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## Reimagining 'Suicide Bombing'

The global 'war on terror' was framed through fear of one key antagonist, the fanatical 'suicide bomber.' As the signifier of all that the 'free world' opposes this figure is the subject of an academic cum security industry. The 'Professor of Suicide Bombing' develops policy advice about how to prevent and anticipate such attacks, drawing on social scientific analyses of what causes individuals to engage in such attacks. This article rejects social scientific explanations of human bombing, interpreting this figure as a social symptom of the dominant order. Taking its cue from two unlikely bedfellows, Phillip Bobbit (2008), and Slavoj Zizek (1989), I contend that the human bomber's act is a symptomatic response to the politicisation of life in modern societies. This restores to human bombings a significance which exceeds the delimitation of the act as mad or bad in the social scientific literature.<sup>1</sup> Explicitly at stake in these acts is the value of lives, the means for determining this value, and the meaning of value itself in relation to human life. 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.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Explaining 'Suicide Bombings'

The aftermath of suicide bombings which target Westerners is predictable. Within minutes news flashes of yet another terrorist atrocity dominate the global broadcast media. Reporters describe the devastation and quote unnamed authorities, who immediately blame groups allied to Al Qaeda, Isis or other groups. The bombing is

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<sup>1</sup> 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. This entails a methodological break with the two main modes for the explanation and interpretation of such acts. The social scientific approaches tend to focus on causal explanations at the level of the individual, while sociological approaches tend to focus on the social and political circumstances which these acts respond to. My approach extends the latter approach, but suggests a form of symptomatic reading very rare in the sociological literature. (see Neumann 2009)

<sup>2</sup> One obvious objection to this argument is that it generalises across too many different instances, trying to explain what are in fact different acts. However we should note the prevalence of this particular form of act, as well as the similarity rather than distinctiveness of different places around the globe. Those 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 of those forms of government and rule which have been generalised across the globe, and the consequences of these practices for so called traditional ways of life.

described as an attack on all freedom loving people. An all too familiar story, dressed up in antagonistic tropes, is replayed as a ghostly echo of all previous attacks: freedom has been dealt a blow by fundamentalism; reason has succumbed to irrationality; religious extremism (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.<sup>1</sup> 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. The post-modern individual satisfies his pleasures without the moral scruples of 'less developed' communities. The presentation of bombers in the media maintains the stereotype which links suicide bombing to Islam, despite the banal statistical detail that such acts are committed by men and women from every religion, and in many instances by secular political groups.

These antagonistic tropes have 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 about how to prevent future atrocities. Most social scientific studies share a set of methodological assumptions, even if their conclusions and their uses of the evidence differ. However, as I now argue, these approaches do not explain suicide bombings. Instead they serve to validate a particular framing of order, figuring these acts in a manner which maintains the status quo. They rarely suggest that these acts might have something to do with the status quo. What follows is a brief outline of these limitations in the social scientific literature.

#### (a) *Religious Fundamentalism*

Early studies of 'suicide bombing' concluded that 'suicide bombings' are driven by religious (i.e. Islamic) 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) Her results indicate that suicide bombers are spiritually intoxicated and determined to cleanse the world of impurity reflecting their 'human nature to desire transcendence' (Stern 2004, p.282). The acts are 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. A minority ‘take pleasure from violence perhaps as a result of a genetic predisposition.’ (Stern 2004, p. 286) Moreover, 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)

Stern completes her text with a discussion of policy implications. This includes, and 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 of some to enjoy violence. Leaving aside the racist undertones 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 every instance the organisations responsible, and indeed the bombers, insist that their interventions are political. 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 groups, and sometimes individuals.<sup>ii</sup> In most instances the expressed motivations are not religious but nationalist. Even in cases where religion is very obviously a factor occupation by foreign powers is always invoked as a motivating cause.

Second, Stern constructs those interviewed as ‘others’ driven by irrational beliefs. She fails to account for the forms of interpellation which delimit the bomber’s sense of self.<sup>iii</sup> Instead, religious commitment is treated as a neutral fact about the actor, rather than as a symptom of a more wide ranging set of social and political concerns. Stern limits her study to those explicitly committed to fundamentalist Islam determining in advance the answers to her study. This link between religion, irrationality and Islam is no error. It echoes, and reinforces, the dominant ideological and political discourse which articulates the free subject as a rational, responsible actor willing to accept difference, and reject fundamentalism in all of its variants.

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 assumes that the suicide bomber is best placed to explain her own act, and that this may be supplemented by an account of who the bomber is (age, ethnicity, religion and the like.) There is 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. Moreover, there is one obvious limitation to Stern’s analysis. Her decision to interview only bombers who are Islamists means that she will

inevitably focus on these men and women share, their religious and ideological commitments. She assumes that this is an adequate explanation of suicide bombing. However, had Stern interviewed other bombers she may well have found radically different motivations for these acts. More important, this focus on motivation limits the possible analysis of the suicide bomber as a figure symptomatic of the dominant ideological configuration.

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, 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 explain suicide bombings are no different to other studies of the causes of terrorism: fundamentalism, poverty, brain washing, depression and criminality. Each of these 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 argue 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 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, the people involved were well educated and enjoyed many of the supposed benefits of 'modern' societies. There is no statistical correlation between economic deprivation and acts of terror (Pape 2004, p.18). 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 which delimit the interpretive horizon within which these acts become possible.

#### (c) *Psychopathology*

A third set of explanations contends that the suicide bombers have personality disorders or are psychopathic. This literature characterises 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' have 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 which target the pathology.

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 ideological issues'; a personal stake in the issue such as perceived oppression; low cognitive flexibility; and 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. However, 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.

#### (d) *Rational Political Choice*

'Suicide bombing' is now routinely explained in political terms, as a rational and strategic instrument for groups involved in asymmetrical struggles. A key text in this literature is Pape's *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (2005). Pape argues 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. On this account the explicit motivation for such attacks is the demand for occupied land to be returned, and for national political self-determination. Pape 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, drawing upon the largest set of data available about the perpetrators of these acts, that religious, psychological and economic explanations are flawed. Instead, the empirical evidence indicates that the individuals who carry out these acts are psychologically 'normal', often have good economic prospects, and are well integrated into their own communities. Rather, 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).

On Pape's account these acts are rational choices in the circumstances. 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: the individual suicide bomber, the political organisation(s) the bomber represents and the communities who lend support to such acts. Pape can thus demonstrate both the altruistic dimensions of these acts, and 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 chapter outlining the policy implications. His work, along with that of Bloom (2005) and Gambeta (2005), confirms that asymmetries in power, religious difference (as opposed to religious commitment), foreign occupations and political oppression are the key reasons why the acts take place.

There are though profound limitations to these approaches. 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). 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 20<sup>th</sup> century. He relies on an ideal of scientific neutrality, and is driven by a methodological commitment to ascertain the relevant facts about bombers. He assumes that the use of the widest possible data set, combined with ideological neutrality and a scientific methodology which investigates the 'rationality' behind such acts, delivers the best possible explanation. As in the other examples mentioned above Pape takes the idea of what a fact is for granted. He assumes that acts have a causal explanation which may be statistically inferred once the correct evidence has been garnered. If this text is methodologically superior to similar studies it also betrays what such approaches cannot address. Pape cannot explain why acts of terror take this particular form. Instead he shows 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.

(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 their particular form. 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. These approaches underplay the relation of these acts to the structures, institutions and life-worlds within which they emerge. In particular they occlude from view the centrality of the claim to reclaim life which is symbolically performed in the act of taking one's own life and those of others.

There are then two 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 has come to occupy such 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 as a weapon designed to take the lives of other 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?<sup>iv</sup> In what follows I argue that these acts are anticipated by the dominant global order, that this ordering forecloses<sup>v</sup> 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.

## 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 contends 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' rejects the explicit ideology of a dominant order, their acts mimic the dominant form's structural characteristics. The piracy of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries resembled the mercantile states they preyed upon, adapting their mercantile and cynical manners to their own ends. In Bobbit's view the dominant emergent form today is the networked market state. The market state divests itself of social responsibilities, setting the rules of a networked polity, incentivising individuals and private organisations, rather than providing

welfare. The key activity of the market state during a period of transition from the welfare nation state systems of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is deregulation - of the economy, also of reproductive laws, of genetic manipulation and of human rights. Rights will 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, from the teaching of degrees, and the provision of services required at an educational institutional. The state's sole role on this account is to regulate provision. In Bobbit's view the suicide bomber on this account 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.' (p.53) *Al Quaeda*, like the mercantile pirates in a different era, 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 globalised market state He views terrorism as a symptomatic response to this order. However, he fails to elucidate what he means when using the term symptom, nor why this symptom is produced by the outsourced market state form. Moreover, he overemphasises the structural features of the market state, with little discussion of the material reconfiguration of human life in the past three decades of neo-liberal governance. My task then is to deepen 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, reiterating its logics but in a distorted form. He echoes, without conceptualising, Freud's account 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. For Freud though symptoms are psychosomatic expressions often experienced as pain, and the somatic form of the symptom is crucial to its interpretation.

A symptomatic account interprets suicide bombing as an acting out<sup>vi</sup> which renders visible the failure of the universalism promoted by a particular order. Symptoms, as signifiers of underlying complexes, point in allusive manner towards these complexes and their limits. This interpretive work asks why these particular acts of 'terror' are 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 liberal democracies? 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 Zizek 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*.'<sup>vii</sup>

If the 'symptom is strictly speaking a particular element which subverts its own universal foundation' (Zizek 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<sup>viii</sup> 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’ which is at the same time a positive condition of that order (Zizek 1989, p.74).<sup>ix</sup> 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.<sup>x</sup> 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) The Value of Life*

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, have gathered. No warning is issued. The bomber targets as many people as possible treating their bodies and their lives as dispensable. S/he rarely knows who will die and aims to create a spectacle 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.<sup>xi</sup> The bomber treats the victims’ bodies and their lives as dispensable. I return to the relations with others implied in these acts, but let me focus first on the bomber and her body. The suicide bomber quite literally instrumentalises her body, and those of others. 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. Fanon, in Wretched of the Earth, argued 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 life 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 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, the discipline and ordering of all bodies in space and in time in a globalised economy and polity. Yet it takes to an unthinkable extreme the ordering of the body, an extreme beyond the bounds of common sense. The obvious response to this claim is that it generalises too much. How could one possibly make such spurious claims without evidence? Where are the case studies which show that this is a response to the technologies which monitor, measure and value in every locale? I would go further and argue that the resonance of these acts is their explicit rejection of the dominant regimes of value which order all lives. To quote Wendy Brown: ‘...today’s *homo oeconomicus* is an intensely constructed and governed bit of human capital tasked with improving and leveraging its competitive positioning and with enhancing its (monetary and nonmonetary) portfolio value across all its endeavours and venues’. (Brown 2015, p.10) She goes on to note that this is as true of businesses as it is of schools, of countries and of charities. Brown, Lazzarato and others develop Foucault’s late lectures on bio-politics and neoliberalism (Foucault 2008) tracking the forms of discipline and control which entail the accounting for every aspect of the lives of population(s) and individuals: subjects are encouraged to view themselves as personal capital and are evaluated as embodied capital; 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 mortgage their own time and labour; credit worthiness is deployed as a technology of control over individuals, organisations, cities and states.

Two sides of the dominant subjectivity emerge: the apparent commitment to the liberation of the self from all constraints (all pleasures are made available to those who can consume) requires a constant monitoring of the self against risks now individualised rather than collectivised (debt, insurance and the like), while populations are subjected to a security discourse which plays on fear and legitimises the extension of informational and logistic technologies of control. 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 21<sup>st</sup> century then is not simply the reframing of older discursive practises. The key determinants of so called neo-liberalism concerns three issues: a fantasmatic commitment to the rationality of the market, and the self interest of individuals; the extension of actuarial forms of valuation to all life, with the concomitant marketisation of all relationships; and the extension of information technologies as a means of exercising control over the distribution of bodies in space and in time, and 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 ‘free’ 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; and information technologies require new forms of legal ownership and control, notably the patent, which disaggregate the model of industrial production. We begin to understand these most radical and seemingly irrational acts if we recognise the capturing of life that is the core of the so called neo-liberal project. 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 what is proper to which bodies. This goes beyond an analysis which locates these changes as the the marketisation of the state, a policy long advocated on the libertarian right.

The suicide bomber mirror this meshing of actuarial power exerted indirectly over the subjects of differentially valued bodies, a power which power which extends 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 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: an absolute enclosure in webs of debt, property, work, and inequality which order the differences between lives lived in freedom. The suicide bomber performs the complete liberation of the body which the neo-liberal order celebrates. She poses two further challenges to this order.

First, these technologies 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 are already committed to a particular image of that future. This in part explains the growth of what can only be termed the fantastical politics of the event, as proposed by Badiou and Zizek, a commitment to the incalculable event which sets new coordinates as yet unrecognized. The act of the suicide bomber mimics 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.

Second, the suicide bomber enacts a claim that value cannot be reduced to an actuarial calculation, that what matters is not simply life as a 'speck of capital' (Brown 2015, 10) whose value is calculable. This argument may well seem perverse. After all do we not live in the era of value pluralism? Have not the deliberative democrats and their multicultural acolytes demonstrated that the axiomatic basis of all democratic societies is value pluralism, and a rejection of any overarching conception of the good? Surely the suicide bomber is committed to a version of the good which would destroy all the benefits of liberal democratic pluralism? The suicide bomber's act, on

my account, is symptomatic of a simple fact: the pluralism of values is ultimately subject to a common measure of calculation. Liberal democratic pluralism is only of value if it can give an account of itself.

(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. However 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 danger and the promise of this necessary imbrication of the self in the other.

As an inter-subjective act the human bomber makes two claims: first, he enacts the most radical equality of bodies by reducing all to a common flesh, disarticulating the unity of individual bodies and identities. 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 a formal equality which applies the same rules of equivalence to all, and then presents the unequal results as a form of equality. The bomber lays claim to an other life, a life beyond his reach, and 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 an equality of flesh reduced to a zero point is enacted where finally no flesh has value as it become merely meat.

The suicide bomber thus puts into question how we live together. He will have no life to come and will take the futures of others in his ghastly act. This is a ghostly echo of how we purchase the future, a future which is calculated and loaned out, so that the subject must act out the future 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 might 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. She notes that 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), and encourages a shift of perspective, to think from the perspective of the victim. The apparent disregard for this life stokes the imaginary antagonism which drives the war on terror, but why 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.<sup>xiii</sup>

More interesting though is to set this suicidal homicide against the particular form that war has taken since Desert Storm. Caverero notes that the technologization of warfare has sought to write the body of the soldier out of battle altogether, epitomised in particular by drones which target enemies, without risking the lives of those who control the weapon. The 'War on Terror' - which takes place everywhere and nowhere at the same time - is asymmetrically structured. Ethical arguments are deployed to justify the claim that no state should put its combatants at risk, if this can be avoided. Technologies which allow for remote control war become standardised. Drones rely upon the gathering of data about the lives of millions of individuals, whose behaviour is evaluated against a calculus of 'normality'. Life is refracted through logistical and calculative technologies which mathematize risk and justify killing on the basis of the data. Here sovereign, governmental, and 'civilisational' discourses overlap. The sovereign decision to kill (Obama's kill list), depends upon the gathering of logistical data about target populations; it manages those populations through fear; and it racialises killing insisting that the perpetrators of this violence are acting in the best, humanitarian interests of civilisation, unlike those they target (see for example Chamayou 2014). These logistical and murderous powers are exercised outside the international conventions which once regulated warfare and without democratic accountability.

Contrast this 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, refusing to shy away from the wanton destruction such weapons wreak. This is testimony to the attempt of logistical societies to magically transmogrify war into a bloodless event, rendered free of cumbersome bodies all of whom have identities, communities and families. A typical response to such a claim is to argue that the suicide bomber is testimony to the uncivilised, fundamentalist ethos which attacks without reason, logic or due cause. However, the claims about the superiority of the new technologies of war are illusionary: many civilians die, many wholly innocent are executed. Drones are the most notable example of these technologies which are deployed in defence of the asymmetries which structure the relations between states, the asymmetries which protect small elites within states, and the

asymmetrical values of the lives within states. These acts are a form of feedback, signalling back to the system a certain truth about itself.

(e) *The Value of Life*

Suicide bombers then pose questions which any human might ask: 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, almost everywhere hegemonic mode of subjectification maintains the possibility of surplus consumption for some, which 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, Das Kapital, Volume I, Chapter 10, Section 1, p. 257.)

This order also distributes 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. The international economy is restructured as informational and service oriented and excess consumption by the wealthy mirrors debt, poverty and war economies for others. Montag terms this necro-economics, or market death. 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 simply reinforces these dominant logics.

### 3. The Promise of the act

I have used the terms acting out, as opposed to act, in this account. 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 but dominant complex the suicide bomber mimics that order in distorted form. Symptomatic acting out derives its structural logic from the order it claims to oppose: the globalised market state and the bio-political logistics of life. 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. In that precise sense these are metonymical acts: they echo dominant orders but do not reorder them; they propose 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 politic in that it cannot confront that order head on, in part because its diagnosis of that order is incoherent. One might object to my (ab)use of bio-political and psychoanalytic frameworks in this account. Although it is not the subject of this paper I would simply note that any account of the hegemony of neoliberal rationality must describe both these dominant logics and their psychosomatic fallout. Indeed this is precisely what Freud's account of the neuroses of middle class Vienna began to do. This may not require recourse to psychoanalytic categories, but in my view Freud's investigation of the claim that the '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' has yet to be surpassed. That may not seem so radical but this is a radical anti-subjectivism pointing the way towards a study of these processes of constitution of the ego- the categories of identification and of introjection in particular demonstrate the cannibalistic nature of all identity.

In what sense though is the act of the suicide bomber mistaken? This displacement occurs in two respects: first the method of attack avoids a confrontation with fundamental claims of the dominant 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 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. Acts of human bombing react against the abstract violence of asymmetrical wars, and the actuarial and logistical violence which authorises exclusion in the name of equality.

A properly political act would target the contours of the dominant framing of order. Suicide bombers are 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. Such acts would be improper in two respects: they would reframe the terms of the proper which delimit how lives should be led. In doing so they would reject the configuration of property and propriety which makes of individuals and groups units of information: specks of

human capital, ripe for investment; or specks of dangerous flesh, ripe for immunisation.

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<sup>i</sup> 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.

<sup>ii</sup> For a discussion of the statistics see Pape, *Dying to Win*, p. 40.

<sup>iii</sup> 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.

<sup>iv</sup> I am parodying a similar question posed by Zizek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. He is drawing directly on Lacan's account of interpretation of the symptom here.

<sup>v</sup> I use this term foreclosure in a precise sense: in psychoanalysis foreclosure refers to signifiers which cannot be integrated within a particular symbolic framework.

<sup>vi</sup> 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.



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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.

<sup>vii</sup> Zizek (ibid): p.11.

<sup>viii</sup> 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.

<sup>ix</sup> We can go down this route only so far though. While Zizek 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.

<sup>x</sup> 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)

<sup>xi</sup> Adriano Cavarero addresses the horror that is central to these bombings. Her text Horrorism analyses the increase of random, horrific violence against helpless victims, of which suicide bombing is but one example.

<sup>xii</sup> 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.