

RESEARCH ARTICLE

**KNOWING SUICIDE TERRORISM?  
TRACING EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE ACROSS  
SCHOLARLY EXPERTISE**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This article introduces a critical view on terrorism research and its knowledge about suicide terrorism. The analysis combines a feminist-postcolonial perspective with a sociology of knowledge approach, including discourse and dispositive analysis. It draws attention to the limitations of hegemonic knowledge production and to an Occidental self-assertion as its by-product. What we know about suicide terrorism and how we generate this knowledge, I argue by presenting a comprehensive study of analyses of scholarly publications on suicide bombing from the 1990s to 2006, is embedded in globally asymmetric power arrangements. I establish a link between the various forms of political violence that are present in scholarly expertise on suicide terrorism and the epistemic violence that is inherent in this field of knowledge production. By introducing the concept of epistemic violence, this text contributes to a more complex understanding of our fields of research, their objects of analysis, and the entanglements between these two dimensions, of which we are inevitably complicitous as scholars. First, the transdisciplinary research perspective is introduced in order to move away the focus from political violence (suicide bombing) and turn it on epistemic violence (knowledge production about it). Second, I present the results of the research project that this article summarizes.*

**Keywords:** epistemic violence, suicide terrorism, Occidentalism, knowledge, coloniality

**WHAT DO WE KNOW?**

Suicide attacks challenge normative conceptions of power and order, legitimacy and illegitimacy, rationality and deviance within the academic and political realm of International Relations and beyond. Producing and disseminating expertise on suicide attacks is one way of coming in terms with some of the challenges that these violent articulations of political agency affect in politics and science. Yet, what do the scholars and experts really know about it? How has this knowledge been aggregated and in what ways is it shaped? Which epistemologies, theories and methodologies lay the ground for the creation of this object of knowledge? And: What does this have to do with global power politics?

Scholarly expertise is thought to provide solid explanations. Yet, the mainstream body of knowledge on suicide terrorism is not free from simplifica-

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tions, ideologizations, and biases. It adheres to the positivist model of a modernist paradigm and a problem-solving approach that is likely to be essentialist. This field of scholarly expertise is part of the globally asymmetric power relations in which both the attacks and the production of knowledge about them are situated. As I have shown in a comprehensive study (Brunner, 2011) of texts, paratexts (Genette, 1997), graphs, models, illustrations and book covers, a close assessment of the scholarly object of knowledge, i.e. suicide terrorism, can tell us a lot about the entanglements of political violence and scholarly knowledge production. Such an analysis exposes the ambivalences of the said knowledge production in a field of “embedded expertise” (Burnett & Whyte, 2005) which is situated between public discourse, politics and the academia. We are, thus, tasked to think of political violence and knowledge production as existing in a complex setting of “entangled histories” (Randeria, 2006) which did not begin in the fall of 1989 or in September 2001. These entanglements have to be thought of in the light of a longer and broader legacy of Western dominance, in a “colonial matrix of power” (Mignolo, 2009, p. 2).

Firstly, here, a theoretical framework at the interface of Feminist IR (International Relations), Postcolonial Theory and Sociology of Knowledge is introduced. Then, the argument for enlarging discourse-oriented approaches through Foucault’s less received notion of the dispositive, which enables a more materialist approach, is made. Finally, Coronil’s concept of Occidentalism which allows for a significant twist in the debate on political violence is proposed. Starting from the central notion of epistemic violence, the suggested perspective starts from a decolonial understanding of an ongoing coloniality not only of power, but also of knowledge. It challenges existing scholarly expertise on the issue of suicide terrorism, which, as a broadly discussed object of knowledge, has turned into a privileged signifier of Western self-assertion.

Due to the spatial limitations of this article, the aim to argue for a theoretical shift in the debate on political violence, and the centrality of epistemic issues on the topic, the empirical data can be introduced only cursorily. However, the main results of the study in three steps are presented in the second half of the text. Seven contours and conditions of the emerging object of knowledge are briefly outlined in the first place. This is followed by a methodologically sensitive description of the different paths that expertise has taken towards and around the issue during the past twenty years of scholarship (1996-2006). In a third step based on the analyses of the study, an analytical framework of six major modes in which Occidentalism is at work in scholarly expertise on suicide terrorism is offered.

#### **FEMINIST IR, POST- AND DECOLONIAL THEORIES AND SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE**

Feminist, post- and decolonial thinkers claim that violence has never been the exception to international relations (as a field of politics) and of IR (as an academic discipline), but it is constitutive of them. Moreover, the historical and contemporary asymmetries in which violence and power are embedded have always had structural (Galtung, 1969) and symbolic (Bourdieu

& Wacquant, 2004) elements. The organization, production, dissemination, consumption and application of knowledge are central to these dimensions of violence, which cannot be grasped by the narrow definition prevailing in positivist approaches. In an attempt to read this field of knowledge production against the grain, I focus on what post- and decolonial authors call epistemic violence. Starting with Spivak (1988), I employ the notion of epistemic violence to point out the function of scholarly expertise for the perpetuation of globally asymmetric relations between knowledge and power. Spivak defines the term as “the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other” (1988, pp. -281). Scholarly expertise has always played a major role in this project—and it continues to do so today. But epistemic violence is about more than that. Thus, according to Enrique Galván-Álvarez,

[e]pistemic violence, that is, violence exerted against or through knowledge, is probably one of the key elements in any process of domination. It is not only through the construction of exploitative economic links or the control of the politico-military apparatuses that domination is accomplished, but also and, I would argue, most importantly through the construction of epistemic frameworks that legitimise and enshrine those practices of domination (Galván-Álvarez, 2010, p. 11).

While IR and Terrorism Studies aim to establish order by categorizing social phenomena that seem to be beyond the rationalities of the modern nation state and its monopoly on violence, feminist approaches have always been busy challenging these orders while at the same time theorizing them in a profoundly different way (Hunt & Rygiel, 2006; Riley, Mohanty, & Pratt, 2008; Sjøberg & Gentry, 2011). Postcolonial critique pursues similar goals, while it is interested in deconstructing Eurocentrist and Universalist theories and practices in general (Engels, 2014; Shilliam, 2011). Decolonial perspectives (Coronil 1996; Mignolo, 2002) point at the persistent coloniality of power and knowledge and its effect on continuing imperial politics today. Another tradition on which this analysis is built is rooted in the German tradition of the sociology of knowledge (Keller, 2005; Keller, 2011). Neither of these perspectives are present at the core of terrorism research, just because of their broad concepts of violence and their focus on knowledge production. Set against this theoretical background, I understand the sub-discipline of Terrorism Studies as a field of knowledge and power in the first place. It has to be located within the highly asymmetric setting of international relations in which both political violence (incidents commonly subsumed under suicide terrorism) and epistemic violence (scholarly expertise on them) take place simultaneously and interdependently.

### **FROM ORIENTALISM TO OCCIDENTALISM**

Said’s concept of Orientalism focuses on the link between politics and scholarship, which has always accompanied and enabled colonial projects (1986, p. 223). Coronil’s understanding of Occidentalism (1996) focuses on the same phenomenon, but he highlights the other side of the process, namely the epistemologies, theories, methodologies, structures, agents and practices that have enabled the production of Orientalism. He does not

conceive of Occidentalism as the opposite of Orientalism, as Buruma and Margalit do by defining Occidentalism as “the West in the eyes of its enemies” (2004). Such an understanding creates the illusion that the term Occidentalism is a simple reversion of Orientalism, a claim to which Coronil convincingly objects. On the contrary, he views Occidentalism as the historical prerequisite which allows for the construction and perpetuation of Orientalism and locates both in deeply asymmetric power relations which stem from 500 years of colonialism (Coronil, 1996, p. 57). Rejecting the idea of simple reciprocity and reconsidering global politics and political violence therefore includes “relating the observed to the observers, products to production, [and] knowledge to the sites of formation” (Coronil, 1996, p. 57) in order to point out asymmetries of power and knowledge in the past and the present.

We can consider Terrorism Studies as a part of these asymmetries. Finally, we can understand one of its most popular objects of knowledge today, suicide terrorism, as a privileged signifier in a process of Western self-assertion which tacitly naturalized dominance through Occidentalism. (Counter-)terrorism expertise itself can therefore be understood as being implicated with structural, symbolic, epistemic and various kinds of direct and physical violence. To highlight these entanglements, we have to change our perspective on violence. We should understand it as part of a larger process, in which definitions of violence are fiercely contested, since both politics and the academia are located within the above mentioned “colonial matrix of power” (Mignolo, 2009, p. 2). Disputes within them revolve around the questions of whose and which kind of political violence is legitimate and which is not.

In this setting, addressing the role and function of epistemic violence is a means to examine the contested field of knowledge production itself, and not just the incidents that are described, explained and at times theorized by mainstream expertise. Such an understanding does not relativize the problem of violent agency and its consequences. Quite to the contrary, it increases the level of attention that we pay to political violence and highlights the often invisible conditions under which it unfolds. Seen in this light, suicide attacks are a complex phenomenon including structural, symbolic, discursive and epistemic dimensions. They unfold in a setting of highly asymmetric power relations, which have their own epistemic-political histories and legacies. The communication or discourse theory approach, which Critical Terrorism Studies (Jackson, Breen-Smith & Gunning 2009) apply to contrast the positivist paradigm of Terrorism Studies, does not suffice to meet this challenge, however. Therefore, in this work Foucault’s concept of the *dispositif* along the concept of Occidentalism are applied, and integrated it to a feminist-postcolonial-sociology of knowledge based approach.

### **FROM DISCOURSE TO DISPOSITIVE ANALYSIS**

The present research links key questions of discourse analysis to the Foucauldian notion of the *dispositif* (Bührmann & Schneider, 2008; Caborn Wengler, Hoffarth, & Kumięga, 2013) as the net that can be woven between “discourses, institutions, architectural arrangements, reglemented deci-



sions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral or philanthropic teachings, in brief, what is said and what is not said" (Foucault, 1978, p. 119). Keller's (2005) sociology of knowledge also widens the scope of discourse analysis to include institutions and agents. Such an understanding allows the analysis of more heterogeneous material to be included than its linguistic predecessors. This analysis started by identifying relevant textual materials defined according to the following criteria: language (English as the dominant language of mainstream research), form (scholarly articles and books) and time of publication (1996–2006), disciplinary profile (various social sciences that merge in the field of Terrorism Studies) and research focus (on suicide terrorism) of the publication, institutional location of publishers/editors (renowned publishing houses, think tanks etc.) and of the respective journals (8), monographs (14), anthologies (5) and selected articles within them (15),<sup>2</sup> quantity and quality of citation in the field, location across Terrorism Studies and neighbouring fields of research, and relevance for the making of this object of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Non-textual (25 images, graphs and models) and para-textual elements (legends, indices) from within the written expertise were selected and analyzed according to selected methods of textual (Jäger, 1999; Keller, 2004), para-textual (Genette, 1997) and visual (Breckner, 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) analysis, and integrated the findings into the results of the textual analyses.<sup>4</sup> By working through this vast range of materials, the conditions and contours of a larger counterterrorism dispositive are identified. This enabled the analysis of the methodologies, theories and epistemologies that shaped this recently booming sub-discipline of IR, as well as its interrelations with non-academic fields of knowledge and power. Building on these results, six different modes of Occidental self-assertion that have characterized the object of knowledge suicide terrorism during the examined time period (1996–2006) are discerned.

In the following sections, the results of this comprehensive study are briefly elaborated to show on how many levels we can find elements of epistem-

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2. Monographs are: Berko, 2007; Bloom, 2005; Davis, 2003; Hafez, 2007; Israeli, 2003; Khosrokhavar, 2005; Laqueur, 2003; O'Neill, 1981; Pape, 2005; Pedahzur, 2005; Reuter, 2004; Shay, 2004; Skaine, 2006; Victor, 2003. Anthologies include Reich, 1990; ICT, 2001; ICT/ADL, 2002; Gambetta, 2005 and Pedahzur, 2006 (for a more detailed selection of articles from these books see Brunner, 2011, pp. 65-67). Journal articles stem from *Terrorism and Political Violence* (Israeli, 1997; Weinberg et al., 2003; Strenski, 2003; Kimhi/Even, 2004; Pedahzur, 2004; Silke, 2006; Lewis, 2007), *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (later: *Conflict and Terrorism Studies*) (Kushner, 1996; Hoffman, 2002; Cunningham, 2003; Dolnik, 2003; Moghadam, 2003; Hoffman/McCormick, 2004; Lester et al., 2004), *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (Dale, 1988; Ferrero, 2006), *Foreign Policy* (Sprinzak, 2000), *Science* (Atran, 2003), *American Political Science Review* (Pape, 2003), *The Atlantic Monthly* (Hoffman, 2003; Lewis, 2002) and *The Washington Quarterly* (Atran, 2006). For a detailed contextualization of these journals and their publishers and editors see Brunner, 2011, pp. 65-66.
  3. For a detailed definition and justification of the body of material and the methods of textual, visual and para-textual analysis see Brunner, 2011, pp. 57-61.
  4. For a detailed description of methods and methodologies see Brunner, 2011, pp. 61-79, 81-151.

ic violence. Tracing this violence across scholarly expertise goes beyond a merely textual analysis. It is also more than a methodological critique, which suggests that we could do better research on terrorism if we only used the right methods and thereby evaded epistemic violence. The aim of the following overview is not to present every analytical step of the perennial work underlying this article, but to give an impression of the multiple ways in which epistemic violence unfolds throughout the process of scholarly knowledge production on suicide terrorism, and to underline the importance of a conceptual shift in the analysis of political violence.

### **CONTOURS AND CONDITIONS OF AN EMERGING OBJECT OF KNOWLEDGE**

Seven contours, which shape the object of knowledge during the first two decades of its formation, emerge from the analysis of the material.<sup>5</sup> First of all, scholars are usually not the first to provide knowledge on suicide attacks. Whenever and wherever attacks occur, it is the media which produce and distribute knowledge first. Newspaper articles are frequently cited in the analyzed texts and provided the basis for scholarly articles and books prior to the first comprehensive research projects. It is remarkable as to how unfiltered many of these journalistic accounts were absorbed by Terrorism Studies. The blurring of academic and journalistic traditions and practices is particularly striking when it comes to knowledge production on women suicide bombers, a field in which facts and figures are to a large extent taken from journalist sources without further reflection (Davis, 2003; Skaine, 2006; Victor, 2003; for a detailed critique of these volumes, see Brunner, 2007). This also holds true for knowledge generated by security and intelligence agencies which equally enters the field of scholarship, albeit less explicitly.

Secondly, a specific and IR-related format of the English language is absolutely dominant in the constitution of this scholarly object of knowledge (Stump & Dixit, 2013, p. 63). This normalized condition of knowledge production reflects epistemic-political power relations and is thus neither natural nor pure coincidence. Therefore, only a few non-English books made it into the canon before 2008; one translated from a German book (Reuter, 2004) and another from a French book (Khosrokhavar, 2005), both were first published in 2002 and passing through substantial omissions and adaptations for the international market.

The third contour is that it is striking how easily a field of research, which is dominated by the social sciences, has integrated fragments of knowledge originating from Islamic Studies (Israeli, 1997) without closer assessment of the compatibility of research designs, theories and methods of the respective disciplinary traditions. The same is true for psychology (Merari, 1990) and criminology (Berko, 2007) which have co-constituted the field and its objects of knowledge from the beginning, when the search for individual motivation and profiling dominated the analyses. Later on, political science (Pape, 2005) established a strong reference for the field

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5. For all details, analyses and references on these aspects see Brunner, 2011, pp. 81-151.

with its rational choice approach. Later work fosters a re-biologization of knowledge, as life sciences (Thayer & Hudson, 2010) gradually gain ground in the social sciences when it comes to explaining violent agency on the sub-state level (for a critique of neo-biological racism in Terrorism Studies, see Brunner, 2012a).

Fourthly, one can observe a remarkable shift in the naming of the object of knowledge and, hence, in the definition of the narrow gap between legitimacy and illegitimacy of political violence over time. Preferences change according to disciplinary, ideological and political standpoints, and suicide terrorism has slowly replaced more neutral terminology such as suicide attacks or suicide bombing. The lack of discussion in the academic field about the differences between and contents of the respective terminologies is problematic though. The most striking example for this development is when “[...] a suicide terror attack [...]” (Schweitzer, 2001, p. 78) tacitly turns into “[...] a suicide attack [...]” (Moghadam, 2006, p. 18). The simple omission of a single word illustrates this problem in a nutshell. This obviously incorrect citation shows up in many later publications and establishes what resonates with the use of the term today: Suicide attacks are hence per se defined as terrorist, which puts the question about the legitimacy or illegitimacy of political violence beyond discussion and erases the use of political violence by states. It seems that once transformed into a specific and narrow interpretative framework, suicide terrorism is not in need of further definitions.

This result can be linked to the fifth contour of the object of knowledge, i.e. the normalization of a counter-terrorism perspective which takes center-stage. The nexus between the military, politics, and intelligence services on the one hand and terrorism research on the other becomes evident and powerful. A number of scholars explicitly subscribe to the impetus of fighting terrorism (for a detailed analysis of this problem, see Brunner, 2011, pp. 101-126), while others only implicitly apply attitudes and approaches that are influenced by this dominant discourse. The attitude of having to contribute to combating terrorism is deeply inscribed into the analyzed texts and obviously influences the theories, methodologies and epistemologies with which the respective objects of research are approached and treated, resulting in a sense of emergency and morality that underlies much of the scholarly work on the issue. The features mentioned so far have led to a much narrower understanding of the forms of political violence associated with suicide terrorism.

A colourful unambiguousness—the sixth contour identified by the research—is most visible in the images which escort the object of knowledge through academia, politics, and public discourse. An analysis of the book covers has revealed a veritable “spectacle of the other” (Hall, 1997, p. 225).<sup>6</sup> These

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6. Three thematic foci can be identified: images of visually anonymized male and strikingly personalized female perpetrators, stagings of an explosive belt (despite the fact that it is not the preferred method), or abstract visualizations of fire and/or transcendental notions of heaven. Only few illustrations exceed these visual topics. For a detailed discussion of visual analysis of the issue see Brunner, 2012b.

most telling artifacts (which more often than not look like fiction bestsellers rather than academic books) can be understood as interfaces between the scholarly expertise inside the books and public discourses that surround it. On the surface, the covers seem to condense what the social sciences themselves disregard as rational expertise suitable for the content of their books. What remains unspeakable for them is most explicitly displayed on the colourful outside of their products: a gaudy and blatant orientalization around its main ingredients, namely sexuality, violence, and religion.

Regarding the political circumstances that lead to increased knowledge production on terrorism and political violence, one has to remember that the period of condensed knowledge production on the issue lies between the end of the bipolar world system (1989) and the second major turn in IR, i.e. the attacks commonly abbreviated as 9/11. These circumstances eventually gave rise to an unprecedented boom in Terrorism Studies in the subsequent decade. But even though knowledge production on suicide terrorism certainly experienced its first peak in 2005, 9/11 was not the first occasion that inspired scholars to investigate the phenomenon. Violent incidents including the simultaneity of killing and self-killing in a political context had already occurred before September 2001. Consequently, this phenomenon had also been analyzed prior to the second turn in IR. Yet, these earlier works focused on single occasions, regions or conflict settings, which later turned into case studies for what slowly turned into a more generalized object of knowledge, namely suicide terrorism. Some case studies have become paradigmatic (especially the Israeli-Palestinian conflict). Others, however, have gradually vanished from comparison and analysis (the state-sponsored Japanese Kamikaze). This constitutes a seventh contour of the emerging object of knowledge. From 2008 onwards, we can speak of a certain normalization of both the phenomenon and the knowledge production on it. This is also sustained by the fact that during the last years more and more critical assessments of both have started to challenge the canonized publications from outside Terrorism Studies as well as from within. The supposedly self-evident object of knowledge named suicide terrorism faces some analytical challenges today. Some of the most serious reproaches can be made via a critique of methodologies (Stump & Dixit, 2013). Such critiques, though, should not merely address problems of (in-)adequate methods, since not all of these problems can be solved within the existing frames of (even critical) Terrorism Studies. In fact, one can discern significant theoretical and epistemological deficiencies when looking at how suicide terrorism expertise is being formed and articulated.

### **ROCKY PATHS TOWARDS KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE**

Some of the most obvious methodological challenges lie in the contestation of the ideological and epistemological boundaries which form the object of knowledge. These boundaries have been always and already inscribed in the ways along which suicide terrorism is approached by scholars. Over time, one can observe changes and trends in research designs and methods, which go hand in hand with disciplinary booms, cycles and

turns (for all details, analyses and references on these aspects see Brunner, 2011, pp. 151-220). The four most important paths towards knowledge and expertise are profiling, interviewing, databases, and finally producing proto-theories through graphs and models.

It was psychological and criminological approaches, often developed in direct relation with counterterrorism practices and institutions, that dominated the field in the early period. Due to a desire to grasp both the phenomenon and its protagonists, profiling became a favourite approach not only for intelligence agencies, but also for scholars. This method gradually transformed into different ways of portraying both real and presumptive perpetrators, which is why identikits about typical suicide bombers are present in various dimensions. Portraying and profiling can be discerned on the textual and the visual level (Pape, 2005, pp. 206, 228) as well as in the theoretical approaches to the phenomenon (Lester, Yang, & Lindsay, 2004) or in the methodical make-up of some research designs (Sageman, 2004). With the amplification of an individual-based research focus and perspective upon collectives, groups, regions, peoples, nations or entire cultures and geopolitical entities are subsumed under ideologically laden profiles. These profiles tend to fit a range of culturalized, sexualized and racialized stereotypes which are based on psychological and criminal categories.

Taking some of the theoretical and methodical weaknesses of early profiling into account, researchers soon tried to personally meet and interview their objects of knowledge (Brannan, Esler, & Strindberg, 2001), that is, failed perpetrators or—more problematically—uninvolved prisoners who, for reason rooted in racial profiling, were compared to potential suicide bombers or considered as organizers of suicide attacks (Khosrokhavar, 2005). Even though many studies rely on data gained from interviews, methodological and methodical discussions are almost entirely absent from these texts. The reader is confronted with the so-called facts, the genesis of which remains unclear. Others (Berko, Wolf, & Addad, 2004) do explicate the set-up of their study, but remain assailable with regard to their interpretations. Finally, it is remarkable that only few researchers take their own position in this asymmetric setting and its relation to the outcome of the study into account.

Another important path to knowledge, and chronologically the next step towards knowing suicide terrorism, is the use of already existing databases and the creation of new databases. These more or less comprehensive bodies of systematized information (Pape, 2003; Pape, 2005; Pedahzur, 2005; Sageman, 2004), do not simply merge existing facts and figures into authoritative knowledge. Ideological preferences and epistemic violence also find their ways into what is considered as neutral and objective information. Once aggregated into a database, this presumably objective information is perpetually cited without further reflection on how it came into being. The knowledge that feeds these databases consists more often than not of a mixture of scholarly and journalistic accounts, the differences between which disappear on the way from research to result. It is

striking how little attention social scientists pay to the quality or validity of the heterogeneous pieces of information that feed into a database. Moreover, existing professional and commercial databases are taken for granted by social scientists, since hardly any terrorism scholar considers the conditions and consequences of their seemingly indispensable use. Language, geopolitical location, commercial or the ideological background, or even proximity to powerful institutions of any given data remain unquestioned. Fragmented information and comprehensive knowledge seem to blur when it comes to knowing suicide terrorism, and both are organized in highly debatable relations of knowledge production, dissemination and consumption, if they are open to the public at all.

Besides highly formalized texts and beyond more informal and illustrative images, we can find another form of aggregated and normalized knowledge in conventional terrorism expertise. Sober graphic elements are interspersed with articles and books, and they provide condensed, abstracted knowledge of proto-theoretical quality. In a field of research in which theories and epistemologies play only a subordinate role, I consider the existing graphs and models as telling artifacts of condensed theoretical content. Marginal and incidental as they may seem at first sight, these visuals provide significant information about preferences and trends in constituting the object of knowledge. Their distinct symmetry is striking as it stands in considerable contrast to the conditions under which both the violent incidents and the research about them are organized, and to the claim made by terrorism researchers that this is highly asymmetric warfare. At the same time, these models often erase empirical historicity and locality by suggesting universal validity. A close look at these visual elements exposes another inconsistency that seems to prove the Occidental self-assertion which is written into this expertise. Finally, and despite the constant talk about the international and global dimension of the phenomenon and the importance of reacting to it globally, none of the graphs and models provides an international or global dimension.

#### **INTERDEPENDENT MODES OF WESTERN SELF-ASSERTION**

Further results of the multi-stage analysis reveal six major modes of Occidentalism that appear across textual, para-textual and visual elements of the material: pathologization, (ir-)rationalization, sexualization, historicization, geopoliticization, and culturalization (see Brunner, 2011, pp. 220-340).

Illness, deviance, contagion on the one hand and immunization and healing on the other, are important notions and items shaping the mode of *pathologization*. Yet, it is not only factual or prospective perpetrators of suicide attacks who are referred to in pathological terms. Early attempts at pathologization, which all operated along physical or psychological parameters, have not been entirely abandoned with the emergence of more sophisticated approaches. Rather, pathologization has spread and diversified along with the dissemination of the idea of profiling. It has transformed from a focus on individual agency (pathologizing deviant subjects)

via groups of persons (families, political organizations) to entire geopolitical entities (the Islamic/Arabic world). I will return to this aspect when I elaborate on the mode of culturalizations.

Terrorism experts soon challenged the earlier paradigm and tried to make their point by distinguishing rational from irrational forms of political agency. Yet, the approaches which subscribe to rationality and political explanations rather than to the psychological and criminological perspectives that preceded them, often revert to pathologizations. However, the (*ir-*)*rationalizations* perspective is the only one that explicitly focuses the core of Terrorism Studies, which may be considered to be the definition of legitimacy and illegitimacy of political violence. The discussion of the notions of hero (nation state soldier) versus martyr (suicide terrorist) by Diego Gambetta (2005, pp. 272–278) is a most telling example. The ambivalences that are written into this issue are exposed when one tries to draw a clear line between what is legitimate, rational and therefore normal, and what can never be. Suicide attacks tend to be rationalized when counter terrorist practices are at stake, and they tend to be irrationalized when it comes to mobilizing acceptance for these practices. Last, but not the least, the issue of (*ir-*)rationality lies at the heart of most analyses of the so-called female suicide terrorism, not only with regard to the sex and gender of its protagonists, but also concerning the striking absence of debates about the (*il-*)legitimacy of political violence at large.

The basic assumption of clearly distinguishable and intrinsic natures of both rational (state-sponsored and legitimated) and irrational (sub-state and illegitimated) agents of political violence is closely related to orientalist *sexualizations* of the phenomenon. As feminist-postcolonial theorists have shown, sexualizations have always been central to practices of Othering on a global scale. This is still the case with respect to Occidentalism (Dietze, 2010). While female and male agency are explained differently, both sexes are placed in a matrix of oppressive orientalist gender relations, which are said to provide one of the central motivations for violence committed by people from and in the so-called Arab world, compared to which the sexed-gendered power relations in Western societies appear as almost naturally egalitarian, progressive, and enlightened.

The historical contexts that researchers compare contemporary events to are significant. Even though *historicizations* are made in various ways, the researchers show specific interest in certain criteria (link to religion and especially to Islam, focus on the Middle East, compatibility with an Orientalist frame), whereas others attract far less attention (state-sponsored suicide attacks in World War II, secular movements). While some of the examples are historicized as isolated cases (Sri Lanka/Tamil Elaam, Turkey/Kurdistan, Japan), others constitute central parts of the phenomenon's generalization. First and foremost, it is the Israeli/Palestinian example that soon acquired the status of an uncontested *pars pro toto*. Others, such as Chechnya, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Iraq are easily linked to the implicit and explicit criteria of this generalization. One of the analogies that enable this focus is the medieval group of the so-called Assassins, who during the middle-ages carried out targeted killings of contemporary enemy leaders in



what is today Iraq, Iran and Syria. Their mythologization goes back to the writings of Marco Polo and has fascinated European travelers, merchants, clerics, and later scholars and a general European public for centuries (Brunner, 2012a). In contrast to this frequent reference, historicizations that refer to global politics during the Cold War or to contemporary power relations have not reached the potency for generalization in the process of formation of an object of suicide terrorism yet, but remain complementary.

These observations lead to the fifth mode of Occidental self-assertion which I call *geopoliticization*, i.e. the generalizing of both particular geopolitical foci of research (certain attacks attract more curiosity and resources) and underlying political interests (of scholarship and politics). Geopolitics can be considered “a convenient fiction, an imperfect name for a set of practices within the civil societies of the Great Powers that sought to explain the meaning of the global conditions of space, power, and technology” (Ó Tuathail, 1996, p. 237). Othering (and Selfing) are central elements of these geopolitical definitions and explanations. The authoritative object of knowledge, which we have come to quite naturally call suicide terrorism, works as a privileged signifier in that respect. It helps to separate mental and territorial spaces from each other, denying their historical entanglements and thereby reinforcing the asymmetries of power on a global scale. However, the mode of geopoliticization provides a few surprises. Some publications point towards the responsibility of Western politics and consider potential relations between the attacks and the targets they are aimed at. Such rational choice approaches (Pape, 2005) coexist with crude conceptions of radical difference (Israeli, 2003) as well as with an emphasis on causal relations “between our society’s policies and actions and those of terrorist organizations and supporters” (Atran, 2003, p. 1539). Policy recommendations range from the demand for similar tactics, practices and even certain mentalities of terrorism and counter-terrorism (Atran, 2006) to the advocacy for an open confession of the imperialist nature of Western power and their respective realist politics, also with regard to issues of energy (Pape, 2005, p. 237). Another, albeit marginalized, focus lies on the warning of future suicide bombers, who might not fit the ready-made identikit and pseudo-profiles, but who seemingly resemble ‘us’ more than we are generally prepared to acknowledge (Khosrokhavar, 2005, pp. 230-237).

*Culturalization* is the most evident mode of Occidental self-assertion, since today’s “culture talk” (Mamdani, 2005, p. 17) about political violence is easily compatible with a variety of other discourses. Their manifestations can be found in the media, in politics, in informal communications and in scholarship. As mentioned before, terrorism research has widened its gaze to encompass certain forms of political violence. Today, scholars not only look at perpetrators, their social environment, or organizations which apply certain tactics, but they also take regional, national, or international constellations into account. However, the pathologizations, irrationalizations, historicizations, sexualizations, and geopoliticizations are not overcome by that wider focus, but have rather been integrated to it. Certain forms of (sub-state) political violence are thereby excluded from the space of the political and transferred to a diffuse realm of the cultural, whereas others (perpetrated by nation states or international alliances) occupy the sphere

of politics. While Western nation states claim a quasi-naturalized legitimacy of violence for themselves, the so-called areas of instability are not even thought of as being able to produce anything but illegitimate violence; not for political reasons, but for reasons that are thought of to be deeply rooted in what is then simply framed as the cultural.

### CONCLUSION

An approach to suicide terrorism that takes into account the concept of epistemic violence reminds us of the coloniality of power before, during and after political violence occurs, while at the same time it points at the coloniality of knowledge. This move challenges the narrow definitions of violence that mainstream voices consider crucial for studying (suicide) terrorism. It locates both the objects and the subjects of research into asymmetric power relations shaped by a centuries-old heritage of coloniality, and goes beyond the Euro-Atlantic consensus even of critical scholarship. It focuses on the long-term prerequisites, potentialities and consequences that enable both the committing of political violence and the definitions of research and abatement policies against it; it includes symbolic, semantic and otherwise institutionalized dimensions of epistemic violence and thinks through what the different levels of violence have to do with each other. The attempt to link the epistemic violence which is embedded in scholarly work with the political violence that experts try to analyze, explain and theorize, will not remain without controversies, however. These are part of the power relations that we as scholars, experts, and academics have to deal with when we investigate violence in all its dimensions.

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