SUICIDE BOMBERS: BEYOND CULTURAL DOPES AND RATIONAL FOOLS

Robert J. Brym  
Department of Sociology, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

Cynthia Hamlin  
Department of Social Sciences, Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Brazil

CULTURAL DOPES VS. RATIONAL FOOLS

Between December 1981 and mid-March 2008, 1,840 suicide attacks killed more than 21,000 people and injured another 50,000 worldwide (Wright 2008). Were the perpetrators of these horrific acts cultural dopes or rational fools? These are the two main images that a generation of journalists, government officials, and academics have sketched in their attempt to understand suicide missions. The cultural dope: an “ideological zealot trapped by rigid adherence to dogma” (Wiktorowicz and Kaltenhaler 2006: 299; Moghaddam 2006). The rational fool: a calculating machine who aims to liberate occupied territory by the most efficient means possible (Sprinzak 2000, Bloom 2005, Pape 2005).

Social scientists will immediately recognize these two social types from a wide variety of other contexts. The cultural dope is Harold Garfinkel’s term for the oversocialized conception of men and women that is embedded in the work of social theorists from Durkheim to
Parsons (Garfinkel 1967). Cultural dopes are empty vessels into which society pours a defined assortment of goals, beliefs, symbols, norms, and values. These elements of culture determine the actions of individuals. Sometimes, individuals come into conflict, but when they do, they are merely expressing cultural requirements that are at odds. That is why, according to some proponents of the image of the cultural dope, suicide bombers today signify a clash not between political groups, but between Muslim and Judeo-Christian *civilizations* (Huntington 1989).

In contrast, rational fools, as Amartya Sen (1977) calls them, are utility maximizers. They assign values to states of affairs based on the perceived capacity of those states of affairs to generate welfare or satisfaction (an assumption known as “welfarism”). They choose actions based on their expected consequences (an assumption known as “consequentialism”) (Sen and Williams 1994). For example, suicide bombers supposedly gauge their tactic to be an especially effective means of mobilizing support for, and achieving, their ultimate goal of liberating occupied territory. They recognize that, as relative powerless antagonists, they possess few if any alternative tactics that could more efficiently promote their aims. Welfarism and consequentialism thus circumscribe the scope of their action.

In this paper, we argue that cultural-determinist and rational-choice theories fail to offer credible explanations of the phenomena they purport to explain because they employ unrealistic conceptions of social actors. After demonstrating some of the empirical shortcomings of these theories as they apply to suicide bombers, we propose an alternative based on Raymond Boudon’s theory of action. Boudon introduces the notion of “ordinary rationality” as the backbone of sociological explanation. His idea aims to overcome the problems inherent in conceptions of social actors as either utility maximizers who accept cultural preferences as given or as automata whose goals, beliefs, symbols, norms, and values are reflexes of socialization. We find Boudon’s concept of ordinary rationality a promising device for making sense of suicide bombers. We conclude our discussion by illustrating his model of ordinary rational action through a brief analysis of *Paradise Now*, a film about suicide bombers that was nominated for an Oscar as best foreign-language film of 2005.
Cultural determinists usually associate propensity to engage in suicide attacks with adherence to fundamentalist Islam. Yet the historical record calls the association into question. Thus, the first known suicide attack involved a Western assault on Persian forces; one of the two Spartans who survived the battle of Thermopylae in 480 BCE went on a suicide mission against the Persian invaders (Boyle 2006). About 600 years later, Jewish Zealots launched suicide missions against Roman occupiers. In modern times, Japanese kamikaze pilots and kaiten torpedo pilots attacked American vessels in the Pacific during World War II, and the Viet Cong engaged in suicide attacks to liberate their homeland in the 1960s. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka – a non-Muslim and non-religious group – accounted for 60 percent of the world’s suicide attacks between 1983 and 2000 (Sprinzak 2000). Among the 83 percent of suicide attackers worldwide between 1980 and 2003 for whom data on cultural background is available, only 43 percent were discernibly religious (Pape 2005). In approximately the same period, fundamentalist Muslims conducted fewer than half of all suicide missions in Lebanon, Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza (Ricolfi 2005).

If many cultural groups, not all of them religious, have engaged in suicide attacks, then Muslims have employed the tactic only sporadically. Members of the Shi’a Isma’ili sect, known as Assassins, engaged in suicide attacks against Sunni leaders in the 11th century. Muslim suicide attackers next resurfaced in the 18th century in parts of India, Indonesia, and the Philippines in opposition to vastly superior colonizing forces from Europe and America, and again in the late 20th century in various parts of the Muslim world (Dale 1988).

It is true that since 2003 Muslim fundamentalists have been responsible for most suicide bombings worldwide (Moghaddam 2006). Significantly, however, many if not most of the recent attacks have had a specific political aim. They have often sought to liberate territory by attacking occupying armies and their allies, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, suicide attacks have often spiked in response to identifiable political circumstances. In Iraq between 2003 and 2006, for example, suicide bombing campaigns tended to follow either big counterinsurgency offensives or developments suggesting that the country had reached a turning point on the road to political stability. In the former
case, they were intended to punish governments and their allies, show them that the *jihadis* would not be deterred, and recruit new cadres eager to seek revenge by exploiting the *jihadi* image of victim and martyr. The wave of suicide bombings that took place around the January 2005 election for an Iraqi constitutional assembly, when the new Iraqi constitution was endorsed in August 2005, and around the December 2005 Iraqi parliamentary election illustrate the latter case: suicide bombing campaigns were sometimes intended to demonstrate the resilience of *jihadi* power and opposition to political stability (Hafez 2006).

Historically speaking, then, propensity to engage in suicide missions is not associated with fundamentalist Islam alone. Moreover, among Muslim fundamentalists, political factors are often associated with frequency of suicide attacks. No cultural constant can explain such variation (Brym 2008).

Rational-choice theory is similarly unable to account for variation in the frequency of suicide missions. The Palestinian case illustrates this fact well. Are the motives for Palestinian suicide missions overwhelmingly utilitarian? Hardly. During the second Palestinian *intifada* or uprising against the Israeli state and people (2000–05), 138 suicide attacks took place. In most cases, suicide bombers issued statements just before their attacks explaining why they were about to martyr themselves. Following each attack, newspapers reported interviews with relatives and friends outlining the factors that prompted the suicide bombers to act, and militant organizations issued official statements outlining their rationales for supporting the suicide missions. Systematic analysis of this rich body of evidence reveals that bombers and their sponsors often expressed support for liberating territory from foreign occupation. However, another animus figured even more prominently, especially at the individual level. Not the desire for collective welfare, but revenge for specific acts of Israeli repression was the main reason suicide bombers and their organizational sponsors gave for their actions (Brym and Araj 2006). Although revenge is less important and strategic logic more important in other cases, such as Iraq, one is obliged to conclude that the reason for suicide attacks cannot reasonably be reduced to strategic gain.

Even if we consider only the collective or organizational level of suicide missions, the type of explanation favoured by rational choice theorists cannot account for all cases. It is true that suicide bombings often occur in clusters as part of an organized campaign, and their initiators
often time such campaigns to maximize strategic gains. A classic example is the campaign launched by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) from 1993 to 1997. In the wake of the Oslo accords, fearing that a settlement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority would prevent the Palestinians from gaining control over all of Israel, Hamas and PIJ aimed to scuttle peace negotiations by unleashing a small army of suicide bombers. Still, one cannot conclude that such strategic reasoning governs all suicide bombing campaigns because they often occur without apparent strategic justification. For example, the second intifada, which witnessed six times as many suicide attacks as the 1993–97 campaign, erupted after negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority broke down in 2000.

Finally, we may consider whether suicide missions are rational in consequentialist terms, that is, in terms of expected results. Some analysts say that suicide bombing serves the instrumental goal of increasing popular support for its organizational sponsors. Again, evidence fails to support the universality of the claim. Secondary analysis of more than a dozen Palestinian public opinion polls conducted during the second intifada found that the correlation between popular support for suicide bombing and the frequency of suicide bombings in the preceding month was not statistically significant. Increased popular support for Fatah was not preceded by a statistically significant increase in the frequency of suicide bombings by Fatah’s al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade. Nor was increased popular support for Hamas preceded by a statistically significant increase in the frequency of suicide bombings by Hamas (Brym and Araj 2008).

Also relevant to the consequentialist assumption is research showing that while suicide bombing campaigns sometimes result in minor concessions, they typically fail to achieve their territorial or other strategic aims (Moghaddam 2006). For example, the 1993–97 Palestinian campaign did not cause Israel to break off negotiations with the Palestinian Authority. To the contrary, negotiations continued, and Israel exerted remarkable restraint as measured by the exceptionally low ratio of Palestinian to Israeli deaths due to conflict throughout this period (Brym and Anderson 2009). Eventually, Israel and the Palestinian Authority negotiated an Israeli withdrawal from much of the West Bank and Gaza. However, when the suicide bombing campaign of the second intifada broke out, Israel reoccupied much of the West Bank and Gaza: hardly evidence of the strategic success of suicide bombing. Finally, while Israel withdrew
from Gaza in 2005, its action cannot be interpreted as a result of suicide bombing because hardly any suicide bombers came from Gaza, hardly any attacks were launched from there, and hardly any suicide attacks took place there (Brym and Maoz-Shai 2009).

In sum, whether one measures the strategic basis of Palestinian suicide bombing in terms of its alleged successes, timing, individual motivations or organizational rationales, one sometimes detects instrumentally rational action and sometimes not. Neither the calculating machine idealized by rational-choice theorists nor the religious homunculus idealized by cultural determinists operates universally.

**BOUDON’S SYNTHETIC MODEL OF RATIONALITY**

Boudon seeks to integrate and go beyond the two approaches to the understanding and explanation of human action that we have introduced. His efforts are worth considering because they provide a more credible means than the alternatives of accounting for the actions of suicide bombers (see especially Boudon 2006).

Boudon develops his ideas by first identifying key problems in the way Pareto and Durkheim sought to explain social action. Pareto introduced the notion of “non-logical action” to underscore the insufficiency of instrumental rationality as an explanation for a range of social actions that are neither utilitarian nor irrational. In his model, non-observable sentiments, not rationality or logical-experimental reasoning, underlie most human action. One can observe vestiges of these unobservable sentiments in so-called “residues”, or basic drives for “conservation”, “innovation”, and so on. However, because people are not aware of these sentiments, they often rationalize their actions through rhetorical arguments or “derivations”. For Pareto, then, many of the reasons people give for their beliefs and actions are mere rationalizations of drives of which they are not aware.

Boudon takes exception with Pareto’s approach. For Boudon (1995), many reasons offered by actors that are not based on logical-experimental reasoning do not have a mere covering-up function. Instead, they may be sensible insofar as people have good reason for believing them. Said differently, people’s actions are not always or even frequently determined by causes that escape their consciousness, but by reasons that, despite...
not being objectively valid, are sufficiently solid given the situation in which people find themselves.

This is where Boudon (2006) invokes one of Durkheim’s main intuitions – that social structures and cultures influence people’s actions and beliefs. For instance, instead of postulating that people in “primitive” societies perform magical rituals because they have a “primitive mentality”, or because they have sentiments or instincts to which they have no conscious access, Durkheim assumed that people in such societies have “theories” which make sense to them, given what we could call their “stock of knowledge”. They rely on a religious interpretation of the world that people in their societies consider a legitimate source of knowledge. Not unlike modern scientists, they often “rescue” their theories by introducing ad hoc hypotheses to reconcile them with data; if rain dancing does not produce rain, perhaps the ritual was executed improperly.

Despite Durkheim’s advance, Boudon notes that Durkheim’s methodological rule of explaining social facts by other social facts did not always allow him to consider the intentional aspects of human action. This led in Durkheim’s work and in that of his followers to a conception of homo sociologicus as a passive subject, a sort of automaton whose action is the product solely of the forces of socialization.

The solution Boudon proposes to the problems raised by the work of Pareto and Durkheim is a view of homo sociologicus as both socially situated, as in Durkheim, and active, as in Pareto. His model of social action employs utilitarianism as a starting point but allows for non-utilitarian action (Hamlin 2002, 67–96). He variously terms his model subjective rationality, cognitive rationality, and, most recently, ordinary rationality.

In Boudon’s view, Weber came closest to defining rationality in a satisfactory manner. Weber assumed that explaining and understanding usually involve retrieving actors’ reasons for their actions. However, Weber recognized that some actions result from emotional responses that lack a cognitive component and are therefore not based on reasons. Weber also distinguished between reasons that actors give to explain their actions and reasons that exert an actual causal impact on those actions. The two may not be the same; actors’ stated reasons may serve merely to rationalize action. However, unlike Pareto, Weber did not assume that all non-rational action falls under this category. Boudon
thus concludes that Weber’s notion of rationality rests on the distinction between objective and subjective reasons and that, although the latter are not necessarily objectively valid, they are not arbitrary either, but based on good reasons from the actor’s viewpoint (Boudon 1989).

According to Boudon, subjectively good reasons are neither arbitrary nor dependent on the subjects’ idiosyncrasies, but tend to be general in the sense that all individuals who are placed in the same situation will tend to perceive the same reasons as good (Boudon 1990). Boudon’s notion of subjective or ordinary rationality follows from this distinction (Boudon 2008).

Finally, Boudon distinguishes positive beliefs (which describe what the world is) from normative beliefs (which describe what the world ought to be). He does not deny the existence of an affective dimension of action, particularly moral action, but his cognitivist perspective contrasts sharply with models that prioritize desire over belief. In Boudon’s view, adherence to moral principles is triggered by what actors judge to be right, good or fair, not by sentiment or affect, which is related to desire (Hollis 1987, 68–9). In Boudon’s words,

> The sentiments of justice or injustice, legitimacy or illegitimacy are rightly so called since they include an affective dimension: nothing is more painful than injustice. However, they are, at the same time, grounded on reasons. Moreover, the strength of the sentiments is proportional to the strength of the reasons: I suffer more from injustice if I am convinced of the validity of my rights (Boudon 1997, 21).²

Let us now illustrate the advantages of Boudon’s approach by considering the portrayal of suicide bombers in *Paradise Now*.

**SUICIDE BOMBERS AND ORDINARY RATIONALITY**

Khaled and Said are single men in their twenties – mechanics and best friends. They reside in Nablus, which means they have lived under Israeli military occupation their entire lives. Because of the occupation, they have never been able to travel outside the West Bank. They enjoy few opportunities for upward mobility, are bored stiff, and have been
robbed of their dignity. Like most Palestinians, they want the Israelis out so they can establish an independent country of their own. However, years of demonstrations, rock throwing, commercial strikes, and armed attacks have had little effect on the powerful Israeli regime. A succession of scholarly reinterpretations has removed religious proscriptions against suicide missions and reinterpreted them as acts of martyrdom. As a result, the popularity of suicide bombing in Palestinian society has grown enormously. To Khaled and Said, it thus seems entirely natural to volunteer as weapons of last resort: suicide bombers.

Forty-eight hours before the scheduled mission, their handlers take them to a secret, guarded location. There they receive instruction on how to carry out the attack. The handlers tell Khaled and Said to bathe, shave, get their hair cut short, pray, and prepare a martyrdom video explaining their actions. Khaled and Said are not especially religious men, which is perhaps why serenity and solemnity evade them. They express deep fear, and they pepper their preparations with humour, errors, and everyday trivia that make them seem like very ordinary people. For example, in the middle of recording his martyrdom video, full of high-sounding political rhetoric and abstruse Koranic allusions, Khaled alerts his mother, whom he knows will watch the tape, to a bargain on water filters at a local merchant’s shop.

Something goes wrong on the first attempt to carry out the mission. On the second attempt, Khaled and Said are separated, but Khaled makes it over the border and gets as far as a bus stop. As the vehicle that is intended to contain the explosion that will kill its passengers approaches, he stares at the young Israeli mother and daughter who wait with him. He recognizes the inhumanity of his planned action and returns to Nablus.

Said, however, goes through with the attack on his second attempt, but not before we get the full story about what drives him. Suha, the woman he loves, is the daughter of a famous martyr for the Palestinian cause. Yet she strongly opposes suicide bombing. Said listens intently as Suha argues that suicide missions defile Islam’s spirit, kill innocent victims, and accomplish nothing positive because they invite retaliation in a never-ending cycle of violence. In the end, however, Said finds the forces pushing him to carry out the attack more compelling than Suha’s arguments. Thousands of Palestinians are paid, threatened, and blackmailed to serve as informants for the Israelis. Said’s father was one of
them. Palestinian militants apprehended and executed him. Said has been deeply ashamed of his father’s actions for much of his life, and angry with the Israelis for forcing his father to serve as a collaborator. His ultimate motivation for becoming a suicide bomber is his sense of injustice, which prompts his desire for revenge and the reclamation of his dignity.

The story of Khaled and Said is fictional. However, its empirically grounded and finely woven characterization of the two main protagonists makes it a useful illustration of Boudon’s model of ordinary rational action. We see that the plan of Khaled and Said to engage in a suicide attack rests on a complex mix of reasons. They are in part utilitarian insofar as they are based on an assessment of the best means to advance the cause of Palestinian statehood. But it is unclear why Khaled and Said do not elect to become free riders. Plenty of others are perfectly willing to volunteer their lives, so why not rely on their bravery rather than sacrificing oneself? Deciphering Khaled and Said’s decision requires understanding why they opt to surrender their own immediate welfare. It is helpful in this connection to refer to an affective (though not necessarily irrational) reason, notably their desire for revenge. We may further enrich our explanation by referring to cultural values, showing that they select a popular and religiously sanctioned tactic from the available repertoire of means of collective violence. However, this still does not explain why they see suicide bombing as a viable action, especially when one considers that Islam is strongly opposed to suicide. We must recognize that such actions had to be reinterpreted and legitimized as something different from suicide, namely martyrdom (Gambetta 2005).

As is always the case, irrespective of context, interpreting a particular type of death as suicide must fulfill certain criteria of meaning attribution that refer to particular social situations and cultures (Hamlin and Brym 2006).

The decisions that Khaled and Said make are theoretically interesting also because they are shot through with ambivalence, as decisions often are when real flesh-and-blood men and women make them. Khaled and Said think their action will bring political benefits – but they are not sure. They clothe their decision in terms of religious rectitude – but they are not very religious themselves, fear death, and are uncertain they will enter paradise when they complete their task. They seek revenge – but the inhumanity of their plan troubles them and causes one of them to experience a change of heart. Above all, Khaled and Said understand
that they can choose how to act. They know they can change their mind. Their plans are in effect only until further notice, as it were.

We, the viewers of *Paradise Now*, are bound to conclude that Khaled and Said are a lot like us, and that if we found ourselves in similar circumstances we might turn out to be a lot like them. By revealing the reasons for their action in their full complexity, *Paradise Now* renders their actions understandable and makes Khaled and Said seem fully human. We would not find their actions plausible if they acted as mere cultural dopes. We would see them as less than human if they acted as rational fools. What makes *Paradise Now* art – and what renders Boudon’s theory of action superior to the alternatives – is that they both make it possible for the outside observer to experience empathy for previously inscrutable others.

**NOTES**

1. One could argue that revenge is as legitimate a goal as any other in terms of welfare, but it is hard to believe that this is the case when the means to attaining that goal (suicide) is incompatible with the notion of individual welfare, at least in this life. It makes more sense to assume that suicide bombing which is motivated by reasons such as revenge and religious belief is based either on affective causes or on what Weber called “value-rationality”. This type of rationality, contrary to the strategic logic that characterizes utilitarianism, rests on a commitment to values that compels individuals to act even if it leaves them worse off (Sen 1977). Although it is possible to extend rational choice theory to religion and argue, for instance, that radical Islamic groups “offer spiritual … incentives to individuals who are concerned with the hereafter” (Wiktorowicz and Kaltenhaler 2006: 295), this “religion-as-economy” mode of analysis rests on a number of problematic principles and inferences, including “its psychologistic representation of the spiritual actor as a calculating maximizer; its transfiguring reconceptualization of religious culture and practice as a sublimated trafficking in commodified utilities; its strained assimilation of religious organizations to profit-seeking business firms; … its chronic ‘homogenizing’ or ‘flattening out’ of the complexities of history … as is induced by a positivistic commitment to the deductive deploy of universal axioms … [and] the risk of metaphorical misspecification that is inherent in an analytical strategy which proceeds by extending categories and theorems beyond their original domain of derivation and application” (Bryant 2000: 521–2). A similar critique can be made of Gary Becker’s extension of the notion of the market to explain marriage and suicide (Hamlin 2002).

2. In our view, Boudon’s model is superior to rational-choice theories like Elster’s, which try to explain the actor’s adherence to norms and beliefs in terms of subintentional causality. When Elster states that beliefs, desires, and emotions cause
actions, he subscribes to Donald Davidson's notion of causality. Davidson holds that stating that a belief or a desire is the cause of an action is just a convenient way of rephrasing an intentional explanation to indicate the existence of an unknown causal explanation (Elster 1983, 22). In contrast, Boudon's notion of rationality allows one to treat beliefs, desires, and emotions in causal terms, not as black boxes; their emergence is not just postulated, but can be explained. We take issue only with Boudon's methodological individualism, which he is unable to sustain. Whereas intentions are personal, meanings are inherently social (Bhaskar 1979), as is suggested by his interpretation of Durkheim. A review of Boudon's use of causal explanation allows us to observe that he always smuggles collective concepts such as norms and values into his analysis, thus contradicting his individualistic claims (Hamlin 1999, 2000, 2002).

REFERENCES


doctrine of cumulative deterrence”. Unpublished paper, Department of Sociology, University of Toronto

