

## Understanding the Terror Attack: Some Initial Steps

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As I write this in early April I am incoherent as I think we all are, still reeling from the terror attack on the Muslim community in Christchurch. Once again Muslims are the victims, coerced witnesses to the twisted narratives, fantasies, and hate of white ethno-nationalism. As a Pākehā person I ruminate over our complicity, our silences, failures and histories of entitlement, the things we haven't done. Nightmares of the physical horror of the shootings intersperse with images of the faces of those who died, Ardern's grave dignity and serious purpose, Farid Ahmed's extraordinary act of forgiveness, the banks of flowers, the arms of protection that too late try to circle New Zealand's mosques.

What can we say as psychologists that might help us understand? Perhaps very little on our own. No doubt the most useful expertise will be in ways of best supporting those in trauma. In the longer term, this event will require a broad inter-disciplinary trajectory of explanation, laying down a path with Muslim colleagues and scholars, step by step, that might contribute to productive routes forward. This is not a true crime series. We know who did it and roughly why. It is now all about trying to understand the context, and the situation. Colleagues have started this process in the UK. Stephen Reicher, Alex Haslam and Jay Van Bavel have written a deeply insightful piece in the British Psychological Society in-house journal *The Psychologist* thinking through the toxic identity and group dynamics that produced the killer as an 'engaged follower'. They analyse bits of his manifesto to demonstrate the way his poisonous ideology defined 'us' and 'them', dehumanising 'them' as a warrant for the attack, following the kind of murderous logic characteristic also of Nazi Germany.

For obvious reasons I am not going to analyse the killer's words here and in fact we don't need to do more of that. Why was white ethno-nationalism persuasive in the first place, and what tools can democratic social justice movements use in response? Crucially –

what do these challenges mean for Aotearoa New Zealand? How does Islamophobia intertwine with older forms of racism, and with ethnic relations formed through the deep historical violence of Empire? What are the intersections between extremist violence and certain forms of masculinity? For years we have studied racism and that work continues to be relevant. But there is a danger with new atrocities if social psychologists assume familiar theory and research offer a template that can be simply layered over a new event.

I know something about the 20th century ideologies Pākehā people used to justify colonialism and Māori disadvantage (Wetherell and Potter, 1992). I think I have some handle on identity dynamics, but I don't know enough about the new international communities of hate, I don't know how Islamophobia works, and the ways in which these movements intertwine with what happens here, affecting all seen as 'other'. What I can offer is simply four suggestions about possible starting points.

***Let's not evoke lone wolves and/or the universality of prejudice:*** It is so tempting as a psychologist to follow some familiar strategies when faced with the need to explain such as searching for a universal law of behaviour or a compelling account of individual pathology. These can lead in such contradictory directions- 'unfortunately group-based violence is just part of human nature and to be expected' and/or 'he was a just a lone wolf, one evil individual' – neither direction takes us very far. Of course, the killer was evil and he was exceptional, but this is a partial truth that obscures. Why was evil expressed in this way? How did this specific kind of evil become thinkable? How does 'exceptional evil' become banal, normative and routine as it did in Nazi Germany, for instance? The rhetoric of human nature, meanwhile, is often combined with the view that both 'sides' are blameworthy – Islamic fundamentalists and far right white supremacists – both have engaged in

terror. But again this does not get us very far. The more urgent questions are always – why this, why now, what does it mean, and what to do next?

In their 2012 edited collection *Beyond Prejudice*, John Dixon and Mark Levine pull together a collection of critical articles describing social psychology's reliance on the concept of prejudice as a general catch all explanation for racism, sexism, homophobia, and so on. The authors argue that this approach has run its course, and explore what can be put in its place. Applied to the terror attack in Christchurch, a classic prejudice argument might be that categorising and distinguishing between groups is part of our biological inheritance. Once the world is categorised in terms of groups, human irrationality and cognitive limitations lead to stereotypes and over-generalisation. In this account, we are all vulnerable to being prejudiced, and in this sense 'normal' prejudice is on a continuum with the extreme prejudice shown by the Christchurch killer. For emotionally disturbed individuals, 'everyday' prejudice will fuel active hatred and violent aggression. The solution recommended by prejudice theorists, from the Enlightenment onwards, has been education, or the assumption that 'learning to tolerate' will avoid the 'mischief of irrationality'.

As Michael Billig (1988) points out, however, my rationality is often your irrationality. Enlightenment rationalism, too, has been used to justify acts of barbaric violence. After all, many Enlightenment philosophers owned slaves or participated in the slave trade. Tolerance as a kind of 'largesse of the powerful' is no solution either. To understand the terror attack in Christchurch we need to get specific. Why is it normative for some groups in some contexts to turn to violence while other groups do not see that as legitimate? What is the social history of our current group categorisations? What kinds of differences between people become noticeable and who benefits from that? How do some groups become empowered to act out? And, if most people in a society insist on their

rationality, and that they are not prejudiced, why are those 'tolerant' societies still racist and unequal? Prejudice explanations are too individualistic; we need to hear from social historians, sociologists, anthropologists and economists to build a depth picture of why them, why now.

**Focus on ideological flows and identity dynamics:** The other day I heard some fascinating commentary on Radio New Zealand about the terror attack from UK based journalist and social activist, Laurie Penny. There were two points that struck me in particular. First, Penny argues that our image of fascism is out of date – we imagine a political party, soldiers marching in massive public spaces, uniforms and insignia, and the iconography of Hitler salutes – in other words a highly visible political phenomenon with a figurehead and ideologue, one-party government and dictatorship. Instead, she suggests that the fascism and white ethno-nationalism mushrooming globally on the internet are relatively invisible, and almost mainstream in new ways which are hard to combat. Many of the classic features of fascism can be found – authoritarianism, ultra-nationalism, attempts to forcibly silence critics, misogyny, advocacy for violence towards those outside the core group - but dispersed in thousands of places across the global internet.

Leaders such as Trump aid and abet, through their dog whistles, their unwillingness to call out white supremacist movements, their demonizing of Muslims and through their hostile environments for migrants but the ideological flow is dispersed, everywhere and nowhere, there in the millions of views of YouTube rants that do not seem to add up to much individually, in the connections between torrents of abuse directed at women, the links between movements such as Incel, Islamophobia, Identitarianism, and so on. Penny goes on to argue that most of us like to think that we would have known what to do in the 1940s, we would have known to fight back, and whose side to be on, but that is much less clear when fascism is hidden in plain sight. How does this new hate construct its recipients? And, a question from further back in the process - how did the affective practice of aggressive, violent, 'righteous' indignation become so normalised? How do affect and particular discourses combine and

intensify? The post war period in the global North saw an unprecedented banishment of violence from the public sphere, now it is slowly creeping back.

Maybe there is a slow radicalisation going on of not just a pathological few but whole cultures, and it is this level of cultural change that produces the extremist few? This relates to Penny's second point. She didn't use this terminology but it is one I find useful for thinking about cultural shifts – Raymond Williams' (1977) notion of a 'structure of feeling'. Williams argued that a community, a culture, a generation are distinguished by what he described as a kind of practical consciousness, a common sense of values, notions of how the world works, dominant feelings, debates and forms of experience. For Aotearoa New Zealand, we could contrast the structure of feeling of Pākehā New Zealand in the 1950s, for instance, with the structure of feeling of the 2000s. The 'characters' of each period are different, what is taken for granted, the hopes, ambitions and horizon of expectations. There are no clear boundaries in structures of feeling, some themes continue, others disappear, change is gradual and often difficult to articulate.

Penny is interested in exploring how the window of public discourse and public emotion has shifted in recent years to a greater acceptability for hate and white ethno-nationalism. Maybe the attack in Christchurch will bring some reflexivity and some transparency to this shift in what is seen as acceptable discourse. But, in terms of explanation, it seems to me that it is this territory of new ideological flows, and the identities these offer, that we have to grasp. These new settlements are key to understanding the radicalisation process and the ways in which emotions, subjectivities, group norms, and systems of justification can begin to intertwine in hugely harmful ways.

**Supporting Muslim and Māori scholars in gazing back:** The notion of 'gazing back' I want to highlight here comes from Alice Te Punga Somerville's blog post on Brexit (see also Te Punga Somerville, 2012 and Borell, 2017). She describes obsessively watching the UK Brexit referendum results on television - a Māori woman and her Fijian partner engrossed by the unfolding drama. She is thinking about an illustration by Gustav Dore that depicts Thomas Babbington Macauley's

imagining of a future to come where a New Zealander will sit on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St Pauls. (In 1840, when Babbington Macauley was writing, 'New Zealander' meant Māori.) Te Punga Somerville brilliantly unpicks Dore's image and uses it as a device to reflect on the potential gaze back from indigenous people in the former colony to the ruined empire.

The point in gazing back is to reverse and disrupt the normal direction of analytic traffic, from the white British or Pākehā researcher to the migrant and indigenous subject, and to understand differently. Ann Phoenix (1991) has argued that too often black British people, for example, are 'a pathologised presence and a normalised absence' in psychological research, and the same could be said of Muslim and Māori, and other ethnic minority groups in Aotearoa. The support needed, therefore, is about finding the spaces, funds and jobs for Muslim and Māori researchers to keep on going with their work, discovering ways of healing, understanding trauma, and registering what it is like to live in hostile environments typified by micro-aggressions, the impacts and life-long consequences. This entails difficult research by Māori and Muslim researchers on Pākehā racism and Islamophobia – difficult because, as Belinda Borell (2017) describes, the emotional labour involved in recording and listening to privilege when that privilege is not yours is enormous. Borell's thesis is an important starting point. She used kaupapa Māori methods to explore Pākehā privilege and the kinds of justifications offered for white colonial entitlement, analysing the uncomfortable hesitations, the everyday discourses, and the distancing and defensive rationales.

**Understanding the fine lines of leadership:** Jacinda Ardern has received global admiration for her leadership in this crisis and rightly so. But I also want to understand what she did and why it was so effective, and that's important for the future. Many accounts pick up on the ways in which Ardern focused on spreading aroha, trying to mitigate hate through love, empathy and compassion. This was key, but as the Australian social theorist, Ghassen Hage (2019), has commented, love alone is never enough. It is the way love is mobilised and, I would add, how positive emotion is

organised with the making of meaning and identity.

Not long after the event, I saw a tweet from the UK that said: ‘why are we making so much fuss about a white woman just doing her job?’ The tweeter was making the point that we need to change the conversation from Ardern’s noble acts, and focus on the lives of those who were killed. This was before we did find out more about those who died, and indeed they must be centre-stage, not the homogeneous attacked, but people with histories, with lives, and with reasons to live. As many have noted, this should not be about making white people feel better.

But there are ways and ways of doing one’s job. Understanding the fine lines of leadership in this case, and the political choices, involves grasping that the identity Ardern chose to speak from was not ‘white woman’ but New Zealander, defined as a person from this place. She spoke from an inclusive national identity, and as the representative of a country with, as she described in an interview with Waleed Aly (New Zealand Herald, 2019), 200 ethnicities and 160 languages (more ethnicities than there are countries in the world). What was compelling was the way Ardern drew identity boundaries in the hours after the attack – ‘they are us, he is not us’. Aroha was not indiscriminate, it would flow from the collective to those so deeply wounded, and white supremacists were placed outside this collective.

In her speech at the memorial event two weeks after the killings, Ardern described the open-heartedness of the Muslim community who ‘had every right to express anger but instead opened

their doors for all of us to grieve with them.’ She described their stories of seeking refuge and arrival, and for some these are stories of long establishment in Aotearoa, noting that: ‘these stories, they now form part of our collective memories.’ She also said, ‘we can be the nation that discovers the cure’ for hate and racism and, of course, with these words offered the people from this place a particular kind of national identity to take up and use to define who we are in this moment, in addition to shame and misery.

Effective leaders work with events and the material conditions determining people’s lives, and they supply narratives that make sense of these. But, crucially, to be persuasive, these narratives must contain logics and lines that are already present, tacit and sometimes explicit, in the nation’s communal structure of feeling. Ardern, then, drew on a New Zealand exceptionalist discourse of ‘best little nation in the world’, where best here came to mean welcome, warmth, openness and caring. In an odd way, after the attack, I was reminded of the time when New Zealand hosted the Rugby World Cup. I was newly returned to New Zealand, and it was so striking after the anomie of London and the UK the ways in which people cared about being good hosts in very immediate and personal ways, rushing to the airport to greet arriving teams, making sure tourists were properly fed, housing them in their own homes when beds ran short, exemplifying and modelling the welcoming and collective generosity so pervasive in Māori and Pacifica cultures, and flying the flags of all the rugby nations from their cars.

Political leaders often try to do this kind of discursive work, supplying energising national narratives, but they are persuasive and effective only to the extent they mobilise existing identity trajectories, and if they act skilfully. It is important to be clear here. I am not arguing that the nation’s dominant response of shock and aroha was inevitable, and I am not buying into New Zealand’s sense of exceptionalism, but suggesting that, fortunately, this was one of the emergent ways of being that happened to be possible right here, right now. Structures of feeling are complex, dynamic and contradictory. It would have been easy, perhaps, for Ardern to pull on other threads in our national common sense and set up narratives for exclusion, tit for tat, violent expulsion, marginalising and minimising the victims. Those logics were waiting also in the wings.

Ardern’s political work and constructive choices don’t change overnight a hostile climate, a colonial history, or make white ethno-nationalists think again, but they are likely to reinforce and bolster some positive paths and may have significant material effects, worked through everyday actions. I think that what she achieved was an intervention in the flow of ideology/identity/affect, the flow which authorises and legitimates feelings and actions, and which formulates common sense. If the world is drifting to fascism and hate, self-consciously she tried to remind us of other imaginings and other configurations of identity, emotion and sense making. I hope that what she might have accomplished is a decisive resetting.

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