



FEARED & REVERED

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“The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.”

—W.B. Yeats, *The Second Coming*

HOW COULD 75,000 TALIBAN sweep Afghan cities from 300,000 well-trained, better-equipped government forces—forces that mostly folded and fled? Various explanations have been offered, from naïve, racist, and orientalist notions that Afghans are wholly different people with a primitive culture, to more nuanced but incomplete ideas about how the Taliban promise at least stability in a sea of chaos and corruption, but each explanation avoids probing Taliban fighters’ readiness to die as “martyrs,” and to do so even outside the battlespace.

The argument that these fundamentalist fighters think they will enter heaven upon death fails to untangle belief in the sense of an intellectual insight (“I will go to heaven”) from belief as a discursive practice of engagement. Once collective or religious zealotry enters into a violent and existential conflict, we each subjectivize or individualize our group ideology and make it part of us. And objective truth just doesn’t motivate like wartime subjective truth.

The scientific and positivist notion of knowledge in the liberal capitalist West as an “objective” approach to reality presupposes a horizon with unbiased experts at one end and self-interested consumers—“rational” actors—at the other. It is from this viewpoint of universal expertism and atomized self-serving that behaviors that decrease survival, such as suicide bombing or going unvaccinated, are seen as wholly irrational.

The Taliban are not some primitive bunch of pre-modern thinkers. It is a mistake to think their society has not experienced the kind of individualism that Westerners believe is a natural stage of societal advancement. To understand what motivates groups like the Taliban, we must understand the material power of an ideology that is



Afghan evacuees board a US Air Force plane at Hamid Karzai International Airport, Kabul, Afghanistan, 22 August 2021.

not simply about the strength of conviction itself. We have to acknowledge how our beliefs make our identity. Their inseparability is what creates the invincible persona of the Taliban, which the opposition largely lacks.

It’s no puzzle if we consider it. Why do so many people of the Third World, people who felt the sting of colonial humiliation, and economic and political exploitation, seem to attack most fiercely the arguably best part of Western Enlightenment’s legacy: the questioning of any authority that restricts our individual freedoms? Is it hard to see that much of the anger comes from the sense of hypocrisy on display? Since the end of WWII, the self-styled “liberal” West has violently dominated and exploited vulnerable regions while presenting that domination as a vehicle for freedom and democracy.

It may be that objective and comparatively lackluster ideologies will need substantially greater appeal to overcome the specific subjectivized ideologies of fighters, martyrs,



Berkeley fans cheer on the Golden Bears during a game against UC Davis at Memorial Stadium.

and tribes. The Taliban have the edge of a subjective existential belief. The coalition-trained forces had only the unexciting and objective consumerist ideology of the West. The vague and abstract notions of “freedom” (in what context?), “democracy” (often conflated as simply being a client of the United States), and consumption (subject to globalization and its cheap, mass-produced goods) do not always have the appeal that Americans believe they have. In other words, the occupation forces weren’t able to subjectivize the American vision or tailor it to the relevant peoples of Afghanistan.

This is to suggest that anti-capitalist or anti-liberal state goals that feel “impossible” to those who have already been persuaded by American ideology and who embrace the idea that history really “ought to be over” are by no means necessarily such.¹ Liberal ideology holds that beliefs and opinions are up for dialogue and discussion: there’s a free market of ideas and none of them is a matter of life or death. But that’s not true for many other ideologies. An *agonistic* identity—a war-fighting mindset defined in opposition to the mainstream—can make it seem like “we, the people” can do anything. In other words, belief systems like the Taliban’s are totalitarian in the sense that they can be totalizing. Such belief is not just a “perspective”; it gives one a reason to live, a reason to die.

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The question, then, is how many Americans would be willing to lay down their lives to preserve liberal democracy in the United States? What if former Vice President Mike Pence had refused to certify the 2020 election and President Donald Trump remained in office indefinitely? I’m

not so sure that there are very many Americans so committed to liberal democracy that they’d be willing to give their lives to overthrow Trump. I fear we’d find more people willing to die for Trump than willing to die to protect Congress.

Like most solutions to the world’s environmental crises, there is a need for a fundamental paradigm shift in our approach to violent, anti-democratic ideologies. While one certainly can overstate the similarity of “American Taliban” to Afghanistan’s Taliban with regard to their subjective claims to truth and their anti-liberalism, anti-positivism, anti-cosmopolitanism, and so on, it is pretty clear how both are global “anti-globalist” movements.² Perhaps the best way to push back against them, then, is not through paradigms of self-interested consumerism, but rather in collective moral action.

Agon, Violence, and Victory

One of the indulgences of being a sports fan is that it can provide one with a certain kind of faith. This is, of course, implicit in the word “fan,” which comes from the Latin *fanaticus*, meaning “a worshipper.” On match days, a person can become, temporarily at least, a fundamentalist—what the writer Tim Parks calls “a weekend Taliban.”³ Good and bad are—momentarily—absolutely clear, as distinguishable as the color of the jersey players wear.

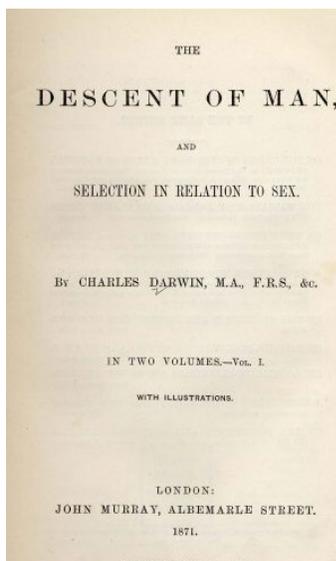
In association football (aka soccer), for example, fans can participate in a marvelously binary Manichaean theater: two teams, two goals, and two halves. If we humans cannot completely overcome our natural agonistic impulses, through sports we can, for a time, find a way to indulge them in a safe, usually harmless manner.⁴ Sporting tribalism, in the best way, allows its adherents to invest much meaning in something that is, basically, meaningless. In this globalized world, where fundamentalist religion and political idealism seem more risky than helpful, extreme devotion to a sports team seems to offer a powerfully

counterintuitive way of forming community and engaging with the sacred.

Whether the devotion is to a sports team (red or blue, AS Roma or SS Lazio, Giants or Dodgers) or a political party (labor or elite, liberal or conservative), tribalism itself can still evoke a great deal of visceral feeling.⁵

Another answer to the need for meaning—a proximate one, it must be said—is that tribalism can also help alleviate the boredom that is a common-enough side effect of modernity. Being fanatically devoted to a team of some kind can make life interesting again. It also provides us with “plug and play” narratives and ready-made adversaries. Identity is the stuff of purest meaning; belonging with others who share our sense of self is central to the meaning of identity. *We are us, together*, and being together now and connected together through time makes our sufferings and our sorrows, as well as our triumphs, stories to be celebrated.

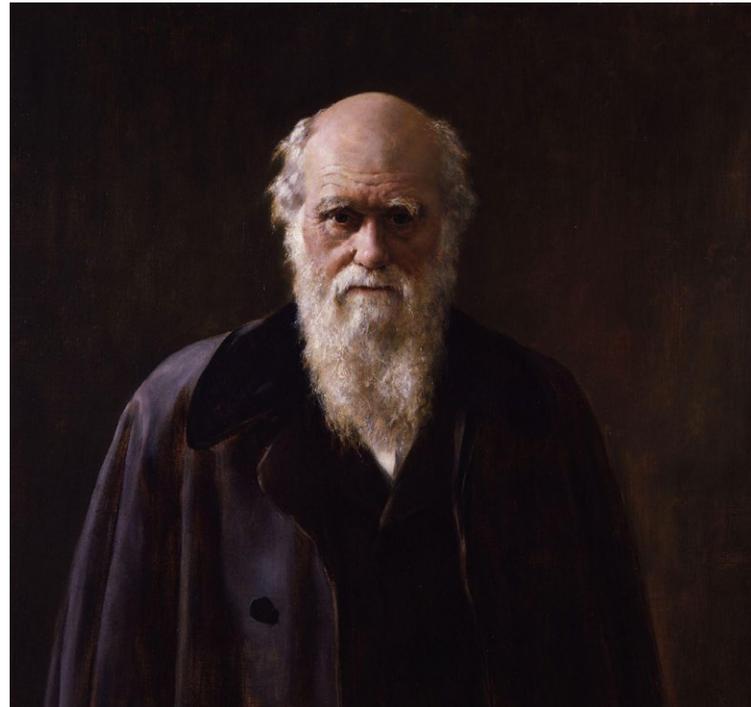
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Such emotionalism may have been adaptive in our distant past: early groups of humans who imagined an “us” through the observance of sacred principles that connected and bound them together (*religio* is Latin for “re-connect”) would have had an advantage over those who did not. This idea would have particular importance for survival, when the community of “us” was on the losing side of an existential conflict. In

On the Origin of the Species, Charles Darwin wrestled with the question of why people would ever be willing to risk themselves to help strangers.⁶ Only in 1871, in *The Descent of Man*, did Darwin find an answer: Societies that include brave people in their population would have an advantage when faced with *hopeless causes*—situations in which the brave act without regard for self-preservation or personal esteem in the event of success.⁷ In other words, particularly

in existential conflicts when losses against a superior competing group could mean genetic or cultural extinction, solidarity and moral commitments to group loyalty, sacrifice, and heroism would have been consequential.⁸ The experience of conflict against such an aggressor can also foster a greater appetite for punitive violence. In this way, a



Charles Robert Darwin, by John Collier, 1883.

sense of an existential conflict can both help build solidarity among local identities and adversely affect chances for diplomatic solutions.⁹ Like any other adaptation applied outside of the context for which it was developed, then, parochial attitudes and internecine behaviors can be maladaptive and cause us much harm in the present day.

Friedrich Nietzsche characterized the world of the ancient Greeks as one in which adversarial rivalries and joy in victory were accepted and even celebrated; from this worldview the Greeks derived early ethical concepts. When no wars were to be had, they arranged physical contests between opposing city-states. For Nietzsche, this embrace of contestation, rivalry, and discord ensured that the Greeks lived an agonistic form of life, but he emphasized that to them, “the aim of the agonistic education was the welfare of the whole, of the civic society.”¹⁰

Any appreciation of Nietzsche’s notorious views about power requires an analysis of the *agon*, or contest, since this guiding interest organized the central areas of his

philosophy.¹¹ While life, as seen through Nietzsche’s fixation on agon, is replete with struggle and always ends in death, it is the agon itself that can provide value and significance. The concept of agon was the North Star that led Nietzsche from his focus on the works of Homer, Socrates, and St. Paul to his one-time friendship with Richard Wagner—from aesthetics to metaphysics to ethics and psychology. According to him, the distance between modernity and the Classical world resides here; while the ancient Greeks found Homer’s scenes of vengeful combat in the *Iliad* thrilling and inspiring, we tend to find them unsettling and troubling. Living in a time of perennial peace, something that is held up as an ideal today, would not have been preferred by the Greeks, because rivalry, sacrifice, and victory helped to give their lives meaning. Reflecting on this gulf of emotional difference caused Nietzsche to posit that “forms of life” are distinguished by their conception of violence and victory, and that the ethics of the Classical world came from such models as the *Iliad*.¹²

Agonistic behavior needs equal and worthy rivals; for the Greeks, mere sporting rivalry was not enough. True heroic courage required not challengers but real, hateful foes. Importantly, the meaning of these rivalries did not lie in the annihilation of such an enemy, but rather in the engagement itself. Nietzsche explained that agonists must compete to elevate their own status, and also to elevate the status of their group, whether familial, tribal, racial, or political, thereby increasing the likelihood of generational continuity. In this way, the contest could be symbolic, but the *dominance* of the home group over the rival’s, and thus the long-term vitality of the agonist’s community and culture, were thought to depend on the engagement.¹³



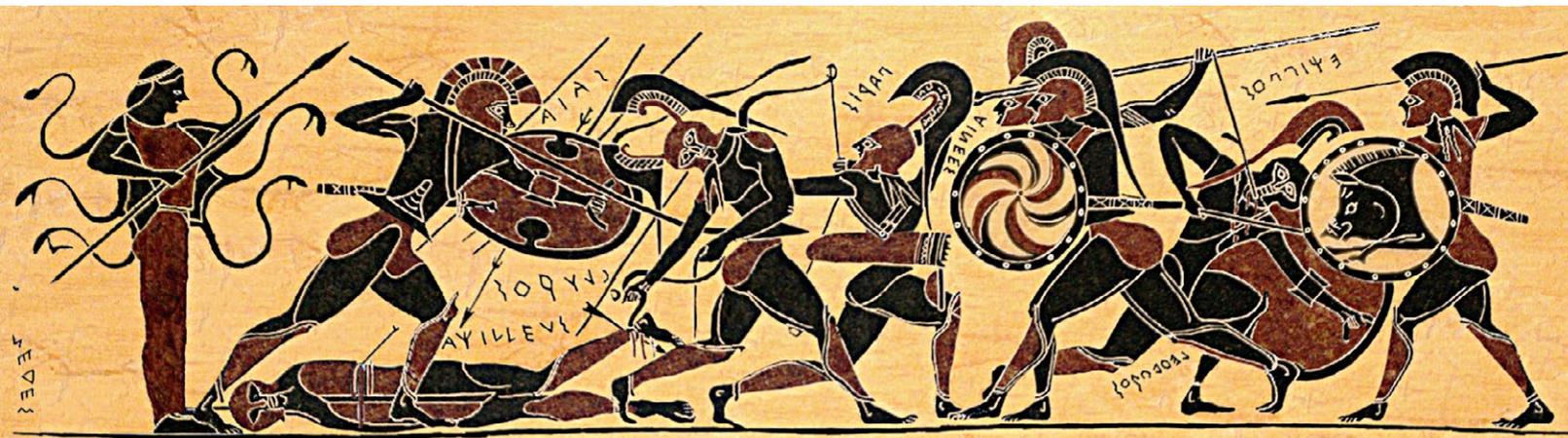
Scene from the *Iliad*, drawing by Michael Martin Drölling, 1815.

Like the Maori with their *haka* battle cry, the Greeks regarded *alala* as “the personified spirit (*daimona*) of the war cry.”¹⁴ Similar to a contest of ritual shouts on the battlefield, nearly all contemporary online “debates” on social media follow patterns of agonistic ritual; the quality of the facts or content matter little in these exchanges, because the goal is not really persuasion or the elevation of truth. Rather, such exchanges are the simulation of debate, whose real goals are simply *esprit de corps*—the confirmation of tribal identities, group honor, loyalty—and the disheartenment of the enemy.

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Viewed from within this particular framework, when a modern group of right-wing extremists, for example,



engages a particularly hated (and *necessary*) enemy such as civil rights activists, then even if there is no literal intent to murder, there will still be violence. What is a “patriot militia” but a well-armed gang with a sense of moral righteousness that barrio gangs rarely aspire to?

Defining Delinquency

Societies create delinquents. The very stability and order that an established society offers its population as communal goods to be cherished, nurtured, and defended invariably inspire some members of that society to rebel against the sacrifice of a degree of personal autonomy that a stable community requires. In a society where a concept of absolute personal autonomy comes to be fetishized over the existence of the society itself, delinquency can quickly mutate from a personal or political statement to an existential threat.

By *delinquent*, I don’t mean simply an alternative to the status quo but, rather, an alternative ethics. For the delinquent, the real or imaginary mainstream of the bourgeois liberal life—and its pull—is seen as a moral danger, such that much of a delinquent’s social life is centered around containing and rejecting its temptations. When delinquent institutions form and maintain themselves in the face of the state, this is usually referred to in revolutionary terms as a “dual power” situation. Since most states have not had the power to quell and crush every kind of resistance they face, nearly all of human history has actually been characterized by dual power.

If this were a purely theoretical work, I would explain that all this suggests an interesting way of synthesizing theories of value and theories of resistance. For present purposes, however, it is perhaps enough to say that the typical delinquent is part of a “counter-power” or “anti-power” movement, one within a collection of social institutions set in opposition to the state and its institutions: from deliberately autonomous communities to radical labor unions to denizens of temporary communities like Burning Man to “sovereign citizens” and extra-legal militias. By this measure, not only Salafism, Falun Gong, and the Amish, but many more mainstream religious faiths, such as Roman Catholicism, could also be “delinquent” in their relationship to state power. There are, again, many forms of resistance, which is why a universal, cookie-cutter approach to engaging with delinquent individuals and groups is bound to fail. What is necessary is a real anthropological engagement with these groups, where possible.

In his short work, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, the late anthropologist David Graeber showed that, by

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looking past the normative break between “pre-modern” and “modern” societies, we can form a much richer understanding of how alternative forms of resistance may work.¹⁵ He suggested that counter-power, at least in the most primordial sense, *already* existed in pre-modern egalitarian societies where the institutions of state and market were not present. Rather than being embodied in popular institutions that pose themselves against the power of chiefs, nobles, or plutocrats, resistance in these early societies was embodied in institutions whose purpose was to ensure that such hierarchies never came about in the first place. What these institutional forces “countered,” then, was the potential for the establishment of those hierarchies necessary for the formation of the state itself.

This viewpoint would help explain an otherwise peculiar fact: it is often the more egalitarian societies that are torn by rough inner politics, or at a minimum, by extreme forms of symbolic violence.¹⁶ Of course, all societies are to some degree at war with themselves. There are always clashes between competing interests, values, factions, clans, and the like. In more egalitarian societies, however, with their greater focus on crafting and sustaining communal consensus and harmony, this conflict often requires the creation of spectral enemies to stand in for real rivals within the group. Monsters, witches, vampires, werewolves, and the like become the fall guys for more human antagonists. Nowadays, of course, it’s communists, terrorists, Muslims, immigrants, scientists, or really any “outsider” to the aggrieved group.

In this way, the rubric “delinquent” can refer to those of the far right/alt-right who invaded the US Capitol

on 6 January 2021, but can as easily address the radical left: anarchists, communists, and the various modernist-aesthetic groups that have carved out their own intentional “delinquent spaces” in global modernity. “Delinquents” here, then, refers to folks who wish to bring into the world something that is useless to the State, its economic base, and the prevailing status quo.

which can be read as a kind of hyper- or total-performance (in the tradition of a Wagnerian *gesamtkunstwerk*, or “total work of art”), the Burning Man participants perform themselves into being.

Although Bowditch argues that Burning Man embodies a revival of values of anticorporatism and the premodern,



The Temple at Burning Man

My approach appreciates Antonio Gramsci’s position that arguably all aspects of human experience are political and involve the creation of knowledges (narratives) and counter-knowledges.¹⁷ In this way, even the so-called “apolitical” cultural or “nonviolent” entertainment events of our time can be considered along the spectrum of the delinquent.

One easy example of such a delinquency is the annual cultural event of Burning Man.¹⁸ There have already been numerous major academic studies published about the notorious, rich, and varied performance culture of the Burning Man festival that is annually staged in northwestern Nevada.¹⁹ Each year (pandemics permitting), some 35,000 souls make the pilgrimage to Black Rock City, the temporary urban entity constructed to host Burning Man on a vast dry lake bed. In her expansive work on the temporary cultural space of Burning Man, *On the Edge of Utopia*, Rachel Bowditch demonstrates that the culture of Burning Man, which is presented by its organizers as a utopian escape from “the default world” or the conventional “real” world, is often further expanded and replicated by its participants in the larger cultural realm.²⁰ In this way, through the performance culture of the event,

participatory community, she also admits that such endeavors are riddled with hypocrisy and contradiction. So, although it can be easily claimed that Burning Man’s participants fail to *not* support the market—i.e., corporatist consumer culture—materially, it can also be argued that they do succeed in constructing an annual temporary hypercommunity: as Bowditch suggests, “a complete symbolic system” from which they practice a logic different from and in some ways adverse to the broad market culture.²¹

Burning Man, however, is but one point of delinquency along the spectrum. Other contenders would include the various intentional communities of those seeking alternative lifestyles and/or alternatives to the state. In other words, resistance can take many forms. This points to the need for a true anthropology of delinquency—one that seeks to understand and address the needs of those who occupy the most radical and critical edges of modernity in rejection of the states and capitalists that seek deterritorialization, eradication of local particularism, and the homogenization of human diversity. Such work would seek to examine how phenomena such as extreme politics, habitualized violence, and physiological transformation

(“tats” and “dreads,” beard styles and clothing) promote the creation of intentional communities and spaces of delinquency against the state.

Perhaps the most visible aspect of delinquents is their various ritualized behaviors relating to their temporarily autonomous zones, like Burning Man as temporary autonomous city, or in the spectacle of the televised news media, where group identity is refashioned by, and is in part dependent upon, the gaze of the camera seeing delinquents as protestors, there in the temporary autonomous protest site. Like Burning Man participants, delinquents at such gatherings can also perform themselves into being. This is equally true of black-clad “antifa” delinquents on the left, finding their identity in part by the very presence of the riot police opposing them (who feel the same pull of identity), and the gun-toting, camo-gear’d “patriot” militias of the right, festooned with ethno-state imagery. Each typically can be found displaying homemade banners with various messages intended for their political/identity opponents, contiguous allies, and the broader general public.

But understanding the delinquent phenomenon in aesthetic terms of carnival protest, ritual, and performance is, even at best, partial, and leaves us wondering how to explain the full set of behaviors witnessed on the afternoon of 6 January 2021, when a mob supporting then-US President Donald Trump, who hoped to overturn his 2020 presidential election defeat, stormed the US Capitol in a violent attack directed at the 117th Congress.²² In the end, their actions led to a temporary suspension of government and the deaths of five people.

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The details of the event reveal that the violence that was directed against the state but also, paradoxically, in the name of the state on 6 January, was not perpetrated without a political conscience or motivation. One of the consequences of the modern liberal order, especially in the United States, with its emphasis on self-definition and self-fulfillment, is that it places so much consequence on politics, on seeing life through a political lens. The state becomes the means to ensure the success of the individual



Protesters supporting US President Donald Trump break into the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 in Washington, DC.

and, in this way, the success of our lives comes through the achievement of certain goals in the pursuit of political ends. We focus so much on the liberation of the autonomous individual that we come to see the world in almost completely political terms. This itself may be able to help explain the madness of American society today, especially when it comes to questions of politics. Politics can never bear the weight, the pressure, and the expectations we’ve come to place on it over the past half century.

Actual mob and political violence aside, what we must try to understand is how these politicized delinquents use their respective ideologies to create, maintain, and elevate their rivalries and social life.

Culture and Ideology

Culture is reality’s playbook: it is a pattern of shared basic assumptions and norms learned by a group as it solves problems of external adaptation and internal integration. It is also “ideology,” in the sense that our own cultural lens relies on core notions, reflexive suppositions, assumed beliefs, and implicit expectations about the world and our place in it. It is the “unknown knowns”—the necessary fourth variable if we allow that “there are things that are known and things that are unknown.” It is what former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld left out in the initial articulation of his infamous theory of knowledge.²³ Culture is the things we know implicitly—the things we assume are true.

“Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.” So, to understand people, we must understand these “webs.”

This is why traveling to a foreign country can leave us feeling—pleasurably or uncomfortably—disoriented. Of course, even within a culture, there is meaningful variation, nor is it usually confined to specific territorial boundaries such as nation-states. Any attempt to categorize cultures must therefore consider and appreciate not just cultural variation and contradiction, but culture as a force of both continuity *and* change.

It is from within this perspective that I utilize the term “ideology,” as part of a particular lexicon to describe the culture and manner in which the delinquents I portray understand and interact with the world. Anthropology has helped develop a number of strategies for shedding light on the complex nature of the relationship between humans as cultural animals and their environment, broadly understood. Ideology has generally been the most popular way of designating a system of assumptions and logic that then crashes in some particular way upon reality.

Paul Kroskrity uses the term “ideology” to clarify the “language ideologies” that “represent the perception of language and discourse that is constructed in the interest of a specific social or cultural group.” He goes on to say that this includes “notions of what is ‘true,’ ‘morally good,’ or ‘aesthetically pleasing.’”²⁴ What he refers to, then, is a kind of methodology that explains and unpacks the link between knowledge and perceptions of reality. Biologist James Danielli used ideology in a reference to “the discursive practices which institute each human society’s field of consciousness.”²⁵

People’s behavior can’t be understood just through economic ideas like a rational cost-benefit analysis, or through studying how they are governed, or through an analysis of the means of production, or by assuming that philosophy



Taliban fighters pray outside a local mosque in Kabul on 26 August 2021.

meant the same for someone in eighteenth-century France as it does for someone in, say, modern-day Bali.²⁶ There are, in fact, no final definitions or supreme theories of cultural interpretation, but Clifford Geertz put it this way: “Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.”²⁷ So, to understand people, we must understand these “webs.”

To make a facile example, extraterrestrial aliens wouldn’t understand millennial American culture just by watching the film *Fight Club* and translating the dialogue for analysis.²⁸ They’d have to understand the interconnecting themes between human biology, sexual selection, politics, twentieth-century ideas of masculinity, the various waves of feminism, and the history of marketing and advertisement, not to mention the history of Hollywood—things even Americans can have a hard time understanding. In this way, then, culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed, but instead a context within which these things can be intelligibly and richly described.

In this web of belief about the world and one’s place in it, every strand depends upon every other strand. But the cultural web is not an external structure in which we are



enclosed. It is the texture of our thought, and it is quite hard to accept that what we think is wrong. Nevertheless, these beliefs are not absolutely set; instead, they are variable and fluctuating, to allow for different situations and permit empirical observation and even doubts.

As delinquents construct what I will describe as an agonistic form of life, in which seemingly all social relations reflect a resolve to opposition and difference, they also develop an *emic* (in terms of an internal framework of understanding) disposition that delights in the creation of distance between themselves and others.²⁹ In this way, for many delinquents, myth (as well as agonism) is their testimony, witness, and evidence of holding an agenda that is greater than that of mere “delinquency.” Similar to the way anthropologists use the term “culture,” agonism can be fashioned into a guiding structural principle. Again, like culture itself, this kind of delinquency is the stuff of their reality, but delinquency differs from culture by deliberately setting itself in agonistic opposition to the conventional, prevailing culture.

The Centrality of Myth

Myth is central to beliefs. The miracle of our social lives, as well as our political culture, depends on beliefs, which in turn are based on myth. Saint Augustine described consciousness as an integration of “expectation, attention, and memory”: “the future, which [the mind] expects,

passes through the present, to which it attends, into the past, which it remembers.”³⁰ As Kirsten Hastrup has articulated, we use cultural symbols and institutions to create a bridge between the memory of our past and the anticipation of our future. In this way, it is in our present that action and experience join.³¹

How myth is used lends itself to being studied from the perspectives of the anthropological giants on myth: Durkheim, Malinowski, and Levi-Strauss. Emile Durkheim noted that myth, by way of ritual and ritualized institutional behavior, marks the norms of social order and, in this way, strengthens the social cohesion and unity of groups.³² Later, Bronislaw Malinowski connected the importance of myth in particular as an instrument in the legitimization of specific social structures, and in this way observed the link between myth, power, morality, and social mores.³³ Meanwhile, Claude Levi-Strauss focused on the meanings of myths, not in their narratives but in their subconscious structure, and in this way regarded myth as a tool for an objective, universal mode of thought.³⁴ Together, these three approaches can advance our understanding of the function, use, and aim of myths among radical and extremist groups. Because myths are cohesive and help form the basis of difference between groups, hold privileged links to morality and the legitimization of distinctive social structures, and can operate as self-standing phenomena, they are particularly valuable for a discussion of delinquency.

Delinquents live as what British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner called “social anti-structures.”³⁵ Many varieties of delinquents have withdrawn symbolically, and in some cases actually, from the larger community in order to fully embrace what Turner calls their “signal mark of identity.”³⁶ The “sovereign citizen” movement and neo-fascist militias that have proliferated in the United States over the past half century exemplify Turner’s characterization, as do radical Islamist organizations like al-Qaeda and ISIS; such groups often withdraw from the larger community to stand against the very state in which they operate.

While such extremists may be conscious of who they are (or are purported to be) politically and/or culturally, their political interest remains largely ritual and cultish. Politics of this kind are focused on transforming society, but on doing so only within the conditions of the constellation of myths that support the extremist phenomenon in question. This interest in political transformation from the perspective of the symbolic challenges the notion of a division between the interests of the “real”—as in material, power-oriented—elements of a group, and the interests of

the more symbolic, sign-driven, “language”-based-identity elements. To the contrary, we may better understand the aspirations of these groups along a continuum of change and action that simultaneously engages their emotions as well as their stated goals.

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Remember that rapture and frenzy are always and perennially enemies of the state. It is true that the myths of the delinquent present a dystopian fall from purity—*it is a time of darkness* tropes—but they also offer ecstatic hope in good news, positivity and, in the case of QAnon or religious fundamentalism, a one true messiah.

Radicals, whether left, right, religious, or political, often believe that they and they alone hold the salvation for humanity, even if the way humanity may be speciated can vary. The constellation of myths that radicals orbit purport that they are the only remaining bastions of purity in a corrupted world, and that they are the “keepers of the faith,” the “fully lived humans” on guard against the victory of self-absorbed cosmopolitans. For example, American radicals’ myths at both ends of the political spectrum motivate them to critique bourgeois consumerism as a purpose for living and, more important, to seek to establish or maintain structures, in the form of both extremist groups and political organizations, that undermine the democratic and—in the case of the far right—the egalitarian foundations of the liberal state. What is important is how such a narrative operates as an ideal against modern liberal market-driven understandings and expectations of what it means to be human.

Perhaps because a different economic system seems unimaginable for most twenty-first-century humans, all that may be left is myth. Myth plays to feelings, to the emotions, in a way similar to advertising. There is strong utopian mythologizing by delinquent groups on both the far left and the far right that blames institutions for modern woes, as if they weren’t created by humans or were just created by the wrong kind of humans. Both sides tend to rest their arguments for radical change on the assumption that people will magically become honest, ethical, and reliable if only we could start over and do things the correct way: their way.

Friedrich Nietzsche urged the pursuit of a life in which myth acted to counter modernity’s “common-currency

humans” and the dearth of mystery. Nietzsche raged against the defeat of the heroic life spent in creative and dangerous pursuits of honor and nobility at the hands



A “Blue Lives Matter” flag, US Capitol, 6 January 2021.

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of modern life’s careerism and the utilitarian pursuit of money.³⁷ We see this embrace of noble suffering reflected clearly in ISIS’s use of Hollywood-style structures of individual personal glory and, particularly, the heroic martyr narrative, which uses narrative forms that are familiar to Western audiences and promises personal redemption.³⁸

Meanwhile, demagogic leaders around the world likewise rhetorically use not just absolutist framings and threat narratives, emphasizing non-negotiable boundaries, moral outrage at the supposed transgression of those boundaries, and a rejection of the political establishment generally, but also hold forth a promise of salvation in the hands

When the state and media become perceived as legitimate targets of agon and violence, this hostility in turn serves to assert and affirm the identity of the delinquents as they see themselves.

of heroic patriots who will help a true leader deliver the nation back to its rightful glory.³⁹

Georges Sorel understood myth as a “supra-ordinate goal,” the foundation of motivation and action.⁴⁰ He regarded the decline of myth as a motivator of behavior in the modern world to be a main contributor to the victory of a limited and shallow historical outlook that has no belief in *glory*, along with an atomistic individualism that has no understanding of or desire for collective greatness.⁴¹ Consider how George Orwell, in his 1940 review of *Mein Kampf*, understood the heart of the problem:

Hitler, because in his own joyless mind he feels it with exceptional strength, knows that human beings *don't* only want comfort, safety, short working-hours, hygiene, birth-control and, in general, common sense; they also, at least intermittently, want struggle and self-sacrifice, not to mention drums, flags, and loyalty parades. . . . Whereas Socialism, and even capitalism in a more grudging way, have said to people “I offer you a good time,” Hitler has said to them “I offer you struggle, danger and death,” and as a result a whole nation flings itself at his feet.⁴²

We need to recognize and understand myth, as Nietzsche and Sorel did, as a goal and a motivating force for a very particular way of life that is aggressive, violent, and martial.

Protest Sites and (Other) Delinquent Spaces Within the State

Writing in 1953, Julius Evola, Italian philosopher, anti-Semite, occultist, and a leading philosopher of Europe's neofascist movement, argued, “What is needed is a new radical front with clear boundaries between friend and foe. The future does not belong to those of crumbling and hybrid ideas but those of radicalism—the radicalism of absolute negations and majestic affirmations.”⁴³

Reflecting this assertion, it must be noted again that the delinquent's self-understanding is produced by an ever-present system of antagonisms. Rivalries between in-group members and those on the out—antagonisms in the name of city, state, region, geopolitical boundary, political affiliation, religion, and “race”—are crucial to the basis of the delinquent identity.

If agonism towards outgroups—particularly local outgroups—is a natural position of delinquency, it may follow that we can understand the hostility that delinquents on both the right and left express for the media and the state as a kind of “meta-natural.” If the delinquent is marked in part through agonism towards the conventional, mainstream culture, then the state and its perceived complicit servant of narratives, the media, both of which are in a position to define and describe delinquency as they wish, can become entangled as legitimate targets of agon. Note that such perception and behavior can be markedly contradictory. After all, on 6 January in Washington, DC, rioters beat police officers with poles carrying “Blue Lives Matter” flags.⁴⁴ When the state and media become perceived as legitimate targets of agon and violence, this hostility in turn serves to assert and affirm the identity of the delinquents as they see themselves.

According to Max Weber, “a State is a human community that (successfully) claims *the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory [emphasis in original].”⁴⁵ Weber then adds, “The State is considered the sole source of the ‘right’ to use violence,” and in this way it follows that force and violence must be restricted to only those authorized to use them by the state.⁴⁶ Sorel, distinguishing between the violence of a dissident outsider and violence done in the name of the state, notes the aptitude for, and function of, both intellectuals and bureaucrats in their service to state-sanctioned violence. He asserts, however, that, due to unfamiliarity with the martial, or perhaps disdain for direct violent action, these civil servants do their service mainly through the manipulation of an ethos and morality that condemn violence generally while justifying it for the state. In this way, Sorel asserts, morality itself is an instrument wielded by the state and its servants

against any disruptions to the stability of the liberal order and the modern marketplace.⁴⁷ Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, writing in the late twentieth century, goes yet further in describing a relationship between the state's monopoly on legitimate violence and the assimilation of the modern political subject into a system of protected happiness. The modern state, he suggests, "assumes and integrates the care of the natural life of individuals into its very center" and yet "subjectivization [will] bring the individual to bind himself to his own identity and consciousness and, at the same time, to an external power."⁴⁸ In this way, Agamben argues, the state is able to transform all of the human "objects" that dwell within the state's confines to "subjects" only by enforcing their obedience and conformity to the state's morality and its particular inclusionary/exclusionary model of humanity.⁴⁹

In order to produce social control, the state must create spatial control. However, if we momentarily conceive of the modern state's territory as a metaphor for zones of inclusion and exclusion, there are also marginal spaces for those who can find cracks in the order and craft critiques of its functioning and systemic completeness.⁵⁰ These are the spaces I refer to as *delinquent*: spaces that are within the state's geo-spatial coordinates, but are so unorthodox that they cannot be brought to heel within the state's system of conventionality. Of course, in post-industrial societies like the United States, transnational corporations compete with the state in defining people's values, particularly in the self-regulating digital "spaces" of social media. The emergence of digital delinquent spaces and the generation of collective violence between groups will likely be systematically affected by the communication patterns created through different communication technologies. This is primarily because collective violence calls for the crafting and propagation of narratives, beliefs, and "memes" justifying and legitimizing collective violence. In this way, while the emergence of increasing connectivity will nurture greater group solidarity and political moderation, increasing connectivity that flows along segregated networks will further fragmentation and political extremism.

In thinking of the relationship between the state and extremists, it is also helpful to note how the protest site can serve as the potential location of a delinquent space. The mythic narratives, pageantry, agonism, and liminality of the spectacle of a protest can become features of the hyperreal (a condition in which what is real and what is fiction are seamlessly blended together so that there is no clear distinction between where one ends and the other begins), intentionally pushing at the boundaries of what is acceptable and what is

Studies of radical Islamist groups show that their interventionist programs, promoting charity (*dawah*) and social services within communities, gain them greater popularity and support than their calls for violence and opposition.

deplorable, while undermining the conventional norms of the state and its society along the way.⁵¹

What is to be Done?

How can we—modern, democratic, pluralistic society—hope to reject, out-compete, and prevail over these increasing countercultural pressures of our day? It seems to me that no countervailing message spreads in a social vacuum, in the abstract space of ideology or counter-narrative alone. We must understand that the means of *engagement*—not



Community gardening in Montreal



Serving the Black Lives Matter Community

mere narrative—are critical, requiring close knowledge of those communities at risk of sliding into extremism. What sorts of issues are they concerned with? What are their real or perceived grievances, and what are the problems driving them to rage? How can society at large honestly acknowledge such problems and offer better solutions, and thus co-opt these communities before they're seduced by competitors with other, possibly dangerous, agendas? And crucially, in what kinds of networks do these issues rise?

The literature is quite consistent.⁵² Most often, people join radical groups after being exposed to an extremist message by someone in their existing social network. This clustering suggests that a significant portion of recruitment does not take place primarily via direct appeals or through individual exposure to social media, as might be supposed. Rather, recruiting often involves enlisting family, friends, and fellow travelers from specific locales, such as neighborhoods, online chats, forums such as 4Chan and 8Chan, universities, prisons, and so on.⁵³ Think Pashtun fighters and the concept of *andiwali* (shared experiences, comradeship), which is a good predictor of whether a particular fellow will pick up his rifle. Relationships are a feature of the human condition. We are social animals. Long before the development of modern social psychology, Aristotle understood this well, describing it in his best work on ethics, the *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁵⁴ He gave particular attention to deep relationships, which he termed *philia*, a label he used to describe all meaningful relationships that one can

develop with others. It is through such relationships that all things real exist for us.

Preventing or reversing radicalization isn't easy. Without engagement between disparate groups, oppositional identities, rivalry, and violence will continue to spread through social networks. Noted criminologist David Kennedy has demonstrated that intimate social engagement and community work can help turn young people away from local gangs.⁵⁵ His "Operation Ceasefire" program drew on the understanding that offenders within communities operate in groups, so he sought to bring them into contact with respected community members and social services, along with law enforcement officials. However, it should be noted that such means of informal social control can work only in communities in which people know each other and care about their reputations and how they are perceived within the group.

Another strategy can be gleaned from studies of radical Islamist groups that show that their interventionist programs, promoting charity (*dawah*) and social services within communities, gain them greater popularity and support than their calls for violence and opposition. At the very least, we need a kind of "delinquency-focused" anthropology, one that seeks to address and understand the particular needs and real or imagined grievances of specific communities—including their all-too-human need for belonging—through community engagement work. Such an anthropology, especially focused on the young people who are and will be the most vulnerable "at risk" population for extremist recruitment, can become a way of beating radical groups at their own game.

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NOTES

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