The role of heroic doubling in terrorist radicalisation: a non-psychiatric perspective

Roger Griffin
Oxford Brookes University

Complementing psychiatric approaches to extremist violence

This article opens with a *caveat lector*. It is written by someone with no formal qualifications in any branch of psychiatry or psychology, but who has instead, like so many colleagues in the human sciences, trespassed in a somewhat cavalier fashion from his own specialism into areas of causal explanation where social psychological models are borrowed to cast light on patterns in collective human behaviour which defy satisfactory explanation within conventional historiographical paradigms of causality. Such a procedure obviously risks cherry picking elements of the social sciences that fit preconceived theories to produce 'scientistic' knowledge of the sort that may sound convincing to fellow non-scientists, but has the quality of the Emperor's New Clothes to experts.

In this article the situation is different. What it outlines is a model of radicalization which might be called euphemistically 'heuristic', 'speculative' or 'intuitive'. In other words, it has not been subjected to empirical testing, even if it can claim to draw on well documented case histories of terrorist violence and invoke several well researched areas of social anthropology and extremism studies. It thus makes no claim to count as a contribution to psychiatric knowledge in the area of extremism as such. Rather, it seeks to generate a fruitful dialogue between the human sciences and psychiatry on whether the motivations of those who carry out violent attacks on targets which for them symbolize a system or historical status quo they find intolerable should be considered *a priori* within the framework of 'mental disorders' and 'abnormal behaviour' which are the province of psychiatry. It suggests instead they can be treated more usefully in terms of complex but 'normal' mechanisms of identity formation, and the human need for transcendent meaning and a sacred purpose in life. It should thus be read as the equivalent of a remedy that is proposed to complement orthodox medicine rather than as an alternative to it.

In fact, my work on extremist movements in modern and contemporary history results from an earlier act of inter-disciplinary transgression. An undergraduate degree in French and German literature brought regular immersion in an unfamiliar, even extreme way of seeing the world creatively articulated in a work of fiction which reflected a particular stage in the History of Ideas and the evolution of Western culture. Translated to the study of modern political ideologies this meant reconstructing fascist world-views not from outside in, namely the perspective of opponents or victims, but from inside out, namely in terms of the account which fascists themselves gave of their values, aspirations, and policies, and the symbolic forms of representation through which they expressed them. Once methodological empathy was established as the prerequisite for identifying fascism's mobilizing myth and formulating its ideological definition, a highly productive velvet revolution took place within comparative fascist studies which allowed even the most extreme acts of Nazi violence to be explained in terms of 'normal' psychological processes and needs (Griffin, 2008). The shift in focus is reminiscent of the gradual revolution that 'antipsychiatry' achieved within mainstream psychiatry when some investigators began describing conditions and symptoms of abnormal psychology in terms of the patient's own experience of them, without imposing preconceived criteria of sanity or normality as the lens through which to investigate them.

Lifton's theory of doubling

It is this spirit that a series of particularly impressive investigations into the complex area of causality that arise when attempting to make sense of deliberate acts of inhumanity have been carried out by the American psychiatrist Robert Lifton. In the course of his long career he has applied his professional expertise to probing ever deeper into the 'normal' psychological mechanisms involved in such areas as brainwashing, survival of nuclear attack, belief in revolutionary immortality, denial of war guilt, fear of death, millennial cults, the plurality of the self, and, of crucial relevance to this volume, the role played by 'doubling' in acts of extreme inhumanity. For Lifton doubling is the phenomenon that occurs when an individual compartmentalises his or her life so successfully that without involving syndromes associated with such statistically rare conditions as multiple personality disorder, psychosis, sociopathology, or schizophrenia, an individual's socialized, civilized, 'moral' self can continue to live an affectively stable existence in tandem with a

secondary, amoral personality who deliberately carries out atrocities. The secondary persona, who apparently takes over the 'host's' life on a regular basis, is reminiscent of the archetypal topos of the 'evil twin' who completes taboo-breaking acts of depravity and cruelty with no guilt or remorse as long as they serve an ideological imperative or a higher cause.

He first explores this phenomenon in his ground-breaking *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (1986), based on in-depth interviews with some of those who carried out medical experiments and selections for extermination in the Nazi death camps while maintaining the emotional routines of a normal home life, a duplicity brought to life for millions by John Boyne's *The Boy with Striped Pyjamas* (Boyne, 2006). As he put it in an interview with Harry Kreisler of Berkeley:

So, when they were in Auschwitz they had an Auschwitz self, which was responsible for doing all of this, as well as for the very vulgar life that one led in Auschwitz. Very heavy drinking and vulgar jokes, and the whole combination of things that made up Auschwitz. But they would go home to their families, from Poland to Germany, for weekends or for leaves and they would be ordinary fathers and husbands where they would function in a relatively ordinary way, calling forth a non-Auschwitz self or a prior, relatively more humane, self. And each of these selves functioned as though it were a separate autonomous self. And that's why I called it 'doubling', even though, of course, they were part of the same overall self. (Kreisler, 1999).

The context of the interview was the publication of a book that applied this model to making sense of one of the most spectacular and potentially lethal terrorist attacks to occur before 9/11, the release of sarin in the Tokyo metro system in 1995 by members of the obscure Aum Shinrikyo cult, an assault on civil society that, had the toxic chemical been sufficiently pure in its liquid state, would have caused many thousands of deaths (Lifton, 1999). By analysing the testimonies which he gathered from members of this bizarre New Age doomsday cult, Lifton was able to drill deep into the motivations of the fanatics, many of them highly educated scientists, who had been prepared to execute the orders of their guru Shoko Asahara in a deliberate act of mass destruction. Within the cult's tightly controlled group mind, the indiscriminate loss of life was necessary to precipitate the onset of a human-made apocalypse, thus fulfilling the predictions of a new millennium which Asahara had arrived at by syncretizing elements of Zen Buddhism, Christian eschatology, and New Religious

Movements. Deploying weapons of mass destruction during rush-hour on the station immediately below the Japanese parliament was supposed to 'force the end' of the present dispensation, thereby ushering in the new dawn.

Just as the doctors' Nazi doubles were working to hasten the rebirth of Germany in a new millennium predicted by Adolf Hitler by wiping out its racial enemies and improve its Ayan stock (Redles, 2005), so Aum's converts had internalized the need to eliminate the world of non-believers *en masse* to clear the way for an earthly paradise. Indeed, its technical section was working on procuring a nuclear weapon to bring about a very different 'end of history' than the one Francis Fukuyama anticipated in his best-seller published three years before the attack (Fukuyama, 1992). In both cases, educated, socialized, high functioning individuals with no history of socio-pathological symptoms were induced by a hot-house environment of societal malaise, individual despair and the fanatical belief maintained by charismatic leadership, to develop a secondary self. Lifton himself comments that in the same way as the camp doctors had developed a Nazi self who cohabited with a non-Nazi self, so Asahara's adepts had been able to 'form both an Aum self, which was thriving in Aum, and a non-Aum self or anti-Aum self which had doubts and even antagonisms' (Kreisler, 1999).

It is revealing that the interview in which he makes these remarks is entitled 'Evil, the Self, and Survival. Conversation with Robert Jay Lifton, Psychiatrist and Author'. It is clear from the following discussion that in developing his ideal type of doubling in two 'trade books' written for the general reader, Lifton has actually stepped out of his professional psychiatrist persona into his speculative authorial one. Freed from the fetters of experimental rigour and the tyranny of footnotes, he has felt licensed to coin an idiosyncratic concept not sanctioned by any classic psychological or psychiatric theory in order to make sense of his findings. As he points out in *The Nazi Doctors*, though 'doubling' may evoke the well-established psychoanalytic (Bokanowski, Lewkowicz, 2009) and psychiatric concepts of 'splitting' (Jackobsen, 1997), it is not to be confused with it. In an important passage (Lifton, 2000), he emphasizes that, whereas splitting is a mechanism of self-preservation and self-defence resorted to by a vulnerable, disempowered psyche under immediate (perceived) threat, doubling allows an *empowered* individual to commit acts of evil guiltlessly, without affecting the functionality of the 'normal', socialized self, which

continues to coexist with the inner murderer or torturer without apparent conflict or remorse.

The philosopher Frank Seeburger argues that Lifton creates unnecessary confusion between the two when he talks of splitting as if it is a special category of doubling, and not demarcating clearly enough between the survival function of 'splitting', where agency is denied a vulnerable individual who in self-defence projects the cause of suffering onto another 'bad' inner or external self (Burton, 2012), and the 'doubling' that enables someone who exercises agency to 'embrace evil with an extreme lack of restraint' (Seeburger, 2009). Distinguished from splitting in this way, Lifton's doubling acquires an as yet under-researched relationship to the duplicity of consciousness associated with two other mechanisms for disowning the 'evil' committed in extreme circumstances by the protagonist, namely 'denial' and 'cognitive dissonance'. But in fact the point Seeburger makes seems corroborated by Lifton's himself when he states in the Berkeley interview that he does not intend doubling to be understood with Freudian connotations. Instead, 'doubling has more to do with the work of Otto Rancke [sic!], one of the early psychoanalysts, than with Freud himself'.

Heroic Doubling

Lifton is here actually referring to Otto Rank, student and then critic of Freud, and author of *The Double: A Psychoanalytical Study* (1914), an enormously influential study of the archetypal motif of the Doppelgänger which was based not on interviews with patients, but on a wide-ranging study of the motif in Western literature and cinema. Though Rank analyses different treatments of it in German (e.g. von Chamisso's *Peter Schlehmil*), Russian (e.g. Dostoevsky's *The Double*), English (Stevenson's *Jeckyll and Hyde*, Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*), and American literature, the immediate catalyst to Rank's exploration of the double was Paul Wegener's silent film *The Student of Prague* (1913), loosely based on Edgar Allen Poe' *William Wilson*. In it, the student Balduin, hopelessly in love and desperate for a change of fortune, unwittingly allows the Mephistophelian Scalpinelli to take possession of his reflection as a result of a 'Faustian' pact he makes in order to become rich and win the heart of the countess he loves. In the guise of Balduin, the impostor wreaks ever more havoc in the student's life until he has to watch in anguish

while his own double kills the count, thus dashing any hope of a relationship with the countess. Balduin's suicide marks the triumph of his evil twin. Lifton makes a direct allusion to Wegener's film in the chapter of *The Nazi Doctors* entitled 'Doubling: The Faustian Bargain'.

In short, when Lifton's concept of 'doubling' is used in the context of modern, civilized human beings spawning an alter ego capable of coldly committing acts of fanatical violence or calculated inhumanity, it should be linked not to Freudian psychoanalysis or the psychiatry of splitting, but to Rank's classic study of the uncanny, demonic, repressed 'other' within us all, a theme explored by his contemporary Carl Jung through the concept of the 'shadow' within a different psychoanalytic frame. In doubling, the latent human capacity for extreme violence and cruelty is attributed to an aspect of one's own self which functionally separates off from the original personality so completely that it acquires relative autonomy from it, immunizing it from the torments of conscience, guilt, and compassion. It is in this sense that Lifton calls the mechanism 'a form of socialization to evil' (Kreisler, 1999).

Were he to have written his book a century later, Rank would doubtless have been struck by the continued proliferation of malevolent doubles in modern cinema and television, whether in horror films (transformations into vampire or zombie often play on the theme of doubling and the sense of the uncanny that results), and in the many portraits of a serial killer who seemingly has a 'normal', even engaging persona, outside or in between acts of homicidal violence (e.g. Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, Mary Harron's *American Psycho*, or the many films inspired since 1913 by Jack the Ripper and the Boston Strangler). But he may have been equally impressed by the proliferation of positive, benevolent screen doubles who pit themselves against evil, not just those familiar as the superheroes of Marvel Comics such as *Spiderman*, Batman, Wonder Woman, Superman, X-Men, and the brilliant spoof of such films, The *Incredibles*, but also as the more complex characters at the centre of some of the most successful films of all time, such as Star Wars, Lord of the Rings, Avatar, and Harry Potter. In such films the unwanted confrontation with embodiments of moral evil forces a 'normal', unheroic human being (or Hobbit) to forge a heroic double from within his or her psychological resources capable of saving humanity, planet Earth, or (in the case of Avatar) an entire lunar ecosystem.

What this article suggests is that the 'heroic double' is to be conceptualized as the mythological counterpart of the 'evil double' illuminated by Lifton's theory, so that doubling is no longer identified with moral depravity or psychosis. This insight in turn opens up a fresh perspective concerning the psychological dynamics of extremist violence when it is committed for (what the protagonist experiences as) ideological or idealistic motives. The deeper implications of this change of perspective emerge when the original connotations of 'the hero' are brought into focus.

The sacred warrior

An important feature of concept of heroes in classical Greek mythology was that they were partly human and partly divine, just as *avatar* referred in Sanskrit to the divine power 'rising' within a mere mortal. To become a hero thus represents the ability to transcend the limits of time and space of an ordinary life, connect with a higher plane of existence, and achieve a form of immortality, if only within human memory and cultural legend. Joseph Campbell famously showed the many permutations of the hero myth within universal human mythology and its persistence into literary culture (Campbell, 1949), but not enough work has been done on its central role within the political imagination of modern totalitarian regimes. Both communist and fascist states set about realizing an *anthropological revolution* (Gentile, 2005) through mass organizations, controlled cultural production, and propaganda which will produce a 'new man' and a 'new woman' whose self-sacrificial contribution to the new order, whether through martyrdom ⁱ or superhuman productivity guarantee them a form of secular immortality as heroes of the nation. ⁱⁱ

When the transformative process of extreme physical and mental training involved in creating a heroic 'new man' is specifically associated with the creation of a 'warrior' elite (the Fascist Black Shirts, the Nazi SS, the US Marines, the British SAS etc.) it immediately draws on a particular mythic archetype, the 'sacred warrior' or 'warrior-priest' encountered in many epic narratives within the world's mythological and religious traditions, the evil-slaying heroes of Greek and Roman legends and Norse myths, the tales of dragon-slaying Christian Knights, and the cosmic battles of the Hindu Mahabharata being just those more familiar in the West. It is a motif linked to feudal cults of military discipline and preparation for death on behalf of a higher moral

code the world over. But the warrior double also has affinities with the universal religious topos of the believer as martyr, perfected through faith, devotion, and self-sacrifice, and prepared to fight and die for his or her faith, a tradition familiar from Judaic, Christian and Islamic traditions, but which surfaces in many other guises.

Nor should such mythic *topoi* be dismissed simply as literary fictions. Christopher Coker has explored the central role of the warrior archetype in the terrorist mindset, and argues the physical act of fighting for, and committing violence for a higher cause can offer some who feel stranded in a meaningless existence without transcendence a psychological portal to a higher existence, a higher self:

[War] allows a warrior to tap into the vein of his own heroism. It allows him to lead an *authentic* life. In that sense, his life is never quite the same again. Battle can be akin to an epiphany or a religious experience. When we talk of the warrior soul, we do so because many of us must find a place for the sacred in our lives, and it is more than symbolic that the two words 'sacred' and 'sacrifice' etymologically share the same root. Sacrifice is the key to the warrior ethos.' (Coker, 2007; Juergensmeyer, 2001; Yamamoto, 2001).

A concrete example of the relevance of such an observation to the most spectacular act of terrorism of all time is provided by Ruth Stein in her Freudian reading of the motivation of the 9/11 bombers as expressed in a letter presumably authored by their leader Mohamed Atta and which all the members of the group are thought to have read in the loneliness of their hotel room on the eve of the attacks. The purpose of the letter, an incongruous blend of practical instructions with religious and psychological exhortations, 'was to transform a young Muslim into a warrior, instilling spiritual motives that create inner peace, fearlessness, obeisance, and lack of feeling during the killing' (Stein, 2010). In other words, the letter aimed to maintain the members of the cell in their heroic warrior avatar, immune from the debilitating pangs of conscience and fear that still threatened to well up from their individual, non-heroic, 'real' selves and ruin their sacred mission.

The psychodynamics of terrorist radicalization

This train of argument leads to the hypothesis that the reason why both evil and heroic doubles recur as an archetype of the mythopoeic and literary imagination throughout history is that they externalize universal human potentials for moral good and bad. By being dramatized within characters in conflictual situations, they serve to warn or

inspire members of members of societies bound by strict mores of the capacity of exceptional individuals either for acts of gross inhumanity, or for noble self-sacrifice for a supra-individual cause. That this ambivalence is rooted in normal psychology, and the tendency of modernity to proliferate personae, is brilliantly explored in Lifton's *The* Protean Self, which lays bare the myth of the very word 'individual'. Human beings have eminently dividable personalities, prone to cause both their private and social roles to mutate radically over time, or even develop a number of coexisting personae without necessarily displaying the pathological symptoms that would bring them within the province of the psychiatrist. The latent 'monster' within functional individuals can be engendered by underlying psychological conflicts, or by extreme personal, family, or social situations which lead them eventually to break through the social mores and taboos that society has created to repress primordial urges of passion, violence, revenge, or destruction. Meanwhile, the benevolent hero can be born of the needs of the community for extreme acts of dedication and renunciation on its behalf, of targeted social or state engineering, or of the intense ideological conditioning imposed within an existentially threatened subculture, all of which can have a transformative effect on an 'ordinary' person. The heroic double may even erupt from normality mysteriously without obvious external catalysts. In each case, the dynamics of doubling, malevolent or heroic, are bound up with deep existential needs for meaning, identity, purpose, and transcendence, whether such needs are deliberately exploited by society, the state or the subgroup, or surface spontaneously from deep within an individual's personality.

The implications of this line of investigation for understanding terrorist radicalization and other forms of extremist violence are significant. Applying methodological empathy, it is obvious that in the eyes of the fanatic who resorts to extreme acts of violence for the sake of a mission or cause, acts of inhumanity are morally justified in the name of a higher good, and that talk of 'evil' as a reified entity indicates that an external perspective is being applied which muddies the waters of comprehension. It is clear from Stein's analysis of the Atta letter that, at least within the 'Global Salafi jihadist' (Sageman, 2004) value system of the 9/11 bombers, the acts they were about to perform were not prompted by evil, but by the pursuit of a higher moral good which was sacred to them (Atran, 2010), even at the cost of their own lives. Indeed, they were so sacred that the killing of the passengers on the plane was not barbaric but ritual slaughter. The journey completed by the members of the

Hamburg Al-Qaeda cell from engineering postgraduates to terrorists was thus subjectively an act of heroic doubling, not of a metamorphosis into evil monsters dramatized in one of the many cinema and TV versions of *Jeckyll and Hyde*.

This article thus suggests that Lifton is misleading when he portrays doubling as 'socialization to evil'. In the context of terrorism and other ideologically motivated atrocities, it is a socialization to extreme violence which leaves the primary personality intact and 'normal'. When official society approves of the cause that nation- or state-engineered heroes kill and die for, often in the most brutal circumstances, they are ritually immortalized and heroized in ceremonies, commemorations, war memorials, and films. Correspondingly, those who commit acts of violence against the nation, state, or existing social order are generally demonized. But at a psycho-dynamic level the process of radicalization is identical: individuals with no previous history of extreme violence or fanaticism are able to find the extreme psychological strength within to kill and die for a cause with an unflinching sense of purpose, but only as long as they have internalized ideological forces current in society, state propaganda, or the ideals of a particular subgroup or movement, to the point where a cause becomes genuinely sacred to them. At this point they seem to spontaneously generate from deep within their psyche the archetype of a 'heroic' avatar of themselves that functionally suspends or disables the social constraints of their non-heroic self, and along with it the culture's moral taboos against extreme violence and death. What is seen from the state or victim perspective as an 'evil double' is experienced subjectively by the protagonists of violence and by those who believe in their cause as a hero, a martyr, a warrior for a sacred cause.

Creating a world of meaning

The lives of several terrorists have been sufficiently well documented for readers to apply for themselves their methodological empathy to reconstructing the process of 'heroic doubling' that occurred in the preparation of their acts of symbolic violence. The biographies of Ted Kaczynski (Chase, 2004) Timothy McVeigh (Michel, Herbeck, 2001) and Anders Breivik (Seierstad, 2012) allow the slow metamorphosis to be traced from 'normal person' to 'sacred warrior' fighting as a lone wolf for a higher cause by committing acts that turned them into a feared and reviled public enemy. In each case a similar syndrome emerges: a phase of anomie, of identity crisis,

of lack of direction, of depression is transmuted to a sense of total nomos. Frustration, impotent rage, humiliation give way to a sense of empowerment and heroic destiny. Inertia gives way to a manic activism. Rays of light from a higher plane of life's meaning penetrate the gloom to show a way out of the sense of isolation, alienation, and despair. The individual starts to feel that he or she is the agent of a higher cause or will, even if that cause is not religious in the conventional sense, it is sacred.

It is this aspect of the radicalization process that is alluded to when Hafez speaks of 'the discursive practices that inspire individuals to engage in self-sacrificial terror', and of the 'logic of liberation and personal redemption' that enable people to overcome the fear of death 'to make the ultimate leap toward a "heroic" end' (Hafez, 2006). His observations are echoed in Robert Robins' and Jerrold Post's study of 'political paranoia':

The individual whose world is falling apart is experiencing his own psychological apocalypse. From this state of ultimate powerlessness and meaninglessness, *some* create a world of meaning in their mind, a new world in which they have power and significance. Through this vision they have found personal redemption. iii

It is only at this point in the doubling process, when the feeling of being called to serve a higher will or destiny, of being enlisted in a cosmic struggle (Jones, 2010), iv to defeat an evil system, is overwhelming, that a form of splitting suddenly becomes relevant (Gould, Prentice, Ainslie, 1996). The discovery of a terrorist cause goes hand in hand with identifying a demonized enemy, a process involving elements of several dualistic mental states, notably Manichaeanism, fundamentalism (Hill, 2010), and apocalypticism (Strozier and Boyd, 2010). in which the world is polarized into opposing forces of good and evil. As Post puts it, 'Once embarked on his mission he 'idealizes his grandiose self [heroic double] and splits out and projects onto others all the hatred and devalued weakness within'. In short, the terrorist mindset deludes the protagonist into believing that the sacred goal can only be achieved through symbolic acts of cathartic violence against an evil, dehumanized system or enemy which had been produced by a splitting process which is no longer the correlative of vulnerability or threat, but of an overweening sense of empowerment and agency.

In the spirit of Otto Rank, it is worth highlighting three of a number of films allow the spectator to enter into the subjective process of doubling and experience the

journey to cathartic violence from the point of view of the protagonist: Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* in which Travis Bickle, 'God's lonely man', becomes a murderous vigilante who has become mentally and physically transformed by his mission to clean up New York; David Fincher's *Fight Club*, in which the rage of those who, like depressed clerk Edward Norton, feel part of a 'between' generation without great causes to live for takes form in Project Mayhem, led by Norton's sociopathic (and unreal) double Tyler Durden, whose goal is to blow up New York skyscrapers symbolic of a hated world of materialism and credit cards; and James Cameron's *Avatar*, in which Jake Sully, a paraplegic former marine, has the power of his body restored and reconnects with (non-human) life in saving a moon in a far-off solar system from ecological destruction at the hands of terrestrial predators from a dying Earth still driven by corporate greed. Step by step the process of heroic doubling unfolds, whether with an 'evil' outcome (*Fight Club*), a 'good' outcome (*Avatar*), or an ambivalent one (*Taxi Driver*) from the point of view of the presumed 'normal' moral perspective of the audience.

The implication of this analysis for those professionally concerned with refining psychiatric explanations of terrorism is that, before psychiatric categories and premises are applied to particular cases, it is worth considering the evidence that a process of doubling has taken place involving in large measure patterns and syndromes familiar from 'normal' psychology. It may also be that, following in the footsteps of Otto Rank and Robert Lifton, modern psychiatry would do well to work hand in hand with social anthropology, cultural anthropology, and cinema studies in order to arrive a more complete understanding of the psychological mechanisms involved in terrorist violence, and the symbolic universe that terrorists inhabit.

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ⁱⁱ Wajda

iv. On the importance of cosmic war in the imaginary universe of the religious terrorist see Mark Juergensmeyer, 'Cosmic War', *Terror in the Mind of God. The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 148-66. See too James Jones, 'Eternal Warfare', in Strozier, *The Fundamentalist Mindset*, 103.