

# THE LOFTY SYMBOLISM OF THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

Zuleyka Zevallos

Postgraduates are often reminded that 'Nobody ever reads your PhD, except for your examiners'. My PhD examined the identities of second-generation migrant-Australian women living in Melbourne. I chose to investigate this area out of a deep and personal sense of passion for the topics of migration, ethnicity and multiculturalism. These three interconnected topics remain perennially important in Australian society, but when I decided to steer my career outside of academia, I wondered how I might apply my skills in new research areas to maximise my knowledge. My job hunting adventures saw me cheekily applying for every job that tickled even my slightest fancy, but never did I imagine that one day I would be working for Defence (especially given that, on multiple occasions, I have marched in anti-war protests). How did my travels out of the ethnicity studies/academic track begin? One day, as I diligently read through my TASA e-list email, as all good little TASA members do, I saw a position advertised for a 'social scientist' with the Defence Science and Technology Organisation (DSTO). I can still hear myself laughing incredulously over this advert: 'A sociologist in Defence? Surely an oxymoron', I thought to myself. 'What could they possibly want with us?' At first I dismissed this anomaly in my job searching horizon, but my sociological imagination had been spiked ('Yeah, what do they want with us?'). The position description was typically obscure, and it revealed very little about what the job actually entailed. So I did the only thing I could do in order to satisfy my curiosity: I decided to apply for the job and get myself an interview in order to find out more. (Plus, it meant a free trip to Adelaide and I had never before ventured to the beautiful festival state – or the 'city of churches', as my friends still prefer to call it.)

This job interview was by far the most fun of all the jobs that I had applied for – the interviewers would later become my bosses, and I walked out thinking, 'I could work with these people'. They were serious about employing sociologists to inform their work, and, more broadly, they have

been attempting to challenge the existing defence culture by employing sociologists – this was encouraging to see. Peter Berger, however, may disagree. He once likened sociologists who work outside academia to a tragic pawn used by some scheming Machiavellian figure:

An alchemist locked up by a predatory prince who needs gold and needs it quickly will have had little chance to interest his employer in the lofty symbolism of the Philosopher's Stone. Sociologists employed in many agencies of government and branches of industry will often be in roughly the same position (1963: 169).

Berger's point is that employment in government and industry is likely to force sociologists into projects that depend upon an 'ethically questionable' application of their craft (1963: 170). Currently, there are few research areas that are likely to create such ethical dilemmas for the average sociologist more so than counter-terrorism, especially when it has the potential to lead to moral panic and stigmatisation of particular migrant groups. Montgomery McFate (2005) traces the history of the American armed forces' use of anthropological studies from the First World War through to the present efforts to manage insurgency in Iraq. He argues that anthropologists have an overwhelming aversion to working with the defence forces, mostly on ethical grounds. With few exceptions, McFate argues that counter-insurgency missions often fall not at a tactical operational level, but due to a 'lack of cultural knowledge'. As McFate sees it, the American defence force conducts its own cultural assessments, but it 'yearns for cultural knowledge' that is informed by 'good' anthropology:

Regardless of whether or not anthropologists decide to enter the national security arena, cultural information will invariably be used as the basis of military operations and public policy. And, if anthropologists refuse to contribute, how reliable will that information be? The result of using incomplete 'bad'

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anthropology is, invariably, failed operations and failed policies (2005: 37).

A little closer to home, in November last year, Merv Bendle created controversy in *The Australian* when he argued that

Academic discourse on terrorism is dominated by second-level analyses of representations and discourses on terrorism considered merely as a word... Australian intelligentsia... is happy in its complacency and anxious to avoid any facts that might disturb its comfort zone (2006: 25).

Other academics, of course, have a different vision of terrorism studies and how the social sciences can make a useful contribution to the various issues relating to national security. In his 2006 Ashworth lecture delivered at Melbourne University, Kevin McDonald (2006) spoke passionately about how sociology has a *responsibility* in shaping social understanding and policy responses to terrorism. He argues:

We need a type of sociology that can encourage the development of social creativity, new forms of innovation, and strive to construct languages and experiences where conflicts can enter into social and political time. The social sciences have a key role to play in helping us understand the different forms of violence we encounter in the contemporary world. But we need to remember that where successful responses to terror have emerged – such as in Northern Ireland or the Basque country in Spain – they have always been grounded in images of a world of hope, not fear. Helping to construct and sustain such images is a key task today for the social sciences – sociology, in particular.

Sociology has a longstanding tradition in shaping social policy and informing public debates of important social issues. It is critical to discuss the concept of terrorism and the deeper social causes that contribute to the manifestation of insurgent political activities. Responses to terrorism, however, also require day-to-day security responses and long-term strategies that will help manage issues of national security in

a practical manner. Intelligence agencies and defence forces around the world invest in various technical tools and techniques in order to achieve contextual insight on terrorism. Social modelling represents one such response.

Social modellers aim to represent dynamic social phenomena in order to anticipate changes over a period of time with the aim to explore different scenarios of groups, social issues and entire societies. Social models use mathematical techniques and computer simulations in order to represent social phenomena. They increasingly rely on ethnographic data but often with an uncritical understanding of society. Lucy Resnyansky (2006) argues that in social modelling, the concept of terrorism is defined in relation to the risk assessment of catastrophes. She writes that social models of terrorism often draw upon economic and engineering theories and they measure terrorism in regards to the potential hazards terrorism poses society, including structural vulnerabilities, the number of attacks and their potential to cause casualties and weaken existing infrastructure. She cites examples of terrorism models that include modelling software to track terrorists and mathematical models to evaluate terrorism threats. Such models are developed in order to support intelligence gathering and counter-terrorism analysis, but with a limited view of the concepts, actors and behaviours that influence terrorist activity. Resnyansky argues:

*...the technologies used in the social modelling of ethnic groups are not value-free; they operate... upon essentialist understandings*

Although these models measure the effects of terrorism in terms of casualties and damages, they do not aim (and are unable) to take into consideration the social, cultural, political, and moral aspects of these effects. In fact, the conceptualisation of terrorism as a factor/cause of economic loss silences the moral aspects of terrorism.

Instead, it promotes a perception of terrorism as a catastrophe or a disaster whose consequences need to be priced. Therefore, the conceptualisation of terrorism threat as yet another hazard (or a factor influencing a consumer's choice) may contribute to the naturalisation of terrorism (2006: 227-228).

In particular, the technologies used in the social modelling of ethnic groups are not value-free;

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they operate with a biological definition of ethnicity that draws upon essentialist understandings of 'race' and 'culture' (Bennett and Resnyansky 2005). Counter-terrorism efforts require a theoretical understanding of social phenomena and the undesired effects that certain technologies can have, such as racial profiling and ethnic stereotyping.

I am trained as a qualitative researcher, and so the idea of building computational models to represent social actors and entire societies does not come easily. Funnily enough, I now work in a large interdisciplinary social modelling team within DSTO that has around 20 members. Much like DSTO itself, our group is predominantly made up of researchers from the natural sciences: there is one psychologist and four sociologists (including myself), and the rest of the team is made up of mathematicians and social modellers from diverse backgrounds, augmented by computer science. Our group develops software tools and conceptual models to identify and explore the motives, social processes and social networks that may threaten Australia's national security. We are not 'spooks' – we do not collect intelligence data, but rather our research supports the work of analysts and policy makers, by enhancing the ways in which they think about security issues. The group is unique among other teams of its kind working in defence around the world, largely due to its long-term research projects that aim to explore issues of terrorism by blending social scientific frameworks with social modelling techniques. These techniques include social network analysis, social simulation and Bayesian modelling.

I have been working at DSTO for over a year, and I have, on more than one occasion, heard various social modellers say, 'We have to do something useful with all this qualitative stuff!', referring to ethnographic data and theoretical writing on different social groups from around the world. In my view, reading rich, complex data and debating issues are useful endeavours in and of themselves. The reality is that I now work in an organisation that is historically dominated by positivists, and so I am forced to move beyond my

own ontological proclivities, and to take this comment seriously. How can sociology make a 'useful' and *practical* contribution to the interdisciplinary social modelling of terrorism? The answer is a slow work-in-progress, but the journey remains fascinating because achieving true interdisciplinary synergy in this field of research poses such a great challenge.

Elsewhere, I discussed how our group often collaborates with outside researchers, and that a high-profile social modeller once jokingly said, 'Don't ask the sociologists, they'll say "it depends"' (Zevallos 2006a). This comment, although said in jest, hit home for me the challenge of integrating sociology within social modelling efforts. The critical and reflexive framework from which sociologists work, including sociology's comparative approach to culture and

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history and its critique of taken-for-granted knowledge prove especially challenging to positivists informed by theories from the natural sciences. This is because sociology does not lend itself easily to definite 'rules' and causal relationships that can be neatly folded into social modelling analyses. It seems counter-intuitive for qualitative sociologists to adopt social modelling as a means to test out ideas about the world, and yet social modelling has the potential to incorporate sociological theories in an applied way so that non-sociologists (such as modellers and intelligence and policy analysts) can use sociological knowledge in their everyday and long-term responses to terrorism.

If I can get my colleagues to understand the concept of the social construction of ethnicity, then I feel this is already a good starting contribution. My research involves the study of the motivations of suicide terrorists, as well as studying patterns of insurgency around the world. My research goals remain congruent with the basic tenets of my training as a sociologist: get people to challenge their taken-for-granted assumptions about culture, ethnicity and identity. For example, in order to understand terrorism in Southeast Asia, Western concepts such as violence, leadership and organisation need to be problematised in regards to the local cultural

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context (Zevallos 2006a). Equally, we need to be thinking critically about the data and methods we use in studying terrorism – relying solely on economic data and media reports gives only a partial view of the possible motives and causes of the individuals who engage in political violence (Zevallos 2006b).

Despite the ontological and epistemological hurdles in making interdisciplinary teams work, I argue that sociology enhances the social modelling of terrorism specifically because it studies social concepts, groups and structures as fluid constructions that are ever changing (Zevallos 2006a). It may be true that one should not ask a sociologist a question if they expect an easy answer, but then again the study of terrorism has no one-size-fits-all solution, so who better to help delve into such a complex area of research? Western counter-terrorism responses require careful consideration of the multiple subjective and objective conditions that may lead to political violence. Sociology is well positioned to make a strong contribution in this field, even if we can only show the significance of the social construction of ethnicity and culture (and other proverbial philosopher's stones), one social modeller at a time.

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## AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR CORA BALDOCK

Rebecca Conning

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Following the launch of her book, *Families Caring Across Borders: Migration, Ageing and Transnational Caregiving* (co-authored with Loretta Baldassar & Raelene Wilding), at the 2006 Annual Conference of The Australian Sociological Association, Cora Baldock met with Rebecca Conning, to reflect on her career in sociology and contributions to the field. In this excerpt from the interview, Cora and Rebecca discuss Cora's early experiences in sociology.

Cora was born in 1935 in Rotterdam, as Corrie Vellekoop, the youngest of three children. Her father's lifelong role at the Norwegian Consulate at that city meant Corrie was fluent in English from a young age. When six months old, Corrie had her first serious asthma attack, an event later recognised as one of three key factors that together shaped a "breath-taking" life - while asthma introduced many limitations, it also brought opportunities. The outbreak of WW2 was a second significant factor. While her parents and siblings were experiencing the bombing of

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