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### **Culture, Conflict and Death**

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

Since massacres have occurred in all parts of the world, in nearly all cultures and religions, we are tempted to believe that they are part of "human nature". Two "theories" of human nature are very popular to explain human aggression. One family of theories belongs to the realm of biological and evolutionary explanations. The other popular explanation why human beings mass kill their fellow humans goes back to Sigmund Freud. War, says Freud, is part of men's nature because of its biological roots and therefore not avoidable. Both theoretical frameworks are not only too simple to explain massacres but they also discount our culpability.

Massacres, however, are the products of human creativity not of instinctual forces. They are uniquely human and fundamentally social. All massacres were justified by the perpetrators, such as the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo or Hitler who called for the destruction of "inferior" humans. Nazi propaganda fostered antagonistic attitudes towards the "enemies" of Germany, namely Jews and idealized the Aryan race as superior to all others.

As mentioned before, the account of collective violence in terms of innate aggressions or our biological heritage has many difficulties. Collective phenomena are the province of social psychology and also of sociology, anthropology, and political science. We still do not understand how it is possible for an otherwise peaceful collectivity to engage in mass murder. As I have pointed out, there is some commonality in terms of the motivations of individuals who we recruited to engage in mass murder: They do it for a higher purpose; they do it in order to protect their culture against enemies; they are even willing to sacrifice their own lives if it serves a higher purpose.

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The major premise of my talk is the assumption that culture is more than a system of shared practices. Rather, culture serves a major need in human existence, namely to provide a source of existential meaning. As pointed out by the German sociologist Max Weber in 1904 culture gives meaning and importance to our lives in an otherwise meaningless universe.

The idea that culture is a major source of meaning as it imbues and links our individual lives with social and perhaps transcendental meaning was taken up by a group of social psychologists (Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg, 2003) who combined insights of existential philosophy, psychoanalytic theorizing and assumptions of social psychology to form a model which they labeled "Terror Management Theory". According to the authors of Terror Management Theory, the main function of culture is to alleviate anxiety caused by the awareness of our possible death. To summarize, the basic tenets of this theory are:

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

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

Terror management Theory opened a new understanding of the intricate relationship between culture and death. Threat to our cultural worldviews can mobilize individuals and

groups to fight and even die when certain additional conditions are met: These are low self-esteem and death related thoughts in conjunction with a promise of immortality.

These conditions may explain some of the causes of Islamic terrorism as pointed out by Pyszczynski et al. (2003) in their book "In the wake of 9/11. The psychology of terror."

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

## References

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