

# What is Wrong with the War on Terror?

Written by Katie Cowan

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## What is Wrong with the War on Terror?

<https://www.e-ir.info/2008/02/10/what-is-wrong-with-the-war-on-terror/>

KATIE COWAN, FEB 10 2008

Trying to answer a question like 'what is wrong with the 'war on terror'' is a daunting task. The policies of the Bush Administration and the conduct of the United State sand its allies in counteracting the threat of terrorism have received a wealth of criticism, much of which has been aired publicly. Indeed because of the wealth of public criticism, this analysis focuses on a critique that does not see much light beyond academic literature: a critique of the construction of a terrorist threat successful enough to legitimise a war in its name. This critique involves an understanding of postmodern International Relations theory, predominantly discourse analysis, but also identity politics and poststructural conceptions of knowledge. The analysis that follows illustrates the development of a 'war on terror discourse', and the danger that flows from such a black and white construction of global order.

### Theory – The Construction of Discourse

In qualifying what is wrong with the 'war on terror', this discussion analyses the construction of the 'terrorist' as an enemy within a wider discourse. The theory of discourse construction is the fundamental element in understanding the effect of discourse on policy. A discourse that constructs an enemy 'other' simplifies the identity of that 'other' and legitimises actions taken against it. It is this oversimplification of complex identities and the claim to objective truth thereof that is wrong with the discourse on the 'war on terror'. What follows is an overview of discourse theory and identity politics, and an explanation of how this has impacted on what has come to be known as the 'war on terror'.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[1]<!--[endif]-->

Discourse is the name given to the process by which meaning is established in relation to a given notion. It is constituted through language and performance and gives rise to identity, policy, social relationships and the greater or lesser possibility of political outcomes.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[2]<!--[endif]--> Discourse is thus a specific construction that decrees a particular interpretation of something. Discourse analysis theorises that any understanding of 'reality' is filtered through the systems and understandings that have been constructed. As Phillips and Jorgenson put it, "Reality is only accessible to us through categories, so our knowledge and representations of the world are not reflections of the reality 'out there' , but rather are products of our ways of categorising the world."<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[3]<!--[endif]--> However this poststructuralist approach claims that although there is a "material world external to thought", our interpretation of that world can only be done by rendering what we see in terms of what we already know and understand.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[4]<!--[endif]--> It is not possible to think or conceive of objects outside a meaningful system of discursive practice.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[5]<!--[endif]-->

Because discourse is an exercise of presentation and interpretation, it follows that discursive truth is subjective. Enlightenment philosophy understands the world as holding objective truths, discovered through scientific study. However, with the development of critical theory came the argument that if we understand the world according to the discourses in which we are engaged, then any knowledge or truth we derive from that interpretation belongs to our time only.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[6]<!--[endif]--> Critiques of foundationalist IR theory, including neo-realism and liberalism, are based on their claims to truth that goes unchanged by time or that "transcends contingent human actions".<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[7]<!--[endif]--> The nature of discourse implies that knowledge is based on our ways of relating to the world. Laclau and Mouffe, though they are purists in discourse analysis, put it plainly when they say "because of the instability of language, meaning can never be permanently fixed."<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[8]<!--[endif]--> Truth, according to poststructuralism and discourse analysis, changes with time

# What is Wrong with the War on Terror?

Written by Katie Cowan

and discourse.

The 'war on terror' discourse owes its success to its divisive framing of the identities in play, as well as to the 'truthful' nature it attributes to that framing. There are two parts to the construction of identity within discourse: firstly the creation of the 'other' and secondly the comparison of that 'other' to the self. In the literature it appears a universally-accepted principle that identity is created through contrast with something else. As Foucault understands it, the 'other' is created as "the excluded against which behaviour is judged and defined."<sup>9</sup> The theory that all identity and definition comes from an interplay with what one is not is troubling and the literature fails to satisfactorily explain its reasoning. In the realm of political discourse however, the positioning of ourselves against an 'other', whoever that 'other' is, is undoubtedly one of the more potent forces within foreign policy formation.

Theorists Michael Shapiro and David Campbell have both described foreign policy as a process that "makes 'foreign' certain political events and actors."<sup>10</sup> The construction of the identity of the 'other' against whom you intend to wage war is one of the most important and powerful measures in legitimising war, second only to the construction of threat and danger. "People go to war because of how they see, perceive, picture, imagine and speak of others: that is, how they construct the difference of others as well as the sameness of themselves through representations."<sup>11</sup> An important component of this legitimacy is the extent to which the construction is considered to be 'truth'. The logical understanding of truth, as has already been noted, is that it changes with time and between people – we see the world not as it is, but rather as we are.

The power of discourse lies in its ability to naturalise a particular way of interpreting something, be it a different person, a race or an idea. By extension the reaction to this person, race or idea is limited to the understanding that has been constructed. Because discourse naturalises one interpretation over another, the creation of an 'other' within discourse is potentially a political weapon. The construction of an 'other' as benevolent rather than malevolent will have a profound impact upon foreign policy in relation to that other. This is especially true in the absence of public criticism. Richard Jackson poses one of the criteria for a successful discourse as the case where it is carried out not just by those who constructed it but also by their opposition and, in the case of government, by media and the public themselves.<sup>12</sup> Indeed the sign of a successful discursive construction is the extent to which it goes unquestioned. The legitimisation process of discourse means that it is easier to exercise force over the Other that has been constructed because doing so seems natural and appropriate. This is why discourse and the 'othering' process is potentially destructive; it provides for the exercise of violence, war and power over an enemy that exists solely within the realm of linguistic discourse.

## What is wrong with The 'War on Terror' Discourse? – A Critique

Richard Jackson's work *Writing the War on Terror* illustrates both the nature of the 'war on terror' discourse and the power it has in guiding foreign policy. The overstatement of the threat of terrorism is a part of the discourse, but this analysis focuses on the construction of the 'terrorist' identity because it has larger implications for global relations between East and West into the future. This critique of the discourse focuses on three matters of concern: firstly the negatively dichotomous construction of 'the terrorists' in relation to Arabs and Muslims, secondly the muting of public debate on the correctness and appropriateness of such an identity construction. It will then go on to examine the third concern regarding what has resulted: a war that was tacitly waged against a civilisation, without consideration of grievances that may exist and that, because of the way it was discursively constructed, offers no hope of positive conclusion for years, perhaps decades, to come. Jackson details the construction of the identity of 'the terrorists', showing how 'the terrorists' came to be synonymous with evil, insanity, deviance and inhumanity. In reading the transcripts of speeches and statements made by Bush Administration officials each of these elements of the 'terrorists' identity is presented as 'reality' and thus as the natural truth of their identities. Significantly, this language contrasts with the good, human, natural, righteous framing of the nature of Americans. "It is a language which creates an irrevocably divided moral universe, in which all virtue lies with the United States and all iniquity with 'the terrorists'."<sup>13</sup> This is an obvious construction of an 'other' within political discourse, and one around which the discourse centres.

# What is Wrong with the War on Terror?

Written by Katie Cowan

There are four principle ways 'the terrorists' are constructed, the most obvious being 'evil'<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[14]<!--[endif]-->. Labelling terrorists 'evil' identifies them within a recognisable framework, both morally – the basic good vs. evil dichotomy<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[15]<!--[endif]--> – and politically – the dichotomy created between communist and capitalist during the Cold War.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[16]<!--[endif]--> It also allays the possibility of empathy because it removes all question of political legitimacy; evil is its own explanation.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[17]<!--[endif]--> In the same way, framing terrorists as insane,<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[18]<!--[endif]--> deviant,<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[19]<!--[endif]--> and inhuman,<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[20]<!--[endif]--> positions them against a background of uncontrollability and disgust, to such an extent that one has no interest in seeking to understand their motivations and political views. The discursive framing of terrorists has the effect of depoliticising their behaviour and moralising the response, which in turn has the effect of taking their identity beyond politics.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[21]<!--[endif]--> This is a powerful and consistent construction of the identity of an 'enemy other', an enemy that acts without reason and seeks only to inflict suffering on their victims. If we take Michael Shapiro's statement that foreign policy is a process of 'making foreign' certain ideas and people, then this process of constructing the terrorist identity as one completely foreign to that of the average American was instrumental in creating an enemy against which war could reasonably be waged.

There are several problems here, quite apart from the danger of ignoring the political roots of terrorism. The main one is that this framing incites a fearful, vengeful response. Successfully controlling and constructing the discourse can be seen as an exercise of power.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[22]<!--[endif]--> As Derrida put it in an interview in 2003: "We must also recognize here the strategies and relations of power. The dominant power is the one that manages to impose and, thus, to legitimate, indeed to legalize...on a national or world stage, the terminology and thus the interpretation that best suits it in a given situation."<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[23]<!--[endif]--> Unfortunately the scope of this discussion does not reach to explain the neoconservative promotion of American hegemony, particularly in the Middle East. However, much of the literature discusses the American penchant for cultural influence in that region, as well as the political and ethical problems with trying to impose Western democracy on states where it does not suit.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[24]<!--[endif]--> It suffices to read the following, said by neoconservative Max Boot in 2002, to see that to at least some degree American foreign policy seeks to maintain its hegemonic influence in the Middle East: "Who cares if Saddam was involved in this particular barbarity?" By overthrowing Saddam Hussein the United States could 'establish the first Arab democracy...[and] turn Iraq into a beacon of hope for all the oppressed peoples of the Middle East.' "<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[25]<!--[endif]-->

It is in light of such statements that the significance of the 'East vs. West' or 'us' vs. 'them' divide comes into play. 'The terrorists' being spoken of within this discourse are invariably Arab or Muslim. Though government officials take care not to attribute terrorism to Islam, it is nevertheless an idea that has not gone unconsidered, particularly within neoconservative circles. Because the 'war on terror' is waged in Muslim or Arabic countries and 'the terrorists' that are defined above are indeed Islamic, it appears by extension that the war is against the wider Islamic world. In reading the work of William Kristol and Samuel Huntington, Jeff Lewis summarises their view of Islam as being that Islam is "fundamentally constituted around the overthrow of all other religions."<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[26]<!--[endif]--> This contrasts with the discursive illustration of Americans as peaceful and 'righteous'.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[27]<!--[endif]--> The 'enemy other' is thus not limited to 'terrorists' but in some way is linked to the 'otherness' of the Eastern world.

As a result, the 'Westerner' and the 'Arab' have become a part of a polemic construction of civilisational identity, one that appears almost fixed, in contrast to poststructural epistemology. The construction of identity changes over time, so no one construction can ever be an 'eternal truth'. Discourse attempts to fix identities. In a foreword to the 2003 edition of *Orientalism*, Edward Said points out that 'the Orient' has been constructed in various ways over time, all of them asserting that "this is the Orient's nature and we must deal with it accordingly."<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[28]<!--[endif]--> Thus the construction of identity is not truth, not absolute, and not permanent. The discursive construction of 'the terrorists', Americans and Christians, Arabs and Muslims, and everyone else involved in this discourse is transient. Discourse is a process of interpretation and presentation; what 'knowledge' about an idea or a group only exists because it has been constructed that way and this particular discourse is dominant. The fundamental problem with this is that if one accepts a construction of 'good and evil' or 'terrorist and

# What is Wrong with the War on Terror?

Written by Katie Cowan

Western' as a permanent immutable truth there is no hope or possibility of resolution.

It is clear that discourse naturalises these dichotomous classifications, but its power is secured in its ability to dull the political and academic impulse to challenge dominant ways of thinking. A discourse, by its all-encompassing nature, does not leave itself open to being easily challenged, and the discourse constructed for the 'war on terror' is no exception. As Jackson concluded when analysing the extent of criticism of the 'war on terror', "alternative and critical voices are rarely heard in the political arena in America".<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[29]<!--[endif]--> He adds that where there is criticism, it focuses on strategic and tactical arguments rather than "substantive or foundational issues".<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[30]<!--[endif]--> In his zeal Jackson appears inappropriately absolutist here, but he is justified in saying that the discourse has become pervasive to the point where it is an accepted part of foreign policy. It is interesting to note that critical theorists Ken Booth and Tim Dunne, advocates of critical theory and who believe that their role it is to critique society in order to keep it vibrant and operational,<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[31]<!--[endif]--> have included in their book an author who speaks of the 'war on terror' using precisely the language of the discourse.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[32]<!--[endif]--> The fact that a proponent of critical theory writes using this language highlights the reach and success of the discourse.

The discourse of the 'war on terror' removes the events of September 11 2001 from their socio-political context, placing them in a wider historical and indeed civilisational context, that serves to endorse the East/West divide and prevent constructive solutions being sought.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[33]<!--[endif]--> The concern here is that this kind of global 'good vs. evil' paradigm will evolve and remain dominant for generations. Jacques Lacan has conceptualised this deadlock – using the Israeli/Palestinian issue as illustration – as a 'double-entry matrix'. In that conflict, after over sixty years of extreme hostility there appears no way out because the modes of interaction and interpretation (discourse) are based on mutual hatred and acknowledgement of religious and national difference.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[34]<!--[endif]--> The pessimist would speculate that by subscribing to such concrete constructions of difference within our own discourse we are destined for the same fate. This is especially true given that evidence that the discourse is not limited to the current United States administration, but has spread throughout the world. Thus the parameters of interaction between East and West appear set for the foreseeable future. Evidence of this is everywhere. Notably, it is in the language of future US presidential hopefuls, who all speak of their foreign policy platforms in the context of a global 'war on terror'. None of the same question the conceptual validity of such a war, nor the way it articulates the two civilisational antagonists.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[35]<!--[endif]--> This has to be one of the most glaring problems with the 'war on terror': the longer it goes unquestioned, the more it will be accepted as the natural order of things, justifying a protracted engagement in military and cultural clashes.

The arguments here are based on current theoretical understandings of politics, but the irony is not lost that such constructions are in themselves potentially transient. If one applies the principles of discourse analysis to discourse analysis itself it is easy to argue that an understanding of politics as discourse interplay is no more a claim to truthful reality than anything else. After all, if all knowledge is subject to interpretation, even the theory that recognises this may be displaced as society and history moves around it. This does not undermine the analysis completed here, rather it cautions against replacing one conception of 'absolute truth' with another. To be fully engaged in critical theory one must be ready to remove oneself from one's own understandings and make sure they still match that which they are trying to describe. No political idea will ever hold all understandings for all time.

Political discourse is a form of power arrived at through consent. It both constructs and is constructed by the powerful, and its construction invariably has a profound impact on the direction of domestic and foreign policy. The argument here, however, is not that this discourse is the thing *most* wrong with the 'war on terror', but rather that it is what legitimised the waging of war and what will allow the war to continue. Furthermore, its construction of the identity of 'the terrorists' has decreased willingness for understanding and dialogue between Eastern and Western cultures. By claiming 'the truth' about terrorism, and evading questions of terrorists' political grievances and motivations, this discourse has allowed the waging of a war of that cannot be won. An important influence on the future potency of this discourse will come from moving the critiques found in academic literature into the wider political arena. The hope then is that humankind will be able to disentangle itself from a war that has needlessly been constructed as civilisational before the East/West divide is irreversibly entrenched.

# What is Wrong with the War on Terror?

Written by Katie Cowan

## Bibliography

Booth, Ken and Dunne, Tim (eds.), 2002, *Worlds in Collision: Terror and the Future of Global Order*, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan.

Burke Anthony, 2004, 'Just war or ethical peace? Moral discourses of strategic violence after 9/11', *International Affairs* vol 80 no 2, p.329

Campbell David, 1998, *Writing security : United States foreign policy and the politics of identity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Campbell, David, 2007 'Poststructuralism' in *International Relations Theory: Discipline and Diversity*, Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, Steve Smith (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Crenshaw Martha, 1981, 'The Causes of Terrorism' in *Comparative Politics* vol 13 no 4, p.379

Dalby, Simon, 1990, *Creating the Second Cold War: The Discourse of Politics*, London: Pinter Publishers.

Der Derian, James, 2002, 'The War of Networks' in *Theory and Event* vol 5 no 4.

Devetak, Richard, 2005, 'Postmodernism', in Scott Burchill (ed), *Theories of International Relations*, Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan.

Howarth, David, Norval, Aletta J and Stavrakakis Yannis (eds.), 2000, *Discourse theory and political analysis : identities, hegemonies, and social change*, New York: Manchester University Press.

Jackson, Richard, 2005, *Writing the war on terrorism : language, politics and counter-terrorism*, Manchester : Manchester University Press.

Jørgensen Marianne and Phillips Louise, 2002, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, London: Sage.

Layne, Christopher, and Thayer, Bradley A, 2007, *American Empire: A Debate*, New York: Routledge.

Lewis, Jeff, 2005, *Language Wars: The Role of Media and Culture in Global Terror and Political Violence*, London: Pluto Press.

Said, Edward, 2003, *Orientalism*, New York: Random House.

Wyn Jones, Richard (ed), 2001, *Critical Theory and World Politics*, Colorado: Lynne Rienner,

<!--endif-->

<!--if !supportFootnotes-->[1]<!--endif-->In an effort not to participate in this discourse I will avoid referring to the United States' military foreign policy of the past five years as the 'war on terror', rather referring to the whole discourse as 'the discourse'. Where this is not possible, the 'war on terror' will intentionally be written in inverted commas.

<!--if !supportFootnotes-->[2]<!--endif-->Campbell, David, 2007 'Poststructuralism' in *International Relations Theory: Discipline and Diversity*, Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, Steve Smith (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.216

<!--if !supportFootnotes-->[3]<!--endif-->Jørgensen Marianne and Phillips Louise, 2002, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, London: Sage, p.5

## What is Wrong with the War on Terror?

Written by Katie Cowan

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[4]<!--[endif]--> Campbell, 2007, p. 219

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[5]<!--[endif]--> Howarth, David, Norval, Aletta J and Stavrakakis Yannis (eds.), 2000, *Discourse theory and political analysis : identities, hegemonies, and social change*, New York: Manchester University Press, p.3

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[6]<!--[endif]-->Devetak, Richard, 2005, 'Postmodernism', in Scott Burchill (ed), *Theories of International Relations*, Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, p.63

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[7]<!--[endif]-->Jorgensen and Phillips, p.5

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[8]<!--[endif]--> Ibid. p.6

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[9]<!--[endif]-->Dalby, Simon, 1990, *Creating the Second Cold War: The Discourse of Politics*, London: Pinter Publishers, p.6

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[10]<!--[endif]--> Campbell David, 1998, *Writing security : United States foreign policy and the politics of identity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p.61

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[11]<!--[endif]-->Der Derian, James, 2002, 'The War of Networks' in *Theory and Event* vol 5 no 4, para.21

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[12]<!--[endif]--> Jackson, Richard, 2005, *Writing the war on terrorism : language, politics and counter-terrorism*, Manchester : Manchester University Press, p.159

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[13]<!--[endif]-->Burke Anthony, 2004, 'Just war or ethical peace? Moral discourses of strategic violence after 9/11', *International Affairs* vol 80 no 2, p.334

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[14]<!--[endif]-->Jackson disseminates the discourse – speeches, statements, legislation and policy measures – thoroughly to the extent that reproducing his arguments here adds nothing to this analysis. For the details of his deconstruction, see chapter 3 in *Writing the War on Terror...*

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[15]<!--[endif]--> Jackson, p.66

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[16]<!--[endif]--> Ibid. p.67

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[17]<!--[endif]--> Ibid. p.69

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[18]<!--[endif]--> Ibid. p.60

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[19]<!--[endif]--> Ibid. p.65

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[20]<!--[endif]--> Ibid. pp.70-71

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[21]<!--[endif]--> Ibid. p.69

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[22]<!--[endif]-->Dalby, p.19

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[23]<!--[endif]--> Devetak, p.167

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[24]<!--[endif]-->See Layne, Christopher, and Thayer, Bradley A, 2007, *American Empire: A Debate*, New York: Routledge

# What is Wrong with the War on Terror?

Written by Katie Cowan

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[25]<!--[endif]--> Boot, Max "The Case for American Empire" *The Weekly Standard*, October 15 2001, in *American Empire*, p.52

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[26]<!--[endif]--> Lewis, Jeff, 2005, *Language Wars: The Role of Media and Culture in Global Terror and Political Violence*, London: Pluto Press, p.61

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[27]<!--[endif]--> Layne, p.67

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[28]<!--[endif]--> Said, Edward, 2003, *Orientalism*, New York: Random House, p. xviii

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[29]<!--[endif]--> Jackson, p.160

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[30]<!--[endif]--> Ibid.

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[31]<!--[endif]--> Dalby, p.9

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[32]<!--[endif]--> Parekh, Bhikhu, 'Terrorism or Cultural Dialogue?' in Booth, Ken and Dunne, Tim (eds.), 2002, *Worlds in Collision: Terror and the Future of Global Order*, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, p.271-274

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[33]<!--[endif]--> Lewis, p.61

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[34]<!--[endif]--> Lewis, p.69

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[35]<!--[endif]--> Jackson, p.160

—

*Written by: Katie Cowen*  
*Written at: University of Canterbury, New Zealand*  
*Written for: Dr Jeremy Moses*  
*Date: September 2007*

---

## About the author:

I'm in my fourth year of a Law and Politics double degree at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand. My particular interests in IR are discourse analysis and identity politics, but I enjoy a good discussion about pretty much anything related to the discipline!