Religion, Prejudice, Violence and Politics

When it comes to everyday discourse about political agency, there is a disturbing asymmetry between the kinds of explanation that tend to be offered of one's own group and those offered of foreign or enemy groups. The actions and motivations of political actors in one's own camp, say Western politicians, tend to be rationalized and understood in terms of straightforward, even if not always wholly lucid or laudable, cognitive goals. Beliefs and principles are generally assumed to be the chief motivating features here, and so explanations of actions, including acts of horrendous violence, have to refer to these. The underlying supposition of Western popular discourse on US policy in Iraq, for example, seems to be that no matter how ill-planned it has been, there could be no reason for the invasion of Iraq other than destroying weapons allegedly already present, or forestalling the development of weapons of mass destruction by an unwholesome and dangerous dictator or helping the Iraqis to free themselves of a tyrannical regime. These are often taken as laudable – or at least perfectly understandable – goals and as central to explaining, if not justifying, US action. Even if the strategy for achieving them is seen as misguided, the intention of the strategy at least makes sense.

However, the non-Western ‘Other’, as Wendy Brown, Judith Butler and others have noted, tends to be derationalized and dehumanized in an effort to push them beyond the pale of anything that affectively, morally or conceptually requires an equality of respect. This is a necessary first psychic step towards regarding the ‘Other’ as a morally and emotionally legitimate target of gross violence. The motivations of the ‘Other’ are seen as obscure and, when exposed to the cold light of reason, frankly ridiculous. Religion, as Brown argues, is seen as functioning one way in the West – as a force and artefact of culture and an embodiment of
ethical values – but quite differently elsewhere. In countries where Islam dominates, religion is seen as all the things that religion in the West is not. It is seen as a force at odds with rationality, culture, ethics, civilization and progress. This is not to deny that religious and racial prejudices lie behind the murderous acts perpetrated by the self-declared enemies of the West. It stands to reason that the same kinds of psychological forces, in particular prejudices and related phenomena, help account for violence and antipathy on all sides. The point is that these forces are at work in all moves to political violence. Any adequate understanding of terrorism and violence – including, crucially, state violence and state terrorism – has to be grounded in a general account of racial, religious and other prejudices and how they give rise to violence.

Our aim in this chapter, therefore, is to explore the link between racism, religious conviction and violence. We do so from a psychological perspective. Political violence is a complex phenomenon, and there is no easy route to an explanation of it. However, accounts of the psychology of racist and religious prejudice must play a role in any such explanation. Our focus is on the psychological underpinning of prejudice and related propensities to violence, which we explore through a psychoanalytic account of the nature of prejudice.

Racism and the prejudices

What, then, is the nature of prejudice, particularly in relation to violence? Prejudices, including racism, function in a variety of ways as modes of ego defence. They are attuned to specific character types and to the multitude of ways these types, often in combination, are manifest by individuals. This accounts for the strong motivational character of the prejudices as well as for their dangerous and often destructive nature.

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Elisabeth Young-Bruehl says, ‘we can define prejudices by saying that they are the reflections in attitudes towards groups (and individuals as members of groups) of characteristic modes (usually complex modes) of defense’. She goes on to give a detailed account of these defences in which she relies on psychological and especially psychoanalytic concepts, theories and data. The key point in this account is that prejudices are modes of ego defence: they are ways in which we protect ourselves from perceived psychic threats of one sort or another, and as modes of defence they vary depending on character type. Note also the claim that social and political conditions function as triggers for prejudice by exacerbating the level of threat experienced by the ego. The ordinary