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The War on Terror and the War of Terror. The Reflective Politics of an Elite of Grievances and Their Young Acolytes Quest for Justice. The Case of Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect*

Danila Genovese[a]

Abstract

In the aftermath of an "Islamist" attack, public discussion of the causes of terrorism seems limited to the assumption that there could be no explanation for terrorism beyond the fanaticism of its perpetrators.

This study attempts to comprehend the discourses and practices engaged in by two "extremist" Islamist parties: Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect.

On the basis of the author's empirical work, the paper examines how their self-representation and their agenda are reflective of the strategies of the War on Terror.

It introduces the concept of a fetishist desire for politics and it explores the dynamics of radicalization operating among them.

Keywords: Islamism, terrorism, racism.

1. Introduction

On the 22nd of March 2017, at 2:40 p.m., a man driving a car rammed into several pedestrians on Westminster bridge, and then rushed to stab a police officer in front of the House of Parliament. The attacker was immediately shot by the police. The toll of the attack was 5 dead and 50 people severely injured.

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* The present research study was approved by the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC), Westminster University, London.
All participants aged between 18 and 45 have signed an informed consent and agreed to the recording of our conversations and to the publishing of their contents.

[a] European Society of Criminology, working group on Radicalization, Extremism and Terrorism.

Corresponding author:
Danila Genovese
E-mail: danilagenovese@yahoo.com

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This tragic event was quickly labelled by the media and the UK Government as a terrorist attack carried out by Islamic extremists (Dodd et al., 2017).

Soon after the event, Channel 4 released a picture of a "famous hate preacher", Abu Izzadeen, identifying him as the perpetrator of the attack (Sweeney, 2017). They had to retract this claim. Abu Izzadeen was still in jail, after being arrested in 2016 for forging a passport.

It soon emerged that the perpetrator of the attack was a "Jamaican man" (Casciani, 2017), Khaled Masood, with a history of petty crimes, "born and bred" in Kent. It was unknown whether his parents were also born and raised in the UK. In fact, stressing Khaled's *Jamaican* origin, rather than his actual place of birth, could represent more of a *cultura*l label, one originating in a racializing practice of representation. Apparently, he converted to Islam in his 20s.

Two months later, on the 23rd of May 2017, at a popular Ariana Grande concert, a young man, Salman Abedi, detonated a shrapnel-laden home-made bomb in the hall of the Manchester Arena, causing the death of 23 people and injuring 250 others. The attacker was born and raised in Manchester. His parents fled Libya as opponents of Colonel Gaddafi's regime.

The BBC was the first news broadcast to reveal the identity of the suicide bomber, who was described as "Libyan" (Dodd, 2017). They later had to specify that the attacker actually held a British passport and was a "British Muslim".

On a Saturday, the 3rd of June 2017, at 10:08 p.m., the Metropolitan Police received reports that a vehicle had struck pedestrians on London Bridge (London). A white van came to a halt outside a pub on the south side of the bridge and three attackers then jumped out and continued on foot to the nearby Borough Market, a popular bar and restaurant area. The men were armed with knives and attacked and stabbed a number of people. Armed officers confronted the men, who were wearing what looked like explosive vests, which were later found to be fake. All three were shot dead in Borough Market within eight minutes of the first call to emergency services. Three attackers were named: Khuram Butt, 27, a British citizen, a member of the banned British extremist Islamist group Al Ghurabaa; 30-year-old Rachid Redouane; and Youssef Zaghba, 22, an Italian national of Moroccan descent. Seven people were confirmed dead and at least 48 were wounded.

The occurrence of a terror attack, whose toll of dead and injured represents an irreparable human loss, should encourage everyone, from the media to government representatives, to refrain from a moralistic reading of the facts, and to examine instead the circumstances, the reasons and the motives (Asad, 2007, p. 40) behind it, in order to understand the root causes and thus help to prevent future strikes.

Similarly, it should be generally acknowledged that a terror attack is the product of several factors, connected at a deeper level than the ideological or theological choices made by the perpetrators.

By presenting an analysis of my four-year ethnographical work with members of Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect, two British Islamist parties banned for glorifying terrorism (Terrorism Act 2006, section 2), this paper attempts to open up new lines of enquiry on Islamism, Islamists in Britain and their dynamics of radicalization. It aims at providing a different account from the one propounded by the mainstream media and government representatives, who see terrorists as motivated by a fanaticism that is inherent to Islam.

In this paper, I present an overview of the political agenda of Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect, one that appears to be the mirror image of the ideology and the strategy of the War on Terror. In this way, I explore what I call the reflective dynamic between the practice of representation and self-representation, as voiced by the political actors themselves. I analyse the two parties' political discourse and practices, through the vocabulary of a fetishist desire for politics nurtured by their members.

I attempt to discuss the reasons that persuaded those young Islamists to believe in the apparent alternative of a better future, proposed by leaders like Anjoum Choudary and Abu Izzadeen, whom I define as an "elite of grievances". I analyse the social and political factors that enabled their process of ideological radicalization.

2. Methodological note

This study employs a combination of approaches deriving from political science and anthropology, since much of Islamist politics in general occurs outside the channels of representative democracy, and much of UK Islamist politics occurs within the realm of a cultural and racial minority.

During four years of fieldwork (2004–2008) among radical Islamist parties in London, Luton, Burnely, Birmingham, and Southend, I took part in many meetings as a non-participant observer and interviewed 80 party members of Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect, including their leaders, Anjoum Choudary and Abu Izzadeen.

My interviewees were all male, the majority were born and brought up in the UK, resided in the Greater London area and were aged between 16 and 45. Mr Choudary had a high level of education and was a practising lawyer, while Mr Izzadeen worked as an electrician. The majority of the party members had left school early to start working in local shops and family-run businesses.

When I embarked upon this fieldwork, my main concern was that experience is never objective. Instead, it reflects what we want and what we need to explain (Butler & Scott, 1992) I did not start from a theory or from a survey of the existing literature, but from the fieldwork, favouring an approach that would let theory emerge from an analysis of the data: the ground theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 6) grounded theory is inductively derived from the study of the phenomena it presents, meaning that data collection, analysis and theory stand in a reciprocal relation to each other. The context of my research related to Muslims, a minority group in Britain, and, as the present paper will clarify, to those among them who see their political future in Islam: the Islamists.

My objectives were to learn from Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect members about their political discourses and practices and to find out how their Islamism was practised, in the context of the relations of power with the UK government. I began with a prepared list of relatively open-ended questions, to enable me to find out more about each interviewee, relating to their backgrounds and, crucially, the reasons why they had joined Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect, and what the institution of an Islamic state would mean for the global Muslim community.

Sometimes, the interviews turned into a conversation. In some cases, other party members were present and contributed to the discussion. At other times, especially when I was interviewing party leaders, the interviews tended to be quite formal. By and large, the party members were forthcoming about the shared goals of their Islamist agenda, in the UK and in the rest of the world, and about their own motivations for joining the party. There were also some practical difficulties involved in the project, related to both my status as a woman (Oakley, 2000, p. 16) and a non-Muslim, inquiring about their idea of the "political" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 16).

It is also worth remembering that these interviews were carried out during a period when Islamists had come under attack (Marranci, 2006, p. 64), accused of being terrorists and fundamentalists – enemies of the West (Asad, 2007, p. 9). Since 2006, the PREVENT programme launched by Tony Blair's government has engineered a system of surveillance directed at a wide population whose activities, behaviours and, above all, beliefs were not criminal, but, according to government officials, indicative of an extremism that constituted a stage towards terrorism (Cohen & Tufail, 2017). As a result, my interviewees were initially very suspicious about my real purposes for conducting research. It took a little time to win their trust, to be allowed to take part in their meetings, and then to approach them for an interview. Once the trust was gained, my interviewees became more voluble and willing to talk at length, about Islamism in general, their own personal reasons for joining Al

Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect, the benefits of embracing Islamism in Britain, and of putting Islamist discourse, in whole or in part, into practice.

As mentioned earlier, sometimes the interviews turned into conversations, specifically with the younger members who did not want to be quoted in the first place. For ethical and moral reasons, I report our conversations using pseudonyms, with the single exception of the young Khuram Butt, guilty of the London Bridge attack. Those field experiences allowed me to learn and understand much. Primarily, I grasped and glimpsed something of the complexity of their situation: the overlapping levels of their identities, which, as young boys born and bred in the UK, they had to cope with. They decided to embrace Islamism as their political "ideology" (Maajid, Al Ghurabaa, personal conversation, June 27, 2006), yet they profess an Islam very different from that of their fathers and grandfathers, which they consider "traditional, in the sense of being obsolete" (Maajid, Al Ghurabaa, personal conversation, June 27, 2006).

Still, these young Islamists go to school, have fun with their friends and schoolmates, who might be from different religious, cultural and political backgrounds and who might look at them "suspiciously, sometimes because of their political beliefs" (Ian, The Saved Sect, personal conversation, April 4, 2006). These specific elements and the collection of such observations were extremely valuable for the conduct of my research. They helped me understand the processual and ever-evolving character of their Islamist discourse and practices, which were not the product of a perennial and unchanging religion-based culture called Islam, as the culturalist-orientalist framework of analysis alleges. Their Islamist discourses and practices were primarily lived and experienced in a country that had no Muslim background, and which my interviewees felt and represented to themselves as a country where they were members of a minority, subject to different practices of discrimination (Bhopal, 2018, p. 134).

3. Analytical framework: some clarifications

The act of labelling certain forms of violence as terrorism can also be a racialized act. This was revealed clearly in the hours after the two London attacks and the one in Manchester, before the identity of the perpetrators was known. Media commentators on BBC1 and Channel 4 rushed to represent the attackers, respectively, as a Jamaican, a Libyan, and "a famous hate preacher", the Save Sect leader Abu Izzadeen (Sweeney, 2017). Their false information about the attackers, who were British nationals, was not simply a gaffe; it demonstrated the racial subtext to the entire counter-terrorism discourse.

The concept of *race*, as it is used in this study in relation to the Muslim minority in Britain, refers to the employment of phenotypical differences as symbols of social distinction (Hanchard, 1994). These symbols, meanings and material practices distinguish dominant and subordinate subjects according to their racial categorization. Race in this regard is not only associated with the biological and the genetic, as a marker of phenotypical difference, but of status, class and political power. Race is crucial, not in itself, but because of its inability to exist merely conceptually and in absence of practices of racism.

A common objection to this framework of analysis is that Muslims are not a race. However, since all racisms are socially and politically constructed, it is possible for cultural markers associated with *Muslimness* to be turned into racial signifier (Lentin & Titley, 2011, p. 69).

The notion of "culturalism", which I have found useful for this study, is defined as the equation of cultural practices with the material, expressive, and artefactual elements of cultural production and the neglect of the normative and political aspects of a cultural process. That is to say, a culturalist approach ends up freezing and hypostasizing cultural practices, divorcing them from their histories and the attendant modes of consciousness that brought them into being.

In this paper, I use "power" to mean the capacity to represent and make someone or something intelligible within a certain regime of representation (Foucault, 1980; Hall, 1997). In this sense, power relates to the production and diffusion of knowledge. This conceptualisation of power cannot simply be thought in terms of one group having a relationship of domination over a subordinate group. Attention must also be paid to the positions of both the dominant and the dominated, and to relationships between their respective practices and discourses of (self)-representation, including their fantasies of (self-)representation and their fetishizing devices (Ahmed, 2000; Hage, 1998).

In his seminal 1903 book *The Souls of the Black Folk*, the African-American author W. E. B. du Bois argued that the problem lay not only in the way that a dominant group categorized minority groups in stereotypical ways, but also in how the latter came to see themselves from the dominant group's perspective. It will become clear in this paper that there a reflective dynamic is operative in the ways that Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect members are represented by the mainstream media and government officials, and the ways in which Islamist actors represent themselves. There is also a reflective dynamic between the strategies and the ideology that support the War on Terror and the discourses and practices engaged in by the extremist Islamist parties who "fight to free the global Muslim community and to establish the Caliphate" (Anjoum Choudary, Al Ghurabaa, personal conversation with the author, June 10, 2006).

The suturing point of such a reflective dynamic of representation is a fetishism for politics: a shared rejection of a (possible) political relationship between the UK government and the Islamist actors.

From the perspective of anthropology, fetishism refers to the way the powerful spirit of a god can be transferred to an object, which then becomes charged with the spiritual power of that for which it is a substitute. In psychoanalysis, fetishism is analysed as the substitute for the absent phallus, meaning that the sexual drive is displaced (Mercer, 1994). The notion of fetishism used here borrows from both these meanings, as it involves both displacement and a transferential relationship (La Capra, 1987).

Fetishism also comprises a sort of reverse denial, which means that a strongly felt, powerful fascination is both indulged and rejected. Fetishism can therefore be seen as a type of disguising strategy used for both representing and not representing, for alluding to something that cannot be shown, as it is forbidden and taboo. Throughout this paper, it will become clear that the concepts and practices of representation and self-representation, with their inherent fantasies and fetishism, are essential keys to understanding the deflected interaction between Islamist parties and the UK Government, as well as the deadlock between the persistent security threat and the improbable

actualisation of the parties' Islamist political programme in the UK.

On the basis of my empirical work, this paper also attempts to give an insight into the process of radicalization and the causes of terrorism, without resorting to popular radicalization models that focus on the ideological-theological choices made by political actors or their psychological predisposition (Gartenstein-Ross & Grossman, 2009; Laqueur, 2004; Sageman, 2004; Wiktorowicz, 2005). As the analysis of the data will show, adoption of a radical theology does not necessarily lead to violence; the event of a terror attack is deeply embedded in the political and social circumstances of its perpetrators, and the way that they experience and make sense of the social and political context in which they live.

4. Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect: an overview

Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect were both the offspring of al Muhagiroun:[1] their plan was to *Islamize* Britain and "to establish a Khilafa in

[1] Al Muhagiroun (Arabic: المهاجرون, The Emigrants) is a militant Salafi jihadist network based in the United Kingdom. The founder of the group was Omar Bakri Muhammad, a Syrian who previously belonged to Hizb ut-Tahrir; he was not permitted to re-enter

Downing Street" (Abu Izzadeen, The Saved Sect, personal conversation with the author, June 6, 2006).

Al Ghurabaa was headed by Anjoum Choudary and The Saved Sect by Abu Izzadeen. They were banned in 2006 for "glorifying terrorism" (Terrorism Act 2006, section 2). Once the parties had been formally banned by the Home Office, Mr Choudary and Mr Izzadeen re-formed them under different names. They were banned again. This did not stop them from publicly declaring their allegiance to ISIS and the caliph al-Baghdadi or from spreading their message of an incumbent jihad to their young followers.

In September 2016, Mr Choudary was sentenced to 5 years and 6 months in jail, along with his acolyte Muhammad Rahman (Dodd, 2017). They were both accused of funding and organizing terrorist acts.

In January 2016, Mr Izzadeen was sentenced to two years in jail for breaching the Terrorism Act and for leaving the UK illegally.

I interviewed Mr Choudary and Mr Izzadeen several times.

Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect openly supported al-Qaeda, the 9/11 attacks, the 7/7 suicide bombers, hailing them as the "Magnificent 19" and "avenging heroes", respectively, and they declared their allegiance to al Baghdadi and to the Islamic state of Iraq and the Levant.

Mr Choudary and Mr Izzadeen follow the ahl al Sunna wal Jamaa (ASWJ). That means that follow only the Quran and the Sunnah, in accordance with the understanding of the Companions and the family of the prophet Muhammad.

Overall, the *syntax* of my meetings, interviews, informal conversations with party members was *political*, not religious: they reported personal experiences of racism and violence, they spoke of practices of social and economic marginalization in the UK, they expressed hostility to British strategies in the Middle East. My interviewees regarded these as important "grievances" that led them to oppose the "persecution of Muslims in the UK and its aggressive foreign policy" (Ibrahim, The Saved Sect, personal conversation with the author, April 7, 2007) and to join parties such as Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect.

A detail that emerged from the qualitative research is that the epistemic representation of Islamist leaders as "evil forces", "hate preachers" (Phillips, 2006, p. 33), routinely performed by UK officials and media outlets, paradoxically consolidated their popularity among their young followers.

Within the multicultural framework of the "culturalization" of politics, where Islamism and Islamists were denied their political ontology (Mamdani, 2004, p. 16), the architecture of the enemy, conjured up as the Islamist leaders,

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Britain after 2005 (https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/aug/12/politics.syria, last accessed on the 8th of September, 2019)

has served to establish their political legitimacy and leadership in the eyes of the young members of their parties.

In the realm of their political practice, my fieldwork revealed that that those parties" leaders have developed a sort of fetishism (Freud, 1927) for politics, one nurtured through their Islamist discourse of an "Islamic state where the *political* is at the service of the *spiritual*" (Anjoum Choudary, Al Ghurabaa, personal conversation with the author, June 10, 2006). However, my fieldwork showed that, paradoxically, those leaders aimed at the exact opposite of the "spiritualization" of politics: the supremacy of politics over religion.

The day after Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect were banned, on the 18th of July 2006, I interviewed Mr Choudary at his family home in Redbridge, East London. My first question to him was about his reaction to the decision taken by the Home Secretary John Reid to ban the parties. His view was that the action represented "a total failure of the British government and their capitalistic ideology. Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect are ideological movements and political movements for a future of radical justice. The Government rather than engaging in dialogue and discussion, they have tried to silence and repress our voices. I think this is a victory for us" (Anjoum Choudary, Al Ghurabaa, personal conversation with the author, July 18, 2006). My next question was strictly related to my surprise at hearing the event being described as a victory and learning, for the first time in my long fieldwork, that Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect were *ideological* and *political* movements. Those attributes were novel and mostly extraneous to the vocabulary and discourses of ASWJ Islamist movements, like Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect. The fundamental core of their discourse, as Mr Choudary had declared many times previously, "is that Islam comprises all, the true path and it is not absolutely a mere ideology or vulgar politics" (Anjoum Choudary, Al Ghurabaa, personal conversation with the author, June 10, 2006). Mr Choudary elaborated on why that was a victory, affirming that "when someone doesn"t have a good counter argument, the easy thing is try to ban the other voices", but instead of explaining the use of the terms "ideological" and "political", he reinforced that conceptualization by affirming that "if you start to stop people propagating their thoughts and ideas, you push them underground. Ultimately, I think that this will quicken the victory for Islam and the Caliphate, because when you ban something, people will become more interested in it" (Anjoum Choudary, Al Ghurabaa, personal conversation with the author, July 18, 2006).

One could see that a "discursive practice" and a "signifying practice" were at work, which ultimately conformed to different audiences and contexts, and were schizophrenic in their content, to the point of utterly denying what had previously been advanced as absolute truth. There was an open play of sheer fascination with power and a preoccupation with taking power, free from any

religious or spiritual connotation. My point is that Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect practices and discourses developed under the constraint of a denial of what was ultimately desired but not expressed: the fetishism for politics. This contributed to their delegitimization as political actors and inflated their narratives of insecurity.

Another consideration that I reached in the course of my empirical research is that there seemed to be a sort of r*eflective* dynamic (Lacan, 1966) between the institutional representation (in the anti-terror laws) of Islamist parties and their own self-representation. The outcome was an imaginary flux of projected knowledge (Said, 1997, p. 67) between the two poles of the UK government and the "extremist" Islamist parties: a sort of "meta-politics" of a deflected political action.

Parties like Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect, banned under the 2006 Terrorism Act, are labelled by the Home Office and the representatives of the UK Government as "terrorists" or "glorifiers of terrorism". The dimension denied to them, by institutional power, is politics. That means that there is no possibility of having a political dialogue or "clash" with them.

On the other hand, those same parties refused the label of "political", while pursuing a political discourse and practice, as the fieldwork revealed. Their official narrative was that their actions were "religious, prevailing over politics" (Anjoum Choudary, Al Ghurabaa, personal conversation with the author, June 10, 2006). This is the reason—they affirmed—that they could not have "any meaningful relation or exchange with the UK political government, because representatives of an alien system" (Anjoum Choudary, Al Ghurabaa, personal conversation with the author, June 10, 2006).

In both cases, the dimension excised was the political one, interpreted as a sort of ontological difference (Brown, 2006, p. 19). The final outcome of this deflection has been a persistent security threat, on one side, and the ongoing ostracization of political actors, on the other.

5. "Are we ready for another 7-7": the War on Terror and the War of Terror

Among the many meetings I attended and recorded as a non-participant observer, there is one which is representative of Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect's political discourses and performative strategies. The meeting celebrated the first anniversary of the 7/7 London bombing and it was launched under the title: "Are we ready for another 7/7"?

The content of that meeting together with the speeches delivered by the two leaders showed clearly that Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect's "doctrinal

fury" (Saleh, 2017, p. 155) and radical agenda were reflective of the aggressive strategies of the UK"s War on Terror (Fekete, 2001, p.99)

In his speech Abu Izzadeen, stressed that 9/11 and 7/7 have had the important role of dividing and defining two camps: the Ummah of the Believers and the camp of the Munafiqiin and the hypocrites headed by Blair and Bush. The reaction to those attacks had been the beginning of a "Crusade against Islam and Muslims, which forced Muslims to make a choice between the two fronts, either support Bush or support al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden" (Abu Izzadeen, The Saved Sect, as recorded by the author, July 7, 2006). The core argument of his speech was that the terror attacks were simply acts of retaliation against the occupations and wars waged by the West against the Muslim world in the past few centuries. In this connection, Abu Izzadeen declared that one ought "not to feel sorry for the 52 victims as they were not Muslims and they constituted just a small percentage in comparison with the millions of children killed in Iraq, Palestine, and Afghanistan" (Abu Izzadeen, The Saved Sect, recorded by the author, July 7, 2006).

So far, his discursive approach bore an exact resemblance to Bush and Blair"s bipolar division of Humanity, at the start of the War on Terror (Gregory, 2004, p.11): Christians and Muslims, Right and Wrong, Good and Evil, all reinforced by the notion of a forthcoming Crusade to wage against the Enemy (Muslims in the one case and Western countries in the other).

Mr Izzadeen was explicit about their plans to islamize Britain, to the point that he declared "I want to see the flag of Islam raised in 10 Downing Street … Islamizing Britain is a divine duty" (Abu Izzadeen, The Saved Sect, recorded by the author, July 7, 2006).

At this point, members of Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect, seemingly transfixed by the charismatic eloquence of their leaders, started chanting "Islam in Downing Street, Islam in Downing Street" as if it was their slogan for an endless campaign (like the War on Terror) which would islamize the world.

It is obvious that such a project very closely resembled "the imperialistic colonial policies of the West in the Muslim world" (Anjoum Choudary, Al Ghurabaa, personal conversation with the author, June 10, 2006), so severely decried by the two parties' leaders. The relevant observation here is that the dynamic connecting the practices and political discourses of the two poles of the UK government and of Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect's members was based on a mirroring process, in which they reflected each other's image but refused to engage with each other's self-representation, in a space from which politics was banished.

Another observation that I reached from the analysis of their numerous speeches, which I recorded, is that neither Abu Izzadeen nor Anjoum Choudary ever mentioned (in their talks) any Islamist party other than al Qaeda and ISIS.

Islamist parties like the Muslim Brotherhood, the Algerian FIS, the Somali al Shabaab, or the Sudanese NIF, which were part of a coalition in power and that constituted examples of Islamist ideology applied to the political life of a country, were never mentioned by the two leaders, in their analysis. Their exclusive reference to al Qaeda and ISIS, symbols of the enemies of the West, according to the promoters of the War on Terror, suggests that the two leaders aspired to embody the enemies that the West needed. It supports the hypothesis of a reflective dynamic of representation at work, and it reveals the use of a specific performative strategy in front of their young audience.

Besides, an analysis of their speeches revealed that, according to the two leaders, the problems affecting the Middle East and the "Muslim" population were exclusively the consequence of the Western colonial and neo-colonial projects in the Middle East. Neither Abu Izadeen nor Anjoum Choudary have ever offered a more careful examination of the political, social and economic conditions of the Middle East, by analysing dictatorial governments, economic stalemate, social inequalities, patriarchal social structures and the pervasive racism directed at local minorities (Saleh, 2017). In every meeting that I attended, the narrative advanced about the Muslim population was one of pure victimhood, due to Western oppression: the solution offered as a cure-all for problems was the aggressive "Islamization of the world" *(*Abu Izzadeen, The Saved Sect, personal conversation with the author, June 20, 2006). In many ways, what The Saved Sect and Al Ghurabaa leaders presented was a spiteful, and equally hostile mirror image of the "Western policies" they opposed.

This same approach was echoed by Anjoum Choudary in his speech that day. The tragic terrorist attacks in London on the 7th of July 2005 were addressed as an unmistakable sign of the strength of Islam and of its believers and of the weakness of a decadent British society "founded on alcohol, drugs, casinos and dysfunctional families" (Anjoum Choudary, Al Ghurabaa, recorded by the author, July 7, 2006). According to this view, a total lack of values and degenerate moral conduct have always been a fact of English history, leading Choudary to loudly affirm that "British values are basically fish and chips and nothing more" (Anjoum Choudary, Al Ghurabaa, recorded by the author, July 7, 2006). This manifested an extremely reductionist approach, belittling the "Other" and trivialising them in order to justify their submission. The English lack of values was presented as the main reason that the Islamic flag and the Islamic state would be "one day dominant and established in the whole world" (Anjoum Choudary, Al Ghurabaa, recorded by the author, July 7, 2006). This also sounded like a brutalised and inverted version of the colonial concept of the "white man's burden" (Kipling, 1929), otherwise called "cultural racism" (Goldberg, 2002, p. 143), with the educational and developmental mission

unmasked as sheer domination, justified by a supposed Islamic moral superiority, in place of Western technological advancement.

On this occasion and on several others before, both Abu Izzadeen and Anjoum Choudary offered an interesting reification of Islam. It was presented as a monolithic block, characterised by unchanged and unchangeable moral values, deprived of human agency, of history, of geographies: the *Oriental* performed by the orientalised (Said, 1997, p. 8).

As mentioned above, the dynamic at work between the pervasive representation of the Islamist parties practised by British public discourse (Kundnani, 2014, p. 23) and the Islamist parties' self-representation was of a *reflective* kind: both agents denied the Other's political viability and trivialized its agency to the point that submission and annihilation seem achievable goals.

The War on Terror has been a war of extermination against Islamist parties across the globe (Gregory, 2004). As Immanuel Kant so presciently wrote, in his 1795 essay "Toward Perpetual Peace", when hostilities degenerate into a war of extermination "all justice is destroyed" (Kant, 1885). The final aim of the anti-terror campaigns has been the annihilation of Islamist groups, without acknowledging the possibility of a dialogue with them. They have been treated as "ontologically" irredeemable and politically illegitimate: wrapped in a sort of double-bind of Western superiority (Bernasconi, 2003).

It is thus not surprising that parties like Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect elaborated the same approach, articulating a manifesto of imperial domination and the submission of the Other as morally and politically inferior and, as such, exterminable.

In the two cases, the main preoccupation has been with taking Power, refusing the Political (Mouffe, 2005, p. 9). In the specific case of leaders like Mr Choudary and Abu Izzadeen, the deep fascination with gaining the upper hand was also shown in relation to the young members of their parties, whose political hopes had been eroded by the top-down culturalist deployment of multiculturalism, carried out by the local councils, and a *necro-politics* (Mbembe, 2003) performed by Islamist leaders like Mr Choudary and Mr Izzadeen. The latter exploited any serious issue of social and economic discrimination as a means to coalesce a group around their own leadership. This is what I call an *elite of grievances*: a segment that exploits grievances (experienced by their members) to eventually expand their constituency (by planning the institution of a dictatorial regime like the Caliphate) in order to keep their *elite* status.

It is crucial, in the light of this study, to reflect upon the circumstances that enabled eloquent leaders like Mr Izzadeen and Mr Choudary to be successful in attracting young people and in apparently radicalising them.

On the basis of my fieldwork, this paper argues that the process of radicalization is not the direct consequence of radical discourses masterfully

delivered by Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sects leaders; on the contrary, ideological radicalization was embedded in the interconnection and development of several political and social factors, which constituted the humus for a radical ideology to flourish. Moreover, it is also crucial to highlight that the adoption of a radical political view doesn't automatically produce a violent outcome, like a terror attack.

Of the 80 members of both parties with whom I conducted fieldwork, only one, Khuram Butt, took the tragic decision to carry out a terror attack. This study proposes that it is vital for policy makers to comprehend the factors and the circumstances that prepared the ground for a violent and extreme choice, adopted as necessary.

6. Young Islamists: a radical quest for justice

My empirical work with the young members of Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect revealed that it is paramount for local and national institutions to acknowledge the social and political grievances of some members of society; likewise, it is important to ascertain whether a social actor, who feels wronged, can successfully negotiate an institutional channel to gain justice. However, studies and national inquiries have too often revealed that, historically, British institutions and public bodies have been afflicted by forms of structural racism, which have favoured the concealment of racist behaviour, and prevented minority members from obtaining fair, equal treatment and from accessing justice (Bhopal, 2018; Ditch the Label, 2015: EHRC, 2016; Macpherson, 1999).

My fieldwork has also suggested that it is vital for young activists to be able to express their grievances in social and institutional contexts, without fear of being censored, or belittled, or being involved in counter-terrorism measures and a system of surveillance that have promoted greater alienation of minority members, rather than their inclusion (Cohen & Tufail, 2017, p. 43)

When I approached the young members of Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect, they all shared with me their personal life stories: at what age they joined the party, what Islamism meant for them, and what the institution of the Khalifa would achieve for the global Muslim community.

From their accounts, it emerged that the reasons that led them to embrace Islamism as their political ideology, in the version propounded by Anjoum Choudary and Abu Izzadeen, were directly connected to their desire to avenge the racism and discrimination they had experienced in their lives, which "no one ever acknowledged" (Khuram Butt, Al Ghurabaa, personal conversation with the author, June 16, 2008). They were determined to attain "a form of justice that the Caliphate will constitute for the global Muslim community"

(Khuram Butt, Al Ghurabaa, personal conversation with the author, June 16, 2008).

Every young man, all members of those twin parties, told me that "every daily activity had the potentiality of turning into an incident of racism" (Ibrahim, The Saved Sect, personal conversation with the author, June 16, 2008), and they all reported experiencing at least one serious case of anti-Muslim racism. As someone recalled, there was never a "sorry or the intervention of the police to arrest the abuser and eventually heal the wound by taking us to an hospital" (Ali, The Saved Sect, personal conversation with the author, April 24, 2007).

After the racist attack, "you will see a bleeding young boy who would try to walk home and bear the brunt of the cuts and the injustice" (Jamal, Al Ghurabaa, personal conversation with the author, May 7, 2006).

During my fieldwork, I collected many stories like the above, in which the circumstances and the pretext for the attack would vary. What remained constant, in their accounts, was the experience of feeling "humiliated, inferior and excluded" (Khuram Butt, Al Ghurabaa, personal conversation with the author, May 7, 2006) from a social context, the colonial concept of race seemingly replaced by ones of culture and immigration.

When I asked my interviewees, if they had reported those attacks to the police or if they had consulted their imam or any other Islamist organization, such as the Muslim Council of Britain or the Muslim Association of Britain, their answer was negative on both counts.

They believed the police would have done nothing: they would have "downplayed the attacks as a brawl among young boys. They would have denied that it was racially motivated. They are useless and racist" (Khuram Butt, Al Ghurabaa, personal conversation with the author, May 7, 2006). Their experience with the associations and imams was of "government puppets and *chimpanzee* to sold their beliefs to become MPs, judges, doctors and police chiefs" (Khuram Butt, Al Ghurabaa, personal conversation with the author, April 6, 2006). When I asked them to explain what they meant, the most frequent response was mired in "cultural talk". My interviewees clarified that every discourse about current affairs pronounced by their imams and the "big Islamist parties leaders" was delivered in relation to the framework of the "ignorance of the Muslim culture and the need to explain it to people who don't know our culture", which made them feel in a way "to blame for the racism we experience" (Majid, The Saved Sect, personal conversation with the author, April 18, 2006). The young Khuram was quite forthright in his comments, saying that even when he got beaten up for "being Muslim", his local imam adduced the "ignorance of our culture" to explain the event (Khuram Butt, Al Ghurabaa, personal conversation with the author, May 8, 2007). Khuram then added, with some vehemence, "F*** this culture, I want to be respected, I want

to be important, I want my Islam to avenge the wrongs and not to blame Muslims for their culture. I don't know what culture is. I am Muslim and I know Islam. Al Ghurabaa has helped me in finding my identity and it gives Muslims a future of justice. I will fight and do whatever necessary to establish the Khalifa in the world" (Khuram Butt, Al Ghurabaa, personal conversation with the author, May 8, 2007).

Such comments, expressed so colourfully, were crucial to grasp the circumstances that led some young people, like my interviewees, to join parties like Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect. Analysing my personal conversations with them offered an important framework to understand the development of a process of radicalization, one which occurred socially, before assuming any ideological character. Only later in their lives did the Islamist activists interviewed decide to embrace a radical ideology, one that seemed to make sense of their daily struggles.

For a young man like Khuram Butt, guilty of the London Bridge attack, the process of radicalization was spun deep within the social fabric and in his life experience. His decision to embrace the version of Islamism offered by Anjoum Choudary and Abu Izzadeen should be considered a consequence of his feelings of humiliation, his experience of discrimination and his desire for revenge. The fact that he decided to act upon those emotional impulses, on the 3rd of June 2017, should not be related to the ideology he chose, but to the way he elaborated his life experience, where violence, in the absence of other institutional channels, would achieve a form of "justice" for him and the rest of the Muslim community.

Based on my numerous conversations with Khuram, I argue that what pushed him to embrace violence was the firm belief that the society he lived in was so corrupt that it legitimated and justified the discrimination he had experienced as a Muslim. The latter ranged from anti-Muslim racism to anti-terror policies, all of which seemed to target Muslims and their *Muslimness*.

It was not any specific theological or ideological discourse that radicalized an activist like Khuram, and led him to choose violence, but the combination of his social and political circumstances and his feeling of the "failure" of the society he lived in. Khuram Butt felt that social and institutional contexts were unable or unwilling to provide reparative justice for the several wrongs he, like other Muslims, had suffered.

Radicalization models that fail to distinguish between radical beliefs and violent methods seem to assume that certain ideologies or theologies are inherently violent and to be blamed in a terror attack (Sageman, 2004; Wiktorowicz, 2005). On the basis of my empirical work, I argue that this is not demonstrated by the data. I also advance the idea that applying those models to counter-terrorism policies paradoxically promotes a dynamic of radicalization

among Islamist activists, who feel discriminated, targeted and unable to express their discontent.

The young members of Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect whom I met and talked to had, as minority members, too long experienced a sort of institutional discrimination related to culture, as a substitute for race. Policy making also contributed to preserving a status quo that made the idea of a post-racial society "a myth" (Bhopal, 2018, p. 155).

Leaders like Anjoum Choudary and Abu Izadeen promoted a militant Islamist agenda, instead of the passive acceptance of their minority status and the rarefied understanding of Muslim *culture* proposed by imams and the various leaders of the more moderate Islamist parties.

Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect leaders offered the prospect of an Islamic state for Muslims, one that would avenge all their members' grievances, grievances that had been "sublimated" and rarely addressed by national institutions (EHRC, 2016). In this context, it is also important to remember that their perception of the War on Terror was of "a global war on Islam and Muslims" (Khuram Butt, Al Ghurabaa, personal conversation with the author, June 9, 2007).

At this point, I am reminded of a famous passage from Franz Fanon, which helps us understand what is at stake. For a "Negro who works on a sugar plantation … there is only one solution: to fight. He will embark on this struggle and will pursue it, not as a result of a Marxist or an idealistic analysis but quite simply because he cannot conceive of life otherwise than in a form of a battle against exploitation, misery and hunger" (Fanon, 1967, p. 224).

The young members of Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect did not want to "talk any more about the need to understand society ignorance about Islam and the Muslim culture" (Khuram Butt, Al Ghurabaa, personal conversation with the author, August 3, 2007); they wanted that the abuses they "had endured for too long were finally denounced and sanctioned, because no one would do that for us" (Khuram Butt, Al Ghurabaa, personal conversation with the author, August 3, 2007).

Clearly, it was easy to inflame those young men's hearts and minds with the prospect of revenge, omitting to state that the price they would pay for reprisal would be a substantial restriction on their rights. Such a restriction would be even greater if an Islamic state were instituted. In such a state, they would experience total submission to their leaders (Saleh, 2017). Besides, in the existing order of things, by fighting the battle against the *munafeqeen* (the infidels) they would be sent to jail or eventually killed (like the young Khuram Butt).

If leaders like Anjoum Choudary and Abu Izadeen had a role in their radicalization, this was confined to their rhetorical ability in promising them

forms of reparative justice, coalesced around the idea of an Islamic state for the Muslim community.

The members' young age and their frustration at the wrongs they felt society unable to correct, were fertile soil for the advancement of a hegemonic plan of revenge, elaborated by an elite of grievances, like Anjoum Choudary and Abu Izadeen.

It goes without saying that elaborating a political plan for a future of radical justice should not be criminalized as a terror attack, even if the political plan itself (a Caliphate) rests on a "non-Western ontology" and is perceived as subversive of the current British political system (Sayyid, 1997, p. 43).

Similarly, the public expression of such plans by some political actors should not be interpreted as a warning sign about an impending terror attack; rather, it constitutes an imperative, for policy makers, to analyse the circumstances and the factors contributing to forms of social and political injustice, which affect some members of society. Hence, policy makers should strive to find political and social strategies to rectify gaps in justice, in order to prevent future disruptions of the social fabric, like a terror attack.

7. Conclusions

The ethnography presented above shows that the practices of representation and self-representation of Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect, two radical Islamist parties, are influenced by a reflective dynamic and a fetishism for politics and power. Their leaders claim that their struggle is aimed at "instituting an Islamic system where the political is at the service of the spiritual" (Abu Izzadeen, The Saved Sect, personal conversation with the author, April 26, 2005), just as it was in the time of the prophet. This is why they describe themselves as "followers of the purest form of Islam" (Abu Izzadeen, The Saved Sect, personal conversation with the author, April 26, 2005). On the contrary, my fieldwork reveals that the project of establishing an Islamic state is the product of a deeply political agenda, rather than a spiritual one, with an imperialistic intention, similar to that carried out by European countries in colonial times (Gregory, 2004). In this, their discursive practices are very similar to the ones propounded by the supporters of the War on Terror, also influenced by a reflective dynamic, leading to a perpetual war of terror.

The fieldwork also revealed that the party leaders nurture a powerful fascination – a fetishism – for taking power and for domination, over their Western "enemies", but also over their young acolytes, whose social and political grievances they have exploited (but not created), and whose hopes for

a future of political and social justice they have manipulated, in various ways, into the idea of instituting an Islamic state.

The UK government, on the one hand, with its institution of a *culturalist* multiculturalism, marred by an Islamophobic War on Terror (Gregory, 2004, p. 21) and, on the other hand, the Islamist leaders determined to seize power through hegemonic strategies have jointly deprived the young men of a political space*,* in the name of an ill-defined "cultural protection", or of an endless War on Terror, or of a War of Terror to establish the Caliphate.

Needless to say, not every young Muslim victim of racism has taken the decision to join Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect. Variables like family, education, personal attitude all played an important part in influencing the young men's political choices. At first, I contemplated compiling statistics of those variables to see what role they played in those young boys' decisions to join Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect. But then I realised that it would have been a mistake: I would have elaborated a model of radicalization that would focus on the role of ideology rather than on social variables and their lived experiences.

The most important consideration is that, for almost 80 young Islamists, their plans of revenge for the racism they experienced, of protecting the Muslim community at home and abroad, and of acquiring an active role in political life led them to follow leaders, like Anjoum Choudary and Abu Izzadeen, who were "glorifying terrorism" (Terrorism Act 2006). However, only one of them, Khuram Butt, decided to carry out a terrorist attack. The majority of the members held radical views but were not terrorists, a distinction that is too often neglected in attempts to construct models of radicalization.

The UK's domestic policies, with their lack of robust anti-racist strategies (Bhopal, 2018) at the institutional and public levels, its counter-terrorism strategies and their racializing subtexts, its programmes like Prevent which systematically censor minorities' voices of discontent and opposition – all played a significant role in offering the young Islamists *appealing motives* to join Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect and to follow their leaders' radical views. Those views were, in fact, a reflection of the ideology that supported the War on Terror.

The cultural(ist) solutions implemented by the British multicultural system (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992) resulted in the de-politicization of those young people and the *culturalization* of their political, social and economic challenges, resulting in the maintenance of the status quo and the denial of racism against minority members. In a way, since 2001, in the name of national security, the British strategy of the War on Terror has legitimized numerous racist practices against Muslims, whose "badge" was no longer and exclusively their race or

their culture, but predominantly their alleged innate "tendency" to radicalization, extremism and terrorism.

On the basis of my empirical work, what pushed a young man like Khuram Butt to embrace violence was the belief that peaceful political action would be unable to end and rectify the persecution and the humiliation that society had inflicted upon Muslims. Furthermore, the War on Terror and the domestic security strategies were perceived as an endless war on Muslims. This perception, expressed several times in the course of my fieldwork, has been corroborated by declarations made by US and UK officials since 9/11, interpreting the September 2001 Authorization for Use of Military force (Gregory, 2004) as having transformed the whole world into a battleground. Khuram thought it necessary for his survival to replicate the violence he felt was directed against him.

Terrorism remains a real political threat, but one which could be dealt with more effectively by using better intelligence, by investigating active incitement, financing and the preparation of terrorist violence, by promoting less racist policy tools (Cohen & Tufail, 2017, p. 44), and by not waging wars. Counter-terrorism strategies that imply that Muslims are prey to an inherent radicalism are faulty and counter-productive. They are based on a culturalist and Orientalist reading of Islam; above all, they contribute to marginalizing minority members, whose social experience, as my fieldwork shows, has already marked them as racialized, second class, immigrant children.

Terrorism, like racism, seems to be an ideological "scrounger", as it has historically demonstrated its ability to "dress up" in various disparate ideologies, even as the irreparable and destructive effects of its practices on its victims remain the same.

What this should suggest is that, beyond ideologies and radical rhetoric, the spectre of violence seems to find fertile soil, to be endlessly regenerated**,** in the practices of those who feel entitled to discriminate and of those who feel wrongly discriminated against. My empirical work suggests that terrorists are people who look for a form of justice that the society they live in seems unable to provide**.**

For policy makers, it is imperative to elaborate security policies that consider forms of violence and social (read racial, sexual, environmental) terror in a broad sense, reflecting that those who feel terrorised, as victims of violence and discrimination, without the prospect of obtaining justice from institutions, might eventually (and tragically so) entertain the idea of employing disruptive means of bringing about a change, in a perpetual *War of Terrors*.

It is also reasonable to argue that a project of political and social justice for all should be the driving force behind an anti-terror campaign, to "win the

hearts and minds of British Muslims" as Prime Minister Tony Blair declared, ironically, on the eve of the War on Terror.

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