

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

POINT OF NO RETURN: EXTREMISM, SECTARIAN VIOLENCE, AND THE MILITANT SUBJECT

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INTERLOCUTORS SERIES

The SCTIW Review Interlocutors Series is a forum wherein two or more scholars are invited to have a written dialogue with one another on a topic of mutual interest, who might otherwise only do so indirectly through their published articles and books, or at colloquia with limited audiences. The structure of this alternative forum is intended to preserve the informal aspects of the standard interview format therefore unburdening the participants from the requirements of exhaustive archival references, while simultaneously encouraging a truly critical and collaborative conversation unencumbered by restrictions of time or word count, the expectations of spontaneity, or the intervention of an interviewer's leading questions. Thus, no limitations have been imposed on the duration of the participants' correspondence or the outcome, and, with the exception of the initial question, the unfolding of the dialogue is entirely of their own making. Through this more reflective and, hence, more deliberate yet interactive format, the hope is that the interlocutors will arrive at new insights they otherwise might not have come upon independently—shared in a public forum.

THE INTERLOCUTORS

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SCTIW REVIEW: In your research, the two of you have critically examined the extremist or the sectarian, as well as violent rhetoric and violent acts. Interestingly, both of you untangle these movements from the political discourse that typically frames such discussions. What is the methodological and/or theoretical import of decoupling these phenomena from the political? Furthermore, how or why are these currents—extremism, sectarianism, and violence—useful for understanding (post)modernity [or modernities, as some have argued]?

MOHAGHEGH: Above all else, I think that this rather mysterious constellation of subjectivities—that of the extremist, the sectarian, the fanatic, the insurgent, the militant, etc.—presents such a crucial a challenge for us to decipher precisely because it reveals the deeply catastrophic arc of modernity itself. In a way, these figures serve as vital passcodes to the darkest vault of our epoch; they wrench the immense cruelty of this particular timescape into transparency, they make the atrocity undeniable, by bringing to the radioactive surface and igniting (once and for all) the apocalyptic drives that have always been at the heart of its foundational logic. To that extent, they are quite simply the perfect existential prototypes of that same delirium which has accompanied every jagged contortion and decadent imprint of the modern era. They merely position themselves as its *last* instantiation, the true guardians of its final throes; they engrave its manic legacy upon themselves and thus aim to fulfill a malevolent promise which has been hovering in the atmosphere for a long while now. After all, one cannot stay so critically blind to our epochal condition of the past few centuries: a seemingly inexorable procession of genocides, holocausts, empires, doomsday devices, weaponries of palpable or covert subjugation, spectacles of authoritarian control, alienation, and global war. The most multi-dimensional apparatus of sadistic tendencies that human desire could fathom—a singular will to massacre and bloodlust in the name of the absolute. And yet, almost coterminous with these techniques of brutal exchange, modernity also devises its own endless barrage of ideological smokescreens in order to conceal, elude, deflect, and dissimulate these otherwise flagrant iterations of wrath. Beneath a thin veil of humanist rhetoric, Enlightenment idealism, and utopian fantasies, the totality of the disaster has tried to remain perpetually camouflaged. Given that backdrop of diversion and

hiddenness, when the Middle Eastern poet Adonis writes, “This is my name: I am the landmine of civilization...And I tell my brothers, bring your axes,” we find ourselves suddenly in the presence of a certain extremist outlook poised to do no less than tear through the frail cloak of the real.

As a consequence, what we have called “extremism” on the Eastern borders marks the decisive hour when this petty sorcery of modernity is exposed. In the same way that Nietzsche once declared that, “Night too is a sun,” so is the extremist’s destructive touch also its own powerful force of illumination. In essence, these practitioners (of ruinous unmasking) are the ones willing to take modernity at its fatal word and see things through to their eruptive limit—in this respect, they are not purists seeking transcendent distance but rather establish their stronghold at the center of an impossible order of things, altogether entrenched/incriminated in the whirlwind of epochal violence. They inhabit the travesty of a failed attempt at Being and recite the requiem of its grave error. They summon themselves to a universal bath of fire, as embodiments of the unbearable, and therein pronounce the closing lines of our age’s vicious incantation: for how else can we read self-immolation except as a testament to the fact that it has all gone too far? For that reason alone, however excruciating to behold, and *especially because* they are excruciating to behold, these individuals and their disparate alliances must be addressed; they must be interpreted in their full complexity and implication; for it is within such excessively crystallized world-views, by extracting their various cosmologies of struggle and counter-infliction, that we can cultivate a sharper perception of the map that guides whatever prospect of a future (assuming one remains).

And so, perhaps what intrigues me most about these profiles of extremist consciousness that we find emerging in far-and-near provinces is whether they can actually bridge the chasm between modernity and some radical outside of the postmodern. Are they lost causes, damned to recycle the same archetypal plagues, or can they actually generate a speculative aftermath? For that to occur, they would have to abandon their epistemic anchors and show us something theoretically ingenious, to counter-balance their affective allegiance to horror, the sacred, and identitarian myths with an equal devotion to fascination, foreignness, and experimental thought, and so at least my own inquiries are fueled by this dice-throw search for a more devious instinct (intellectual, aesthetic, experiential) within the folds of their outrage and violation. To debate these groups’ relative morality or evil is at once irrelevant, simplistic, and uninteresting; rather, we need to ask how far-reaching their encryptions might prove in negotiating a creative escape. Stated more exactly, does the sheer momentum of their hatred, fury, and vengeance dialectically entrap them in a no-exit predicament, invariably binding them to the toxic finitude of their enemy, or might they also hallucinate some fugitive trajectory beyond the reigning paradigms of what stands? In effect, are they mere representations of the farthest boundary of our reality (enslaved to its last gasps), or are they also clearing space for a supersession of the continuum altogether? Are they entirely retaliatory typologies, irrecoverably submerged in the labyrinth of the present, or can they in fact speak towards the oblivion of an unforeseen horizon? When we perform these convoluted archaeologies of knowledge into their poetry, philosophy, and images, do we notice even a vague trace of conceptual versatility (the ecstatic counterpart to their anger), an autonomous current or anomalous turn irreducible to the confines of “what is,” a certain strangeness, entrancement, or captivation that breaks mind and body away from their otherwise transfixed gaze upon the immediate fluctuations of the political? A non-formulaic utterance, neither ideologically scripted nor historically over-determined, to confirm that they can in fact exorcise the long-inhaled smoke of modernity and breathe toward the drastic

elsewhere: no doubt, a single term of desertion and becoming is often enough to slide the scales from disenchantment to enchantment. That they provide us with intense and ominous happenings in our everyday world is a given, but what are the constraints of their collective imagination in terms of producing otherworldliness? Is it a nihilistic dead-end beneath the fever-dream of conflict, or are there some genuine visionaries among the swarm? I believe the degree and scope of this potentiality waits to be seen, then—though the more we track such incendiary circles the closer we come to deciding whether these formations do indeed constitute the conclusive race of insiders (too gravely entangled), or whether they might also survive themselves to harbor some version of an outsider destiny (the next movement onward).

DEVJI: I quite agree that the naming as well as the reality of “extremism” or “militancy” tells us as much about the violence of modern politics as it does about that of “radical Islam.” Placing the phenomenon under the sign of excess, for example, does nothing more than gesture towards the excessiveness of sovereignty more generally, something built into the concept while always contriving to remain outside it. In this sense the sheer visibility of militant sovereignty exposes, and indeed calls forth, the otherwise disavowed excesses of its Euro-American enemy. But this exercise of power in the operation of illicit surveillance, renditions, black sites, detentions without trial and the like, still remains secretive (even if only as an open secret) and is literally beyond the law.

What interests me about militancy is that it breaks down and individualizes sovereignty, whose “excessiveness” is now illustrated in the sacrificial violence of the suicide bomber, who not only reveals the self-destructive aspect of sovereign power, but in doing so also puts into question the category of interest that alone lends it some political rationality. By destroying the subject of interest, militancy sets sovereignty free and reveals how insubstantial its rationality really is. Of course this had always been known by the founding figures of modern politics, with men like Hobbes, for instance, so insistent on tying interest to property because he realized that only such an attachment made its rationality possible. And faced with the freeing of sovereign power, the “West” can only try to mirror it by its own excessive practices.

In Osama bin Laden’s heyday, the destruction of interest and freeing of sovereignty was manifested in violence as a form of negation. Rather than spend much time justifying al-Qaeda’s practices as “Islamic,” he tended to describe them as mirror images of “Western” violence. In other words militancy not only brought to light the terrorism of its enemy, as a mirror does, but, more importantly, drew its own strength and legitimacy from this rival in a relationship of curious intimacy. The militant subject, therefore, had no positive or ontological form, but, as if in some perversion of Neoplatonism, emanated from his opponent. The demonstration of this negativity was, naturally, the suicidal disappearance of the bomber at the moment of his triumph, as well as the death he shared with his victims, one that made it impossible to clearly demarcate one from the other.

If the lack of ontology and subjectivity in many of al-Qaeda’s practices managed to depart the logic of modern politics in a significant way, the violence practiced by ISIS, though apparently similar, does something rather different. For apart from the recent video-clip of the American journalist James Foley’s beheading, ISIS doesn’t use the language of mirrors, insisting, rather, on identifying what it does positively and with canon law. Similarly, whereas al-Qaeda had avoided arrogating religious authority for itself, declaring a caliph or even establishing a state, ISIS has done all three. Instead of seeing in this merely its perverse

“return” to traditional forms of Islamist polity, however, what fascinates me is how and why such “excess” must now be identified with the law. For crucial here is the fact that the law names practices, like the killing or forcible conversion of Shiites or Christians, that it had never previously countenanced.

Does the making lawful of sovereign power end up destroying its very excessiveness, which in Carl Schmitt’s celebrated definition must be beyond the law? Or is the lending of juridical authority to practices with little precedent meant to destroy the law as well? The positive and ontologically laden character of ISIS practice seems to indicate that violence has come to possess its own rationality, and is no longer tied to ideas or reasons in any direct way. However conventional its setting up of a state might be, then, ISIS appears to be involved in a project where practices of violence receive the name of the law almost arbitrarily, because it is this alone that gives the group coherence and identity. The rituals of violence, in other words, are endowed with little or no scriptural justification, and are meant, rather, to display a unity and purpose at the level of practice alone. For by being named and thus deprived of its old-fashioned excessiveness as something secret or disavowed, power here is stripped of sovereignty in some fundamental way.

MOHAGHEGH: I think all of your insights here are perfectly accurate, despite our having to conjecture ahead of things and in the relative dark. To improvise upon those many points of departure, then, I would just extract three distinct conceptual elements and extend them as follows:

1. *Law/Sovereignty.* If we take something like the ascent of ISIS into consideration, as you rightly point out, then we find an emergent strain of “radicalism” that is simultaneously producing unstable discourses (heretical, subversive, criminal) while also making larger claims to absolutist archetypes of domination (the establishment of a state, claims to divine or prophetic mission, codifications of law, the merciless eradication of dissidents). Thus the paradox of a kind of anarchistic totalitarianism. On the one hand, we bear witness to rather exceptional formulations of iconoclasm and avant-gardist spectacle (calling for the demolition of Mecca and its sacred artifacts, lining enemies in the city squares in ancient-style crucifixions, launching semiotic assaults against the West by hacking social media and other virtual channels). This is its postmodern configuration which, as you uncovered so acutely in the case of al-Qaeda in *Landscapes of the Jihad*, traverses previous borders of nation, culture, ethnicity, language, and even religious school in search of a uniquely fractal ideological enterprise. This lends it a certain fluidity, versatility, and even creative expansiveness which we have not witnessed on the historical scene before. On the other hand, we observe the increasingly authoritarian tactics of this group and wonder whether there will be a recoil toward the same despotic structures of law and sovereignty that we have seen a thousand times before.

In answer to that, my suggestion would be that we take the broader situational topography into account and realize that ISIS does not represent the exhaustion of this visceral current but perhaps just an amorphous middle-ground from which further enigmatic cadres will splinter, evolve, and transform. It is a contagion borne by the air of continual war, and so there could be many forthcoming variations. From that more panoramic-kaleidoscopic standpoint, the Middle East becomes a series of deserted isles for which every fortification is always already a fortification-

under-siege (at once wrought of iron and yet incredibly fragile). For if we follow the core logic of sectarianism itself (which is one of distortional multiplicity), then we can envision how every arriving militancy will inevitably produce three counter-militancies to challenge, sabotage, and potentially overthrow the first, each with their own self-originating doctrines, aesthetics, and political strategies. This is the ricochet-effect and carnivalesque atmosphere, of ongoing rivalry and insatiability, of extreme power-seeking and vulnerability, with which we must contend at present. And so, while internally certain movements might aspire to totalitarian conditions of control, the overall constellation will keep things transient, volatile, chaotically charged, and ever-rotating between different bastions of positional superiority at any given moment. To that immanent end, there could be countless instantiations of the law, and countless incarnations of sovereignty.

2. *Violence.* I am quite drawn to the existential scaffolding behind these extremist “rituals of violence” that you correctly describe as having “little or no scriptural justification” and which seemingly occur just to endow some sense of “unity” or “purpose.” To enter this specific prism of analysis, then, I think we have to temporarily break away from examining the overarching currents/patterns and make profound incisions into the question of how subjectivity forms or unforms across such turbulent spheres of action. What is astounding here, though often with horrific repercussions, is the way in which the experience of cataclysmic ruin (for instance, the systematic devastation of a capital like Baghdad) effectively dismantles or clears out all prior, long-standing categories of identity. Thus there are endless examples of once-“ordinary” individuals now taking on extraordinary roles (schoolteachers becoming warlords, taxi drivers becoming rebels, blacksmiths becoming poets, tailors becoming mystics or cult leaders) once the continuity of socio-historical everydayness is ruptured and made obsolete. The aftermath of an urbicide (the killing of a city) or ecocide (the killing of a homeland) functions as a temporal-spatial abyss that convenes its own infinity-machine for the now-disconnected subject. In the absence of any remaining obligation to the face, one is granted the immense ontological freedom to adorn this void (of self) with any conceivable mask. That is how a PhD in Islamic Studies like al-Baghdadi (head of ISIS) decides one day to name himself a descendant of the prophet and heir to a caliphate; for when the scholar’s university is reduced to debris and broken stones, when the institutions that provide contextual significance are in ashes, he is no longer able to be “the scholar.” He becomes anonymous, an impersonal and exilic force thrown beyond the experiential point of no return. Thus the dreamscape of fanaticism takes hold.

For this reason, the book I am currently working on is dedicated to tracking the several connections between mania and fatality in Middle Eastern literature and philosophy—that is, how a particular compulsion might lead to a particular gesture of cruelty. No doubt, the great authors of this rapidly deterritorializing region shared an almost prophetic instinct that, in the vacuum left by political disaster, there would be a sharp rise in subjective disturbances and deviancies (an era of violent outsiders). Hence, one wonders whether we have to confront a completely unprecedented transaction between desire and death, and whether this nexus is precisely what drives the current species of insurgents and partisan frontrunners. As evidence, we can turn to the writings of Hassan Blasim, arguably Iraq’s most compelling literary voice of the past decades, and note how almost every short story begins from a point of

minor obsession (ablutomania: the excessive attraction to bathing or washing; dendromania: the attraction to forests; geliomania: the attraction to laughter; ecdemomania: the attraction to roaming; uranomania: the attraction to heaven; xyromania: the attraction to razors) that then stages a motive/opportunity for some kind of onslaught (patricide: the killing of a father; regicide: the killing of a king; dominicide: the killing of a master; deicide: the killing of a god; vaticide: the killing of a prophet; chronocide: the killing of time; linguicide: the killing of language; androicide: the killing of humanity). What are at first glance seemingly harmless curiosities toward an object or image or idea, invented against the backdrop of a ravaged nation-state, thereby escalate into full-scale lethal inflections. And so the link between these corridors of being—a singular focus and the will to annihilate everything external to it—might give us a paradigm for engaging with whatever brands of passion or adoration (not belief, stronger than belief) now guide the footsteps of these sectarian circles. They wander in the mind; they transfix others with their own hypnotic stares, and convert whoever remains non-ecstatic and non-spellbound into fated targets.

3. *Secrecy.* Without saying too much here, I would like to distill your reference to secrecy above as perhaps the component of surpassing global importance. As postmodern cultures in the so-called West enter into an age of ever-confining mediation, instrumentality, and chronic self-projection (i.e. the self-surveillance of social media), it appears as if we might generalize about a trend toward living only in artificial exteriority. In this narcissistic-neurotic prism, every thought, impulse, or desire must be instantaneously exorcized and flung into the network of infinite simulation where it awaits an abstract onlooker. The fact that this reflex engenders a more insidious form of totalitarianism and one-dimensionality (the auto-eradication of privacy, discretion, seclusion) is obvious, just as the anxious need for immediate techno-disclosure (of what one feels, where one is located, or what one is doing) has ironically been marketed as the signpost of liberal democratic freedom. Thus when the friends and associates of the Tsarnaev brothers were questioned after the Boston Marathon bombing, the most common reaction was one of unqualified surprise—that is, surprise over the fact that these young men could somehow harbor such alternative, sinister viewpoints. Similarly, al-Baghdadi of ISIS was said in interviews with American prison guards who once held him in captivity to be remarkably “savvy” and “quiet” and that he was never suspected to be an instigator or among “the worst of the worst.” What is most shocking here, however, is the affective presence of shock itself: for what does it mean when a society expects that whatever one sees on the performative surface in fact represents the entirety of a person’s consciousness? No obscurity or prospect of the unknown, no asylum or going-beneath, no underpass or inner refuge of speculation. This standard points to nothing less than the methodical obliteration of the right to secrecy itself (perhaps the true guarantor of freedom).

To my mind, then, the crucial question is whether we might perceive some of what is occurring in the extremist-sectarian environment (i.e. their deliberately cryptic nature) as a counter-balance to this suffocating pseudo-transparency of the postmodern. More exactly, does their apparent taste for principles of stealth, concealment, disappearance, disguise, legend, rumor, imperceptibility, esotericism,

suspicion, miracle, and subterranean-occult gathering indicate a re-instated pact with the power of secrecy against an episteme intent on destroying it?

DEVJI: Your proposition that the emergence of ISIS marks not a historical shift so much as another instance of sovereign innovation, itself immediately challenged by many others, is a very interesting one. It suggests that the kind of subjectivity involved in militant practice is both entirely performative but also superficial in its temporary and transient character. Is this why such an identity requires the greater and greater deployment of violence, so as to ground itself existentially and, indeed, legally, by pushing the militant beyond the point of no return as a wanted man?

You are no doubt right to see these subjectivities as proliferating in a situation where the state has collapsed and society can no longer sustain institutionally inherited forms of identity. But the new subjects that come to light in these situations are themselves made from received or at least transmitted images and fantasies, which is what makes “Muslim” forms of violence, for example, increasingly distinct from that characterizing other instances of social breakdown. A good example of such proliferating fantasies of identity may be found in the late Ivorian writer Ahmadou Kourouma’s novel of 2000, *Allah n’est pas Obligé*, about a child soldier in Liberia. Published a year before 9/11, this book references Islam in its title and narrator’s identity, but none of the violent fantasies it describes would today be identified as “Muslim.”

Yet “foreign fighters,” like the European Muslims who have gone to fight in Iraq and Syria, clearly do not adopt their new identities in situations of state breakdown. Instead they identify with ISIS-style Islam in a mediated and vicarious way, by rejecting the societies of their birth and residence to assume a subjectivity so abstract, in Olivier Roy’s terms, as to make its violent instantiation a necessary exercise in self-making. And so I return to my initial point, that beyond their political instrumentality, such rituals of violence might represent an impossible effort to ground subjects in an old-fashioned and even nostalgic way.

In her book *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, Wendy Brown argues that the decline of traditional forms of state sovereignty, even in rich and stable countries not threatened by war, has resulted in the disaggregation of its component parts and their symbolic proliferation in otherwise archaic forms like walls. This may also be true of the symbolic forms propagated by Islamic militancy, among which “archaic” punishments and institutions like the Caliphate stand out. Interesting is their prosaic character, tied, as I noted earlier, to the law, rather than the apocalyptic visions that haunt the analyses of Muslim “moderates” and Westerners alike.

Why is it that what we take to be “excessive” does not seem to be so for the members of ISIS, as it was even for those al-Qaeda fighters who willingly deployed such violence? Another way of putting this question is to ask why the apocalyptic figure of the Mahdi, once frequently invoked by insurgencies all over the Muslim world, has been replaced with the normative one of the Caliph? Is this an unquestioned inheritance from the Islamist past, which is to say a theme taken from Orientalist narratives, or, like Wendy Brown’s walls, does it indicate a failure to exit the old world of sovereign power?

It seems to me that the furious externalization of ISIS’s identity (rather than “ideology,” of which there seems to be none) suggests the absence of an inner, secret or esoteric life, whose realm of freedom and selfhood must therefore perversely be manifested in such exoteric practices, themselves rehearsed over and over again in an impossible effort to

combine absolute freedom and absolute servitude in the identification of deliberately “excessive” violence with the law. The “secrecy” represented by this new kind of militancy, if only in the unpredictable shift between one kind of subjectivity and another, tells us about its transient nature rather than the presence of an inner life within it.

Indeed, if anything the militant subject serves as the perfect illustration of a media-produced identity, with ISIS as obsessed by a fully transparent world as any Euro-American consumer of reality TV, webcams, surveillance, etc. Surely this is why the Shia, in particular, are viewed and treated with such loathing, because they are meant to possess an inner life that can only be condemned as hypocrisy and dissimulation. This hatred of the Shia, while drawing upon the fragments of a theological tradition, is novel in its obsession with the secret, esoteric or inner life that is, by definition, truer and freer than one described by the law.

What this means is that the law’s violence, as I have been arguing, must in its sheer excess now embody both freedom and obedience. But this unstable and contradictory formulation of militant subjectivity is unable to replace the inner life and its freedom, something that Sunni Islamists in the past had realized and Shia ones like Khomeini had relied upon to limit the realm of law. In some ways Islam as defined by ISIS represents the attempt to pinpoint the zero degree of Sunnism as a form of normative order, but in doing so illustrates merely its disintegration in a context defined by the decline of Islamism and its ideological state after the Cold War.

MOHAGHEGH: I think the conversation just hit upon another phenomenal juncture, particularly in your suggestion of a significant rift or crisis occurring across the boundary of interiority and exteriority. In essence, you rightly situate the militant subject as emerging from the void of any authentic inner world, and hence that theirs is a subjectivity always projected onto the hollow representational surfaces of some virtual stratosphere. Not shockingly then, as you point out, they overcompensate either through excessive demonstrations of violence or through excessive instantiations of the law (as if grasping for solidity among the smokescreens). No doubt, the compulsion to graphic spectacle that these movements all seem to harbor would vindicate this diagnosis of their innately aerial or artificial makeup. Taken to its logical limit, we can say that such a prototype of the Middle Eastern extremist is forever consigned to live on the outside of things. But then again, is this a purely negative or unproductive space, or does it unlock certain unique possibilities?

Even if the circumstance that we face in tracking the new breed of extremism is one of phantasmatic gamesmanship and incalculable masks without faces, then I would just make three points to perhaps fuel our interpretation onward:

1. At some level, this is precisely what the most radical Western philosophers have predicted or even desired for over a century. In its moderate articulation, there was the announcement of the death of the knowing subject as a necessary ethical gesture in the aftermath of a totalitarian, genocidal century; the interior self thus underwent a kind of mercy-killing given its role as an accomplice to the treacheries of the modern age (disbanding all interest in absolute humanity). To that end, Foucault said that the soul itself was constructed just as an instrumental means to torture subjects into submission and docility. In its more dangerously active version, however, we find Nietzsche’s interest in a profound existential transvaluation of concepts of depth and authenticity (elevating figures of

“lightness” and “overflowing” in their place), and that hint taken up by Bataille’s fascination with “expenditure” and “waste” for which all interior impulses would necessarily gush or pour outwards (embodied in his emulation of a headless being that had also cut its own heart from its chest), and then onto Deleuze and Guattari’s experimental writings on behalf of “the body without organs,” “the schizoid,” and “the nomad” who shift against the vertical monoliths of human identity in search of “lines-of-flight.” Not to mention the thousand disfigurements and malformations of the human form that haunt us from various aesthetic and literary worlds: Kafka’s insect, Picasso’s shattered torsos, Bacon’s horrible mutations of the face. Stated simply, these are all premonitions of the disappearance of true subjects, and with it the prospect of releasing individual experience to the radical outside of thought and sensation (the desert, the abyss, the open). We must take this seriously, then—the very lessons of existentialism, modernism, and post-structuralism for well over a hundred years have been geared toward an irreversible rebellion against interiority. Visions of departure and ulterior force.

2. Even more importantly for our purposes here, contemporary Middle Eastern literature is quite possibly the most severe and precise harbinger of these diagrams of runaway exteriority. The most important novel in Iranian history, Sadeq Hedayat’s *The Blind Owl*, is dedicated to nothing less than one man’s colossal fixation with his own shadow and mirror-reflection (to approximate whatever hangs across the wall); similarly, Iraqi poets Mahmoud al-Buraikan and Sargon Boulus share dreams of Bedouins, sailors, labyrinth-goers, and knife-sharpeners with no greater intent than to traverse the checkpoints of self and world; and even the iconic Palestinian writer Mahmoud Darwish tested the thematics of exile to such a drastic extent that the “I” would often take on scathing, hallucinatory shapes and ideas. Countless fugitives. And still, I would present the once-Syrian Adonis, whose political inclinations are admittedly very problematic, as perhaps the most brilliant/malevolent enemy of interior subjectivity. Stated outright, his verses are expert mutilations of guarded sites of mind and body. Three selections of lines are enough to reveal this imperative, extracted from three verses: a) “The expanse was my thread—I the astral crater....And I wrote the city...to bathe the grieving faces in the hemorrhage of ages”; b) “here he comes like a pagan spear, invading the land of alphabets, bleeding, raising his hemorrhage to the sun”; and c) I sing the language of the spearhead. I shout that time is punctured, that its walls have crumbled in my bowels. I vomited: I have no History, no present / I am Solar insomnia, the Abyss, Sin, and Action.” The rhetoric is not incidental here—hemorrhaging, vomiting, incision-excision techniques, frenetic projections and emanations of the bowels: everything here is coerced into a spilling-outward; no inwardness survives. Now I am not saying that the Islamic extremist is a perfect equivalent of these avant-garde currents, or that their predilections for decapitation are the fulfillment of this philosophical war against the tyranny of the knowing subject, for there is often little evidence of any conscious mastery or will within such extremist groups that would echo the aforementioned writers. It is to say, nevertheless, that the gutting of a long-sanctified principle of esoteric, inner life has been a long time coming, and perhaps rightfully so. This was its own

oppressive metaphysics, to say the least, now replaced by the “language of the spearhead” that punctures the totalities of time and invades the totalities of space, and carried out by an anonymous, impersonal someone who asserts that he bows before no History. I take these declarations as far more than metaphor or creative fantasy, then; I take them as maps or constellations from which to read an obscure moment.

3. In light of this convergence between Middle Eastern poetics and Western philosophy—one that presents us with an alternative criterion of subjective erasure, banishment, forgetting, and restlessness—we must ask whether it even matters that sectarian circles in our era are increasingly contrived and concocted entities (rising out of thin air). Let us propose a theory of the event here: i.e., that it is irrelevant whether such movements are ultimately true or false, as long as they happen. Thus the correct accusation of their superficiality should never lead us to underestimate the repercussions therein (the monumental impact of the surface), nor to discount the rich world of appearances from which these groups derive their power. Whether they are in fact made up of cynics, liars, charlatans, storytellers, alchemists and corrupters of tradition or discourse, whether their fanaticism is pristine or born out of ontological desperation, pales in comparison to the more pressing questions before us: Will they carry out the deed? Will they execute the almost unthinkable, because thought itself no longer possesses a subjective referent or reality-principle, and how can they so fluidly enter into the corridors of excruciation? More exactly, does their great distance from prior axioms of truth and subjectivity unleash a formula for instantaneity, hyper-endurance, and cruel extremity? Does their lack of concrete origin or context (not having to follow structures of pre-existing authority) then decrease the interval between abstraction and action, the future and the present, destiny and everydayness, in ways that will make such agents far quicker and harsher in their commitment to the task? Will they kill better for not having been genuine disciples? Hence the effect supersedes the cause: for even if they conveniently borrow from ancient or medieval schools and texts, they answer to no hermeneutic guidelines or system of judgment beyond themselves, and even then it is just a theatrical charade of allegiance (no spirit left here). What matters then, above all else, is that they do things, fatal and fatalistic things, which cannot be dismissed. We must therefore have the conviction to ask, whether we reject their ambitions or not, from where these hooded men and women generate the sheer capacity to go through with such endeavors. At some register, I can’t help but think that this descent into non-actuality, this subject-less improvisational universe, is the cornerstone of something that can surpass the tangible potency of either ideology or belief. It is also more than just machinic nihilism—rather, something closer to pretending. The paradox: that their basis in void, nonsensicality, or consumptive ethereality in fact makes them more visceral in consequence than those who still need to formally exist, and that the faraway dreams of the sectarian will elicit an entire configuration of material outcomes in the realm of flesh and bone. The more remote they become (in the imaginary), the more empirically vicious their tactics (in the so-called real).

The question then poses itself: who specifically is drawn in by the gravitational pull of this extremist nowhere and its mad exhibitions? To answer that, I am reminded of the debates of the Frankfurt School which arrived at the following conclusion: that when politics become aestheticized, it leads to fascism. Perhaps, but this is also the primary operational attraction of the carnival, an outsider atmosphere that temporarily sets up camp on the peripheries of the town, and which preys upon the boredom and suffocating banality of that town's existence in order to seduce the populace toward the unnatural, the freakish, and the forbidden. It is, in effect, its own colorful play on older theories of intrigue, abandonment, and transgression (the escapist logic of both fairytales and religion). Given that diagnosis, we can apply a similar reading to the Europeans who are suddenly joining the ranks of Islamic militancy: for much like the dead-end town, is this defection not its own subtle confession that the myths of state and society have collapsed in the Western centers and capitals? Perhaps the utter failures and disenchantments of liberal democracies are undergoing more of a silent death (one is reminded of Blanchot's theory of the disaster here: i.e., that "it ruins everything while leaving everything intact"). The façade of Western civilization therefore remains standing, but this counter-exodus or reverse migration to the Islamic conflict zones, whether of diasporic Muslim citizens going back to join the state of war or European outcasts looking for vitality/delirium among "the natives," and thus marching miraculously in the opposite direction of global capitalism, is perhaps an indication of the imperceptible bankruptcy that has now befallen the self-proclaimed West. Perhaps these aspiring militants, transfixed by the impostor prospect of yet another rising identitarian horizon, are the teachers/symptoms of an accurate intuition: that the West has nothing left to offer, and that even the wicked overtures of the martyr's carnival are more exhilarating than watching empires decay.

A last point, then, about a recent development that has taken place simultaneous with this correspondence: namely, the formation of a small squadron of Kurdish women aiming to challenge the strongholds of ISIS (the 2nd Peshmerga Battalion). This is a critical piece in the puzzle because it again allows us to envision the current trends of insurgent consolidation in the region outside of any one group; the detriment is that at any moment a given name in the media (al-Qaeda, ISIS, Boko Haram) will usurp the lens of our broader analysis and occupy a monopolistic predominance at the expense of the multitude that partakes of this environmental turmoil. Rather, there are many players here, as we have already noted, and now including an all-women cadre that, according to reports, has already begun to define itself in novel ways outside the typical symbolics of Kurdish identity. Even as they fight in solidarity with and for the survival of their nation or ethnos, their hands are inescapably drawn to sketching new and unforeseen profiles. Again, the emancipatory/traitorous possibility of the outside: what beautiful or hideous banners, chants, songs, pseudonyms, images, and philosophies will these women begin to draft now that they have traveled from their communities and into the badlands of mortal struggle? What becomings or legends will accompany this next sect, as they set their sights beyond what they have known?

DEVJI: This is a very suggestive line of thought indeed, one that allows us to resituate militant subjectivity in a significant way. John Gray has broached some of these themes already, especially with regard to the aesthetic avant-garde, and my colleague Zaheer Kazmi intends to take them in new directions by looking at other forms of Islamic radicalism. I am entirely in agreement with your point that the coming together of militants from such

diverse backgrounds, and the increasing number of converts among them, indicates a crisis much greater than that of “Islam” or Muslim societies, a concentration on whose sociology simply disguises the broader, philosophical contours of the problem. Of course it is entirely predictable that the forms of sovereign action on display in militant Islam should manifest themselves in classically Orientalist terms and sites, something that illustrates the continuing hold of the past upon them, even if only as a long-standing fantasy which is finally achieving its fulfillment.

Reading about the Middle Eastern writers you describe, it struck me that their aesthetic of de-subjectivization stands in stark contrast to the work of the Indian poet Mohammad Iqbal, one of the most important Muslim thinkers of the twentieth century. Yet like them, Iqbal recognized the crisis or outpouring of modern subjectivity, as well as the inability of traditional Sufism to address it. Sufism, of course, was the classical form that the exploration and intensification of inner life took in many Muslim societies, and though Iqbal was severely critical of it, he continued to deploy the full panoply of “mystical” terms and concepts in his work. In other words he was already conscious of the crisis you describe, and focused his work on remaking a Muslim subject, trying to build a new idea of the esoteric or hidden life within it. Just as there exists a narrative about the outpouring of subjectivity, then, so, too, might there be another about its reconceptualization. But it is not clear whether such a project has a future ahead of it.

Let us put aside, for a moment, the possibility of resituating a Muslim subject from outside the world of militant practice, something that nevertheless occupies the attention of philosophers like Abdennour Bidar. Within the wider practice of militancy itself there exist, as you point out, a number of new and potential subject-forms, including the all-woman Peshmerga regiments. What interests me about ISIS, however, is that the very thing that makes its members so cruel in the instantiation of a jihadi subjectivity might also allow them to shift out of it at a moment’s notice, as security specialists haven’t failed to notice. In other words, the “superficial” or externalized nature of their performance of selfhood is what appears to permit these men to remain so detached from its consequences. Why else do we see video clips of them smiling and laughing as they blow up bound prisoners in an abandoned jail, rather than looking serious and profound like the terrorists of old did? It is not simply the disregard for life that is crucial here, but a sense of being untouched by and distanced from one’s own actions, as if playing some particularly grotesque part in a piece of theatre, which is after all what these clips are about.

I have argued elsewhere that it is the instability of the militant’s subjectivity that permits his “conversion,” both into and out of terrorism. So his cruelty is as much an attempt to stabilize the jihadi’s self, if only by pushing it past a point of no return, as his “moderation” might be for the opposite cause. Such practices can then be seen as wagers of some kind, though it isn’t clear whether their purpose is the making and recovery of a self or its further destruction. I think it would be interesting to read Baudrillard’s book on seduction in this context, since it is all about the power of the superficial and the lure of the mirror, and deals precisely with Nietzsche’s thought experiments about the “nothingness” of the feminine or indeed of the world and of truth itself as a woman. Does this offer us a potential way of thinking about militant misogyny as well? Is the veiled woman in this sense a mirror for the male Muslim subject, defined entirely by her external appearance and behavior?

In the past, of course, the fantasy of lifting her veil, and discovering the pagan or divine truth beneath, had provided poets and mystics with a whole vocabulary to describe the inner life and its dangerous excitements. But the new Muslim woman has, in some places since the late nineteenth century, become normalized as the arch-representative of Islam, and in fact

the generic Muslim subject for modernists as much as fundamentalists. Yet as a generic Muslim she can possess no inner life or truth of her own, and is constituted by her sheer externality—she must be seen in order not to be seen. I am reminded of the books published by the first Islamist poster-girl, an American Jewish convert named Maryam Jameelah, in the 1970s, on whose frontispieces she was depicted covered from head to foot. This “portrait of the author” could, of course, have been of anybody, even a man, seeming to proscribe the very inner life that had made Jameelah interesting. Like the “hypocritical” Shia, then, the woman is always suspect, because she might conceal some inner truth, and can serve as a mirror for Muslim masculinity only by being emptied of her content.

MOHAGHEGH: No doubt, I think this is right in establishing the conceptual matrix upon which hangs one of the most dire yet telling global futures: that is, a livewire subject-formation born of the exact terms you just enlisted...“unstable,” “distant,” “untouched,” at once full of “detached laughter” and “theatrically grotesque,” continually “wagering” with the radical potentials of “nothingness” and “seduction,” and yet able to shift beyond their current (un)reality at “a moment’s notice.”

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Citation Information

Devji, Faisal and Jason Bahbak Mohaghegh, “Point of No Return: Extremism, Sectarian Violence, and the Militant Subject,” SCTIW Interlocutors Series, *SCTIW Review*, September 3, 2014. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/232>.