups (Buehler 2011, 646). Those whom we define “others” become the antithesis of American values and embody everything we dislike about ourselves. Without an enemy we cannot fulfill our role as the protagonist, so we unfairly label large groups of people to allow ourselves to believe “that political events are the consequences of a contest between good people and malevolent people, rather than between self-interested actors possessed of different perspectives and priorities” (Oliver and Wood 2014, 953).

The news is constantly filled with cases of Islamophobia, complete with quite obviously irrational political and social fears that our society is in danger of a hostile takeover (Dyson 2012; Hamilton and Ura 2015; Steinback 2011). Why are we so insecure? Why do we capitalize on the religion of any terrorist who happens to be Muslim instead of analyzing the circumstances from which that terrorist came? Why do many of us view Islam as inherently hostile to our way of life? Why are extremists from other faiths not defined by their religion? I think a single answer works for each of these questions. We do it because we have to in order to maintain our protagonism. We reduce the world’s complexity down to a level that allows us to maintain the image we have created for ourselves. By labeling a group, religion, or idea in such a way, we find our antagonist and can freely project our negative traits and fears toward a blanket group. Anyone associated with that group becomes the enemy.

Today, America’s strategy is to fix the world’s problems by spreading our own values. We believe that making “them” like “us” is the answer to violence, war, and social unrest, but we too struggle with the very problems we claim to be fixing elsewhere.
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Like the plot of a movie, we find ourselves with one hero and one villain, but the world is not so black and white. Before we begin pointing the finger at “others” as the root cause of our insecurity, we would be wise to first analyze our own reflections.
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Bibliography


