Knowing suicide terrorism?

Tracing epistemic violence across scholarly expertise

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Biographical information

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Abstract

This article introduces a critical view on a contested field of expertise: terrorism research and its knowledge about suicide terrorism, which has turned into an object of knowledge in its own right during the last decade. 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 its constitutive by-product, an Occidentalist self-ascertainment that is supported by much of the research on political violence. 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. Academic expertise across the field of International Relations, including the booming sub-discipline of Terrorism Studies, is a vital part of these 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 epistemic violence as an innovative concept for the investigation of questions around

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2 The transdisciplinary research and analysis for this book, Wissensobjekt Selbstmordattentat. Epistemische Gewalt und okzidentalistische Selbstvergewisserung in der Terrorismusforschung (Brunner 2011), was carried out at Humboldt-University, Berlin, and at the University of Vienna between 2005 and 2008. It was awarded the Christiane Rajewsky Prize 2011 for best PhD dissertation by the German Association for Peace and Conflict Studies (AFK). The present article resumes its central arguments and results in English for the first time. For an earlier article-length version in German see Brunner (2012c).
peace, conflict and (non-)violence, this text contributes to a more complex understanding of our fields of research, its objects of analysis, and the subtle entanglements between these two dimensions, of which we are inevitably complicitous as scholars. The argument is presented in two steps. First, the transdisciplinary research perspective is thoroughly 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 study that this article summarizes. The conclusion invites the readers to a self-reflection of our/their own position in and approach towards analysing political violence.

**What do we know?**

More than any other form of sub-state violence, 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 to terms with some of the challenges that these violent articulations of political agency affect in politics and science. Yet, what do scholars and experts really know about it? How has this knowledge been aggregated and in what ways is it shaped, considering that it contributes to the ongoing process of ‘writing the war on terrorism’ (Jackson, 2005)?
Which epistemologies, theories and methodologies lay the ground for the creation of this object of knowledge across academia? And: what does this have to do with global power politics?

As is well known and agreed upon, media coverage and general public discourse can be highly problematic due to simplified and ideological biases. Scholarly expertise, however, is still thought to provide solid explanations and policy recommendations. Yet, the mainstream body of knowledge on suicide terrorism is not free from simplifications, ideologizations, and biases, either. It seems to be an area that particularly adheres to the positivist model of a modernist paradigm and, due to a strong preference for essentialist conceptions, a problem-solving approach that is ‘blinded to the myth of security’ (Brown, 2011: 215). This poses serious challenges as critical terrorism scholars have outlined convincingly (Jackson, Breen-Smyth & Gunning, 2009; Stump & Dixit, 2013). As I will argue in this article, this field is in itself 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 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. From a feminist-postcolonial perspective, which challenges the normalcy and normativity of knowledge and power by pointing to their inherent dimension of ‘epistemic violence’ (Spivak, 1988: 280), 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: 2) shaping the ‘geopolitics of knowledge’ (Mignolo, 2002).

**Feminist IR, postcolonial theory and sociology of knowledge**

Feminist and postcolonial thinkers claim that violence has never been the exception to International Relations, but is constitutive of them. Both violence and power are characterized by masculinism and androcentrism on the one hand and by Eurocentrism and universalism on the other. Moreover, the historical and contemporary asymmetries in which violence and power are embedded have always had structural (Galtung, 1969) and symbolic (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2004) dimensions. The organization, production, dissemination, consumption and application of knowledge is central to these dimensions of violence, which cannot be grasped by the narrow definition of violence which prevails in positivist approaches. In my attempt to read this field of authoritative knowledge production against the grain, I focus on what postcolonial authors call epistemic violence. Starting with Spivak, whose early
use of the term is the point of reference in publications on the issue until today, 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 herself defines the term as ‘the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other’ (Spivak, 1988: 280–281). Scholarly expertise has always played a major role in this project – and it continues to do so today. But epistemic violence, which in contrast to symbolic or structural violence has not been comprehensively theorized yet, is about much more than that. 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: 11).

While International Relations 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 International Relations have always been busy challenging these orders while at the same time theorizing them in a profoundly different way (Ackerly, Stern & True, 2006; Enloe, 1989; Hunt & Rygiel, 2006; Riley, Mohanty & Pratt, 2008), and

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3 Articles which emphasize epistemic violence at least in their titles are dispersed across the humanities and the social sciences. Most of them make use of the term without further explanation Ayotte & Husain (2005). Useful exceptions are Galván-Álvarez (2010), Garbe (2013) and Castro-Gómez (2002).
Queer Theory has added to that substantially (Puar, 2007). Postcolonial Critique pursues similar goals, while it is interested in deconstructing Eurocentrist and universalist theories and practices in general (Agathangelou & Ling, 2004; Engels, 2014; Shilliam, 2011). Neither of these and similar approaches is commonly found at the core of terrorism research, most importantly because of their broad concepts of violence and their focus on knowledge production itself. While much of (counter-)terrorism expertise is closely embedded in state logics and institutions, most feminist and postcolonial scholars are likely to be critical vis-à-vis the national and international nexus of power and knowledge. Moreover, they have seriously challenged the concept and practice of the state as the most legitimate agent of political violence today. Another tradition I have built my analysis upon is rooted in the German tradition of the sociology of knowledge. Reiner Keller has adopted this tradition for discourse analysis, which had for a long time been focused only on language and linguistics rather than on structures, institutions and social agents (Keller, 2005, 2011). Set against this theoretical background, I understand the sub-discipline of Terrorism Studies and their reasoning about suicide terrorism as a field of knowledge and power in the first place. This field 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

Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism criticizes the making of orientalized Others which is intertwined with the nexus of power and knowledge. More specifically, Orientalism depends on the link between politics and scholarship, which has always accompanied and enabled colonial projects:

*What [...] has never taken place is an epistemological critique at the most fundamental level of the connection between the development of a historicism which has expanded and developed enough to include antithetical attitudes such as ideologies of western imperialism and critiques of imperialism on the one hand, and, on the other, the actual practice of imperialism by which the accumulation of territories and population, the control of economies, and the incorporation and homogenization of histories are maintained (Said, 1986: 223).*

Imperialism has certainly changed its face over the last decades, but it is far from losing its impact. Fernando Coronil’s understanding of Occidentalism (Coronil, 1996) focuses on the same phenomenon, but he highlights the other side of the process, namely the epistemologies, theories, methodologies, structures, agents and political practices that are necessary to produce Orientalism. In doing so, Coronil wants to move ‘toward nonimperial geohistorical categories’ (Coronil, 1996: 51) for the present and future analysis of imperialism. He does not conceive of Occidentalism as the opposite of Orientalism, as Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit do by claiming that Occidentalism means nothing but ‘the West in the eyes of its enemies’ (Buruma & Margalit, 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:

*In other words, by ‘Occidentalism’ I refer to the ensemble of representational practices that participate in the production of conceptions of the world, which (1) separate the world’s components into bounded units; (2) disaggregate their relational histories; (3) turn difference into hierarchy; (4) naturalize these representations; and thus (5) intervened, however unwittingly, in the reproduction of existing asymmetrical power relations* (Coronil, 1996: 57).

Such a perspective rejects the idea of simple reciprocity and at the same time makes clear how epistemic violence works, since according to Coronil, Occidentalism stems from the earlier European conquest of the Americas, whereas Orientalism only developed in a later European expansion towards the South and the East. Reconsidering global politics and political violence therefore includes ‘relating the observed to the observers, products to production, knowledge to the sites of formation’ (Coronil, 1996: 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.

According to a postcolonial sociology of knowledge (Boatcă, Gutiérrez-Rodriguez & Costa, 2010; Quintero & Garbe, 2013), suicide (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 and understand it as part of a larger process, in which definitions of violence are fiercely contested in the political as well as in the academic domain. Both of these spheres are themselves located within the above mentioned ‘colonial matrix of power’ (Mignolo, 2009: 2). Disputes within them revolve around the question of whose and which kind of political violence is legitimate and which is not.

In this setting, addressing the role as well as the function of epistemic violence is thus 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. By no means does such an understanding 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 violence unfolds. Seen in this light, suicide attacks – as many other forms of political violence – are a complex phenomenon which has structural, symbolic, discursive and epistemic dimensions. It unfolds 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 often apply to contrast the positivist paradigm of Terrorism Studies, does not suffice to meet this challenge. In my work, I have therefore applied Foucault’s much stronger, but barely employed, concept of the dispositive, and integrated it to a feminist-postcolonial-sociology of knowledge based approach.
From discourse to dispositive analysis

What is the object and field of knowledge, which is discursively produced? Along which rationales is the terminology constructed and organized? Who is authorized to speak the truth? What are the strategic goals of a given discourse? My research links these key questions of discourse analysis (Bührmann, 2005) to the notion of the dispositive (Bührmann & Schneider, 2008). This concept was developed by Foucault, but has been neglected until recently. What Foucault himself endeavoured to establish with it is the understanding of

*a decisively heterogeneous ensemble which covers discourses, institutions, architectural arrangements, reglemented decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral or philanthropic teachings, in brief, what is said and what is not said. [...] The dispositive itself is the net which can be woven between these elements (Foucault, 1978: 119).*

In addition to increasing efforts to reintroduce the dispositive into discourse research (Bührmann & Schneider, 2008; Caborn Wengler, Hoffarth & Kumięga, 2013), Keller’s approach, which is based on a sociology of knowledge, also widens the scope of discourse analysis to include institutions and agents (Keller, 2005). Such an understanding allows for the analysis of more heterogeneous material to be included than its linguistic predecessors. I started my analysis by identifying relevant textual material that I defined according to the following criteria: language (English as the dominant language

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4 Translation from German by the present author.
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 e.g. the respective journals (8), monographs (13), anthologies (5) and selected articles within them (15), quantity and quality of citation in the field, location in the field of Terrorism Studies and neighbouring fields of research, and relevance for the making of this object of knowledge. From this material, I selected non-textual (25 images, graphs or models) and para-textual elements (legends, indices) from within the written expertise, analyzed them according to selected methods of textual (Jäger, 1999; Keller, 2004; Titscher et al., 1998), para-textual (Genette, 1997) and visual (Breckner, 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Lueger, 2000) analysis, and integrated the findings into the results of the textual analyses. By working through this vast range of material, I identified the conditions and contours of a larger counterterrorism dispositive (results I). This enabled the analysis of the methodologies, theories and epistemologies that shaped this recently booming sub-discipline of International Relations, as well as its interrelations with non-academic fields of knowledge and power (results II). Building on these results, I finally discerned six different modes of

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5 Due to lack of space, I cannot cite all the analyzed texts and visual elements in this article. For a detailed definition and justification of the body of material and the methods of textual, visual and para-textual analysis see Brunner (2011: 57–61).

6 For a detailed description of the different methods applied and more references concerning their methodological contextualization in the research design see Brunner (2011: 61-79; 81-151).
Occidentalist self-assertion that have characterized the object of knowledge suicide terrorism during the examined time period (1996–2006) (results III).

In the following three sections, I will briefly elaborate on the results of my comprehensive study to show on how many levels we can find elements of epistemic violence. Tracing this violence across scholarly expertise goes beyond a textual analysis. It is also more than a methodological critique, which suggests that we could do better terrorism research, if we only used the right methods and thereby evaded epistemic violence. The aim of the following summary of results 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.

Results I: contours and conditions of an emerging object of knowledge

Clearly discernable contours, which shape the object of knowledge during the first two decades of its formation, emerge from the analysis of the material. Scholars are usually not the first to provide knowledge on suicide attacks. Whenever and wherever attacks occur, it is the media which produces and distributes knowledge first. Newspaper articles are frequently cited in the

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7 For all details, analyses and references on these aspects see Brunner (2011: 81–151).
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). This also holds true for knowledge generated by security and intelligence agencies which also enters the field of scholarship, albeit less explicitly. Furthermore, 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: 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), another from a French one (Khosrokhavar, 2005), both first published in 2002 and passing through substantial omissions and adaptions for the international market.

Thirdly, 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 (as a most extreme example see Israeli, 1997) without closer assessment of the compatibility of research designs, theories and methods of

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8 For a detailed critique of these volumes see Brunner (2007). Many works on women suicide bombers have been published meanwhile, but most are repeating gendered and Orientalist/Occidentalist stereotyping. Distinctly different from a postcolonial perspective are Deylami (2013), Brown (2011) and Rajan (2011).
the respective disciplinary traditions. The same is true for psychology (e.g. Merari, 1990) and criminology (e.g. 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 with its rational choice approach. Recent work, however, seems to foster a re-biologization of knowledge, as life sciences (Thayer & Hudson, 2010) again gradually gain ground in the social sciences again when it comes to explaining violent agency on the sub-state level.9

Fourth, one can observe a remarkable shift in the naming 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 field10 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: 78) tacitly turns into ‘[…] a suicide attack […]’, (Moghadam, 2006: 18) when defining the phenomenon at stake. The simple omission of a single word by one author citing another really makes a difference and illustrates this problem in a nutshell. This obviously incorrect

9 For a critique of neo-biological racism in Terrorism Studies see Brunner (2012a).
10 In this article, I focus on academic/scholarly discourse. For the problematic of labeling terrorism in the media, see Dobkin (1990), for the way politicians make use of this sensitive issue see Winkler (2006).
citation shows up in many later publications and establishes what resonates with the use of the term today: suicide attacks are now per se defined as terrorist, which puts the question about the legitimacy or illegitimacy of political violence beyond discussion and finally erases the diversely documented use of political violence by states. It seems that once transformed into a specific and narrow interpretative framework (Sinnformel, an untranslatable term coined by Geideck & Liebert (2003), suicide terrorism is not in need of further definitions.

This result can be linked to the fifth contour of the object of knowledge: the perspective of emergency and the normalization of counterterrorism which takes center-stage in a field of research not necessarily responsible for policy recommendations and moral impetus. Yet, as scholars from the field of critical terrorism studies (Raphael, 2009) and others have rightly argued, the nexus between the military, politics, and intelligence services on the one hand and terrorism research on the other is evident and powerful. Moreover, a number of scholars explicitly subscribe to the impetus of fighting terrorism, even when not publishing in the context of counterterrorism think tanks or policy consultancy. Others still 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

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11 For a detailed analysis of this problem see Brunner (2011: 101–126). As to my own position, I clearly do not want to do ‘better’ terrorism research, but speak from a perspective that is located at the crossroads of feminist studies, peace studies, and science studies.
of emergency and morality that underlies much of the scholarly work on the issue.

The features mentioned above have led to a much narrower understanding of the forms of political violence associated with suicide terrorism. A colourful unambiguousness is most visible in the images which escort the object of knowledge through academia, politics, and public discourse. An analysis of the book covers\textsuperscript{12} – the sixth contour I have identified – has revealed a veritable ‘spectacle of the other’ (Hall, 1997: 225). These most telling book covers (which more often than not look like fiction bestsellers rather than academic studies) can be understood as interfaces between the scholarly expertise inside the books and public discourses and cultural memories 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.

Regarding the conditions of 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 International Relations, 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. Even though knowledge production on suicide terrorism certainly experienced its

\textsuperscript{12} The results of the analyses of (about 20) book covers are too comprehensive to be included in this article. For a detailed and deepened discussion of visual analysis of the issue, including numerous examples, see Brunner (2012b).
first peak in 2005, 9/11 was not the first occasion inspiring 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 International Relations. 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, which became a pars pro toto for the phenomenon early on, reinforcing already existing stereotypes). Others, however, have gradually vanished from comparison and analysis (e.g. the Japanese Kamikaze, who played an important role in early comparative studies; their omission was presumably due to their state-sponsored dimension which soon irritated the main contours of the arising object of knowledge as the absolute Other). 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 the field of Terrorism Studies as well as from within.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{13}\) As its earliest manifestation and with far-reaching consequences, the journal Critical Studies on Terrorism was established in 2008 after an initiative of critical scholars of terrorism inside the British International Studies Association (BISA), starting in 2006, followed by comprehensive volumes on the topic, such as Jackson, Breen-Smyth & Gunning (2009).
The supposedly self-evident object of knowledge named suicide terrorism, which has risen to prominence over the last two decades, 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 mainstream suicide terrorism expertise is being formed and articulated.

Results II: 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 are always 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.¹⁴ The four most important paths towards knowledge and expertise are profiling, interviewing, databases, and finally producing proto-theories through graphs and models.

¹⁴ For all details, analyses and references on these aspects see Brunner (2011: 151–220).
It was psychological and criminological approaches, often developed in direct relation with counterterrorism practices and institutions that dominated the field in the early period. Desiring 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 methods of portraying both real and presumptive perpetrators, and identikits about typical suicide bombers are present in various dimensions. Portraying and profiling can be discerned on the textual and the visual level (e.g. Pape, 2005: 206, 228) as well as in the theoretical approaches to the phenomenon (e.g. the reference to Adorno’s authoritarian character, see Lester, Yang & Lindsay, 2004) or the methodical make-up of some research designs (e.g. the aggregation of profiles via newspapers and articles, see Sageman, 2004). The major problem with this remarkable expansion of profiling far beyond a counterterrorism technique is that real or presumptive attackers and individuals are not the only ones to be framed in already questionable profiles. With the amplification of the research focus and perspective on 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. They define and thereby create deviant, dangerous individuals requiring control and/or annihilation in the first place.

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 – 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 and the reader is confronted with 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 very few researchers take their own position in this asymmetric setting and its relation to the outcome of the study into account, while from a sociology of knowledge standpoint it is obvious that any search for truth and authenticity faces major obstacles on all levels of research.

Another important path to knowledge, and chronologically the next step towards knowing suicide terrorism, is the use of already existing and the creation of new databases. These more or less comprehensive bodies of systematized information (Pape, 2003, 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

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15 The most comprehensive and widely used database on suicide attacks worldwide between 1981 and today was established in the context of the Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism and is available at <http://cpost.uchicago.edu/search.php> (13 May 2015).

16 For a critical attitude towards databases also see Ranstorp (2009).
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 existing pieces of information. Many scholars collect facts and figures from newspaper articles as if they were empirically proven material. They tend not to reflect on possible biases in numbers, names and terminologies, even though the latter are of enormous significance for the research questions and results of studies on political violence. Moreover, existing professional and commercial databases are taken for granted by social scientists, since hardly any mainstream terrorism scholar considers the conditions and consequences of their seemingly indispensable use. The language, the geopolitical location, the commercial or the ideological background, or even proximity to powerful institutions of any given data are not questioned. 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 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 artefacts 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. It also opposes the claim made by terrorism researchers themselves that we live in global times of asymmetric warfare. At the same time, these models often erase empirical historicity and locality by suggesting universal validity. Furthermore, a close look at these visual elements exposes another inconsistency that seems to prove the Occidentalist self-ascertainment which is written into this expertise. 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 I have come across in my research provide an international or global dimension, when it comes to explaining the reasons and causes of suicide terrorism.

**Results III: 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, which I sketch out in the following paragraphs.\(^\text{17}\)

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. It is remarkable that 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, who tend to have a more social science background, soon challenged the earlier paradigm and tried to make their point by referring to the concept of rationality and distinguishing rational from irrational forms of political agency. Yet, these and other approaches which subscribe to rationality and political explanations rather than to the psychological and criminological perspectives that preceded them, often revert to pathologizations. However, a perspective based on rationality is the only one that explicitly approaches the core of Terrorism Studies, which I consider to be the definition of legitimacy and illegitimacy of political violence. The discussion

\(^{17}\) For all details, analyses and references on these aspects see Brunner (2011: 220–340).
of the notions of hero (nation state soldier) versus martyr (suicide terrorist) by Diego Gambetta (Gambetta, 2005: 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. More generally, suicide attacks tend to be rationalized when counter terrorist practices are at stake, and they tend to be, at least partly, irrationalized when it comes to mobilizing acceptance for these practices. Last, but not least, the issue of (ir-)rationality lies at the heart of most analyses of 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, 2009, 2010). While female and male agency are explained differently (Åhäll & Shepherd, 2012), 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.¹⁸ Sexed-

¹⁸ For a critique of feminist approaches to agency itself, see Auchter (2012). For a more substantial critique that gives up the state-centered security approach altogether and starts thinking from the notion of resistance and subalternity see Brown (2011) and Deylami (2013).
gendered power relations in Western societies then appear as almost naturally egalitarian, progressive, and enlightened. As such, they have become a core argument for forceful and violent practices against internal Others residing within Western nations and even more so for violent interventions abroad promoted by these states and their allies.

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 carried out targeted killings of contemporary enemy leaders. Their mythologization goes back to the writings of Marco Polo and the Middle Ages. The fanciful stories that were told about the Assassins in what is today Syria and Iran have fascinated European travellers, merchants, clerics, and later scholars and a general European public for centuries. As I have argued elsewhere (Brunner, 2012a), it is the analysts’ focus on religious fervor (that is commonly associated with Islam), sexual excess and absolute obedience within a very rigorous structure, which
facilitates a generalized idea about suicide terrorism. 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 Occidentalist self-assertion which I call geopoliticization. By that, I mean the generalizing of both particular geopolitical foci of research (certain attacks attract more curiosity and resources) and underlying political interests (of scholarship and politics). As Ó Tuathail states, geopolitics can be considered as ‘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: 237). Othering and the process of Selfing that goes along with it are central elements of these geopolitical definitions and explanations, and scholarly knowledge production plays a significant role. I argue that the authoritative object of knowledge, which we call suicide terrorism today, works as a privileged signifier in that respect. It helps to separate both 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, too. Some of the most recent publications do indeed point towards the responsibility of Western politics and consider some potential relations between the attacks and the targets they are aimed at. Such rational choice approaches coexists 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: 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: 237). Another, albeit marginalized focus lies on the warning of future suicide bombers, who might not fit the ready-made identikits and pseudo-profiles, but who seemingly resemble ‘us’ more than we are generally prepared to acknowledge (Khosrokhavar, 2005: 230–237).

Culturalization are the most evident mode of Occidentalist self-assertion since today’s ‘culture talk’ (Mamdani, 2005: 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 political violence (sub-state) 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. By way of such a conception, both ends of the spectrum find
themselves bound to specific geopolitical areas and thereby become generalized. While Western nation states claim a quasi-naturalized legitimacy of violence for themselves, 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. My analysis arrives at a conclusion on culturalizations. This is where future research projects on more recent scholarly expertise or other bodies of knowledge should commence. A deeper analysis of and reflection on how culturalizations evolve in our knowledge about politics, violence and power would contribute to a powerful postcolonial-feminist critique in the tradition of a sociology of knowledge which would eventually include a global perspective, too.

Conclusion

An approach to suicide terrorism based on a broad conception of violence, including epistemic violence, reminds us of the complexity of societal relations of power before, during and after violence occurs. It therefore does not agree with the narrow definitions of violence that mainstream voices consider crucial for studying terrorism. Perspectives like the one presented in this article locate both the objects and the subjects of research into asymmetric power relations shaped by a centuries old imperialist, Eurocentric, and androcentric heritage.
They will therefore not limit themselves to a supposedly given object of research that is terrorism in one way or another, and will go beyond the Euro-Atlantic consensus even of critical scholarship. Feminist-postcolonial approaches are likely to focus 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. This includes symbolic, semantic and otherwise institutionalized dimensions of epistemic violence and thinking 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. These, however, 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.
References


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