

‘Suicide Bombing’ and the value of life

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The discursive framing of the ‘war on terror’ was secured through fear of one key figure: the irrational, religious and fanatical ‘suicide bomber.’ As a key signifier of all that the free world opposes this figure is now the subject of a whole academic, cum therapeutic, industry. The ‘professor of suicide bombing’ doggedly develops policy advice about how to prevent and anticipate such attacks. This article rejects social scientific explanations of human bombing, interpreting this figure as a social symptom of the hegemonic framework for the ordering of life, rather than as an irrational outburst against modernity. I argue that the human bomber’s act is a symptomatic response to the politicisation of life itself in neoliberal societies. Such an analysis restores to human bombings a significance which exceeds the delimitation of the act as ‘mad, bad or sad’¹ in the social scientific literature. Explicitly at stake in these acts is the value of lives, the means for determining this value, and the meaning of value itself. If the human bomber is a figure of fear this article concludes by refiguring this fear as the expression of desire, a desire without possible object in the current political conjuncture. I begin with a critical analysis of the dominant modes of interpretation of suicide bombing. Second, I think these acts as symptomatic responses to a particular ordering of lives. I trace the logics of this order through an analysis of the form of the act itself. Last, I characterise these acts as forms of acting out, that is as symptomatic of the dominant order, rather than as attempts to refigure that order.²

1. Explaining ‘Suicide Bombings’

A young woman walks into a restaurant populated by tourists, many of whom have had one drink too many. She eats well. After wiping her mouth, she stands up - apparently ready to pay - but then triggers a bomb strapped to her chest. She and a number of others are killed. Within minutes news flashes of yet another terrorist atrocity dominate the broadcast media. Reporters describe the devastation and quote

¹ In this respect at least my analysis is at one with those ‘terrorism experts’ who argue as does Neumann, that to understand so called terrorism we must focus on the social and political conditions in the global environment, rather than the acts themselves. However, I contend that it is only in analysing the form of these acts that we can begin to explain the phenomenon of suicide bombing. (Neumann 2009)

² One obvious objection to this argument is that it generalises across too many different instances. IN my view scholars trained in the abstruse logics of identity politics, and multi-culturalism are far too quick to generalise the assumption that each locale has its own rules, structures, cultural identities and the like. Of course there is some truth in this. Far more interesting however is the translation in particular contexts of those forms of government and rule which have been generalised across the globe, and the modulations of these practices in response to resistance and difference.

unnamed authorities, who claim that groups allied to *Al Qaeda* have attacked freedom and democracy. A young woman corrupted by radical ideologues has wasted her own and other's lives. Soon the US President, a European statesman or a UN spokesperson will blitz the television channels: 'This is an attack on all freedom loving people. The terrorist threat is not going to disappear. We must stand firm against...' An all too familiar story, dressed up in antagonistic tropes: freedom has been dealt a blow by fundamentalism; reason has succumbed to irrationality; fundamentalism (coda for Islam) has triumphed over democracy.

This re-presentation of the event manages, but also abuses, the trauma. It establishes a narrative which fixes the limits of interpretation. The human bomber comes to represent, as an over-determined signifier, the antagonistic other, all 'we' are fighting, a 'we' configured through this opposition.ⁱⁱ Two words encapsulate this neat distinction: freedom and fundamentalism. No matter what divides 'us', 'we' share a commitment to fighting for freedom against 'fundamentalism.' The term evokes a series of associations: the fundamentalist insists that there is one truth and one path to this truth; (s)he insists that this life is a preparation for the life to come and that humankind's fall from grace necessitates a return to the lost fundamentals; the fundamentalist is committed to a greater good. In contrast, liberated individuals pursue their own life projects, love and happiness divested of the 'illusion' that there is one good, and supposedly tolerant of others, and respectful towards difference. The representation of bombers in the media maintains the stereotype which links suicide bombing to Islam, despite the banal statistical detail demonstrating that such acts are committed by men and women from every religion, and in many instances by secular political groups.

These antagonistic tropes have found their Lysenkos. A new academic expert, the 'Professor of Suicide Bombing', prowls the halls of academia. S/he draws on statistical evidence to demonstrate that religion, poverty, psychopathology, politics - or a combination of these factors - explains these acts. The expert then informs policy makers how to prevent future atrocities. Most of this social scientific literature shares a set of methodological assumptions, even if their conclusions and their uses of the evidence differ. First a principle fact or set of facts about the agents are identified. Second, these facts are then correlated with incidences of suicide bombing in order to explain their occurrence. However, as I now argue, these approaches cannot explain human bombings. Instead they serve to validate a particular framing of order, figuring these acts in a manner which maintains the status quo.

(a) *Religious Fundamentalism*

Initially researchers argued that 'suicide bombings' are driven by religious (i.e. Islam) commitment. These arguments echoed a hegemonic common sense which framed them as the acts of radical fundamentalists. Jessica Stern's text Terror in the Name of God purports to explain religious militancy, and why militants kill. She writes:

Religious terrorism arises from pain and loss and from impatience with a God who is slow to respond to our plight, who doesn't answer (Stern 2004, x).

Her methodology is straightforward: 'I arranged to have locals (sic) administer detailed questionnaires, querying the terrorists about their motivations.' (Stern 2004,

xix) Stern demonstrates that suicide bombers are spiritually intoxicated and determined to cleanse the world of impurity. This reflects 'human nature to desire transcendence' (Stern 2004, p.282). The acts are thus in part a response to the God shaped hole of modern culture (Stern 2004, p.284) but are also 'ingeniously cruel' restorative acts, which respond to religious and political humiliation. Recruits are promised that their wounded masculinity will be healed. Some suicide bombers 'take pleasure from violence perhaps as a result of a genetic predisposition.' (Stern 2004, p. 286) Stern contends that the Islamic world is particularly vulnerable: 'Most Muslim-majority states are corrupt and fragile and unwilling or incapable of providing their populations with education, health care and other resources required to create robust economies and stable polities.' (Stern 2004, p.287) Her text finishes with a discussion of policy implications. This includes, and again this is all too familiar in this literature, an insistence that the US must preserve its special values of tolerance, empathy and courage without resorting to tactics which inspire more resistance. Stern's book, a New York Times notable book for 2003, repeats all of the clichés which underpin the war on terror: suicide attacks are the result of wounded Islamic masculinity; they are supported by a fundamentalist ideology; they ferment in undemocratic Muslim states, and may reflect a genetic predisposition to enjoy violence. Leaving aside the racist undertones of this particular text there are good reasons for rejecting the argument that suicide bombing is driven, in the last instance, by fundamentalist Islam.

First, there is a statistical correlation between 'religious commitment' and suicide bombing in between 37% and 48% of suicide operations, depending upon how the evidence is analysed (Pape 2005, p.17). However, in almost all of these instances the organisations responsible, and indeed the bombers, insist upon the political nature of their interventions. Since the early 1980s suicide attacks have been carried out by Hezbollah in Lebanon, by Al Qaeda globally, by the PKK in "Kurdistan", by the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) in Sri Lanka as well as by a number of smaller organisations.ⁱⁱⁱ In most instances the expressed motivations are not religious, but nationalist. Even in those cases where religion is very obviously a factor, occupation by foreign powers is always invoked as a motivating cause.

Second, Stern's approach constructs those interviewed as others driven by irrational beliefs. She fails to account for the processes of subjectification which results in the the bomber's self perception.^{iv} Stern also limits her study to those explicitly committed to fundamentalist Islam determining in advance the answers she will outline.

Third, Stern presumes that the best way to gather evidence about 'suicide bombing' is to interview those who have planned attacks, or who support such attacks. This participant observation type approach assumes that the suicide bomber is best placed to explain her failed act, and that this may be supplemented by an account of who the bomber is (age, ethnicity, religion and the like.) However, the conclusion Stern reaches is self selecting (i.e. it is already determined by her selection of who to interview.) Moreover she presumes that what is solicited in interview allows the interpreter to understand the act. There is, of course, value in seeking to understand the motivations of those who deem such acts appropriate. However, it is foolish to take at face value what is said, or to assume that explanation stops once the framing of the acts by the bombers themselves is shown to be similar. Motivation is not, in and of itself, an adequate explanation of a phenomenon.

Last, there is one fundamental problem: Stern's explanation could be deployed to explain almost any act of terror. Even were we to accept her quasi-existential account of religious longing, wounded masculinity and fundamentalist belief, this could never address the form of the act, that is the specificity of a terrorist attack designed to both kill and be killed. This is the case for all of the explanatory frameworks explored below. The various forms of correlation which supposedly explain suicide bombings are no different to other studies of the causes of terrorism: fundamentalism, poverty, brain washing, depression and criminality. Each of these supposed explanations seeks a correlation between the act and the characteristics common to those who engage in the acts. None of these studies address the specificity of 'suicide bombing' despite claiming to explain the peculiar resurgence of this phenomenon in so called late modernity. They explain what might drive an individual to engage in such an act. They forget to ask why the act takes this form.

(b) *Relative Deprivation*

A second group of scholars argued that 'suicide bombers' suffer either relative deprivation or extreme poverty. These explanations attribute terrorist activities to either real or perceived disadvantage, and assume that disadvantage translates into psychological motivation. Again statistics belie this claim. The men and women who engage in these acts have come from every social class. In some instances, notably the attacks on September the 11th 2001, the people involved had good educations, and enjoyed many of the supposed benefits of so called modern societies. There is no statistical correlation between economic deprivation and acts of terror (Pape 2004, p.18). It is also a mistake to present such correlations as if they could explain particular acts. Almost all social scientific approaches accept that social and political conditions, perhaps perceived in terms of relative deprivation, have a relation to acts of terror or resistance. However, such perceptions cannot be measured, and nor can one assume that so called relative deprivation only influences those who fit into the statistical categories developed to measure such experiences. Precisely because humans are self-interpreting beings, relative deprivation may influence others who do not themselves experience deprivation. The important point about the experience of deprivation is not its simple existence (this is always relative to other experiences of deprivation) but rather how such perceived or real inequalities are politically articulated. Expressing surprise at the statistical fact that relative deprivation is a poor predictor of the likelihood of any one individual engaging in such an act, misses the inter-subjective dimensions delimiting the interpretive horizon within which these acts become possible.

(c) *Psychopathology*

A third set of explanations contends that 'suicide bombers' have personality disorders or are psychopathic. This literature tends to characterise the human bomber as an unemployed social recluse with deep seated psychological problems. However, by any measure the individuals involved are fully aware of what they are doing, understand the consequences of their actions, and often put their personal affairs in order before the event, paying off debts for example. Moreover, such 'pathological personalities' existed before the last three decades of so called 'suicide bombing'. What requires explanation is not personal psychology but this act. Either way

psychological explanations are only ever used to develop technologies of intervention. Victoroff (2005) develops an exhaustive summary of these approaches. Whilst critical of the use of anecdotal evidence and subjective interpretation in psychological approaches, he concludes by describing terrorism generally, and suicide bombing in particular, as 'a variably determined sub-type of human aggression' (Victoroff 2005, p.34). He proposes a unified scientific theory 'perhaps drawing upon a neuro-economic model that acknowledges the ultimate adaptive nature of this behaviour, modified by an empirically based psychology identifying the influence of individual and group dynamics' (Victoroff 2005, p.35). On this view typical terrorists share four common traits: 'high affective valence regarding an ideological issue'; a personal stake in the issue such as perceived oppression; low cognitive flexibility; and last a capacity to suppress instinctive or learned moral constraints (Victoroff 2005, pp.35-36). A supposedly scientific argument states the obvious: 'terrorists' are angry about an issue and they set aside the moral constraints which prevent others from engaging in these acts. This text has two virtues: it presents an exhaustive summary of the psychological literature while demonstrating its limits. It then proceeds to use an 'empirical psychology' to reach conclusions which are, at best, conjecture. Victoroff acknowledges that far more empirical work to support the psychology of terrorism needs to be completed, but his starting assumptions mean that this research is likely to confirm what is already obvious. To put this point bluntly, Victoroff and writers of his ilk explain the psychological state of those already engaged in such acts. He cannot begin to understand why the act takes this particular form, and why these forms of terror have become so prevalent.

(d) *Rational Political Choice*

'Suicide bombing² is now routinely explained in political terms, as a rational and strategic instrument for groups engaged in asymmetrical struggles. A key text in this literature is Robert Pape's *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*. Pape argues persuasively that these activities are chosen by political organisations for their strategic superiority over other possible acts. They are rational choices in situations where there are few alternatives. He demonstrates that the explicit motivation for such attacks is the demand for occupied land to be returned, and for national political self determination. Pape also notes both the historical specificity of the wave of suicide bombings which began in the early 1980s, and the range of organisations prepared to use this form of attack. He argues that religious, psychological and economic explanations for such acts are flawed. Instead, the empirical evidence points to the opposite conclusion: individuals who carry out these acts are psychologically 'normal', often have good economic prospects, and are well integrated into their own communities. He writes:

Most suicide terrorism is undertaken as a strategic effort directed toward particular political goals; it is not simply the product of irrational individuals or an expression of fanatical hatreds. The main purpose of suicide terrorism is to use the threat of punishment to compel a target government to change policy, and most especially to cause democratic states to withdraw forces from land the terrorists perceive as their national homeland (Pape 2005, p.27).

Here Pape make clear his methodological commitments. He views these acts as rational choices in the circumstances, and he deploys empirical evidence, demonstrating statistical correlations, to support this view. His wide ranging text draws on evidence from attacks across the world. He, like Hafez writing in 2006, analyses these acts from three points of view, first, the individual suicide bomber, second the political organisation(s) claiming responsibility and last the communities who lend support to such acts. This allows Pape to emphasise both the altruistic dimensions of these acts, as well as the strategic decision making which informs organisational logics. Hafez (2006), likewise, in his text *Manufacturing Human Bombs: The Making of Palestinian Suicide Bombers* draws on 12 years of empirical research to demonstrate that the motivations of individuals differ from those of groups, (the first relating to personal aspirations for martyrdom, the second to the strategic objectives of the organisation) while societal motivations have to do with levels of perceived and real oppression.

Pape's text is refreshingly free of judgment, even if he finishes with the all too familiar account of policy implications. His work, along with that of Bloom (2005) and Gambeta (2005), confirms that asymmetries in power, religious difference, foreign occupations and political oppression are the key explanatory factors. These texts are all committed to the view that suicide bombings are 'strategic [acts] whose behaviour is not only intelligible but amenable to rational analysis.' (Euben 2007, p.129).

There are however profound limitations with these approaches. Pape never reflects on the unique nature of human bombs, nor does he explain their prevalence during the period which he studies. His account might just as well explain the acts of anti-colonial movements in the second half of the 20th century. He relies on an ideal of scientific neutrality, driven by a methodological commitment to ascertaining the relevant facts about bombers. He assumes that the use of the widest possible data set, combined with no ideological commitments, and a commitment to determining the rationality of the act, will deliver the best possible explanation. As in the other examples mentioned above Pape takes the idea of what a fact is for granted, and he assumes that acts have a causal explanation which may be statistically inferred once the correct evidence has been gathered. Pape's text betrays itself in not explaining what it sets out to explain. He cannot explain 'human bombing' or suicide bombing. Instead he has shown that there is a certain strategic sense in these acts, that they are responses to foreign occupation, and that they often result in political success. Why though have these acts of terror become so prevalent since the early 1980s? Why does the media focus on these acts, given that there are so many more acts of terror which do not involve suicide?

(e) *Limitations of the Political Science of 'Suicide Bombing'*

What unites these explanations? First, they all find their rationale within an accepted framing of order. They assume that the acts can be remedied once the causal factors which resulted in the acts have been determined. Second, in assuming a direct causal link between social facts and psychological motivation, they fail to account for the peculiarity of the act itself. Indeed, no purported explanation of these acts addresses the particular form that the acts assume. These explanations might just as well be deployed in the context of Northern Ireland, or to explain Basque separatist terror.

Third, these explanations presume the neutrality of the facts ascertained, or, presume a standard of rationality which can be deployed regardless of context or social structure. Thus, the rational choice variants of these arguments suggest that suicide bombers aim to maximise their perceived interests. Religious motifs are recast as instrumental actions. These are all versions of a scientism which claims to explain *motivation* (rational given the circumstances or beliefs), *cause* (experience of deprivation whether existential or material) and *cure* (therapy in all of its variants). The political science of suicide bombing seeks, as Charles Taylor once noted in relation to voting behaviour, to ascertain the brute data beyond interpretive dispute. It treats meaningful actions as facts about the agent. Political science underemphasises the relation of the act to the structures and institutions which delimit the act, the symbolic order against which the interpretation of the act must be judged, and the particular ordering of life against which bombers react. (Taylor, 1971)

These writers thus ignore the possibility that these acts, as awful as they are, challenge fundamental precepts about the dominant global ordering of life and life chances. The proposed solutions are already the practices that govern the social logics which give rise to martyrdom operations. These analyses are not ideological misrepresentations. Rather, they represent a dominant worldview committed to secular reason, the celebration of freedom and individual innovation, the extension of both quality of life and length of life.

There are then a number of questions which this literature cannot answer. First, why use the body as a weapon, even in cases where other strategies are possible? Second, why is it that the figure of the human bomber occupies a dominant place in the social imaginary? What is at stake in these acts, regardless of their provenance, is the body and its relation to the polity, yet this is precisely what most explanations cannot address. Why has life itself been politicised such that these acts come to figure our present? How is the body, when used as a weapon designed to take the lives of others, related to the body politic? Why is this link between mortality and politics forced upon us? Why does this figure exercise such a fascination for the gaze of the media? Why, in spite of constant interpretation and reinterpretation, does suicide bombing not dissolve itself? Why does it persist?^v In what follows I argue that these acts are anticipated by the dominant global order, that this ordering forecloses^{vi} other acts, and that as symptoms of this order they cast a dire light on its logics. This obscene supplement to the dominant ordering of our worlds illuminates its logics.^{vii}

2. Suicide Bombing as Social Symptom

In his influential text *Terror and Consent: The Wars for the Twenty-First Century* Phillip Bobbit writes:

‘In each era terrorism derives its ideology in reaction to the *raison d’être* of the dominant constitutional order, at the same time negating and rejecting that form’s unique ideology but mimicking the form’s structural characteristics.’
(Bobbit 2008, p.26)

Bobbit historicises this claim, contending that terrorism has always been a symptom of changes in the constitutional order of states. It exists as an ‘...epiphenomenon of

the constitutional order.’ (25) He understands this order in terms of the configuration and organisation of both material and symbolic power. While ‘terrorists’ reject the explicit ideology of a dominant order, they mimic the dominant form’s structural characteristics. In Bobbit’s view we live during a phase of transition, and the emergent form is the networked market state. The market state divests itself of social responsibilities, sets the rules of a networked polity, incentivises individuals and private organisations and increasingly does not provide welfare on the model of the social democratic state. The key activity of the market state during a period of transition from the industrial and welfare nation state systems of the 20th century, is deregulation not only of the economy, but also of reproductive laws, of genetic manipulation and of human rights. Rights, he argues, will now become variegated, awarded differentially rather than universally. In a similar vein services such as education, welfare provision, health and criminality will be disaggregated into their component parts and franchised out to the cheapest suppliers. Thus, to take a recent example, the 2011 white paper on higher education in the United Kingdom proposes the disaggregation of degree awarding powers (reserved for Universities), from the teaching of degrees and the provision of services required at an educational institutional, which may both be tendered out to the cheapest provider. The state’s sole role on this view is to regulate provision, managing the accounting systems required to maintain accountability. Accountability in these systems is rewritten according to the rules of accounting and actuarial calculative logics. On Bobbit’s account the suicide bomber is an ‘ideal weapon for the outsourcing market state terrorist network... All the network advantages of redundancy, interoperability, diversity and decentralised command and control are maximised by the outsourced suicide bomber.’ (Bobbit, p.53) On Bobbit’s account *Al Qaeda* mimics the market state, outsourcing terror, refusing centralised command structures, and claiming credit for actions by groups only distantly related.

Bobbit directs us to the structural features of the increasingly globalised market state. He views terrorism as a symptomatic response to this order. However, he fails to elucidate what he means by a symptom, and gives no indication as to how a symptom might be produced. Moreover, he overemphasises the structural features of the market state, with little discussion of the material reconfiguration of human life which such a neo-liberal polity requires. I concur with Bobbit’s intuition that the ‘terrorist’ act is symptomatic of a particular constitutional order. He establishes the starting points: the *form* that the act takes mirrors that of the constitutional order and mimics its logics but in a distorted form. Here Bobbit approaches Freud’s description of the symptom as a distorted response to perceived danger, and as the expression of a drive which cannot find direct expression as a consequence of repression. However, for Freud symptoms are psychosomatic expressions of repression often experienced as pain. The somatic and affective dimensions of aspects the symptom are the starting point for its interpretation.

A symptomatic account reads suicide bombing as an acting out^{viii} which renders visible the failure of the universalism promoted by this order. Symptoms, as signifiers of underlying complexes, point in allusive manner towards these complexes and their limits. This interpretive work asks why this particular act is chosen by so many, and why now? Why are these acts then re-presented by media outlets and governments, as *the* signifier of opposition to the ‘West’. Here the concern is not with the content of

the bomber's declarations, nor with the causal models developed to explain the act. Rather, as Žižek writes:

'The point is to avoid the properly fetishistic fascination of the 'content' supposedly hidden behind the form: the 'secret' to be unveiled through analysis is not the content hidden by the form...but on the contrary *'the secret of this form itself.'*'^{ix}

Žižek is of course echoing Marx's account of the fetishism of commodities in the first volume of *Das Kapital*. If the 'symptom is strictly speaking a particular element which subverts its own universal foundation' (Žižek 1989) in what sense does the suicide bomber subvert a dominant universalism in driving its logic to its most extreme point, unwittingly exposing the force underpinning that order. The sacrifice^x of the body and the killing of others as a symptom is 'a pathological signifying formation...resisting communication and interpretation which cannot be included in the circuit of discourse' but which is at the same time a positive condition of that order (Žižek 1989, p.74).^{xi} As an act that brings communication to a halt, refusing the terms of communication structuring our world, the suicide bomber nonetheless enacts the perverse underside of this dominant order. The symptom, then, is a compromise formation. It allows for the expression of the drive in an indirect manner.

While these acts puncture the dominant universalism, they do so only by acting out the logic of that order. It is only if situated in relation to the practices which constitute the logics of this order, that the acting out of the human bomber may be understood. Conventional explanations of suicide bombing are blind to this order, to the ways in which that order is naturalised and its history forgotten.^{xii} In what follows I interpret: first the use of the body as a weapon; second, the embodied relations with others laid claim to in the act; third the horror of the act, and fourth the promise of the act, the politics it alludes to but cannot claim. I interpret suicide bombing as an over-determined complex which alludes to the underside of the neo-liberal capture of life. In other words, I take Bobitt's claims at face value: a dominant constitutional order itself structures the terms of terrorist response, particularly in the form of the act. Interpreting suicide bombing along these lines casts a harsh light on that order, but it also pushes beyond Bobitt's analysis of the constitutional order, to focus on the ordering of life.

(a) *Bodies that matter*

The least disputable 'fact' about human bombing is that the body is quite literally at stake. A human being attaches a bomb, normally prepared by others, to her own body. S/he enters a public place where others, not directly complicit in acts of oppression, though often indirectly implicated in these acts, have gathered. No warning is issued. The bomber targets as many people as possible, treating their bodies and their lives as dispensable. He aims to create a spectacle, a media event which no one can ignore, an event designed to ignite passions. The body of the bomber is invariably torn to shreds, as are those of others close by.^{xiii} The bomber treats the victims' bodies and their lives as dispensable. It is as if the body of the bomber is no longer their own, as if in order to reclaim personhood the body has to be given up. The suicide bomber quite literally instrumentalises her body, and those of others. Fanon, in his *Wretched of the Earth*

argues that in the colonial situation violence becomes an end in itself. For Fanon the psychological liberation which goes hand in hand with a process of social liberation requires violence not as its means, but as intrinsic to achieving liberation, a means of subjectification for those rendered inert by the colonial order. However, Fanon cannot maintain the line between violence as instrumental, and violence as an end in itself, without severe difficulty (Fanon 2001, pp. 73-74). The suicide bomber dissolves this distinction altogether. This is one reason why rational choice theorists cannot explain 'suicide bombing'. The bomber makes certain that their flesh has a value, precisely at the moment when they can no longer experience that value.

The sacrifice of the body is, I contend, a rejection of the almost complete absorption of all bodies into a particular ordering of bodies in neo-liberal polities. What is at stake is how each body is accounted for, accorded value, and disciplined. The body of the suicide bomber, his own and yet not his own, disciplined and ordered yet not in his control, identified with an ideology that lays claim to it for political purposes, echoes, I contend, the discipline and ordering of all bodies in space and in time in a globalised economy and polity. Yet this takes to an unthinkable extreme the ordering of the body, an extreme beyond the bounds of common sense, yet at the same time an explicit echo of that common sense.

Foucault in his late lectures on bio-politics identified the forms that modern power takes in relation to the subjects of this power. His account is all too familiar to anyone living in contemporary democracies: control is exercised over individuals through debt; subjects are encouraged to view themselves as personal capital, and are evaluated as embodied capital through the various technologies invoked to determine the requisite value of each individual; each subject is viewed, and comes to view himself, as an investment opportunity; those who work can purchase their own futures by taking out debts which discipline their actions in the future; citizens in democracies own mortgaged properties, and thus mortgage their own time, labour and life.

The two sides of the dominant subjectivity thus emerge: a commitment to the liberation of self from all constraints which requires a constant monitoring of the self against risks now individualised, rather than collectivised. This is a project which is not simply about the extension of the free market in goods and commodities, as certain Marxist critics suggest; it is not simply about the predominance of finance capital over manufacturing or industrial capital as writers influenced by Hilferding's account of imperialism suggest. Rather, it concerns the capitalisation of life itself.

The neo-liberalism of the first decades of the 21st century then is not simply the reframing of older discursive practises. The key determinants of the hegemonic neo-liberalism of today concerns three issues: first, an ideological and fantasmatic commitment to the rationality of the market, and the self interest of individuals; second, the extension of actuarial forms of valuation to all areas of life, and the concomitant marketisation of all human relationships; and third, the extension of information technologies as a means of exercising control over the distribution of bodies in space and in time, and as a means of valuing all bodies, against the same calculus. This has been termed the financialisation of everyday life, but I prefer the phrase actuarial politics, a politics which like the insurance technologies of old depends upon the valuing of subjects as embodied in a variety of social relationships, all of which are monetised. Each of these determinants has its underside: self

interested individuals undermine the implicit moral framework required to maintain a balanced market; information technologies once actuarialised rationalise discrimination against those who score badly against the calculus, raising disturbing ethical questions about the very basis of human life lived in common; last these new practices require appropriate forms of legal ownership and control, most notably the ability to patent information which allows for the exercise of economic and political control from afar, through the outsourcing of labour and service activities. This order distributes possible relations between bodies and subjects in an apparently neutral calculus. What is at stake is each body as a bearer of messages, the body as engraved with different signs and values, signs which distribute different forms of property in this body.

The human bomber represents back to us this almost universal power exerted indirectly over bodies and the subjects of those bodies, a power which is increasingly all encompassing as the same technologies – both of the self, and of the administration of everyday life – extend to every corner of the planet. The bomber uses his body as a weapon. This exercise of absolute control over the self by the self is an almost exact figuration of the ideal self of neo-liberal societies: the individual who takes charge of their own life, makes their own decisions unfettered by the constraints of taxation and regulation, the individual whose morality consists in securing life for himself, and in so doing not becoming a burden on others. This version of *homo oeconomicus* is more a cultural ideal than a reality, but it is the form of subjectivation characteristic of contemporary capitalism.

This combination of freedom and of risk is enacted, although perversely so, in using one's body as a weapon. The perverse twist is important here: the individual takes charge of his own life in the most extreme form, to the point where she no longer has any control over that life. This giving up of all control over the self is however the other side of an order which preaches self-liberation and yet requires an absolute enclosure in webs of debt, property, work, and inequality which orders the differences between lives lived in freedom. The suicide bomber performs the complete liberation of the body which the neo-liberal order claims to encourage.

(b) *Purchasing the Future*

The human bomber invests his life in the future. Likewise, the dominant financial instruments of our time purchase the future: investment in life is determined by the possibility of a long term return, a calculation which already shapes that future, seeking to protect the future from the contingency of the incalculable event. This colonization of possibility as a calculable asset forecloses the possibility of a future which may be other, as we have already committed our selves to a particular image of what the future must be. This in part explains the growth of what can only be termed the fantastical politics of the event, as proposed by Badiou and Žižek, a commitment to the incalculable event which sets new coordinates as yet unrecognized. The act of the suicide bomber mimics precisely this form of ordering life through debt. The bomber performs an incalculable act, one which exceeds all ordering of this life, but in doing so s/he closes off any possible future, taking others with her. The suicide bomber once again takes to its extreme this logic of investment in future. If the broker makes a calculation apparently guaranteed to secure a return, the suicide bomber engages in an act in which the return is guaranteed for a future which cannot be

calculated at all. In so doing the act of suicide bombing enacts a different form of valuing human life. Whether impelled by secular or religious commitments what the suicide bomber suggests is that the value of any one life cannot be calculated, that a value reduced to the abstract horror of number is no value whatsoever. The perverse desire to kill as many heathens, or Americans, or colonisers as is possible enacts this commitment to a numerical determination of value, even as it depends upon the presentation of the bomber as having a unique value, as one who cannot merely be counted, but whose life has a value beyond the count.

(c) *Equality of the Flesh*

I have already indicated that these acts stand in for the enclosure of individual bodies within technologies which both map and make the subject. Human bombings are also inter-subjective acts. In *Mass Psychology* Freud contends that: ‘the individual from the beginning of his or her life is invariably linked to somebody else as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent...from the very first individual psychology is social psychology as well.’ (Freud 1985: p.158) He contends that the individual mind is thus a group mind, and that the distinction between self and other is far more difficult to maintain than is commonly presupposed. This helps on the one hand to explain the radical destitution of self that occurs when objects of libidinal investment are lost- as in love- but it has implications for any conception of politics: a decisive rejection of liberal conceptions of the rational self, but also a warning about the consequences of what it means to be a human animal- the fragility of identity, the dangers and the promise of this necessary imbrication of the self in the other.

Engaged in an inter-subjective act the human bomber makes two claims: first, he enacts an equality of bodies. Equality in death is enacted, in a grotesquery that mocks equality. The flesh of your body is of no more value than is mine, she claims. This perverse claim to equality is also an existential protest against what existence has become. The bomber lays claim to another life, a life beyond his reach, but in so doing passes comment on this life, where equality is daily betrayed. Of course the equality laid claim to is not one that we would recognise. Of course the act violates any sensible understanding of what equality might be. However, at the literal level of the body, what is enacted is an equality of flesh reduced to a zero point, where finally no flesh has any value, and become merely meat.

Second, the suicide bomber puts into question how we live together. The bomber will have no life of their own to come, and will take the potential futures of others in his ghastly act. There is however a ghostly echo of the manner in which contemporary societies are organised around the purchasing of the future, a future which is costed, and then loaned out so that the subject must act out the future which they have purchased. A global order structured around logics of debt instils in its subjects an ethos of behaviour rather than action. In this sense the financialised subject is more like a zombie than a human. The term zombie originated in the Niger delta region. Zombies were animated corpses, who labored for an unseen God, but were incapable of acting for themselves. The suicide bomber’s act refuses the zombification offered up by consumer culture, seeks to wake the living dead from their mortification, but offers nothing in return. We must be precise here: this is not in any direct sense the reason for the act carried out. One could not trace a causal link, in the sense in which an empirical study might, between perceptions of consumerism say and a desire to

take the lives of others. Rather, the act is situated within the overdetermined complex within which we find its significance.

(d) *Asymmetrical Warfare*

When kamikaze pilots attacked American ships towards the end of World War two, they did so as soldiers defending their nation. Whatever the wrongs of the imagined community their actions were against other soldiers, themselves engaged in war, and prepared to kill or be killed. Acts of suicide terror target unknowing civilians. Caverero's text *Horrorism* highlights this. As she notes what is regarded as most awful is the 'scandal [of] the aberrant self annihilating will of the perpetrator, despite the fact that the slaughter of the innocent is starting to appear normal.' (Caverero 2009, 92). The apparent disregard for this life stokes the imaginary antagonism which drives the war on terror, but why, Caverero asks, the focus on the perpetrator rather than the victim? Certainly the media drives this perverse fascination, but there is more to this fascination than the mediated image of the fundamentalist driven to commit suicide and homicide simultaneously. Certainly this spectacle disciplines, requiring subjects ever vigilant to the potential dangers which may lurk on trains, planes and automobiles.^{xiv}

More interesting though is to set this suicidal homicide against the particular form that war has taken since Desert Storm. Caverero notes the technologisation of war, which has sought to write the body of the soldier out of battle altogether, epitomised in particular by stealth bombers which target 'terrorists' without any risk to those who control the bomber. This contrasts with the explicit use of the body as a weapon. Rather than hiding behind technologies of destruction which dull the watching eye into the illusion of participating in a video game without victims, the suicide bomber's act testifies to the horror of war in refusing to shy away from the wanton destruction such weapons wreak. This is testimony to the attempt of warring powers to magically transmogrify war into a bloodless event, rendered free of cumbersome bodies all of whom have identities, communities and families. This asymmetry echoes others, more obvious and enduring: the technologies available for waging war are deployed in defence of the asymmetries which structure the relations between states, as well as the asymmetries which protect small elites within states. These acts are a form of feedback, insofar as they signal back to the system a certain truth about itself.

(e) *The Value of Life*

What unites these formal aspects of the act is a question which any human asks: what is the value of my life. The neo-liberal ordering of contemporary life answers this question in actuarial rather than metaphysical terms. This complex, often contested, though almost everywhere hegemonic mode of subjectification maintains the possibility of surplus consumption for some. However it is quite literally the consumption of other lives. In this sense Marx was correct in *Das Kapital* when writing that '...dead labor vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks...' (Marx Volume I, Chapter 10, Section 1, p. 257.)

This order also distributes value in death. Increased life expectancy in the West, the creation of conditions under which citizens are increasingly 'incapable of the experience of death' (Daub. 2006, p.151) is mirrored by a fall in average life

expectancy in many postcolonial societies as poverty, disease and famine destroyed the lives of millions, as the international economy is restructured as informational and service oriented, and as excess consumption by the wealthy mirrors debt, poverty and war economies for others. Montag terms this necro-economics, or market death. Or, as Mbembe writes:

In the colonial situation sovereignty means the right to define who matters and who does not; who is disposable and who is not. This combines three distinct operations of power: necro-politics, disciplinary control, and a bio-politics. (Mbembe 2002: 20)

This is an inclusive exclusion of life, a calculus determining which lives are worth enclosing, how best to do so in each case, and which lives should be excluded or kept at a polite distance, a distance which is in fact infinite. The suicide bomber parodies precisely this strange world in which some have become incapable of the experience of death, while others live with death, are allowed to die, have become disposable. The bomber quite literally disposes of lives as if they have no value, but this disposing mirrors the daily disposal of lives, not in the manner of a direct killing, but at a distance so that responsibility might be denied, or indeed impossible to trace. The disruption of the management of death at a distance, situates death in the immediacy of empire, as a spectacle to be devoured by those kept at arm's length, but also as a shock which reinforces the dominant logics.

3. The Promise of the act

I have used the terms acting out, as opposed to act, in the account above. This suggests a distinction between an authentic act, as opposed to an act somehow inauthentic. I am prepared to hold on to this distinction, and use it as the basis for a critique of these acts. As a symptom of an underlying complex the suicide bomber mimics that order, but in distorted form. Symptomatic acting out derives its structural logic from precisely the order which it claims to oppose, in this case the globalised market state. However, symptoms, as awful as they may be, are also indicative of a resistance to the constraints through which they are produced. They are an attempt to present what cannot be presented. Such acting out however misses its target. In that precise sense it is metonymical, it echoes dominant orders but does not reorder them; it proposes an alternative politics, but it is a politics already fostered by that order. Suicide bombing, as a symptom, displaces any coherent response to a particular ordering of the body in that it cannot confront that order head on, in part because its diagnosis of that order is incoherent.

This displacement occurs in two respects: first the method of attack avoids a confrontation with fundamental claims of that order while acting out its imperatives. The evangelical commitment to the extension of freedom is linked, not coincidentally, to a quasi-religious Christian fundamentalism which subtends to the evangelical hinterland of the war on terror. The fundamentalism of groups such as Al Qaeda does little more than return this message in distorted form. Second, the targeting of other lives echoes what that order already authorises, through the legitimisation of acts of violence that allow some to die while privileging certain lives over others. To put this plainly, the suicide bomber reacts against a particular order that is now

hegemonic in most areas of the world. Instead of addressing that hegemonic ordering of the social world and positing feasible alternatives, the suicide bomber acts out a response which is not in fact an act against that order. Instead the act affirms, both in terms of form, and in the response it evokes, precisely the form of that order. However, we should not miss the claim which is made in the act. As perverse as it may seem the act of the bomber enacts an equality of flesh, a flesh rendered meaningless meat. This enactment reacts against the abstract violences of both asymmetrical wars, and actuarial forms of counting, which determine the value of lives in monetary terms.

A properly political act by contrast targets the contours of the dominant framing of order. Suicide bombing as a symptom displaces a coherent response to a particular ordering of the body in that it cannot confront that order head on, in part because its diagnosis of that order is incoherent. One does not have to identify with the methods of the jihadists, to recognise that this is a war driven by a rejection of the terms on which freedom has been implemented, a reaction to conditions of profound inequality which this freedom protects. In this sense, and in this sense alone, a commitment to equality recognises the symptomatic torsion condensed in the bodies of those for whom this life is no longer worth living. A commitment to equality refuses the explicit commitments to inequality which many of these groups espouse, and the implicit commitment to inequality which is what the war on terror protects. It thus rewrites this set of antagonisms on terms unrecognisable within that binary horizon.

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ⁱ I use the shorthand 'mad, bad, sad' to denote the key terms on which suicide bombing has been analysed: mad, refers to the psychologisation of bombers as psychotic depressives; bad refers to the criminalisation of bombers, refusing any political status to the acts, and sad refers to the economic arguments which circulate around the term relative deprivation.

ⁱⁱ Alain Badiou has noted that this figure (specifically in relation to the 9/11 attacks) determines a subject (the West, democracies, us), a predicate (Islamic terrorism) and a sequence (the war against terror.) This has three related effects a subject effect, an alterity effect and a periodisation- effect.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a discussion of the statistics see Pape, *Dying to Win*, p. 40.

^{iv} It is a fashionable cliché that participant observation is more likely to deliver evidence which better reflects the interests or motivations of a group. Stern obviously could not do this, so she opts for interviews carried out by locals, but then takes this 'evidence' at face value. The interview becomes the indirect route to garnering social facts.

^v I am parodying a similar question posed by Žižek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. He is drawing directly on Lacan's account of interpretation of the symptom here.

^{vi} I use this term foreclosure in a precise sense: in psychoanalysis foreclosure refers to signifiers which cannot be integrated within a particular symbolic framework.

^{vii} Slavoj Žižek first uses this term in *How to Read Lacan*. He writes: This, of course, brings us back to the opposition between Ego-Ideal and obscene superego: at the level of Ego-Ideal (which here equals the public symbolic law: the set of rules we are supposed to follow in our public speech), nothing problematic happens, the text is clean, while, at another level, the text bombards the spectator with the superego injunction "Enjoy!", i.e. give way to your dirty imagination... This double reading is not simply a compromise on the part of the symbolic law, in the sense that the law is interested only in keeping up appearances, and leaves you free your exercise of dirty imagination on condition that it does not encroach upon the public domain. The law itself needs its obscene supplement, it is sustained by it.' (2006) The crucial point here is that the Symbolic domain requires for its functioning an imaginary supplement, one which is acceptable as long as it does not encroach on the public domain. I want to go one step further and suggest that the neo liberal ordering of life requires precisely this transgression which is demanded by a symbolic law which says not just enjoy, but value, make certain your life has value.

^{viii} I will distinguish between acting out, and an act. The former confirms the social logics which it appears to oppose; the latter takes on the very logic of that order, rather than acting out its imperatives. One of the questions we will have to consider is the extent to which this order forecloses the possibility of acts which reject its logics.

^{ix} Žižek (ibid): p.11.

^x Again, we should be precise when using this overdetermined word sacrifice. It means, very simply, the performance of sacred rites. In what sense is the human bomber performing a sacred rite? Most explanations immediately revert to religious stereotyping. However, more important is that a rite follows prescribed rules, and does not question the logic of those rules. Moreover, what is important is the sacred status of those rules. Sacred rules are not themselves subject to any higher power, precisely because in earthly terms they are at the source of that power. Here we touch on the relationship between sovereign power and life analysed most convincingly in Agamben's *Homo Sacer*.

^{xi} We can go down this route only so far though. While Žižek avoids such banal generalisations there are Lacanian theorists who would argue, as does Stavrakakis for example, that aggression is the projection outward of an impossibility which cannot be fulfilled. Thus the fundamental deadlock of the real is projected on to an other as the reason for my failure to achieve plenitude. The Bosnian war is thus reduced to a misrecognition of this fundamental deadlock. All analysis here grinds to a halt, in the stupid assertion that in the final instance a democratic ethos recognises this lack in the self which no

antagonism toward the other can ever resolve. One can see how this could play out in relation to the interpretation of suicide bombing without thinking at all.

^{xii} I implicitly draw upon Adorno's analysis of the relation between nature and history in his early text *The idea of natural history* here. (1932)

^{xiii} Adriano Cavarero addresses the horror that is central to these bombings. Her text Horrorism analyses the preponderance of violence against helpless victims, of which suicide bombing is but one example.

^{xiv} Jackson (2005) develops a sustained critique of the language of the 'war on terror', demonstrating the rhetorical tropes deployed in the shaping of a public consensus around the need to foreign interventions, the justification for the violation of the central tenets of liberal democratic rights, and the extension of the political hegemony of the military industrial complex. However, he at no point analyses the figure of the suicide bomber as a nodal point within this discursive practice.