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THE WESTERN JIHADI SUBCULTURE AND SUBTERRANEAN VALUES

This article draws on the criminological work of Gresham Sykes and David Matza as a starting-point for theorizing the nature and appeal of the western jihadi subculture, defined here as a hybrid and heavily digitized global imaginary that extols and justifies violent jihad as a way of life and being. It suggests that at the centre of this subculture are three focal concerns: (1) Violence and Machismo; (2) Death and Martyrdom; and (3) Disdain of the Dunya. More critically, it argues that these three focal concerns have immediate counterparts in the shadow values of the wider society with which western jihadists are in contention. This argument has important implications for debates over radicalization and the attractions of jihadist activism.

Keywords: Jihadi subculture, subterranean values, machismo, dunya, martyrdom, radicalization

Introduction

Here is Ibrahim al-Mazwagi, explaining to an American citizen-journalist in Syria what jihad means to him:

> *Bilal Abdul Kareem*: What is jihad?
> *Al-Mazwagi*: Jihad is ah…, ah jihad means to ah…what's the word I'm looking for?
> *Bilal Abdul Kareem*: Struggle?
> *Al-Mazwagi*: No, no, no, not struggle…but to kick some butt! [giggles] Jihad is to kick Obama's… [laughs, then pauses] What's that word? There's a word [longer pause] Yeah, ok, jihad is to spend all your time and effort in fighting the enemies of Allah SWT [*Subhanahu wa ta'ala*]. (Gilmore 2013)

Al-Mazwagi, who grew up in London and graduated from Hertfordshire University, was the first British-born jihadist to be killed in the Syrian civil war in February 2013, just a fortnight before his twenty-second birthday (Kerbaj and Al-Abdeh 2013). When asked why he went to Syria, he said, by way of explanation and sounding not unlike a character from Chris Morris's parody *Four Lions*, 'Well, I've always known about jihad, seen the Mujahideen on TV and everything' (Gilmore 2013). He also expressed his keenness to die as a martyr in defence of his faith, something his mother, he relayed, heartily approved of: 'She said, "Make sure you're not at the back. Go to the front" [laughing]. I don't think my mother loves me that much. No, I'm joking. She must love me for her to say that. *Hamdullah* ["thank god"], she understands.' (Gilmore 2013)

Three months after Al-Mazwagi's death another British man, almost identical in age, travelled to Syria to join the conflict there, becoming a member of a group that later merged with ISIS. Ifthekar Jaman, from Portsmouth, had attended a private school and worked as a customer services operator at Sky (Maher 2014). According to press reports, he had seemed well integrated and was popular among his non-Muslim colleagues. But he was also an aspiring jihadist who was active in helping other British nationals, including five of his friends from Portsmouth, travel to Syria (Saner 2015).[1] Six months before leaving the UK he made a video, live-streaming it to his followers on social media, in which he professed his

[1] Jaman's group called themselves 'al-Britani Brigade Bangladeshi Bad Boys', establishing that one of the things they were particularly bad at was alliteration.

admiration for Osama bin Laden ('I think he looks kinda cool') and gave advice on how to wear a turban and how to apply kohl eyeliner – or, rather, how to look like a premodern *mujahid* [fighter] (Soni 2014; Perry 2015). In Syria he sought to live out this fantasy, regularly posting tweets and photos of his new life inside the then nascent caliphate (Maher 2014). In one tweet, he wrote: 'There are those who think that the Jihad in Syria is 24/7 fighting but it's much more relaxed than that. They're calling it a five star jihad.' (Soni 2014) Reality, however, was soon to test this proposition: Jaman was killed in December 2013 in an ISIS offensive in Deir ez-Zor in eastern Syria (Maher 2014).

Al-Mazwagi and Jaman were just two of 850 British nationals, including 145 women, who joined ISIS and other violent extremist groups in Syria and Iraq (Cook and Vale 2018: 17; see also BBC News 2017). The total number of western Europeans who travelled to these two countries to contend in the Syrian civil war stands at nearly 6000 (Cook and Vale 2018: 14). No doubt there were many more who wanted to join the conflict, but were unable to do so, either because they didn't have the relevant contacts to facilitate the precarious journey, were not fit or able enough, or were just too scared; and no doubt there were many more still who had not the slightest intention of going but actively approved of the fateful choices of those who did go. Jaman's brother, Mustakim, told Channel 4 News: 'He [Ifthekar] died protecting the people. He fought for his God and the people itself. In our religion, there's nothing better you can do than to fight in the path of Allah. His martyrdom is such a noble way to go out and just the best way someone can go out.' (Soni 2014) One young Muslim man who had never met Jaman but followed him online confessed in an audio tribute after Jaman's death, 'This is going to sound weird, but I was actually really impressed, *mashallah* ["god has willed it"], by how handsome this guy was. I was jealous. I was like, "Man, this guy's got a turban on, he's got really great eyes, beard, everything about this guy, he looks like the prophet".' 'He made it [jihad] look cool,' he added (Perry 2015).

The aim of this article is to describe and probe the public culture of these individuals - a culture that is strange and yet familiar, both distant and close. How did they – and other self-proclaimed western jihadists like them - make sense of their lives and the wider world in which they lived? What are the core values that defined who they were and how they acted?

Drawing on a rapidly expanding literature in terrorism studies on radicalization and western foreign fighters, the article suggests that three core values in particular underpin and animate the western jihadi subculture: namely, *violence and machismo*, *death and martyrdom* and *disdain of material goods and concerns* (the 'dunya'). In offering this taxonomy, the article aims not only to describe an emergent deviant subculture but also to critically reassess some conventional ways of thinking about radicalization and specifically western jihadism.

The article is divided into four parts. Parts one and two summarize the theoretical underpinnings of the article. Part three sketches out the primary values or (borrowing from Miller (1958: 6)) 'focal concerns' of the western jihadi subculture. The fourth part of the article explores how these focal concerns reflect other shadow norms or values in western culture, while the conclusion addresses the wider implications of the overall argument.

Radicalization

It is necessary, if somewhat trite and boring, to begin any discussion of radicalization by pointing out that the concept is deeply contested among scholars. Rik Coolsaet (2011: 240), for example, complains that radicalization is 'ill-defined, complex and controversial'. Peter Neumann (2013: 873) observes that there is an 'inherent ambiguity' in the term, giving rise to much confusion. Alex P. Schmid (2013: 1) calls it 'problematic', but does not believe, like some scholars (see Truong 2018: 7) that the term should be discarded due to the heavy political freight it carries.

Radicalization has been defined, variously, as: ‘a process during which people gradually adopt views and ideas which might lead to the legitimisation of political violence’ (Taarnby Jensen 2006: 61); ‘a process of personal development whereby an individual adopts ever more extreme political or politic-religious ideas and goals, becoming convinced that the attainment of these goals justifies extreme methods’ (Ongering 2007: 3); ‘a process of relative change in which a group undergoes ideological and/or behavioural transformations that lead to the rejection of democratic principles (including the peaceful alternation of power and the legitimacy of ideological and political pluralism) and possibly to the utilisation of violence, or to an increase in the levels of violence, to achieve political goals’ (Ashour 2009: 5); ‘the process through which individuals and organisations adopt violent strategies – or threaten to do so – in order to achieve political goals’ (Olesen 2009: 8);‘the social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political or religious ideology’ (Horgan and Braddock 2010: 279); ‘an increase in and/or reinforcing of extremism in the thinking, sentiments, and/or behaviour of individuals and/or groups of individuals’ (Mandel 2009: 111); ‘the process by which individuals – on their own or as part of a group – begin to be exposed to, and then accept, extremist ideologies’(Sinai 2012: 21); ‘an ideological socialization away from mainstream or status quo-oriented positions towards more radical or extremist positions involving a dichotomous world view’ (Schmid 2013: 18).

Ambiguity and confusion indeed. Neumann (2013: 874), for his part, defines radicalization as, ‘at the most basic level’, the ‘process whereby people become extremists’. While this sounds intuitively reasonable and has the benefit of brevity, it is not particularly helpful, since ‘extremist’ and ‘extremism’ are just as ambiguous and politically charged as ‘radical’ and ‘radicalization’ (Kundnani 2009: 7).

Despite the interpretive flux and ambiguity that surrounds the term, there is a broad consensus among scholars and policy-makers that radicalization, whatever it is or involves, is a *process* that occurs over time (Schmid 2013: 1; Neumann 2013: 874), and that this process results in *conversion* to a worldview that is antithetical to mainstream society. Scholars tend to disagree over how this conversion occurs and what ultimately explains it, quarrelling over, for example, the role of ideology or western foreign policy in the totality of the process. But the notion that the radicalized person, regardless of the particular ideology into which they have radicalized, is committed to a value-system that is opposed to or at radical variance with that of the conventional society is generally taken for granted among scholars. It is this assumption that this article calls into question. It also, at the same time, seeks to challenge popular discourse on radicalization and jihadism in which jihadists are demonized as barbaric others whose essential difference or otherness lies in their essentially medieval outlook (Gray 2003; Sageman 2017: 101).

To be clear, I am not suggesting that radicalized individuals do not undergo a transformation of personal self-identity; nor do I wish to question that radicalized individuals do not exist in direct or even violent confrontation with the status quo. Rather, my aim is to suggest that the moral distance between them and the society they self-consciously repudiate and hope to replace is less marked than we conventionally suppose.

Seen from this perspective, the western jihadi subculture is not some strange and mysterious assemblage that defies understanding or comprehension, but is, in fact, a hybrid cultural repository or ‘imaginary’ (McDonald 2018: 11-12) that reflects, albeit in exaggerated form, some of the more rousing motifs and concerns rooted, and to some degree repressed, in western culture. This shift in perspective allows us to see what might be appealing or seductive about the western jihadi subculture.

In making this argument I draw heavily on the criminological work of David Matza and Gresham Sykes, most notably their classic 1961 paper on 'Juvenile Delinquency and Subterranean Values' (Matza and Sykes 1961). At the centre of this work is the contention that the deviant is not as a deviant or 'out there' as conventional accounts would suggest. Indeed, Sykes and Matza (1957) argue, the deviant is broadly committed to, rather than at war with, the dominant value-system. Moreover, deviant values are far less deviant than we might suppose. Matza and Sykes (1961: 713-15) single out the following as particularly noteworthy: (1) excitement; (2) a disdain of work; and (3) aggression and machismo. According to Matza and Sykes (1961: 715, 712), these values – that is, 'the emphasis on daring and adventure; the rejection of the prosaic discipline of work; the taste for luxury and conspicuous consumption; and the respect paid to manhood demonstrated through force' – are 'closely akin to those [values] embodied in the leisure activities of the dominant society'. For example, although adventure isn't exactly an 'organizing principle' of the modern nation state, with its overworked denizens and gluttony of risk-averse bureaucrats, it is nonetheless a value that very many recognize as worth pursuing for its own sake. As Matza and Sykes (1961: 716) remark, 'In fact, most societies seem to provide room for Saturnalias in one form or another, a sort of periodic anomie in which thrill-seeking is allowed to emerge'. Similarly, the delinquent's avid interest in violent and macho pursuits is scarcely confined to his own sub-group: 'There are numerous examples of the acceptance of aggression and violence on the part of the dominant social order.' (1961: 717). Hence, Matza and Sykes (1961: 717) conclude, 'The delinquent may not stand as an alien in the body of society but may represent instead a disturbing reflection or a caricature'.

The broader point that Matza and Sykes tried to make is that cultures are exceedingly complex and riven with tensions and contradictions. If this sounds perfectly banal today, it is because it is, but at the time at which Matza and Sykes's work on subterranean values was published it was bracingly innovative and created some of the intellectual space for the emergence of a 'post-subcultural' turn that sought to map the messiness and hybridity of deviant subcultural practice (Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003; Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004; for an overview, see Dimou and Ilan 2018: 4; Jensen and Larsen 2019: 8-9).

The subcultural dimension of terrorism and high-risk Islamic activism (Wiktorowicz 2005) in particular has attracted little sustained interest in terrorism studies and the related disciplines of criminology, international relations and political science (Ruggiero 2010: 709; Pisoiu 2015: 10). But there is evidence that this is changing. In one of the first efforts to explicitly utilize subcultural theory for understanding 'third wave jihadism' (Sageman 2008), Simon Cottee (2011: 738) suggested that the 'rejectionist' culture associated with it is 'a collective solution, devised by young westernized Muslim males, to resolve their twin problems of status-frustration and identity-confusion'. He also alluded to the notion of 'jihadi subcultural style' (2011: 742), although he didn't fully unpack its constitutive elements. He furthermore observed that the western jihadi subculture, far from being 'hermetically sealed off from the dominant order', is intimately embroiled in that order, particularly in its creative and promiscuous appropriation of western street culture (2011: 744-45).

Uliano Conti (2017: 278), more recently and drawing on the work of the Birmingham School of contemporary cultural studies, is similarly interested in western jihadi culture, focusing on its visual expression in rap music videos. Specifically invoking the concept of bricolage, he describes how *nasheed*-driven[2] videos popular among ISIS supporters combine premodern

[2] A *nasheed* is an Islamic hymn (Lahoud 2017: 42-43).

visual tropes, such as horses, swords and knights, with traditional 'pop militant lyrics understandable by young native Europeans' (see also Jensen and Larsen 2019: 10).

This theme of a hybrid jihadi street culture (Vidino 2007) is taken up by Jonathan Ilan and Sveinung Sandberg (2019), who, through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu, offer a sophisticated theoretical account of the ways in which street and radical milleus in some European cities intersect and feed off each other. Ilan and Sandberg (2019: 278) contend that the widely noted preponderance of former street criminals in new jihadi groups (Basra, Neumann and Brunner 2016) points to 'continuities in attitudes and behaviours' between the two. Even as they discard the 'hedonistic and materialist' culture of the street, becoming ever more committed to an 'ascetic and politico-religious ideology', western jihadists still 'retain forms of street practice and lingo even as they undertake violent jihad' (2019: 279). For Ilan and Sandberg, this is more than just 'role residual' (the hangover traits of a past self that persist long after role-change (Ebaugh 1988: 5)), but exemplifies real synergies between 'street and jihadi fields'.

The most comprehensive and ambitious treatment of jihadi subculture is Thomas Hegghammer's *Jihadi Culture*, a wide-ranging volume on the art and social practices of militant Islamists. Hegghammer's focus is on the full gamut of practices that serve no obvious 'operational benefit'. This includes such phenomena as 'gestures, manners, habits, conventions, rituals, and ceremonies' (Hegghammer 2017: 172). He divides these practices into three main overlapping categories: *devotional* (i.e. prayer and invocations), *recreational* (i.e. singing and storytelling) and *identity-marking* (i.e. dress and manners) (2017: 177-78). The picture that emerges from this account is of a deeply conservative and puritanical culture in which religion and religious observance are at the very centre. 'Jihadis', Hegghammer (2017: 199) writes, against the view that they are extremists who lack true faith, 'take religion very seriously'. He also concludes that jihadi groups are 'surprisingly orthodox in their ritual practices…in contrast to other subcultures, such as the Ku Klux Klan or the skinhead movement, which, culturally speaking, represent complete innovation and sharp breaks from the mainstream' (2017: 200).

While there is clearly a great deal of overlap between the ritual practices of jihadists and devout non-violent Muslims, there is a very real and profound sense in which jihadi groups in the west break, to use Hegghammer's terminology, from the mainstream. Ann-Sophie Hemmingsen (2010: 11) suggests that the particular 'worldviews, norms, dress codes, language and insights' of Danish jihadists 'can best be understood as a counterculture'. Sageman (2011: 199) similarly observes that western jihadists embrace a lifestyle that is distinct and 'countercultural'. According to Quintan Wiktorowicz's (2005: 60), in his study on the banned Islamist group Al-Muhajiroun, there was an acute and exhilarated sense among the group's activists that they were 'acting against the mainstream'. They were 'rebelling against their parents' Islam and traditions, establishment Islam, and British culture', and many seemed to enjoy their status as 'outsiders'.

My aim in what follows is to suggest that while jihadi activists in the west inhabit and recreate a subculture that is indeed distinct and counter to the mainstream, the core values at the heart of this subculture – namely, machismo, martyrdom and ascetic authenticity - share much in common with a cluster of subterranean values in the wider society with which the jihadi subculture is in contention. These core values stand in obvious tension with other normative values – most notably, the principles of non-violent dialogue, sexual equality and individualism and material wealth – yet they are still recognized and accepted by many.

The Western Jihadi Subculture

The western jihadi subculture can be defined as a global imaginary that extols and justifies violent jihad *as a way of life and being*. From within this imaginary, jihad is not just a form of military activity, but an all-encompassing master status (Merton 1968) born of an overwhelming sense of sacred duty (Atran 2010). It is an identity (Conti 2017: 274; Jensen and Larsen 2019: 11) – and one which trumps all other identities.
The language of this subculture is primarily English, but it is creatively infused with a hybrid of urban street-slang, formalized diction and a repertoire of Arabic words (Wood 2019). Its membership is strikingly diverse, attracting a dizzyingly cosmopolitan cadre of participants from across the globe (McDonald 2018: 2-3), and includes both active jihadists at one extreme and non-violent supporters and sympathizers at the other. Though its membership is made up, in the main, of young adults, both male and female, from diaspora Muslim communities, its appeal is not limited to this particular demographic (Roy 2017: 2, 25, 30). It is both a lived and heavily mediated subculture, but its global proliferation and accessibility would not be possible without the internet and mobile phone technology.
Drawing on a growing body of research and data on western jihadists,[3] I suggest that the western jihadi subculture is animated by three distinct, but overlapping, focal concerns : (1) *Violence and Machismo*; (2) *Death and Martyrdom*; and (3) *Disdain of the Dunya*. Let us address each in turn.

Violence and machismo

It is difficult to exaggerate just how deeply saturated the subculture of jihad is in the culture of killing, gore and atrocity, and anyone who is interested in killing, gore and atrocity is likely to be interested in the subculture of jihad (Cottee 2017a). Internet gore sites, for example, are awash in ISIS atrocity videos, as were, to a lesser degree, some tabloid British newspapers (pre-eminently the *Daily Mail Online*)[4] when ISIS was in the ascendance back in 2015. But western jihadists are of course particularly fascinated by the spectacle of killing and the whole dark culture that surrounds it: weapons, particularly large phallic ones, such as curved swords and the iconic AK47, are everywhere present in the jihadi imaginary. Hegghammer (2017: 7) writes illuminatingly of 'the fascination many jihadis have with war, weapons and military effects', pointing out that 'the jihadi fascination with things martial sometimes clearly goes beyond the purely functional'. Indeed, jihadis name and sleep with their weapons. They pose with them in preening selfies (Roussinos 2013) and some even make their infant children brandish them.
The fascination with weapons and violence is not just a male preserve within the western jihadi subculture (Gadher 2014). For example, one 25-year old British woman who joined ISIS in early 2015 would regularly post pictures of herself brandishing an AK47, which she would affectionately refer to as her 'Klash' or 'my baby'. In one tweet, posted in March 2016, she

[3] See, notably, Wiktorowicz 2005; Sageman 2004, 2008; Holmes 2005; Wright 2006; Moghadam 2009; Atran 2010, 2016; Ramsay 2013; Filkins 2014; Pantucci 2014; Vergani 2014; Faiola and Mekhennet 2015; Stern and Berger 2015; Winter 2015; Vidino and Hughes 2015; Friis 2015; Coolsaet 2016; Amarasingam 2016; Walklate and Mythen 2016; Kepel 2017; Roy 2017; Sunde 2017; Dawson and Amarasingam 2017; Hegghammer 2017; Meleagrou-Hitchens, Hughes and Clifford 2018; Truong 2018; Thomson 2018; Andersen and Sandberg 2018; Greenwood 2018.
[4] Consider, for example, the following 'news item' published in early 2017: 'ISIS butchers release propaganda film showing a prisoner being drowned in a FISH TANK and a wheelchair-bound ISIS militant carrying out a suicide car bombing.' This article not only describes the atrocities in lurid detail but contains embedded clips from both videos (see Robinson 2017, emphases in original).

boasted about receiving weapons training at a camp: '*Muhajirat muaskar* [an all-female training camp] is the best thing so far for me :) loving it! *Alhamdullilah* ["thank god"]... firearm training is *wajib* [duty] in the land of Jihad.' (Cottee 2019a) And, like many other female ISIS members, this young woman would exalt in the slaughter of the group's multiple enemies, taking to social media to celebrate the latest beheading or terrorist atrocity. 'There is no doubt,' wrote the authors of a report on foreign female ISIS affiliates, 'that the women who migrate to the territory controlled by ISIS revel in the gore and brutality of the organisation. They appear desensitised to the horrific nature of the violent acts being committed.' (Hoyle, Bradford and Frenett 2015: 29) By way of illustration, the authors cited numerous graphic examples. One is the reaction – publicly shared on Twitter - of a pro-ISIS supporter to a video in which 22 Syrian Army hostages are beheaded all at once: 'So I finally watched #IS [Islamic State] latest video, OMG ["Oh my god"]! I Love *Dawlah* [the Islamic State]! The Nusayri scene, Gut-wrenchingly awesome…' (Hoyle, Bradford and Frenett 2015: 28-29) Responding to the same video, another member of the pro-ISIS 'sisterhood' tweeted, 'So many beheadings at the same time, *Allahu Akbar* ["God is the greatest"], this video is beautiful.' (2015: 29)

This points to a deeper thread that runs through the entire jihadi subculture: namely, to plagiarize from Albert Cohen (1955: 27), 'an enjoyment in the discomfiture of others, a delight in the defiance of taboos'. That is to say, jihadis seem to revel in the trashing of what they scorn to call the 'civilized' norms of their enemies, whom they dehumanize as 'filthy pigs' fit for slaughter. As the terrorism scholar Walter Laqueur (2007) has observed, they do not just want to destroy their enemy; they want to *degrade* him. In the civil war in Syria and Iraq this was often ritualized in festive displays of exorbitant depravity, where ISIS fighters would inflict cruel and creatively demonic punishments on their victims, all the while filming it to complete the humiliation (Cottee 2014a). Western ISIS members, in particular, showed a vigorous willingness as executioners, proudly posing with severed heads in photos that were instantly uploaded to their social media accounts (Cottee 2014b). Often, they would attach to these photos scandalous comments so as to elicit 'LOLs' [laughs] and 'likes' from their online followers,as well as outrage and anguish from among their enemies. One British jihadist in Syria, for example, captioned a photo with the following piece of text: 'Chillin' with my homie or what's left of him.' (Gadher 2014) This was a reference to the severed head he was triumphantly holding aloft. Another ISIS militant, from Trinidad, appeared in a leaked video also holding up a severed head. 'Hello, my name is John,' he said in a mock English accent, performing the role of ventriloquist. 'Right now John look like he died of natural causes', a voice commented off-camera, howling with laughter. There is clearly a great deal of 'active spite and malice, contempt and ridicule, challenge and defiance' (Cohen 1955: 28) in these carefully manufactured spectacles of atrocity and in the memes and 'likes' that they generate among online jihadi followers and 'fanboys'.

Although jihadi-supporting women are seemingly just as animated by the spectacle of violence as their male counterparts, the actual violence that drives the jihadi subculture is primarily *male* violence. In the jihadist sphere of action it is men who have the monopoly over its use, and it is only men who fight on the frontlines as fully-fledged combatants. Indeed, the jihadist is a quintessentially male figure. There are no female jihadists (much less non-binary ones). This is not to say that women do not play prominent supporting roles in the subculture (Saltman and Smith 2015) or have not taken up arms (or suicide-belts) in self-defence (Winter and Margolin 2017), but the ground-rules in the subculture are clear and emphatic: violence is an all-male preserve and only men can hope to attain the revered status of a holy warrior (Lahoud 2014, 2017a, 2018; Cottee and Bloom 2017).

Connected to this is the idea of the *real man*, who is defined strictly in terms of their willingness to fight and die in jihad (see esp. Thomson 2018: 160-161; Greenwood 2018:

241-243; Atran and Hamid 2016). The opposite of 'the real man' is the moderate Muslim man who thinks that dialogue is the solution. These Muslims are condemned as 'coconuts' (dark on the outside, white on the inside) or 'sell-outs'. Above all, though, they are seen to be unmanly and weak, since they have neglected their duty to do jihad and claim their place among the 'lions' of the faith.
Interestingly, the gangster, a characteristically macho figure in western culture, is included among the unmanly in the jihadi imaginary, since his devotion to material wealth marks him out as shallow and weak in character – as fundamentally *not* 'real', in the sense of being fully sincere and devout in his faith commitment. This is vividly conveyed in a jihadi propaganda video where a gun-toting man with a London accent taunts his fellow Muslims back home in Britain: 'I'm in the land of jihad at the moment…Where are you when they are slaughtering our children and our fathers, not to say our women after they get raped? Where are you when we need to start taking heads off?...You still walk around boasting that you live the so-called gangster life. You are listening to Styles P [an American rapper] in your bedroom.' (Gadher *et al* 2014) Hence to be a 'real man' is not just to possess the ability both to take violence and to hand it out, but also to display fortitude of character in choosing the right path, spurning what is easy and seductive for what is seen as durable and difficult (i.e. ultimate salvation through good works and self-sacrifice).

Death and martyrdom

Graphic images of terrible suffering and slaughter are everywhere present in the jihadi subculture, circulated and replayed in an endless loop of Muslim blood being spilled. No scene of atrocity, no matter how shocking or disgust-provoking, is considered off-limits as an image to be shared, commented on and anguished over among the jihadi 'fam' (family). Not even images of babies with their intestines hanging out – this is a reference to a recent photo of a baby killed in Baghouz[5] that went viral in pro-ISIS social media accounts - are beyond the pale. Indeed, such atrocity pornography is carefully curated and zealously disseminated to show just how 'barbaric' and 'depraved' the enemy is.
To be sure, there is one crucial exception, which speaks to just how socially conservative and puritanical the jihadi subculture is: scenes of female nudity and sexual violation are seldom, if ever, shared. This, in part, explains why ISIS refused to claim the killings of two Scandinavian women by a group of wannabe jihadists in Morocco in December 2018. For ISIS, the beheading video the killers made and sent to the group for redistribution was just too graphic, but not in the conventional sense of showing too much blood and gore (no amount of blood and gore is too much for ISIS). Rather, it was too graphic in that it showed too much of the women's naked flesh as they were being cut and slaughtered to death. As one member of an ISIS online chat-room lamented, 'they [the killers] had been warned about disseminating a video without covering the naked bodies of the female prostitute tourists' (Miller and Mekhennet 2019).
Whereas the killing of unbelievers ('*kuffar*'), hypocrites ('*munafiqun*') and apostates ('*murtadeen*') – the unholy trinity of deplorables for all jihadis - is justified as righteous (either as a form of punitive revenge or self-defence), the suffering and death of Muslims everywhere is condemned as an abomination deserving of further violent retribution. And while images of slaughtered enemies generate excitement and joy among jihadi supporters, images of slaughtered ('true') Muslims provoke ostentatious outpourings of grief, self-pity and outrage. These public displays of 'vicarious emoting' (Roughley and Schramme 2018:

[5] Baghouz, in eastern Syria, was the last sliver of territory commanded by ISIS before it was retaken in March 2019 (Callimachi 2019).

279) are best understood as solidarity rituals, where the protagonists bond over their shared sense of horror (McDonald 2018: 25-26), which they take personally as a form of collective victimization.

Within the jihadi imaginary jihad is as much about dying as killing. One type of death is accorded special prominence: that of the martyr, the heroic warrior who dies fighting for the sake of Allah and the *ummah* (global community of Muslims). Martyrs are venerated for their bravery and selfless commitment to the faith; they are honoured and live on in the collective memory of the subculture, setting a glorious example for its members.

This veneration often takes the form of an infantile boast or provocation worthy of Albert Cohen's spiteful and malicious delinquents: *We love death more than you love life* (Pantucci 2014; Buruma and Margalit 2004: 49; Roy 2017: 2-3). Or as one British jihadist tweeted: 'The true Muslim is always a problem for the *kuffar* [unbeliever]. He can never be defeated. He is not afraid of death, torture, imprisonment nor exile.' (Maher 2014) This boast - about loving death more than life - is often interpreted literally by outside observers, as if jihadists are not afraid of dying, which is scarcely credible. Indeed, when it approached the end-game for ISIS in eastern Syria in early 2019 thousands of ISIS members decided to choose life over death, ignominiously surrendering to the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) (Wright 2019), instead of going out in a blaze of glory. Yet the boast, however infantile, does convey a real sentiment, which is a reverence for the seemingly fearless, self-sacrificing hero.

Not all martyrs, however, are heroic. Indeed, many are just the sorry victims of war and massacre, but are nonetheless elevated to the status of martyr to give their lives meaning and an enduring significance. Consider, for example, the testimony of a female ISIS member from Findland:

> After four months of us being here [in ISIS-controlled territory], my son was martyred, and this was yet another blessing. Every time I think about it, I wonder to myself, "If I stayed in Dar al-Kufr ["house of unbelief"] what kind of end would he have had? What would have happened to him?" Alhamdulillah ["thank god"], he was saved from all that, and what could be better than him being killed for the cause of Allah? Obviously, it's not easy, but I ask Allah to allow us to join him. (Al-Finlandiyyah 2016: 39)

To non-jihadi eyes, the sentiment expressed here will seem utterly perverse: how can the death of a small baby boy in a war zone be preferable to his flourishing in a relatively safe and progressive European county? Yet it is simply a function of how death is viewed from within the jihadi imaginary - as the ultimate liberation from lowly life or what jihadis contemptuously call the '*dunya*'.

Disdain of the dunya

The 'dunya' is the material, temporal world: the world of earthly concerns and possessions in the here-and-now, as opposed to the world of the hereafter – that is, the eternal world of punishment or paradise that awaits us after we die. From the perspective of the jihadi subculture, the dunya is essentially worthless. It is valued only in the sense that it is something to be overcome and transcended. More crucially, the dunya is regarded as a source of perennial danger: a potential contaminant that can derail or destroy a person's faith commitment. Sexual freedom and the sexualized body are condemned with particular interest and vigour, as something to be constantly repudiated and banished from view. Muslim women who do not fully cover (i.e. those who do not wear the *niqab*, face-veil and even gloves) are denounced, while western non-believing women are dehumanized as dirty sexual objects deserving of

murderous punishment. For example, the ring-leader of the 2002 jihadist plot to bomb the Ministry of Sound nightclub in Britain spoke disdainfully of the 'slags…dancing around' who would be killed (Burke 2017). A similar sentiment was expressed in ISIS's claim of responsibility for the 2015 Paris attacks: the Bataclan nightclub, where 90 were brutally murdered (Chrisafis 2015), was as a hedonistic sewer of 'prostitution and vice' (Dearden 2015).

Material wealth is scorned with equal trenchancy, as well as with much self-righteous pomp, especially by those who came from wealthy families. 'Are you willing to sacrifice the fat job you have got, the big car you have …Are you willing to sacrifice this for the sake of Allah?,' says a British jihadi in ISIS's first official English-language video (Siddique 2014), extoling his own personal sacrifice as well as encouraging others to follow his example. A Trinidadian ISIS fighter makes an almost identical plea in the following Facebook post, imploring his fellow Trinidadians at home to join him in Syria: 'I had a nice house, car nice job work in oil love fishing an sports like any other young person Allah he test u wit this dunya [life] so wats the matter wit u wats ur excuse for not leaving darul kuff ["land of disbelief"] an adhering to the Call of jihad fighting for Allah an[d] victory of Islam.'

This renunciation of material wealth is really code for, 'I am pure of heart and faith', 'I am not soiled by grubby bank notes'. It also seems to be gendered, in that jihadi-supporting women do not tend to talk about foreswearing the big car, the big chain and the big house. Instead, their claim to purity rests on their renunciation of sexual liberty, which they express by proclaiming their modesty. This proclamation invariably takes the form of a stinging critique of the immodestly of other women for not covering properly or for infringing other modesty norms. 'The least you can do', Tooba Gondal advised her female Muslim followers in September 2015, 'is not be fitnah [deviant] online and remove all photos of yourself (includes eyes showing in niqab).' (Cottee 2019a) At any rate, the jihadi subculture is positively puritanical in its attitude towards material wealth and sex. It will surprise no one, of course, that few of those who belong to or police this subculture are able or willing to live up to its strictures all of the time (Cottee 2019b: 99-102).

While the dunya is repudiated and feared in equal measure, the ability to overcome its seductive appeal and forego its ostensible pleasures is lionized in the western jihadi imaginary. The jihadi who was once rich but who jettisoned it all for jihad is regarded with particular reverence, as is the gangster figure who renounces his past excessive lifestyle. These men are revered not because they are indifferent to the blandishments of the west, but because they later renounced them as a matter of principled and single-minded intent. They are revered, in other words, because of their inner strength in sacrificing comfort and ease for hardness and challenge. This inner strength can be described as a *spiritual badassness*, where the person who possesses it is unfazed by the material temptations around him or her. Within the jihadi subculture this represents a form of 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu 1984) by which jihadists claim authenticity and strive to distinguish themselves both from outsiders – the '*kuffars*' [non-believers] in their midst - and the insiders within their own ranks. These claims are expressed verbally in the form of self-lionizing statements, but they are also performed or embodied in a variety of ways, such as, for men, refusing to shake the hands of female acquaintances, or, for women, wearing the *niqab* and refusing to interact with members of the opposite sex without the company of a *mahram* (a male family member).

The Jihadi Subculture and Subterranean Values

Jihadis make a point of proclaiming their status as 'strangers' (Wood 2017) and see themselves as 'foreigner[s] in their own land (Khosrokhavar 2017). They are (to use Georg Simmel's (1950: 402-8) phrasing) *in* our social world, but they are not *of* it. Or, at any rate,

this is what they like to say. What they really mean by this is that they are not like the rest of 'us', whom they regard as blind slaves to the dunya. They are *different*. Ironically, their enemies wholeheartedly concur with this, seeing their difference as a despicable 'Otherness'. Yet, when viewed more closely, the focal concerns of the jihadi subculture point not to radical divergences from the dominant culture, but to striking parallels with it, in the form of shadow values that commend war-making, masculine valour, self-sacrifice, sexual conservatism and spiritual authencity.

Consider the violence and machismo at the heart of the jihadi subculture. No doubt the violence is monstrous and demonically extreme (Cottee 2019b: 4-6). But monstrousness and demonic extremity are hardly alien to western culture and politics, where they find expression, in both graphic and less graphic forms. Take, for example, the festivals of lynching in the American Deep South between 1890 and 1940 (Garland 2005), as well as the atrocity pornography that marked and celebrated it; or the use of Agent Orange by the U.S. military in the Vietnam War: a deliberate policy of ecocide that resulted in incalculable suffering that continues to this day (Hitchens 2006); or the targeting of civilian populations in the Allied area bombings of German cities during the Second World War (Walzer 1977: 254). This is not to suggest that there is something intrinsically violent about western societies, but violence, as Matza and Sykes (1961: 717) correctly pointed out, is 'everywhere at hand' in them: 'The ability to take it and hand it out, to defend one's rights and one's reputation with force, to prove one's manhood by hardness and physical courage-all are widespread in American culture.' So too is the taste for violence exemplified in the demand for ever more violent movies, video games, mixed-martial arts cage fighting, and websites trading in violent porn and gory atrocity images (Sontag 2003; Miller 1997: 112; Goldstein 1999). Indeed, with the rise of the far right in Europe and America (Belew 2018), machismo seems to have returned to the public sphere with a vengeance, taking on ever more toxic forms in fringe online 'incel' subcultures that demonize women and celebrate male supremacy (Cottee 2018). In 2016, when he was campaigning to be elected as president, Donald Trump proved that he could be just as bombastic in his rhetoric as ISIS, pledging that were he to win the campaign he would 'bomb the shit' out of the group (Moore 2017). When ISIS's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed in a raid by U.S. Special Forces in October 2019, Trump doubled-down on this testosterone-fuelled rhetoric by claiming, without substantiation, that Baghdadi was 'whimpering and crying and screaming all the way' to his death (Baker, Schmitt and Cooper 2019). In short, as Jock Young (2007: 171) put it, 'the metaphor of war and all it permits is a core part of western culture'.

Consider, next, the value of violent self-sacrifice. Clearly this is not, as Matza and Sykes (1961) might put it, a 'major organizing principle' of late modern societies, where relationships in atomized communities are shallow and fleeting (Bauman 2000) and where 'me culture' (Storr 2017), dominates. But the notion of using violence to defend one's family, community or nation is hardly rejected by society at large and finds vivid expression and vindication in the wider culture, especially in the form of war movies, combat memoirs (see esp. Junger 2010) and official ceremonies that mark the selfless courage and contribution of fallen soldiers. It also has deep historical roots in the west, as Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit show in their short and incisive study of 'anti-westernism'. In November 1914 the German army launched a series of futile attacks on the British in Flanders. According to Buruma and Margalit (2004: 50), the tens of thousands of German men who were killed in this exercise in mass-slaughter were venerated by German nationalists, who in remembrance invoked the words of Karl Theodor Körner: 'Happiness lies only in sacrificial death.' France and Britain too, Buruma and Margalit note (2004: 52, 57), 'had their propagandists of sacrifice and valour', who saw 'heroic death as the highest human aspiration'.

Consider, finally, the strain of moral puritanism that runs through the jihadi subculture. This is obviously radically at odds with the liberal consensus on sexual freedom in advanced western societies, according to which sex is as much a pursuit of recreation as of procreation. Yet the notion of 'saving' oneself for the 'right person' and periodic retreats into celibacy are far from uncommon in the wider society and culture, as are negative (and highly gendered) labels that express a less than libertine outlook, such as 'slag', 'bitch' and 'ho'. Indeed, in many parts of the U.S., where religious conservatives exercise considerable political power and sway, a moral puritanism still colours the political discourse and policy-making. For example, and as I write this, several U.S. states have just passed laws which effectively ban abortion, while others have taken steps to drastically restrict abortion access (Chavez 2019). Similarly, while the jihadis' ritual denunciation of material wealth and excess goes against the prevailing cultural grain of a society that continues to revere 'money success' (Merton 1938) as an end, it coheres seamlessly with an anti-consumerist discourse that is as old as modernity itself (Buruma and Margalit 2004: 53) and drives contemporary forms of 'green' and climate change activism.

Conclusion

Of course if one wants to find parallels between divergent cultural forms one will be apt to find them; and the focus on the complexities and tensions in any given culture should not blind one to the very real differences that exist between cultures. But one should also be alive to the binding threads and commonalties, especially when interested others are so keen to erase them out of existence due to fears of contamination.

To summarize: the western jihadi subculture stands against the capitalist ethos of consumer hedonism. It rejects the liberal notion of sexual freedom. It repudiates non-heterosexual relationships and identities as profoundly deviant and sinful. It mocks the claims of western feminism. It scorns democratic principles, perspectivism and compromise – and much else, including material comfort, utilitarian happiness and pleasure. In trenchantly and self-consciously repudiating all of these things, it stands counter to the defining self-understandings of the cosmopolitan liberal order. Yet it also heavily borrows from that order: not just in the trivial sense that it uses its technologies and street argot and apparel, but in how it manifests the shadow undercurrents that co-exist within the cosmopolitan liberal order. These undercurrents, which have a long and distinguished pedigree, express a deep dissatisfaction with the spiritual thinness – even soullessness - of social democracy and universalist human rights discourse (Young 2007: 152-3, 170; Buruma and Margalit 2004: 8-9, 50-52). At the same time, they summon a spirit that embraces violence, danger, risk, excitement, sacrifice, drama and authenticity. The western jihadi subculture, in its rejection of the dominant order, embodies just that dissatisfaction and subterranean spirit and is thus continuous with the 'westernism' it rejects.

Two key implications follow from this argument. The first relates to the conventional wisdom that radicalization is a process of conversion to an alternative or 'extreme' set of values. However, if, as I have sought to argue in this article, the values at the centre of the western jihadi subculture are in some ways continuous with a cluster of subterranean values in the mainstream this suggests that the process by which some western individuals come to embrace jihadi values is less mysterious than we might think: that is, they embrace them because they have a footing and pedigree in the dominant culture and because there is something intrinsically compelling or attractive about them. (This is not to imply that there is nothing mysterious about the small minority who chose to violently act on these values (see Sageman 2017: 90 on 'the turn to political violence').) It therefore follows that any attempt to mine an

individual's past for signs of pathology or traumatizing experiences (Goffman 1961: 151) to explain the 'mystery' of radicalization is bound to be misconceived, while a more promising approach would be instead to focus on the social networks and milieus to which they belong (Holman 2016; Malthaner 2018).
The second implication relates to (post)subcultural theory, with its characteristic focus on mundane and depoliticized hedonistic youth cultures at the End of History (Muggleton 2000: 49). It is arguable just how well-equipped it is to capture a subculture that represents a spectacular and self-conscious 'fuck you' to a society it regards as decadent, barren, morally hollow, weak and inane. For example, while a semiotics of micro gestures and practices might be useful to interrogate subtle forms of proto-political resistance (Dimou and Ilan 2018: 15), it is hardly needed to make sense of the moral and political brazenness of jihadi contention (Jensen and Larsen 2019: 9-8). And yet, on the other hand, it remains an open question just how political the western jihadi subculture really is, given how so much of it is manifested in online performative spaces, where, for some, the pinnacle of jihadi activism seems to be getting suspended from Twitter (Pearson 2018) or attracting 'likes' for Facebook posts. Indeed, perhaps the western jihadi subculture, far from being an effort to revive History, is simply a vehicle for nostalgic, apolitical cosplay designed to manufacture excitement for bored and sated western youths. Post-subcultural theory may be well-placed, after all, in helping to unpack these and other perplexities.
The article leaves a lot of questions unanswered. It does not address the social functions or purposes of the western jihadi subculture. What do its participants get from it, aside from a sense of solidarity with like-minded others? And how is entry into and subsequent involvement in the western jihadi subculture gendered (Jensen and Larsen 2019: 5-8)? The article does not address the role of the western jihadi subculture in actual jihadist violence. Does the system of values on which it is based serve to retrospectively justify jihadist violence, or does it enable the violence it glorifies by providing rationales and an audience of spectators for it? Or, alternatively, does it help to suppress jihadist violence by allowing its online consumers to indulge in their fantasies without acting on them (Awan 2007: 77)? A further line of inquiry for future research would be the possible parallels between the subterranean values of the western jihadi culture and those of other extremist subcultures, such as the far right.

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