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Sleepers, Moles and Martyrs

Secret Identifications, Societal Integration and the Differing Meanings of Freedom

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&

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Introduction

John Bendix & Regina Bendix

The symposium "Sleepers, Moles, and Martyrs: Secret Identifications, Societal Integration, and the Differing Meanings of Freedom" was held on October 6–8, 2002 in the conference facility Waldschlösschen in Reinhausen near Göttingen, Germany. Regina Bendix organized the symposium in collaboration with Friedrich Kratochwil and Richard Ned Lebow. Occasioned by the social, political and mass media discourses after the bombings of New York's World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, an interdisciplinary group of scholars came together to explore the connotations and implications of the term "sleeper". The biographies of terrorist perpetrators are but one of many permutations of sleeper-like phenomena in late modern polities. Clandestine operatives of the state are sleepers, and both willing and unwilling victims of terrorism are discursively transformed from sleepers into martyrs. Starting with analyses of the discourses about sleepers in Part I – their historical antecedents, narrative emplotment, and semantic differentiation – Part II turns to the hidden or unspoken aspects of the state, the challenge of fundamentalist terrorism to the modern political project and the tensions between neighborly discourse, public display and the state. Part III juxtaposes changing depictions of Shiite martyrdom with the violence done to the term "martyr" within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In Part IV, cultural secrets encoded in memorials and public silences in academic discourse are addressed. The different cases assembled offer comparative materials and perspectives from the USA, France, the Netherlands, Pakistan, Spain, Iran, Israel, Istria and Sweden.

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The German and American press often used the term "sleeper" in the immediate aftermath of the September 11th 2001 attacks on New York and Washington. It was shorthand for describing how major acts of destruction could be planned by foreigners living in Western Europe or North America, in a sense under the very noses of the authorities. It was an easy way for the media to characterize what now seemed a façade: those who appeared well integrated in host societies and cultural environments not their own in fact had remained secretly devoted to ideals not just alien to the environment they lived in, but when awakened or called to their "true nature", devoted to destroying their hosts. In the vocabulary of Kenneth Burke's theory of rhetoric, "sleeper" became a way to name the problem.

Since then, a more complex picture has emerged, for along with the irrefutable reality of the destruction and the clear symbolic import of the targets, it also became necessary to identify not just how the acts were carried out, but where to locate the direct perpetrators in social, cultural and political terms. While the term "sleeper" seemed particularly suited to Mohammad Atta, as the personification of the unassuming long-term resident from another country who awakens to action and violence, the term "sleeper" itself comes, among other connotations, out of an older secret service context in which agents are deliberately planted within other societies to spy and be "moles".

Even the animal allusions that have been attached to such spy work – the nosiness and furtiveness attached to "ferreting" out information; the subterranean work of burrowing in like a mole in its dark, night-like environment – are noteworthy, for they readily become attached to this more recent imagery of the terrorist "sleeper". Real and imagined secrecy, or keeping rather than revealing secrets, has been the focus of past work in a variety of disciplines, but the September 11th events lent a sense of urgency, in geopolitical terms, to understanding it better against this backdrop.

At the same time, the self-destruction Atta and his compatriots engaged in, coming in an era marked by suicide bombing as a political (and religious) act in the Middle East, suggested the presence of a strain of martyrdom that deserved greater scrutiny. In Western public discourse and perception, self-destruction as a radical form of political speech has become rare and is more seen as belonging to a distant if not "backwards" past. Self-immolation has been an episodic feature of political protest in various nations since 1945, but examples have tended to be horrifying cries by individuals wanting to be heard by governments or by the population at large. The intent has been not to destroy others in the process, but if anything to halt – through a dramatic, ultimate gesture – further destruction, almost as though the sacrifice of the one would help save the many. Recent political suicides seem also to stem from a mixture of a recognition of personal failure, desperation, and an attempt to wrest one's public biography, through this ultimate performance, from the discourse of scandal (Noyes 2002).

There have also been many cases of innocent bystanders being killed as a byproduct of groups left, right, religious, and regionalist making statements through violence rather than words. Here the desire may be to destroy specific individuals seen as embodying whatever is despised, or to bring down (or at least force the hand of) a government by sowing terror in public spaces. Yet while there are exceptions, such acts often do not come at the expense of a bomb-layer or assassin's life, and there are even cases of deliberate attempts to keep bystanders

safe by issuing warnings ahead of time. Some of the groups who use such methods also are aware that wanton destructive acts with many casualties may well reinforce public support for the state rather than for the group's cause, and cast their violence in symbolic and material terms instead.

Religiously inspired and politically motivated martyrdom performed on a global stage that costs a perpetrator his or her life and deliberately destroys bystanders who are judged guilty by association seems to be a new story, performed for an audience that is larger than ever. Terrorism often targets specific governments, but the acts of September 11th were also directed explicitly against value systems or lifestyles. Yet as some contributors point out, we may simply be the victims of bad memory, as there are antecedents in various traditions for martyrdom even of this kind. New is that the mass media today ensure global coverage and thus globalized knowledge of such acts.

Television coverage has been a feature of hostage crises in recent years, and perpetrators have not infrequently manipulated this access. That CNN and other television networks aired the destruction on September 11th live not only turned the morning news into visual trauma, but definitively put an end to an idea that has circulated since the 1960s, namely that 'the revolution will not be televised'. Immediacy and instantaneous transmission have multiplied the cultural interpretations and personal angles from which to approach the terrorist acts many times over.[1] It is then not surprising that the Bush administration quite successfully enlisted the media's support in fighting the war on terrorism by in essence restricting what they could report about it. Being a witness to destruction, live on the television screen, also meant witnessing the visual narrative the terrorists wanted to relate and thereby potentially also seeing more than one side of a global conflict.[2] An administration arming to go to war has little interest in its citizens wondering why there is such anger and hatred against American values and American citizens. The image of the burning and collapsing twin towers, replayed again and again since then, also repeats the story of these suicide flyers, demonstrating that

"the act of turning physical defeat into narrative victory" is a rhetorically most powerful operation (Edwards 2002:181). As Oskar Verkaaik said during our discussions, "death is very convincing." Al-Qaeda very effectively utilizes existing media imagery to fuel not only terrorist imaginations but also to participate in shaping global narratives about power, belief and justice. Terrorists might be drawing inspiration from extant (Western) print or film fiction, but the regular use of documentary and interview footage, along with recordings from unknown locations, clearly feeds into a desire to create the public perception of a "shadowy" style of power being used by Al-Qaeda's chief ideologues or "dreamaturges", if one wants to put it in the language of sleep.[3]

The biographies of the 911 perpetrators have proven rather more complex than initially thought, deserving more sophisticated treatment than the many conspiracy theories have been able to offer.[4] Discovering that "sleepers" exist who reveal their hidden selves in final performances of enormous violence has troubling implications for liberally-minded (and Judeo-Christian) societies that for decades have wrestled with questions of integration (esp. of Muslims) and multiculturalism. While the military, the police, and the secret services in various countries have tried to address "shadowy" networks and presumed "links" between past, present, and future perpetrators – in the process themselves building networks and practices of secrecy[5] – the symposium "Sleepers, Moles, and Martyrs" that formed the basis of the papers assembled here was oriented more toward making a contribution to the discussion of what the implications now might be for host societies, polities, and cultures in Europe and North America.

Disciplinary Encounter

The symposium brought together ethnologists, folklorists, anthropologists, political scientists, literature scholars and sociologists from six countries. It is then not surprising that though the conference was in English, a variety of disciplinary tongues were spoken, and a fair amount of translation between fields and perspectives took place. To ethnologists who tend to emphasize the importance of the particular, the idea of the "sleeper" is already embedded in the fieldwork they engage in. Fieldwork requires the researcher to engage in documentation and participant observation, and such behavior creates numerous ethical dilemmas, and to those being visited, interviewed, and watched, the motivations for gathering information may be quite obscured or even suspect.[6] Political scientists, who tend to emphasize the importance of the general, must resign themselves to the fact that their scholarly work may be of immediate interest to agencies of the state that have vested interests in being secretive about what they are doing with this knowledge.

In the context of the interaction at this conference, a number of the reservations that disciplines hold towards others were fruitfully brought into the open. Some of the social scientists would have liked to see ethnographers add meaning and interpretation to what they gathered from informants, even as they enjoyed the new perspectives on narrative and symbolic evidence ethnologists and folklorists provided. Some folklorists and anthropologists, in turn, would have liked to see their social science colleagues descend a bit from their fascination with typologies and generalization and address what their theoretical constructs actually looked like in the field. By the same token, however, it was important for the ethnologists present to recognize that some social scientists would still like to be able to rely on them for assessments of cultural wholes, even though it is today more impossible than ever to provide a clearly defined concept of culture and the notion of cultural wholes has, within the discipline, long been criticized if not abandoned. The social scientists in turn came to recognize that though ethnologists can provide detailed, context-rich, cultural information, it would often come in forms hard to abstract or fit into predictive formats. To that extent, one of the fruits of interdisciplinary encounters of this kind is the discovery of latent – if not sleeping – images that other disciplines hold about one's own.

Overarching Themes of this Special Issue

It seemed both undesirable (and near-impossible) to find one overarching explanation for the sleeper phenomenon, but it was possible to point to several recurring major themes and sub-themes: the role of modernization (and its attendant divergent modernities) in relation to identity formation; the need to relativize perspectives and language; and, most frustrating, the difficulty of trying to investigate what by its very nature is not intended to be revealed.

The "traditional" narrative of modernity generally foregrounds its relevant components – industrialization, democratization, dislocation. Yet our discussions confirmed what scholars of modernization have been saying: modernity comes in multiple and competing forms. Thus "fundamentalism" as embraced by the perpetrators of 911 cannot be labeled a threat emanating from the "residual". It is rather a competing, extreme modernity. In the medicalizing language that also surfaces around the sleeper complex, competing modernities generate not viruses but rather something akin to autoimmune disease. From this perspective, sleepers and the ideologues who provide them with their script do not want to participate in the collective modernizing project and practice a seemingly non-modern intolerance. But in developing their strategies, they nonetheless employ thoroughly modern techniques and technologies, culminating in what is again a highly modern desire for maximum visibility.

At the level of the individual, modernization presents the self with differing options or identification choices. The culture of one's family or background differs in aspect from the culture that needs to be adapted to upon migration. The culture of background may itself be transforming in an incomprehensible manner or in a manner individuals deeply object to. There is an option to adopt the socio-economic status one is born into as opposed to the economic and professional status one aspires to, or there may be a choice to identify later in life with moral or religious precepts different than those one was socialized into.

The self may experience these options as empowering, valued facets of modern life. But the self may also experience such choices as painful, incongruent demands to be rejected, even violently so, and this latter aspect is difficult to understand in the context of Western societies that positively value the changes modernization brings. The typical expectation in the West has been that leaving what is labeled as "traditional" for the promise of the "modern" is inherently a good thing, carrying as it does implicit judgments about progress versus stagnation. The devaluation of what is thereby declared "not modern" does not go unnoticed among those so labeled.

At the societal level, the question is how the different kinds of modernities, in their order, values and predictabilities, can be grasped and brought into perspective. What 911 has shifted into plain view is the Panglossian conceit and sense of comfort with how things in the Western world are. In light of individuals who use the tolerant, comfortable, modern surroundings to act in very intolerant, destructive, and seemingly un-modern ways it is unavoidable that we reconsider the economic and political "order of things" from the highly local to the global.

Faced with real destruction, not abstractions or simulacra suitable for postmodernist or deconstructionist analysis, a more realist[ic] ethnographic and analytic practice is in order. The ethnological or anthropological project has been to make the mentalities of places conceptualized as Other understandable. While this effort must continue, there is a need to increase efforts to understand the niches "we", or small groups of "us", fashion. In immigrant contexts with established and emerging mixed neighborhoods and urban spaces, there is a palpable uncertainty over what the "we" might look like both culturally and socially, what the rules will now be, and what borders of tolerance are shared. Notions such as "loyalty" or "shared memory" which might inform social collectives from neighborhoods to entire polities carry multiple referents. The Hamburg neighbors, teachers, fellow-students and acquaintances of Mohammed Atta were caught, in hindsight, in a dilemma: were they witnessing increasing religious devotion or should they instead have been alarmed (or even notified the authorities)? Such overt uncertainties must be emphasized

but so must research into the realms of the shadows, the darker and less talked about aspects of our societies and polities.

The papers are grouped in four loose categories. The first section brings together three analyses of the discourses about sleepers: historical antecedents (Magliocco), communicative and narrative mechanisms (Campion-Vincent), and semantic operations (Bendix). The next section, using the notion of "shadow" and its multiple meanings, makes efforts to come to terms with known but hidden or unspoken aspects of the state and its history (Verkaaik), what examining the foundations of our theories of the secular state can tell us (Kratochwil), and the unfolding of self vis-à-vis the state in the tension between neighborly secrets and public display (Noyes). The third section combines officially endorsed yet subtly changing depictions of martyrdom (Marzolph) with a paper documenting the violence done to the term "martyr" itself (Hasan-Rokem). The two case studies in the final section probe into cultural secrets and public silences surrounding war memorials (Frykman) and knowledge production (Klein).

Notes

1. For a poignant account of a reaction unfolding alongside media coverage, mixing the personal, cultural and political, cf. Bowman (2001). A first assessment of 911's impact on journalism can be found in Zelizer and Stuart (2002).
2. Visual narration touches us aesthetically, intellectually, affectively and effectively – most poignantly evident in the controversy surrounding composer Karlheinz Stockhausen's response to 911: "Rushing in where angels fear to tread, Karlheinz Stockhausen voiced what some may have felt, but none dared say. For him, the crashing planes and collapsing towers felt like art: 'What happened there is: now you must re-adjust your brain. The greatest work of art imaginable for the whole cosmos. Minds achieving in a single act what we in music can only dream of, people rehearsing like mad for ten years, preparing fanatically for a concert, and then dying. You have people who are that focused on a performance and then 5,000 people who are dispatched to the afterlife, in a single moment. I couldn't match it. Against that, we – as composers – are nothing.' Surely the guy is crazy? In Stockhausen's defence, he did go on to admit it was a crime, because part

of the 'audience' was 'not consenting'. This demur didn't soften Gyorgy Ligeti's retort: 'Stockhausen should be locked up in a psychiatric hospital'" (Watson 2001).
3. The idea of "sleepers and dreamers" was developed in Thomas Hauschild's conference contribution. He built connections between examples of Al-Qaeda video-footage and alternate models of leadership and loyalty.
4. For the second anniversary of 911, the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*'s title story surveyed an astounding number of publications devoted to explaining the events with the use of (mutually contradictory) conspiracy theories (Cziesche et al. 2003:58–76, cf. also Campion-Vincent in this volume).
5. Some of which was discussed orally by conference participants with first-hand knowledge, information which even when presented in generalized terms was deemed unpublishable – for security reasons! Edward Shils's *The Torment of Secrecy* (1956) about the U.S. administration and bureaucracy makes the point that even legitimate governments that otherwise promote transparency find it necessary to have shadowy realms. One has difficulty, it seems, even openly discussing the secrecy surrounding secrecy.
6. The Albanian novelist Ismail Kadar's fictionalized rendition of Milman Parry and Albert Lord's fieldwork, undertaken in search of epic song in the Balkans in the first half of the 20th century, develops the "ethnographer perceived as spy" marvellously (1999).

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