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Memorial Explosions:

12/08, 9/11 and the Global Politics of Iconicity

Paper delivered at the Conference *Rethinking Global Society*, Bauman

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I launched an investigation into convergences between the logic of terrorist destruction and contemporary Islamophobic policies through my research on art and tourism. This incongruous statement begins to make sense if one considers how, security concerns aside, counter-terrorist measures allow nation-states to demonstrate a civilised image on the global scene. The badge of civility has been claimed by many political units and has permeated narratives of Western modernity. The idea of fostering a globally plausible self-image, however, is constitutive of what can be (and has been) termed 'cosmetic cosmopolitanism'. This cosmopolitanism, which prioritises self-presentation and plausible facades, has more ambiguous origins than that which elevates the possibility of fostering human togetherness on a global scale to the status of a political project. We must bear in mind that the original story of acquiring and losing 'image' or 'face' stems from biblical narratives of the Original Sin. The Fall of Adam and Eve from Paradise, which was achieved through the collaboration of Woman with an Evil Snake, both gendered and coloured the archetypical tale of knowledge. The selfsame story haunted continental philosophy, especially the founders and followers of post-Hegelian ethics and Levinassian alterity. How ironic, then, to re-encounter this story into late modern configurations of counter-terrorist civility. In this paper I argue that contemporary anti-terrorist image-making policies *mirror* the ways Western theosophical discourse imagined humans as gendered and racialised beings. Significantly, terrorism's target continues to be the prestige of political units, institutions or organisations, but victimised nation-states appear to operate on the selfsame principles as their enemies.

Contemporary terror is inextricably tied in Western public spheres with Islam. From the 9/11 tragedy onwards, right to the 7/7 London bombings and the [Jyllands-Posten cartoon controversy](#), the fear of a nebulous 'Islam' has been at the centre of Western democratic concerns. I will not attempt to define 'Islamophobia' in such a short space; suffice it to say that just as xenophobia, the concept appeals to commonsensical ways of knowing, fearing and rejecting other cultures. The fear of Islam is the fear of otherness within our social and cultural domain – the stranger of Simmel and Bauman, if you like. In this respect, Muslim communities seem to have assumed in racial stereotyping the function of Jewish diasporas that stretched to the four corners of the world and joined diverse societies without renouncing the memory of their own distinctive origins. Unlike the Jewish diaspora however, Muslim communities do not seem to have a single, well-defined 'homeland'. Here the Islamophobic discourse on terror has achieved the unthinkable: not only did it confirm the idea that 'Islam' destroys images and collective reputations, it also granted Muslim communities arbitrarily with an imagined territorial node, a fictional 'home'. This 'home' is the Middle Eastern netherworld, where bombs and nefarious plans are produced and then trafficked into Western national and transnational spaces.

Consider how this trafficking is held accountable for the symbolic violation of national cultures around the world. The mass rapes of women in war zones, a practice in developing countries that destroys the intimate space of the family and publically humiliates the head of kin obeys to the same political logic. This logic draws upon globalised themes of honour and shame, with the former remaining masculinised and the latter feminised. Islamophobic discourse feminises national cultures to valorise the value of Western democracy and civility at the expense of ethno-cultural difference. A vicious circle commences here: Islamic terrorism's 'shaming' of Western nation-states replicates by turn any civilised political unit's urgency to preserve its global reputation. State reputation is literally and symbolically associated here with the role of icons and 'faces' (and it may be pertinent to draw parallels here with the Christian practice of worshipping God through actual icons). There are no better examples of this paradox than those proffered by the 9/11 terrorists' decision to crash two planes on [America's twin architectural icons](#); or, in [7/7's case](#), the selection of London's globally emulated technological miracle, the transport system, used both by the city's prestigious business labour and its global tourists.

But we know full well that even Western domains are regulated by internal divides and cultural, economic and political inequalities. Wallerstein's world systems theory, however rigid in its conception, accounts for the presence of static ideological centres within otherwise fluid

transnational domains such the ‘West’ or ‘Europe’. It is here that I would like to anchor my analysis. I will place my anthropological spyglass on the imaginary margins of the European civilised world to do so, where ‘backward customs’ began to fade in recent decades, especially with the ‘help’ of tourist and technological expansion. We think that the code of honour and masculinity foregrounds social action and policy only in these marginal countries just because they are marginal – therefore, ‘backward’. If, however, we change our perspective, we will see more clearly how the same code of preserving state honour colours the background of Western democracies. When George W. Bush argued that either the world sides with America to eliminate Islamic terrorism or we ‘are like them’, uncivilised, he was called a patriot, not a bigot or ‘backward’. And yet, the destruction of America’s prestige by shadowy ‘Oriental’ enemies revealed the theological underpinnings of the War on Terror as well as the fact that American imperialist nationalism is reminiscent of the honour cultures it seeks to destroy: not only did Islamist terrorists (if indeed Islamist terrorists co-ordinated the 9/11 tragedy) manage to turn Western mobilities into a deadly weapon, they also gained in unprecedented global prestige through them. Just as Western honour codes are beaten by Eastern [honour codes](#), Western technology is beaten by its reproduction by the terrorist savages it seeks to eliminate. The most powerful terrorist weapon is visual, electronic and hyperlinked. Not only does electronic and broadcast terrorism demonstrate the ‘villains’ ability to globally broadcast faceless threats, it can also ensure that when these threats materialize, the victimized state loses in global standing.

I want to look at some recent political developments in Greece to better illustrate Western civility’s double standards. Because of the ancient Hellenic culture that thrived in the same peninsula in which the modern Greek state and nation were founded, Greece was pronounced the centre of European civilisation early on. But the colonisation of the peninsula by Ottoman Turks between the 15th and the 19th centuries stripped modern Greeks of their Hellenic glamour. Western patronage and intellectual Hellenomania instilled this inferiority complex in them, also making the search for global prestige the Greek nation-state’s political priority. This has been a priority from the foundation of modern Greece in 1832 until today. Decades of endemic political corruption allowed things to come full circle in 2009, with the announcement in effect of state bankruptcy in 2010 and a formal request for European aid. For a country that had allegedly lent its glamorous ancient civilisation to the Western world, losing face globally altogether was the ultimate political humiliation. This triggered internally a double reactive mechanism (one controlled by the centre and another by the masses) with several targets (the state itself, the European community, Western ‘patronage’ and even the idea of state order itself). The fear of

Islamic contamination had already reared its ugly face domestically [in late 2008](#) when, following an altercation between police and a group of youths in the Exarcheia district of Athens, the 15-year old Alexis Grigoropoulos was shot and killed by a police officer. The murder inflamed the Greek public to such an extent that rioting crowds in Athens, Thessaloniki and a number of European cities generated mayhem with demonstrations and extended violence that lasted for weeks. Global media discourse began to draw unsavoury comparisons with the riots of Greek dissident groups against [the junta of 1968-1974](#), a dictatorship that isolated Greece on the global plateau with its paranoid anti-communist and racist agenda. The actions of the conservative government of Nea Dimokratia in 2008 further encouraged connections of state violence against rioting groups with the Albanian identity of the victim. Of immigrant parentage, Grigoropoulos came to symbolise the Greek state's oppression of ethnic difference, but underneath this, more associative chains were formed. Historically, [Albanian pre-national communities played a significant role in the production of Greek national identity](#) and the nation-state's foundation. Centralised policies subsequently criminalised and expunged these communities from national self-definitions: their mobile, nomadic character is comparable to modern migrations in Europe, after all. At the time, in search of global recognition, the Greek nation-state followed Western political scripts that excluded anything associated with Ottoman Islam from European civilisation. Coming from the Ottoman empire into Greek territories, Albanian communities were conveniently cast as undesired Eastern invaders of Greek national culture. Contemporary Albanian migrations reproduced this Albanophobic narrative, aligning Greek immigration policies with other Western agendas.

I do not wish to examine Greek nation-building as an exceptional instance, only to highlight how such policies of 'saving face' in the global political plateau illustrate a Western *mentalité* that draws upon precisely what it aspires to supersede. I refer to the archaic (masculinised) logic of honour that seeks the preservation of political *prestige* at the expense of (feminised) ethnic difference. In reality, the 'terror' of Western political discourse resides within the nation-states terrorists attack. Ethnic communities within the nation-state retain an ambivalent place in national self-narration, a potentially contaminant quality that may shame and humiliate the nation's purity. Saving face, preserving national honour intact, necessitates constant control, manipulation and assimilation of ethnic difference. Contemporary political discourse in Western domains emulates the original theological discourse that gendered and coloured evil but represses the origins of this emulation. It is not a coincidence that in the Greek case, killing a migrant demonstrator was presented as a sound way to maintain public order in an increasingly

dangerous world of mobile enemies with no face but many dangerous plans. Greek neoconservative debates on criminalising the use of hoods in public also mirrored in this context of anti-state demonstrations Western phobias regarding the public uses of hijab. The loss of face gestured here to the ethnic demonstrators' lack of phenomenological whiteness - an evidently gendered and racialised motif that cost the lives of innocent suspects in both the Greek and British cases (post 7/7 arrests and killings).

According to Greek public discussants, the promises the government of Nea Dimokratia had made in 2007 to win re-election were never realised. The promises included reforming the social and economic system and the privatization of ailing public institutions such as Olympic Airlines so that Greece becomes more integrated into Europe. Instead, a series of economic and political scandals involving the Church, an increase in violent crime and a sluggish legal system wasted public funds and patience until a single shooting was enough to spread terror. High levels of unemployment stemming from governmental inability to implement functional reforms in education and the labour market worsened things. The 2008 events had coincided with a visit by Thomas Hammarberg, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe (8-10 December 2008), to northern borderline regions that have a larger concentration of ethnic minorities. [Hammarberg's report](#) on his visit highlighted the problematic treatment of Muslim minorities by the Greek state, cautioning the authorities on issues regarding citizenship rights. His report came as an additional blow to the government's prestige, unequivocally questioning Greece's ability to *synchronise* with socio-political changes at European level.

Falling from the paradise of civilisation is a fear shared by all national Leviathans. George Bush [had proudly stated in 2005](#) how the American nation stood guard on the tense borders of civilisation Islamic villains sought to destroy: 'In this new century, freedom is once again assaulted by enemies determined to roll back generations of democratic progress. Once again, we're responding to a global campaign of fear with a global campaign of freedom. And once again, we will see freedom's victory', he claimed. Behind this pseudo-utopian message laid hidden a totalitarian vision of humanity, akin to that propagated in the 1960s by the Greek junta. Its motto ('homeland, religion, family'), sums up contemporary anti-immigration trends and Islamophobic attitudes we saw emerging with the Bush administration, then spreading across the world like a new disease. The idea of familial bonding and kinship systems, ceremoniously attributed to the Eastern honour rationale, guided both the Greek junta's and the American presidency's policies.

What kind of conclusion could one draw from these reflections? The prioritisation of prestige compels nation-states to destroy internal reciprocities to construct and reconstruct their own image in a community of nations. This self-destructive streak is stylistically identical to the forceful seclusion of Muslim women in the private sphere of home, where they cannot be shamed and can preserve the family's honour. Irrespectively of the heterogeneous purposes contemporary terrorism may carry or the interpretation of terrorist action by various political actors, its logic remains the same. The concerns of victimised nation-states also remain identical to Islamic terrorist objectives. The two sides end up mirroring each other. In Western democracies we would like to believe that we left behind the religious fundamentalism that does indeed guide the destructive actions of such terrorist groups. But we forget that our concern for prestige obeys to the rules of Christian cosmology, or that our re-active and pro-active policies merely replicate terrorist destruction, only they turn it inwards, against ethnic suspects, hoodies and [veiled women](#). Protagonists in this vicious circle of violence are neither the national governments nor the 'terrorists'. It is technology itself that turns death into a public spectacle for global consumption, a symbolic value on which illegal groups can capitalise.