

The perception of the other for
identity-building: the construction
of a threat through the
American identity.

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Abstract

The concept of threat is a wide concept to embrace because it has often been associated with something unknown or something evil. However, the main idea of the concept is that it produces an existential fear. Hence, it must be eliminated or at least tried to be eliminated. These assumptions are quite limited because they cannot apprehend the polarity of things. The concept of threat and identity even though they seem mutually exclusive, are in reality, mutually sustaining. Hence, this qualitative article shall argue that there is an existential need to have a threat or fear of the unknown for the construction of a strong identity due to a mechanism of elimination. It explores the need to have a threat as a scapegoat and how these sorts of threats are pivotal to categorially understand our own identity and to understand the nation-state

Keywords: threat, identity, identity-building, dualism, nation-state, evil

Introduction

The concept of a threat can be summarized as a thing or entity that unequivocally represents an existential problem and promotes fear. To understand something as an existential problem or a threat, it must be summarized or understood through the dualist debate of the “us” versus “them” where the fear of the other or something different is the motivating emotion. A threat is an entity that propels fear and makes the us question our moral agency. Through a perspective of security studies, the concept of threat can also be understood by apprehending the referent object of security. In the presence of a threat the rational aim is to achieve security, which is a self-referential practice, through the eradication of such a threat. Security is a constructed relation between the collectivity and individuality; both are equally needed for a continuous feedback of interests –backed with a collective identity- for a government not to be toppled (Buzan & Hansen 1983). Hence, this paper argues that there is existential need to have a threat or some sort of fear of the unknown for the construction of a strong identity. Meaning that what we wish to eradicate is precisely what we need. Because the fastest way to know what you are is by knowing what you are not, through a mechanism of elimination, what the “us” does not represent, which is by knowing what the “other” represents.

Another approach to understand the concept of a threat can be seen through a Judeo-Christian lens, where the concept of threat is seen as evil due to dualism/dichotomy and the binary logic we have inside language. Inside dualism, everything that is evil must be eradicated. However, dualism cannot be destroyed, because if we wish to have good there needs to be the other side of the coin, which is evil. The threat is that thing or entity that might propel fear, uncertainty and insecurity that overall might cause a riot within the collectivity (de Graaf 72). The existential fear of the threat, in this approach, comes from the fear of God. If we wish to be saved, then the “others” must be punished, purged, and eradicated. According to Watts “The punishment of sinners in hell shall be very great, very many and very pure, to wit, mixed with no comforts and which shall increase their misery everlasting... which shall not consume on member alone but all the members together with horrible punishment” (160). Evil (threat, other) and the good (security, us) are “binaries” but are mutually sustaining. Hence the existential need of a threat or other for the construction of the “us”, through the process of identity building because within our logic polarities is precisely what sustains concepts and ideologies.

If we take into account the concept of threat in a state-centric approach, then a threat is the thing or entity that might damage the social cohesion and the webs of significance a nation-state could have. If the webs of significance are weak, then a social crisis might appear. Nonetheless, threats are pivotal for the formation of the actual identity, it is a double-edged sword. To be able to differentiate the “us” versus “other” is the easiest way to achieve it, by knowing what you are not through a mechanism of elimination, instead of apprehending what you are. Huntington has a very interesting appreciation of the word enemy, for it is necessary to create national identity. All in all, the enemy propels identity through differentiation, which thrust the need to demonstrate superiority, leading to antagonism through competition between the us and the them (Huntington 26). Also, when in time of crisis, to have a “other” is pivotal not only for nation-building but also for the formation of the others through a scapegoat logic. Having a scapegoat propels the emotions of unity throughout the social cohesion, where the “us” is not to be blamed but the others, which are also a synonym of “sinners” as aforementioned in the previous paragraph. To have a threat or a scapegoat as a propeller of unity might sound a lunatic idea. However, it is widely used by countries worldwide, per example the idea of immigrants, which are the “other” to be blamed for the economic problems a country might have. The scapegoats allows the community to exalt their identity myths and to uphold their illusion of identity. Additionally, the best example to mention upon the need of a threat inside the state, can be seen through 9/11 where Muslims were seen as the other and by default were the scapegoat of the suicide attacks. The last time, the US was able to increase their social cohesion was in 2001 right after the suicide attacks there was a motivation to stick together against the threat.

To have a concept such as a scapegoat, by default sets the assumption that language is binary because persecution is a binary demeanor. Accusations for the victims “the scapegoats” tend to be unjust and absurd because no crime has been committed for the persecutors create an illusion of the myths “stereotypes” of their identity and their society. All of this propelled by an institutional collapse that ultimately require victims to be purged due to negative reciprocity and cultural schizophrenia. According to Girard at the core the scapegoat is “the twin or fraternal enemy who illustrate the conflict between those who become undifferentiated in a particular graphic fashion” (31). The scapegoat is the entity that creates this differentiation

in a social crisis propelled by a lack of differentiation from within due to weak myths that hope to have a concrete relationship with reality. The scapegoat is the victim which conforms other customs form the collective, leading to polarization. At the end of the day the scapegoat is the responsible for the sickness and will be responsible for the cure and restoration of order, it is both a victim and a hero (dualistic vision).

Identity on the other hand, is another concept that is mutually sustaining from threat, to identify with something is rather to feel in a “warm circle” which Goran Rosenberg coined as a term, there is a sense of affinity or belonging, which ultimately exalts our humanity through a social culture. The more our humanity is exalted the more our need to dive into the conflict of our self-identification, in the quest to find our existential substance over the matter and the easiest way is through a *Gemeinschaft*¹. According to Bauman “The warm circle/ *Gemeinschaft* means a shared understanding of a natural and tacit kind; it would not survive from the moment the understanding becomes self-aware” (5). Hence, identity is something abstract because it cannot be self-aware and in the words of Girard what is identity is propelled by an illusion of myths or stereotypes. The quest of substance and identity is rather an unconscious process to work or it must be dead. To have an identity can also go in hand with a Judeo-Christian tradition of having a pastoral care, where the individual or the collective can find asylum or the illusion of asylum when in need. To have an identity is a phenomenon that increases trust within the community, because uncertainty is lowered, and our existence/identification is reassured. The main goal of having an identity, is to decrease our vulnerability because identity at the core is made up of the social practices that we accept and we deem appropriate for ourselves and for our collectivity. To have an identity is to accept the performativity of certain social roles or expectations that might become an obligation (Hekman 11). The concept of identity regulates social organization and how we relate to others through a level of *sameness*, decreasing uncertainty of our context/environment and about ourselves.

An initial demarcation for this article is in place to further understand the need of a nation-state to have a threat for their proper identity

¹ Ferdinand Tonnies coined the concept of *Gemeinschaft*, which can be considered as a warm circle as mentioned by Goran Rosenberg, where apprehension with the other does not require words and this understanding does not need to be sought. It is a social unit where sympathy and help are expected without asking because there is a sameness. It is a feeling of real togetherness, a reciprocal binding feeling.

building. The first sections shall discuss the idea behind the US identity or what we normally call the *American Identity*, which goes in hand with the perception and notion we have of the American Dream. We discussed the initial creed the American identity had and the ongoing creeds the identity has nowadays. In the second section we analyzed the need to have evil and continuous threats along with the Judeo-Christian explanation over the negative perception we have evil and the need to have evil to reach goodness and our perception of our own humanity. Later on, we shall address the types of threats the US as a nation-state has just as the case of 9/11 and we shall discuss the current threats the US has, specifically within the region which is Venezuela. By the end of this article, we shall understand why there is the need to have a threat at all time for identity building and additionally we shall understand why some countries such as the US historically have the need to have constant antagonists. All in all, the formation of identity requires the constant threat of the unknown, which propels more barriers for a mechanism of elimination.

The US identity

The national identity the US upholds since the 1990's has been rather limited only by a one sole identity creed, which is the *political identity* that primarily focuses on the democratic institutions such as capitalism as the best economic system, and democracy as the best political system. As a matter of fact, the original US identity based itself on four different creeds, the more creeds an identity can uphold the stronger the identity gets. The original American identity based itself on the following creeds: ethnicity, race, culture and finally the ongoing political creed. Out of all of them the least politically incorrect is the political creed because for a person to belong inside the "US identity" only requires for the political culturalization through capitalism and democracy. Meaning that no matter the culture or race a persona could have, if they identify with capitalism and democracy, they can be part of the American identity and belong to the warm circle above-mentioned.

In contrast with the other creeds, it would require a person to be ethnically northern European, white as a race, and protestant as a religion. According to Huntington "For all practical purposes America was a white society until the mid-twentieth century...American identity as a multiethnic society date from and, in some measure, was a product of World War

II” (56-58). As a matter of fact, the wide-known rumor that the US is a country of immigrants is quite false, the country is a country of settlers and not immigrants. Immigrants in contrast of settlers maintain a close connection with their home countries, while settlers do not, because their aim is the construction of a new society. However, the US has sold this distorted reality “illusion” to universalize US identity to the world as the champion of democracy and inclusion. The problem lays in the fact that US identity one has one sole mechanism of elimination, which is not enough to eliminate a substantial amount of people. The less elimination a community can performs, the more they will require something exogenously made to be that mechanism of elimination.

The fact that nowadays the US can only uphold its identity with one creed makes it more susceptible to be broken down. More so for the fact that democracy as a political ideal has failed the great majority, people have not been treated nor seen as equals. When the only creed standing cannot properly function as it should, it breaks the social cohesion, webs and the social culture the nation can have, because people cannot feel any sort of familiarity or *sameness*. Leading again to a social crisis. The warm circle in the US case is breaking down, because the needed the unconscious trust is not applicable. In 1790 the US was a highly homogenous society, excluding African Americans, having a highly homogenous society increases the possibilities of having a strong social cohesion as well. However, it is necessary in the words of Bauman to highly differentiate our society from the others, the more you try to build a global society through commonalities the more uncertainty it will build within the social culture. As a matter of fact, the process of differentiation/elimination has decreased due to political correctness, because the security of some is seen as a threat to the majority. Hence, no security through identity shall be applied, but rather everyone should have the same creeds leading to the formation of values and not an identity.

The US at the present time is a highly heterogenous society, which due to the different cultures it holds, it decreases the feeling of identity and overall belonging. When speaking of cultures, we do not only talk about race but in fact we talk about religion, traditions and even language. The aim of having a political creed for the US was to become the ideology through “Americanism” and not to require other sort of ideologies, an ideology of exceptionality. However, when the American ideology fails, it fails the social culture and the *sameness* the country might have. In fact, the less

social cohesion a national has, they are more vulnerable to threats. The less social cohesion or identity, the less trust they have not only to themselves but also to their government. This ultimately leads to a vulnerable nation-state that at the same time is hungry for an identity. This is the paradox of identity-building and threat perception, the least the illusion of *sameness* the more the threats the society might perceive, which increases the need for the population to build barriers for differentiation "*otherness*". The US identity is dead because it is not unconscious anymore, it requires a constant fear of the other. Therefore, the US requires a new warm circle with a new creed for identity and a new process for construction.

The unwanted other is the wicked evil.

The best way to picture identity building is through nation-building where both require coercion and capital. However, in this section we shall only focus on coercion, which it is not necessarily directed towards their citizens, but to the others within the nation-state, meaning the scapegoats or that which is evil and unknown. Evil is a term, which is highly influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition, evil must be avoided or else punishment shall be applied on the wickedness of humanity. Everything that is evil or that belongs to the negative dualism must be punished and eradicated. In this case evil is extended towards scapegoats and they must be blamed for every problem that might arise within a society as a punishment for not producing *sameness* by challenging the customs accepted in society before. Hence, they are perceived as a threat being wicked and evil, a human disease to avoid, but definitely needed for identity-building. According to Petersson "Conceptually, scapegoating can be understood as a certain kind of enemy image, and also a negative stereotype" (89). Negative stereotypes (myths) are instrumental to uphold groups identities within nation-states because it sets clear borderlines to know where things start and where things end. In fact, every human society is propelled by violence and consequently evil "All human communities without exception are based on the one principle, both constructive and destructive" (Girard 188) Religion has an obvious manifestation of political power through war and fear. It is able to categorize what is good and what is bad, which is also a power stand and a tool to reinforce power that is extrapolated for the conception and need of scapegoats.

Therefore, evil as a concept within the religious scope is a tool to implement power upon humanity because the social body for the construction

of identity must be porous, and must keep that way. Scapegoats reinforce the feelings of unity to form social groups. When there is an evil “other”, a process of “*otherness*”, the feelings of unity to your own group are tighter and also the community feels prouder of belonging, propelling a feeling of excellence by exalting their humanity. Through history countries have created internal rivals as a way to keep the population controlled because the stronger the identity, the more pleased citizens are and the more trust they give the collectivity and their governments. A threat must always have a negative stigmatization, for the identity to grow stronger and tighter. The negative stigmatization is a synonym for evil, because if the threat is evil then the “us” is good. On the other hand, the others are purged not only due to fear of the unknown, but through punishment they are the living reminder of the consequence humanity must face if they are evil, which is punishment.

All in all, within the dualism of evilness and otherness (as a negative categorization) the other is the constant reminder of sin and fear of the unknown. Religions that come from the Judeo-Christian tradition constantly mention fear as a way to uphold faith while giving us unconscious meaning and understanding. As stated by Ruiz “History becomes part of an overarching religious discourse or narrative... religion underpins political authority, and vice versa” (40-41). The scapegoats and everything related to evilness is seen as the existential threat influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition which can extrapolated towards security studies. In security and in religion conflict arises due to processes of self-identification, *same-ness*, with very similar creeds that were abovementioned while evil is the unwanted *otherness*.

Within the Judeo-Christian morality evil must be eradicated and categorized as unwanted to a heresy of not belonging, in fact the root of the word heresy means to think by yourself. What is evil or a threat is what is a different from the warm circle and the accepted identity webs. This is all a hypocritical sentiment of moral outrage because systemic evil, threats and coercion are imposed and accepted by the perpetrators and the victims alike. According to Zizek “Systemic violence [...] the violence inherent in a system: not only direct physical violence but also subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence” (9). The scapegoat is an unwanted evil that at the same time we need it for identity formation. Inside religious morality, evil and is required to know goodness , they are both mutually sustaining.

The never-ending US threats

If we take into account the US case, the last time nationalism was deeply rooted inside the US was due to 9/11 where Muslims were stigmatized and used as scapegoats, *the others*. In fact, after 9/11 the last process of sameness was produced inside the US and since then the country has been experimenting a social crisis. However, for years American identity was becoming weaker because it only supports itself on one identity creed, which is the political creed. By having a threat or a problem to our existential identity, we ultimately want to defend our identity because it is what represents our humanity. Or when in comparison to something worse, or something that is perceived as worse we ultimately have this feeling of excellence of our own group. In fact, crisis of identity is a worldwide phenomenon due to globalism, where identity becomes narrower and can be regarded through communal terms. The problem with the US is that their identity has already tried to be universal, and unfortunately when you try to make an identity universal it cannot be regarded as an identity it can only be seen as a value. This has weakened the social cohesion the American Identity has because it has no mechanisms of elimination.

Nowadays the US counts with another threat/scapegoat inside the region as a way for the US identity to improve, which is Venezuela. The perceived threat/scapegoat of Venezuela through a security lens represents both a political and social threat to the very own institutions of the US, which are capitalism and democracy. They are the heretics for been the other, not only politically but also within the other aforementioned creeds such as race, religion and ethnicity. Venezuela ideologically is a counterbalancing force that at the core erodes the institutions (social culture) that make up an American identity of "Americanism" or even the conception of patriotism for the US. The competition between ideologies is quite a complex entity to securitize and to perceive as a threat. The vulnerability socialism gives the US even as a 'strong state' is real and it not due to tangible capabilities but rather due to intangible capabilities that increase a threat the US has internally rather than externally. According to Buzan, once one wishes to eliminate or diminish a political threat then "It would require an interminable military crusade, the costs of which would far outweigh the objectives... for it is difficult to differentiate those domestically generated versus those generated from an outside source when the threat is political" (77). Within security studies, threats are built by States. In this particular

case, the generator of US threats is the US itself, as they did during the red scare, the cold war, and they still do in regards with immigration. Societal and political threats both have a distance attribute. Per example, certain immigration can be transformed into from a political threat to a societal threat due to the distance South America has with the US. The more influence a threat has towards the US institutions the less sovereignty the US shall have. Especially now where there is a decline of American nationalism and a lack of trust in US institutions due to inequality and racial biases.

In the societal sector (which normally intertwines with the political sector as well) the most powerful threatening forces are propelled by globalization, which are migration and the clash of civilization through the cultural homogenization of the West. The less differences between the “warm circle” and the “outside/unknown” the more the *sameness* is broken down and the webs of significance end up degrading themselves. Regarding Venezuela, immigration from the south represents a threat because socialism might get into the US as a viable political system, challenging the American democracy/capitalism (their *sameness* and their own humanity). As stated by Bauman “Sameness, is in danger at the moment when its conditions begin to crumble: when the balance between internal and external communication that once leaned drastically inward, is equalized, thus blurring the distinction between us and the them” (7). In Venezuela’s case the country and their political system represent a societal/political threat due to the identity challenges Venezuela is producing inside the US.

However, the perception of threat can only crumble when the *sameness* or an institutionalized value is been threatened, the fear of not knowing what you are. This could lead to the argument that the construction of threats is necessary not only for identity building/nationalism but also as a way to identify unconscious creeds that exalt our humanity. As stated by Huntington “White Americans see immigration as a threat not so much because they US could become a Spanish speaking (whites could be a minority) but rather because the increasing self-assuredness of different minorities threaten to produce a less unified, more multicultural and thereby less universalistic United States” (131). The political diversity Venezuelan immigrants have is a threat not only due to xenophobic reasons but in fact the politically incorrect creeds that make up the American identity are still valid and current. The US explicitly basis their identity upon their perception of politics, to be a communist inside the US is not even an outrage

but it is extremely odd. However, due to racism and xenophobia against Hispanic immigrants, it leads to the rational argument that the exaltation of humanity and identity of the US are still heavily linked to the creeds of race, ethnicity and religion. To explicitly mention that the only way to be part of the US and their identity, is to be white and protestant, would lead to heavily international backlash and would crumble their culture of exceptionality, leading to another social crisis.

Conclusion

To categorize something as a threat is often and most likely a perception of the community and the individual. A threat that is not perceived as a threat does not disappear but rather it simply stays as an unknown threat to the security of the warm circle, it is ignored. The paradox within this whole paper it is that the threat is the existential fear that we all wish to eradicate, but we all so dearly require. Identity could be perceived as simply the unconscious feeling of belonging or sameness, ipseity, but unfortunately identity is an illusion. *Otherness* and *Sameness* within a dualist logic might be perceived as mutually exclusive concepts. Nonetheless they are mutually sustaining as with evil and goodness. The phenomena of mutually sustaining concepts can also be seen through the identity of the “us”, there is the polarity of having the other side of the coin which is the “other”. The other has always been used in a negative demeanor as the scapegoat, the unknown, the evil and the ones that must be purged. In fact, the scapegoat is a victim of violence and the savior of that violence at the same time.

In a time where there is a crisis of identity worldwide due to globalization the best way to keep people happy is by giving them a feeling of belonging and security. Bauman stated that “Promoting security always requires the sacrifice of freedom, since freedom can only be extended at the expense of security” (13). The US is not the only country in the world that lacks identity, due to globalization there are less homogenous societies, which at the end destroys the social cohesion producing uncertainty that at the end propels identity building through mechanisms of elimination. To have a threat is a great mechanisms of elimination because within language concepts cannot be distinguished one from another, per example the concepts of scapegoats or evil require their mutually sustaining binaries of martyr or goodness. According to Zizek & Gunjevic “The difference between good and evil is inherent to evil good is nothing but universalized evil” (62). All in all, redemption and sacrifice punish humans due to this universalized evil within.

On the other hand, to be a human or a god is often a twin concept, you can hardly tell them apart “Among god, man and beast there is little distinction” (Girard 30). Nonetheless, evil is something that must be eradicated but it cannot be destroyed because it is the unknown. The mechanisms of elimination act as the motor to create sameness and the warm circle that must be maintained not only by purging the others but also by exalting the myths of the “us”. The concept of threat is precisely what does with identity-building and vice versa. It is a never-ending circle that constantly feeds each other. Without both polarities the concept of the other or threat cannot be attained nor the concept of the us. To determine what is good or bad is a power stance which establishes a system of compliance where the logic can only be polar and separate, it influences rationality because things at firsthand cannot be understood as mutually sustaining.

The threat and the identity even though they seem to be complete opposites concept-wise there are mutually sustaining and they need each other to survive. To eradicate a threat would ultimately mean that every single identity or *sameness* shall be eradicated as well, which is the case of the US by trying to make their identity universal. When there is no single point of differentiation, one cannot be something, because everyone already is. Without differentiation no one could be able to grasp what they are because through a binary language, we need to be able to categorize, if it is impossible then we cannot know what we are or not. The US has a problem due to their exceptionality. They cannot even apprehend their true creeds for their identity building due to shame. Identity-building has to be discriminatory if it wishes to work, therefore, the US is always requiring threats or multiple threats to achieve differentiation from the warm circle to the outside world. The unconscious process of identity-building has to be personal and not communal; identity is an illusion because it cannot be self-aware. When identity cannot be rational, then the warm circle always needs a distraction to feel reassured inside their community. The US sells their identity as universal, it is a value, that everyone wishes to attain it and is not a personal emotion and it is not a *sameness*. If everyone is the same then the community can also become the *other*.

Huntington states that the US has a weak identity, which is the motor of the social crisis the US is upfronting due to having one identity creed which is the political one. However, I am able to refute this because of the multiple threats the US uses to uphold their weakened warm circle. The US identity is

in crisis and they require a new identity with new creeds, this is what propels the US to have multiple threats at all times, the creation of threat of scapegoat by default are made due to interests at bay. Human communities historically have always had an interest to promote persecutions of their minority groups. Within security and threat formation there is always a political actor with an interest to perceive something as a threat and normally is to have a perlocutionary effect and to gain public support. A strong identity does not require any threats. Because a threat is an illusion and is built without arguments. Once the general mechanism of scapegoating is understood, the scapegoat/threat is seen as useless by the revelation, because the threat is an illusion that emanates from the social crisis.

Venezuela is seen as a violent country, that promotes poverty and lacks human rights, which exalts the webs of significance for the US by being the opposite. However, the scapegoat also feeds from this mechanism of elimination. South American identity in the last decade has tilted more towards the left as a way to exalt their humanity and asymmetrically challenge US identity-building. Without the US, Venezuela could not have a challenging discourse against the US and without Venezuela the US could not apply coercion for their identity-building. The other at first sight is seen as a thing to be avoided but at the end of the day we need it to reinforce our own existence. Security is not solely the security of the State but of the nation that underpins it along with their identity, hence, to maintain a scapegoat is a way to ultimately assure security. Conceptually because identity is an illusion, the logical way to uphold the illusion is with another illusion, which in this case is the scapegoat. The scapegoat/threat is perceived in the hopes that it will have a relation with the concrete reality, which often is not the case but at the same time it is a great method to avoid awareness.

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