IMPERIAL HOMUNCULI: THE SPECULATIVE SINGULARITIES OF AMERICAN HEGEMONY (DRONES, SUICIDE BOMBERS, AND RAMPAGE KILLERS, OR, AN EXCURSION INTO DURKHEIMIAN GEOMETRY)

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ABSTRACT

Purpose — This paper explores the domain of the symbolic imaginary to comprehend the mechanisms and effects of neoliberal deregulation (anomie) and reckless capital accumulation within and external to the US imperial core with special emphasis on the war on terror, the figure of the suicide bomber, and the internal manifestations of social liquidation in the appearance of the rampage shooter. The concept of the piacular developed by Durkheim is expanded to demonstrate the contrast between the “variable” or human forms of terror with “constant” or mechanized form
of the piacular as it appears in the form of the unmanned aerial vehicle or drone. The apparently disconnected image of the drone flying around up there somewhere in the clouds is intimately connected with seemingly unrelated phenomenon of mass murdering martyrs and fanatics down here on the ground. Lastly, the prospects for an anti-drone movement are touched upon and suggested as a fulcrum point from which to “touch” the synthetic point where terror, rampage, and revenge unify.

Methodology/approach — Unique to this paper is the development of a dialectical, formal, conceptual “geometry” rooted in Durkheim’s classic analysis of suicide for disclosing the hidden analogs obtaining in the relationship between suicide bombings and rampage shootings and their conceptual fusion in the form of the unmanned aerial vehicle or drone.

Findings — Capitalism linked to global defense and security operations produces its own terrifying nemeses as both causes and effects. Rather than something that has to be defeated, terror is an enemy that cannot be defeated but neither can it prevail against an empire. Likewise, the rampage shooter is not merely an individual in need of psychiatric care but a product of domestic policies that sacrifice everything for security and war. These two figures are “mirror opposites” or speculative doubles of one another, which when we attempt to comprehend the image of the seemingly unrelated drone machine what were find is the unexpected synthesis of the twin logics of terror and rampage at work in the sky.

Social implications — If people hope to live in a society ruled democratically rather than imperial subjects they must know where to apply moral and political leverage. Suicidal bombers and lone shooters are definite problems, but focusing on the defects of individuals diverts the critical gaze from the larger problem of foreign policy, domestic austerity, and, perhaps, the war on the drone represents a unique opening within the aggregate system to push back against the abstract, imperial system of global and domestic hegemony.

Originality/value — This paper represents a new and unique synthesis of Durkheimian and interpretive sociologies with various strands of critical social theory providing new optics for the analysis of international terrorism, domestic mass murders, and the use of unmanned aerial vehicles in the wars on terror.

Keywords: Terror; drones; rampage shooters; suicide bombers; imperialism; anomie
Anomie can be measured imperfectly with gutted variables like suicide statistics, the deregulation of financial sectors, divorce and unemployment rates, and so on, but how does one critically manifest something like the relationship between imperial hegemony that operates at the planetary scale and the guiding spirit of limitlessness (anomie)\(^1\) that animates neoliberal ideology? Once we begin to investigate such relations, we find ourselves squarely within the domain of the imaginary. Mainstream sociology would not bother with such an enterprise but critical sociology must ply its trade following different methods. The imaginary is always already interpenetrated with signs and our language is full of imaginaries that we do not have direct access to but, nonetheless, confront the individual as an objective reality that cannot be dismissed (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 121). Moreover, the imaginary cannot be disconnected from the image itself. We know the world and our coordinates within it by virtue of our language, signs, “picture thoughts,” and our emotional reactions, all of which guide our collective and individual conduct, either active or passive. The preponderance of coercion should not overshadow the fact that order depends, to an important extent, on our willing consent\(^2\) and that means that it has to “make sense” to us: good and bad, us and them, sane and crazy, ad infinitum. When the Fordist regime of capital accumulation gave way to the era of flexibility and hyper-finance (Krier, 2008), a new imaginary and symbolic regime was also needed to shore up the drive for limitless acquisition, austerity, and endless war. It is more than coincidental that the rise of the modern age of Terror corresponds with the decisive shift in the mode of capturing surplus value (Worrell, 2011, 2013, 2015b). Terrifying objects are important in solidifying acquiescence or obedience to a social and political order that is, now, fundamentally antidemocratic and even totalitarian (Wolin, 2008).\(^3\) Among a wide array of objects, few are more terrifying than the image of the suicide bomber and, especially, the rampage shooter.\(^4\)

What I have in mind, here, is a foray into the structure of symbolic objects within the imperial imaginary with the aim of drawing into close proximity three representations: the suicide bomber (over there, external), the domestic rampage shooter (here, internal), and the unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) or “drone” (here and there, internal and external).\(^5\) What we will discover is that the drone, the third term, represents the crystallization of the piacular spirit, the sublime objectification of imperial anomie and archaic revenge. The suicide bomber and rampage shooter represent speculative doubles, mirror opposites if you like, one external to the imperial core and the other internal — or, to put it another way, the shooter
represents the logic of imperial recklessness and disregard for limits, what Bacevich calls our “heedless worship of freedom” (2009, p. 6), reflected back into domestic life in the form of the maniac loose in the elementary school.6 The “spirit” these two objects share is a unique “ecstatic” fusion of anomie (deregulation)7 and altruism (otherness)8 that we will call piacular-ism.9 Metaphorically, we can distinguish between the suicide bomber and the rampage shooter by signifying one as “positive” and the other “negative.” The “transcendental” object-unity of these two forms of the piacular takes the form of the UAV or “drone.” The drone vehicle puts at our disposal a singular, sui generis representation of what amounts to the anomic drive toward limitless, external expansion and austere, domestic anarcho-capitalism run amuck. All three, and others not examined here, are forms of imperial homunculi.

The figure of the homunculus is adapted from Goethe’s Faust ([1808] 1961) and altered for our purposes: it is a tiny, synthetic construct that empire spontaneously produces through its own momentum, becomes dependent upon, and which, ultimately, vanishes in an act of self-destruction (Worrell, 2013).10 We are used to thinking of empire in either big abstractions like global hegemony, nation states, governments, regimes, regions, coalitions, movements, insurgencies, foreign policies, proxies, troop surges, etc., or little concrete terms like manipulative, sociopathic chief executives, etc. What is missing is a focus on minuscule abstract objects and their dialectical entanglements with one another, across boundaries demarcating the external and internal, foreign and domestic. A brief overview of Durkheimian ontology is in order here so that we can better grasp the nature of social imaginaries and the domain of the sublime.

THE GEOMETRY OF POSITIVE HELL AND NEGATIVE HEAVEN

Durkheim posited a dynamo-genetic model of social organization and regulation in which human assemblage is productive of “special effects,” or, a surplus of energy that, when projected through signifying practices, for example, ritual mimesis, crystallizes into external, coercive, and sui generis representations affixed to material supports or carriers. A system of prohibitions (taboo) swirls around these representations, their human conductors, and the material “envelopes” that fill out social space—time, and are
reflected back into consciousness (interiorization) where they confront the collectivity as mystified, alien, and authoritative powers.\textsuperscript{11} As Durkheim puts it, the assembly forms an entirely new psychical species ([1897] 1951). A commanding god, for example, would simply be the society in its external, transfigured, and hypostatized form ([1897] 1951).\textsuperscript{12} When society is equilibrated, society amounts to a kind of “positive hell” where people enjoy isonomic regulation of life, specialized roles, and contentment within an organic division of labor within a dense matrix of primary and secondary associations that support the development of actual individuality rather than radical individualism or “molecular exile” (Sartre, [1960] 2004, p. 733).

This “hell” is the sublime objectification of four pathological currents of moral energies circulating and fusing into a positive, plastic social reality (cf. Gissing, 1897).\textsuperscript{13} When equilibrated, egoism, altruism, anomie, and fatalism are sublated (canceled upwards) into a sui generis\textsuperscript{14} world (a virtual reality, as Zizek would put it, not far from a dream-like state)\textsuperscript{15} that makes sense to ordinary people.\textsuperscript{16} Then, some disturbance upsets the equilibrium and a “great void” opens at the heart of society, and a process of full or partial desublimation results in a disaggregation of structures and energies, rendering society and its active elements dysfunctional at various points or in whole.\textsuperscript{17} If society is too slow to respond or actually enjoys its own self-destruction, it will be pulled into a death spiral from which it cannot extract itself.

A society trapped in a maelstrom (Worrell, 2015a) is not an equilibrated “positive hell” but a “negative heaven” of disorganization, narcissism, idolatry, iconoclasm, agitation and destructive outbursts of rage, disappointment, futility of action, binge and grab consumption, and debt slavery — as mere tips of the iceberg. Importantly, a disorganized society is one that lures its members to their death (total or partial).\textsuperscript{18} Conduct becomes infantile and embryonically suicidal or fully self-destructive. Each of these pathological coordinates mark partial syntheses of morbid currents, what we can think of as the four horsemen of the apocalypse (egoism, anomie, altruism, and fatalism) issuing commands to suffering members of a social system. The two coordinates that interest us the most right now are “piacularism” and asceticism as they are situated within the “Durkheimian octahedron.”\textsuperscript{19} Looking at this structure from the two-dimensional, “top down” angle, we find something that looks like the one shown in Fig. 1.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{durkheimian_octahedron.png}
\caption{Durkheimian octahedron.}
\end{figure}

In Fig. 1, E = egoism; An = anomie; ID = disease of the infinite; F = fatalism; Alt = altruism; FD = disease of the finite;\textsuperscript{20} R = resignation;
Ex = ecstasy; a = asceticism; p = the piacular. The central void is complicated and signifies several things: for one, it denotes the “whirlpool” of energies either merging or disaggregating at the “center” of society, the central abyss that is either directly or indirectly luring the surplus population to its doom. An important consideration is that resignation is not purely passive but represents, here, a tension or drive between what one has to accept in theory but rejects and seeks escape in practice (the “Rejection in Theory, Acceptance in Practice” scheme — RITAIP). The passage from the left (passive or entropic) side of the social field to the right (active or energetic) is made through the transpositional corridor established by ascetic self-repression or self-torture.

Piacularism might best be grasped as the speculative double of asceticism. Ascetic acts function to demonstrate that a person or group is “above suffering,” whereas a piacular rite functions to signify that a person or group is in the throes of suffering (Durkheim, [1912] 1995). The three representations of the suicide bomber, the rampage shooter, and the unmanned drone fill out precise coordinates within a formal, geometric theoretical space best comprehended by evoking Durkheim’s classic *Suicide*. Below, we will draw upon the overall geometric mapping already established as a field of contradictory forces impelling conduct and later demonstrate how sadomasochistic dynamics are linked to the overall field of forces and how destruction of the other plays out in the life of the pure imaginary. We will start with the human bomb.
THE SUICIDE BOMBER AS MARTYR

In a little book on terror (Worrell, 2013), I located the suicide bomber within the context of what amounts to imperial anomie, a concept that roughly converges with the notion of *fitna*. Ali and Post (2008) suggest that it is *fitna* or anarchy that is definitive when it comes to the moral drive propelling suicide bombings. “According to Islamic doctrine, the word ‘fitna’ has been translated as chaos, ‘time of temptation,’ war, as well as anarchy” (2008, p. 615). However, the current of anomie is alloyed, in the case of the suicide bomber, with a multidimensional form of altruism. Let us look at anomic and altruistic suicides and then how they can fuse into a composite type.

*Anomic* suicide (especially the negative or *regressive* variety) is passionate like the altruistic type but enthusiasm and hope are replaced by “anger and all the emotions customarily associated with disappointment” including “exasperated weariness” and “violent recriminations against life in general, sometimes threats and accusations against a particular person to whom the responsibility for the suicide’s unhappiness is imputed. With this group are obviously connected suicides which are preceded by a murder” (Durkheim, [1897] 1951, pp. 284–285).

*Altruistic* suicide is rooted in emotional turbulence and manifests itself in a burst of energy and faith under the guidance of reason and will ([1897] 1951, p. 283). The enthusiasm of the altruist is “either happy or somber, depending on the conception of death as a means of union with a beloved deity or as an expiatory sacrifice, to appease some terrible, probably hostile power” (ibid.). The three subtypes of altruistic suicide are *optional* that introduces an element of prestige (+) or considerations of honor to actions; *obligatory* that relates (−) to matters of duty; and finally *acute*. In the case of Palestinian suicide bombers, for example, we have seen a blending of the optional and obligatory forms. In terms of the *optional* form, the suicide bomber has emerged as a kind of celebrity (MacAskill, 2005) that, through its moral valorization, resets the balance of obligatory sacrifice on the part of the remainder of the community (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011, pp. 172–189).

Altruistic and anomic forms of suicide may combine and reinforce one another in their modes of interaction (alternation, superimposition, or fusions are three possibilities).

This composite is the kind of destruction we find among “besieged” communities (Durkheim, [1897] 1951, pp. 287–288). However, Islam does not permit suicide and, considering virtually all suicide bombers today are
adherents of the Islamic faith, this wave of self-destruction represents quite the riddle. As Durkheim says, “Nothing, in fact, is more contrary to the general spirit of Mahometan civilization than suicide.... As an act of insubordination and revolt suicide could therefore only be regarded as a grave offense to fundamental duty” ([1897] 1951, p. 329). How have suicide bombers circumvented the prohibition against suicide? Suicide is transformed through the concepts of “jihad” (holy war) and “martyrdom” which enables the suicide victim to traverse the taboo of self-destruction (see Strenski, 2006, pp. 270–280).

The martyr, we are told, is in love with the sacred. “They were trying not to avoid life but to fulfill it in what they considered to be an act of both personal and social redemption. In this way they were connecting a contemporary political strategy to a sacred history of martyrdom and sacrifice” (Juergensmeyer, 2008, p. 417). McCauley and Moskalenko reach similar conclusions: while this life may be misery the suicide is not against this life but “for god” and martyrdom transforms suffering into redemption (2011, pp. 173, 181). The “very presence” of the martyr “is a reminder to others that there is more they can do to serve the people” (ibid., p. 177) and god. The martyr also “raises the bar” of ascetic self-renunciation that impels others to measure their conduct against the higher standards of the fighter willing to give all (ibid., pp. 179, 185); and we should note that where one finds asceticism one will find its speculative double, piacularism.

We arrive at an understanding of the suicide bomber (or, really, by now the martyr) as one mounted by the spirits of anomie (regressive) and a ternary altruistic complex.

When a martyr looks in a mirror, he or she sees a Jewish or Israeli reflection. However, when we examine the speculative relation in terms of internal and external, the martyr would see not the Jew but his or her weird counterpart in the United States, the rampage gunman.

**AMERICA’S DEMENTED RAMPAGE GUNMAN**

The rampage killer not only represents the terrifying internalization of imperialist asymmetrical warfare reflected back into the system’s core: random and singular but statistically predictable and recurring on a regular basis and, as such, part of a virtual social movement; direct attack on people (no innocent bystanders), but also represents an indirect attack on the entire social system at its symbolic nerve center, the school; low-tech
from a strategic standpoint but high-tech from a tactical standpoint; the fusion of the human and the inhuman, the trigger finger and the weapon; targeting many, killing few.

On March 5, 2001, Charles Andrew Williams entered Santana High School in Santee, California and shot 15 of his fellow students, killing two and wounding 13 more. In a recent interview with O’Brien (2013), Williams says that he was incapable of “comprehending the finality” of his actions, that he was suicidal, and that his “grand plan was suicide by cop.” In other words, the destruction of others was a means toward another end, the desire for self-destruction that he was incapable of inflicting upon himself. The explanation for this event follows the standard (even ritualized) formulations for other mass shootings in America: mental illness, alienation, bullying, drug and alcohol abuse, decadent youth culture, and so on. Liberals tend to seek institutional and organizational factors to comprehend mass killings while conservatives blame the dissolution of traditional values and the receding power of god in an increasingly secular world. The point of liberal-conservative convergence, however, the blind spot or null point in the American episteme, is the spirit of anarchy: civil deregulation on the part of liberals and economic deregulation on the part of conservatives. America is the land of anarcho-capitalism ruled by a spirit of limitlessness. That Williams was incapable of “comprehending the finality” of his actions is telling: the United States is, preeminently, the land of the infinite, from foreign policy and military adventures, to financial and speculative magic, to religious fanaticism and cultural hype (Worrell, 2013).

The American bias is toward examination of the abstracted psyche (mass murderers are simply “crazy”) but, as Durkheim notes, the psyche is itself an infinity and sociology cannot venture off into the infinite. The infinite cannot be grasped by critique regardless of how powerful it is. Moreover, if we want to comprehend the sociology of gun violence, we will be forever stymied by looking through the peephole of the psyche. Besides, that which is essential with respect to the psyche is precisely its social determinants. The psyche is infused with the social. The psyche is a condensate that “drips” out of the collective order. If society is “crazy” it will mass-manufacture “crazy” people. If violence is considered prestigious (positively or negatively) and sanctified, people will act violently in order to participate in the positive or negative prestige of violence and, hence, approach sanctification. Few nations today have gone so far as to glorify and sacralized war, violence, and mass destruction. We are, after all, a “gunfighter nation” (Slotkin) and war is now a fulltime, multidimensional occupation (Worrell, 2011). It should come as no surprise, then that the imperial spirit of
limitlessness, mass death, and indiscriminate killings (witness drone attacks that kill off more than 100 bystanders in order to “nail” one bad guy) should be reflected back into the internal core of its system in the form of mass killings of innocent civilians. Much of this is reflected in the life of Adam Lanza.

Labeling the Sandy Hook Elementary shooter, Adam Lanza, as mentally disturbed or disabled, etc., is not the end of analysis but only the beginning. When we examine the broad contours of Lanza’s life (e.g., *Frontline, 2013*) what stands out most dramatically is the problem of unceasing change from one school to another and alternating integration with isolation; just when the child would become somewhat integrated his mother would move him to another school — enforced detachment from others. The one constant element of his life was his mother but she represented not stability (a point of contact with reality) but the guarantee of ceaseless change and instability — his life was one of solidity melting into thin air. Where Andy Williams could not fathom the “finality” of his actions, Lanza, it seems, conceived all too well of the finality of his actions: this is the end. When “the disease of the infinite” (anomie) manifests itself in its singular, exasperated, enraged, and armed form we have something like an Adam Lanza. If Lanza was “crazy,” it was because the social organization of his life was “crazy.”

It is interesting to think of the word that is often used to describe shooters: demented. Adam Lanza and people like him obey and disobey commands that most of us never even hear. Is it because they are “crazy” that they “hear voices”? Virtually all of us are subjected to the same commands as mass shooters but the social organization of our lives means that those commands are either disavowed altogether or sublated into “positive” or socially approved injunctions. Lanza’s mother wanted only the best education for her son but created an unendurable and unending nightmare (her plans for his transfer to another college was, apparently, the final straw). Other kids in the same situation would have used, say, an electric guitar to “slay” the world and put their misery behind them but Lanza used a gun to accomplish a literal slaughter: the end of mother, the end of schools, the end of everything, and the embrace of nothing. Adam Lanza was an unwilling subject in the kingdom of anomie, who, apparently, reached his limit and struck back wildly, irrationally, and murderously.

If we examine extreme cases of destructiveness, of the self or other, we will find that they lie at the terminal point of a fluid continuum connecting them with normal, everyday conduct. For example, the extreme form of altruism (the acute form represented by the religious fanatic who engages
in voluntary human sacrifice for the well-being of his or her imagined god) is related to the spirit of selfless generosity necessary for any society to function. When a Williams or a Lanza come unhinged and go on a rampage, our ritualized collective response serves to localize, personalize, and translate the event into a mental health problem — in a very real sense, our scripted and ritualized responses are elements in the cult of anomie violence that guarantees the recurrence of mass killings. Rituals make people, places, and things sacred (positively or negatively) and potential objects of a future cult. Wills (2012) is correct to frame these killings as a form of sacrifice: people, it seems, must die periodically if the spirit of anomie is to reign supreme. Lanza (we shall presume) wanted to put an end to his suffering at the hands of the people and impersonal forces that he imagined made his life miserable. However, in so doing, and ironically, did his master’s bidding. Lanza and killers like him, seen from the sociological point of view, are but personifications and instruments of abstract social forces. In short, anomie, in the form of Adam Lanza, killed 27 people on December 14, 2012 at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Adam Lanza was not merely a killer but anomie’s willing executioner, a man possessed.26

Nonetheless, there was something more than anomie. Indeed, pinning everything on “anomie” would not offer much in the way of an original insight. Had Lanza merely shot his mother and then himself (a familiar case of murder—suicide) we could probably rest at the concept of anomie to tell us what we want to know regarding the big picture but the sheer scope of the crime suggests something more, something more on the order of terror.27 Lanza’s “gun rampage” that resulted in the senseless, mass slaughter of children suggests an alloy of elements. The possibilities are bewilderingly complex.

PIACULARISM

“Piaculum” is derived from the Latin for expiation and appeasement but the contemporary sociological meaning goes beyond expiation. As Durkheim says, “Any misfortune, anything that is ominous, and anything that motivates feelings of disquiet or fear requires a piaculum and is therefore called piacular” ([1912] 1995, pp. 392–393). “Piacular” rites and acts are those engaged in when a group feels itself to be the victim of misfortune, in the grip of some disaster, is distressed, or is terrified. Historically, we can find groups that resigned themselves to the fact that misfortune and
disaster would be visited upon them by virtue of their god’s vengefulness, especially when their god was already known as “a god of natural catastrophes who could and often did send pestilence and frightful misfortunes of all sorts against those who evoked this wrath” (Weber, 1952, p. 301) but these cases are rare and popular sentiments run in the direction of the piacular (ecstatic) rather than patient resignation.

By casting suicide bombings under the concept of “piacularism,” we can unify the salient features of the phenomenon and preserve its perspectival quality at the same time. In short, piacularism, if I am permitted to invent a word, allows us to account for the bomber representing a case of suicide—murder from the standpoint of victims and targets while also analytically respecting the standpoint of the perpetrator that the bombing is not a suicide (which is taboo) but an act of sacrifice in a holy war. Godlove (2005, p. 45) points to the piacular rites that characterized post-9/11 America (how we mourned as victims) and we know that some currents of reactionary pseudo-conservatism in the United States are characterized by piacularistic rites and ideologies (Worrell, 1999a, 1999b) but we should also be examining the “other side” of the terror—victim relation whereby self-annihilation and mass violence are imagined as the most appropriate solution to acute anomic crises.

The piacular act or ritual is capable of transforming a group of ordinary people into a frenzied monstrosity and the ordinary individual into an instrument of divine fury. Punishment may be directed internally or externally. The internal piaculum is simply the mourning and sorrow expressed by the group and the rites of expiation for sins they feel they have committed (here, the piaculum merges with melancholy). It would be difficult to find a group that did not, at least ever so slightly, blame themselves or engage in self-incrimination for a misfortune that has befallen them—recall that in the wake of the 9/11 attacks Jerry Fallwell and Pat Robertson heaped blame for the attacks not only on the terrorists themselves but also on the sinfulness of America, as if the terrorists were instruments of divine retribution (Goodstein, 2001). If nothing else, piacularism directed inward toward the group functions to firm up resolve and the sense of hardship and sacrifice that will be necessary to meet present challenges. External piacularism is the construction of the diabolical other that must be punished or subjected to violence as a price to be paid for inflicting the group to misfortune and misery and they turn to violence as a technique for “remedying this evil” that has befallen them (Durkheim, [1912] 1995, p. 407). The “evil” object will have to die. By definition, there must exist an evil X that
mixes a kernel of empirical reality with myth in order to transfer blame for collective misfortune.

Once calamity hits a society, it will “find a victim at all costs on whom the collective sorrow and anger can be discharged. This victim will naturally be sought outside, for an outsider is a subject minoris resistentiae [less able to resist] since he is not protected by the fellow-feeling that attaches to a relative or a neighbor, nothing about him blocks and neutralizes the bad and destructive feelings …” (ibid., p. 404). Durkheim noted that in the 19th century, Jews functioned as a scapegoat in a malaise-stricken France and his remarks on French antisemitism are highly relevant (thanks to Karen Fields for making the connection between piacularism and antisemitism):

When society undergoes suffering, it feels the need to find someone whom it can hold responsible for its sickness, on whom it can avenge its misfortunes: and those against whom public opinion already discriminates are naturally designated for this role. These are the pariahs who serve as expiatory victims. What confirms me in this interpretation is the way in which the result of Dreyfus’s trial was greeted in 1894. There was a surge of joy on the boulevards. People celebrated as a triumph what should have been a cause of public mourning. At last they knew whom to blame for the economic troubles and moral distress in which they lived. The trouble came from the Jews. The charge had been officially proved. By this very fact alone, things already seemed to be getting better and people felt consoled (Durkheim, quoted in Lukes, 1973, p. 345).

Importantly, self-negation of this piacular form can be of a partial variety where we see people merely inconveniencing themselves or wounding themselves. More extreme, piacularism can be carried to a higher pitch where the self-negation is total rather than partial. Here, with total piacularism, we find the person sacrificing the entirety of their life in one moment. Why do people feel duty-bound to kill themselves for some higher cause or, negatively, to rid their society of some impurity? To allow society to suffer without reaction would be to display indifference (egoism) and, ultimately, signal the worthlessness or irrelevance of that society. “If society permitted them to remain indifferent to the blow that strikes and diminishes it, it would be proclaiming that it does not hold its rightful place in their hearts. Indeed, it would deny itself. For a family [for example] to tolerate that one of its members should die without being mourned would give witness thereby that it lacks moral unity and cohesiveness. It abdicates; it renounces its existence. For his part, when the individual feels firmly attached to the society to which he belongs, he feels morally bound to share in its grief and its joy. To abandon it would be to break the ties that bind
him to the collectivity, to give up wanting collectivity, and to contradict himself” (Durkheim, [1912] 1995, p. 403).

Piacularism is an obscure concept best explicated at the end of Durkheim’s work on primitive religions ([1912] 1995, pp. 392–417). At first glance, piacularism, which emphasizes collective ritual mourning in the face of tragedy, would throw us off the track of the lone rampage killer. Indeed, piacularism is most obviously a potential reaction on the part of victims of a shooting spree. However, when we dig a little deeper we can construct a matrix of piacular forms at each scale of social life: on the one hand, the piacular proper that represents collective rites of mourning and reaction that put the members of a society into contact with positive sacred energies. If, however, we turn to the negative and individuated form of the piacular, we find the criminal acts of the rampage killer bent on destroying as much of society as he can (and in the case of rampage shooters in the United States, it is always a he). Incidentally, between these two polar endpoints, we find, for example, the terrorist qua suicide bomber who acts “alone” but for the betterment of their imaginary Big Other and the empirically existing, suffering community of oppressed of which he or she is a member. The piacularism of the rampage killer that strikes periodically in American life must be qualified and reconstructed to emphasize its specialized, individuated, and negative form, as opposed to the positive and collective form of the piacular rituals that will follow in the wake of the shooting spree. The seeming paradox that the piacular applies to both the good and blameless group of victims and to the evil perpetrator can be resolved when we recall that the lone maniac is not as “alone” as he appears at first sight.

We ask again: how can the lone gunman with no moral cause to kill and no social collaboration constitute a manifestation of the piacular, which is eminently social or collective? A suicide bomber, for example, represents a single “instrument” of death but dies for some “cause” and for his or her community or god, its collective representation (what Lacan and Zizek would call the Master Signifier). Can the same be said for the lone gunman who kills in the name of apparently nothing? How does nihilism (nothingness) pertain to the vital energies of life? If we turn back to suicide, we find that what appears to be a lone act, uncoordinated from any central authority, is in reality a social fact, not only statistically, but that the cohort of voluntary self-killers constitutes, unconsciously, an actual class of subjects each obeying commands to dispose of themselves. “Life’s vanquished form a long cohort of captives that society drags behind its chariot” (Halbwachs, [1930] 1978, p. 297). We already know in advance more or less how many people are going to kill themselves every year and we can predict when the
rate of self and other destruction will rise and fall: with every steep market correction, white men in Manhattan start to fly out windows; terrorists launch an attack on US soil and the rate of self-destruction will plunge temporarily.

**DRONES AND THE SPIRIT OF REVENGE**

One way to grasp the synthesis of the fanatic—martyr (the human bomb over there) and the demented rampage killer (human gun over here) is the drone object or UAV equipped with Hellfire missiles and cameras (over there) and *just* cameras and maybe deliveries (over here). As a signifier, the drone represents the sum total of all anarcho-imperialist contradictions and, most importantly, we find the hidden spirit of the drone: the *lust for primitive revenge against the other* — that which separates Freudian melancholy and mourning from the fully sociologically piacular (Fig. 2).

The use of drones over the imperial periphery is easy to grasp, but the use of the domestic UAV introduces an interesting aspect: the logic of transposition and perpetual revictimization. The sight of the drone overhead is a constant reminder that the negative Other “out there” somewhere

![Heterarchy](image)
is lodged within the symbolic space of the imperial core. Just like torture of the enemy combatant transforms the torturer into the eternal victim (Worrell, unpublished manuscript), the domestic UAV keeps American’s divided between Us and Them and provides a symbol of the external war within the fabric of home life. And, really, the drone “here” is seldom seen, like the “terrorist” over there — what is seen and reported are the anti-drone protests which, ironically, serve to remind “citizens” to never forget that we are (not at war) but victims and, as such, forced to use weapons like drones in order to destroy Evil while preserving sacred (pure, American) lives. The more abstract drones are and the more remote, the closer and more intimate they are in our unconscious life (the embodiment of the ex-timate). The drone, like the terrorist, is like the background radiation of daily life. The revenge quality of the drone attack is seen in the unintended death rate among those subjected to life with drones.

When drones are used to kill they do so while annihilating indiscriminately (kill them all and let god sort them out). To “nail” one bad guy it often means killing dozens or even more than 100 bystanders. We hear stories every week about wedding parties and funerals being bombed by US drones where whole families are destroyed.

What we have here, with this indiscriminate quality of death, is akin to the “categorical” targets of terror strikes: there are no such things as innocent victims per se; being killed by a drone is proof itself that the people killed were worthy of death. The drone does not destroy you because you are a terrorist; rather, you are retroactively classified as a “terrorist” in the act of being destroyed by the drone. We destroy and mutilate as if we were shooting nothing more than tin cans or old tires. In the capricious and indiscriminate use of drones as killing machines, “mechanized piacularism,” we find an archaic and barbaric spirit of punishment hidden behind the modern, rational, technological appearance.

Civilizations and modern, rational societies do not punish to avenge. When we find killing in the form of the drone strike, we see barbaric, archaic forms of vengeance where the desire for inflicting pain is never satisfied, extending out further and further until the death of a single American is never paid back even at the expense of thousands of others (see Durkheim, [1893] 1984, p. 44). Rather than believing, as some do, that we have “never been modern” it would be far more accurate to say that we have never not been primitive. It is here, to return to our original geometric imagery, that we need to bring together several threads of the argument with an eye toward the role of the imaginary Big Other, ascetic self-negation, and destruction of the terrifying object. For this, we need only
turn to a footnote (#19) in the first chapter of Marx’s analysis of the commodity ([1867] 1976, p. 144): Peter, the singular relative moment, knows himself as a man (universal equivalent) in the use-value form of his particular equivalent, Paul, who recognizes Peter’s claim to be a man (Other). Of course, this recognition has to be based on something more than Peter’s claim to be something greater than, and different than, a single individual: commitment to norms and the self-repression that accompanies life in, here, the church. Here, though, is the most decisive aspect that few comprehend: Paul’s role as the particular equivalent is eclipsed or hidden from view such that Peter comes to believe that he stands in a direct, unmediated relationship with the Big Other (the universal equivalent). It is not the case, yet, that Paul is some kind of “mediator that vanishes” — he will vanish but not due to some dialectically syllogistic process but at the hands of Peter who suspects Paul of infidelities and egoism.

To be bound to our others, to associate in a durable and meaningful fashion, requires sacrifices and heavy doses of ascetic self-repression. Repression is the moment of self-alienation that puts us on the road to sublation whereby we emerge as something greater than, and different than, the sum of our individual parts, in short, to be fully social, to exist as a “sublime objectivity” (both a private person and a member of the group) we have to renounce our infra-liminal enjoyments. Crucially, the repressed always returns in the form of the uncanny (Freud, [1919] 1959). In other words, what happens in the infra-liminal domain, self-alienation, does not stay in the infra-liminal domain. One of the key elements worth salvaging from Zizek is the idea that the Big Other is never fully totalized, in other words, some thing, some fetish point de caption blocks or prevents the Big Other (the Master Signifier or our collective representation) from attaining its full actualization (2002, pp. 18–19, 214–222). Some terrible X in the form of a specular image captivates the singular relative and intervenes to keep utopia from crystallizing and that no-good X is the return of the repressed in its transfigured form: either excessively large and abstract (Terror) or weirdly small (the homunculus). From Peter’s standpoint, this gap between what should be, the attainment of pure perfection, and what exists, the abomination that ruins everything, must have a cause and must be solved.

Peter knows well what sacrifices he has made in good conscience and he knows that the Big Other is blameless in its inherent perfection. That only leaves one party that could be ruining life: Paul, his alter ego, the particular equivalent of Peter. Once a “Man” Peter is transformed into a paranoid martyr willing to die to purify the social order now plagued by anarchy
and that means destroying Paul, also once a “Man” but now it is revealed that he is a selfish, greedy infidel. What is this destructive logic but a perfect form of repressive desublimation whereby Peter destroys the very foundations of society at the molecular, intersubjective level? Peter does not grasp that it is Paul who constitutes his humanity (his social mirror) and that without him, there is no society, and no imaginary Big Other to defend. This path of suicidal homicide is “liberatory” in its destruction of the Other, it marks a return to the infra-liminal, but necessarily leads to autism and molecularization in the liquidation of the little other. This is the logic of the rampage gunman: everything must die so the Other can live, but, of course, without us or the paranoid fanatic pulling the trigger, there is no Other. The suicide bomber, over there (external to the core) is simply the mirror image of the rampage gunman over here (within the core). The results are the same: a return to the infra-liminal but at the cost of the other. Importantly, these two singular forms of murderous self-destruction (the internal rampage shooter and the external suicide bomber) contain the secrets of other forms: we could march out two additional forms that expand from the simple all the way out to the universal where we find warring nations engaged in a death struggle (e.g., Cold War) but this will have to wait for some other day.

Finally, the drone represents the piacular condensation or synthesis of the other two moments of the internal and the external, the paranoid delusional sadist destroying his own equivalent and the suicide bomber martyring his or her self for the Big Other, but, of course, the big shift here is that the drone is a manifestation of the Big Other guided by what Zizek calls the unseen Other of the Big Other. It is interesting that lone wolf gunman and suicide bombers operate at our level, on the ground, metaphorically speaking, while the drone operates “up there” and for the most part undetectable to the senses — we only know of its presence in its material effects, the deliverance of information back to the imperial core, and revenge along the periphery for the enjoyment of the permanently victimized good guys. In the final analysis American empire needs an enemy that it cannot lose to and terrorism is just that kind of battle. Then again, if the struggle against terror is something that cannot be lost it also cannot be won, which would seem like a dead end, but this is exactly the kind of nemesis that empire needs: the fully developed speculative era of fictional capital, dark capital, virtual capital, potlatch capitalism, etc.,\(^{33}\) needs a speculative, dark, virtual, entity of horror in which to get entangled with and the drone is the perfected embodiment of all things imperial today: dropping commodities on Us and hellfire missiles on Them.
FUTILITY AS CONCLUSION

The lone gunman represents the tiny, synthetic manifestation of all social monstrosities in one, fiery moment of murderous self-destruction, striking the concrete up-close in a futile attempt to injure the abstract far away. The suicide bomber is also quite effective in inflicting death and destruction disproportionate to the number of people committing these acts. However, in a world of Biopower, the capacity to wield forces and powers of life and death over an entire planet, the suicide bomber (like the rampage shooter) is insignificant. What is a dynamite vest or a rifle in comparison to a nuclear attack submarine or a Star Wars program? The drone, like the deranged shooter and the fanatical suicide bomber, the twin faces of picaularism, the third term, is also a futile technology that guarantees that the United States generates “terrorists” wherever it goes like a bow wave generated by its own momentum.

We have a tendency to dismiss lone gunmen as lunatics (and who would argue otherwise?) but trying to deal with the problem at that level is the definition of futility. Likewise, we are mass-producing suicide bombers with every step we take as a nation. Now women and children are lining up to kill. Neoliberal policies are responsible for the internal meltdown and external chaos inflicted on the global population. If it is correct that the image of the suicide bomber and the rampage shooter are dialectically connected as speculative doubles we are still helpless to push back against the root mechanisms that generate these kinds of violent responses. There has to be a concrete leverage point from which to push back against a regime and its policies that, if successful, would mean the diminishment of a wide spectrum of violent eruptions here and abroad. If correct, it is resistance to drones (military and commercial) that represent, at least for now, the best concrete point from which to resist “everything” all at once as a retrospective portal back into other, seemingly unrelated, phenomena, rather than fighting against random flares.

While some sociologists make apologies for drone warfare as the lesser of two evils (Etzioni, 2011), resistance to the use of drones seems like the focal point. Unfortunately, the state keeps its drone assets offshore or locked up behind barbed wire fences and defended by armed troops on military installations. Consequently, anti-drone movement, when we see them reported on in the media, is sad spectacles of retirees blocking entrances and being hauled off by police. The anti-drone movement may be facing sheer futility, yet, the movement is still embryonic with only a few years of growth. Do we live in an era of futility? Futility, from futile, itself
from the Latin for *leaky*, is an interesting concept in the geometrical
Durkheimian space of heavenly negativities: futility is the name of the por-
tal into the great death spiral or maelstrom of a civilization going into the
twilight. So long as citizens have an opportunity to protest drones at the
point they are on the ground, at the mouth of air bases, disrupting opera-
tions then there is an opportunity for the public to make contact and effect
the rampage-terror-vengeance unity at the point of its synthesis.

NOTES

1. Says Bacevich, “For the majority of contemporary Americans, the essence of
life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness centers on a relentless personal quest to
acquire, to consume, to indulge, and to shed whatever constraints might interfere
with those endeavors” (2009, p. 16). What is this if not Durkheim’s concept of
progressive anomie in a nutshell? Importantly, when infinity is the object, rage and
futility and ruin are sure to follow.

2. “The imperial presidency would not exist were it not for the Congress, which
has willingly ceded authority to the executive branch, especially on matters tough,
however remotely, on national security” (Bacevich, 2009, p. 69; see also Johnson,
2006, on the new imperial presidency).

3. The concentration of power within the executive branch is especially distres-
sing, resulting in Bacevich referring to the office of the president as a hybrid

4. In reality, nothing is more horrifying than nuclear weapons or planetary
climate upheavals that could lead to the deaths of millions, if not billions, of people.
Yet, nukes and weather are, for the average person, too abstract to function as
more than background problems that others can fuss over.

5. Taking a cue from Simmel’s “geometry of the social world” (Aron, 1964, p. 5)
we will, here, map the spatial relations, fluxion points, and traversals characterizing
the imperial system of objects and use of deadly force.

6. There is literally a “fine line” in the theoretical geometry between the maniac
and the fanatic that corresponds to the boundary between anomie and altruism.

7. Anomic takes three forms: progressive (+), regressive (−), and chronic.
Anomic societies are characterized by deregulation, anarchy, erratic growth and
contractions, dysfunction, the spirit of limitlessness, weariness, frustrations, explo-
sive eruptions of rage, etc. Rather than thinking of anomie as “normlessness” it
would perhaps be better to associate it with something closer to antinomianism (see
Tiryakian, 2009, p. 223, on the connection between anomie and antinomianism).

8. Altruism, in its positive modality, is synonymous with hyper-solidarity and,
in its negative modality, is synonymous with hypo-individuation. In no way should
we fall victim to the idea that altruism is synonymous with generosity or charity
toward others but, quite the opposite, it is an inability to see concrete others as fully
real and to subordinate self and others to some grand, abstract Big Other that uses
us as tools. Clearly, this represents a kind of psychosis that has links to the
speculative or polar opposite of altruism, egoism, where, pushed to its extreme (narcissism, autism, and finally to psychosis) we arrive at the unity point where one passes into the other. Where there is altruism, there is already egoism and vice versa. We might think of alterity as the dynamic process whereby one passes into its other form.

9. I hate to invent words, but “piacularism” or things “piacularistic” seem to get the job done in a way that connects the phenomenon well to it’s polar opposite, asceticism, and denotes something more than simple martyrdom. To throw a kink in the proceedings, think of piacularism as a synthesis of sadomasochism blended with destructiveness toward the external Other while inflicting the self with pain and destruction. What I am calling “Piacularism” is adapted from Durkheim’s chapter on piacular rites in Elementary Forms ([1912] 1995). I think this is an important step in combining classical sociology with the traditional concerns of critical social theory with respect to the authoritarian character structure.

10. Here, terror is best thought of as a metaphorical bow wave automatically generated through imperial motion.

11. The ontological status of these external powers should not lead us astray into vitalism or transcendentalism, etc., rather, these “things” that seem so obdurate to people are effects of the conceptual poverty of collective consciousness (see Zizek, 2002, p. xxix).

12. One should detect, here, a background that corresponds, roughly, with the logic of “objectivation” as presented by Berger and Pullberg (1965).

13. I am also drawn not only to Poe’s Maelstrom for this vortex imagery (Zizek uses this as well) but also to Augustine’s allusions to the whirlpool habitus characteristic of urban life (1991, p. 113).

14. This sublime social reality that emerges is greater than, and different than, the sum of its parts.

15. Before we dismiss Schopenhauer’s notion that the world is but a dream we should pause to consider Freud’s phenomenological mapping of the moments connecting dream work and waking forms such as jokes and ideologies. Waking thought is not radically different from dream thought, rather, they lie upon a continuum and are separated by degrees and interpenetrate one another.

16. The American mentality finds individuality and intense collective life mutually exclusive but, as Durkheim notes, the words “individual” and “individuality”, though similar in spelling, mean radically different things and are even opposed to one another in some respects (Lukes, 1973, pp. 54–55). America is not the land of real individuality but of antisocial egoism (cf. Simmel, 1971, p. 259) and adaptive narcissism. Anyone paying attention to developments in speculative astrophysics and quantum mechanics will detect a growing psychosis in the scientific representation of the structure of nature.


18. See George Simpson’s editorial introduction to Durkheim’s Suicide where the concept of “partial suicide” is connected to the sociological concept. Another way to think of “partial” suicides is to think in terms of “virtual” suicides where one effaces his- or herself within the symbolic domain in an attempt to expiate some sin or unconsciously discharge accumulated guilt. This is, more or less, a kind of debasement of one’s precise coordinates within the domain of the symbolic where
the body and self fallback into base material reality, a willed fall from grace (the sublime). Simpson references Fenichel [1945] 1996 for “partial suicides” and Fenichel draws upon Brill and Menninger for this notion. The one-stop source for “partial suicides” is Menninger’s *Man Against Himself* (1938). Though it is beyond the scope of this paper, Durkheim and Menninger force us to realize that the concepts of life and death are polar oppositions (rather than diametric) and that the Hegelian and Marxist concerns for the “living dead” or the “undead” (Zizek) are highly relevant for contemporary society. Are we living beings or are we all located somewhere between life and death?

19. Think of this “octahedron” as two, pyramids stacked base-to-base with the four primary currents at the converging corners and the top and bottom as the residences of the twin imaginary Big Others (positive and negative, sacred pure and sacred impure, i.e., the domain of divinity and devils).

20. Durkheim does not formally elevate fatalism to the same rank as the other forms of suicide (it was relegated to a footnote) but we must take it more seriously, as he does informally within the context of the other three forms. Giving it equal weight and a place on the map we can extrapolate the countervailing opposite of “infinity disease,” what I am here naming finitude disease — over-crystallization or hyper-reification and heteronymous over-determination of social members.

21. Ekstasis is the original Greek, meaning “being outside of oneself” and related to the heterotelic nature of altruistic life, compared to the autotelic qualities of egoistic introspection and autistic inwardness.

22. A good example of the direct pull of the void on the Stoic is found in Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* where he claims that the vortex is the “world’s core principle” (1987, p. 168). Constraints mean we cannot pursue Kierkegaard’s notion further but the full passage is worth considering because *Either/Or* is, arguably, the master class in Stoic melancholy.

23. Resignation represents the unity of egoism and fatalism, or a convergence point. Do not be fooled by the entropic imagery, resignation is a form of resistance and an attempt to solve deadlocks. The notion of rejection in theory, acceptance in practice (RITAIP), is Bhaskar’s (2008, p. 143).

24. The negative form pertains to contractions and failures and lacks what Shakespeare (2000, p. 21) called the “vaulting ambition” we associate with the limitlesseness of positive anomie.

25. Demented as in driven to behave irrationally due to anger, distress, or excite-ment. From the Latin *dementare*, from *demens* “out of one’s mind.”

26. Here, the anthropological idea of a person being “mounted” (possessed) by forces is especially pertinent. Lanza was, in the moment of annihilation, an ecstatic being, outside of himself. If we had sufficient space, it would be possible to map out the various points that lie along the continuum of instrumentalization, from nihilism at the egoistic and entropic “side” of the social universe, through infantilism, to sadistic violence on the energized side.

27. Denoting, of course, the well-known quantity—quality dialectic whereby at some point quantitative addition crosses a threshold into an entirely new qualitative state. France, for example, suffers more than 400 murders per year and, generally speaking, these deaths are not reported in the United States, yet, when 12 murders are committed on a single day in a single event (the Charlie Hebdo attack of
January 7, 2015) it is a massacre, terrorist attack, and makes headlines the world over.

28. The domestic use of drones for surveillance is not a consideration in this paper.

29. Interestingly, the drone was once a weird machine occupying “the no-man's-land between aircraft and cruise missile” with regard to international arms proliferation and control (Siegel, 2005, p. 35).

30. “Yet bend not all the harm upon yourself. Make those that do offend you suffer too” (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 77). “The Tale of Cupid and Psyche” in The Golden Ass is one of the most startling and insightful myths with respect to piaucarism. It lies right on the boundary between mourning and the piacular (Apuleius, 1994, pp. 75–119).

31. “This disposition, in which the subject and his or her shadowy, ex-timate [external yet intimate] double stare into a common third point … epitomizes the relationship of the subject to an Otherness …” (Zizek, 1993, p. 107).

32. According to Castoriadis, the imaginary itself is rooted in the repression of drives (1987, p. 134). Here we are interested in how the terrifying, imaginary object is subjected to a kind of repressive de-sublimation that undermines solidarity.

33. On the various circuits of capital (virtual and dark) see Krier (2008) and on potlatch capitalism see Worrell (2015b).

34. Surprisingly, apart from the surveillance angle, there is presently nothing like a sociology of drone warfare to speak of. Domestic surveillance is an important problem but the focus here is on mass killings rather than the security gaze per se. While I do not believe that laughing at, or ridicule toward, counterterrorism measures like drone strikes does much to promote resistance (Heath-Kelly, 2012), I think Zizek has the right stance toward domestic surveillance: just treat it dismissively — here, laughter and ridicule offer an opportunity for an infra-liminal space of resistance, even if only symbolic. But one must move beyond the symbolic in the world of concrete resistance.

35. In my own neck of the woods, punishments for protesters are shaping up to be as stiff as sentencing guidelines permit. The antidrone movement cannot expect much in the way of legal protections with regard for free speech and freedom of assembly: “For those for whom international law is immaterial but U.S. law is paramount, the drone program must go before it completely erodes justice and especially civil liberties here at home. As too few in our region know, Town of DeWitt judges have issued, renewed and enforced orders of protection against nonviolent protesters at the request of Hancock Field Air National Guard commanders, including the notorious Colonel Earl A. Evans. For those who struggle to protect women at risk for violence from intimate partners, it is a travesty of justice to see orders of protection extended to the architects of drone killings” (Curtain, 2015).

REFERENCES


