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Fatal Attraction: The Islamic State's Politics of Sentimentality

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The ability of the Islamic State (IS) to gain virtual and literal ground in terms of recruitment throughout the world is very much linked to its politics of sentimentality.

The militant group appears to be creating, through the romanticization of the Caliphate, a type of (virtual and actual) space where a sense of community reigns. By using affect in their appeals, the IS promises its recruits a chance to depart from mundane daily life to participate in something bigger and supposedly better. The spokesman for the Islamic State, Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani ash-Shami, proclaimed when declaring the establishment of the Caliphate that:

> The time has come for those generations that were drowning in oceans of disgrace, being nursed on the milk of humiliation, and being ruled by the vilest of all people, after their long slumber in the darkness of neglect—the time has come for them to rise. The time has come for the ummah of Muhammad (peace be upon him) to wake up from its sleep, remove the garments of dishonor, and shake off the dust of humiliation and disgrace, for the era of lamenting and moaning has gone, and the dawn of honor has emerged anew. The sun of jihad has risen. The glad tidings of good are shining. Triumph looms on the horizon. The signs of victory have appeared.[1]

This statement demonstrates the IS's aim to appeal to a form of victimhood that conceives itself as having been treated unjustly, as having been marginalized and abused by the West. As such, the IS claims to offer the disenfranchised—who see no way to live in honor in the West—a chance to reinvent themselves as heroes in the IS's dystopic reality. It does so by concocting fantasies of belonging that are presented in the form of relief from what is experienced in the lived real.

In one of the more popular videos titled "There is No Life without Jihad," stirring images appear as the audience follows the story of Muhammad, a young Syrian battling internal melancholy at the state of affairs in his country. The video is measured and sober in both tone and content: no gruesome decapitations are featured; no kidnappings, sex slaves, or bloodshed is visible. On the contrary, the video expertly targets real grievances by its depiction of Muhammad's helplessness in the face of a crumbling world. The viewer follows Muhammad into an IS recruitment office where he meets a community of people who believe in the same cause and are going through the same internal struggle and who are there to offer guidance, support and salvation. As the story unfolds, it seems that the only way out of the darkness for Muhammad (and his likes) is by joining the Caliphate. This is an example of what Laurent Berlant calls the "intimate public," a space and place that

is sheltered from “social antagonisms, exploitation, compromised intimacies, and the attrition of life.”[2] An “intimate public” exists in a *juxta*-political safe world where various narratives are transformed into one.[3] As such, the intimate public created by the IS circulates general themes of suffering, humanity, and victimhood with which identification is possible regardless of a person’s religion or whether they have experienced the exact same kind of suffering as their fellow “comrade.” Instead it is individuals’ diverse experiences of suffering and victimization that converse with one another in this intimate public.



Screen grab from video 'There is No Life Without Jihad'

Slavoj Žižek wrote that “the function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape.”[4] Indeed, IS recruitment strategies call on people to “choose happiness over misery” by joining the ranks of the Caliphate, so in a way, a different “social reality” becomes itself the escape for the IS recruit. Indeed, the general feel of the “There is no Life without Jihad” video that features young Muhammad is that the Islamic State extends camaraderie and the possibility of heroic activity. Such strategies are commented on by J.M. Berger, who claims that the easier recruits for the Islamic State are individuals who feel insufficient, humiliated, disrespected, full of untapped potential and insatiable ambitions, who are angry at perceived or real injustices and are

therefore looking for an entity to blame for their struggles.[5] In this sense, the video supports a potential recruit's grievances and ultimately introduces or reinforces the idea that the source of their angst is outside themselves.

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Additionally, one of *Dabiq* magazine's articles reads that "[the] revival of the Khilāfah gave each individual Muslim a concrete and tangible entity to satisfy his natural desire for belonging to something greater."[6] This type of summons functions through the creation of a sense of community to which Muslims belong, a community that protects itself regardless of whether the individual members of that community have actually met face-to-face. It can be said that a virtual intimate public is concocted and later actualized upon *hijrah* (migration) to the Khilafa. This is precisely the appeal of the IS, in that it allows its adherents to negotiate a form of belongingness to a world in which they are not only seen, but recognized and called upon. The Muslim victim as such becomes a symbol for general victimhood, so that no matter what potential recruits' grievances are, they are able to identify with the suffering of the Muslim victim. In turn, this identification is made possible through the intimate public where belongingness is solicited using sentimentality, which binds together the various experiences of its audience into one narrative that is emotionally encompassing and generalizable to each individual case.[7]

The intimate public focuses recruits' personal narratives on "identification with the suffering, endurance, and sacrifice"[8] of Muslim peoples and thereby places more emphasis on the concepts of humanity and suffering than on Islamic tradition. As such, a picture of Muslim humanity emerges from the existential reality derived from a common suffering that is identifiable. This is what the proclamation of the Caliphate aimed at depicting: an identified victimhood that belongs somewhere and whose suffering is not only recognized, but will eventually be alleviated as it reaches "honor" and "victory."



ISIS spokesman Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-Adnani ash-Shami

These strategies confirm the observation made by Berlant, who argues that individuals have an “expressed desire to be somebody in a world where the default is being nobody or, worse, being presumptively all wrong.”[9] In a sense, the intimate public thrives by creating an emotional connection that produces a sense of relief and an answer to the persistent internal struggles of individual recruits. This emotional connection is actualized by the creation of a “market domain where a set of problems associated with” being righteous and Muslim in this moment in history arises. The term “market” employed by Berlant in her analysis refers to commodities (videos, books, articles etc.) being circulated with the aim of enabling a sort of “emotional generality” regardless of the “diverse historical locations of the readers and the audience, especially of class and race.”[10]

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Indeed, IS propaganda tools such as recruitment videos and their *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* magazines (among others) are prime examples of disseminated commodities that illicit in some readers a feeling of identification or belonging that they cannot find elsewhere. As such the "generic-but unique"[11] struggle of each becomes identifiable with others in this interwoven intimate public by creating a "sentimental subject" who "is connected to others who share the same sense that the world is out of joint, without necessarily having the same view of the reasons or solutions."[12] Berlant argues that sentimentality centers around the imaginary of "the good life" and that it works together with a view of the world that justifies people's feelings as containing a wisdom about the world that could make it better.[13] So for dispossessed people struggling with the increasing pressure of the present historic moment and its alienating factors, IS proposes a simplistic narrative that makes a life of sacrifice seem sensible.

Notes

1. "The Return of Khilafah." *Dabiq*, July 5, 2014, 3.

2. Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Duke University Press, 2008), 6.

3. ibid, 1-13.

4. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Verso, 2008), 76.

5. Berger, "ISIS and the Foreign-Fighter Phenomenon"; J.M Berger, "How We Underestimated ISIL."

6. "The Extinction of the Grayzone," *Dabiq*, February 12, 2015, 57.

7. Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 5.

8. Faisal Devji, "The Terrorist as Humanitarian." *Social Analysis* 53, no. 1 (January 1, 2009): 174

9. ibid, 3

10. ibid, 5

11. ibid, 6

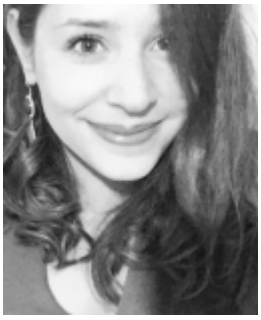
12. ibid, 21

13. ibid, 21-22

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