

# *Journal of*

  

# *Theoretical & Philosophical Criminology*

ISSN: 2166-8094

JTPCRIM  
Feb, 2018  
10: 21-33

## **Radicalisation and beheadings: Philosophy of Transgression in terrorist violence**

*Elisa Impara, Kingston University (UK)*

### **ABSTRACT**

The scope of this article is to explore a body of literature that deals with the concepts of transgression, evil and festival to construct an alternative theoretical framework for violence. For the purpose of this work, the radicalisation of western-born young Muslims and so-called Islamic State's executions will be taken into consideration. The works of Bataille, Foucault, De Sade and Caillois will be the primary focus of this article. This article suggests using non-traditional criminological sources to create an alternative narrative, aimed at adding a different dimension to the conversations around radicalisation and beheadings.

**Key words:** transgression, evil, festival, beheadings, radicalisation

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Throughout humankind's cultural history, religious and mundane attitudes have been waltzing together, overstepping each other's boundaries. Actions, events or behaviours that departed from traditional parameters have been identified as transgressive, heretic, and criminal. Consequently, acts where sacred and profane are not neatly demarked become frequently discussed in terms of taboos, bans, limits, transgressions. For example, in visual art, the eroticism of Caravaggio's paintings, with their hints of sexuality shocked society. The religiosity of representations of biblical themes was desecrated by Caravaggio's irreverent dark brush-strokes, which also challenged the painting style of the time. The profanation of the sacred *peinture* with human basic instincts (Caravaggio's characters felt human and not divine) transgressed the moral codes of the time imposed by catholic thought. Contemporary critics also considered irreverent some of Magritte's surrealist paintings, such as *Perspective: Le Balcon de Manet* (1950) and *Perspective: Madame Récamier de David* (1951). These works featured coffins positioned as if they were living people. The relationship between taboos and transgression is a relationship that is characterised by a power struggle in the sense that they both instigate attraction and repugnancy in individuals. This relationship also enables the process of othering, the creation of groups, identifiable as different from what is considered socially and morally accepted. In recent years, subcultures, but also religious groups, have being subject to this process. Discussion on terrorism and radicalisation highlight just that, an othering process in which religious and mundane attitudes are not always recognisable in a clear manner by those who do not engage with those practices. In the case of terrorist subcultures<sup>1</sup>, the process of othering is two-folded: believers

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<sup>1</sup> In this work, I will employ the word 'subculture' to refer to terrorist groups to emphasise their resistance to dominant society and to reinforce the idea that their movement combines mundane and religious aspects.

versus non-believers, but also a process that affirms, in the eyes of the militants, a 'revolutionary' (yet theocratic) counter-political movement.

This theoretical work intends to explore how scholarship on transgression (as understood by French philosophy and literature) can add an extra layer of analysis to the understanding of sentiments behind deviant acts. Particularly, this work will consider the concepts of transgression, evil and festival to discuss radicalisation of western-born youth and beheadings by the so-called Islamic State: these will function as examples to support the need of finding an alternative narrative to support and enhance criminology's understanding of violence. This piece will principally consider the works of Bataille, Foucault, de Sade and Caillois for the assessment of the following two hypotheses:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** investigation of traditional motivations for radicalisation should be integrated by a discussion related to more 'mundane' sentiments (e.g. thrill, excitement) that encourage an individual to perform religious/political violence.

**H<sub>2</sub>:** alternative theoretical frameworks can favour an understanding of the attraction that religious violence exercises on young individuals.

As the rationale for this theoretical discussion is to demonstrate how the investigation of terrorist practices can benefit from a narrative that departs from more traditional criminological sources, the work will mainly concentrate on philosophical scholarship; this places the individual's thrill for transgressing norms at the centre of its discourse. The choice to limit criminological sources to this discussion has been taken so that employability of an alternative scholarship can be more evident. Furthermore, the work will purposively focus on the mundane side of terrorist practices, touching upon psychological, religious and sociological approaches only briefly: I took the decision to keep all these distinct, so that the contribution of the mundane analysis to the field can emerge more energetically. Three lines of theoretical investigation will be applied to the experience of radicalisation and beheadings:

- a) Scholarship on transgression, with focus on *Eroticism* by Georges Bataille (1957) and *Preface to Transgression* by Michel Foucault (1963);
- b) Scholarship on Evil, with focus on *Les 120 Journées de Sodome* (1785) and *Justine: ou, les Malheurs de la Vertu* (1791) by Alphonse de Sade;
- c) Scholarship on Festival, with focus on *L'Homme et le Sacré* (1939) by Roger Caillois.

## **Violence and criminology: a brief overview**

In April 2016, news agencies around the world reported that Canadian hostage John Risdell had been killed in the Philippines by pro Al-Qaeda group Abu Sayyaf. Militants severed his head five hours after the expire of his ransom deadline. In January 2017, a mass shooting in Istanbul killed at least 39 people. A suicide bombing took place in Manchester in May 2017, causing 22 deaths. A van drove into pedestrians on a busy street in Barcelona in August 2017, killing 14 people. These are just a selection of recent terrorist attacks. Since 2014, about 42 terrorist incidents took place on European soil alone: terrorist attacks are not frequent, but they have increased gradually in the past few years. This has raised the necessity to discuss and understand terrorist practices and strategies, making the contribution of criminological analysis even more essential for policies and existing scholarship alike. Sumner (1994) emphasises the inadequacy of the notion of deviance, which develops around the axes of crime/offence and law/judicial regulation, but leaves out fundamental human emotions. Attempting to decode some of these intricate experiences is one of the tasks this work attempts to achieve. As I will suggest in the course of this work, plotting human emotions attached to extreme violence in this criminological 'Cartesian plane' may not be such a straightforward possibility. Hence the need to find a theoretical approach that can support this exploration.

Traditionally, criminology has regarded violence as deriving from rational or opportunistic

motivations<sup>2</sup>. However, behaviours, like beheadings, do not seem to fit these frameworks as comfortably as other criminogenic experiences. The challenge that criminology faces is to unpack and decode complex emotions that are experienced by those who engage with extreme practices. Along with methodological problems (e.g. access to the population), the process of translating those emotions into a comprehensible criminological model may also represent an onerous task. From a classical perspective, beheadings and other terrorist strategies could be discussed in terms of rationality and hedonism (Beccaria, 1982). People have free will and may choose to engage with violence. Violence may be articulated in the search for pleasure and in the avoidance of pain. Functionalist and anomie perspectives (Durkheim, 2006; Merton, 1938) suggest that crime is somehow necessary to set some boundaries in society. Anomie is caused by rapid social change where norms gradually disappear. Crime (and violence) are said to emerge from a strain between what people want, what they can achieve and how to achieve it. Whereas Durkheim's perspective echoes some of the approaches I will be using in this work, it does not fully address the complexity of terrorist violence. Subcultural theories (Cohen, 1955; Miller, 1958; Cloward and Ohlin, 1970) regard violence and crime as the result of resisting society's dominant norms. Frequently addressing youth cultures, these approaches to violence refer to experiences like coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, utilitarianism, or societal frustration. Traditional terrorism studies align themselves with both functionalist and subcultural approaches, addressing terrorism and radicalisation in terms of collective resistance, masculinity, integration and alienation from parental culture, socialisation and political engagement (Ryan, 2014; Horgan, 2008; Silke, 2008; Juergensmeyer, 2003; Stern, 2003; De Mause, 2002; Pearlstain, 1991). Whereas I find these contributions essential in the understanding of terrorist practices, they fail to explore a possible mundane appeal that an organisation like so-called Islamic State triggers among young people. After all, this is a 'Games of Thrones' generation, exposed to crafted and staged images of violence in films and TV shows. The power of images and glamorisation of 'war' should become a feature in current debates.

The work of Katz (1988) associates crime and violence to the ideas of sneaky thrills and re-enacting the culture of a badass. Radicalisation and terrorist actors can be discussed as entities that reproduce an iconography of violence: based on Katz's work, we could associate extreme violence like beheadings to this sense of thrill. Katz suggested a connection between crime and culture that was later reinforced and re-discussed by cultural criminology (Ferrell and Sanders, 1995). This scholarship explores the associations between crime and culture in terms of culturalisation of crime and criminalisation of culture. Its acceptance of violence as a form of excitement (constituting crime causation) constitutes the base upon which I will develop the rest of my argument.

## **Exploring acts of violence against Bataille and Foucault's philosophy of Transgression**

Scholars in different époques have critically engaged with the idea that humankind is inclined to pursue a life, where desires must be achieved even though this implies infringing moral and institutional codes (Durkheim, 1965; Foucault, 1994; Jervis, 1999). Intellectually, the seduction of infringing norms relates to the assumption of a world that no longer recognises any positive sense to the sacred (Foucault, 1994: 56). Durkheim (1965) suggested the world is divided into sacred and profane: the idea of sacred includes all those collective representations that transcend everyday life and belong to religious thoughts, whereas profane is engaged with everything else that is mundane. Sacred and profane describe the twin polarities of human life. By choosing the dogmas of the sacred, individuals can live a fulfilling life that celebrates order and contrast with chaos. This bipolarity, however, does not neatly explain why certain people enjoy activities that are regarded as profane/deviant by the majority of society, even when these advocate religious motivations: invoking scriptures to justify violence represents a good example of the complexity of understanding the binomial relationship between sacred and profane. For the individuals who engage with religious violence, this is sacred and legitimate; the same violence becomes profane, medieval and barbaric (just to quote some of the words used to describe terrorist acts) for other individuals. Foucault (1994: 239) suggests that

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<sup>2</sup> The discipline of criminology systematically reviews its practices and theoretical approaches: this revision is informed by the current political landscape, methodological innovation, technology and social affairs. However, for the purpose of this work, I will briefly (and selectively) review some approaches that function as roots to a big portion of criminological thinking.

transgression allows individuals to experience that gleaming world that has no restrictions. Consequently, within this context, transgression constitutes almost an opportunity.

In this respect, I draw on the definitions of transgression and ban discussed by Georges Bataille in his work *Eroticism*: Bataille (2001) conceives bans as something illogical because they paradoxically come to life via the experience of transgression. There is no ban (sacred) that cannot be transgressed; based on this principle, transgression (profane) is not about rejecting a ban, but rather its fulfilment. Sacred and profane need each other and cannot be understood if their connection is broken. Bataille (2001) suggests that bans, upon which the world of reason is articulated, are fundamentally irrational: in this way, Bataille challenges the way transgressive behaviour is assimilated. There is a perceived sacredness in the deviant act, which has to be acknowledged. This allows us to discuss those behaviours that are frequently referred to as a folly or motiveless and that are carried in the name of religion. Terrorist practices offer a good example of sacred/profane interplay due to their 'religious' connotation, but also due to their more mundane nature (e.g. advertisement for recruitment purposes, use of social media, glamorisation of warfare). Increased risks of terrorist attacks forced politicians and terrorism experts alike to address radicalisation in a more substantial manner: why are western-born young people so attracted to extremist discourses? What is the appeal of religious violence? Why do young Christian-born individuals convert to terrorist Islam? Whereas, psychological or socio-economic approaches should not be dismissed, along with the knowledge that religion plays an undeniable part in terrorism (especially in terms of cherry-picking parts of the Quran for violent discourses)<sup>3</sup>, adding a more mundane dimension to this can be beneficial, especially to understand why so many young people are attracted to extremist narratives.

Foreign fighters present a growing threat to international security (UN Counter-Terrorism Committee, S/2015/939). With radicalisation hardly ever occurring in mosques, the need to understand the mundane attraction to religiously violent behaviour is even more important. Traditional criminological discourses provide a partial analysis on why Islamic State militants engage in those practices: attackers come from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, different faiths and from a variety of life paths, making traditional psychological and sociological understandings valuable, yet incomplete. A study by Benmelech and Flor (2016) suggest that poor economic conditions have no impact on recruitment of Islamic State combatants: the authors emphasise how the number of foreign fighters joining the Islamic State is positively correlated to a country's GDP. Another study on sympathies for violent protest and terrorism (SVPT) found that "specific life events are strongly associated with a lower risk of SVPT, whereas the effects are mostly independent of depression" (Bhui et al, 2016: 488). The study emphasised how most participants were employed and educated and how contact with the criminal justice system was the only factor that carried a higher risk of SVPT.

Violence implies a set of meanings: purpose and opportunity, but also an element of pleasure in breaching taboos, the achievement of transgression. Based on scholarship on transgression (Foucault, 1994; Bataille, 2001; Caillois, 1957), it is possible to suggest that violence displays the various ways in which some individuals perceive and relate to life<sup>4</sup>. The transgression of the limit, as defined by Foucault (1994), is a quick, abrupt moment, an injection of adrenaline that exists in a limited space of time; he suggests that transgression overtakes and never ceases to overtake a line that, behind it, quickly closes in a wave of little memory, by moving down again up to the horizon of the insuperable (Foucault, 1994: 58). Compartmentalising the mundane in the religious is not an easy task. However, Atran and Ginges (2012: 857) suggest that sacred values are not exclusive to religion: mundane values can be sacralised through the employment of rituals. In the case of the Islamic State, this mundane sacredness is articulated through violent narratives, which mix ritualistic fantasy, staged guerrilla (e.g.

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<sup>3</sup> As other religious texts, the Quran requires to be read in full, given that some passages, if extrapolated from their context, lose their true meaning (e.g. Quran [2:191]: "And kill them wherever you find them..." without the follow up in Quran [2:193-194] that suggests that Muslims may only fight active combatants and in self defence). The Quran [3:8] advocates the need to take the Book as a whole entity, condemning those who cherry-pick its components.

<sup>4</sup> It is worth to point out how what I announced in this paragraph could be equally applied to religion. Religion offers purpose, opportunity, pleasure, a sense of belonging and a way to make sense of life's challenges and hardships. Acknowledging this makes the violence-religion-mundanity nexus stronger, yet more complex to address in a comprehensive manner.

beheadings) with a narrow interpretation of scriptures. The mundane sacredness of terrorism is peculiar because of its binomial nature: mundane for some individuals, authentically religious for others.

This theoretical framework allows a reflection upon the experience of both the act of beheading and its perpetrators: whereas decapitation can make sense in terms of its spectacular strategy to advance terrorist narratives, the slicing of a head with a knife is not a pragmatic choice of execution. Larson (2014:89) suggest that beheadings are unpredictable events, far from being an exact science, as removing a person's head in one neat motion requires skills and strengths. Anatomic knowledge on where to use an axe or a knife may not be the sole requirement: ability to sustain the view of the act should also be considered. If even 12% of penultimate and final year medical students experience syncope/near-syncope episodes during dissections (Jamjoom et al, 2009), non-medically trained individuals may also struggle with the sights of decapitation. The theorisation of transgression seems to offer a possible speculation, in terms of that power struggle between excitement and revulsion I mentioned at the beginning of this article. This is why beheadings can function as a good example of the intertwining relationship between sacred and mundane: beheading as a form of punishment has a place in Islamic theological tradition (Furnish, 2005), but it becomes a sacralised mundane performance in the hands of terrorist subcultures. Capital punishment is implemented following a very narrow and traditionalist interpretation of the Quran, which differs from a more flexible approach implemented by many States in the Middle East and North Africa region (Mumisa, 2015). In this respect and in the eyes of the perpetrators, beheadings are divinely inspired sacred acts. However, the more profane/mundane contexts in which these acts are concretised cannot go unnoticed: the religious call to punish non-believers is glamorised, constructed and divulged via social media. Again, the sacred needs the profane to be defined. This raises key questions like whether a separation between narrow Islam and entertainment is possible and how much religion is actually absorbed by young westerners joining the Islamic State cause. The concept of transgression as theorised by French scholarship allows for a robust understanding of the dynamics that involve the interplay of religious attitudes, mundane sacredness and violent behaviour. Through the use of metaphors and similitudes, this scholarship offers us more specific words to develop discussions around the sacrality and mundanity of terrorist acts and the physical output of these. Furthermore, use of this body of literature makes our need to isolate sacred and mundane elements in terrorist practices irrelevant because it is their union that creates that thrill (either mundane or purely religious) that makes extremist narratives appealing to some individuals.

### **Eroticism, sacrifice and transgressive acts**

For both Bataille (2001) and Foucault (1994), transgression can be associated to eroticism and sexuality: it gives the same sense of adrenaline, with its peak as rapid as the moment of orgasm. Bataille (2001) suggests the ideas of eroticism and death reinforce transgression: the combination of these elements constitutes, in his view, Sacrifice. Erotic is the problem of the problems (Bataille, 2001: 197): the erotic moment is the most intense experience of the human spirit; similarly, death is both universal and the most intense of experiences. Without doubt, transgression through eroticism, with its irreverence, embodies at the same time the religious side of the sacred and, paradoxically, its unorthodoxy. Transgression becomes a framework in which the sacredness and sacred mundane co-exist and can be part of each other. From one perspective, the profanity of terrorists' pseudo military acts defies both secular and Islam laws (see Surah Al-Mā'ida, 5:32); from another perspective, its rituality references a visual mundane sacredness, where the performance of death legitimises the subculture and provides enthusiasm for the Islamic State as a political, revolutionary project. With the use of the concept of transgression, I intend to imply both the reminiscence of ancient practices (e.g. beheadings), but also the spectacular, attractive impact these may exercise on some individuals. Violent behaviour becomes attractive because it is constructed in a specific framework of spectacular sacrality. This instigates reactions that touch upon divinely inspiration, but also physical thrill.

In ancient times, sacrificing animals to divinities was common practice. The sacrificed animal became a symbol of purity: in fact, this was reached through the 'transgression' of sanctity of the animal's life. Sacrifice puts together the pieces of the hitherto fragmentary being through these cruel rituals, as death brings the human being back to its totality (Bataille, 2001). Modern religious practices have detached themselves from their origins and have rejected the notions of transgression altogether (Bataille, 2001). Islamic State militants have re-appropriated the concept of sacrifice in their resistance

to what they regard as heretic society. Furthermore, sacrifice (and executions) has been revived, acquiring new attractiveness thanks to social media: its articulation in popular TV shows (e.g. *Games of Thrones*) and its glamorisation in the forms of pictures and videos contribute to the creation of a theatrical terrorist cause. An example of this comes from an Italian-born woman who espoused the terrorist cause. During skype conversations with her parents Maria Giulia Sergio, an Italian, catholic-born citizen who joined the Islamic State, allegedly invited them to join the Jihadi battle because “here we cut heads and soon we’ll do this in Rome too!” (Vanni, 2016).

The theorisation of transgression gives us an opportunity to compartmentalise the different elements that compose violent behaviour and to assess its nature in a more neutral manner. Foucault (1994) suggests that, through transgression, the limit awakes; transgression exercises pure violence towards the entity that enchains it. Whereas this theorisation may be challenging to translate into practice when dealing with violence like beheadings and terrorist attacks, it may offer an insight of some of the motivations for these behaviours. It allows, in fact, the construction of a discussion around the idea of excitement and crime: rethinking the way people perceive transgressive behaviour, placing emotions at the centre of a criminological discussion is in line with the perspectives elaborated by cultural criminology (Ferrell and Sanders, 1995; Presdee, 2000). Cultural criminology, in fact, attempts to ‘regain’ possession of individuals and their emotions as main actors in the criminogenic discourse. Crime, after all, is a human experience; therefore, emotions (even the most complex ones) should receive attention in the analysis of crime causation.

### **Interpreting radicalisation and beheadings using the concept of Evil: De Sade and beyond**

As previously mentioned, the entwining of transgression into the social sphere has stimulated human intellect for centuries. Bataille and Foucault were not the first thinkers who attempted to address the issue of transgression. Traditionally, this concept can be regarded as an evolution of the notion of ‘evil’. This has been investigated from different perspectives: Sant’Agostino (2006) argued that the notion of ‘evil’ is non-existent, that God is perfect and does not create it; Schelling (2006) identified the capacity to do evil as the trait that differentiated the essence of human freedom; Kierkegaard (1980) elaborated the notion of ‘absurd’, in which humankind was perceived as always sinful before God and the idea of ‘sin’ transcending nature; In the Kantian concept of ‘radical evil’ (Kant, 1960) outlined the human propensity to choose evil, where evil was regarded as a moral alternative; De Sade (2004) associated evil to the ideas of excess, transgression and excitement.

Lara (2001: 1) suggests evil as a philosophical concept has never been fully clarified, but, rather, it has been used to group together various experiences (from natural disaster to human failures) that fell under the umbrella of morality (or lack of). Evil emerges, therefore, as an opposing force to what is good and moral. Reference to evil has been articulated in relation to recent Islamist terrorist attacks, raising the need to explore what this concept means and how this can be transformed into a tool to understand radicalised violent behaviour. Alexander (2001: 153) points out how social evil has been deprived of the intellectual theorisation it deserves. He suggests that good and evil should be regarded as products of cultural understanding (Alexander, 2001: 154): within the organisation Islamic State, cultural norms and behaviours have been turned upside-down. Criminology is challenged to step back from its own hermeneutic interpretation of good and evil and attempt to explore the values and emotions Islamic State militants attach to those behaviours that are identified as such.

Kant (1960) did not consider evil a natural characteristic to be attributed to humankind, given individuals have the freedom to choose how to behave; however, the responsibility to engage with evil is a trait of humankind. For Kant, people are aware of moral laws, but occasionally decide to depart from them. Humankind is evil in the sense that only the human species can decide to overlook norms and transgress them at the expenses of others. Alexander (2003) moves from Kant’s notion of evil to the idea of social evil: “For every effort to institutionalize comforting and inspiring images of the socially good and right, there is an interlinked and equally determined effort to construct social evil in a horrendous, frightening, and equally realistic way” (Alexander, 2003: 110). The antonym of good, consequently, becomes a cultural expression; narratives of outrageousness, violence and ambiguity can be finally verbalised: “As Bataille (1990: 29, 21) observed ‘evil is always the object of an ambiguous condemnation’; it is ‘not only the dream of the wicked’ but ‘to some extent the dream of {the} Good’” (Bataille quoted in Alexander, 2003: 118). Evil becomes a decoding tool that discusses an individual’s self-interest.

I identify in the works of De Sade the emergence of transgression and evil as expressions of self-interest. The Sadean approach to transgression has a sexual *jouissance* (Lacan, 1992: 199) and a tendency to physical satisfaction: “[in De Sade] the situation is of an ‘either /or’. We cannot normally hold to both of these claims [either/or] at the same time without risking total discursive paralysis, or at best stuttering. One cannot simultaneously be on both sides of the prohibition within the same discourse” (Allison, Roberts and Weiss, 1995: 143). In De Sade’s work, experience becomes total through the achievement of physical excess (Allison, Roberts and Weiss, 1995: 143). In the narration of De Sade’s plots, sexual pleasure and physical perversion become the main characters of a story that focuses also on bodily fulfilment and rituality. Transgression into taboo areas is the currency with which satisfaction is bought. Morality and religiosity are turned upside-down: physical pain is addictive and exciting. Morality, chastity and deprivation become capital sins, whereas violence acquires a positive value, which is almost dogmatic and religious.

This inversion of morality (and its physicality) is a useful tool to attempt an analysis of executions and attacks by the Islamic State and the religious appeal these acts exercise on western-born youth (either Muslim or Christian). Sadean characters (perhaps like Islamic State militants) are driven by passion for what they regard as mundane sacredness: this becomes concrete and tangible through violent rituals, which are followed as religious dogmas. In *Justine: ou, les Malheurs de la Vertu*, De Sade (2004) describes meticulous scenes of transgressive, non-consensual sexual behaviour, where victims are abused and where perpetrators are aroused by the violence. I propose to use the Sadean character, particularly the perpetrators of violence, as a metaphor to identify the element of excitement that, I suggest, characterises the staging of beheadings and appeals to young people joining the Islamic State. Like Sadean characters, terrorist characters are driven by an upside-down, narrowly interpreted religious passion: whereas existing scholarship addresses this religious and psychological sides of terrorism, the mundane element is not equally tackled. Terrorist characters may achieve ‘Sadean satisfaction’ through the mundane excitement derived by their acts of religious engagement and guerrilla.

Humankind, in De Sade’s writings, is shown to have lost its decency. The Sadean philosophy is “a serious knowledge [that] can be inscribed only in a normative and ultimately moralizing metaphysical discourse; a repertory of perversions can only take the dull and pretentious form of a medical discourse” (Allison, Roberts and Weiss, 1995: 148). Human weaknesses are exposed in analytic language capable of penetrating to the core of their essence. Bodily functions constitute the infringement of what is sacred. Eroticism is not theorised as previously seen in Bataille and Foucault, but it is played with to the extent that it becomes graphically, visually and ‘literally’ disturbing. Non-consensual, improbable sex and becomes a metaphoric expression of a forbidden reality. They are ‘excitement’. Sadean characters do not contemplate transgressive excitement, but enjoy it fully (Nicoletti, 2005). Terrorist characters also engage in graphically disturbing activities and physical aggression that attempt (metaphorically and conceptually) to bring down political powers: Islamic State militants do not engage in state-actors’ wars, but rather in military theatricality like Sadean characters engage in a sexual performance.

The Sadean fiction of evil can be compared to the articulation of terrorist practices at the time of Internet. The Sadean story makes the abnormal normal: the experience and the counter-experience. De Sade’s characters enjoy being sinners: in fact, in their view, failing to satisfy one’s own desires constitutes a real sin. Furthermore, they express their emotional and intellectual essence through the performance and enjoyment of cruelty. In this, Sadean characters mirror Islamic State militants: the desire to create a pseudo rituality that defeats secular norms and reinforce narrowly interpreted religious dogmas. Like Sadean characters, they enjoy being regarded as transgressors because this label gives them permission to reinforce their resistance against who does not espouse their restricted vision of religion, law and state. Sacralised mundanity reinforces affiliation to the group, whereas the staging of beheadings nourishes the militants’ morality.

De Sade removes the moral frame actions are usually located in. This is “the *jouissance* of destruction, the peculiar virtue of crime, evil sought for evil’s sake, and, in the last instance, the Supreme-Being-in-Evil” (Lacan, 1992: 197). Crime is excitement *par excellence*. Here transgression is reversed: the abuser/evil-doer is rewarded and the victim/moral being is punished. In Islamic State executions, spectators witness the same process: criminals behead civilians instead of criminals being punished for their actions. The sadistic individual has unlimited power over his/her victims: in *Les 120 Journées de Sodome*, De Sade (1961) the victims are in the hands of sadists. Victims are there for sadists’ own pleasure and desire for violence. The excitement of gaining power is a goal that must be

achieved no matter when or how. Both Sadean and terrorism victims are the personification of the ban that is transgressed. In the context of the latter, the transgressed ban is a metaphor for the violation of ascendant powers.

In Lacanian terms, this could also be compared to “the rebellion of *Jedermann*, of everyman, insofar as he aspires to happiness. The truth that man seeks happiness remains true. The resistance to the commandment ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself’ and the resistance that is exercised to prevent his access to *jouissance* are one and the same thing” (Lacan, 1992: 194). Airaksinen (1995) argues that the Sadean person wants everything at once, regardless of consequences: the Sadean eye captures nuances that others do not notice: by looking at what should not be seen, individuals get closer to mundane sacredness. Terrorist militants also want an immediate, spectacular reaction to their violent, mundane or religious sacredness. The concepts theorised by De Sade encourage a reflection on the thrilling impulsiveness (over critical thinking) that young people joining the Jihadi cause may experience, along with their religious sentiments.

### Regulating transgression: the theory of the festival

The last line of theorisation in this work concerns the need to regulate transgressive behaviour. Sadean characters achieve forbidden desires through an erotic, yet disturbed imaginative *mise en scene*. Their inner impulses are liberated and satisfied. De Sade’s style and his aesthetic produce a fiction of evil (Airaksinen, 1995): the intention of the characters is to do evil; their actions lose their ‘immoral’ connotation now they are put into practice. During this theatricality, their transgression is almost prescribed, raising, in this way, a discussion on the need to have times when society allows what is normally forbidden.

Bataille (2001) investigated transgression as an element capable of decoding human experience and human instinct. Individuals are socially productive due to their commitment to work (labour). Through labour they produce the ‘object’ (*l’utile*) that delineates their individuality (Bataille, 1986). However, this individuality is a lost one: it is pre-constructed by society. It is a fragmented individuality: through transgression people regain totality. Jenks (2003) suggests that maximising pleasure or pain is the way to achieve a complete meaningful life, one whose elements are not rigidly categorised into the sacred and profane.

The essence of transgression lies in the paradox that it requires recognition of the ban for humankind to achieve full completeness. The apotheosis of ban is reached when society attempts to regulate transgression so that norms and bans are reinforced. Labour is reinforced by the ‘holiday time’, *la fête* (Bataille, 1986): *la fête* is a celebration of life without norms. The representation of taboos, limits and bans is visible in the celebration of holidays and festivals. Bataille (2001) suggests that Caillois was the first thinker who could elaborate a concept of transgression through his study of festivals.

The theory of the festival advanced by Caillois (1959) is based on the principle that the order of the universe is maintained by the experience of excess, through the festival. Eliade (1957) suggests the time of the festival (Sacred time) is a mythic time that originates the beginning of reality (*in illo tempore*). ‘*In illo tempore*’ also saw the presence of gods and divinities. Humankind (which Eliade defines as the Religious man) wants to live permanently in the festive state. The celebration of *in illo tempore*, where transgression and excess are allowed, implies that the process of breaching bans and limits was present at the origin of life. In fact, by reproducing chaos, the festival also reproduces the process that created order in the first place: in other words, the procedure that leads to hierarchy and power. The process is this: historically, holidays and festivals took place so that divinities and kings can be celebrated; these entities represented ‘Law’ and ‘Power’. Gods and kings established what was morally and socially acceptable and what was not. Holidays and festivals aim to interrupt the daily routine in which laws are respected and ‘Power’ obeyed: traditionally, during times of festivity, behaviour that was usually banned became tolerated. This occurred, of course, so that those bans could be re-affirmed once people had enough of excess. Defining and allowing a certain degree of transgression preserved State power. During the festival, any possible excess could be sought and enjoyed: the consumption of huge amounts of food; music and licentious dancing; nocturnal debauchery; (Caillois, 1959: 99). The experience of transgression is collective (shared by everybody). In this context, the normal pattern of life and social order is set aside. Paradoxically, transgression inherent in ‘festivity’ contains within itself the paradigm of a ‘religious ritual’, which also has an ‘educative’ purpose:

[...] The religious ceremonies forming part of the festival agitate the souls of the believers. If the festival is the time of joy, it is also the time of anguish. Fasting and silence are required before the festival starts. Habitual taboos are reinforced, and new restrictions are imposed. Debauchery and excess of all kinds, the solemnity of the ritual, and the severity of the previous restrictions are equally united to make the environment of the festival an exceptional world (Caillois, 1959: 99).

The festival of transgression, consequently, overturns morality to re-affirm it. This can inform the understanding of terrorist practices because it offers a platform for the reflection on the separation of secular and religious lives. In her discussion of the myth of religious violence, Armstrong (2014) suggests that rather than focusing on why some people are so obsessed with religion, we should perhaps consider how we reached the stage where religion is separate from any other aspects of human activities, politics included.

Through the excesses of festivities process society is purged of its impurities and regenerated. Similar to the body that rids of its organic discharge, the festival is a release of tension of the anxiety that *l'utile* has created within the individual. Kristeva (1982) associates corporeal waste with the pollution of identity: "excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death" (Kristeva, 1982: 71). This is the lost individuality discussed by Bataille (2001), an individuality that manifests organic defilement. An encounter with it can be shocking. So, individuals decide to push aside this aspect of reality and 'protect' themselves by constructing taboos: Bataille (1993: 16) suggests that human eyes cannot cope with either sun or coitus or with corpse and darkness. However, both Sadean and terrorist characters break these taboos, allowing their eyes to see what the rest of society finds disturbing.

I believe this body of literature looking at the festival as a metaphor to rid of societal restrictions has a lot to offer to an exploration of radicalisation and terrorist behaviours. Legal and moral codes have made it problematic to acknowledge that criminal/transgressive behaviours may originate from the willingness to engage with excess and destruction (informed by both religious and mundane values). The Islamic State becomes frequently reduced to religious folly, but the group offers its militants a way to participate in something as exciting as the building of a new State. In this respect, it allows terrorist characters to break free from the dogmas of dominant society and traditional political powers. Violence and guerrilla become a state of perpetual festival, religious for some, mundane for others. The works of Caillois, Eliade and Kristeva highlight the process of frustration that pollutes humankind and society's need to regulate it. When this process does not occur, society witness acts that become frequently dismissed as motiveless. In the ritualistic staging of beheadings, we can detect different experiences: the polluted self that Kristeva discusses, but also the excitement that religious excess and mundane sacredness may trigger.

### **Transgression: a cultural approach to biological components?**

In this theoretical work, I advocated an alternative theoretical framework in which to locate our understanding of terrorist practices like beheadings and radicalisation. This should be integrated to existing approaches that look at religious, psychological and sociological factors informing extremist behaviours. I borrowed the concept of transgression as intellectualised by French philosophy and literature to suggest that this can help us make sense of the sacred and mundane elements that underpin terrorist attractiveness. I argued that compartmentalising these two elements is not necessarily relevant to understand why young westerners are attracted to the Islamic State and its deeds. Transgression offers us the framework in which we can safely discuss the sacred mundanity and thrills that come with terrorist violence. It is this melange of sacred and mundane that is appealing.

However, to conclude this overview of transgression as an analytical tool to understand extreme acts of violence it is essential to mention few words on whether there is an element of biology in transgression. In this article, I used words like exciting and physical. I mentioned how transgression triggers something in people that encourage them to infringe taboos. I talked about a polluted identity that wants to break free from societal impositions. This 'biological' side of transgression may appear

inconsistent with the 'cultural' framework this work adopts. Transgression is surely culturally driven: culture influences people's values, their behaviours, how they look at institutions and how they make sense of their beliefs.

Nisbett and Cohen in *Culture of Honor* (1996) argue that not only is culture an essential step towards the comprehension of human behaviour, but also that culture shapes behaviour by causing changes in our biology. This can also be relevant in the case of groups that espouse counter-culture narratives. Culture and biological influences belong to two different domains. Nevertheless, "culture is as much part of human biology as bipedal locomotion, and cultural and genetic influences on human behaviour are thoroughly intertwined" (Richerson and Boyd, 2001: 61). The scientific notion of biology, in fact, exists within the domain of culture: culture provides the tools that can be employed in the study of natural sciences. Through culture individuals elaborate empirical models of investigation. At the same time, biology and genetics allow individuals to access culture: memory, reading, thinking, writing, learning and speaking are all examples of activities that shape culture; genetic set-up, brain functions, and hormones support these activities. In other words, the production of culture emerges from a series of biological measures.

Our cultural development and the way people regard it is greatly affected by the development of brain functions: the evolution of human beings proves how both biological and cultural maturations have a relationship of reciprocal support. Consequently, the study of natural and medical sciences is located within a cultural framework: the way they are understood, interpreted and used are partly subject to cultural influences (for instance, Western-based or oriental).

From this perspective, transgression is subject to both culture and biology too. Under a cultural point of view, transgression can emerge from the desire to subvert norms and from infringing societal taboos. From a 'biological' perspective, excitement in 'doing transgression' affects the body and leads the individual to experience a series of physical 'symptoms'. For instance: excitement induces the production of adrenaline, which stimulates heart-rate; during excitement, there is a constriction of the peripheral blood vessels supplying the skin (sweating) and a dilation of the blood vessels supplying the heart and skeletal muscles. Furthermore, the sympathetic nervous system plays a central role in the physiological experience of excitement and arousal: it prepares the body to 'deal with' emergency situations, danger, etc. The sympathetic nervous system, in fact, causes the release of noradrenaline, which is a hormone stimulating, among its several functions, heartbeat, and the conversion of liver glycogen into glucose. All this contributes to high levels of stress, euphoria or a distorted perception of reality.

I regard the motivations behind joining a terrorist organisation and carrying out acts like beheadings as a set of emotions<sup>5</sup> that are partly influenced by that idea of mundane excitement and sacred transgression. These are based on the works of Bataille, Foucault, De Sade, Caillois and Kristeva. The cultural (or religious) resonance of excitement and transgression, however, is amplified by physical excitement that actions like beheadings may trigger in certain individuals. Terrorism studies should take into consideration this sense of thrill, which is informed by a combination of religious, scriptural and mundane sentiments. The alternative theoretical approach elaborated here attempts to provide a framework where to advance understanding of why young people are fascinated with extremist practices. It also offers a way to isolate the various elements that compose terrorist violence: religiosity, mundanity, and glamorisation of violence. It also provides a framework for the exploration of phenomena that would not be easily accessible in a more empirical manner. In other words, scholarship on transgression can help us make sense of those human sentiments that are not accessible as primary data.

The concept of transgression emphasises that some actions that are deemed as deviant include elements that go beyond traditional socio-economical explanations. When we read of western-born youth feeling to Syria or are confronted with yet another terrorist attack, initial hopelessness is replaced with the need to understand how certain individuals can engage with such 'evil' acts. Digging into the lives of perpetrators, like in the case of Salah Abdeslam (one of the perpetrators of the Paris attacks in 2015), does not seem to provide sufficient or satisfactory explanation. In this respect, I hope this work has fully explored the two hypotheses, set at the beginning of the article, demonstrating how an alternative theoretical framework can provide some extra layers of investigation in the study terrorist practices.

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<sup>5</sup> I believe these emotions are similar for those individuals who are religiously motivated to conduct terrorist acts. They shape around the perceived religiosity of an individual; the experience of excitement remains unchanged.

Finally, I used selected non-criminological authors with the purpose of compiling an alternative theoretical framework; the suggestions made in this article (and the theoretical framework itself) do not intend to substitute more traditional criminological, sociological or empirical approaches. They present an alternative view that should function as an integrating element rather than a replacement

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