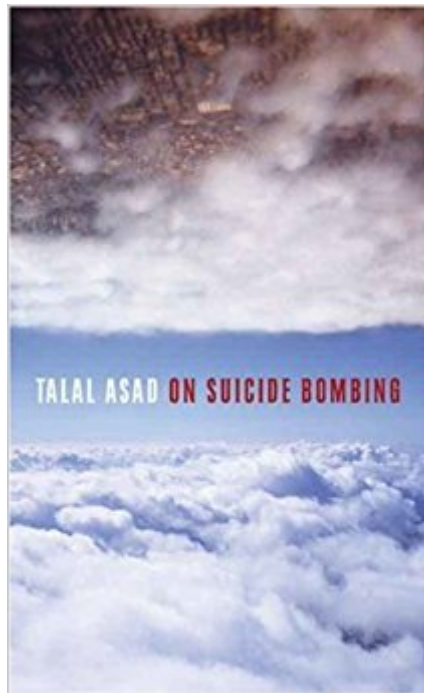




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On Suicide Bombing (The Wellek Library Lectures)



Synopsis

Like many people in America and around the world, Talal Asad experienced the events of September 11, 2001, largely through the media and the emotional response of others. For many non-Muslims, "the suicide bomber" quickly became the icon of "an Islamic culture of death"; a conceptual leap that struck Asad as problematic. Is there a "religiously-motivated terrorism?" If so, how does it differ from other cruelties? What makes its motivation "religious"? Where does it stand in relation to other forms of collective violence? Drawing on his extensive scholarship in the study of secular and religious traditions as well as his understanding of social, political, and anthropological theory and research, Asad questions Western assumptions regarding death and killing. He scrutinizes the idea of a "clash of civilizations," the claim that "Islamic jihadism" is the essence of modern terror, and the arguments put forward by liberals to justify war in our time. He critically engages with a range of explanations of suicide terrorism, exploring many writers' preoccupation with the motives of perpetrators. In conclusion, Asad examines our emotional response to suicide (including suicide terrorism) and the horror it invokes. *On Suicide Bombing* is an original and provocative analysis critiquing the work of intellectuals from both the left and the right. Though fighting evil is an old concept, it has found new and disturbing expressions in our contemporary "war on terror." For Asad, it is critical that we remain aware of the forces shaping the discourse surrounding this mode of violence, and by questioning our assumptions about morally good and morally evil ways of killing, he illuminates the fragile contradictions that are a part of our modern subjectivity.

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Provocative. (Jonathan Shainin Bookforum) Asad's book is valuable because the legal distinctions he is challenging are especially vulnerable now. (Samantha Power The New York Times Book Review)

Talal Asad is a professor of anthropology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and the author of *Formations of the Secular* and *Genealogies of Religion*.

This book was recommended to me by a very liberal (leftist) friend who also (coincidentally) happens to be a professor at Yale, so one can assume that Asad's work is fairly well-received in the academic community. Nonetheless, I will attempt my own perhaps rather amateurish but still sincere critique. Asad essentially makes a terrorist's argument, not dissimilar to the argument floated by Charles Manson at his own trial in an attempt to justify his own complicity in the murder of innocents (the Tate-Labianca killings). Asad essentially argues that "the brutality of a state army and of a terrorist group have much in common[.]" (Asad, p. 36) Similarly to Manson, Asad wishes to sweep away the entirety of law or specifically international law in Asad's case, as some sort of con job by the West. Manson too sought to erase society's distinctions, particularly of guilt or innocence, justifying his own acts by pointing to the acts of the U.S. government in Vietnam - a "Tu Quoque" or "you too" argument. Judging by my own perception of the reputation of this book among the current intelligentsia, and comparing it to Manson's reception among the previous crop of elite pseudo-intellectual terrorists such as the Weather Underground, this type of logical fallacy is still quite fashionable among well-respected members of global society, though without giving any credit or even acknowledgement to Manson. As Asad writes it: "All constitutional states rest on a space of violence that they call legitimate. In a liberal democracy, all citizens and the government that represents them are bound together by mutual obligations, and the actions of the duly elected government are the actions of all its citizens. When the government acts against suspected terrorists and inferior military opponents, everyone is (rightly or wrongly) involved in the space of violence. There may be criticism by particular citizens of the government's actions on moral or legal grounds, but until these are conceded constitutionally by the government, all citizens remain bound to the space of violence that its representative government inhabits." (Asad, p. 29) The

argument is not a new one, nor is it a description of a phenomenon confined to the modern age; even during the Middle Ages, emerging complexity had begun to erase distinctions between combatants and non-combatants. (see, Christopher Allmand, War and the Non-Combatant, MEDIEVAL WARFARE A HISTORY 258 (Maurice Keen ed., Oxford University Press 1999) (noting that St. Augustine as early as the fifth century argued that in a just war all could legitimately be killed and there was no distinction between combatant and noncombatant) Just as Manson did at his trial and later through the media, ultimately Asad seeks to erase these distinctions (or differentiation of subsystems as Niklas Luhmann might put it) between acts of state violence and those of the terrorists whom the state fights against. Asad argues that he is not seeking "culpits," but rather is concerned with "definitions of death dealing" that ultimately justify "the destruction of civilians and the terrorizing of entire populations [by the state]." (Asad, p. 13) Luhmann would of course point out that these differentiated systems are the very features that define or describe modern systems of communication (or "society"). Asad argues that the "ruthlessness of terrorists often matches the effects achieved in the strategic strikes made by state armies, even when the latter use the language of humanitarian law in which a liberating or self-defensive purpose can be claimed." (Asad, p. 21) But he fails to see (or acknowledge in any real way) that these distinctions of "humanitarian law" (and the like) define modern society, for better or worse.

Well-written, thought-provoking, incisive. It shakes up much of what's taken-for-granted in liberal thought and in public discourse on the "war on terror." The first chapter is both a critique of liberal theories of war in general and a deflation of Walzer's facile notion of "just war," in particular. The second chapter debunks several common Islamophobic myths about a "culture of death." The third--most ambitious and most in need of elaboration--interrogates what is about suicide attacks strikes Western audiences with horror. It suggests an explanation in, among other things, the combination of the attacks' intimate invasion of everyday life, the disappearance of the criminal but not the crime, and the clash between such a suicide attack and the redemptive suicide of Jesus's crucifixion. While, at least the last chapter begs for further elaboration and development, perhaps it can be forgiven, given that this is a series of lectures delivered at a critical theory conference.

This is an important, thoughtful reflection on the trajectories of violence and "unequal killing," particularly in encounters between Israelis and Palestinians, by one of our most astute intellectuals. Professor Asad's authoritative knowledge about the politics of religion and secularity resonates

throughout these lectures but only to reveal that the reflexive link between "terrorism" and religious motives made by many pundits in the West is specious and superficial at best. The argument is complex yet deeply engaging and the writing luminous. A fine read.

Rather than giving us more "imaginary" scenarios of what "might be going on in the mind of a terrorist" (as if modern torture methods or any other methods could definitively uncover intentions - a witch hunt mentality), Talal Asad is asking the right questions. What makes terrorism so terrifying that it has to be labeled distinctively - rather, than say, a gun-wielding student running amok at a university, killing 30+ people and then himself? Why does the topic of suicide bombing cause overwhelming horror over and beyond the scope of other horrific acts by state armies or school shootings - the disproportionate maiming and killing of civilians, women and children from far range by modern military weapons? The author doesn't attempt to give simplistic answers and wave the problems away, nor does he apologetically defend any perpetrator of terror - individual dissident or modern government. What he does is uncover the disturbing truth that the double standard exists in our media and liberal democracy discussions: as soon as a modern government labels a dissident regime or country or religious group as "barbaric" or "uncivilized", it gives itself the right to kill "their" citizens or attack "their" defenses just as it has been previously attacked. Where is the line crossed? Very deep reading. The author touches on Islamic and Christian culture and compares and contrasts what living and dying mean in each. This was one of its strongest aspects. Once the ideas of living, dying, and sacrifice are understood in terms of a particular culture, only then can its stance on suicide or bombing or terrorism be correctly understood. Do proponents of terrorism or suicide bombing abide by the tenets of their religion or is it a subversion of their teachings? Or does it even depend on their circumstances or our reading of it as a foreign culture with the necessary misinterpretations? It is a highly engaging book and covers many more relevant and related areas. I am glad it covers a side of the issues that is sorely missing and needed and has been missing from the contemporary media and intellectuals/academics who, as usual, are like a flock of sheep, saying about terrorism and the Islamic world just what everyone else does.

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