

Toward an anthropology of culpability

ABSTRACT

Anthropologists concerned with political violence and justice must engage in a comparative examination of culpability for past and ongoing crimes. When powerful states use reparations, truth commissions, or war crime tribunals to attribute culpability to others, including their past selves, they often, paradoxically, legitimize ongoing injustices. As against culturalist explanations for mass violence, which set up a hierarchy of cultures, we need to look at the institutional sites through which public morality is constructed. This approach is illustrated with reference to the killing of Muslims in Gujarat, India, in 2002 and to the invasion of Iraq by the United States in 2003. [*culpability, comparative anthropology, reparations, genocide, war, India, United States*]

Anthropologists concerned with questions of violence and justice are faced today with two seemingly contradictory processes. One is a growing national and supranational attempt to identify culpability for past crimes and to punish perpetrators or make amends to victims—whether in the form of international criminal courts, truth commissions, reparations, or apologies for past behavior. The second is the development of a unipolar world order in which a doctrine of “preemptive strikes” and an unending “war on terror” are transcending international and municipal law as we know it, creating victims who are allowed no claims or even legal status. How should our discipline relate these processes? Equally important, if we understand anthropology’s *raison d’être* as one that expands our notions of human existence across cultures and countries, how do we use this occasion to arrive at elements of a common morality?¹ I suggest that one way to do this is to engage in what one might call an “anthropology of culpability,” defining culpability as guilt in a larger moral, and not merely legal sense, to try and understand when and how and to what extent people become culpable for acts of violence they have committed or that are committed in their name—while at the same time exploring the inequalities in attributions of culpability that are an essential part of the new world order. Throughout history, judgments (by dominant groups or persons) of a person’s, or a people’s, or a country’s degree of culpability for violations of some “natural” order have influenced notions of what can be legitimately done to them (see also Hinton 2002; Levene 2000:315; Padel 1995; Sluka et al. 2002:22; Taussig 1987).

Since September 11, 2001, the United States has been successful in mobilizing world support behind its definition of *terrorism* or *militant Islam* as the major problem facing the world as a whole. Anthropologists wishing to challenge this effort have tended to focus on “explaining” Islam, highlighting its diverse faces and its moderate voices, or on anthropologically interpreting the fascination of “Islamic fundamentalism” for young Muslims (e.g., Shaw 2002; see also the practical suggestions for responding to

terrorism offered by the American Anthropological Association Committee for Human Rights [2001]). In calling for anthropological advocacy against the war on terror, David Price notes that “we can help to reveal the complexity behind an oversimplified picture and to de-exoticise those who are being marginalized as uncivilized or reactionary” (2002:5). Price also argues that because the U.S.-led war on terror might be used by leaders around the world to suppress their own native and minority populations, “anthropologists can enrich public discussions of terrorism by ‘studying up,’ and examining state terrorism” (2002:5). Even when scholars acknowledge U.S. government complicity in state terror elsewhere, their focus is still predominantly on explaining the “non-West,” including the repressive practices of non-Western elites, to audiences in Europe or the United States rather than on analyzing the moral and military discourses of their own countries (for a rare exception, see Sluka 2000; Sluka et al. 2002). When Cynthia Keppley Mahmood writes that “the skepticism we face about our motives in willingly suspending judgment to grasp the *mores of a culture in which violence forms a central part* will always be far outweighed by the practical benefits of pursuing this type of research” (2002:2, emphasis added), it is unlikely that she has U.S. culture in mind but, rather, that of Muslims, Sikhs, and Others elsewhere. And, yet, as Michael Moore’s film *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) has shown, the United States is as good an example as any, if such a thing is possible, of a “culture” in which violence forms a central part.

Faced with growing instances of state terror, some anthropologists have also argued that the way for the discipline to “decolonize” itself is for anthropologists to become human rights activists, to serve as “witnesses,” “alarmists,” or “shock troopers” (see Sluka 2000:12–13). Human rights activism and anthropology may not always be complementary, given the rhythm of time necessary to absorb ethnographic information versus the activist need to get information out fast, differing audiences or styles of writing, and the pressures of tenure-driven production. Further, not being a human rights activist or a judge may carry a certain advantage, namely, being able to talk not just to victims but also to perpetrators of violence and, thereby, to understand mass complicity in guilt without having to attribute an exact degree of criminal responsibility. Such a stance, of course, does not mean moral neutrality (see Borneman 2003:202).

The problem for anthropology really is that its most powerful practitioners do not yet realize that the discipline is no longer the preserve of the West but, rather, is a global phenomenon inflected by national histories of scholarship. One indication of this problem is that whereas most Western, particularly U.S., scholars claim the unmarked category “anthropologist” for themselves and “anthropology” for their discipline, those of us in the academic

peripheries refer to ourselves and are referred to by our national denominations, for example, as “Indian anthropologists.” When Cynthia Mahmood compares anthropologists to missionaries and justifies anthropological engagement with violence as a spiritual impulse, she ignores the fact that many non-Western anthropologists have also initiated studies of suffering, violence, or state terror (see, for instance, Daniel 1996; Das 1990; some of the anthropologists referred to by Sluka 2000:24). The “places that anthropologists go to” or the “people that anthropologists study” have for some time now not been “foreign” but their own homes or people like themselves.² Passages like the following are unlikely to endear U.S. or European anthropologists to those of us at the “ends of the earth”:

Why do so many of us risk life and limb to venture to the ends of the earth, suffer enormous privation and delays of career and family, collect tropical diseases as other people collect stamps, all for salaries that often barely support us and a field whose value is barely recognized by the outside world? Reflections on our motivation, by African campfires or Arctic starlight, show it is surely not the adventure nor the intellectual curiosity alone. There is more to the ethnographic enterprise: I believe a sort of—dare I say it—spiritual impulse, that was recognized in the early days of our discipline but now lies unlabelled beneath the determined demeanours of those young students bravely going off to Palestine or to Colombia, to face new kinds of fieldwork and new kinds of dangers. [Mahmood 2002:1]

Why indeed? I argue here that rather than attempting to save the souls of others, anthropologists’ primary task today must be to widen public understanding of what it means to be human. This involves turning the same lens by which we examine Others on ourselves, wherever we stand in the global contours of the discipline. To do this we must put bricolage, juxtaposition, and comparison—between the “West” and the “rest”—at the heart of the ethnographic research *and* teaching enterprise. Although this idea was mooted at least two decades ago (see, e.g., Marcus and Fischer 1986), and hybridity is the name of the fashionable identity game, in fact very little has been done in the direction of exploring cultures refracted in the common light of globally traveling discourses of terror, war, economic rationality, or even human rights. This article attempts to undertake this task in one specific context, suggesting ways in which anthropologists might understand the logic of culpability as it operates in the world today.

In the first part of this article, I look at why locating culpability for acts of violence against collectives, whether in the past or present, has become important, indeed central, to the national and international conduct of politics today. As against the dominant claim in the social

sciences literature that reparations, trials, and apologies are leading to a new international morality, I argue that there is a serious danger of this morality being little more than a way of legitimating ongoing injustices.

The second part of the article is concerned with the diverse ways in which the issue of culpability for violence is framed and attributed, both by perpetrators and victims and by international actors, including anthropologists, within a particular world order. I look at the ways in which culturalist explanations for mass involvement in violence set up a hierarchy of societies and “cultures.” By looking at two recent instances of mass violence—the killing of Muslims in the Indian state of Gujarat in 2002 and the invasion and occupation of Iraq by the United States in 2003—I argue that culture and its accompanist, “morality,” are constantly in the process of being made and remade, a process in which certain institutional sites, notably the media and the law, occupy increasingly important spaces. I recognize, of course, deep histories of prejudice and ignorance, for instance, in European and U.S. notions of native savagery, manifest destiny, and Orientalism (Said 1994:288) or, in the Indian context, of Hindu stereotyping of Muslims (Gupta 2001). What is of current interest, however, is the way in which ahistorical, technologically modern, and professional media reenact these prejudices with more powerful effect than ever before. Not surprisingly, in the creation of public sanction for violence against specific groups and for the mode of its enactment, much depends on the power to inscribe the presumed culpability of the victims. In his study of terror and healing in the Putumayo, Michael Taussig says, “What stands out here is the mimesis between the savagery attributed to the Indians by the colonists and the savagery perpetrated by the colonists in the name of . . . civilization, meaning business” (1987:134).

The politics of restitution, reparation, and apologies: Creating a hierarchy of wrongs and wrongdoers

Broken Memory: At the end of the eighteenth century, Napoleon’s soldiers discovered that many Egyptian children believed the Pyramids had been built by the French or the English. At the end of the twentieth century, many Japanese children believed the bombs that fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been dropped by the Russians. In 1965, the people of Santo Domingo resisted an invasion of forty-two thousand U.S. Marines for 132 nights. People fought house by house, hand to hand, with sticks and knives and carbines and stones and broken bottles. What will Dominican children believe a little while from now? The government celebrates this heroic resistance not as a Day of Dignity but as the Day of Brotherhood, placing an equal sign between those who kissed the

hands of the invaders and those who bared their breasts to the tanks.

—Galeano, 2000

In recent years, the world has witnessed a number of demands for the redress of historical injustices and some remarkable acceptances of culpability. Some instances have involved crimes against individual groups within a state (e.g., the U.S. government’s reparations to Japanese Americans for internment during World War II, the Australian and Canadian governments’ recognition of the harm done to their Native populations through forcible acts of assimilation and expropriation). Others have international dimensions, involving crimes against foreign citizens (Japanese reparations to Korean “comfort women,” Clinton’s “apology” for supporting the military junta in Guatemala) or crimes that have resulted in the relocation of people from one state to another (e.g., German reparations to Jews, demands for reparations for slavery) (see Barkan 2000; Gibney and Roxstrom 2001; the collection of essays in Torpey 2003b). Some demands are directed by groups to institutions within their own country, such as the Native American and Canadian First Nations demand that museums return human skeletal remains and sacred objects to them (Killion et al. 2002; Phillips and Johnson 2003), whereas in other cases the demand for restoration of looted treasures has become a matter between two countries (see Meyer 1995; also see Barkan 2000 on the Russian–German dispute over art taken in World War II). In a broader perspective, the trend toward setting up truth commissions (as in Guatemala or South Africa) or war crimes tribunals (as for Rwanda or the former Yugoslavia) is equally an attempt to identify culpability and to repair social fractures (see Chapman and Ball 2001; Fletcher and Weinstein 2002; Hayner 2002; Minow 1998, 2002; Osiel 2000; Torpey 2003a). According to Marc Gibney and Erik Roxstrom, “The apology phenomenon is best viewed as part of a much larger effort at seeking, establishing, and understanding the truth, exemplified in the myriad of truth commissions that have been created throughout the world” (2001:937).

Why have retributive justice and reparations become important at this moment in time, some half a century after the Nuremberg Trials first placed these questions on the international agenda? Several scholars have argued optimistically that the recent wave of apologies and demands for reparations signals a real change in the international political order, the emergence of a new international morality and a triumph of human rights discourse (Barkan 2000; Gibney and Roxstrom 2001:914–916; Torpey 2003a; Vandeginste 2003:251). John Torpey notes that reparations have been “an essential complement to the spread of human rights ideas. This is because reparations help to make the notion of human rights seem real and enforceable

in the absence of a global police force empowered to back rights claims with armed might" (2003a:5). Laura Hein argues in the context of reparations that "the key postwar legal transformation has been the growing consensus that individuals—not just states—have standing in international law" (2003:131). Alan Cairns talks of a "postimperial" world order in which, through the mechanism of apologies and reparations, previously voiceless people are now asserting their histories and humankind as a whole is "coming to terms with its past" (2003:68). Even while recognizing the serious limitations of Clinton's apology to the Guatemalan people, Gibney and Roxstrom argue that "the transnational state apology serves as a special kind of truth commission in the sense that it has become the western states' vehicle for acknowledging their own involvement (or, in the case of Rwanda, non-involvement) in some of the world's horrors" (2001:937–938). Finally, in his much praised account of the history of war crimes tribunals, Gary Bass argues that such proceedings are the outcome of domestic liberalism extended to international politics: "Liberal ideals make liberal states take up the cause of international justice" (2000:18).

There have been other explanations, too, of a more sociological, historical, or psychological nature—for instance, locating the wave of reparations in the transition from authoritarianism to democracy (Huntington 1993), the rise of a historical consciousness as an essential part of modernity and the emergence of many little histories that challenge the notion of a unitary nation-state and a unitary history (Olick and Coughlin 2003), and the loss of a transformative vision for the future and the rise of narrow ethnicities (Maier 1993).³ Voices like Charles Maier's, however, are minor compared with the triumphalist crescendo connecting state apologies, reparations, restitution, reconciliation, truth commissions, and international war crimes tribunals to a victory for liberal morality and "new human rights standards" (Gibney and Roxstrom 2001:915) as institutionalized mainly in Western states. This liberal morality may be defined broadly as respect for individual life, liberty, and property (for a discussion of liberalism[s], see Gray 1989; Sandel 1984).

To some extent it is true that the discourse of reparations, apologies, and the like is a marker of morality in international relations because it signals acceptance of the principle that there must be justice for wrongs committed. It is also important to note that the demand for justice—for reconciliation, reparation—and, indeed, the notion of human rights more generally have roots as deep in the non-West as in the West. When commentators reiterate the common claim that notions of rights or humane governance came from "Greek, Stoic and Christian roots" (Falk 1992:32) or debate cultural relativism and human rights in terms of the conflict between Western values

and non-Western cultures (Perry 1997; Teson 1992), they ignore other traditions (in the Indian context alone, see Bayly 1998 on precolonial Indian ideas of governance; Matilal 2002 on epics and ethics; Nandy 1995:71 on the sources of Radhabinod Pal's judgment in the Tokyo trials). Ultimately, however, origins do not matter. Edward Said points out that ideas (and people) travel across geographical boundaries: "What matters a great deal more than the stable identity kept current in official discourse is the contestatory force of an interpretative method whose material is the disparate but intertwined and interdependent, and above all overlapping streams of human experience" (1994:312).

Critical to the interpretative method Said talks about are analyses of historical time and context or what certain ideologies set out to silence as much as what they promote (see, e.g., Iyer 1960 on utilitarianism and imperialism; Arneil 1996 on Locke and Anglo-Saxon expansionism). As in any sociological study of practical morality—apart from philosophical debates over its origins in moral realism, emotivism, utilitarianism, and the like—scholars need to subject the phenomenon of reparations and its ideology to deeper excavations. As Karl Marx pointed out long ago, although bourgeois citizenship and its concomitant morality of rights was an advance over feudalism, it was not enough as long as citizenship or rights in the political community were "degraded . . . to a mere means for the preservation of the so-called rights of man" or private property rights in civil society (1977a:54).

Applied to the reparations context, until a more thorough-going transformation of national and international systems is achieved, portraying reparations claims collectively as part of a new international morality becomes part of a self-congratulatory liberal understanding that allows real and ongoing inequalities and injustices to go unchallenged. Without minimizing the justness of existing calls for reparation and the struggles of those who are making these demands, the most important effect, perhaps, of the contemporary conduct of the international discourse of restitution, public apologies, and international tribunals for war crimes has been to legitimate powerful states. The implicit message sent out by Western states is that the behavior giving rise to the need for apologies is a thing of the past as far as they are concerned and that the only present-day acts warranting prosecutions and the establishment of tribunals are those by "rogue" states, such acts often necessitating military intervention by the West. In the case of international tribunals for war crimes or of truth commissions, the predominance of First World judges or prosecutors sitting in judgment on Second or Third World criminals, while ignoring the liability of their own or allied countries for war crimes or complicity in violence, cannot but fail to reinforce this perception.⁴ If international morality is to mean something more than

the self-serving prejudice of powerful states, scholars must explore the political economy of restitution claims and tribunals in a comparative perspective. One needs to ask why and how certain groups succeed in having their demands taken seriously and others do not, or why certain prosecutions of war are recognized as giving rise to war crimes whereas others are not.

Even were one to take claims to a new morality on their own terms, however, and admit that moral disagreements are possible primarily because of the existence of shared moral traditions that transcend cultures (see Matlal 2002), the nature of differences here is troubling. The moral reasoning involved in reparation claims admits of several different and difficult-to-resolve issues. First, there is the question of distributive justice across time: Whereas some liberal philosophers tend to discuss this issue in terms of the responsibility of individuals for the sins of their ancestors (see Thompson 2001; Wheeler 1997), others have pointed to the *continuing* disadvantage of certain groups or to the continuity in state structures as a reason for the *state* and not for individuals to own guilt and provide reparation (see Perels 1993:252 on the continuity of personnel from the Nazi state to the Federal Republic of Germany). The second problematic issue is that of the appropriate unit of reparation—whether entire countries, communities, or individuals.

A third problem for the anthropologist concerned with morality is the clash between new entitlements due to need or labor invested and old entitlements based on expropriation. As Maier notes, it is not immediately obvious whether “a handsome private villa that for several decades has found a new life as a kindergarten or communal facility be returned to descendants who have never seemed to need the asset” (2003:297). Given the same basic principle, public discourse is framed very differently depending on the subjects of restitution and their relative economic and political power. Take, for example, the differences in Western media coverage and the attitude of international financial institutions when restitution involves privatization (as in Eastern Europe) versus a situation involving collectives (e.g., Australian Aboriginals) or currently disadvantaged individuals (e.g., black demands for white farms in Zimbabwe).⁵ Even where restitution works in favor of groups who owe their continuing disadvantage to initial acts of violence, the implications for contemporary equity are not always clear: For instance, a recent domicile bill in the Indian state of Jharkhand proposed to grant priority in government recruitment to applicants whose ancestors were listed in the 1931 settlement records. This bill was struck down by the High Court but not before it became a contentious issue, with many long-term settlers and working-class immigrants claiming that their citizenship rights were being denied and indigenist advocates

claiming the “historic necessity” of restoring rights to indigenous peoples. The poor are usually pitted against the poor—in the struggle for jobs, for land, and for identity; one is scarcely ever afforded the luxury of a clear class struggle.

Restitution claims also raise questions of memory and representation: how historical injustices are framed and transmitted in national history texts and popular narratives; how the symbols of a nation—for example, monuments, founding days, flags, and anthems—are implicated in previous histories of conquest and violence; and whether restitution privileges certain moments in history as against others (Maier 1993; Minow 2002; Torpey 2003a). The histories demanded by criminal trials may differ in quite significant respects from historian’s histories, in which attributions of culpability may be less black and white or more evenly distributed between perpetrator and victim groups (Arendt 1963; Rousso 2003). It is not clear how morality and the cause of deterrence are better served by seeing history through the prism of a courtroom trial rather than through a historian’s pen. Audrey Chapman and Patrick Ball (2001) also show how the “truth” that emerges from truth commissions is framed through seemingly “technical” issues like the choice of commissioners, the model and methods they employ, and the manner in which they select and present materials. In the South African case, given Archbishop Tutu’s commitment to reconciliation, “by giving white victims space in hearings far beyond their proportion of statement-givers and out of proportion to their level of victimization, the TRC created the truth that the ‘children’ of all races suffered violations more or less equally” (Chapman and Ball 2001:40). The contribution of such “truths” to the process of healing and the cause of justice is thus debatable (see also Osiel 2000:137; Wilson 2001).

Some scholars have questioned whether truth commissions or international tribunals, given their focus on individual legal responsibility, can address the issue of societal breakdowns of morality, or what Mark Osiel calls “the uncertain line between culpable and inculpable parties” (2000:125–129). Some state legislation has begun to address this issue: For instance, the Rwandan Organic Law of 1996 on the prosecution of offenses for genocide or crimes against humanity distinguishes among four different categories of perpetrators—from masterminds to those who engaged only in stealing and damaging property (Vandeginste 2003:255). Yet as Stef Vandeginste (2003), Laurel Fletcher and Harvey Weinstein (2002), and others have shown, international tribunals have serious limitations in dealing with the issue of mass involvement in violence. Truth commissions assume that once ordinary people—as opposed to state leaders, top-ranking officials, and so on—learn the full horror of what was being done in their names, perpetrator remorse will be

part of a national reconciliation process (Minow 1998). This assumption does not appear to be necessarily borne out, and reconciliation increasingly seems another name for impunity. Fletcher and Weinstein, who studied responses of judges and prosecutors to war crimes trials in Bosnia, found that the trials did not have the desired effect in terms of reconciliation and healing—on the contrary, “universally individuals identified their national groups as victims” (2002:581). They also “question whether individualized guilt may contribute to a myth of collective innocence” and argue that there is a “collective nature to mass violence” that must be understood on its own terms and not in the legally permissible terms of individualized guilt and responsibility. They call, therefore, for the integration of criminal trials into “broader initiatives in rule of law, humanitarian assistance, democracy building and economic development” (Fletcher and Weinstein 2002:580–581).

Equally serious, apologies for particularly egregious acts of colonialism, for example, Blair’s expression of regret for England’s complicity in the Irish potato famine, might falsely suggest that such acts were aberrations in an otherwise humane system (Gibney and Roxstrom 2001: 933).⁶ Various crimes, moreover, find no mention in the growing list of acts for which recognition is demanded as crimes against humanity, among them, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As Justice Radhabinod Pal had noted in his dissenting judgment in the Tokyo war crimes trial, “If any indiscriminate destruction of civilian life and property is still legitimate in warfare, then, in the Pacific war, this decision to use the atom bomb is the only near approach to the directives of the German Emperor during the first world war and of the Nazi leaders during the second world war” (Minear 1971:100–101; see also Arendt 1963:235; Nandy 1995; Taylor 1970:173). What makes the bombing of Japan even worse is that, in the words of one U.S. military historian, “The bomb was not needed to avoid an invasion of Japan and to end the war within a relatively short time. Alternatives to the bomb existed and Truman and his advisers knew it” (J. Samuel Walker, in Alperovitz 1995:7).

Surely, the inscription of certain sufferings as more deserving than others cannot help in the creation of a new international morality. As Wole Soyinka notes, the redress of injustices like the 1492 edict that evicted Jews from Spain, while negating the demand for reparations for slavery on the grounds of limitation by time, seems a fresh injustice: “Justice must be made manifest either for all, or not at all” (1999:91). But most importantly, if “reparations . . . serve as a cogent critique of history and thus a potent restraint on its repetition” (Soyinka 1999:84), how does one understand the frequent replay of actions that should have belonged firmly in the past? For instance, the U.S. government apology to Japanese Americans for intern-

ment in World War II by implication suggests that the state no longer targets populations within its midst on grounds of suspect nationalism, an idea that is increasingly doubtful post–September 11, given the profiling of Muslim men (American Civil Liberties Union 2002; Cole 2003; Lewis 2003).⁷ Apologies for the Tuskegee experiments conceal the way in which, as Eduardo Galeano writes, “the environmental map is also a racial map. The most polluting factories and the most dangerous dumps are located in the pockets of poverty where blacks, Indians and Latinos live” (2000:221; see also Kuletz 2001).

To summarize, the reparations phenomenon only raises a series of moral questions that attend acts of injustice. It does not, as yet, point to anything like common or equitable international norms, unless one accepts norms that encode inequality in their very being. Much more needs to be done in the direction of a comparative political economy of claims and achievements than is currently envisaged in the literature if scholars and activists are to use this phenomenon to advance a common humanity.

In the following section, I look at the way in which acts of violence by different societies are framed in some of the historical and anthropological literature and at how attributing mass culpability to “culture” sets up a hierarchy between societies and cultures.⁸

Culture: A source for genocidal violence?

No reason exists to believe that modern, western even Christian man is incapable of holding notions which devalue human life, which call for its extinction, notions similar to those held by peoples of many religious, cultural and political dispensations throughout history. . . . Who doubts that the Tutsis who slaughtered Hutus in Burundi or the Hutus who slaughtered Tutsis in Rwanda, that one Lebanese militia which slaughtered the civilian supporters of another, that the Serbs who have killed Croats or Bosnian Muslims, did so out of conviction in the justice of their actions? Why do we not believe the same for the German perpetrators? . . . Alternatively, this period can be approached without such assumptions, and instead with the critical eye of an anthropologist disembarking on unknown shores, open to meeting a radically different culture and conscious of the possibility that he might need to devise explanations not in keeping with, perhaps even contravening his common-sense notions, in order to explain the culture’s constitution, its idiosyncratic patterns of practice, and its collective projects and products.

—Goldhagen, 1997

When Daniel Jonah Goldhagen writes that his understanding of the Holocaust—the foregrounding of mentality (an “eliminationist antisemitic” mind-set) as the

propelling force for violence—is inspired by an “anthropological” approach, we, as anthropologists, must feel concerned. When people from other disciplines invoke anthropology, they usually do so to understand radical difference, to see the Other in “cultural” terms, to follow the path trodden by Geertzian hermeneutics (Goldhagen 1997:492 n. 36). And there is enough ammunition within the anthropology of violence to justify such a reading—for instance, when Bruce Kapferer (1988) explains Sinhala violence on Tamils in Sri Lanka as a consequence of a Sinhala–Buddhist ontology that requires the exorcism of an Other within (in a different context, Sahlin 1985, 1995 and Obeyesekere 1992 also debate the issue of the cultural roots of violence).

These culturalist explanations are particularly marked when it comes to the Third World, not just in anthropology (which has traditionally dealt largely with the Third World anyway) but in the social sciences more broadly, and following this, in the media.⁹ The most common form of cultural accounting, of course, is in terms of “ancient ethnic–religious hatreds.”¹⁰ John Bowen (2002:384) argues that the term *genocide* is also frequently used nowadays to refer to political killings, again giving it a culturalist spin. Even a historian as sensitive as Inga Clendinnen, who accounts for ordinary German involvement in the Holocaust in terms of the brutalization engineered by repeated killings or of the notion of obedience to authority, appears to lose this focus on institutions—the role of the government, political parties, media, and rumor—when it comes to Rwandans or Serbs, the Other of “Western” “liberal” civilization today:

My own conviction is that our sense of Holocaust uniqueness (and we do have that sense) resides in the fact that these ferocious, largely secret killings were perpetrated within “twentieth-century Western society,” and that both our sense of portent and of the peculiar intransigence of these actions before puny human interpretation find their ground in the knowledge that they were conceived, executed and endured by people very like ourselves. It is not that this material stands too far from us. It stands too near. We do not easily imagine ourselves Aztecs or Rwandans or, for that matter, Serbian or Croatian farmers. We do recognize ourselves as very like urban Europeans of five or six decades ago. [Clendinnen 1999:18]

Locating culpability for violence in “culture,” “mentality,” or some other equivalent and assuming that violence is endemic in certain societies but has to be “explained” in others inevitably set up a hierarchy of societies and inform the international community’s response to acts of violence by individual states and peoples.¹¹ Thus, to revert to the problematic identified in the first half of this article, certain crimes are seen as “crimes against humanity”

whereas others escape that label, and human rights violations or territorial invasions by certain countries are met with sanctions, whereas others meet no censure.¹² Increasingly, the notion that Western liberal morality is pitted against Islamic fundamentalism has gained ground, not just in George W. Bush’s famous juxtaposition of civilization versus barbarity (“You’re either with us or against us”), but even in “scholarly discourse.” Take just one representative sample, arising from a debate on anthropology and ethics after September 11:

The Islamicists have declared war not only on Israel but also on the US, and by implication much of the Western world, including the EU. Their global assaults demonstrate that for them there are no neutral territories, nor non-combatants. They have also indicated that within their (presumably fundamentalist) interpretation of Islam there can be no room for an independent enterprise of social science generally, or for anthropology in particular. [Wax 2003:24]

Of course, there have been other views within anthropology (Gusterson 2003; Kelly 2003; Nader 2001; Price 2002; Sluka 2000; Sluka et al. 2002), which also tends to be far less conservative than other social science disciplines, but these require much reinforcement if they are to make any dent in public discourse.

In the following sections I try to show, first, that social scientists need to problematize the self-construction of Western morality by exploring the difference between acts of omission and acts of commission when it comes to public participation in or silent acquiescence to mass violence like war or internal genocide. Many of the same factors that explain actual participation in acts of violence may also explain support for violence done in one’s name by one’s state. No society or culture is immune to the potential for violence, and this is a fact worth reiterating in the current political climate.

Second, this problematizing must be contextualized in terms of an ongoing construction of morality by the state or by dominant groups in society. A growing body of literature draws on the work of social psychologists to explain participation in mass violence or, at least, the “bystander phenomenon” in terms of obedience to authority, anonymity, crowd behavior, the pressure of group conformity, diffusion of responsibility, and so on (see Fletcher and Weinstein 2002:603–617). Where collective violence is located in individual willingness to kill, however, additional explanatory factors are needed. But instead of locating these factors in culture, an essential national character, mentality, ethnic–religious conflict, or the human condition, we need to historicize these factors and look at the institutions through which this killing is incited and made to appear morally permissible, in other words, to examine the process by

which Othering takes place (see Hinton 2002 on the role of Othering in genocide).¹³ Of these, the media and the law are two very important institutions, and their role as “ideological state apparatus” (Althusser 1971) bears deeper study, though their message is always mediated by their internal organizational structure and professional rationale. Ideological “interpellation” is never direct and depends heavily on the politics of reception—the relation between ideology and the lived experience of those being addressed (Thompson 1978:175; see also Willis 1977)—and the task of the anthropologist or historian is really to investigate this process of subject formation in all its complexity. In following Marx’s insight that the “human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual,” that “in its reality it is the ensemble of social relations” (1977b:157), one is not thereby committed to a dry structuralism, the notion of a “process without subjects,” or the abandonment of humanism. As E. P. Thompson (1978:171) puts it, every (class) struggle is at the same time a struggle over values. And so against the conformism created by a media that supports sheer power, there are internal voices of dissent and struggles to define citizenship in more democratic ways. As researchers, we need to hold this tension within us if we are to avoid the pitfalls of anthropological culturalism and assign the necessary moral blame and legal guilt to perpetrators of violent acts.

In the formation of the violent subject, the discourse of terrorism plays a central role in the Othering process by highlighting the culpability of the victims and downplaying other factors. This trope has been around for a while, although it may have emerged into its full Godzilla powers only post–September 11. Writing after the first Gulf War, Said pointed out that

the fear and terror induced by the overscale images of “terrorism” and “fundamentalism”—call them the figures of an international or transnational imaginary made up of foreign devils—hastens the individual’s subordination to the dominant norms of the moment. This is as true in the new post-colonial societies as it is in the West generally and the United States particularly. Thus to oppose the abnormality and extremism embedded in terrorism and fundamentalism . . . is also to uphold the moderation, rationality, executive centrality of a vaguely designated “Western” (or otherwise local and patriotically assumed) ethos. The irony is that far from endowing the Western ethos with the confidence and secure “normality” we associate with privilege and rectitude, this dynamic imbues “us” with a righteous anger and defensiveness in which “others” are finally seen as enemies, bent on destroying our civilization and way of life. [1994:310]

The strength of this observation—which harkens back, too, to Taussig’s insight into the mimesis of savagery—is

evident in two examples of recent violence: the genocide of Muslims in the Indian state of Gujarat and the U.S. war on Iraq. Although the two cases may seem far apart in terms of form (localized genocide vs. international war) and function (targeted killing of a minority vs. occupation of a country ostensibly in the pursuit of international peace), they form part of a wider transnational continuum in which the *carte blanche* provided by the United States as the sole superpower pursuing its own “war on terror,” and the demonization of Muslims globally, easily segues into a “war on minorities”—or more generally on democratic rights and civil liberties—within India and elsewhere.

The two cases are also similar in other respects: first, in terms of what they signal about the power of open aggression to legitimate itself and escape criminal responsibility; second, in terms of public sanction for these acts of aggression; and, third, in terms of the opposition they generated within each country, respectively. Some of the biggest protests against the war on Iraq have taken place inside the United States and the United Kingdom, and some of the most insightful criticism of the war has been generated within those two countries. In India, meanwhile, there is much evidence for Mahmood’s claim that “the parallels with what Goldhagen has called ‘eliminationist anti-Semitism’ in prewar Germany are stunning, not only in the ordinariness of sentiments of hostility towards the non-Hindu minorities and the celebration of Hindu purity as the foundation of Indian nationalism, but in the hegemonic quality of the entire discourse” (2000:87). It is essential, however, to place within the same frame the work of Indian human rights activists, lawyers, and journalists and, indeed, of many ordinary citizens for whom the idea of a “Hindu nation” is deeply unpalatable. Perhaps Mahmood’s unidimensional view of Indian politics may be attributed to her limited use of sources like *New York Times* journalist Barbara Crossette and the reports of various international human rights agencies like Amnesty and Human Rights Watch. If there is an eliminationist tendency among some sections of society, there is also, to borrow Jurgen Habermas’s phrase, a “constitutional patriotism” (1993:43) among others. The reason why violence still occurs is in no small measure due to the greater financial and political resources that the eliminationists have.

Intimations of culpability: The Gujarat genocide

On February 27, 2002, a large number of activists and supporters of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), a front of the fascist Hindu organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), while traveling on a train from Ayodhya, got into a quarrel with Muslims at Godhra station in Gujarat state. Mutual stoning ensued, and a fire started in coach S6 of the train, in which 58 people died. Most reports by

journalists and independent human rights organizations at the time attributed the burning to Muslim mob violence gone out of hand (see Punwani 2002). Subsequent evidence given to the Nanavati Commission, set up by the government to investigate the violence, suggests, however, that the fire could have been the result of a tragic but unforeseen combination of circumstances. The rubber passage between coaches caught fire first. Smoke released by the burning rubber caused most of the deaths through asphyxiation, and the flash burning of accumulated gases later added to the toll (Jan Sangharsh Manch 2004). There has been, however, no further official investigation along these lines. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political arm of the RSS in power in Gujarat state and the leading partner in a coalition government at the federal level, described the fire as a planned terrorist act. Given the stakes involved for the BJP, perhaps we shall never know what really happened.

The following day, carefully orchestrated and planned attacks were carried out on Muslim homes, mosques, shops, and persons in a variety of sites in some 19 out of 25 districts across Gujarat. Sporadic violence against Muslims continued for several weeks. By some estimates, over 2,000 persons were killed and over 200,000 displaced because their homes had been burned or looted. As a number of investigations by human rights bodies concluded, the attacks were planned and led by members of the RSS and its various fronts, including the BJP. The RSS objective is to set up a “Hindu nation.”¹⁴ The mobs—ranging from a few hundred to several thousand—carried swords, guns, tridents, chemicals, acid bombs, and petrol and gas cylinders and attacked Muslim men, women, and children quite indiscriminately. They were armed with computer printouts listing names and addresses of Muslims, which enabled specific targeting, often leaving Hindu houses or shops on either side of the targets untouched. In many places, the police helped the attackers either by turning the victims back toward the mob or by firing on Muslims. The most common method used in the attacks was to burn both houses and people, perhaps in symbolic revenge for the burning of the train at Godhra but presumably also to destroy evidence. For the first time since Partition, rape was employed as a weapon on a mass scale. Mosques and Muslim shrines were destroyed and defaced, including those where both Hindus and Muslims had traditionally worshipped together, and in some cases they were replaced by makeshift Hindu temples. Hindus also were attacked, but these instances were few in comparison, and many Hindus who came to the aid of their Muslim neighbors were threatened with punishment. The army was effectively deployed only on March 3, by which time the maximum damage had been done (Sundar 2002).

What especially shocked many people outside of Gujarat was the unprecedented scale of public participation in the violence. In many cases, the victims were

people that the perpetrators had known all their lives, with whom they had feasted on Id a few weeks previously; shopkeepers who had given them free goodies as children; or social workers in the locality. In the elections that followed a few months later, the BJP won a two-thirds majority. Even today, many Gujarati Hindus, including those who did not participate in the killing, rape, and looting, continue to justify the violence and portray themselves as victims of “secular” prejudice and anti-Gujarati feelings. Random attacks on Muslims continue, and most Muslims continue to live in a state of silent terror (People’s Union for Democratic Rights 2002a, 2002b).

To understand what happened in Gujarat, one must obviously look at a variety of factors. A rough list might include the ideology and politics of the RSS and the BJP, including their historical roots; the BJP’s subversion of the administration when in power; the way in which the BJP (as well as other parties) plays on notions of majority and minority, drawing on colonial legacies like the enumeration of religion and caste in the census; the culture of official complicity and impunity bequeathed by the Congress Party, whose own participation in a pogrom against Sikhs in 1984 has become a shameful part of India’s past; the closure of the textile industry in Ahmedabad, which led to mass unemployment and vulnerability to communal politics; and transnational links between diasporic Hindus and local fascist organizations (Varadarajan 2002).

In the immediate context, however, the local Gujarati media played a particularly important role by highlighting the “culpability” of the Muslims and downplaying that of the RSS, the BJP, and ordinary Hindus (Patel et al. 2002; People’s Union for Civil Liberties 2002). Two pro-BJP newspapers, *Sandesh* and *Gujarat Samachar*, not only carried front-page photos of the Godhra victims but also completely concocted stories about the abduction and rape of Hindu women by a Muslim mob at Godhra. Women inevitably become the object of “national,” “ethnic,” or “religious” honor—even as war and chauvinism increasingly circumscribe their everyday lives within their communities of birth. One front-page story in the *Sandesh* on March 1, reporting the recovery of the bodies of two women from a pond in Kalol, pruriently concluded, “As part of a cruel inhuman act that would make even a devil weep, the breasts of both the dead bodies had been cut. Seeing the dead bodies one knows that the girls had been raped again and again, perhaps many times. There is a speculation that during this act itself the girls might have died. . . . Is there no limit to the lust?” (*Sandesh* 2002: 4). Leaders of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad circulated copies of the *Sandesh* report across Gujarat. Muslim survivors from one of the worst of the affected areas in Ahmedabad reported that, in addition to swords and stones, the mobs were waving copies of the *Sandesh*, demanding “blood for

blood” (Hameed et al. 2002:11). The People’s Union for Civil Liberties, Vadodara, which surveyed the print and electronic media coverage of the violence, noted that the same newspapers barely covered the anti-Muslim violence that followed, and when they did, their reports usually began with a phrase that typically read, “In the continuing spiral of communal rioting that broke out as a reaction to the demonic/barbaric Godhra incident” (People’s Union for Civil Liberties and Vadodara Shanti Abhiyan 2002:280).

An equally central part of the explanation for what happened in Gujarat is the international and national discourse of terror (see Varadarajan 2002). Soon after the Godhra train-burning incident, BJP ministers in both Gujarat and the central government described it as a “preplanned act of collective terrorism,” masterminded by Pakistani intelligence but employing local Godhra Muslims. By doing so, they were able to tap into ongoing RSS and BJP propaganda on Indian Muslims as fifth columnists, which, in turn, reflects those organizations’ wider vision of religious minorities as foreigners and aliens. Historically, the RSS has blamed Muslims for the destruction of temples by medieval Muslim invaders, for allegedly having four wives and increasing their number at the expense of Hindus, for killing cows, abducting Hindu women, and so on. But by naming the attack on the train terrorism and associating it with an alleged Muslim anti-nationalism, the ministers were able to gain wider public sanction for their party’s acts of violence against Muslims. An attack on a temple in Ahmedabad in September 2002 and blasts in Bombay in September 2003—although both clearly reactions to the Gujarat genocide—are cited as further evidence of this ongoing Muslim threat.

Under the BJP, the terms *terrorist*, *fanatic*, and *fundamentalist* have become synonymous with *Muslim*. For instance, Narendra Modi, Gujarat’s chief minister, declared on the New Delhi Television program *The Big Fight* soon after September 11, “All Muslims are not terrorists but all terrorists are Muslims.” This view is clearly strengthened by the wider international discourse, radiating from the United States, on Muslims and Islam as somehow umbilically connected to terrorism. At another level, the BJP rhetoric merely reinforces the ongoing discourse of the Indian state. During the violence in Punjab in the 1980s, Sikhs occupied the status of terrorists, and then, too, the public projection of every Sikh as a potential terrorist was used by the Congress Party to justify its massacre of Sikhs in 1984. Although Prime Minister Vajpayee was blatant in his assertion that no Hindu organization could ever be a threat to Indian unity, even a cursory look at the listing of organizations proscribed by the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) 2002, legislation that is symptomatic of Indian state policy more widely, reveals a number of Muslim, Sikh, and left organizations but no Hindu organizations. The

Student Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) has been banned and many of its activists arrested under POTA. In contrast, despite several media reports of the RSS front Bajrang Dal training with guns and distributing tridents, no action has been taken against that group. The Law Commission Report justifying the need for a special law to deal with terrorist acts traced the history of “terrorism” to the 1990s, specifically to the Bombay bomb blasts of 1993 (generally regarded as the handiwork of Muslim mafia dons), but the report did not mention the demolition of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya and the killing of hundreds of innocent Muslims in Bombay in January 1993, to which the blasts were a reaction (Balagopal 2000). What happened in Gujarat from February 28 until at least mid-April fits most of the provisions of the definition of genocide provided by the 1948 UN Convention on Genocide, to which India is a signatory. Yet the prime minister and his BJP associates continue to refer to the anti-Muslim violence as simply “unfortunate,” while using words like *atrocities*, *massacre*, and *terrorism* in referring to the Godhra attack on Hindu train passengers.

Whereas the discourse of terrorism generated by politicians through the media may have the power to incite people to kill, security legislation like POTA is equally powerful in that it enables the long, drawn-out, silent incarceration of those accused.¹⁵ Under such draconian legislation, the reversal of the burden of proof (denial of bail until the court is satisfied of a person’s innocence), the lowering of the threshold for acceptable evidence (including accepting confessions made to a notoriously corrupt and brutal police), and the media-promoted notion of a public baying for retribution against terrorist acts make it that much harder for anyone accused to prove his or her innocence (People’s Union for Democratic Rights 2003a; Singh 2004). The acquittal of Delhi University teacher S. A. R. Geelani, charged under POTA for a terrorist attack on the Indian parliament on December 13, 2001, was greeted with howls of outrage by television networks and other sectors of the media, who called it a serious setback to the government’s war on terror. Referring to human rights activists who had supported the teacher’s claim of innocence and had challenged the possibility of a fair trial under POTA as “red terrorists,” Chandan Mitra (2003), member of parliament and editor of the English-language daily *Pioneer*, called for their deportation to Pakistan along with Geelani. In Gujarat, most of the Hindu activists accused of involvement in the anti-Muslim violence have been acquitted or released on bail, thanks to police complicity in not recording or in misrecording first information reports and to the appointment of VHP members as public prosecutors by the state (see Grover 2002; People’s Union for Democratic Rights 2002b). In contrast, more than 100 Muslims in Godhra have been arrested and illegally detained under POTA for the train-burning case.

POTA criminalizes any sort of support of terrorists, which has led to the suspension of a wide variety of activities, including relief to genocide victims, and has generated considerable anxiety among Muslims, who are subjected to arbitrary raids, intimidation, and harassment (People's Union for Democratic Rights 2003b). To summarize, by transforming ordinary Muslims into potential terrorists, the RSS both dehumanizes them and makes them culpable for their own victimhood.

Problematizing U.S. morality after Iraq

President George W. Bush ordered the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 after declaring that the Saddam Hussein regime's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and its sponsorship of terrorism posed a clear and present danger to the security of the United States. According to opinion polls at the time, a majority of Americans believed that Saddam Hussein was directly complicit in the attack on the World Trade Center.¹⁶ An even larger majority took as given the Bush administration's exaggerated claims about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, thanks in large measure to uncritical media coverage of official pronouncements.

Prior to the invasion, the United States sought but failed to receive the explicit legal backing of the UN Security Council. At the time it was invaded, Iraq had already been under UN-enforced economic embargo for more than 12 years. Severely weakened by the sanctions, the Saddam regime collapsed within a month. But not before, under relentless U.S. bombing, approximately 8,000 Iraqi civilians were killed and 20,000 injured and maimed, along with an unknown number of Iraqi soldiers (Iraq Body Count 2003).¹⁷ The destruction of power and water supplies in the bombing also escalated deaths due to disease (McCarthy 2003). Once the war ended, the failure to provide proof of Saddam Hussein's WMDs has further undermined the credibility of the Bush administration worldwide, as has the administration's failure to "stabilize" or "pacify" the country. Yet opinion polls, however ethnographically suspect, suggest that matters like Iraqi deaths are irrelevant to public opinion within the United States. Although support for the war waned somewhat as the number of U.S. casualties went into three figures, the capture and public display of a humiliated Saddam Hussein earned Bush popular applause.¹⁸

In his essay on political violence, Ted Honderich (1976) invites readers to think about their feelings in the face of systematic inequality versus their feelings in the face of violence aimed at overthrowing unequal orders. The former, he argues, are characterized by passivity—people are less informed about the facts of inequality, its agents are more invisible and more ubiquitous, and the phenomenon itself is more familiar and is seen as part of a

state of "order," whereas violence is seen as a state of "disorder." Similar questions might be raised about individual responsibility for violence committed by one's state in times of war. The "anthropology of war" has long centered on tribal feuds and small-scale conflicts (see, e.g., the bibliographical survey by Ferguson with Farragher 1988), while ignoring the large-scale conflagrations that have swept the world and caught up several anthropological subjects in their midst.¹⁹ Although a similar survey today might include truth commissions, genocide, and even state terror (see, e.g., Hinton 2002; Nagengast 1994; Sluka 2000; Wilson 2001), the relationship between war, military production, and morality in advanced capitalist societies remains largely elusive to the anthropological gaze (for some exceptions, see Kelly 2003; Kuletz 2001; Nader 2001; Watts 2001).

Supporting state aggression against faceless, if demonized, "enemies" through the anesthetic of distance is, of course, different from killing one's former neighbors with guns, machetes, and swords or from transporting visible victims, including small children, to a gas chamber. At worst, such support is seen as indifference. For Goldhagen, the notion of German indifference to Jewish deaths is "psychologically implausible" and indicative instead of "the character of the German people in general" (1997:439–440). What, then, would Goldhagen make of the U.S. public's indifference to the decade-long sanctions against Iraq, which killed some half a million Iraqi children, a price that Madeleine Albright, who was secretary of state at the time, publicly said on the television program *60 Minutes* was "worth it"; or to U.S. and NATO use in Iraq and the former Yugoslavia of depleted uranium bombs, which cause cancer for generations; or to the 1998 cruise missile strike on Sudan's main pharmaceutical plant, on the grounds that it was a chemical weapons factory? (on Sudan, see Risen and Johnston 1999).²⁰ Following Michel Foucault (1977), it is no longer possible to see routine and professionalization as part of a more "humane" project (see also Elias 1978; Fisch 1983; Singha 1998). The shift from killing by visible individuals to killing with bombs dropped from the skies by a virtually invisible, taxpayer-funded professional military does not make the deaths any more acceptable in moral terms.²¹

Some observers would argue that interpersonal morality and humanity are still intact in the United States, in that the majority of Americans simply wanted the Iraqis to be rid of their dictator. Yet many across the world find such morality difficult to take, suggestive as it is of 19th-century discourse about the "civilizing mission" of colonialism. Alexander Hinton's summary of the discourses and labeling that enabled the decimation of indigenous peoples in the wake of European expansionism seems to apply uncannily to Iraq: "This devastation was legitimated

by contradictory discourses that simultaneously asserted that the colonisers had the 'burden' of 'civilizing' the 'savages' living on their newly conquered territories and that their deaths mattered little since they were not fully human" (2002:8). Consider in this light, the Indian journalist Siddharth Varadarajan's discussion of the following excerpt from CNN's interview of the Kuwaiti doctor treating 12-year-old Ali, who lost his arms and his family in the U.S. bombing:

CNN's Kyra Phillips: Doctor, tell us what this little boy has been saying to you.

Dr. al-Najada: Actually, today he was in good condition ... and started speaking with a journalist. The thing which he (asked Ali was) what message he wants to reflect from the war. He said, first of all, thank you for the attention they're giving to him, but he hopes nobody from the children in the war will suffer like what he suffer.

CNN: Doctor, does he understand why this war took place? Has he talked about Iraqi freedom and the meaning? Does he understand it?

Varadarajan writes:

The bare transcript on CNN's website provides no hint of how the doctor reacted to Ms. Phillips's touching belief that little Ali—"free" at last but orphaned, burned, and bereft of limbs—would actually be grateful to the United States. It merely records the doctor replying that he hadn't discussed this issue with Ali because "he's in very bad psychological trauma." "But," he added, "we discussed this issue with his uncle and the message we got from his family, they said they are living far away from the American troops, from the military of Saddam ... and they don't know how they [i.e. the United States] hit them by missiles." [2003a]

When it comes to explaining such indifference to suffering and trauma and the mass acquiescence in state-led terror or war, ignorance may well be a mitigating factor. Indeed, this has been a central issue in the discussions of German guilt for the Holocaust (Arendt 1963; Clendinnen 1999; Finkelstein and Birn 1998). The role played by television networks in supporting the foreign policy and national security concerns of their own countries or of parties in power is well documented (see Aronson 1970; Hallin 1994; Said 1981), as is the manner in which the mass media (e.g., Radio Mille Collines) were directly used in the Rwanda genocide (Article 19 1996; Simons 2002). But what is of direct concern for us here, as anthropologists studying the "war on terror," is the role of the media in producing ignorance, in effecting an erasure

of any sense of public culpability by appealing to a "higher" moral purpose or by shielding the majority of Americans from the suffering of the war's victims.

During the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan, U.S. newspapers reported the "secret memo" issued by Walter Isaacson, Chairman and CEO of CNN, asking that correspondents reporting Afghan casualties

make sure we do not seem to be simply reporting from their vantage or perspective. We must talk about how the Taliban are using human shields and how the Taliban have harbored the terrorists responsible for killing close to 5,000 innocent people in the World Trade Center attacks. You want to make sure people understand that when they see civilian suffering there, it's in the context of a terrorist attack that caused enormous suffering in the United States. [FAIR 2001]

In CNN's coverage of the NATO war on Yugoslavia, the choice of imagery plays a similar role:

News on war destructions have also got the character of dynamic video spots: its reality is minimized to the maximum. Shots of night fires, because the bombings occur the most often by night, give an impression as if happening in some imaginary space, followed by a naked naming of the towns in which all of this is happening, as if it were some pyrotechnics game free of human presence. And, as by rule, right after such shots, presented in a way as not to provoke some emotion, the colourful shots of the Albanian refugees arrive (usually the shots of the children and helpless old people, meant to incite compassion). By that, in an indirect way, the destruction of Serbian towns is being justified, and in such a way as if in those towns, bombed by night, the children and old people have not lived at all. [Novakovic 1999:23]

In Iraq the mission of inuring the U.S. public was accomplished in other ways (Bennet 2003; Varadarajan 2003b), not least by the strategy of "embedding" journalists with U.S. fighting units. Embedding simultaneously accomplished two seemingly contradictory goals: It brought the heart of the battle right into people's living rooms, through cozy relationships established between soldiers and the journalists who became temporarily part of their units (Paine 2003). It also sanitized the war, keeping intact the anesthetic of distance so central to the delivery of death and destruction in modern warfare.

State discourse on terrorism, transmitted through the media, also has an important effect in legitimating security legislation like the Orwellian-sounding USA Patriot Act of 2001, making people accept the violation of civil rights with equanimity, and creating "suspect communities" (see Hillyard 1993 on the Irish experience with British antiterrorist laws; see also American Civil Liberties Union

2002; Liberty 2002). If one were to locate the “banality of evil” (Arendt 1963) in the United States, perhaps one should look not only at the relations between the Bush administration and Halliburton but also at the fears of post–September 11 “security moms” (Tumulty and Novak 2003), at those who make and play online games like *America’s Army*, *Warcraft III*, and *Battlefield 1942*, which involve battling “enemies of freedom in virtual swamps, valleys and blasted villages all around the world” (McCandless 2003), at those who market “aggressive” vehicles like Hummers, sales of which boomed following the invasion of Iraq (Rampton and Stauber 2003). One might also look at the hubris of U.S. exceptionalism in law, which informs Washington’s opposition to the International Criminal Court (Forsythe 2002), at the everyday work of thousands of immigration officials who single out Muslim aliens for fingerprinting and compulsory registration, and at the scandal that is Guantanamo Bay (Cole 2003; Lewis 2003), where, as Giorgio Agamben argues, the U.S. administration has “eradicated the legal status of (the prisoners detained there) and produced entities that can neither be named or classified by the Law” (2002: 1). As the paradigm of security, to borrow Agamben’s phrase, produces a more or less permanent state of emergency nationally and internationally, the project for an anthropology of culpability necessarily entails coming to grips with the “state of exception” to which the “war on terror” has given rise. What would an ethnography of the “state of exception” look like, and can U.S. anthropologists afford to ignore this subject when discussing culpability in near and far corners of the globe?

Conclusion

In a world that prefers security to justice, there is loud applause whenever justice is sacrificed on the altar of security. The rite takes place on the streets. Every time a criminal falls in a hail of bullets, society feels some relief from the disease that makes it tremble. The death of each lowlife has a pharmaceutical effect on those living the high life. The word “pharmacy” comes from *pharmakos*, the Greek name for humans sacrificed to the gods in times of crises.

—Galeano, 2000

In this article I have attempted to raise questions about anthropology’s response to contemporary phenomena like genocide and the “war on terror,” on the one hand, and, on the other hand, about attempts to redress similar acts in the past through truth commissions, war crimes tribunals, apologies, and so on. The seeming contradictions between the two can only be reconciled by a comparative political economy of the way in which culpability and morality are constructed in the world today, by a chipping away at the pretensions of the bearers of moral standards

who act in the name of universal values but are unable and, indeed, refuse, to will a universal application of their norms. I argue that in the process of attributing culpability to others, including their *past* selves, through apologies and truth commissions, powerful states often conceal their own culpability in the present.

State culpability in the present is also concealed by the work of relatively autonomous institutions that engender public sanction or complicity in violence against minorities or distant others. For far too long, anthropology has specialized in culturalist explanations of violence that inevitably set up hierarchies between cultures without looking at the transnational flows of ideas of security, terror, and “normal” states of the economy and the global reach of a few media organizations. Yet to see the perpetrators or supporters of violence not merely as warped individuals but as subject to powerful discourses of hate that translate in unhealthy ways into their everyday lives does not lead one to condone their acts. What it should lead us to do, however, is to confront these discourses of hate with alternative conversations, because we have no other choice.

Notes

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1. As George Marcus and Michael Fischer note, although anthropology’s role in “the salvaging of distinct cultural forms of life from a process of apparent global Westernization” has received much attention, an equally important role that anthropologists have assigned themselves is to use the insights gained from such salvage work as “a form of cultural critique” of their own societies (1986:1), in the process addressing debates “about rationality, the existence of human universals, the cultural malleability of human institutions, and the nature of tradition and modernity in a changing world” (1986:20). Although Marcus and Fischer make their argument from the perspective of “Western” anthropology and its autocritique, the question of human universals remains a central one in any version of anthropology.

2. In India, the first departments of sociology and anthropology were set up in 1919 and 1921, respectively. (For different national histories of anthropology outside the “West,” see Geldin 1994; Sundar et al. 2000.) Writing of her experiences in the 1930s, Irawati Karve, India’s first woman anthropologist, remarked,

The author remembers vividly how Germans and Englishmen refused to see any comparison between the institutions of the primitive people and their own institutions. Every time the author, then a student or a much younger teacher suggested such a comparison it was brushed aside. After this experience one learnt to keep one’s thought to oneself. [1968:179]

The notion of “foreignness” was never true even for Europe and the United States, where a sizable number of anthropologists worked in their own societies (starting at least as far back as Mead). It is further complicated by the growth of a diasporic scholarship where the Other is studied precisely because it is so intimately a part and yet not a part of oneself. Anthropological engagement with difference, if it is to mean anything, must involve more than mere geographical separation (see the collection of essays in Gupta and Ferguson 1997 for a discussion of this in the context of fieldwork).

3. In their review of the existing literature on “why apologies now,” Jeffrey Olick and Brenda Coughlin point to several theories: “the postmodern demise of legitimizing narratives,” “the morally shattering experiences of total war and genocide in the twentieth century,” “the role of the mass media” in transmitting the horrors of war to their readers or viewers, Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s notion of the “apologetic state as an extrapolation from the liberal individual,” and their own theory of the “extrapolation of tort law” to create “restitutive norms necessary for contemporary forms of international commerce” (2003:45, 47).

4. See, for instance, the refusal of two International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia chief prosecutors, Louise Arbour of Canada and Carla del Ponti of Switzerland, to admit charges against Tony Blair, Robin Cook, and George Robertson for violations of international humanitarian law during the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. For substantiation of these charges, see Rangwala 1999.

5. In somewhat parallel terms, had the new South African state not privileged reconciliation over justice, international media coverage would have been overwhelmingly negative. Richard Wilson’s (2001) otherwise excellent study of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) ignores the influences of this wider international discourse and the threat of capital flight on the South African state’s choice for truth and reconciliation.

6. Incidentally, no such apology has been voiced for the Bengal famine of 1942–43, in which an estimated three million died and that, as Amartya Sen (1981) and others have shown, the British colonial government exacerbated by refusing to recognize.

7. A story in the *Washington Post* describes the U.S. military’s plans to investigate the loyalty of its Muslim troops. “Military sociologist Charles Moskos is traveling to Iraq this month to poll troops about morale issues. He plans to ask . . . ‘How do you feel about having a Muslim in your tent?’ ” (Mintz and Vistica 2003: A10).

8. It is worth remembering in this connection that cultures and societies cannot be equated with states (Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences 1996; Wolf 1982:3–23). Moreover, cultures are not uniform texts. Sometimes, one might also need to acknowledge moral and cultural conflict within the perpetrators of violence themselves. As Hermann Rebel says, “Cultures are not merely ineffable to each other but are so internally, to their own participants” (1989:125; see also Sider 1986). Arguing broadly within a political economy tradition, Rebel calls for a more complex reading of subjects, which allows for “split selves,” in terms of cultural hegemony.

9. For an account of anthropology’s responsibility in the wider appropriation and transformation of culture, see Trouillot 2002.

10. As a quick Internet search for “ancient ethnic hatreds” would reveal, the media’s portrayal of wars and genocides as a product of “ancient hatreds” or cultural peculiarities stems in part from politicians’ and the media’s own simplifications but also from some scholarly literature. Even someone trying to provide an

alternative to the ethnic hatreds thesis for Bosnia, like Stephen Schwartz writing in the *Policy Review*, “concedes” that

it would be absurd to deny that the Balkans, like much of Eastern Europe, have remained outside the mainstream of European history, and that their penchant for brutality in politics and war indicates that, in some ways, some of these cultures remain unassimilated to Western values and attitudes. Further, it is clear that violence in the region has a repetitive character, going back even before the Slavic intrusion in the sixth century A.D. [Schwartz 1999]

Many similar examples could be given of media coverage and scholarly analysis for different parts of the world, including the sudden expertise the Western media has acquired on Shia–Sunni divides in Iraq.

11. This assumption underlies the whole discussion on weapons of mass destruction—President Clinton’s 2000 description of South Asia as one of the most dangerous places on earth because of nuclear proliferation in India and Pakistan ignores the fact that the most frequent use of bombing since World War II has been by the United States, which is also the only country to have actually used nuclear weapons. (See also Steel 2003 on the 2003 London arms fair.)

12. The parallels with the related field of human rights are instructive. Several accounts of human rights and relativism suggest that relativism is necessitated by the practices of non-Western Others—so, for instance, in discussing the relativist challenge, popular examples are female circumcision and mutilation and flogging as punishments, rather than, say, silicone breast implants or cosmetic foot surgery in the “West” or capital punishment in the United States (see, e.g., Perry 1997; Teson 1992:43 n. 4). The *burkha* poses a huge relativist challenge to many, whereas the logic of the Western fashion industry goes unmarked in human rights discussions. If the burkha becomes the main symbol of some women’s subordination, then, presumably, one can rest content only with absolute nudity (for an excellent critique of the contemporary politics of discourses on the burkha, see Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002). There appears to be very little discussion of the reasons for “Western” anxiety about clothing and why “Western clothes” are seen as an essential part of liberal politics. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., writing in the *New York Review of Books*, makes what to him and his readers may seem a perfectly natural argument on why Saddam Hussein is politically different from Osama Bin Laden: “Observers noted that Saddam Hussein practically always appeared in Western suits, Osama Bin Laden always in Arab costume” (2003:25).

13. Not all forms of violence, of course, flow from Othering. Jill Korbin’s (2002) perceptive study of mothers charged with killing their children, Christine Gailey’s (2002) analysis of parents who sell their daughters into sex work or other forms of servitude, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin’s (1998) examples of women who were killed by their own relatives during Partition to save the family honor—all challenge everyday notions of what it is to identify with “one’s own.”

14. In the words of the RSS’s former chief and ideologue, M. S. Golwalkar,

The foreign races in Hindusthan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture, i.e. of the Hindu nation and must lose their separate existence to merge in the Hindu race, or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu

Nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment—not even citizen's rights. [1939:62]

Elsewhere, he says:

To keep up the purity of the Race and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the Semitic Races—the Jews. Race pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well nigh impossible it is for Races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindusthan to learn and profit by. [Golwalkar 1939:35]

15. The Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Prevention Act (TADA), which preceded the current Prevention of Terrorism Act, is one of the greatest scandals of modern India. Under TADA, 76,000 people were arrested, many of them ordinary peasants. The conviction rate was less than one percent, in part at least because the sweeping powers given to the police under TADA led to arbitrary arrests and shoddy investigation (People's Union for Democratic Rights 2000). Although TADA was allowed to lapse in 1995 after widespread protest, all parties found it so useful that they have tried to bring in substitutes. The political opposition, including the Congress Party, vociferously opposed POTA on the grounds of its potential misuse. Nevertheless, in the states where it is in power, the Congress Party has enacted equally draconian legislation, like the Maharashtra Prevention of Organised Crime Act and the Madhya Pradesh Special Areas Security Act. POTA itself was forcibly pushed through as central legislation by the BJP-led government on March 28, 2002.

16. Incredibly, the belief persists even after the war. An opinion poll taken in September 2003 revealed that 70 percent of U.S. respondents hold Saddam responsible for the attack on the World Trade Center (USA Today 2003).

17. Iraq Body Count is an Anglo-American research group tracking media-reported civilian deaths. Its website can be accessed at www.iraqbodycount.org.

18. According to Frank Newport, writing in January 2004,

At this point, all Gallup indicators suggest that Bush continues to enjoy majority support for the nation's involvement in Iraq. Less than half of Americans—42%—say that the U.S. involvement in Iraq was a mistake, and according to a Gallup Poll conducted Jan. 9–11 59% say that military involvement in Iraq has been “worth it.” It's important to note, however, that the “worth it” number reached as low as 50% last September, suggesting the potential for it to drop again in the weeks to come. [Newport 2004]

19. In a rare exception, Renato Rosaldo's (1980) account of Ilongot head-hunting takes into account that group's experience of World War II.

20. For the relevant portion of the transcript of Albright's interview with Lesley Stahl, see Campaign against Sanctions on Iraq 1999.

21. In any case, U.S. soldiers put in positions that require inhuman actions at close proximity fare no better than Germans or Third World fundamentalists in terms of individual morality. The testimonies of U.S. soldiers to the Dellums Committee (Citizens Commission of Enquiry 1972) all note that the killing at My Lai was not an aberration but was typical of the Vietnam War, a context characterized by the random killing of civilians, the torture of prisoners, the calling in of napalm strikes, the existence of free-fire zones referred to as “Indian country,” and so on.

Official U.S. policy and military practice had fully dehumanized the Vietnamese. Many of the soldiers who testified noted that they did not protest such practices because of hostility from other soldiers (Citizens Commission of Enquiry 1972:77), because they feared being sent to jail or reprimanded (1972:89, 105), or because protest would have done no good anyway (1972:61, 88, 118).

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