The atmos*fear* of terror: affective modulation and the war on terror
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Since September 11, Muslims in Australia have experienced a heightened level of religiously and racially motivated vilification (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission). These fears were poignantly expressed in a letter to the Editor of *The West Australian* newspaper from a Muslim woman shortly after the London terror attacks:

> ….All I want to say is that for those out there who might have kamikaze ideas of doing such an act here in Australia, please think of others (us) in your own community. The ones who will get hurt are your own, especially we the women who are an obvious target in the public and have to succumb to verbal abuse most of the time. Dealing with abuse and hatred from some due to 9/11 and Bali is not something I want to go through again. (21)

The atmos*fear* of terror finds many expressions among the Muslim communities in Australia: the fear of backlash from some sectors of the wider community; the fear of subversion of Islamic identity in meeting the requirements of a politically defined 'moderate' Islam; the fear of being identified as a potential terrorist or 'person of interest' and the fear of potentially losing the rights bestowed on all other citizens. This fear or fears are grounded in the political and the media response to terrorism that perpetuates a popular belief that Muslims, as a culturally and religiously incompatible 'other', pose a threat to the Australian collective identity and, ostensibly, to Australia's security.

At the time of publication, for example, there was mob violence involving 5,000 young people converging on Sydney's Cronulla beach draped in Australian flags singing Waltzing Matilda and Advanced Australia Fair as well as chanting "kill the Lebs" , "no more Lebs" (Lebanese). The mob was itself brought together by a series of SMS messages, appealing to participants to "help support Leb and Wog bashing day" and to "show solidarity" against a government identified "threat to Aussie identity" (The West Australian).

Since September 11 and the ensuing war on terror, a new discourse of terrorism has emerged as a way of expressing how the world has changed and defining a state of constant alert (Altheide). 'The war on terror' refers as much to a perpetual state of alertness as it does to a range of strategic operations, border control policies, internal security measures and public awareness campaigns such as 'be alert, not alarmed'.

According to a poll published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in April 2004, 68 percent of Australians believed that Australia was at threat of an imminent terrorist attack (Michaelsen). In a major survey in Australia immediately after the September 11 attacks Dunn & Mahtani (2001) found that more than any other cultural or ethnic group, Muslims and people from the Middle East were thought to be unable to fit into Australia. Two-thirds of those surveyed believed that humanity could be sorted into natural categories of race, with the majority feeling that Australia was weakened by people of different ethnic origins. Fifty-four per cent of those surveyed, mainly women, said they would be concerned if a relative of theirs married a Muslim. The majority of the Muslim population, not surprisingly, has gone into a 'siege mentality' (Hanna).

The atmos*fear* of terror in the Western world is a product of the media and political construction of the West as perpetually at threat of a terrorist attack from a foreign, alien, politically defined 'other', where "Insecurity…is the new normal" (Massumi, 31). Framed in a rhetoric that portrays it as a battle for the Western values of democracy and freedom, the 'war on terror' becomes not just an event in space and time but a metonym for a new world order drawing on distinctions between 'us' and 'them' and 'the West' and 'others' (Osuri and Banerjee) and motivating collective identity based on a construction of 'us' as victims and 'them' as the objects of fear, concern and suspicion.

The political response to the war on terror has inculcated an atmos*fear* of terror where Australian Muslims are identified as the objects of this fear. The fear of terrorism is being modulated through government and the popular media to perpetuate a state of anxiety that finds expression in the heightened levels of concern and suspicion over a perceived threat. In the case of the war on terror, this threat is typically denoted as radical Islam and, by inference, Australian Muslims.

In his exposition of political fear, Corey Robin notes that a central element of political fear is that it is often not read as such- rendering it alien to analysis, critical debate and understanding. Nowhere is this more salient than in the rhetoric on the war on terror characterised by the familiar invocation of terms like democracy and freedom to make distinctions between 'the West and the rest' and to legitimize references to civilized and uncivilized worlds. In his speech delivered at the United Nations Security Council Ministerial Session on Terrorism on January 20, 2003, Colin Powell invoked the rhetoric of a clash of civilisations and urged "We must rid the civilized world of this cancer…. We must rise to the challenge with actions that will ride the globe of terrorism and create a world in which all God's children can live

without fear". It is this construction of the war on terror as a global battle between 'the West and the rest' that enables and facilitates the affective response to political fear- a reaffirmation of identity and membership of a collective. As Robin states "Understanding the objects of our fear as less than political allows us to treat them as intractable foes. Nothing can be done to accommodate them: they can only be killed or contained. Understanding the objects of our fear as not political also renews us as a collective. Afraid, we are like the audience in a crowded theatre confronting a man falsely shouting fire: united, not because we share similar beliefs of aspiration but because we are equally threatened" (6). This response has found expression in the perception of Muslims as an alien, culturally incompatible and utterly threatening other, creating a state of social tension where the public's anxiety has been and continues to be directed at Australian Muslims who visibly represent the objects of the fear of terror.

The Australian Government's response to the war on terror exemplifies what Brian Massumi terms "affective modulation" whereby the human response to the fear of terror, that of a reinforcement and renewal of collective identity, has been modulated and transformed from an affective *response* to an affective *state* of anxiety- what the authors term the atmos*fear* of terror. Affect for Massumi can be inscribed in the flesh as "traces of experience"- an accumulation of affects. It is in this way that Massumi views affect as 'autonomous'. In the Australian context, after more than four years of collected traces of experiences of images of threat, responses to terrorism have become almost reflexive- even automated.

Affective modulation in the Australian context relies on the regenerative capacity of fear, in Massumi's terms its "ontogenetic powers" (45) to create an ever present threat and maintain fear as a way of life. The introduction of a range of

counter-terrorism strategies, internal security measures, legislative amendments and policies, often without public consultation and timed to coincide with 'new' terror alerts is testimony to the affective machinations of the Australian government in its response to the war on terror.

Virilio and Lotringer called pure war the psychological state that happens when people know that they live in a world where the potential for sudden and absolute destruction exists. It is not the capacity for destruction so much as it is the continual threat of sudden destruction that creates this psychology. Keith Spence has stated that in times of crisis the reasoned negotiation of risk is marginalised. The counter terrorism legislation introduced in response to the war on terror are, arguably, the most drastic anti-libertarian measures Australia has witnessed and constitute a disproportionate response to Australia's overall risk profile (Michaelsen). Some of these measures would once have seemed an unthinkable assault on civil liberties and unreasonably authoritarian. Yet in the war on terror, notes Jessica Stern, framed as a global war of good versus evil, policies and strategies that once seemed impossible suddenly become constructed as rationale, if not prudent.

Since September 11, the Australian government has progressively introduced a range of counter terrorism measures including over 30 legislative amendments and more recently increased powers for the police to detain persons of interest suspected of sedition (http://www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/law/terrorism.htm). In the wake of the London bombings, the Prime Minister called a summit with Muslim representatives from around the nation. In the two hours that they met, the summit developed a Statement of Principles committing members of Muslim communities to combat radicalisation and pursue "moderate" Islam (http://www.pm.gov.au/news/media_releases/media_Release1524.html).

As an affective machination, the summit presents as a useful political tool for modulating the existing anxieties in the Australian populace. The very need for a summit of this nature and for the development of a Statement of Principles (later endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments or COAG), sends a lucid message to the Australian public that not only are Australian Muslims responsible for terrorism but that they also have the capacity to prevent or minimise the threat of an attack in Australia. Already the focus of at least a decade of negative stereotyping in the popular Australia media (Brasted), Australian Muslims all too quickly and easily became agents in the Government's affective tactics.

The policy response to the war on terror has given little consideration to the social implications of sustaining a fear of terrorism, placing much emphasis on security- focussed counter-terrorism measures rather than education and dialogue. What governments and communities need to address is the affective aspects of the atmos*fear* of terror. Policy makers can begin by becoming self-reflexive and developing an understanding of the real impact of fear and the affective modulation of this fear. Communities can start by developing an understanding of how policy induced fear is affecting them. To begin this process of reflection, governments and communities need to recognise fear of terrorism as a political tool. Psychological explanations for fear or trauma are important, especially if we are to plan policy responses to them. However, if we are to fight against policy induced fear, we need to better understand and recognise affective modulation as a process that is not reducible to individual psychology. Viewed from the perspective of affect, the atmos*fear* of terror reveals an attempt to modulate public anxiety and sustain a sense of Australia as perpetually at threat from a culturally incompatible and irreconcilable 'other'.

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