

## The colonial representation of Jihadi John: matters of life and death in the 'war on terror'

Article (Accepted Version)

James, Malcolm (2016) The colonial representation of Jihadi John: matters of life and death in the 'war on terror'. *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture* (62). ISSN 1362-6620

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/59778/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

### **Copyright and reuse:**

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

## **The colonial representation of Jihadi John: mediated matters of life and death in the 'war on terror'**

**Malcolm James**

On 19 August 2014 a video was uploaded to YouTube showing the beheading of US journalist James Foley by the man who later came to be known as Jihadi John. This was the first of seven videos depicting similar scenes. Distributed through YouTube and widely reported in the press, these videos became an important part of the argument about the barbarity and backwardness of ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) and the Muslim East. At the same time they became a focus for anxieties about 'the enemy within' – British-born supporters of ISIL, and by extension the wider British Muslim population. While seven Jihadi John videos have been released, this article analyses the first three, which were among the most widely disseminated and reported on. These videos show the executions of James Foley, British aid worker David Haines, and US-Israeli journalist Steven Sotloff. This article explores the colonial representation of Jihadi John in this context. It addresses how these images contributed to the war on terror's aesthetics of terror, the significance of their mediated condition and how their representation contributed to on-going colonial violence.

It should go without saying that there is no possible justification for these beheadings. The aim here, rather, is to show how the reception of the beheading videos helps contribute to the colonial binary of 'us' and 'them' that is deployed by the US, UK and ISIL to justify their campaigns. In the context of a further UK bombing campaign in Syria, the increased criminalisation of Muslims living in the UK, and extended aggressions in Syria and Iraq, this article makes a case *for* the valuing all human life and *against* the kinds of colonial representation that work to dehumanise some people so that their death (or oppression) becomes possible.

### **Who is Jihadi John?**

Before entering into this analysis it is useful to establish how Jihadi John received his name. The moniker 'Jihadi John' was created by the *Daily Mail* to refer to the executioner in the first of the now notorious ISIL videos. According to the *Mail*, the name 'John' was given to one of four apparently British members of an ISIL cell called 'the Beatles' by a group of hostages. The other members were nicknamed Ringo, George and Paul.

After the identification of Jihadi John as a British fighter, his real identity became a matter of intense speculation. At the end of August 2014, British papers reported that Londoner Abdel-Majed Abdel Bary, the son of Osama Bin Laden's London spokesperson, was a key suspect. This construction of the terrorist threat ran alongside the story (reported by *Evening Standard* on 23 August 2014) that Abdel Bary was rapper L Jinny. There was therefore an implied connection between Abdel Bary's supposed terrorist danger and longstanding concerns about the disconnection of black young men and black popular culture from white middle-class Britain.

On 26 February 2015, *The Washington Post* identified Jihadi John as Mohammed Emwazi, a University of Westminster graduate. Jihadi John's educational status then fed into a history of panics associated with home-grown terrorism; concerns which reached back to the period of British Irish Republican campaigns, and to the 2005

London bombings.<sup>i</sup> Emwazi's participation in what were formerly the educational bastions of white middle-class Britain seemed to indicate that extremism and radicalisation were operating everywhere. It helped cement the idea that under every moderate Muslim mask was a closet extremist, a foreign enemy.<sup>ii</sup>

Consequently, concerns about Emwazi's liminal condition – between the lines of East and West – were aired. As with recent debates on the 'Jihadi Bride' school girls who left East London for Syria,<sup>iii</sup> and longer standing concerns over the cultural location of second generational migrants, the public was asked to again consider the danger posed by those who disrupt the neat ordering of civilisational discourses. Emwazi's seemingly unfathomable career change – from university student to ISIL executioner – drew attention to this dangerous grey zone. In his transformation from participant in the Western education-consumer-citizen myth, to Islamic terrorist; from model school pupil 'little Mo', bearer of society's future, to barbarian, Jihadi John triggered the fears associated with the 'good' Muslim turned 'bad'. He came to simultaneously symbolise the foreign jihadi, liminal threat, rapper and corrupted future.

Following neoliberal discourse, this investment in Jihadi John the individual permitted renewed public fears to be made sense of through his personal failure towards others. Although his naming as 'John' was an accident of circumstance, this personal failure then became that of an English Everyman – a (liberal) John Bull – and the violation of that normative ideal.

On Friday 13 November 2015 British prime minister David Cameron announced that Jihadi John had almost certainly been killed by a drone strike in central Raqqa, Syria. As with Saddam Hussain and Osama Bin Laden before him he had been 'evaporated' into the colonial ether – only to live on in the growing clamour for war.

### **Culture talk and the spectacle of terrorism**

This construction of Jihadi John can only be understood in relation to the colonial discourses of the 'war on terror'.

As Edward Said has argued, colonial discourse on the Middle East is dominated by a civilisation divide between the West and Islam. More specifically, this divide is between secular modernity as forward-thinking and Islam as pre-modern and backward-thinking. In the war on terror these themes appear through the construction of the West as free, civilised and modern and the East as the inverse. Mahmood Mamdani refers to this kind of civilisational rhetoric as 'culture talk': a discourse that conveniently obfuscates historical and post-colonial analyses in favour of reductive cultural/racialised explanations for global events.<sup>iv</sup> President George W Bush was a great enumerator of these binaries.

We value life. The terrorists ruthlessly destroy it. We value education. The terrorists do not believe women should be educated or should have health care or should leave their homes. We value the right to speak our minds. For the terrorists free expression can be grounds for execution. We respect people of all faiths and welcome the free practice of religion.<sup>v</sup>

In the UK, this culture talk built on the post-colonial construction of British Asians and Muslims. Formerly stereotyped as docile and effeminate, from the late 1980s

onwards British Asians started to be racialised, alongside Islam and Muslims, as pre-modern, barbaric and dangerous. Key moments in the development of this discourse include the *Satanic Verses* controversy of 1988 (when Salman Rushdie was issued with a fatwa by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini), the representation of the Gulf War in Iraq between 1990 and 1991, the Bradford Riots of 1995, the 'Northern Disturbances' of 2001 and the London bombing in 2005.

However, the war on terror's culture talk has not been confined to the US and UK. Osama Bin Laden, Abu Musab al Zarqawi (former leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq) and ISIL have also propagated these discourses. Indeed documents produced by ISIL and al-Qaeda define the elimination the 'grey zone' between the East-West binary as a key strategic objective. One tool in this strategy has been the beheading video.

A series of beheading videos, attributed to Abu Musab al Zarqawi, appeared after the first invasion of Iraq, in 2004, distributed on websites and television networks across the US and UK. They included depiction of the deaths of US citizen Nicholas Berg and UK citizen Kenneth Bigley. Underlining the colonial divide, the video of Berg, dressed in an orange jumpsuit, stated that his beheading was a response to the treatment of Muslims in Abu Ghraib, the US's Iraqi torture prison.

Brought to public attention through the corporate circuitries of American digital media, Berg's execution video became the most popular searched-for item on the Internet. Bigley's video was not widely seen in the UK, but the actions of then prime minister Tony Blair ensured its notoriety in civilisational discourse. On hearing the news of Bigley's death, Blair flew back from Washington to the UK to conduct a bible reading at an Anglican service for the deceased man.

The videos of Foley, Sotloff and Haines were similarly intended and received. Foley's video entitled 'a message to America' shows Jihadi John, dressed in black, condemning the American attacks in Iraq and describing his action as a reprisal. The execution takes place in a desert scene, with Foley, in an orange jumpsuit, kneeling beneath Jihadi John. As with the former videos, the orange jumpsuit references the uniforms worn by detainees at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. The video shows Jihadi John holding a knife to Foley's throat. The following shot is of Foley's decapitated head on his torso. The video ends with an image of Sotloff and a warning to Barack Obama that his fate depends on the President's future actions. The executions of Sotloff and Haines were later shown in similar fashion. In the third video, Haines is required to blame his death on David Cameron for entering into coalition with the US against ISIL in Iraq.

The beheading videos can be seen as an integral part of what Henry Giroux refers to as the 'spectacle of terrorism'. This refers to the panoply of realist imagery associated with the war on terror, which as well as the beheading videos includes images of the collapse of the Twin Towers, aerial bombardments and cruise missile strikes. The spectacle of terrorism consists of imagery that appeals to fear, survival, death, life and security; it uses shock and awe to bypass democracy, debate and dialogue.<sup>vi</sup>

While Giroux focuses on the US, the beheading videos in fact reveal how the spectacle of terrorism has proceeded through the interconnected involvement of the US and UK governments, al-Qaeda in Iraq, ISIL and corporate media and

entertainment companies. Through the production of the videos, the management of their reception, and their distribution, these actors have ensured the continued prominence of civilisational discourses. They have also jointly contributed to its aesthetics.

We are all only too familiar with the spectacles of terror: they are woven into the military-strategic aesthetics of the warring parties, and are developed in tandem with the media and entertainment industries. Thus the aesthetics of the multi-million dollar grossing *Grand Theft Auto* has directly influenced ISIL imagery,<sup>vii</sup> while the aerial bombing scenes in *Call of Duty* bear close resemblance to the portrayal by the US and UK military of ‘successful’ Western airstrikes. This is in addition to the ubiquitous aesthetics of shock and awe used in embedded news footage, films such as *Hurt Locker* or Showtime’s hit series *Homeland*, and evoked in numerous political speeches.

### **Colonial representations of killing**

This was the context in which the Jihadi John videos were interpreted when they came to UK public attention through both traditional and social media sources. In order to understand the colonial representations of the videos, and ultimately how their digital condition fed into a clamour for violence, it is first necessary to interrogate their presentation of killing.

In his discussion of the philosophical dilemmas presented by drone warfare to theories of war, Grégoire Chamayou notes that, from the guillotine onwards, modern Europe has associated just killing with modern mechanical efficiency, and with the alienation of the killer from killed.<sup>viii</sup> In this way, deaths from drones or cruise missile have come to be represented as moral, civilised and modern (regardless of who they kill or how they kill them). When mechanical killing at distance is represented as being modern and civilised, killing at close quarters represents what is pre-modern and uncivilised about the East. It is to this that prime minister David Cameron appealed when, following the release of the first video showing the death of James Foley, he cut short his holiday and returned to Downing Street to condemn ‘the barbaric and brutal act that [had] taken place’. Jihadi John’s own death in central Raqqa was acclaimed as a ‘clean hit’ and a just act by US and UK government officials – coming courtesy of a 45kg Hellfire missile shot from 10,000ft by a Predator drone operated from Creech Air Force Base, Nevada.

The colonial representation of killing pertains not only to the methods of execution but also to the humanity of victims and the inhumanity of the killer. The faces of the victims reference their individual humanity, and a particular investment was made in the individual humanity of David Haines. It was widely reported that Haines had worked with refugees in Syria, South Sudan and Libya, was an aid worker and had a family. Correspondingly, he was represented as both a saviour of the Middle East and its victim. When reporting on the reactions of his family, and that of David Cameron, the press juxtaposed these dual statuses. Makau Mutua reminds us of the important role played by both the saviour and the victim in colonial discourse.<sup>ix</sup> The saviour is the colonial figure who rescues the colonised victim from the savage. Although it may well not have been his own perspective, the death of Haines then provided an allegory for the civilising mission of the West and the threat posed to it by Islam. In the hands of British media and politicians, Haines became symbolic of the West’s thwarted

benevolence, while Jihadi John became the symbol of Islam's barbarity and its inherent threat to the West. Contrasted with the face of Haines, the hood of the executioner referenced the East's inhumanity and pre-guillotine savagery.

Jihadi John's hood also functioned to represent the faceless masses, unnamed dead and dehumanised life forms that appear in colonial discourse as counterpoints to the humanity of the European. Indeed, the war on terror depends on these crude stereotypes for its prosecution. Chinua Achebe notes in his comments on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* the way in which the humanity of the white Europeans on the boat is counterposed to the faceless and frenzied black masses on the riverbank. Jihadi John's hood functioned similarly in the UK to represent the war on terror's inhumanity, thereby legitimising the West's civilising mission.

In this context of entrenched colonial binaries, the aid worker and two journalists became allegories for an unacceptable reversal of the normal patterns of dominance. Their subordination beneath Jihadi John became symbolic of the emasculation of the West by a generic and faceless Islam. As with the imagery of the Twin Towers under attack, this emasculation generated fear of the reversal of colonial and racial order. There are similarities here to Enoch Powell's stoking of racist fears in his 1968 *Rivers of Blood* speech, in his imagery of 'the black man [having] the whip hand over the white man'.

### **Absence and the digital image**

These representations could only work because of the absences inherent in the imagery. Indeed, as Stuart Hall noted in 'The Work of Representation', visual representation works as much through what the image doesn't tell us, as what it does.<sup>x</sup>

In the first instance, the nature of the visual image means that it is limited in what it can reveal about the history and context of the moment in which it initially appeared. When it travels to different places, these absences have to be inferred and filled in by the viewer, using information provided to them by their own social and historical surroundings.<sup>xi</sup> These absences thus allow visual images to be interpreted in different contexts in different ways.

The digital condition of the Jihadi John videos further magnifies the absences of the analogue image. As with the analogue image, the digital image provides scarce commentary on the history and context of the videos. They don't reveal the interrelated histories of ISIL and colonialism, or the broader political history of the war on terror. These absences make them open to interpretation. In the UK, where the understanding of the Middle East is dominated by the kinds of culture talk referenced above, they became over-determined by the civilisational divide narrative. They easily slotted into binary discourses on freedom and barbarism. Indeed, the framing of the videos encouraged this. The desert backdrop means there is very little information that can be interpreted from the surroundings. The actions shown, and the narratives the videos contain, are thus centre stage, inviting a Manichean interpretation.

The digital distribution of the Jihadi John videos provided them with properties of speed and replication that exceeded earlier formats. In addition to their continual referencing in traditional media and political discourse, they appeared on platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and regional social media – platforms that collectively

have more than one billion daily views. Through these platforms, and the wider media ecology of mobile phones and other digital devices, the videos were extensively replicated and hyperlinked. As Rubenstein and Sluis put it, they moved through the digital network in several directions at once, ‘decomposing and recombining, multiplying and aggregating into different contexts’.<sup>xii</sup> They could be viewed everywhere at the same time. This exacerbated the absences already noted, and left them more radically open to colonialist interpretation in different social contexts.

These kinds of interpretation were compounded by the intensity associated with social media. Because of the perception of speed and immediacy that accompanies YouTube and other social media platforms, viewers were given the impression not that the beheadings *had* happened – as is usually the case with analogue images – but that they *were* happening. The relatively high resolution of the image and the close relationship that viewers maintain with their various screens heightened this intimate aesthetic engagement. It compounded the affective registers of fear and anxiety through its return to the spectacle of terror.

The digital format also allows for manipulation. *The Daily Telegraph* revealed that the video depicting the beheading of James Foley might not actually show a beheading at all; instead it was a montage of the act – taking advantage of camera trickery, slick post-production techniques and the extreme malleability of digital code.<sup>xiii</sup> This posed the question: what kind of reality are dominant interpretations based on? However, this dimension of the videos received scant mainstream attention. This was not only because it called into question the truth claims of the video’s dominant interpretations, but also, and maybe more importantly, because it was entirely congruent with the realist simulacra of the war on terror.

### **Jihadi John videos and the justification of colonial violence**

Returning one last time to Stuart Hall, we are reminded that these videos were not only a site of representation, but also an event through which meaning and action could be generated. And although it is impossible to isolate the effects that the Jihadi John videos had on local or global politics, or to disentangle them from the effects produced by other actions that were occurring at the time, it is useful to reflect on the ways in which they contributed to the justification for colonial violence, and in particular to calls for war abroad and criminalisation of Muslims in the UK.

All this is not to detract from the ways in which these videos have contributed to the recruitment and political strategies of ISIL in the Middle East. For those interested, scholars of international relations have paid substantial attention to this dimension of their work. However, given the recent vote in the House of Commons to bomb Syria, it seems appropriate to end this article by addressing how the videos form part of the armoury through which the case for another Western bombing war has been made, and, conjointly, how this relates to the criminalisation of Muslims in the UK.

The first beheading video was released on YouTube on 14 August 2014, followed by two others on 2 and 13 September. These videos played a role in undermining the opposition to bombing Syria that had resulted in a parliamentary defeat for prime minister Cameron at the end of August. Thus on 26 September 2014, with the support of Liberal Democrat and Labour MPs, the Conservative leadership won a vote – 524

to 43 – in favour of UK support for the new US bombing campaign in Iraq. In the motion the following words were used:

This House condemns the barbaric acts of ISIL against the peoples of Iraq including the Sunni, Shia, Kurds, Christians and Yazidi and the humanitarian crisis this is causing; recognises the clear threat ISIL poses to the territorial integrity of Iraq and the request from the Government of Iraq for military support from the international community and the specific request to the UK Government for such support; further recognises the threat ISIL poses to wider international security and the UK directly through its sponsorship of terrorist attacks and its murder of a British hostage; acknowledges the broad coalition contributing to military support of the Government of Iraq including countries throughout the Middle East.

Echoing the colonialist language of the war on terror, the motion used barbarism and the death of a British hostage to justify an air attack that would cause civilian deaths. This action was framed as part of a just and humanitarian war.

At the same time, arguments in favour of surveillance and criminalisation of Muslims in the UK were intensified. In November 2014, Metropolitan Police Chief Hogan Howe responded to the backlash against surveillance following the Edward Snowden revelations by invoking the threat of home-grown terrorism as a justification for greater interception powers. He warned that the Internet was a prime Jihadi recruiting device. Meanwhile, echoing the sentiment of the Counter Terrorism Bill that was at that point passing through parliament, Mark Rowley, Assistant Metropolitan Police Commissioner and lead for national counter-terrorism, prefaced his comments on the need for community (i.e. Muslim community) vigilance with the observation that:

Every reasonable person in the country has been touched by the pitiless murder of James Foley at the hands of Islamic State terrorists, and the murderer's apparent British nationality has focused attention on extremism in the UK as well as the Middle East.

That is to say, the videos provided a context in which continued colonial violence could be argued for, while any discussion about the relationship between security, colonial war, racialisation and marginalisation could be bypassed.

The reported death of Jihadi John on Friday 13 November 2015 provided a similar opportunity. Highlighting the immediacy of the moment, David Cameron cut short his Chequers conference with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and rushed to Downing Street to make the announcement. Drawing attention to the clean and just action that had almost certainly ended the life of Jihadi John, he sought to prepare anew the grounds for bombing Syria. In the event, that moment was short-lived: on the same day the attacks in Paris occurred. That led directly to the vote to extend Britain's bombing campaign in the Middle East to Syria.

At a time when it is again difficult to know humanity beyond the pitfalls of culture talk, the history of the Jihadi John videos should caution us against the further entrenchment of racial, colonial and civilisational discourses, and on the basis of this

prompt us to engage in a robust interrogation of the same to the end of charting a renewed humanism.

*Thanks to Claire Alexander, Nabila Munawar, Naaz Rashid and Sivamohan Valluvan for commenting on earlier drafts of this paper.*

---

<sup>i</sup> Nickels, H., et al. (2012) 'Constructing 'suspect' communities and Britishness: mapping British press coverage of Irish and Muslim communities, 1974–2007. ' . *European Journal of Communication*, vol.27, no.2, pp.135-151.

<sup>ii</sup> Kumar, D. (2012) *Islamophobia and the politics of Empire*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, pp.139. Kundnani, A. *The Muslims are coming! Islamophobia, extremism, and the domestic war on terror*. London: Verso, pp.109.

<sup>iii</sup> See for a full interrogation of these discourses – Rashid, N. (Forthcoming 2016) *Veiled Threats: Producing the Muslim Woman in Public Policy Discourses*. Bristol: Policy

<sup>iv</sup> Mamdani, M. (2002) 'Good Muslim, bad Muslim: a political perspective on culture and terrorism'. *American Anthropologist*, vol.104, no.3, pp.766-775.

<sup>v</sup> Bush, G.W. (2001) 'A nation challenged: excerpts from president's speech: 'we will prevail' in war on terrorism'. Available from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/09/us/nation-challenged-excerpts-president-s-speech-we-will-prevail-war-terrorism.html?pagewanted=all>. Accessed 25th November 2015.

<sup>vi</sup> Giroux, H.A. (2006) *Beyond the spectacle of terrorism: global uncertainty and the challenge of the new media*. Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm.

<sup>vii</sup> Rose, S. (2014) 'The Isis propaganda war: a hi-tech media jihad'. Available from: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/07/isis-media-machine-propaganda-war>. Accessed 26th November 2015.

<sup>viii</sup> Chamayou, G. (2015) *Drone theory*. London: Penguin.

<sup>ix</sup> Mutua, M. (2001) 'Savages, victims, and saviours: the metaphor of human rights'. *Harvard International Law Journal*, vol.42, no.1, pp.201-245.

<sup>x</sup> Stuart Hall, 'The work of representation', in Hall, Evans and Nixon (eds), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Sage 2013.

<sup>xi</sup> Hall, S. (1997) 'The work of representation', in Stuart Hall ed. *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices*. London: Sage in association with the Open University, pp.12-75.

<sup>xii</sup> Rubinstein, D. and K. Sluis. (2013) 'The digital image in photographic culture: algorithmic photography and the crisis of representation', in Martin Lister ed. *The photographic image in digital culture*. Second edition. Abingdon: Routledge, pp30.

<sup>xiii</sup> Gardner, B. (2014) 'Foley murder video 'may have been staged''. Available from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/bill-gardner/11054488/Foley-murder-video-may-have-been-staged.html>. Accessed 26th November 2015.