

Rethinking the martyr within the global jihadi movement¹

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Abstract

Analyses of contemporary terrorism are moving from state-centric to movement-centric models, which tend to reproduce older tensions within the sociology of social movements, where on the one hand instrumental theories understand violence as a tool, while on the other cultural or psychological analyses approach violence as a pathology of modernity, religion, 'identity' or personality. This paper considers video and internet communications of jihadis in the United Kingdom, noting the importance of global cultural forms such as conspiracy theory, technological mediations such as the Internet, the importance of horror and the extreme, the inexperienceable and the unimaginable that together may constitute a new 'grammar of violence'. Rather than analyse such violence in terms of collective identity or imagined community, the paper argues that it is better understood in terms of the sublime, pointing to the importance of somatic modes of experience and to broader significance of death within jihadi culture. This reaffirms recent analyses insisting upon the importance of the extraordinary to contemporary social life, while at the same time underlining the urgent challenge facing sociology to construct conceptual tools to explore such developments.

Keywords: Violence, Terror, Jihad, Globalization, Sociology of Experience, the Extraordinary

Paradigm shifts

Today we are experiencing profound but difficult to articulate transformations as we move from social worlds constructed in terms of nation states to new global flows, modes and spaces of experience. Contemporary forms of violence are both a product of this transformation and one of its engines, and represent a critical challenge to the contemporary social sciences. In the period before and immediately after the attacks of September 11 2001, the dominant approach to the study of terrorist violence was framed within a security studies model. This focused on organizations, and located terrorist violence within a state-centric framework, where terrorist violence was regarded as a proxy for the action of states. The period since September 2001 has seen the intellectual disorganization of this state-centric model, with terrorism

increasingly understood as involving new types of actors that cannot be considered state proxies (Ranstorp 2006). Marc Sageman (2008) argues we are witnessing the development of a 'leaderless jihad', Faisal Devji (2005) argues that the emerging jihad takes on a form similar to the contemporary antiglobalization or environmental movements.

One important tradition within the sociology of social movements conceives of action in rational, instrumental terms, arguing that actors are involved in 'claim making' upon the political system (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). Charles Tilly argues that violence is part of a 'repertoire of action', where collective violence is understood as actors 'employ(ing) violent means of claim making' (2003: 13), violence itself understood as 'damaging acts' (2003: 13). In this approach, where actors 'employ' violence, the relationship between violence and the actor is fundamentally instrumental and external.

Within the sociology of social movements the rational actor perspective had been countered by analyses underlining the centrality of 'identity' to movements. When centred on questions of violence, many of these identity-centred analyses tend to rework older theories of violence as frustration. Examples are Bernard Lewis' (1990) influential 'Muslim rage' thesis, the 'new terrorism' based on fanaticism and irrationality (Laqueur 1999), or in those analyses that understand terrorism as a radicalisation of identity politics due to globalization (Appadurai 2006; Kaldor 1999). Arguably the most innovative work within the identity paradigm is that of French political sociologist Olivier Roy (2004). He argues that behind contemporary terror is the development of what he refers to as 'neofundamentalism', a type of identity politics that refers to a purely imagined community, a global ummah, one that has little connection with any real community. This is a kind of identity deficit model,

where Roy suggests that a particular kind of ‘protest Islam’ is attractive to people on the margins of large, western cities. For Roy, a generation ago such marginal young people would have been attracted to organizations and ideologies of extreme left political groups. This argument is very influential, but it places very heavy demands of on ‘identity’. In Roy’s analysis, neofundamentalism is an expression of the western search for ‘authenticity’, where the ‘quest for authenticity is expressed against the culture of origin and Western culture, by referring indifferently to traditional (ummah) or Western (anti-imperialist) categories’ (2004: 23).

In the end it is not clear why this culture of authenticity is so centred around violence, and why this violence at time involves not only the destruction of the other, but also, as in the case of the London bombings and the failed attempts made two weeks later, the destruction of the self. There is something different at work here, something that takes us beyond a search for authenticity: the central place of death.

Arguably the most convincing sociological argument around the association of death of the self with the death of the other has been proposed by Farhad Khosrokhavar (2005, 2009). He explores the development of the Basij brigades in the Iran-Iraq war, and argues that these young candidates for death identified strongly with a Revolution that they believed was being betrayed and increasingly impossible. It was the impossibility of the Revolution, and the acute sense that the Revolution had failed, he argues, that left these fighters permeated with a profound sense of guilt and anguish. In this case, hoping for death compressed time, obliterating the mid-term of social and political change, obliterating the time of suffering. Since the new world could no longer be created through living, it could only be achieved through dying. Eric Butel’s (2002) careful analysis of the iconography of death during the Iran-Iraq war, where

we encounter a recurring opposition between contamination (life) and purity (death), demonstrates a strong sense of the candidate for death being out of place in life.

Khosrokhavar transfers this conceptual model to jihadi violence in Western societies, arguing that the impossible national community that he demonstrates as central to transformations of violence in Iran and Palestine has now become the impossible global community of the ummah. There are however difficulties with this transformation. The impossible community that Khosrokhavar explores is rooted in a national context, namely Iran and Palestine, marked in both cases by a deep and traumatic experience of crisis of an actual society, where violence is at the very centre of social life, putting into question the very existence of this community in the war with Iraq and in the violence of occupation. It is difficult to assert that the violence encountered in West Yorkshire is of a similar nature.

In fact, once we begin to explore contemporary forms of terror, we encounter a series of questions that mean we need to move beyond 'identity' and construct new type of conceptual tools. These involve the relationship with communications technologies, the meanings of death, the relationship between individual and collective, the significance of horror and the extreme, modes of embodiment and imagination, and ultimately the place of what Bernhard Giesen calls the 'extraordinary' (2005) in social practice. These not only point to a need to break with the concept 'identity', they underline the need to rethink the category of experience itself.

Violence and death, the ordinary and the extraordinary

Two of the London bombers, the leader Mohammad Sidique Khan and Shehzad Tanweer, both made video testaments that were released after the bombings. What is striking is the absence of reference to categories that sociologists generally consider

the basis of social practice: work, family life, urban experience, ethnicity, racism. Instead what is central is the place of violence in their presentations. While Khan does not mention any specific country, Tanweer offers a list of almost all Muslim-majority countries where conflict is occurring. What is striking is the absence of any reference to the day-to-day lives of the populations in the countries they refer to. What is referenced is violence and conflict, the jihad:

‘Your democratically elected governments continuously perpetuate atrocities against my people all over the world. And your support of them makes you directly responsible, just as I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters’ (Khan 2005)

As Devji argues, this is self-referential, there is no further justification for violence required than the fact that violence is being projected upon a generic Muslim population. The jihad does not refer to social and political realities, it refers to itself. The critical medium of experience here is visual. Tanweer, when appealing to Muslims to join him, does not refer to any social reality beyond that mediated by television:

‘Muslims of Britain, you, day in and day out on your TV sets, watch and hear about the oppression of Muslims, from the east to the west. But yet you turn a blind eye, and carry on with your lives as if you never heard anything, or as if it does not concern you’ (Tanweer 2006).

This is not an appeal to solidarity involving a call to act together to change a shared situation. There is no assertion of shared experience that might suggest an analysis in terms of collective identity. What Tanweer is describing is a form of public sphere that has at its centre the suffering of the victim. As Giesen (2004: 48) argues, according a status of victim involves a transformation in the nature of the audience, which moves from observer to witness. An observer is not responsible for what is seen, but a witness is.

We are not dealing here with a shared identity, but rather with a mode of seeing, one that as Devji argues, brings with it responsibility.

As well as his video recording, Sidique Khan left a written Will and Testament. Its focus is on martyrdom, the text drawing heavily on the 'Will and Testament' of Suraqah al-Andalusi, the pseudonym of a British young man who had been linked with Azzam.com. What emerges from this is a story of discovery and transformation through mediated experience, first through audiocassettes then videos. As well as the modern individual in search of self, what we encounter here is a desocialised shift to militancy (Devji 2005), where there is no reference to social realities, what is central instead is an experience associated with listening and viewing.

The experiences that make up this narrative give access to a hidden world. The path he describes is just as much a search for knowledge as for jihad. In this light, the absence of any reference to day-to-day life in Khan and Tanweer's videos is not accidental. Not only is the jihad a self-referential reality (Devji 2009), the encounter with it allows the actor to disengage from the world of the ordinary, and enter into a world of the extraordinary. Exploring this trajectory confronts sociology with critical questions about violence, movements and indeed about experience itself in the context of globalization.

The body as being in the world

Much social science reduces action to a Kantian product of disembodied intention, excluding the body and embodied experience. Yet this appears as central to the culture of the jihad. What has emerged as central to cases of actual and disrupted terror attempts in the United Kingdom is the importance of 'outward bound' physical activities, ranging from paint-balling, white water rafting, hiking and camping. In

part this can be understood as teambuilding and trust exercises, also involving self-making (Devji 2009). But these activities are also linked to a mode of viewing, where what is seen on videos is made part of one's self by its integration through embodied practice. The sociology of trauma might offer some insights into thinking about this mode of response. These experiences of watching extreme violence and suffering constitute a witnessing public, not a collective identity; one confronted with immediacy, intensity and unspeakableness. Bernhard Giesen explores trauma in the following way:

‘Traumas represent a moment of violent intrusion or conversion that consciousness was not able to perceive or to grasp in its full importance when it happened. They represent the rupture of the web of meaning, the break of order and continuity – a dark and inconceivable boundary that provides the framework for the constitution of meaningful histories but has no meaning by itself. Only later on, after a period of latency, can it be remembered, worked through, and spoken out. The traumatic memory reaches back to an act of violence that breaks down and reconstructs the social bond’ (Giesen 2004: 113).

A dark and inconceivable boundary: death

One of the most striking aspects of postings to websites by supporters of jihad is the pervasive presence of images of death, dying and killing. The account of al-Andalusi that served as a model to Sidique Khan underlines the transformative experience of his encounter with *In the Hearts of Green Birds*. These follow a kind of formula, focusing on the death of the martyr as a sign of the presence of God. These stories focus on the physicality of death: the martyr does not decay when dead; the martyr continues to bleed after death; the martyr smells of musk or sweet flowers. Such stories constitute a major dimension of the postings of supporters of jihad, combined with photos of the dead, or increasingly close up filming of the act of dying itself, often viewed or downloaded in extraordinary numbers, in tens or hundreds of thousands. These images of death and the miraculous events accompanying them are

so widespread that they need to be considered central to contemporary jihadi culture, and need to be seen as clearly different from fundamentalism or political Islam.

Technology, conspiracy theory and the occult: signs and hidden worlds

The grammar of death in the global jihad appears significantly different from the model of guilt proposed by Khosrokhavar, where he argues the jihadi experiences a form of suffering bordering on anguish as a result on the impossible 'global community'. The lives of Khan and Tanweer do not suggest guilt due to their personal responsibility for the impossibility of a radically new world. Death instead seems much more linked to a hidden world than to an impossible world. Mohammad Sidique Khan describes a world where reality is hidden, and calls upon Muslims to seek out this hidden knowledge:

'go to your so-called knowledgeable people and ask them why are they hiding this knowledge from us.... Can they lie about Islam and mislead us just because they fear prison? Is this what these great scholars of the past did? Our so-called scholars today are content with their Toyotas and semi-detached houses' (Khan 2005)

The world of the extraordinary is hidden by Muslim leaders who lie because of either fear or greed. The response is to engage on a personal search, for hidden knowledge and for selfhood:

'If you have any doubts or reservations about this and the other Jihadis then I strongly suggest you research them, check the Islamic history, the books are very widely available' (Khan 2005).

Khan's world is one of conspiracy theory. This is not fundamentally a set of ideas, but an increasingly global 'structure of feeling', a form of emotional flow that is a significant expression of contemporary globalization. Kathleen Stewart captures important dimensions of conspiracy theory as such a social experience:

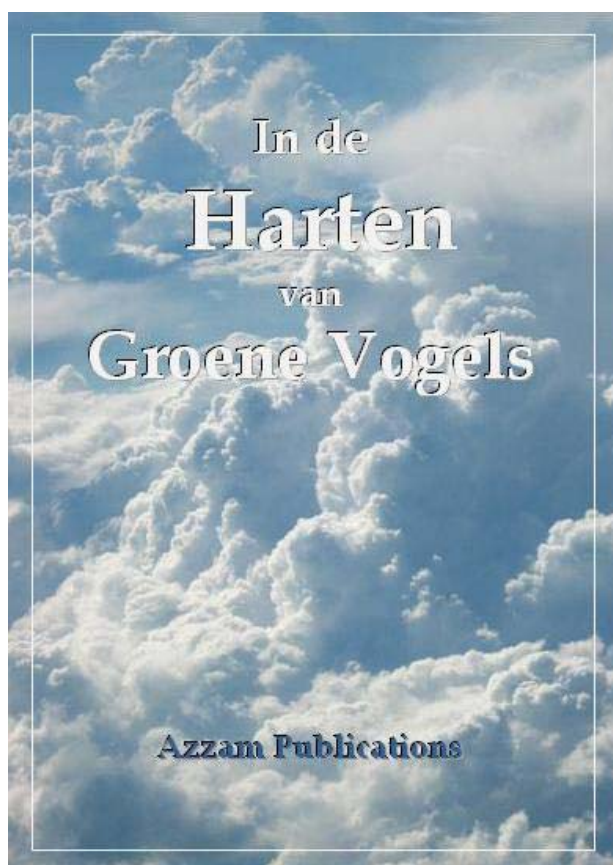
'everything is connected and the connections are uncanny. There are moments of déjà vu, moments when the sense of overdetermination is

palpable. Conspiracy theory lays a claim to a threshold state of consciousness where you are at once connected to the concrete tangible detail and projecting into a future, a higher knowledge, a leading edge, seeking an order behind the visible. It moves between the realms of story and event, the official and the unofficial story, the fantasy and the reality, the subject and the object: caught up in the nervous oscillation of no-man's land, it finds itself fascinated by transformation, encounter, risk' (1999: 17).

This structure of the known and the unknown, the hidden and revealed, recurs in the importance of dreams within the jihad (Hafaz 2007: 157; Edgar 2007).

Horror, captivation and sublime violence

The sense of being overwhelmed by greatness recurs in the culture of the jihad. This is associated with images of the natural world, such as the cover of a recent Dutch translation of *In The Hearts of Green Birds*, where the beauty of nature accompanies a terrifying sense of standing on the edge of an abyss, where the vertigo of falling into something beautiful and majestic will swallow the observer:



The dynamics at work here echo studies of extreme violence: the destruction of systems of meaning, the blurring of the distinction between self and non-self, a crisis of language and communicative capacity (Pécaut 2000). A recurring theme in such studies is what Axel calls a sublime mode of experience,

a 'simultaneity of feelings of pleasure and repulsion, captivation and horror' (Axel 2005: 142). The simultaneity of powerfully opposed emotions such as fascination and dread, captivation and horror, opens up the idea of border spaces, and may help us understand how the domain of the non-lived (in cases such as Khan and Tanweer, a domain experienced fundamentally in visual terms), comes to be experienced primarily through images of the martyr, images which serve as a bridge between the world of the lived and a 'sublime domain of the non-lived', creating a type of social experience where it is this domain of the non-lived that determines ethics and action. The martyr serves here as a bridge between otherwise disconnected domains of experience, making possible a form of identification with what those involved 'have not experienced and cannot imagine' (Axel 2005: 146 emphasis added). The encounter with the martyr is one with the unimaginable and the inexperiencable, a somatic collision of opposed emotions such as pleasure and repulsion, captivation and horror, a point of contact between experience and the void, not the actualisation of a past purity. The practice of viewing horrific images can be understood in similar terms, as a form of stimulating and managing dread. We capture a sense of this in a posting to a UK-based website, where the shaheed's smile is testament to the fact that 'he must have seen something that no one in the whole world has ever seen:



Have a look at this Shaheed's face.

هل رأيت وجه هذا الشهيد

He must have seen some thing made him really happy

لابد أن رأى شيء جعله سعيداً هكذا

Something he has waited for...

شيئاً طال انتظاره

Something he always believed in.

شيئاً هو مؤمن به

He must have seen some thing,

لابد أن رأى شيئاً

No one in the whole world has ever seen...

شيئاً لم يراه إنسان في هذا الوجود

Some thing he has been promised to see when

شيئاً وُعد به هذا الشهيد

He dies only for the sake of Allah...

فقط من يستشهد في سبيل الله

May Allah give us this honor...

اللهم شرفنا بشرف الشهادة

Ameen...

آمين

www.mndah.net

Grammars of experience

The jihad, as opposed to movements of national insurgency, is better understood as a movement based around the inexplicable and the unimaginable.

This is why death, and above all the death of the shaheed, is so central. Bernhard

Giesen argues that the extraordinary needs

to be understood as constituting social life,

underlining that 'ordinary social reality is

constituted by referring to something

extraordinary that transcends the sheer

positivism of rules, order and structure'

(2005: 275). We have seen that the victim

is central to the jihad, where through the

traumatic violence that the victim suffers a

public sphere of witnesses is constructed.

This trauma is shared and incorporated

into personal experience through a mode

of embodied reception, involving a mode

of experience that is best approached not

within a framework of guilt, nor collective

identity, but through a grammar of the

sublime, with its strong association of

powerfully opposed emotions of dread and fascination, elation and risk, and a mode of embodied experience that flows easily into the contemporary culture of conspiracy, and which becomes amplified through contemporary communications technologies where experience and the void collide in the encounter with death, above all in the shaheed's smile. In that sense Giesen's insistence upon the importance of the extraordinary to social life needs to be considered a critical contribution to understanding contemporary social life. However his emphasis on memorials and monuments remains embedded within a national context, and needs to be complemented by an exploration of the encounter with the void in increasingly globalized forms of social life. The analysis developed here suggests that jihad might be better understood as a new type of 'experience movement' (McDonald 2006), one where the extraordinary and the sublime are central. Understanding and responding to the jihad demand of us a sociology able to disengage from cherished sociological categories such as identity and imagined community, and to begin to rethink the category of experience itself in an increasingly globalized world. To respond to the jihad, we have to understand its originality.

Notes:

- 1 This research was supported by a Marie Curie International Fellowship within the 7th European Community Framework Programme.

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