

The Clash of Civilisations and the War on Terror(ists): An Imperialist Discourse

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The 11 September 2001 attacks on America triggered the US "war against terror". The flux of the post-Cold War era was fixed in place with a new economy of danger. At the heart of this war, I would argue, is the formation of a new articulation of America's role in the world and of American identity. This discourse draws on familiar tropes in American history and policy. The war on terror represents a rearticulation of an American "civilising" mission. At this crucial stage when the discourse of American foreign policy is being debated and disseminated, we must question the logic that is in play.

This essay makes two chief arguments. First, the administration of George W. Bush has accepted the logic of Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilisations" thesis and is acting so as to prevent a coalition of the "rest" against the West. Second, this dynamic is at work in the war on terror in what I term an "economy of danger". By "economy of danger", I mean the political use of danger as a commodity or resource in

a particular field of public discourse (such as McCarthyism, the war on drugs and the war on terror). I argue that the aim of the war on terror is not to achieve some kind of military victory, but continually to marshal perceptions of danger to justify American policies.

In Huntington's Footsteps

The "clash of civilisations" thesis has become a touchstone for contemporary theorising about America's role in world politics. The war on terror has reinforced the core arguments of cultural clash, the irreconcilability of "civilisations", and the need for American leadership. In his first short article, and in his subsequent book, Huntington proposed a theory which integrated all of the anxieties of the post-Cold War world: globalisation, culture, identity, religion, fundamentalism, and civilisational decline.¹ In short, he argued that cultural groupings will be the main actors, and culture and identity the main axes of conflict. These conflicts are more insidious and intractable than previous, "rational", conflicts like the Cold War, because identity and culture are zero-sum conflicts.

However, the designation "civilisation" only makes sense with the construction of

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1. Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?", *Foreign Affairs* (summer 1993), and *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

marginalised “others”.² In the imperial discourse which Huntington disinters, barbarians and barbarism are the natural enemies of civilisation. In his cartography of the new world order, Huntington represents Islamic civilisation as youthful, fundamentalist, leaderless and, as such, barbarian. As is evident, this has been adopted wholesale by the Bush administration—even to the extent of naming countries involved in Huntington’s Islamic–Confucian alliance as the “axis of evil”.

Huntington’s description of the post–Cold War world also assigns a place for America at the head of Occidental, or Western, civilisation. In fact, Huntington warns that unless the West unites under the leadership of America—and unless America assumes that leadership role—the countries of Western civilisation will “hang together or hang separately”. This call has been echoed by a number of conservative critics. The appeal to the defence of civilisation is thought to be far more powerful than any appeal to a more narrowly nationalist banner—although there is a conflation of American and Western interests. Most criticism of Huntington’s work has accepted his theoretical claims and focused on his empirical claims. In this paper, I argue that Huntington’s argument can be seen as serving an identity-function, constructing a new identity/role for the United States by describing an era of globalisation, anxiety, and insecurity, and a new economy of danger.

Urging American Primacy

Huntington argues that the international answer to the clash of civilisations is American leadership of Western civilisation. He

revitalises what might be termed a “civilisational realism”, in that he endorses the following three claims:

1. Civilisations are the key cultural groupings in world politics, led by core states supported by the kin-country syndrome.
2. States seek power, cultures seek conversion, and civilisations seek universalisation.
3. All civilisations, and states within civilisations, make political decisions.

Huntington also links three sets of “clashes”: the clash of civilisations, which is figured as the West versus the rest (Islamic and Confucian civilisations); the *real* clash, which is between the West and the post-West (James Kurth’s term for multiculturalism and feminism); and the real global clash, which is between Civilisation and barbarism.

Although Huntington is adamant that the “West is unique, not universal”, his politico-cultural allegiance becomes absolutely clear in his policy prescriptions, which warn that a declining West will lead to a threat to Western identity, culture and power. In this set of rhetorical correspondences, Huntington aligns the West with America, civilisation and the self.

This oversimplification is further inscribed in his description of the world:

The polarisation of “East” and “West” culturally is in part another consequence of the universal and unfortunate practice of calling European civilization Western civilization. Instead of “East and West,” it is more appropriate to speak of “the West and

2. The terms “civilisation” and “barbarian” should be taken as if in inverted commas throughout this essay. Each of these terms has been contested, and their definition is always a political manoeuvre, as elaborated in my *Barbarians and Civilization in International Relations* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

the rest," which at least implies the existence of many non-Wests.³

This dualism of the West and the rest makes the West the original, pure, and central term, whereas the rest is derivative, residual and peripheral. Offering a "metageography" of world conflict, Huntington attempts to unify Western civilisation around the leadership of America, and to urge America to lead Western civilisation. His response to the post-Cold War world is typical of the reluctant imperialist: confident of Western civilisation's merits, but aware, and anxious, of the rising power of non-Western societies. This anxiety is vital to the economy of danger.

Internal Subversion

Besides the external threat, there is a second, domestic, threat to American and Western identity, according to Huntington. It "comes from immigrants from other civilizations who reject assimilation and continue to adhere to and propagate the values, customs, and cultures of their home societies" (pp. 304–5). Huntington argues that these culturally threatening domestic groups are also those that pose a demographic threat to Western homogeneity: Muslims in Europe and Hispanics in America. Muslims are also a problem for America, however, because America is bound to lead the Western civilisation of which Europe is a vital part. As such, while non-assimilated Hispanics are the immediate threat, non-assimilated Muslims become the next vector of threat.

Huntington avers the early twentieth-century view, borrowed in turn from Spengler and Toynbee, that civilisations are politico-religio-cultural groupings. As a consequence,

it is only in his final chapters that he starts to refer to barbarism as Collingwood uses the term—a repudiation of civility. After three hundred pages of referring to "civilisations" in the plural, Huntington introduces the notion of "Civilisation" (with a capital "C"), which denotes the best that humankind has to offer.

In his conclusion, Huntington seemingly argues that a worse clash looms than the clash of civilisations:

On a worldwide basis Civilization seems in many respects to be yielding to barbarism, generating the image of an unprecedented phenomenon, a global Dark Ages ... In the greater clash, the global "real clash" [is] between Civilization and barbarism. (P. 321)

Two things are particularly telling about these assertions. First, Huntington indicates that what is being produced is not a global Dark Ages, but rather the image of it. However, in his discourse, the representation of disorder is just as worrying as disorder itself. Second, Huntington appropriates the term "the real clash" to apply to his new, greater clash—which supersedes the clash of civilisations.

Internationally, Huntington proposes a course very similar to that of the current Bush administration. He does not identify a specific threat against which America and the West might defend themselves. Rather, he suggests an environment of general threat, micro-regions of special danger (the fault lines where two civilisations meet), and agents of danger (the Islamic–Confucian connection). The general threat Huntington describes must be understood as the clash between "Civilisa-

3. Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations*, p. 33.

tion”—led by the West, in turn led by America—and barbarism. As with any invocation of this trope, in Huntington’s formulation the barbarian cannot be pacified, engaged, or contained. The barbarian is at the gates of Civilisation, and America’s chief defence is to strengthen its identity domestically and avoid any interference in other people’s conflicts. The war on terror complicates this narrative because Bush has committed America to taking the conflict to any individual, group or state which sponsors terrorism. Yet despite some superficial differences between them, I would argue that the logic of each grand strategy is the same: the mobilisation of domestic American political identity to achieve foreign-policy aims. America is not a global policeman, but more precisely a global sheriff who keeps the local townsfolk in line through the dispensing of violent (and often idiosyncratically defined) justice.

Disavowing the Model

One of the most consistent messages of the Bush administration has been that the war on terror is *not* a clash of civilisations. Rarely has an administration done so much to distance itself from a model of international relations which seems on the face of it so applicable to its actions. Publicly, President Bush quickly disassociated the 11 September terrorists from Islam:

These acts of violence against innocents violate the fundamental tenets of the Islamic faith ... The face of terror is not the true faith of Islam. That’s not what Islam is about. Islam is peace. These terrorists don’t

represent peace. They represent evil and war. When we think of Islam we think of a faith that brings comfort to a billion people around the world.⁴

It is precisely the rational consideration of national interest which has led the Bush administration to assert repeatedly that its war on terror is not a war against Islam. Strategically, it is not in America’s national interest to alienate the world’s entire Muslim community of one billion adherents as well as numerous important states (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, India, Malaysia, etc.). The United States is anxious to avoid the “kin-country” syndrome identified by Huntington, which would see co-civilisational states rally to the call of jihad. What results is a new kind of cultural containment, whereby an American-led West makes war against individuals or groups, but not against cultures, values, or religions. The story goes that the terrorists pose a threat to “Civilisation” as a state of being or community, and are not targeting any specific community or civilisation. America is both blameless and martyred. The rhetoric of the crusader is important to this narrative. The meaning of this story is that America is acting on the world’s behalf when it prosecutes terrorist from its fortress on the moral high ground. By joining the American war on terror, a state proves itself to be “civilised.” If a state fails to join America, it is read as a sign of barbarity, and marks the state as a potential object of American attack.

In statements in the first week of the post-11 September era, President Bush repeatedly referred to the terrorists as “barbarians” and to the growing American-led

4. “‘Islam Is Peace’ Says President”, White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 17 September 2001 [<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010917-11.html>].

coalition as the "civilised world". Secretary of State Colin Powell followed suit: "I think every civilized nation in the world recognizes that this was an assault not just against the United States, but against civilization."⁵ The rhetorical distancing of the terrorists as "barbarians" sought to appease Muslim countries and co-opt them into the American alliance. America is shoring up an image of itself as the "crusader" of civilisation—at war not with the general barbarian of Islam but the specific barbarian of the terrorist.

The United States has often held a messianic view of its place in history as the bringer of liberty to the world. Despite warnings against the dangers of hubris, it has continued to define the war on terror in moralistic terms—e.g., Bush's "axis of evil". Huntington's policy prescriptions have become official doctrine. The Bush administration is mobilising the call of American values to assert a global leadership role. In particular, it is the open-endedness of the clash of civilisations theory that has been mobilised in the war on terror policy.

Economies of Danger

Neither Huntington's clash of civilisations nor Bush's war on terror aims at a particular goal, but rather each institutes a regime of danger which justifies a menu of American violent aggressions. The sights of US military jets overflying American metropolitan areas and of the US Navy at guard stations in American territorial waters are responses completely out of step with the 11 September attack. The terrorists were not deterred by American military might, and the post-facto demonstration of US (im)potency will not

deter any future terrorists. Internationally, the United States has attacked Afghanistan and Iraq. Domestically, one of the chief ways the Bush administration is reacting to the terrorist threat is through an increase in surveillance and policing measures. Central to this is the creation of the "Office of Homeland Security" and renewed anxiety about borders.

In describing American foreign policy as an "economy of danger", I am borrowing liberally from Foucauldian discourse analysis, and in particular from the theories of David Campbell and James Der Derian. Foucault argues that when we examine policies, institutions, and discourses, we must look at the *circulation* of authority and power. We must ask what does this power produce as well as repress. In doing so, we reveal not only the agents of power, but also the objects of power and the lines of force by which this power operates. For example, in a hospital the doctor has extra knowledge and authority about the workings of your body, which make you a patient; in a court, the judge has knowledge of the law and the facts of your guilt/innocence, which makes you a defendant. With this kind of analysis, we see that American foreign policy does not simply repress certain countries but creates specific objects of violence.

Campbell focuses our attention on the social production of "danger":

danger is not an objective condition. It is not a thing that exists independently of those to whom it may become a threat ... danger is an effect of interpretation. Danger bears no essential, necessary, or unproblematic relation to the action or event from which it is said to derive ... not

5. Cited in "President Urges Readiness and Patience", White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 15 September 2001 [<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010915-4.html>].

all risks are equal, and not all risks are interpreted as dangers.⁶

As this suggests, danger is a commodity, a political resource. Post-structural analysis urges us to analyse how this commodity circulates in public discourse. The war on terror represents an “economy of danger”—a discursive strategy by which the government conserves and husband the public perception of danger so that the commodity is used most efficiently in the pursuit of policy goals. Thus, Colin Powell on the magnitude of the al-Qaeda threat:

We’re talking several thousand, maybe many thousands. We’re not entirely sure ... They’re everywhere. They’re in Europe, they’re in America. You can find connections to them all around. And we have to get them all, or else we will always have a degree of uncertainty and a degree of insecurity within not only American society but within societies all over the world.⁷

The moral outrage of the 11 September attacks is marshalled together with familiar tropes of the barbarian to achieve a self-perpetuating system wherein danger is circulated as a problem to which the only solution is a violent American foreign policy. The war on terror provides a murky enemy image for America to attack, and will continue to provide a near-limitless set of enemies. Who is the enemy? Will the United States strike against the Irish Republican Army, the Basque separatist movement, ETA, Sri Lanka’s Tamil Tigers—all potential targets in a “war on

terror”? Or are the enemies of the United States restricted to countries with little economic or military power?

Bush argues that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, like the earlier removal of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, is a success for the war on terror. Yet the perpetrators of 11 September died in the attacks, and Saddam Hussein’s complicity in those atrocities has never been established. How, then, can the US invasion of Iraq be justified as part of the war on terror? Of course, the United States has a preponderance of military force against a small group of terrorists and specific rogue states—were there to be a battle, a conflict, an actual war. But there is to be no final battle that would end the war on terror. The object of violence is not a specific state, but a state of mind—those who challenge the idea that the state is the only legitimate user of force in the international system.

As the Bush administration argued in its first national security strategy document (released on 20 September 2002, a year after the 11 September attacks), “In the new world we have entered, the only path to peace and security is the path of action.” In many ways, the precise nature or object of that action is less important than action itself. The war on terror is open-ended. The administration repeatedly asserts that this is a “different kind of conflict”. At a basic level, the war has no victory conditions, no visible enemy and no material conflict. There is no territory to be gained, no process to be completed, no conditions of success or failure. President Bush has stated that the war may take “one day, one month, one year, or one decade”.

6. David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 1–2.

7. Colin Powell, interview on *Meet the Press*, 23 September 2001 [<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2001/5012.htm>].

No one can divine the intentions of individual terrorists: the pilots of the two planes which were flown into the World Trade Center were both examined closely at the US border by immigration officials and let into the country without valid visas. So, the United States must take anti-Americanism as the exterior sign of terrorism and act pre-emptively. The Bush administration's national security strategy repeats the trope of realism, against optimism or idealism: "As a matter of common sense and self-defense," the September 2002 document asserts, "America will act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed. We cannot defend America and our friends by hoping for the best." These emerging threats are in the minds of terrorists, but it is their bodies that the administration aims to control.

The Bodies of Terror

My primary assertion is that the Bush administration has accepted the logic of the clash of civilisations, and consequently does not want the objects of its violence to invoke the kin-country syndrome. This results in a new kind of cultural containment, whereby America makes war against individuals or groups, but not values or religions. By this I do not mean the usual kind of political metonymy by which a leader stands for the entire country. Rather, I mean the political strategy that identifies particular bodies as the object of violence and statecraft, such as Saddam Hussein, Muammar Qaddafi, Abu Nidal, Manuel Noriega, or Osama bin Laden, who are separated from their national populations. The deck of cards representing the US most-wanted list in post-invasion Iraq is emblematic of this idea of "strategic individualisation", by which I mean the targeting of individuals by American statecraft—indi-

vidual bodies that stand in for the ideas they are taken to represent (terror, anti-Americanism, fundamentalism). On the ground, these individual bodies often evade capture or death (Qaddafi remains in power, bin Laden and Saddam Hussein remain at large), and it is the bodies of the citizens which suffer. Strategic individualisation is a vital tactic of the economy of danger: individuals are targeted but rarely captured, producing a continuous threat.

Addressing the UN General Assembly on 12 September 2002, during the build-up to the Iraq War, President Bush challenged the United Nations to accede to US policy or risk irrelevance. In the preliminaries to this ultimatum, Bush subtly reframed the guiding mission of the United Nations. While the UN Charter declares the purpose of the United Nations as being to protect future generations from "the scourge of war", Bush individualised the goal: "The founding members resolved that the peace of the world must never again be destroyed by the will and wickedness of any man." This individualisation continued throughout the speech, whether through personalising the Iraqi regime or in particular calling on Saddam Hussein to account for the bodies missing from the 1991 Gulf War. As evidence of Hussein's barbarity, Bush invoked "one American pilot" and some six hundred other individuals of various nationalities for whom Iraq had not accounted. However, no need was felt to account for the deaths caused by UN sanctions; the missing body of the virtuous warrior occludes the many thousands of Iraqi citizens who died following the 1991 war as a result of their failure to overthrow the Hussein regime. In this way, the absent American body serves as a justification for war, and marks the boundary of civilisation and barbarity.

Against whom was the United States fighting during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq? The Americans insisted they were fighting the Taliban regime and al-Qaeda, but not the Afghan people, and Saddam Hussein's regime, but not the Iraqi people. To shore up this image, US forces delivered food and supplies to the civilian populations of both countries. The rhetoric of the American-led war on terror made several political actions possible. First, President Bush's declaration that "you are either with us or against us" promoted a specific, exclusive community of nations, with the United States at its head. The consolidation of a community around "civilisation" connected the Huntingtonian rhetoric of the clash of civilisations to the real clash between civilisation and "barbaric" terrorism. The descriptions of the al-Qaeda terrorists, the Taliban, and the Saddam Hussein regime as "barbaric" legitimated unmitigated violence against those who were excluded from the community of civilised nations.

Afghanistan was the first target of American retribution, and the punitive mission was accompanied with an invocation of the traditional "civilising mission". This nineteenth-century rhetoric was ripe for reuse when the Bush administration could point to barbarisms perpetrated against the women of Afghanistan by the Taliban. The combined food aid to the people and attack on the regime would place America as the saviour of Afghanistan—indeed, of the world, as America moved against "terror". But in the absence of a trial of the Taliban/al-Qaeda, and as evidenced by continued violent resistance, there is no victory in Afghanistan.

Setting aside the uncomfortable question of the absent weapons of mass destruction, the US-led coalition's invasion of Iraq was figured in terms of regime change. American sol-

diers in post-war Iraq are now faced with a policing mission for which they are unprepared. Thwarted in their effort to hang Saddam Hussein from some global gibbet, it is painfully clear that there can be no victory in Iraq.

There has been much discussion in the press about the bodies of bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, namely, speculation concerning their whereabouts, health and physical wellbeing. Now that the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq are officially over, the obsession with the (absent) bodies of the two men is renewed. As with the missing American pilot, their missing bodies justify a continuing offensive. While the Bush administration repeatedly insists that bin Laden and Saddam Hussein are *not* the sole targets or goals of American efforts, it is vexed that their existence can be neither confirmed nor denied. The missing bodies accuse American foreign policy either of incompetence or of having already achieved its aim.

Israel and Palestine

Another striking example of this individualisation of foreign policy is to be found not in America, but in Israel and the Palestinian territories. It is a commonplace that there is a connection between the American response to the 11 September attacks and the Israeli military's March 2002 "Defensive Shield" operation. The declaration of the US war on terror was particularly useful to Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon, who swiftly equated the former with his military crackdown against the second Palestinian intifada. The Bush administration eventually accepted the equation, with the following consequences:

- First, equating Palestinian suicide-bombers with al-Qaeda terrorists connects

Sharon's actions to Bush's rhetoric of absolute self-defence. While Israel has routinely oppressed the Palestinians in the name of national security, the war on terror provides Sharon with a rhetorical *carte blanche* to deal with "terrorists". This free hand seems to apply even to attacks on refugee camps, as in the spring 2002 offensive against Jenin, and to attacks on sacred sites, such as the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, both of which are customarily considered protected.

- Second, Bush's domestic support rose during the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq; indeed, there was a general inhibition on criticising the president, which was seen as anti-American and unpatriotic. Sharon's "Defensive Shield" operation similarly served to consolidate Israeli public opinion, which overwhelmingly approved of the Israeli military's action against the Palestinian authority.

- Third, Israel has allied itself with America in the latter's war on terror. The community-building function of the war on terror(ists) should not be underestimated. Despite the international censure Israel has drawn as a result of operation "Defensive Shield", its affiliation with America insulates it from European and other pressure. Moreover, US domestic support for Israel, precisely due to the equating of the Israeli and American wars on terror, circumscribes the amount of pressure which America itself can bring to bear on Israel.

- Finally, the manner in which Israel has prosecuted operation "Defensive Shield" relies on the post-modern deterritorialisation of war. The territory of Palestine as an entity has been disaggregated. There is no "there" there, to paraphrase Gertrude Stein. There is no consolidated, contiguous Palestinian territory. Rather, there is a series of towns, villages and refugee camps, separated by Israeli settle-

ments, roads, and bypasses. Through control of the media and a careful construction of images of violence, both the Israeli and American militaries are able to provide images of war which are sanitised of any real victims. The objects of violence, Palestinian bodies, are obscured from public view through curfews and policing until they are actively incarcerated. The Israeli government claims that its aim is not to reoccupy permanently the areas ceded to the Palestinian Authority, although by stating that this is not its present goal it makes clear that reoccupation is still a policy option which has been considered. Because this occupation is "temporary", Israel's military invasion is somehow transmuted into an anti-terrorist action. Because there is no Palestinian state—and consequently no Palestinian public space—the Israeli military may invade refugee camps, Palestinian homes, and even the seat of Palestinian government. The deterritorialisation of warfare and the disaggregation of Palestine make Israeli military actions disappear.

The US war on terrorism attaches a new importance to a certain type of non-state actor, namely, those that are anti-American and violent. The tactic of strategic individualisation facilitates the smooth functioning of the economy of danger. Identifying individuals as targets of US foreign policy makes their pacification and repentance immediately visible on the global stage (or rather, effects their disappearance from the global stage), while at the same time creating an endless population of dangerous individuals to be targeted.

Conclusions

My primary argument in this paper is that the war on terror (and terrorists) represents an open-ended strategy whose aim is not the

guarantee of security for American values, American lives, or American capital, but rather a circulation of danger to achieve the expansion of American interests and the control of individuals.

Despite the empirical and normative criticisms made of Samuel Huntington, it is clear that the Bush administration has accepted his clash of civilisations paradigm as its blueprint for contemporary foreign policy. Publicly, the Bush administration has repudiated the clash of civilisations, but its foreign policy follows Huntington's prescriptions precisely. America has recast the war on terror as a clash between "Civilisation and barbarism". Countries are either with the United States or against it. The public repudiation of the clash of civilisations, and in particular Bush's praise of Islam (if not of Iran), can be seen as part of an attempt to prevent the kind of civilisational rallying which Huntington describes as the kin-country syndrome. The logic of the clash of civilisations has cast the topography of the American international imagination.

The terrorist attacks of 11 September shattered America's post-Cold War complacency. The first major assault on the US mainland in nearly two hundred years stood as an indictment of America's national security apparatus and foreign policy (although this last aspect is rarely remarked upon in American public discourse). The reaction of the Bush administration has been the war on terror. This war has no specific victory condi-

tions, nothing that could count as winning. Rather, the Bush administration exploits the lack of precise definition to institutionalise an economy of danger. The economy of danger seeks to husband and utilise danger to provide a rolling justification for US foreign policy and to quell international dissent.

A central aspect of the economy of danger is the strategic individualisation of the object of statecraft. In addition to the habitual metonymy of taking leader to represent state, the tactic of strategic individualisation takes the individual to represent a state of mind. Individuals now come to represent terror, and terrorists represent anti-American ideas. The pacification of individuals serves both to reiterate the ability of the (American) state to impose its military will on others, and to generate a never-ending category of enemies. Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, and Yasser Arafat are taken as symbols of terrorism, and control over their bodies is taken as the object of American foreign policy.

Americans desire wars in which they possess the clear moral high ground, suffer few military casualties, and cause as little "collateral damage" as possible. The tactic of strategic individualisation focuses military, moral, and political statecraft on the body of an individual, thus promoting the economical use of danger in public discourse. This politico-moral-strategic narrative is made possible by the trope of Civilisation being under threat from barbarians. □