

Dismantling Woolwich: terrorism 'pure and simple'?

Ross McGarry asks about the relationship between the 'victim', the 'criminal' and the state

On 22 May 2013 a British soldier, Fusilier Lee Rigby, was brutally killed in Woolwich, London; the two men guilty of his murder are British born Michael Adebowale and Michael Adebolajo. The motives for this attack were purported as the involvement of the British Government in the wars in the Middle East since 2001. Uniquely video footage of the attack and its aftermath were captured by passers-by and broadcast extensively in the British media causing the binaries of this event to be presented as glaringly obvious: Fusilier Rigby was the victim of this brutal act, and Adebowale and Adebolajo are terrorists responsible for murder. Although the roles of the 'criminal' and 'victim' appear well defined in this incident, as 'witnesses' to such events criminologists are morally compelled – as Richard Quinney (1998) would suggest – to address who and what we consider to be both criminal and victimising.

Public narratives

We first came to learn of this incident through images of Adebolajo captured by the public. From the footage we witnessed him holding a bloodied meat cleaver in a blood stained hand, urging onlookers to capture the incident and potential viewers to address the foreign policy of the British Government as the motive for the attack. This became the prevailing image of the event. Not surprisingly this attack provoked public responses from across the political spectrum. Protest derived largely from voices at the Far Right of the political margins who simply

directed their antipathy towards Islam. Although this immediately raises broader and more saddening questions of why Far Right reactions and demonstrations were the most prominent in the immediate aftermath, it also brings us to another set of important critical issues that have sat in the periphery of the Woolwich attack.

To use the parlance of Robert Elias, the cultural framing of these events were 'simplistic'. This was typified by the media's initial pictures of Fusilier Rigby's body as an affordance of him as a helpless victim and the quick responses to individualise the behaviour of Adebowale and Adebolajo, blaming their actions simply as a 'perverted' interpretation of Islam. Moreover, although cleared by Ofcom, showing the images of Fusilier Rigby's lifeless body was 'insensitive' (Elias, 1994); he was a father, husband and son to his loved ones after all. The second image of him in uniform however was 'condescending' (ibid), the significance of his status as a member of the British armed forces remained largely unaddressed, whilst this image remained pronounced.

Victim and perpetrators

As Kauzlarich, et al., (2001) suggest, by focussing on the victim we are able to question what harm has been caused to whom, and why. Fusilier Rigby was a solitary White British male targeted, as Adebolajo noted during the murder trial, specifically as a member of the British military due to wearing a camouflaged backpack and walking towards Woolwich barracks (BBC News, 2013). Seeing

the victim in this way is a rare occurrence for criminology. The grim footage was shown repeatedly in the aftermath of the event, both before and after his identity was made public, and it has since been seen throughout the world. But if the first image of Fusilier Rigby's body is an 'insensitive' yet conceptualising one, the second of him in uniform becomes defining and contradictory. This soldier was targeted as a symbolic representative of state foreign policy in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The personal circumstances of Adebowale and Adebolajo are equally as complex. Both men are Black British males from lower socio-economic groups in London who had attended college and university with varying success. The older of the two men, Adebolajo (29), had declared himself as having 'no fixed abode' when appearing in court. He converted to Islam whilst studying at university, notably at the height of the controversy surrounding British involvement in the Iraq War. The younger of the two men, Adebowale (22), was reportedly bullied at school and involved in 'gang activity' during his youth. He had previously been stabbed in an incident involving drugs which resulted in the death of one of his friends and serious injury to another. A White British male, who had admitted targeting the men as he thought they were members of Al Qaeda plotting a terrorist attack, carried out the assaults and subsequent murder. Following being a witness in the murder trial, Adebowale completed a short prison sentence, was diagnosed with a mental illness and purportedly 'disappeared' for a while and returned having converted to Islam.

So the details of this incident are much more problematic than we had been first led to believe and unpicking them in this way urges us to raise some difficult questions about the relationship between the 'victim', the 'criminal' and the state.

Conflicts as state property

To reframe how we understand this attack and those involved we can employ the thinking of Nils Christie.

Upon being framed as an act of terrorism the death of Fusilier Rigby as a 'conflict' between himself, his family, and those responsible for his death was quickly subsumed as the 'property' of the British State; in particular the mass media, the police and the government. Evidence of this is apparent in the way these events were reported: Adebolajo was thrust into the foreground of the news headlines whilst in the background Fusilier Rigby was slumped, lifeless in the road, in clear view of 'witnesses'. By framing those guilty of his murder as 'Islamists' in exception of mainstream western democratic values and the victim as a laudable member of the British military, the government objectified the former and removed the agency from the latter, diminishing 'the victim to a nonentity and the offender to a thing' (Christie, 1977).

In doing so this conflict quickly became state property by subsequently embroiling the attack in narratives aligning it to 7/7, identifying the culpability of failed British security intelligence, and eventually eulogising the British military as reports emerged that the victim was a British soldier. The response from David Cameron typified this ownership by advocating the expansion of the British security estate to 'dismantle the process of radicalisation of young people' and suppressing suggestions that these events were in any way related to British foreign policy (Cameron, 2013). When considered together as state property it is apparent there has been an oversimplification of this conflict: the state had already constructed the 'criminal' and the 'victim' for us and quickly smothered the possibility of any alternative critical inquiry.

It's crime Dave, but not as we know it

Bringing the victim to the forefront of this discussion and sketching out the biographical details of those involved helps us to re-imagine who the criminal and the victim are in this event. Denying that these attacks had anything to do with British foreign policy further demonstrates the state ownership of this conflict, moreover it

strips away the social context from which Adebowale and Adebolajo have emerged and in which Fusilier Rigby lost his life. These attacks sit against a complex social backdrop that implicate, rather than obscure, the role of the state (Kauzlarich, et al., 2001); to bring this back into view we must readdress the professed motives behind this incident.

One way of doing this is to identify other violence that is implicated in the Woolwich attack. According to the Iraq Body Count (2013) on the same day as Fusilier Rigby's death, 19 people were killed in Iraq as a result of gunfire and explosives; during the same month more than 800 people lost their lives; during the same year more than 9,000 people were killed in Iraq as a result of violence. As for Afghanistan the civilian death tolls due to violence remain unaccounted for.

With the exception of the 55 tragic deaths caused during 7/7 the UK has experienced no further *civilian* fatalities in the 'war against terror', although making arbitrary comparisons of death tolls is not the intention here. What is pertinent is that – like the attack on Fusilier Rigby – British foreign policy is implicated in them *all*. David Cameron (2013) suggests that to claim that terrorists have *not* disproportionately caused the deaths of Muslims is 'an utter perversion of the truth'. Yet denying that such deaths – and indeed the attack in Woolwich – have anything to do with British foreign policy is perhaps a more acute perversion of such violence.

However, when considering this conflict as a state property questions should not be simply centred on Adebowale's and Adebolajo's *conversion* to Islam or 'radicalisation' as Muslims. This oversimplifies the matter and is distracting from the *problematique* here. More pressing are the issues which pre-date the religious affiliations of these men, including their socio-economic marginalisation despite their attempts at higher education, the Islamophobic nature of the incident experienced by Adebowale, and why these young Black British males have found themselves outside of mainstream opportunities, in close

proximity to crime and resorting to violence in protest against the state. These problems speak of perennial issues of racism and social inequality that have consistently been experienced by Black males in the UK. What is equally disconcerting are the political reactions to the events in Woolwich. These were immensely similar to the governments' unwillingness to understand the 2011 'riots' in their appropriate context of social justice. Instead the culprits were promoted as being 'feral' young people, the causes were 'criminality pure and simple', and the expansion of the British police and the punitive use of the 'full force of the law' were advocated for those involved (Cameron, 2011). So perhaps the Woolwich attack instead demonstrates an intersection between much broader issues affecting the UK relating to crime, disorder, social inequality and war. But one thing is for certain: this was not terrorism 'pure and simple'. ■

Dr Ross McGarry is Lecturer in Sociology, Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology, University of Liverpool

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