

Theorising Performative Violence: Radical Islam and Beheading in Perspective

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Abstract

This essay explores that most decisive and profound of corporeal violence – beheading. Once common across cultures, this form or punishment has lost favour in most modern societies. Yet, there are some societies who encourage beheading either on religious or cultural grounds. This study seeks to examine and comprehend the indigenous purposes and cultural meanings of ritual beheading.

The analysis central preoccupation is: Why behead? It is often difficult and almost impossible to elicit a direct answer from the culture or individual that is heart of this gory undertaking.

It is proposed a tentative line of argument that seeks to problematize beheading in contemporary context. While pursuing this question it is examined various theoretical and philosophical positions that help situate this rather gory undertaking. As per empirical evaluation discussion is confined to two well-known contemporary cases. They relate to the sporadic cases of beheading by the Taliban in Afghanistan and the dreaded methods of public execution by the militants of (the so called) Islamic State (IS).

Resumo

Teorizando a Violência Performativa: Islamismo Radical e Decapitações em Perspetiva

O ensaio explora uma das mais decisivas e profundas variantes da violência corporal – a decapitação. Em tempos, comum a todas as culturas, esta forma de punição desapareceu na maioria das sociedades modernas. No entanto, existem algumas sociedades que incentivam a decapitação por motivos religiosos ou culturais. O estudo procura examinar e compreender os propósitos autôctones e os significados culturais do ritual da decapitação. A preocupação central é: porquê decapitar? Muitas vezes é difícil e quase impossível obter uma resposta direta da cultura ou do indivíduo que é o coração deste acto sangrento.

Propõe-se uma linha argumentativa que problematiza a decapitação no contexto contemporâneo. Concomitantemente, examinam-se várias perspetivas teóricas e filosóficas que ajudam a enquadrar este fenómeno. De acordo com a avaliação empírica, confinamos a discussão a dois casos contemporâneos bem conhecidos: os casos esporádicos de decapitação por parte dos talibãs no Afeganistão e os métodos de execução pública conduzidos pelos militantes do (autodenominado) Estado Islâmico (EI).

Introduction

Beheading as a form of punishment has a long history. It has been practiced by all societies and civilisations at some point of their career. One cannot shy away from the fact that “decapitation is central to human politics because it has extraordinary ritual power. Moreover, it is primitive not in its human baseness but rather in its raw capacity to assert authority” (Vlahos, 2014). Yet, in view of some critics, “the idea of execution by decapitation is bizarre and horrific, though for millennia public beheadings around the world were fairly common. It is only in modern times that cutting a person’s head off has come to be considered barbaric” (Bradford, 2012, p.1).

Although it lost favour as a form of capital punishment in most modern western societies (the last execution by guillotine took place in the west in France on 10 September 1977) it is prevalent in some non-western societies such as Saudi Arabia. The Saudis have constructed a religious rationale for their prodigious ritual-legal beheading. They follow the traditional principle of *qisas*: retaliation on the principle of eye for an eye, as the legal basis for beheading. As part of capital conviction evil heads are severed. Here a vigilant and keen blade and righteous cut is a public celebration.

Though historically decapitation was essentially a means to an end, the beheading element itself carried a powerful message and continues to do so today. There are far cleaner and less gruesome ways to kill a person, but few things make a greater impression on the public than seeing a severed head. “That shock value is used to strike fear in enemies and ensure obedience” (Bradford, 2012, p. 2).

While mostly extra-judicial killing of innocent civilians and hostages the philosophy behind this undertaking is very complex, indeed. In the following pages it is examined the complex politics surrounding contemporary beheadings (in an Islamic non-state setting) from an anthropomorphic context. In doing so, I pay particular attention to culture and religion. This context is particularly significant as both culture and religion are invoked to legitimize such undertakings. Beheading, as some scholars have argued, is culturally satisfying, and is central to many a society’s consciousness (Vlahos, 2014).

Performativity

As is stressed earlier, use of particularised physical violence for specific political ends has been a part and parcel of all societies and civilizations at some point of their career or the other. Yet, forms of violence may be undertaken as a performance for their shock value or to make an impact on the targeted audience (which may consists of both the perpetrator and perpetrated communities).

For critics like Jacques Derrida (2013) and Judith Butler (1993) the importance of performative violence is an attractive option to a specific segment in the society or

for a given state. For Derrida, the very enactment of violence is preconditioned on a relationship between the spectacle and the spectator (2013). It is a mediated process where violence inflicted must be demonstrated [in order to have the desired effect]. In the absence of this representation violence has very *little* or *no* meaning.

When an actor or group of actors stage their vile enterprise on a communication device such as videotaping and later publicize it they are obviously using the occasion both as an enactment of real violence as well as emphasizing its symbolism. This, performance, in turn, facilitates the violator to speak to an audience. Very often it is the group, society, or the nation to which the hapless victim belonged which assumes the identity of targeted audience.

The basic characteristic of a performance is the existence of an audience. “The typical image associated with a performance is that of a theatre: on stage, with actors and an audience that observes and absorbs. What the audience absorbs is the message of the performance – this is its purpose. Whether to tell a story, bring attention to an issue, or express a feeling, a performance is done in order to convey a message” (Manzi, 2014, p. 3).

Equally importantly, “performative violence can be seen as a mode of communication through which activists seek to effect social transformation by staging symbolic confrontation” (Juris, 2005, p. 415). Throughout its years in ascendancy (2013-2016) the IS carefully choreographed its beheadings through its media outlet *Al-Furqān*. Thanks to the revolution in the information technology we were provided with a blow-by-blow account of the gory undertakings of Islamic State (IS) when it executed its victims on camera¹.

Yet, at another level, “performative violence is more than just a tactic to convey a message – it generates new symbols and social dynamics (thereby perpetuating itself), and increases social cohesion” (Manzi, 2014, p. 4). The primary objective behind such modes of violence is to “convince all those watching [the event] that they will benefit from obeying” (Osterholtz (2013, p. 139).

Additionally, one needs to reflect on the argument that “performative violence perpetuates itself” (Manzi, 2014). Such performance is fundamental in understanding the dissemination or mushrooming of violent radical Islamic activism across the world. It contributes to what one may suggest as copycat violence. We have several such cases like the beheading of Private Lee Rigby in broad daylight in a crowded London street on 22 May 2013 as a demonstration of this argument. Rigby’s beheading also reinforces the argument that symbols of violence such as military attire, vandalism and arson all serve to convey a message or to open communication lines between groups (Rhodes, 2001).

1 On 16 November 2014 the Islamic State released a 16-minute video that displayed the severed head of 26-year-old former U.S. Army Ranger Peter Kassig.

While the performative aspect of radical Islamic beheading is not exceptional it is their ability to exploit their specific violence through the display of a spectacle as a form of ritual that is unique in itself. As one critic put it, “ritual intensifies emotions generated by group activity” (Richards, 2005b, p. 378). Hence, here was Mohammad Emawazi *aka* “Jihadi John” calculated and cruel, without an ounce of humanity. His behavior no longer surprised the world. But what he stood for offended and disturbed us. He, for a brief period, remained the face and voice of radical Islamic extremism in the world. More importantly, his actions made a lot of people believe as an acceptable conduct.

While performative violence is targeted at an external audience at times it may be undertaken in order to create a specific group dynamics. Juris, for instance, argues that “young militants enact performative violence in order to generate radical identities” (Juris, 2005, p. 414). This is particularly important in those contexts where there is a short supply of radicals.

As they, (the IS), began to get more hostages (Syrian military personnel, for instance) there was a need to find new recruits to observe ritual beheading of the captives. Hence, the videos that were produced of that specific massacre of 19 Syrian air force personnel we are presented with a whole group butchers made of different ethnicities and nationalities.

Furthermore, in contemporary international society, “decapitation as an act of public theater is crafted as a transfer of legitimacy” (Vlahos, 2014). It is a demonstration of the fact that “power that has taken control of both the body and life [in other words] of life in general” (Foucault, 2003, p. 253). It is this “communicative aspect of performative violence, which significantly interplays with the role of audience/witness” (Manzi, 2014, p. 4). In asymmetric conflicts, the weaker of the two antagonists, often resort to and engage in forms of violence, which are primarily communicative in nature. Through these undertakings the perpetrator communicates and seeks “to produce social transformation by staging symbolic rituals of confrontation” (Juris, 2005, p. 413).

Equally importantly, in this narrative *how* the victim is executed is as important as *why* s/he is executed. Interestingly, “performative acts of violence create connections with both the past and future because they create new logics and social structures, and because they keep past logics and traditions alive in the present. This way, the entire dynamic ends up perpetuating itself” (Manzi, 2014, p. 4).

Taking away the enemy’s head through a public ritual in a setting where there is an audience (captive or faraway) has great implications in the context of sovereignty. Severing the head of the person you consider as your opponent or someone who represents the enemy other is at once an engagement in offending the sovereignty that the former represents. Simultaneously, the successful enactment of dethroning the head symbolically affirms sovereignty of the violator over the violated.

Beheading in this narrative then is a performance in both offending and affirming sovereignty.

True, “performative violence creates a new logic which perpetuates itself by keeping the past alive” (Manzi, 2014, p. 4). Yet such violence does not necessarily create a consensus amongst the audience amongst whom it seeks to create that consensus. After the brutal execution of many of their victims, there was a chorus of voices from both the Islamic and non-Islamic world that “the free world cannot be intimidated by the brutal actions of these barbaric [radical Islamists] people” (quoted in Faiola and Cho, 2004).

Severing the Spirit

As for the very act of beheading, one could argue, it is all about separating the spirit from the body. An erect head, intact with the body, is a sign of autonomy. It could also be a symbol of defiance. By that definition, one could argue, the spirit continues to remain in the body if the head is not separated from it (even after the visitation of death on that body).

If the head is the repository of the spirit then it lives on when it is tied to the body. What if that head represents some ideology? A political ideology at that? How does one discredit that ideology? Or, disentangle and dismember that spirit from that body? Therefore, “to cut off the head is in symbolic terms to cut off ruling authority itself. Hence *De Capito* in political terms signifies severing the head of the state” (Vlahos, 2014).

As one critic stresses, “beheading is infused with statecraft: it is a public act asserting the legitimacy of the executor over the illegal and insurgent acts of the executed” (Vlahos, 2014). Sniffing out that spirit (political or otherwise), from the executor’s perspective, could seem the only possible way forward. Hence, from the point of view of the perpetrator the ideology that they are fighting against can be symbolically discredited if the head they are about to chop off could discredit itself before the actual act.

Thus some perpetrators like the IS could force their victims to discredit their own existence, the society and the world they represented to make a parting speech contrary to their beliefs before departing this life.

Consider the forced confession on videotapes of Alan Henning (one of the early victims of IS beheading):

“I am Alan Henning. Because of our [read British] Parliament’s decision to attack the Islamic State, I – as a member of the British public – will now pay the price for that decision” (quoted in Cobain, 2014).

Alan Henning was only one of the unfortunate victims who would literally lose his head in a long-line of public executions undertaken by the IS over a four year

period. Every high-profile execution was accompanied by a specific political message. These were justified as revenge undertakings not only legitimate but also just as a form of deterrence against Western military hegemony. Beyond the shock value, violence, in this trajectory, was clearly a means to an end. For the perpetrators of this violence it was both a duty and a necessity to enact such violence.

The Othering

Although there is the element of corporeal violence beheading is always premeditated. These are, what one might term, intentional dehumanisation undertakings. If violence is an expression of a specific relationship with another constituency then “the individual victim is likely to be chosen as representative of that constituency or category” (Schröder and Schmidt, 2001, p. 3).

Othering is fundamental to such an enterprise. The victim is defined in linear terms. The victim is never cipher for the violator. Very often he embodies the very essence of the community or group that the violator so hates. You can only sever the head provided you have placed the individual before in a category of the other. In this enterprise s/he has to be rendered juxtaposed to the violator’s identity. In the absence of such “othering”, the undertaking is either not comprehensible or impossible to justify.

Very often in a politically charged context these undertakings are expressions of some strong personal and communitarian emotion. It all boils down to the interplay of several layers of the violators’ emotions. One categorise such negative emotion as follows. The undertaking is a product of jealousy towards the victim. It is guided by a strong sense of hate. And, there is always an element of revenge.

In order for the actors to maximize their respective undertaking, it is fundamental that they publicize their performance in the outlet with maximum coverage. “[The effective use of violence] is a very efficient way of transforming the social environment and staging an ideological message before a public audience” (Schmidt and Schröder, 2001, p. 4). Consequently, these are forms of symbolic as well as ‘symbols of violence’.

Violence exerted against a victim in a closed confine can have only limited effect – mostly against that person and his or her body. It can, however, be amplified and the pain be transmitted on both the victim and the larger society he or she represents or identifies with if that action is somehow publicly displayed.

The victim, in these instances, can be a proxy for a whole group. The violence meted to that person, in these instances, can be amplified across the masses if it is executed in a specific manner and equally importantly produced in the public domain. As is stressed by some critics, very often the execution of violence is itself a demonstration on part of the violator. The violator undertakes a specific act in order to relay a specific message.

During their short-lived infamous rule the dreaded IS frequently engaged in acts of violence that bordered on the unthinkable. The multiple angle footage and depiction of the undertaking in slow motion shots were forms of butchery with no parallel in human history. Its media wing *Al Hayat* regularly produced footages and videos of its gory undertakings that included immolation of chained prisoner alive, executions with gun put to the head at point blank range, pushing people off from high rise roof tops and so on. But the most horrific of these were the video under the title of *Flames of War II*, which captured the multiple beheadings of its western hostages and Syrian prisoners of wars with knife and sword.

In copycat undertakings during this period Egyptian militants affiliated to IS beheaded 21 Coptic Christians on a beach in Libya. As a demonstration of their commitment to this mode of violence against non-Muslims they (the IS) even released a video showing this cold-blooded murder of innocents whose only crime was that they belonged to another religious community. What was the rationale behind this barbarity?

In the narrative of communicative violence *how* the victim is executed is as important as *why* s/he is executed. The now infamous “Jihadi John” in one of the IS propaganda videos justified their acts of beheading in the following words, “Just as your missiles continue to strike our people, our knife will continue to strike the necks of your people”.

In all these undertakings and in all such contexts, “the individual victim was chosen as representative of some larger category” (Schröder and Schmidt, 2001, p. 3). Therefore, as Vlahos argues, “it is not enough to say that Islamic State victims were simply journalists or aid workers. Americans and Brits in their very persons represented the majestic and imperial presence of big authority. They were, in the eyes of the righteous, full representatives of Western subjugation and pollution of the Muslim world” (Vlahos, 2014).

The clearest articulation of this act of “Othering” can be demonstrated by the IS propaganda quote below:

“You’re no longer fighting an insurgency, we are an Islamic army, and a state that has been accepted by large number of Muslims worldwide, so effectively, any aggression towards the Islamic State, is aggression towards Muslims from all walks of life who has accepted the Islamic caliphate as their leadership, so any attempt by you Obama to deny the Muslims their rights of living in safety under the Islamic caliphate will result in the bloodshed of your people” (quoted in Byrd, 2017, p. 219).

On another plain, strong group dynamics and social cohesion is built “through the development and destruction of the other” (Osterholtz, 2013, p. 124). In view of some critics, “ritual action intensifies emotion within groups, and performative violence creates distinct identities and serves to polarize them so that ultimately social cohesion within groups (and in contrast to others) increases” (Manzi, 2014, p. 4).

From the perspective of the violator or perpetrator this particularised violence can be summed up as having four key objectives. First, death is commodified in such contexts and the execution is conducted as a form of public consumption. Second, violence here is concerned *with* and concerned *about* effect and outcome. Third, the undertaking seeks to impose a binary amongst the perpetrator and the perpetrated (with the explicit aim of debasing the victim). Fourth and finally, the violator purports to demonstrate the specific action as part of a narrative that seeks to impose a specific political order.

Soliciting the Sacred

Religion has “a greater propensity to promote violence than what is not religion” (Cavanaugh, 2017, p. 23). As anthropologist Alain Daniélou, argues “every religion is founded on the notion of sacrifice and the consumption of the sacrificed victim” (Daniélou, 1979, p. 165). From an extreme purist religious perspective, if the individual is ritually sacrificed then the “sacrifice should be public, with a full consciousness of its value and its cruelty” (Daniélou, 1979, p. 165).

For Daniélou, “the creator [if there is one] is a cruel god who made a world in which nothing can live but by destroying life through the killing of other living beings” (Daniélou, 1979, p. 164). This killing, however, is restricted killing. Killing cannot be wanton. If it has to have the backing of the divine it needs to be conducted in a certain way. There cannot be any lust behind the enterprise of killing. It has to be situated in a specific context. Most important of all, the gods need to be invoked whenever the human beings engage in any form of slaughter. In the absence of such sanction the process would lack any concrete meaning.

On these occasions, by ritually sacrificing an individual or the victim, the violator is taking the gods (or his gods) as witness to his undertaking. It is also a statement in demonstrating the fact that life is not possible except by destroying life. Religion in these contexts becomes particularly incendiary, because, “it raises the stakes to another level, where reason is trumped by passion” (Cavanaugh, 2017, p. 24).

Now let us focus on some of the beheading enterprises undertaken by extremist Muslims from Pakistan to Syria in recent years. While there exists an overwhelming political meaning behind these executions, one cannot escape from the fact that there was a lot of emphasis on the religious. It is the ritual surrounding these barbaric acts that require closer introspection.

As some scholars have stressed, “jihadists’ beheading of their captives corresponds with aspects of cosmic war, particularly on how religious terrorists’ desires to please a deity and secure a place of honor in the hereafter has devalued the lives of both captor and prisoner” (Lentini and Bakashmar, 2004). Therefore, “the notion that people kill in the name of God [in a particular manner] is both undeniable and inescapable” (Cavanaugh, 2017, p. 23). In view of other critics the religious element

cannot be excluded from the IS sponsored high-profile beheadings. For brevity of argument I use Taylor's statement in full:

"The Islamic State often appears to use extreme violence such as beheadings as a way to provoke its enemies further into conflict and draw more gore-hungry recruits. At the same time, it also views itself as a legitimate religious authority and has cited various parts of scripture to justify its more extreme actions, despite considerable criticism and rebukes. Given that beheadings are mentioned in the Quran and that in some accounts of his life, Muhammad is said to have personally approved mass beheadings, some conservative clerics argue that beheadings are religiously justified, though they remain highly contentious with many Islamic authorities" (Taylor, 2016, p. 13).

We are all too familiar with the gruesome nature of IS beheading. Below is a reflection on that blow-by-blow representation of the IS beheading.

"...[t]he ritual procession continues with each jihadist taking a black handled knife out of a wooden box that contains the ceremonial weapons. The victims are immediately pushed to the ground, the camera keeps fading in and out of black in-between the cutting of throats, with the loud sound of hearts beating in the background. In one of the most inconceivable mass murders ever committed, 19 men are simultaneously beheaded at one time by 19 other men" (Perlmutter, 2014).

Such closely choreographed violence, sums up the fact that the IS was only following a long-established anthropomorphic religious practice while ritually sacrificing their hostages and enemies. As Manzi (2014, p. 4) puts it:

"Conceptually, ritual is not the same as performance. Rituals do not necessarily have audiences, but they can. Performance and ritual do intersect, when ritual becomes a *form of* performance. This occurs when there is an audience present that absorbs the ritual's message, except that part of, or the entire audience, also participates in the ritual".

Its [IS'] acts of violence were expressive actions that embodied "cultural and religious meanings for those who carried it. More importantly through their exhibition of particularised violence the violators were reaching out the audience to impregnate them with specific meanings" (Nanninga, 2017, p. 172).

Apart from the clear religious overtones, the violent methods adopted by IS can be construed as an expression of a triumphalist religion that at once unites people of various ethno-racial background but strikes at the very head of those who oppose its (radical Islam's) worldview.

The ritual ends with each soldier holding his bloodstained knife standing above his sacrificial victim, whose heads are placed on the center of their backs. The camera then shows the faces of the jihadist executioners, all from different countries, a multicultural mass murder team. They are somber and serious, not laughing or dese-

crating the bodies, demonstrating how a warrior should behave during and after the kill.

That the specific undertaking had clear temporal undertones would not be an exaggeration. Execution of a specific kind was not a free-standing idea. It had clear religious basis to it. This undertaking was a clear enactment of the jihadist ideologue Abu Bakr Naji's treatise on the management of violence in radical Islam titled *Management of Savagery* (2004). This treatise clearly outlined the need for the Muslims to engage in exceptional violence in order to facilitate and oversee the re-establishment of a Caliphate.

Therefore, while at one end the ritual beheadings by the IS were clearly propaganda tools they nonetheless had their basis in their specific religious invocation. Put simply these were also religiously-sanctioned violence. The Islamic holy book the *Qur'an* does not specifically talk about beheading. Yet, there are references to it in two *Surahs*:

When the Lord inspired the angels (saying) I am with you. So make those who believe stand firm. I will throw fear into the hearts of those who disbelieve. Then smite the necks and smite of them each finger (8:12).

Now when ye meet in battle those who disbelieve, then it is smiting of the necks until, when ye have routed them, making fast of bonds; and afterward either grace or ransom 'til the war lay down its burdens (47:4).

For critics like Lentini and Bakashmar of Monash University's Global Terrorism Research Centre "the religious and cultural symbolism that the sword carries with it in the eyes of the Muslims, particularly in the Middle East, is an important factor in determining the terrorists' choice to behead hostages" (Lentini and Bakashmar, 2004, p. 17). Hence killing is assumed as a sacred act, like the giving of life.

While staying on the topic of religious sanction one could also stress on the point surrounding enactment of violence and the reward. One performs before a visible audience or an invisible god as the performer feels his/her performance stands receiving recognition and approbation. According to a contemporary critic, "the demonization of enemies allows those who regard themselves as soldiers for God to kill with no moral impunity. Quite the opposite – they feel that their acts will give them spiritual rewards" (Jurgensmeyer, 2017, p. 21).

The violator violates on this particular occasion because he feels his performance is going to be received with reward(s). Hence the commitment to this performance. As Laqueur reminds us, a radical Islamists undertakes a specific act of violence as he or the group engages in that undertaking as they feel, "[a]waiting them in paradise are rivers of milk and honey, and beautiful young women. Those entering paradise are eventually reunited with their families and as martyrs stand in front of God as innocent as a newborn baby" (Laqueur, 1999, p. 100).

Penalty and Deterrent

At the root of the criminal justice system is “the principle of deterrence. A wrong-doer is punished so as to teach him that there is a price to pay for a crime and to prevent recurrence” (Malik, 2015). Can we include judicial beheading in this category? Islamic public beheadings can also be exercises in deep penalty. When the Taliban undertook beheadings during its infamous rule (1997-2001) there was a clear narrative surrounding these undertakings. These were primarily situated in the context of law and order. It was using public execution as an intimidation strategy. In volatile times such undertakings served a very useful purpose. These were primarily exercises in demonstrating its unwavering strength.

Through these severe public spectacles the Taliban was sending out clear messages to the masses to be aware of their own acts of volitions and violations. For all intent and purposes these were deterrent mechanisms. As a follow up to this one could reasonably ask, whether these undertakings succeeded in achieving this primary objective?

While the deterrent aspect in these undertakings is well established there are some other attendant issues that need examination to strengthen the performative argument that I stressed earlier. The Taliban not only executed those it found guilty for their supposed crimes but it also made it a public event. It invited the public to partake in this spectacle. When there was public reluctance to partake in these events it forced the masses to be a part of it. The regime turned these events into performance plays. It was both high drama and choreographed performance rolled into one. These were, by all means, disciplining mechanisms.

Clearly there was a demonstrative value in such undertakings. The evidence on the ground suggests that such extreme public punishment instilled deep fear among the masses and deterred potential criminals from committing crimes (Misra, 2004). More recently the resurgent Taliban and the IS in Afghanistan have both been involved in these enterprises. Again, these undertakings, had been carefully choreographed in order to send out a specific message to the audience. In 2012 the neo-Taliban beheaded 15 men and 2 women in the country’s Northern Helmand province. The crime of the victims? They were holding a late night party with music and dance. Their alleged crime involved following practices that according to neo-Taliban was “immoral”.

In some other occasions the neo-Taliban has summarily beheaded many of the country’s ethnic and religious minorities. The beheading of ethnic minority Hazaras in Afghanistan and Sikhs in the Taliban controlled Afghanistan-Pakistan border regions are cases in point. Very often the neo-Taliban has prominently displayed severed heads of the victims in public places in order to hammer home its message that it is not tolerant of non-Islamic faiths as well as various sects within Islam.

An implication of using such performative violence is the intimidation of individuals other than those receiving the violence. Seen from the trajectory of action-

-induced performance “it is intimidation that is exactly what these actions are all about” (Mufson, 2004). “It can also be the intimidation of individuals who witness symbols of violence (in cases where there is no physical harm involved)” (Manzi, 2014, p. 4).

Medium is the Message

Symbolic ritual enactment of violence to relay a specific message to the audience has been a part and parcel of politics throughout human history. Note, for instance, the ransacking and burning to the ground of Persopolis the capital of Achaemenid Empire by Alexander the Great in 330 BC². When Cesare Borgia the Duke of Valentinois invited some of his opponents for reconciliation and executed them in cold blood he too was staging a performance. Attila the Hun’s frequent engagement in displaying the severed heads of his opponents along the roads as he crossed a conquered territory is another case in point.

Forms of particularised violence, enacted by specific agencies, speak volumes about the nature of that violence. Violence in these contexts is never violence *per se*. Here medium is the message. The specific enactments assume the role as vehicles of communication. Through their particularised violence the perpetrators, as a rule of thumb, seek to impose a specific social, cultural, religious or political narrative or preference towards an ideology.

Since these undertakings are occasional, infrequent and selective and *not* repeated, regular or mass-based one cannot help but suggest that there is always a great degree of symbolism associated in such undertakings. If that is so, these “symbolic ritualised violence” seek to produce specific socio-cultural and political transformation in a given setting.

Furthermore, beyond the immediate effect of vanquishing the enemy, these are representation of a specific ideology. Hence as one critic argues, “beheading is infused with statecraft: it is a public act asserting the legitimacy of the executor over the illegal and insurgent acts of the executed” (Vlahos, 2014). When Sir Thomas More the Lord Chancellor was executed by decapitation by King Henry the event was a performance imbued with symbolism and public spectacle. For,

“... beheading is the most symbolically powerful way to show that you have literally separated the enemy from its leadership, its captain. Because decapitation is also the highest act of state, it is also the act of replacing a former legitimacy of rule. Decapitation is a powerful symbolic announcement of new Rulership” (Vlahos, 2014).

Some regimes even take the performance to a much higher level. When the Bulgarian fascists executed the Partisan leader Vela Peeva in 1944 they impaled the behe-

2 For an exhaustive discussion see, Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*. Available at http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/e/roman/texts/diodorus_siculus/home.html.

aded head on a spike and strode around nearby villages to demonstrate their authority. For all practical purposes such violence are forms of communication. They are brutal theatrical expressions staged with an explicit aim to seek attention and make a statement at the same time.

Through the spectatorship of this violence the perpetrator or violator seeks to relay an ideology. Although heinous such undertakings are never products of lapses in judgment. They are carefully choreographed actions that seek to reinforce that specific individual or regimes narrative over their opponent and also a tool to inspire the constituency that rallies behind its actions.

Furthermore, as critics like Vivienne Jabri have suggested, violence cannot be studied in isolation or cannot be removed from the larger ideological context in which it manifests. 'Violence', in her view, "can be a form of political communication resulting from its social and cultural context" (Jabri, 1996). If that is so, the events and episodes I have analysed in the course of this discussion, would appear to be undertakings by groups seeking to overturn the tides of an impending reality that sits against their own conviction and outlook.

Conclusion

Normatively speaking, acts of violence are expressive actions that embody cultural meanings for the participants and 'say' something to the audience. The turning away from the visible display of violence is primarily an enlightened concept. Yet, some societies, with archaic worldviews, are guided by the fundamental understanding that violence in order to be effective must be publicly displayed. For critics like Foucault "in post-Enlightenment societies, arduous, painful, and slow deaths are a thing of the past" (Foucault 1977, p. 12). By the force of this definition the actors unleashing slow, painful deaths on their victims inhabit a pre-Enlightened society.

It would be fair to suggest that the larger international politics has been the catalyst in giving this cruelty an accepted form in radical Islam. Beheading a captive victim or someone found wanting remains integral to some sections of radical Islamic extremists. These are by all means, "performances in which the actors [through their specific violent engagement] display for others the meaning of their social situation" (Nanninga, 2017, p. 173). The severed head assumes an identity. It proves more effective as a signatory agency compared to the complete body. The key attraction here is the demonstrative value such undertakings offer.

As Vlahos reminds us, "beheading – especially as an act of civic theater – is not just a barbaric act: it is the deepest and most powerful tool of political legitimacy" (Vlahos, 2014). Seen from the perspective of the radical Islamists these undertakings articulate the vision of an asymmetric power relation that need to be balanced and levelled even if that requires visceral savagery.

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