



The Spectacle of Terrorism: Exploring the Impact of ‘Blind Acting Out’ and ‘Phatic Communication’

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Abstract

This article utilises theoretical developments on ‘spectacular public disorder’ to contribute to understanding of terrorism. Using examples from the ‘Arab Spring’ (2011), the Paris riots (2005) and London riots (2011) we show how the ‘flashpoint’ hypothesis- for example the deaths of the central figures (from Bouauzizi in Tunis, to Mark Duggan in London) influenced the scope and duration of the disorder. We show that the trajectory of public disorder, from their initial ‘spark’ to post-incident debate, have points of contact with recent episodes of ‘spectacular’ terrorist attacks, from the 2013 mall siege in Kenya to the 2013 attempted decapitation of the marine Drummer Lee Rigby in London. To draw these parallels we develop and elucidate on the toolkit for staging and extending the spectacle, including passage à l’acte, developed by Badiou (2006) apropos of the Paris riots, ‘Phatic communication’, developed by Gluckman (1960) and ‘Channel Testing’ hypothesis developed by Žizek (2011).

Introduction

Criminologists have long grappled with the challenge of designing (and agreeing) clear definitions, let alone explanations, of terrorism with Laqueur (2000:5) noting, for instance, that ‘there are more than hundred definitions which have been offered’. The result of this debate is a remarkable variety of approaches and definitions. Recently, some criminologists have even proposed ‘general’ theories, focused on, say, the role of strains in terrorism (Agnew, 2010), while others have highlighted the developmental processes in the worldview of potential terrorists. A notable example of the latter is Cottee’s (2010) ‘mind-slaughter’ hypothesis, which explores the ‘neutralizing’ worldview of ‘jihadi salafism’, an extension of Matza and Sykes’ (1957) ‘neutralizations’ theory.

The question of terrorism is therefore not a recent one: The history of terrorist behaviour extends into antiquity, meaning that there common themes and concepts which span all ages. As Martin (2014) also notes, state terrorism, dissident terrorism, and other types of political violence are found in all periods of human civilization. Nonetheless, recent thinking has, justifiably perhaps, concentrated on the post-9/11 conflict between, on the one side, those who are waging a self-described ‘war on terror’ and, on the other, those who are waging a self-described ‘holy war’ in defence of their religious ideology (Martin, 2014; Laqueur, 2000). But because of the sheer width and breadth of the subject of terrorism, there is an ever-expanding scope to enrich this discourse through explorations of other, sometimes neglected, points of view.

The present work is offered in that spirit, and is specific to debate on what could loosely be termed as ‘staged’ terrorism; that is, incidences of terrorist attacks (such as the 2014 attempted decapitation of the Marine drummer, Lee Rigby, by two self-claimed ‘Jihadists’ in London) which aim to draw maximum attention to an



issue via the ensuing post-attack debate. Deploying the examples of ‘spectacular (in)security’ (Bauman, 2012) we develop a perspective which emphasizes the value of (extended) visibility, and the critical role played by ‘flashpoints’ (Newburn, 2014; Waddington, 2000; Waddington et al. 1989). We show how, for example, post-attack debate is ensured by well-timed release of a post-attack video or images. We claim that the purpose of such video or images is to perpetuate the ontological insecurity that characterises the period of uncertainty immediately after a disturbing incidence (Bauman, 2012).

There is no suggestion whatsoever here that street protests- or, for that matter, sports events- have the same motivation as terrorism: Neither is it being suggested that the staged spectacle in either achieves the same level of effectiveness. Rather, the point is to illustrate, very loosely, how both reconstruct the terrain of ‘denied space’ (Badiou, 2006; Pape, 2005; Waddington, 2000), reconstructing the basic coordinates of their comparative weakness into a strength- at least for purposes of debate and limelight (Badiou, 2006; Zizek, 2011; 2014). Our comparisons of terrorism and public disorder are therefore limited to this parallel only: While both may aim at redressing a set of acknowledged- or even legitimate- grievances, terrorism stands out for its *ab initio*, and mostly indiscriminate, use of violence as a tool (Agnew, 2010; Cottee, 2010). Public protest, on the other hand, may turn chaotic, but research (for example, Reiner, 2010; Newburn, 2014; Waddington, 2000; 2012) has revealed multiple influences on the scale of violence during protests, the prominent factor being the methodology and choice of policing equipment and tactics.

This article is divided into 5 sections. In the first section, we aim to shed light on the general problematic of theorizing terrorism, including the fact that who/what is or isn’t terrorism is far from agreed. The caveats offered in this section lay ground for the debate extended onto the section after that, which details the linkage of terrorism and strains and how the notion of strains is itself problematic. Thereafter, we explore the linkage between terrorism and public disorder using the examples of the Arab Spring, and the Paris and London riots. Subsequent sections seek to explain terrorism from the perspective of the main concepts, including *passage a l’acte* (blind acting out) and *phatic communication*.

Terrorism: the conceptual problem

A proposal to theorize on terrorism is problematic for a number of reasons: First, delineation of what should constitute terrorism is rife with controversy. A recent twist, involving deployment of new-fangled terminology- such as ‘Jihadism’, ‘Islamism’ or ‘extremism’- in both policy and social commentary circles, complicates things even more. A debate on the delimitation of these concepts would itself require a whole article. Although there is broad agreement that terrorism involves the use of violence to achieve political ends (Agnew, 1992; 2010; Cottee, 2001; Post, 2007; Araj, 2008), what is political- or for that matter, violent- is itself the subject of debate (Newman, 2006; Zizek, 2008). As Zizek (2008) posits: Is ‘structural’ violence, for example the destruction of ecosystems by dumping of toxic waste, or rising child poverty from deliberate shrinkage of the welfare state, any less violent than a gun attack? The point here is: Contextual constraints can make it difficult to analyse, much less to ascribe meanings to terrorism.

Perhaps the best way to avoid lengthy (and unhelpful) interrogation of terrorism and its related concepts, is to invite the reader’s attention to the pitfalls of ascribing concrete, much less uniform, meanings acceptable across board. That is to say; even where delineation is (for the sake of argument) possible- for example on what ‘Jihadism’ is- such delineation cannot be freed from other meta-ideological factors (of social class, gender or race), let alone that it would be an arduous task to try to establish the relative influences of these factors on a protagonist’s ‘Islamism’ (Mamdani, 2001; Moghadam, 2006). In that sense, while the reading of



terrorism this article relies on everyday understandings of ‘terrorism’- such as ‘use of indiscriminate violence for political ends’ (Martin, 2014; Cottee, 2010; Agnew, 2010)- we must nonetheless remain alert to the ideological context of key phrases such as ‘violence’, or for that matter ‘political ends’. Indeed, recent critiques have shown how standard readings of terrorism are problematic- for example, in their assumptions of a post-colonial, mono-cultural interpretation of events (Mamdani, 2001; Post, 2007).

Secondly, and relatedly, we must be careful to avoid the pitfalls of those readings of terrorism, and ‘terrorist groups’, which assume permanent organizational methodology: There is a standard assumption, for example, that *Al Qaeda*, or the so-called *Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant* (ISIL), have a final unreviewable take on events and ‘will not rest until a certain demand is met’ (Malechova, 2005; Martin, 2014). The contrary evidence is that terrorist organizations, like all organizations, go through various stages (Cottee, 2010; Ahmed, 2005; Araj, 2008), and that in this road of evolution, not only do their message (and demands) change but that they are influenced by both the political economy of their operational environment including competition from other groups with a similar ‘enemy’ (Mamdani, 2001; Post, 2007). To take an example, the weakening of *Al Qaeda*, and the subsequent rise of ISIL has, has influenced the message and targets of Somalia’s *Al Shabbab*- and to an extent Nigeria’s *Boko Haram*- as both seek to endear themselves to more sophisticated and wealthier jihadist umbrellas[1].

This useful awareness should not deter further exploration of terrorism, however. Rather, it should encourage greater exploration of how the useful analyses of other social problems can enhance our understanding of terrorism. Below, we attempt an exploration of the sociology of strains (developed by, among others, Agnew (2010), Meier-Katkin et al. 2009) in order to lay ground for analysis of spectacular violence. But before we do that, we must offer the caveat that our perspective is not a unique- or even an original- one: Recent commentary has engaged with the content of post-attack messages (most notably Osama Bin Laden’s famous DVD’s, or very recently Khaleid Sheikh Mohamed’s (KSM) ‘journal’ smuggled from Guantanamo bay[2]). Here, analysis has (albeit narrowly) focused on the ‘ideological map’ of the material- on the Jihadist worldview or the scope of western military interventions as a radicalizing strain, for example (Martin, 2000; Zizek, 2014).

(There are policy influences to this perspective even, including the present UK Conservative Government proposals for the involvement of institutions of learning in so-called ‘de-radicalisation’[3]. While de-radicalisation discourse has certainly benefitted from analysis of, say, so-called ‘jihadist material’-including website posts by teenagers who have escaped to join so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)-, we take issue with its homologous construction of post-attack Jihadist communication. Post-attack communication, which we shall revisit later, differs in context and location, as do the myriad causes of terrorism.)

From strain to stampede

One of the major influences on post-9/11 thinking on terrorism has been Agnew’s *Strain Theory* (1992; 2001; 2010). In *The General Strain Theory of Terrorism*, Agnew (2010) proposes that the spring pool of terrorism is accumulated strains which are (1) high in magnitude, (2) perceived as unjust (involving civilians) and, (3) which are perpetrated by a more powerful other (including the complicit population). As such, analyses of terrorism should focus on: (1) the nature of the strain, (2) the cause of the strain and, (3) the reason for the strain. As Agnew reminds us, however, while the presence of these three factors on their own is not sufficient to trigger terrorism, they have an associative impact on strong negative emotional states on



a potential terrorist: When combined with other traits- such as humiliation or anger—they give rise to a desire for corrective action, by for example convincing the perpetrator that violence is the only available or most effective coping mechanism or redress. Apropos of ‘societal strains’ (from economic or political exclusion or environmental harms) Agnew shows how the lacuna from reduced social control- for example undermined religious or family authority- incubates ‘beliefs favorable to terrorism’. Such beliefs- for example that it is proper to target those outside one’s framework of faith—become not only the response but also the interpretive framework of perceived strains. The genius of the ‘strain’ logic is therefore the emphasis it places on perception in respect of injustice: The way things are perceived is as decisive, if not more so, in choice of reaction compared to the facts of the matter. Taking this cue, post-9/11 discourse has emphasized the need to understand how grievance is constituted and articulated, more so in the states engaged in or affected by the so-called ‘war on terror’ (Post, 2007; Pape, 2005; Martin, 2014; Agnew, 2010). Accordingly, the key thing is in understanding the specific ways in which the actions of the ‘powerful other’ (say, targeted killings of Muslim clerics by a state) help to create a vacuum (of political, familial or religious) authority. Such vacuum, as Araj (2008), Pape (2005) and Post (2007) also show, is normally filled with a perception that there is no alternative to violence when it comes to the injustice of the more powerful ‘other’.

The ‘strains’ hypothesis has points of contact with wider discourse on violent crimes, including ‘crimes against humanity’, such as genocide (Meier-Katkin et al. 2009; Jamieson, 2009) and ‘state crimes’ (Jamieson and McEvoy, 2005). In this wider discourse, the absence of a powerful authority figure (as happens following the overthrow of a military dictator) may facilitate a vacuum that may subsequently be filled by extremist or ethnic militias, who may, in turn, target moderate cultural or ethnic voices. Apropos ‘crimes against humanity’ Meier-Katkin et al.’s (2009) reading of strains highlights the role of spontaneous change in group dynamics; the explosive critical moment in which subliminal desire (greed, revenge, fear, shame, racist rage...) toxically meets with opportunity of loss of authority. This could happen after the removal of a figure of control, as the examples of Gadhafi’s ouster in Libya, or the assassination of Rwanda’s Habyarimana, or the death of Tito’s regime in the former Yugoslavia have shown. Analyses (for example, Jamieson, 2009; Mamdani, 2009) have shown the game-changer role authority vacuums play in political violence.

There is no doubt then that the logic of strains is very helpful in not only outlining but also measuring the risks of societal strains that could engender terrorism. What we should guard against, however, is what Kahneman (2011) refers to as *associative coherence*- the erroneous assumption of causality usually based on co-occurrence: For example, it may very well be that the perpetrator’s strain is merely coincidental to (and not caused or enhanced by their) religion, or ethnicity, or material condition. Space does not allow us an exhaustive discussion of the richness and weaknesses of the strain argument. Let us, by way of extending this argument, see how a homologous notion of strains can also occlude wider considerations of the structural causes of terrorism

Charlie Hebdo’s ‘friends’

A profound critique of existing theoretical frameworks of terrorism is that they tend to be state-centric, emphasizing a geo-political reading of ‘strains’. This creates simplistic dichotomies of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ protagonists- suggesting, for example, that ‘victims’ and ‘perpetrators’ are easy to delineate. The recent *Je suis Charlie*’ march in Paris is a case in point: Everyone, including leaders of regimes that could easily be indicted for torture and war crimes, marched for *Charlie*. It is as if the incidence of attack on a cartoon magazine had condensed the wide and varied world of terrorism (and terrorists) into its visible dichotomies of ‘good guys’



(visible in the streets) and ‘bad guys’ (out there hiding). (It is notable that the logic of dichotomies has been in force for sometime now, since George Bush’s famous ‘You are with us, or against us’[4].) There is agreement among commentators of the so-called ‘war of terror’ that the power of such dichotomies is its polarising effect (Zizek, 2008; 2010; Mamdani, 2009); it forces witnesses, bystanders and anyone else unaligned with some form of pre-existing conflict to either become allies of the speaking/grieving party or to risk losing favour. In the case of the attacks on (a low-circulation) *Charlie*, wasn’t the offer, as Zizek (2010) would put it, ‘the freedom’ to choose as long as one chooses correctly (that, is, in a certain direction?). Of course: Between the implied consequences of not joining the team on the streets, *Charlie’s* unlikely friends joined anti-globalization and anti-war activists- for the common cause of press freedom. The problem, apropos Charlie and easy dichotomy, is how the ‘fake participation’ (Zizek, 2010) it engenders depoliticizes intersectionality; for example by providing protest stage to those who may sympathize with press freedom, but turn a deaf ear to oppression of women or sexual and ethnic minorities, as the case may be. The irony of the presence of some leaders (of Saudi Arabia, which has been accused of limiting the rights of women and non-Muslims, by *Human Rights Watch*, for example) in the streets of Paris was not lost on commentators.

As Cohen (2000) taught us in ‘States of Denial’, neutralization of intersectionality goes hand in hand with constructions of (the complex) nature of strains into easy moral panics: The standard trope in which all problems of post-9/11 terrorism derive from Islamic ‘extremism’ is a case in point, and shows how superficial presentations of complex phenomenon ignore the (complex) ways in which religious ideology, say, is predicated in the environment or the global political economy. Martin (2014) correctly observes that we cannot read Jihadist extremism in Northern Nigeria, to take one example, as merely the product of a religious worldview; we must also look at the trajectory of that country’s fossil-fuel industry or its history of military rule (which weakened civilian/policing institutions) and so forth. Similarly, we cannot look at the rise of Al-Qaeda affiliated *Al Shabbab* in Somalia exclusively from the perspective of Islamist ideology: We must at least cast a glance at the wider political economy, including the theft of (what is left of) Somalia’s natural resources, especially fish, or the dumping of waste by foreign multinational corporations (Zizek, 2010; Mamdani, 2009). How about spontaneous, spectacular violence?

Spontaneity and spectacular violence; from the Arab Spring to the London riots

One of the indictments of the simplistic notions of strains is the little regard they have given to ‘spontaneity’, especially in regard to spectacular violence. While the involvement in spectacular public disorder of (mostly Muslim) ethnic minority young men has been adequately analysed (for example, Waddington, 1998; 2000; Badiou, 2006; Zizek, 2008) the involvement of young men from upper middle class backgrounds in spectacular acts of terrorism in the West has received little exploration. The attempted ‘underwear’ bombing of a Delta airlines plane with 286 people on board by Umar Farouk Abdul Mutallab, is a case in point: Umar, the son of a former chairman of a Nigerian bank, enjoyed the trappings of a wealthy upbringing, including being privately educated in a highly regarded international boarding school. (Among his classmates was the daughter of Karl Hoffman, an adviser to the former US secretary of State Colin Powell.)[5] Under the simplistic reading of ‘strain’, it is difficult to empirically justify involvement of someone who enjoys the trappings of Umar Mutallab- or to show why the strains were experienced more by Mutallab than by other Muslim young men. It is even more difficult to construct Umar as a naïve young man who was misled by cunning extremist recruiters- the victim of the ‘bad guys’.

To make sense of cases such as Umar, we must, in addition to acknowledging the complexity of strains, also



understand the important, but neglected, link between strains and spontaneity. While both the role of social dynamics and strains has been explored in depth, there has been little exploration of the role of spontaneity on violent crime, generally, and even less on terrorism. Take the example of so-called 'Arab spring': On 17th December 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, unable to find work, was selling vegetables on the streets of Tunis. To sanitize the 'central business district' of hawkers, municipal inspectors confiscated Bouazizi's wares, leading to his self-immolation two hours later. His death on 4th of January triggered a protest which would engulf not only Tunisia (leading to the overthrow of the dictator Ben Ali) but cause unrest across majority of the Arab states, especially Egypt where Hosni Mubarak was subsequently overthrown and put on trial. Here, the 'irrational' gesture of 'acting out' by Bouazizi served as the catalyst for others to take on an entrenched system, not so much out of hope or even awareness that the regime could be overthrown, but as gesture to the same regime that 'it may carry on' but must do so under the awareness of this daring gesture of defiance (Zizek, 2012). So, although the strain of oppression (denial of freedom of movement, self-determination and expression, in Tunisia) underlay the protest across the Arab world, the critical moment was Bouazizi's 'act proper' (subsequently recognised by the *Time Magazine* when it named Bouazizi as its 2011 'person of the year') that signalled this moment of defiance.

Similarly, between 6th and 11th of August 2011, young people took part in riots across the London boroughs. The resulting chaos and looting led to the death of 5 people, with more than 3000 arrests reported. Criminologists have drawn a link between systematic marginalization of young men from working class backgrounds and the riots. Newburn (2014:10) apropos Waddington et al. (1989) critically applies the 'flashpoints' approach to the riots, showing how 'structural' and 'political/ideological' alienation combines with situational (spatial and social determinants) and interactional (the dynamics of interaction between the police and the protesters) to determine the scope and length of the riots. The conclusion is that, while the riots were motivated by this 'injustice' of unemployment and controversial police tactics such as 'stop and search,' the riots were themselves 'set-off' by (what would later be ruled as) the lawful killing of a black man Mark Duggan, by Metropolitan Police officers. It is instructive that, even though majority of the rioters had no direct knowledge of the police shooting of Mark Duggan, they saw the riots as an opportunity to make a point about their alienation and also to stage the recovery of their 'public space' (Zizek, 2011; Newburn, 2014).

Waddington (2012) has developed what he terms as 'the law of moments' to articulate the phenomenon he refers to as 'the precise moment when things might have turned out differently'. The 'flashpoint moment' hypothesis presupposes that a critical point in the process of public disagreement signifies the ultimate unwillingness of one party to 'accommodate the systems of beliefs and values, interests and objectives of their rivals' (Waddington, 2012:1). In the case of London riots, this was a combination of the shooting of mark Duggan with the long period it took those in his immediate cycle (including his family) to receive any support and information from the police. In the case of the Arab Spring it was the period between the confiscation of Bouazizi's wares and the indifference of the regime to his plight in the days leading up to his death several weeks later. This period of indifference is a critical stage in re-establishing or totally losing communicative contact between the victim and her more powerful 'other'. Ensuing pubic disorder is, in that sense, an attempt to highlight this loss of communicative contact- an attempt to force the other to re-establish the contact. In the case of London riots, the point was that, by staging the protests in as large numbers as possible, it would be difficult to ignore both the present predicament and the future plight of young people. Here, however, Zizek (2011) goes further than most critiques of the riots and posits that the riots were characterised by a lack of an articulated message- just a display of camaraderie among looters: Although



there were protesters motivated by the injustice of Mark Duggan's shooting, Zizek argues, majority of the rioters were mere opportunists, entrapped in the *jouissance* of getting something for free from the local shopping premises. His point is corroborated by Bauman (2012) who reads the riots as 'consumerism coming home to roost'; the young people were capitalising on the breakdown of law and order to bridge the gap of their symbolic alienation (by post-modern consumerism) through the only avenue available to them- theft.

In '*The year of dreaming dangerously*' (2012) Zizek compares a lack of an articulated message (which he claims to be the main feature of the London riots) to Badiou's (2006) reading of the Paris riots as a *passage a l'acte* (Passage to the act). The phrase *passage a l'acte*, a synonym for 'blind acting out', comes from French clinical psychiatry, and was initially proposed by Freud to designate those impulsive acts, of a violent or criminal nature, which sometimes mark the onset of an acute psychotic episode. Jacques Lacan (in his seminar of 1962-3) developed the concept further to denote the action of someone who, overcome by anxiety, does something which may not make sense ordinarily- for example, committing suicide- but which turns out to be a decisive course of action[6]. In this 'passage into the act' (proper), the psychotic physically exits the scene, but remains active and influential to the narrative's plot: Aren't the invocation of the images of Bouazizi (or Duggan) good examples of actors who exit the scene, but continue to influence things (through the sheer memory of the incidence of their exit)?

As the phrase itself indicates, the *passage a l'acte* is supposed to mark the point when a subject proceeds from a violent idea or intention to the corresponding act: The Paris riots between October and November 2005) were sparked by the death (by electrocution) of two young men who had hidden in a power station to avoid police arrest. (Prior to that, a group of young men had successfully prevented the arrest of their friends by a group of Paris police who had responded to a reported burglary.) These deaths, like Mark Duggan's or Bouazizi's, ignited riots across Paris for two months in which young people, predominantly from ethnic minority backgrounds, protested against perceived harassment by the police. The point here and in the other examples above is that, although analyses have usefully highlighted the 'strain' background (police harassment, lack of jobs...) of such protests, there has not been corresponding focus on the impact of the central figures in the plot: Bouazizi, Duggan and Zyed Banna and Bounna Traore- two of the men men electrocuted in the Paris Power Station.

As the examples above show, the aim of spectacular public disorder is the debate and the coverage they force. Let us now relate this logic to terrorism:

Post-attack discourse; the 'method in the madness'

When, in 2013, the marine drummer Lee Rigby was murdered in the streets of London by two men claiming allegiance to *Al Qaeda*, media pundits and sociologists were at pains to explain the 'root' causes of their troubling behaviour.[7] In '*How did Michael Adebolajo become a killer*' the BBC[8] pointed out, for example, that Adebolajo- one of the killers- was a good-boy-turned-bad who had been dealt a bad hand by Kenyan authorities after his arrest for trying to sneak through its borders in order to join the Somali militants, *Al Shabbab*. (The BBC revealed, for example, that Adebolajo had been sodomised in the Kenyan jail while awaiting trial.) Similar post-Rigby murder commentary focused on the role alienation of ethnic minority Muslim young people played in 'radicalization'[9]: The debate re-ignited following the attacks on an 'upper end' shopping mall in Kenya, in which armed *Al Shabbab* gunmen randomly executed shoppers on a Saturday morning before taking more than a hundred hostages. Instantly, media pundits sought to explain the attacks as an example of western de-linkages with the (homologous) 'Muslim world' or (homologous)



Western belligerence under the so-called ‘war on terror’ in which the West essentially ‘asks’ for these types of attacks by funding incursions into Muslim countries and so on. Apropos of *Al Shabbab*’s attack in Nairobi, their spokesman told the Qatari TV channel, *al Jazeera* that he saw no need to shed tears for the death of ‘1 per cent of 1 per cent’ - the local elites who shop in such complexes[10].

The point of the above is that, however it is regarded, terrorism succeeds precisely when it manages ‘not to be ignored’! It works because its methodology is carefully chosen, anticipating the discourse in its wake. As Cottee (2010) brilliantly argues, the notion of terrorists as ‘mindless’ or ‘confused’ misses the crucial point of terrorism: That this ‘mindlessness’ actually works- it gets attention, sends fear and highlights the issues. The success of terrorism is therefore not necessary in its battlefield victory, but in the mere success of becoming an issue. This point is corroborated in Pape’s (2005) notion of ‘dying to win’ apropos suicide terrorism. Here, the point not to be missed is how terrorism itself precisely relies on the superficial dichotomies of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ to be effective (Pape, 2005; Post, 2007; Moghadam, 2006). In simple language, the point of terrorism is to divide, to force a quick choice between ‘us’ and ‘them’ so that the choice is between ‘who gets the other’, first.

In order to maximise its spectacle, and extend its coverage and debate, terrorism relies on another tool, however: Phatic communication.

Phatic communication and strains

In the aftermath of Rigby’s murder, the *Guardian* (2013) cited the brother of Adebolajo (one of his attackers) as having declared that: ‘It won’t be the last attack, simply because of the tactics of the British secret service and foreign policy, for every violent action is a violent reaction’. Prior to that, Adebolajo himself, brandishing a bloodied machete with which he had attempted to decapitate Rigby, made the following announcement, which is worthy quoting at length:

“We swear by almighty Allah we will never stop fighting you. The only reason we have done this is because Muslims are dying every day. This British soldier is an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. We must fight them. I apologise that women had to witness this today. But in our land our women have to see the same. You people will never be safe. Remove your government, they don’t care about you. You think David Cameron is going to get caught in the street when we start bussing’ our guns? You think politicians are going to die? No it’s going to be the average guy, like you, and your children. So get rid of them. Tell them to bring our troops back so you can all live in peace’ (Guardian, 2013)[11].

As the ‘appearance’ on *Al Jazeera*, cited above in the incidence of *Al Shabbab*’s attacks in Kenya above also show, media declarations of the attackers’ intent have usually accompanied terrorism incidences. The effectiveness of such declarations is in extending the dominance of the incidence in the media. (The irony, of course, is that the media provides extended coverage, with ‘experts’ invited to analyse the achievements and failures of the attacks, or policy makers who call in to remind viewers that the terrorists have failed ((‘they have only killed innocent people, but that will not help their cause...’)) and so on.)

The best way to look at the communication accompanying terrorist attacks is to read it as ‘Phatic communication’, a concept developed by Gluckman (1952) and Jacobson (1960), apropos of Malinowski. Quoting a dialogue from Dorothy Parker, here is how Jacobson outlines the phatic function in communication:



'Well, here we are', he said.

'Here we are', she said, 'Aren't we?'

'I should say we are', he said (Jackobson, 1960: 357).

As Jackobson argues, the effectiveness of phatic communication lies in its power to prolong communicative contact. In the case of post-attack communication, we should perhaps view them as a strategy to extend the contact between the potential victims and the attackers through the usually pre-staged media analyses. Apropos this communicative contact Zizek (2011) has added another dimension: Phatic communication functions as a 'channel-testing' kit, as happens when a speaker shouts 'Hello, one, two, three...do you hear me?' to a crowd. Here, the phatic function should not be confused with a real question (where, for example, the speaker needs the audience to shout back the answer and so forth): Instead, Zizek argues, the gesture serves the metalinguistic function of checking that the equipment is working- if it can it still be put to one's use. Apropos Adebolajo's speech during the murder of Lee Rigby (or Bin Laden's post- 9/11 videos) is the message not a kind of 'Hello, do you hear me?' - a testing of the channels, even if just to remind viewers what the attacker is capable of?

Conclusion

Although public protest differs from incidences of terrorism in both its (articulated) legitimacy and choice of method, we can learn something from the one, which may enrich our understanding of the other. The argument we have made above is that, we can enrich our understanding of terrorism by further concentrating the gaze of analysis to the impact of the choices made by the central figures in a conflict, not only in sparking the protest/violence, but also in determining the duration of the engagement. Specific to terrorism, although the strains of underlying disenchantment fuel the need to act, sometimes it is the desire to 'exhibit', to 'act-out', which may be the decisive fuse setting the process in motion. Sometimes matters depend on the momentary exhibition of the one who becomes the face of an issue or incidence. The *activation energy*, to deploy a chemical adjective, may be the structural strain, but the boiling point- the point of no return- is spectacle: While it may be possible that the majority of terrorist incidences are deeply rooted in strains, or are masterminded by calculating sociopaths who exploit various background conditions to stage the attacks (Cottee, 2010), it is still possible that certain acts of terrorism involve acting out.

The tangent of the spectacular is common in the present (postmodern?) culture of alienation. As Zizek (2010) and Badiou (2006) show, increasingly populations are finding it hard to obtain or maintain meaningful contact with policy makers and governments, even in liberal democracies. This occlusion of communicative contact leaves spectacular display of displeasure as the most effective form of public protest- from anti-globalization and anti-austerity 'occupy' protests, to violent demonstrations against police brutality. These forms of protest serve not only to pressure political regimes into desired causes of action, but also provide spectacular exhibition of assumed injustice (including the presence of detested political or economic actors).

The idea is to 'act out' disenchantment and to gain maximum coverage of this acting out. The effectiveness is thus not in the issues being raised, but in the sheer scale of the response to action. The anti-racist 'million-man' marches in the US or the 2005 'Make Poverty History' in Scotland are good examples of this. Here, the key point is that the success of the spectacle is not necessarily in the wider policy responses (which are certainly desired and even demanded), but in the very gesture of temporary control (Newburn, 2014; Waddington, 2000): The power is, as some of the young London rioters told the media[12], seeing the



police on the run- or, better, others seeing the police on the run. This symbolic control- being the centre of attention- is important and should not be dismissed.

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Notes

[1] See, for example, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/02/23/rivals-islamic-state-al-shabaab-treaten-usa-malls/23899397/>

[2] See, for example: <http://www.channel4.com/news/thoughts-of-9-11-mastermind-revealed-in-new-document-khalid-sheikh-mohammed-al-qaeda-guantanamo> for channel 4's coverage of Khaleid Sheikh Mohamed's 'smuggled' journal.

[3] See <https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/ken-mcdonald-obnoxious-anti-radicalisation-measures-attack-free-speech>, for example, for a loose discussion of this issue.

[4] See: <http://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/11/06/gen.attack.on.terror/>

[5] AFP 'Online preachers of hate: Anwar al-Awlaki, bin Laden of the internet', The Telegraph, December 10th 2013 accessed March 20th 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/6896128/Detroit-terror-attack-profile-of-Umar-Farouk-Abdul-Mutallab.htm>

[6] Lacan, Jacques. (1962-3) *Le Séminaire. Livre X. L'angoisse, 1962-63*, unpublished. Seminar of 16 January 1963.

[7] There is no agreed-upon definition of what 'Jihadi terrorism is'. Broadly, however, Jihadi terrorism, or Jihadism is used in reference is to acts committed by groups or individuals who profess Islamic or Islamist motivations or goals. Islamic terrorists have relied on particular interpretations of the tenets of the Quran and the Hadith, citing these scriptures to justify violent tactics including mass murder, genocide, and slavery.

Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam by Gilles Kepel, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, (2002), p.331

[8] Casciani, D 'Woolwich: How did Michael Adebolajo become a killer', BBC, December 19th 2013, accessed February 17th 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-25424290>

[9] Dodd, D and Halliday, J 'Lee Rigby Murder: Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale found guilty', The Guardian, December 19th 2013, accessed March 18th 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2013/dec/19/lee-rigby-murder-michael-adebolajo-adebowale-guilty>,

[10] See <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/09/2013923628350977.html>

[11] Grandjean, G and Khalili, M 'Inside the mind of Lee Rigby's killer Adebolajo', The Guardian, December 20th 2013, accessed April 5th 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/video/2013/dec/20/inside-mind-lee-rigby-killer-michael-adebolajo-brother-video>

[12] See, for example: <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/dec/05/riots-revenge-against-po>



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