

CHAPTER 8

**Exighophobia/homiophobia:
'Comes a time we are all enthusiasm'**

Talking suicide bombers in the West, a polemic

In the days that followed the Israeli army's reinvasion of the West Bank in March 2002 and the resultant destruction of the embryonic elements of a sovereign Palestinian society, I, like many, sat in my office fuming, emailing depressed friends and colleagues to express our helplessness and despair at the unbelievable injustice of it all. Besides the death and devastation, most depressing, perhaps was the mediatic normalisation of the very idea of a nation's military rampaging virtually unopposed – like Genghis Khan in tanks – through another nation's cities and towns, levelling entire streets, destroying houses, libraries, and so forth. It was for all of us an absurdly anachronistic form of violence: a medieval mode of warfare outfitted in modern technology. I took it upon myself to send Arab, Jewish and other concerned friends an email trying to think through the nature and ramifications of this violence.

While addressing the Israeli government's use of Palestinian suicide bombers (hereafter PSBs) as an excuse for transforming cities into rubble, I pointed out that, to a large degree, the Israeli government shared with the suicide bombers a lack of concern with the actual humanity of the people they murdered in the course of the conflict. In a communal 'us' versus 'them' logic, the dehumanising gaze that sees 'them' as a non-differentiated entity (Israel/the Palestinians), abstracted from the particular human beings that constituted it, is often accompanied by an equally self-

dehumanising, abstracted vision of 'us'. I knew very well from my experience of the Lebanese civil war, as both a participant and a student, that when a logic of communal war prevails, neither of the warring sides really cares for the actual material human-beingness of the situation. More 'important' things, such as 'communities' and 'nations' are at stake. I argued in my email that given the prevalence of that logic, 'the bombs of Hamas against civilians might outrage the humanists among us for being precisely that: bombs against civilians', but what was more important for the Israeli colonialist government was that these bombs showed the Israeli 'us' to be vulnerable, which was also what the suicide bombers were trying to demonstrate.¹

The day after I sent my email, I was surprised to receive a long rebuke from a colleague on the Jewish left. In his email he informed me that he was 'sad to see that these days scholars speak in strangely brutal language. This does no credit either to them or to the human causes they espouse.' I thought this was a bit over the top, but nothing prepared me for the end of the text, where he said that he could not:

join in common cause with people who endorse this horrendous path of voluptuously violent martyrdom. I don't really want to stand alongside anybody who cheers other people, young people, along that appalling path without being prepared to follow it themselves ... I cannot respect the political sensibilities and moral judgment of people who indulge, from positions of comfortable impunity, in this unbecoming kind of vicarious bravery – which is really a form of bad faith and moral cowardice.

The moralising nature of the reply took me aback. I could not believe that I had become someone who endorsed the 'horrendous path of voluptuously violent martyrdom', someone faced with either exploding himself in Palestine or acknowledging his moral cowardice. I imagined myself 'exploding' and smiled at the headline: 'After the first woman Islamic suicide bomber comes the first Christian Lebanese Islamic suicide bomber.' I imagined the faces of my parents, relatives and friends, with whom, as a good Maronite, I learnt how to hate all Arabs, particularly Muslims, and even more particularly Palestinians. I imagined my parents as they faced neighbours giving them the 'your Lebanese Christian son is really a Palestinian Islamic suicide bomber!' look, and how surreal it would have all been ... comic relief in sad times of war.

More seriously, I wondered how my matter-of-factly stated observation about the political imaginaries behind suicide bombing, regardless of whether one agreed with it, had been transformed into support – or lack thereof – for ‘voluptuous martyrdom’. It was as if the moral neutrality of my statement was itself self-condemnatory.

Indeed, as I was later informed by a mutual friend, my colleague felt that the real issue was whether or not I ‘absolutely condemn’ suicide bombers. Apparently it is crucial to ‘absolutely condemn’ suicide bombers if you are going to talk about them; otherwise you become a morally suspicious person. This immediately raised an issue for me. As I had only mentioned suicide bombing in relation to what I thought were the inhumane acts of violence Israel was perpetrating through its reoccupation of the West Bank, I wondered why it was that suicide bombing could not be talked about without being condemned first. After all, we can sit and analyse in a cool manner Israel’s formidably violent colonial invasion without feeling that ‘absolute’ moral condemnation should be a precondition of such a discussion (or a substitute for uttering an opinion about it). To my mind, both the Israeli invasion and the suicide bombings constitute a kind of warped postmodern pastiche of medievally violent political affects, early modern veneration of political entities such as ‘the nation’, and late modern military technology. The fact that my colleague decided that only ‘suicide bombing’ is *necessarily* a moral issue raised questions about the assumptions implicit in our categorisation of violence and about their significance in shaping our political and analytical judgement. The polemic also raised the issue of the political nature of the ‘condemnation imperative’ and its significance for academic practices in the social sciences.

It is clearly the case that in the Western public sphere the ‘condemnation imperative’ operates as a mode of censoring attempts to provide a sociological explanation for why PSBs act the way they do. It is difficult to express any form of understanding whatsoever, even when one is indeed also condemning the practices of PSBs. Only unqualified condemnation will do. And if one tries to understand, any accompanying condemnation is deemed suspicious. A number of public figures have expressed some form of ‘understanding’ of suicide bombers (often linking their emergence to the absence of hope among Palestinian teenagers), only to be forced to apologise for voicing such views; the most publicised cases were those of Ted Turner, the former owner of

CNN, and Cherie Blair, the wife of the British Prime Minister. There is a clear political risk in trying to explain suicide bombings.²

But leaving aside the political nature and the moral pros and cons of this censorship in the public sphere, one would think that a university is still a place where people make a living out of ‘understanding’ as opposed to condemning. I am certainly more comfortable with ‘absolutely condemning’ the living conditions that make people into suicide bombers than absolutely condemning suicide bombers as such. And I like to think that it is the social scientist in me that makes me feel this way. By raising the issue of ‘absolute condemnation’, my colleague seemed to be casting Ariel Sharon and George Bush’s shadow over the university: ‘nothing ever justifies a suicide bombing’. In this climate, how might an academic, located in the West, attempt to understand why suicide bombers do what they do?

Initially, I tried to formulate this question by separating the issues of condemnation and explanation. I began by asking: Can one talk about suicide bombers by concentrating on explanation, leaving condemnation aside without this being seen as a form of ‘justification’? I soon realised that I could not ignore the specificity of my location in the West. How could I, in the seclusion of academia, try to understand suicide bombing without taking into consideration the fact that such an understanding would conflict with certain political interests? What was needed was an attempt to understand both suicide bombers and the public impulse for a categorical condemnation of them.

Talking suicide bombers in the West: a lecture

As a testing ground for my initial question – Can one understand suicide bombers? – I used a seminar with some of my senior students to try to imagine what an anthropology of the practice of suicide bombing might be like. Primary sources consisted of a number of conversations I had with Palestinians in Australia; secondary material was the body of available literature on suicide bombing. I began the seminar with the following brief definition of the phenomenon – which made a number of my students visibly agitated.

Palestinian suicide bombings are acts of violence directed against the Jewish colonisers of Palestine and their descendants in Israel and the occupied territories, who are seen as continuing the colonial enterprise. Anti-colonial struggles have almost always involved forms of violent resistance on the part of the colonised.³

What makes PSBs an uncommon phenomenon and an object of strong condemnation in the West is, above all, that their violence is often, though not always, directed at civilians. The PSBs disrupt the ability of the colonisers to consolidate a 'normal peaceful life' inside the colonial settler state of Israel. As such the PSBs do not respect the Israeli coloniser's division of labour – between the military, who engage in protecting and facilitating the process of colonisation, and the civilian population, who can peacefully enjoy the fruits of this process. Furthermore, the practice is condemned and considered socially pathological because it involves what anthropologists call *self-sacrifice* on the part of the perpetrators.

The most obvious aspect of the PSB phenomenon is that it is a *social fact* in the Durkheimian sense of the word 'social'. It is a social tendency emanating from colonised Palestinian society, and as such it can be explained only as the product of specific social conditions, not as an individual psychological aberration. There is, of course, very little research, let alone statistical data, that can be obtained on the phenomenon. The *Washington Post* journalist Daniel Williams, in an article on the woman suicide bomber Abu Aishah, estimates that there were 59 acts of suicide bombing in the first 18 months of the second Intifada. Williams also notes that 'the pool of potential bombers seems far from exhausted among despairing, hostile youths of Abu Aishah's generation'.⁴ A *Ha'aretz* article reports on research conducted by Fadal Abu-Hin, a psychology lecturer at Al-Aqsa University in Palestine:

In April 2001, Abu-Hin conducted a research study among 1,000 young Gaza Strip Palestinians, aged 9 to 16. According to the results he published, over 40 percent of the respondents said that they were actively involved in the Intifada. Over 70 percent said that they wanted to be martyrs. 'If I were to carry out the same study today,' says Abu-Hin, 'I am sure the figures would be even higher,' adding that he believes that similar figures would be found on the West Bank.⁵

This notion of a 'pool of potential bombers' reminds us of the need to differentiate between the presence of a social disposition towards sacrificing the self (the pool) and the actual practice of sacrificing the self. These are just two of many strands that an anthropology of PSBs would need to untangle.

An anthropology of the practice of suicide bombing is of course a highly unlikely endeavour. It would require the anthropologist

to go into the technical and institutional processes of the practice and would involve fieldwork within such organisations as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Nevertheless, theorising about what this anthropology might involve can provide us with a more complete sense of the phenomenon and what it entails.

Understanding suicide bombing as a social practice requires first of all an examination of the processes of recruitment, including the structure of the organisations and their recruiting and selection methods. As was made clear in press reports following the emergence of women suicide bombers, and then of 'under-age' suicide bombers, these organisations do not always agree about the social prerequisites of membership. They do agree, however, in their opposition to a *laissez-faire* suicide bombing, and their primary method of eliminating this possibility is by monopolising the manufacture and availability of the explosives used in these acts. But these organisations are also in competition over members; each bombing produces a form of symbolic anti-colonial capital that in turn attracts more members. A higher number of bombers and of successful bombings also invites further support from those behind the financing of such operations. To be sure, this is not a market situation where a person emerges from the pool of potential bombers and then proceeds to choose the organisation she or he wants. It is more likely that these organisations play an active role in the formation of the pool; they might have special relations of care, kinship, friendship or patronage with potential bombers, perhaps even before they become potential bombers.

An anthropology of PSBs would also examine the technology of violence used in suicide bombings: manufacturing, distribution, and modes of training; the art of handling, wearing and detonating explosives; how to infiltrate Israeli territory; what networks of infiltration exist, and the art of passing as a Jew; how to target and approach one's target; the art of staying cool as the time for detonating the explosives approaches; and so on. It is likely that this whole process is grounded in an exceptionally masculine culture, and this too needs to be examined.

As mentioned above, the anthropologist is unlikely to have access to this kind of information; it is the reserve of the recruiting organisations themselves and the various secret service agencies that might have succeeded in infiltrating them. Yet we have already begun to confront the nature of the violence perpetrated by the PSBs. Is it terrorism? What does 'terrorism' mean? This is an issue that the anthropologist needs to clarify before he or she

can understand the nature of the phenomenon being analysed.

What is meant by 'terrorism' has never been very clear. Through its intensive strategic usage on the political market by the media and politicians, it has become further loaded with ideological assumptions. From what I have read so far, it seems, unfortunately, that many analysts have added more confusion to the concept as they have struggled with a definition. No author, for instance, has made it clear whether he or she is undertaking an analysis of terrorism as such or of terrorist organisations. To my mind, terrorism is clearly a *form* of political violence. Terrorist organisations, on the other hand, are *groups* for whom terrorism is a core political practice. Thus it is unsatisfactory when analysts who claim to be studying terrorism (a form of violence) concentrate solely on terrorist organisations, as if they have a monopoly over this form of violence.⁶ But the terrorists and their intellectual sympathisers' claims that the state (whether it is a colonial state or not) is a 'terrorist' organisation are also analytically unhelpful.⁷

Two clarifying remarks have to be made. First, if a state uses terrorism, that does not make it a terrorist organisation. Terrorist organisations are groups that rely solely, or mostly, on violence to attain their political objectives. States might use terrorism as an element that helps them maintain power, but it is unlikely that they would rely on it exclusively or mainly. Second, some go as far as describing any coercive aspect of the state as terrorism. Accusations of that sort used to be commonly made against capitalist states by such groups as the Red Brigade and the Baader-Meinhof gang.⁸ It should be made clear that although the coercive aspect of the capitalist state is by no means unimportant and might include terrorism in certain cases, it is incorrect to equate any form of coerciveness with terrorism. Terrorism is a violence that directly aims to kill and destroy, even when its ultimate aim is to exert a form of 'psychological violence'.

So I think it is somewhat pretentious (not to mention insensitive) to deny that someone who blows himself up in the middle of a teenage disco, murdering young people and wreaking havoc, is a terrorist. On the other hand, we need to question the way we are invited to uncritically think of a particular form of violence as being 'the worst possible kind of violence' just by merely classifying it as 'terrorist'. Mark Twain's description of postrevolutionary France in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* holds true for many political realities throughout history:

There were two 'Reigns of Terror,' if we would but remember and consider it; the one wrought murder in hot passions, the other in heartless cold blood ... the one inflicted death upon a thousand persons, the other upon a hundred million; but our shudders are all for the 'horrors' of minor Terror ... A city cemetery could contain the coffins filled by that brief Terror ... but all France could hardly contain the coffins filled by that older and real Terror ... which none of us has been taught to see in its vastness or pity as it deserved.⁹

Twain's 'none of us have been taught to see' points to perhaps the most important aspect of the classification 'terrorist': it involves a form of symbolic violence that forces us to normalise certain forms of violence and pathologise others.¹⁰ This is an invitation to the social analyst to think of terrorism as part of the struggle between states and opposing groups: first, over the distribution of means of violence, and second, and more importantly, over the classification of the forms of violence in the world, particularly of what constitutes legitimate violence.

Terrorism is not the worst kind of violence that humans are capable of. The 59 suicide bombings of the first 18 months of the second Intifada have killed 125 Israelis. Compared with the violence the Israelis have inflicted on the Palestinians before the recent murderous invasion of the West Bank, let alone after, suicide bombings represent a minimal form of violence in Israel and Palestine today in terms of the number of deaths they cause, the psychological damage they inflict on people, and the damage to property they bring about. The fact that we approach suicide bombing with such trepidation – as opposed to the way we approach the violence of colonial domination, for example – is an indication of the symbolic violence that continues to shape our understanding of what constitutes ethically and politically illegitimate violence. Indeed, the fact that terrorist groups never classify themselves as terrorists, instead calling themselves revolutionaries, martyrs, nationalists or freedom fighters, is an indication of the depth of this symbolic violence. If we accept a less morally outraged and more empirical conception of terrorism – as a form of violence specific to a mode of distribution of the means of violence – there is no necessary contradiction between *martyr* or *freedom fighter* and *terrorist*. This does not make terrorist violence less condemnable for those who want to condemn violence; it does, however, make us question why it is terrorist violence that is always at the centre of a condemnation/non-

condemnation problematic and not other, relatively more lethal forms of violence. This is especially so when terrorist violence is considered affectively 'theirs' by a majority of the population from which the terrorists emerge. This is different from the violence of the self-styled radical groups of the 1960s, such as the Japanese Red Brigade or the American Weathermen, who were affectively almost on their own when they engaged in violence.

For the many Arabs who invest a lot of political affect into the Palestinian struggle, terrorist violence is a violence of last resort. As a Palestinian Australian put it to me: 'Let the Americans give us the monopoly over nuclear power in the region and the strongest army there is and we are happy to do "incursions" and hunt down wanted Israeli terrorists by demolishing their houses and "accidentally" killing civilians. Who would want to be a suicide bomber if such a luxurious mode of fighting is available to us. You can kill more Israelis and the world will think you are more civilised!' Suicide bombings are seen here as a marriage between the necessity for resistance and a state of quantitative and qualitative military hardware deprivation.

It is this logic of necessity that is also emphasised by Michael Neuman, a professor of philosophy at Trent University in Ontario. In a piece widely circulated on the Internet, he argues that he sees no moral problem in the Palestinians' deliberate killing of civilians. Using as an example the Native Americans' deliberate killing of white children during their resistance to colonisation, he argues that sometimes, even certain acts that are terrible and cruel can be justified. The American Indians, he points out, had their very existence as people threatened, and in such a situation, 'every single white person, down to the children, was an enemy'. They were 'doomed without resistance' and therefore, 'they had no alternative'. For Neuman, the Palestinians are facing a similar situation:

Like the Indians, the Palestinians have nowhere to go ... Like the Indians, the Palestinians have not the slightest chance of injuring, let alone defeating Israel through conventional military tactics. Like the whites, every single Israeli Jew, down to and including the children are instruments wielded against the Palestinian people.

The Palestinians don't set out to massacre children, that is, they don't target daycare centers. They merely hit soft targets, and this sometimes involves the death of children. But, like anyone, they will kill children to prevent the destruction of their society ... And if the

only effective way of stopping their mortal enemies involved targeting daycare centers, that would be justified too. No people would do anything less to see they did not vanish from the face of the earth.¹¹

This text clearly speaks to the logic embedded in the way Israelis and Palestinians approach each other today. Many consider the imbalance of power – Israeli might and strength versus the Palestinians' struggle to survive – as a sufficient explanation of the suicide bombers' actions. This is definitely how many people in the Arab world, sitting in their lounge rooms watching the news, see it: a real gladiator show featuring the Israeli Goliath and the Palestinian David, inspiring, of course, a total affective identification with the latter. In this unequal struggle, the Palestinians are always imagined on the verge of being squashed, and with them all the Arab masses' aspirations of a dignified life. The suicide bombers become a sign that the Palestinians have not been broken. They are a sign of life. For what better sign of life is there, in such violent conditions, than the capacity to hurt despite the greater capacity of the other to hurt you?

Violence here has no other function than to symbolise the survival of a Palestinian will. There is no room for Fanon's lyrical 'Violence alone, violence committed by the people, violence organised and educated by the people's leaders, makes it possible for the masses to understand social truths and gives the key to them.'¹² Indeed it could be argued that suicide bombings are inherently antidemocratic practices in that they elevate the militancy of the few and encourage the passivity of the majority, rather than their participation. As such they reflect the absence of democratic institutions within Palestinian society (whether or not they are possible in a colonial situation is another question). There are echoes here of the great Marxist debates between the Trotskyites and others about the role of violence and terrorism in bringing about revolutionary change.¹³ Unfortunately, again because of the absence of democratic institutions, no such debates have emerged within Palestinian society.¹⁴

From an explanatory point of view, however, Neuman's Hobbesian, state-of-nature analysis falls short. It risks normalising the situation rather than recognising it as the product of a non-viable political framework, one in which Palestinians have continued to experience a sense of being assaulted (the continued expansion of settlements, people arrested or humiliated, etc.). It

is only because of the failure of the political that such a 'state of nature' becomes the cultural norm, and violence emerges as a genuine and apparently reasonable possibility. As David Held lucidly wrote in an article that appeared just after the attacks of 11 September:

The news (in October 2001) of an increasingly intense pattern of extra-judicial, outlaw killings (organized, targeted murders) on both sides of the Israeli-Palestine conflict compounds anxieties of the breakdown of the rule of law, nationally and internationally. This way only leads one way; that is toward Hobbes's state of nature: the 'warre of every one against every one' – life as 'solitary, poore, brutish, and short.'¹⁵

That one can come to consider such a 'brutish' state of affairs a norm is a sad indication of how far the situation has moved from the logic of political negotiations and solutions.

The PSBs' *Illusio*

It is possible from what has been examined so far, and from an understanding of the daily horrors, humiliations and degradations that constitute colonised Palestinian society, to present an explanation of how some Palestinians develop, in turn, a 'brutish', dehumanised abstract conception of Israeli human beings, a conception that facilitates the task of committing mass murder without any sense of guilt.¹⁶ More difficult to explain, however, is the suicide component of Palestinian suicide bombing. Why have young people embraced the culture of 'martyrdom'? To begin to answer this question, we need to try to understand what kind of suicide suicide bombing involves. Starting with Emile Durkheim's conceptions of egoistic and altruistic suicide, we would note that PSBs do not really fit either of these categories, though they have a stronger likeness to the latter.¹⁷

In a forward to a study initiated in the late 1990s, focusing on suicide and attempted suicide among Palestinians living on the West Bank, Rita Giacaman, a professor of public health at Bir Zeit University, noted the existence of 'chronic protracted stress, emanating out of poverty, oppression and a sense of powerlessness brought about by war'. She adds, however: 'Despite these seemingly harsh conditions, the author found surprisingly low levels of suicide and attempted suicide, even when taking into account undocumented cases, and certainly much lower than the

levels in industrialised societies ... Although this study focused on those who are unable to cope, in fact, it spoke forcefully of the resilience and internal strength of the rest of the population.'¹⁸ Clearly, the conditions of occupation lead to strong forms of communal solidarity and interdependence, and thus make egoistic suicide unlikely. Giacaman points out that during the first 18 months of the second Intifada (before the Israeli invasion):

[The] escalation of army violence, excessive use of force, siege conditions, destruction of infrastructure and economy and the shelling and bombardment of civilian areas, including partial periodic re-occupation by the Israeli army, the loss of lives – over 1000 martyrs to date, mostly young men – and the serious disabilities resulting from injury are only some of the characteristics of daily life. Yet ... communal support is at its peak and is provided in every way: families house other families whose homes are destroyed; houses damaged by shelling and bombing are fixed with the speed of light compared to the normal local standards; and resources, although very scarce, are shared in unprecedented proportions.

This does not make clear, though, whether or not the suicidal tendencies of the PSBs are the result of too much communal solidarity in a warring situation, which leads to a lessening of the sense of individuality among Palestinian youth. These are the conditions of what Durkheim calls *altruistic suicide*. This term may partially describe the Palestinian case, but it misses a crucial aspect: the youth culture from which the PSBs emerge, particularly in the Palestinian refugee camps, is not only conducive to solidarity; it is also highly masculine and highly competitive. That is, even when struggling 'in the name of the community', Palestinian youth do not lose their sense of individuality. They engage in a form of competition for symbolic capital: the surreal practice of throwing stones at the coloniser's tanks in the streets. In this field, the courage to face the tank, cop the rubber bullet and risk death gives an individual youth the highest cultural capital possible, and ends in a heroic consecration of the youth, whether he is alive or dead. There is already a suicidal tendency at work in this practice, well before its 'flowering' in the form of suicide bombing. But this is not all. Such practices also point to one of the core paradoxes that constitute suicide bombings. They are at the same time acts that aim to put the self in danger of annihilation and acts that seek to

accumulate personal status and boost self-esteem. A traditional conception of suicide as a desire to self-destruct and a lack of interest in living a meaningful life is particularly unsuited to explain such a phenomenon.

In an astonishingly ethnocentric piece analysing the relationship between globalisation and terrorism, driven by its final punchline – ‘one of the most ancient rituals of our species, human sacrifice, has also succumbed to globalisation’ – leading German intellectual Hans Magnus Enzensberger constructs a kind of McDonald’s Terrorism Burger, with the same ingredients and taste around the globe. According to Enzensberger, ‘practically all terrorist activities have one characteristic in common that is hard to overlook: the protagonists’ self-destructive tendencies’. Yet, he argues,

the West has persistently underestimated the power of this collective craving for self-mutilation, not to say suicide. As it is apparently not sufficient for us to reflect on our own recent past in order to throw a little more light on the seemingly incomprehensible, it is perhaps necessary to risk a heuristic comparison with phenomena closer to home. A consideration of some aspects of our so-called highly developed societies quickly reveals how widespread is the desire for a personal Armageddon: drug addicts and skinheads deliberately deprive themselves of any opportunity to make something of their lives, and daily we hear reports of ‘family tragedies’ and gunmen going on the rampage ... In all such cases the motives for self-destruction are secondary, and often the perpetrators themselves cannot articulate them.¹⁹

It is somewhat ironic to speak simultaneously of PSDs and talk about people ‘deliberately depriv[ing] themselves any opportunity to make something of their lives’, since one of the key features of Palestinian society today is precisely the *social unavailability* of any opportunity to make something of one’s life. This is particularly the case in the refugee camps from which most of the suicide bombers emerge. This is one of the most important factors that we need to consider when trying to understand the emergence of the PSDs. It is also a key factor in explaining the paradox referred to above: of a self aiming to abolish itself and seek self-esteem in the same act.

Pierre Bourdieu’s idea that society is primarily a mechanism for the generation of meanings for life, which I examined in Chapter 1, is of immense importance here. Bourdieu sees society

as distributing opportunities for people to ‘make a life for themselves’, to invest themselves in life, what he calls *illusio*.²⁰ The deep belief in the importance of our life pursuits. In the popular conception of suicide reproduced by Enzensberger, life is full of meaningful offerings, and suicide is the rejection of all such social offerings. But for Bourdieu, meaningfulness is not always offered by society. Indeed, society is characterised by a deep inequality in the distribution of meaningfulness. As we have already quoted him as saying, ‘One of the most unequal of all distributions, and probably, in any case, the most cruel, is the distribution of ... social importance and of reasons for living.’²¹ When people face a shrinking of their opportunities to realise their selves they suffer from ‘social ageing’.²²

In this sense, we can argue that colonised Palestinian society produces a generalised form of premature social ageing, even of social death: a situation where there is felt to be an almost complete absence of the possibility of a worthy life. This tragicomic summing up of the situation by a Palestinian man I interviewed in Sydney conveys at least the subjective experience of this social impasse:

What we end up having [in Palestine] is the most unusual situation. The Israelis monopolize everything. They monopolize nuclear weapons, they monopolize tanks, planes, what else ... They monopolize the land, they monopolize the water ... what else ... They even monopolize moral virtue ... you know, democracy and freedom of speech, and they monopolize the capacity to write the history of our land ... But they are not only content with this; after monopolizing all this and colonizing us to the bones, they also monopolize victimhood! To my knowledge, no colonizer has ever succeeded in monopolizing even victimhood ... just our luck! We say: ‘Hey, you’re hurting us’, and they say, ‘Don’t you know how hurt we are? Haven’t you heard of the Holocaust?’ They are suffocating us, and when we try to push them away a little bit so we can breathe, they say: ‘We’re being victimized. You don’t recognize we exist.’ How on earth you can not recognize the existence of someone as fat as Sharon sitting on top of you suffocating you, I don’t know!

An investigation by the Institute of Community and Public Health at Bir Zeit University conducted during the first period of the second Intifada (2000–2001) and focusing on Bir Zeit University undergraduates notes: ‘Our students generally have an

inability to dream, an inability to visualize a better future than their hopelessly miserable current life offers.²³ Nothing symbolises social death as clearly or as forcefully as this inability to dream a meaningful life. But this generalised state of social death does not in itself directly cause suicide bombers. Indeed, such a state can as likely cause the emergence of the classical alcoholic postcolonial culture of despair and resignation. The difference in this particular bleak social landscape is the development of a martyr culture. It seems to me that it is here that the suicide bombing as a meaningful activity – as an *illatio* – emerges.

The development of the culture of martyrdom in Palestinian society is an object of historical examination. The obvious point of departure is the perceived military success of the Hizb'allah suicide bombers in south Lebanon and the willingness of other Islamist organisations in the West Bank and Gaza to copy them. But from an anthropological point of view, what is important is that once the first act of suicide bombing occurred, it was immediately followed by a culture of glorification of self-sacrifice, which became further reproduced as more suicide bombings occurred, until this culture of glorification became an entrenched part of Palestinian colonised society. The culture of martyrdom, with the high social esteem (symbolic capital) it bestows on the 'martyrs' themselves (the funeral processions, the speeches, the photos filling the streets and so forth, plus the relative wealth and social support their families receive), stands against the background of social death described above. It reveals itself for many Palestinian young people as a path of social meaningfulness and self-fulfilment in an otherwise meaningless life. The culture of martyrdom is an astonishing manifestation of the capacity of the human imagination – individuals commit themselves to a path that leads to an imagined enjoyable symbolic life following the cessation of their physical life. It is a swapping of physical existence for symbolic existence.

Let us be reminded once more of Bourdieu's conception of social life: 'Through the social games it offers, the social world provides something more and other than the apparent stakes: the chase, Pascal reminds us, counts as much as, if not more than, the quarry, and there is a happiness in activity which exceeds the visible profits – wage, prize or reward – and which consists in the fact of emerging from indifference (or depression), being occupied, projected towards goals, and feeling oneself objectively, and therefore subjectively, endowed with a social mission.'²⁴ This is

how Bourdieu defines the way society invites us to live. In the case of Palestinian colonised society, it is also how it can invite us to die. The struggle to accumulate symbolic capital ('the chase') defines for Bourdieu the essence of how we make our lives worthy of living. But here we are faced with a peculiar 'chase': the accumulation of death as a mode of seeking a meaningful life. There emerges a paradoxical social category: suicidal capital.

In his analysis of boxers and the way they come to invest themselves in the sport, Loic Wacquant points out that the violence and pain that people are confronted with in the streets of the ghetto play an important role in shaping the boxer's disposition and his inclination to take up boxing as a means for making a viable life.²⁵ In the case of the suicide bomber it is likewise not enough to say that suicide bombing is a way to create a meaningful life; a person must be predisposed to take such an action. It is here that the stone throwing fields mentioned above play an essential role. They become almost an institutional preparatory ground for the formation of suicide bombers. But these fields are themselves the culmination of a history of violence structured by the particularities of Israeli colonialism. Indeed, it is impossible to understand the disposition towards self-sacrifice without understanding the unusually suffocating nature of Israeli colonialism. Talking about suicide bombers, Giacaman also argues: 'Their stressful and desperate life events do not only relate to what is taking place in their lives now, but more importantly, to the fact that they have chronically been violated, have been cumulatively disadvantaged, beginning in early life, and have undergone series of subsequent experiences that accumulated over time to produce in youth the disadvantages, inclinations, and behaviour that we see today.'²⁶ Perhaps what characterises Israeli colonialism most is that it is driven by an unusually consuming search for a point of 'zero vulnerability'. The popular support for such a political path is clearly shaped by the sense of insecurity that many Israeli Jews have acquired through their deep internalisation of centuries of anti-Semitism and 50-odd years of Arab anti-colonial enmity. Usually, the expectation of achieving something as extraordinary as 'zero vulnerability' is very hard to sustain. In Israel, however, the euphoric military victories of the 1967 war, the entrenched images of smashed retreating Arab armies that accompanied it, and the continuing overwhelming superiority of the Israeli military combine to make such expectations more sustainable.

This search for zero vulnerability produces a gaze that sees

threats everywhere and ends up reproducing the very vulnerability it is supposedly trying to overcome. It is reminiscent of the gaze of 'order' well captured by Elias Canetti in *The Human Province* and referred to by Zygmunt Bauman: 'The paradox of order ('the ludicrous thing about order', in Canetti's expression) is that it wants to be so total and all-embracing while it "depends on so little. A hair, literally a hair, lying where it shouldn't, can separate order from disorder. Everything that does not belong where it is, is hostile. Even the tiniest thing is disturbing: a man of total order would have to scour his realm with a microscope, and even then a remnant of potential nervousness will remain in him".'²⁷

Indeed, this is how Soraya Asmar, a Palestinian Australian, describes life in Palestine: 'The very existence of anything or anyone Palestinian is perceived as a potential threat to the security of Israel. Be it an office, a farm, a bank, a bakery, a fruit stall, a family home – if you are born Palestinian, anything to do with you is branded "security risk" and is therefore vulnerable to elimination.'²⁸

It is this relentless search for anything that might cause 'vulnerability' that characterises Israeli colonialism most from the perspective of the Palestinians, for any aspect of life where there is a hint of independent political Palestinian will is considered a threat. These attempts to eliminate Palestinian political will have led Baruch Kimmerling, professor of sociology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, to speak of 'policide', arguing that it should be considered a crime against humanity on a par with genocide.²⁹

Interestingly, even many on the left, in Israel, prefer their Palestinians without a political will. Anti-colonial resistance by the Palestinians is perceived as undermining the efforts of the left to reform the dominant Israeli mentality. As the chorus of 'disappointed' so-called peace supporters that follows any form of Palestinian anti-colonial violence indicates, such leftists prefer their Palestinians to be passive so that they can be safely 'left' about them. They see their leftism and radicalism as part of the story of 'Israel, the American-style democracy'. After all, what's an American-style democracy if it doesn't have its radicals and its decimated indigenous people for the radicals to be radical about? For such leftists, the violent resistance of the Palestinian people stands in the way, between them and their radicalism. The sooner the Palestinians swap the bombs for bottles of whisky or gin the better. Then the radical leftists could become truly radical and outraged about the conditions of the Palestinian people – without

anyone violently disrupting their leftism. They could thus follow in the footsteps of their successful American and Australian brothers and sisters, where it's nice, and certainly very safe, to be radically pro-Indigenous or pro-Indian, since any organised anti-colonial resistance has been broken and there is no longer a practical anti-colonial *will* capable of disrupting the process of colonial settlement.

More importantly for us, however, this 'policidal' drive, as it is implemented on a daily basis by the Israeli colonisers, generates the affective condition many Palestinians consider as one of the main factors behind the rise of suicide bombings: colonial humiliation. Humiliation is the experience of being psychologically demeaned – treated like less than a human being by someone more powerful than you, without having any capacity to redress the situation. This is experienced not only at a national level – though the experience of having another nation enter your territory at will, arrest your leaders and talk about them as if they are disposable entities is clearly and significantly humiliating. It is also experienced at a personal level: being shouted at, abused, searched, stopped, ordered around, checked, asked to wait, 'allowed to pass', and so on.³⁰

In a piece with Deleuzian and Spinozan resonances, the philosopher Alphonso Lingis provides an excellent description of how mundane slights are internalised by an individual and how the resulting affect gnaws at his or her very being:

In a social gathering, you find yourself exposed to a caustic or demeaning remark cast your way. Had you been strong in social skills, you would have met the blow with a repartee that would have ended in laughter. Had you been very strong, you would have surprised the aggressor with a put-down so witty he would have found himself unable not to laugh at himself. But you could only mumble something witless, and the fencer turned away to a worthier opponent. You feel wounded, mortified. The blow was delivered and the aggressor turned away; the feeling does not pass. You find yourself unable to be fully present to the sallies and rebounds of the cracking banter about you. Back in your room, unable to sleep, you go over the wound, probing it, feeling it, verifying the pain. In the trace of the aggression you secrete the image of the aggressor. Having been unable to parry the blow at the time or answer it with a counter-blow, you strike out at that image: you disparage, denigrate, vituperate the other, not in his presence, but in his image.

It goes on for hours, for days. How much longer and how much stronger resentment is than was the pain felt in the encounter itself! Your impotence to engage the aggressive force and discharge the pain prolongs itself in this stoked violence.³¹

One can only imagine how much more powerful this affect, this stoked violence, is when the situation described by Lingis is a structured, enduring, and daily encounter with a colonial aggressor whom you cannot ever hope to have 'the strength' to be witty against. Alphonso Lingis allows us an insight into the colonial circulation of affect, without which an understanding of the social conditions of the emergence of suicide bombers cannot be complete.³² And it is also here that we reconnect with the terrorist organisations responsible for the recruitment and formation of suicide bombers. Perhaps their primary function and the secret of their success is that they are mechanisms for the channelling of this colonial affect, transforming the stoked violence born out of colonial impotence into anti-colonial potency.

End of the seminar: are suicide bombers human beings like us?

A student came up to me after the seminar. 'I wasn't very comfortable during some parts of this talk,' she said. 'You've made it seem as if suicide bombers are ordinary human beings.' This struck me as true. But isn't that what is always at stake in social explanations?

This is why it is not surprising that it is often Arabs or Arab sympathisers who, in the political market of condemnation of suicide bombers, counter these populist condemnations with equally populist attempts at social explanation. In demanding or proposing a social explanation, regardless of whether or not the explanation is satisfactory, Arabs are demanding to be included as part of humanity. They're claiming: 'We are not as weird as you think.' Thus, in an open letter to President George W. Bush, the ex-Lebanese Prime Minister Selim el-Hoss asks: 'Those deplorable suicidal operations which you brand as terrorism, have they not ever for a moment prompted you to ask yourself the question: why would a young boy or girl be willing to sacrifice himself or herself with utter peace of mind and full determination? ... How do you label the phenomenon of a whole people standing ready to sacrifice half its numbers in a struggle and martyrdom so that the other half will regain dignity on its own land?'³³

While on field work (working on the unrelated issue of transnational migration) in a Shi'a village in south Lebanon, a

village strudded with photos of young men who died fighting the Israeli occupation of Lebanon, I heard the same argument – expressed in stronger terms – from one of my informants, an educated man and a member of Hizb'allah:

Ali: The Americans pretend not to understand the suicide bombers and consider them evil. But I am sure they do. As usual, they are hypocrites. What is so strange about saying: 'I am not going to let you rob me of all my humanity and all my will?' What is so strange about saying: 'I'd rather kill you on my own terms and kill myself with you than be led to my death like a sheep on your own terms?'³⁴ I know that the Americans fully understand this because this is exactly what they were celebrating about the guy who downed the Philadelphia flight on September 11, the one where the hijackers failed to hit their target. Isn't that exactly what he must have said when he decided to kill himself and everyone else by bringing the plane down? Didn't he say to those hijacking him: 'I'd rather kill you on my own terms and kill myself with you than be led to my death like a sheep on your own terms?' They made a hero out of him ... the only hero of September 11. They are hypocrites, the Americans. They know as much as we do that as a human being we all have the capacity to rush enthusiastically to our death if it means dying as a dignified being.

Me (laughing): We are all enthusiasts! (*kulluma hamas*, which also translates as 'We are all Hamas')

Ali (smiling): That's right, comes a time we are all enthusiasts!

Despite its convenient 'forgetting' of the more unsavoury aspects of suicide bombing that were not part of the 'suicide crashing' of the Philadelphia plane, this explanatory attempt can be seen as driven by an attempt to establish a 'common humanity'.³⁵ This view stands in opposition to the condemning attitude that wants to deny such a common humanity. From a kind of warring disposition towards the suicide bombers, those who can only condemn the PSBs end up sharing with them, at a very general level, the same warring logic. After all, the negation of a common humanity – in its more dramatic form a vision of an abstract dehumanised other where children are not perceived in their children-ness, mothers in their motherliness – is of course inherent to the practice of the Palestinian suicide bomber. Rather than

losing that sense of common humanity ourselves in the rush to condemnation, those of us driven by the ethics of social explanation will always want to ask, 'What kind of social conditions must prevail and what kind of history must a people have internalised to make them lose this capacity of seeing the other in his or her humanness?' This is not an easy question to ask in the West today because the West itself is rapidly losing whatever capacity it had to see the other in his or her humanness.

Exigphobia/homoiophobia: social explanation and the humanity of the other

The rise and dominance of neo-liberal economic policy and its replacement of the welfare state with the penal state is a well-documented and researched phenomenon today, especially in the United States, where the penal state has become a particularly salient feature of the social structure.³⁶ Less documented has been the accompanying backlash against social explanations of crime. The newspapers' letters to the editor commenting on apprehended criminals are often accompanied by sarcastic 'and please let's not hear about his or her deprived childhood'-type statements. There is a noticeable public division between the minority that still likes to hear or formulate some kind of social explanation for crime and a majority that sees any social explanation as a full-blown or creeping justification, aimed at depriving people of the right to seek justice through punishment. More than ever, the practice of social science in this domain becomes itself the object of political struggle. Social scientists, generally proponents of social explanations, are often attacked as a privileged group sheltered from the effects of crime and therefore unable to understand the feelings of the general population.³⁷

It is clear that both zero tolerance towards crime and zero tolerance towards the social explanation of crime are grounded in the uncertainties created by what is called globalisation. Throughout this work, we have amply examined how the latest cycle of capitalist accumulation, the modalities of class exploitation it has made necessary, the resulting change in the quality of work and in the precariousness of people's hold on their employment have all led to a general climate of insecurity in the face of the future. We are increasingly witnessing the rise of a culture that combines a warring and a siege mentality; by necessity, it emphasises the eradication of a potentially menacing other.

In a war/siege culture, understanding the other is a luxury that

cannot be afforded. War emphasises the otherness of the other, and divides the world into friends and enemies and good and evil. This war logic is negated in a social explanation that draws on an ethics of social determinism. By proposing that the other is fundamentally like us, social determinism suggests that given a similar history and background, we might find ourselves in the other's place.³⁸ When we explain an act as the product of a particular history and particular social circumstances, we give its perpetrators some of their humanity back. The ethics of social determinism invites us to think that we might – indeed ought to – put someone like former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic and his followers on trial, not to emphasise how different they are from us. Social determinism reminds us of how depraved *we* human beings can become under certain circumstances, and of how much we need to work against what is worst in ourselves. This is not a negation of responsibility but an affirmation of the importance of both the social conditions of action and the historical conditions of the formation of the acting self – that is, an affirmation of Marx's everlasting dictum that 'we all make history, but not in conditions of our own choosing'.

Social explanation is driven by an inclusionary rather than an exclusionary ethics, and as such it embodies the negation of the logic of war and becomes itself perceived as a political threat in times of war. In the war/siege society, social explanation can disrupt the way both self and society are invited to define and stabilise themselves against an other that has to remain different and unknowable. Social explanation can threaten the warring self with disintegration, which is why it sometimes unleashes such passionate responses. Social explanation is not merely rejected. The threat of the humanised other it carries with it is affectively feared. Thus emerges the couplet of phobias I refer to in the title of this chapter: exigphobia (from the Greek *exigpho*, to explain) and homoiophobia (from the Greek *homio*, the same).³⁹ In this homoio-exigphobic culture, anyone wishing to *know* and to inquire about the social conditions that might explain a possible rise in criminal offences, for example, or about the social background of asylum seekers, is perceived as inherently suspect, a nuisance if not a traitor. Recently, it was revealed that the Australian government directed its bureaucrats not to issue photos that would 'humanise' the refugees seeking entry to Australia. Note that while people refer to such an attitude toward refugees as xenophobia, what is really feared here is not the otherness of the

other but their sameness – it's homioiophobia, not xenophobia.

Consequently, given its warring imaginary, it is hardly surprising to see that this homioi-exighophobic cultural tendency has emerged even more strongly in relation to the terrorist mass murders of 11 September 2001, and later in relation to the PSBs. The monstrous criminality of the September 11 events and the war climate they helped create understandably made them resistant to social explanation at a popular level. But this very resistance was used by politicians to give the homioi-exighophobic attitude a sense of monopoly over morality. To attempt a sociopolitical explanation of the terrorists' actions or to explain why those acts were supported by large sections of the Arab population was considered sacrilegious and immoral in the post-September 11 market of outrage.⁴⁰ In answering the famous question 'Why do they hate us?', anyone who deviated from the Presidential 'They hate us because they hate us', they hate 'our values' and 'our way of life' (that is, they are not humans in the same way we are), was considered not outraged enough and accused of blaming the victim. This is why a group of American politicians referred to a number of critical academics as 'the weak link in America's war against terrorism'.⁴¹ It is this same attitude that also shapes the 'nothing ever justifies suicide bombing' discourse.

Thus in taking the side of social explanation one is clearly not inhabiting a politically neutral position. But it should also be noted that in taking the side of explanation one does not necessarily stand in opposition to the condemnations voiced by politicians. Condemnations of the 'nothing ever justifies' type might well be considered useful when there is a fear of imitation. But clearly, if the aim is to stop the spread of such practices, then knowledge and modification of the social conditions of their emergence is far more effective than the assumption that they are somehow the product of some transposable cultural or religious 'state of mind' disconnected from any social situation, any social conditions, or any specific history, and can therefore be combated solely with moralistic statements of condemnation. Suicide bombings are undoubtedly a form of social evil, but their evil is also the evil of the living conditions from which they emanate. That evil (or sinfulness) resides more in social conditions where the possibilities of a meaningful life are shrinking than in the individuals trying to survive in such conditions. Seeing evil in the conditions rather than in the people is what Roy Bhaskar, following Margaret Archer, powerfully refers to as 'structural sin'.⁴² Some politicians might

choose to portray social scientists who detect such structural sins as 'on the other side', but never have these social scientists been more necessary. Now more than ever, we could all benefit from Spinoza's ethical injunction for the intellectual: 'Do not deplore, do not laugh, do not hate, but understand.'