

Female Hunger Strikers and Suicide Bombers in Western Media. A Transversal Genealogy of Discursive Strategies of Resistance

by Dominique Grisard

Contemporary female suicide bombers, like the hunger strikers of the 1970s, provoke both anxiety and fascination whenever they are featured in mass media. This is because the “spectacular putting to death of the self”, as Achille Mbembe (2003, p. 38) calls it, goes against the binary gender construction which codes “putting to death” and violence as masculine, and giving life and peace as feminine (Mbembe 2003, p. 38).

A feminist perspective on what we call *terrorism* not only leads us to question the gendered economies of life and death dichotomies, it also compels us to read contemporary debates as part of what could be called a *transversal foucauldian genealogy*. In Foucault’s words, transversal struggles not only overcome national frameworks, but traverse time (Foucault 2005, p. 273). Transversality is about the concatenation of diverse forms of resistance without sliding into teleological narrative history (Raunig 2002). By drawing attention to different forms, times and places of terrorist violence to the self, my aim is to destabilize the national frame and the Western notion of the individual often assumed in traditional historical analysis. More concretely, I will go back to women’s involvement in 1970s left wing terrorism in Western Europe and discuss the interventions of female hunger strikers as discursive strategies of resistance. Indeed, a surprisingly high number of women were actively involved in terrorist organisations in 1970s Western Europe. I will argue that female terrorists in the 1970s as well as female suicide bombers today are well versed in media and judicial discourses, and therefore know how to profoundly unsettle them.

There are several strategies by which both hunger strikers and suicide bombers subvert dominant discourses on gender, violence, life and death: First, the female terrorist and her body politic undo the “natural” coupling of violence and manhood. Instead they construct an *armed masculinity without men*. Just think of countless fetishistic representations of female terrorists holding a gun, a case in point being the photo of Palestinian terrorist Leila Khaled (fig. 1). Second, discourses on the female terrorist’s body disrupt the gendered regime of representation by blurring the boundaries between the violent and the violated body. And third, the terrorists’ body politic defies state knowledge production, and manages to use the Western states’ own governing rationale against it. The fourth and most radical strategy of resistance concerns the way

the female terrorist extricates herself from governing technologies of the state, claiming sovereignty over her own body. My aim is to disrupt the current dominant narrative about transnational terrorism, which situates 9/11 as its origin. In fact, there are many other narratives of transnational terror that this one discourse erases. Looking back at the representations of female terrorists in 1970's Western Europe allows us to think more historically about the meaning of the female suicide bomber now, in a post 9/11 security era.



Leila Khaled, former member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), 1970

Given the battles that raged in the media in the 1970's about the meaning of the body, imprisonment, violence and political opposition, it is important to ask whether we can consider a hunger strike to be a mode of resistance in the foucauldian sense, a last resort for the political prisoner isolated in some prison ward and denied access to all other means of revolt? Do female terrorists challenge, contest or change the dominant power/knowledge-regime? What are their strategies and do they manage to subvert the processes of representation or knowledge production?

Let me engage these questions by way of the portrayal of a female terrorist's hunger strike in Swiss media. I will revisit mid 1970s Western Europe, a time and place from which the history of present terrorism may be written anew.

The Discursive Extra of Political Violence by Women: The Case of Petra Krause



Petra Krause, former member of a Swiss anarchist group, 1977

Described by the Swiss media as “the terrorist of the century”, Anna Maria Grenzi alias Marina Fendi alias Waltraud Armruster, was known to her group as “Annebäbi” and born in Berlin in 1939 as Petra Krause (Sterling 1978). She was arrested in March 1975, while strolling around the city center of Zurich. Krause was German-Jewish by birth – she spent the first years of her life in a Nazi concentration camp – and an Italian citizen by marriage. She had joined the group of Swiss anarchist men only one year prior to their arrest. The group was arrested for stealing vast amounts of arms, from Swiss armed forces, for delivering and shipping weapons, and she was suspected to be the supplier of guns and explosives to a select European terrorist clientele, mainly activists in the fight against Franco’s Spain, the western German Red Army Faction (RAF) and the Italian Brigade Rosse. While the group was operating a professional supply and distribution system, it was less successful in actual bombings. Sometimes the bomb detonated, sometimes it didn’t. Its targets - mainly embassies and consulates – were carefully chosen to express solidarity with specific activist groups in other European countries and the group made sure not to hit any civilians.

Once in jail and awaiting her trial, Krause began a fight against the Swiss prison authorities, which received extensive coverage in the press. The press was sure that Krause had done her best to delay the trial, with her obstinate refusal to take fresh-air exercises, an attempted escape, the use of legal expedients forcing repeated trial postponements and most notably, three hunger strikes. In Milan, Rome and Naples demonstrations and sit-ins took place, calling for the release of Krause from Swiss prison; A committee of Italian women deputies who believed Krause was oppressed and persecuted – not so much because of her terrorist crimes, but for being a woman transgressing gender norms – arranged a visit to the Swiss prison.

Hence Swiss Supreme Court Judges felt pressured to inspect the Zurich prison situation; various doctors started keeping check on Petra Krause’s health; an

invigorated anti-prison movement circulated petitions and photographs of an emaciated Petra Krause; a controversial public debate ensued over prison conditions; both the German and Italian government demanded Krause's extradition and the Swiss media reported on all of this – either criticizing Petra Krause's strategic use of her body and health to blackmail the Swiss government or accusing leftist anti-prison groups for selfishly exploiting a highly visible prison victim to further their own goals, namely to put an end to solitary confinement (isolation wards) in Swiss prisons (Finanz und Wirtschaft 1977).



Petition to free Petra Krause from Swiss prison, undated

Petra Krause was held in different Zurich prisons for twenty-eight months, before the Swiss authorities felt pressured to hand her over to Italy. Only 39 Kg to her 5'6" frame, she was finally deemed unfit of standing trial or staying in prison (Aktion Strafvollzug; Rote Hilfe 1976, p. 23). Frail looking as she was – with her slender built, her thin, wan face hidden behind huge dark glasses, an air of sophistication and weariness about her – she was flown out to Italy.



Petra Krause with Swiss police at airport in Naples, Italy in 1977

1. In Prison: Undoing the Coupling of Violence and Manhood

Just like many political prisoners before her, Krause had continued her struggle against the system in prison. In a way, she kept up a performance of what sociologist Harald Uetz termed *armed masculinity* (1999, p. 56-59). Her desire for publicity, self-control and physical violence, as was exercised by the imprisoned in numerous hunger strikes in a most visible manner, were read as masculine behavior. This notion of *armed masculinity* was taken up by the press who stylized hunger strikes as a very active and controlled action, linking it to masculine attributes such as having a politically strategic and calculating mind, a strong political will, and the control and mastery of ones' body. At the same time, the press called hunger strike a form of blackmail because it forced the state and the Swiss public into the uncomfortable role of the passive onlooker to violence. The state had been beaten at its own game, if one believes the newspaper reports that described a state with its hands tied, incapable of fulfilling its role as protector of the nation and guarantor of survival to the prisoner, letting the public watch the slow hunger death of a human being. The castration of the state was even more damning since it happened by way of circulation of the image of an emaciated woman's body. Krause's prison performance not only reversed the preordained roles of the state and the prisoner, but her *female masculinity* also managed to destabilize the notion of embodied gender (Halberstam 1998).

2. Blurring the Boundaries of the Violent and Violated Female Body

Nobody could have predicted the media spectacle that greeted Krause's hunger strike nor could anyone have known that it would lead to her release from prison as there is

no necessary correlation between the power exerted by a hunger striker and the power of media representations. However, one can safely assume that anarchists of the time factored into the extensive media coverage previous hunger strikes had prompted in both Italy and Switzerland. In Krause's case, hunger strike became a successful media strategy to exert power in and outside prison walls. The photographs of her violated body mobilized the Italian left and directed Swiss diplomatic politics. Furthermore, the daily recording of her health shook the public's confidence in the state's virtue (Collettivo Carceri Ticino 1977). Krause's prison fight made use of mythology, a technique that decontextualizes and naturalizes often contradictory, historically specific features around gender and violence (Barthes 1998, p. 113; Meinhof 1986, p. 143). Hence, the images of her hunger stricken body were able to draw on the visual convention that the small body of a woman is more susceptible to suffering than more robust men (Groebner 2007, p. 76). At the same time, the images recall nineteenth-century photographs of deviant women in which the supposed objectivity of the camera captures the deviants' face and body as *true* expressions of an inner self (Bielby 2007, p. 4). Clearly, photography was deployed as *evidence* of Krause's suffering with the effect of revealing the slipperiness of Krause's embodied gender: it morphed from the *armed masculinity* of the "most dangerous" terrorist to the body visibly *girled* by the violence of the state, unsettling the fixity of the citizens' gaze at the terrorist other.

3. The Struggle over Knowledge Production

The daily coverage of crime, crime policing and law enforcement makes the state's "inner fight against an enemy without countenance", as Foucault calls it, acceptable (1994, p. 369-370; Althoff 1998, p. 21-51). Crime reporting produces masses of crime narratives, where delinquency is portrayed as both very familiar and alien at the same time, a constant threat to daily life, but also distant and exotic. Images of Petra Krause's hunger stricken body did just that: They brought the terror home by localizing it in the body of a woman who looked no different to the girl next door. At the same time, the incessant discussion of her mysterious past in a Nazi concentration camp, her being a German-Italian double citizen, and most notably her absence when her colleagues stood trial – all reinforced an elusive image of the terrorist, only aided by the fact that at the end of the day journalists knew very little about Petra Krause (Fo; Rame 1977). Krause made an effort to keep it that way. When anti-prison groups tried to gain wider public support by disclosing personal information about alleged surgical experiments on her child body when detained in a Nazi camp, she decided to interrupt her hunger strike

leaving the public guessing as to whether the rumours of plastic intestines implanted by the Nazis were true (Libération 1975).

Krause not only refused to share her “inner truth” with the public, she also refused to be present at her own trial (Foucault 1983, p. 30). By deploying silence and absence, Krause chose not to submit to the ground rules of judicial and media discourses and as such she rejected both the role of the confessional accused and the chatty female. In this respect, left wing terrorists not only seemed to have had an excellent understanding of how to work the media, they appeared to have borrowed important insights from the feminist critique of liberal law and developed a sophisticated understanding of the workings of power/knowledge and its governing effects. Possibly, left wing terrorist groups were more successful at orchestrating what could be termed a *media revolt* than with their more overt guerrilla tactics.

4. Resisting Survival, Refusing to Live and the Fragmented Body in Representation

Is there a way the exceptional power that the state uses to render the terrorist mute and safe may be ruptured? Can those who are imprisoned find power through the regime to which they are subjected? What the hunger strikers did was to deny the state the sovereign power over their body. They rejected the imperative of personal survival. Through the practice of hunger strike they came to understand how they could expose the repressive state as well as its seemingly humanitarian interest in preserving life. The Hunger striker engaged in an act of violence and literally refused the state access to her body and put up a barrier to its sovereign power of life and death. Here the hunger striker reappropriates sovereign power and uses her body as a weapon.

One might say that today’s suicide bombers go a step further: For them it is not only the renunciation of survival that they enact, but also the death of the other becomes the means of agency. While both the suicide bomber and the hunger striker extricate themselves from the sovereign power of the state, the suicide bomber turns her “body into a weapon (...) in the truly ballistic sense” (Mbembe 2003, p. 36). In photographs of female suicide bombers, shot by terrorist organizations today, standard tropes of femininity are juxtaposed to markers of (masculine) violence. Much the same as in the 1970s, the photographs dislodge common assumptions about violence and gender, raising questions about female agency, volition and our gendered regime of representations.

But what happens when the representational surplus of the assassinating female body becomes *normal*? In January 2004, images of the first mother suicide bomber, 22 year old Palestinian [Reem Saleh al-Riyashi](#) and her boy Mohamed, circulated widely in Western media. How may we read its effect on Western media consumers? Some might be reminded of the fetishistic representations of the terrorist women holding a gun in the 1970s. Others might call into question the Western construction of the (Muslim) woman as victims of male violence.



22 year old Palestinian member of Hamas, Reem Saleh al-Riyashi with her son in January 2004

One year later we are confronted with a new set of shocking photographs of an unidentified Palestinian suicide bomber – her body is nowhere in sight, while her head is almost completely intact, carefully arranged underneath a white sheet, her eyes looking almost straight at the camera. The image seems to visualize what Riyashi is often quoted to have said in a video before carrying out the attack, about how she hoped her “organs would be scattered in the air and her soul would reach paradise” ([Carlos](#) 2007).

How do we know that what we see is the head of a female suicide bomber? The captions identify the head as having belonged to a 20 year old, Palestinian female. The article, however, does not clarify the circumstances, the individual story seemingly erased by the visual horror. The photograph was published in the January 2005 issue on *Bombs* of the magazine NZZ Folio, a monthly supplement to the reputed *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (2005/1, p. 31). In the editorial, the use of this particular photo was justified at length. Instead of representing suicide bombing as something heroic and *normal*, or by using the photo of an “inconspicuous” young man about to follow through with his mission, the magazine wanted to confront its readers with the “reality” and “absurdity” of suicide bombings (Weber 2005, p. 1). And both the reality and the absurdity were seen as best represented by the fragmented body of an unidentified

Palestinian woman.

In this photograph, the violent and the violated body merge into one. The representation of the fragmented female body can be read as a form of fetishism in representation. Her strewn around body parts become the living evidence of her otherness. The bit of her that was preserved, her head, serves as proof of her pathology and irrationality. In this process, the female suicide bomber undergoes both a visual and a symbolic fragmentation – a technique familiar from pornography (Hall 1998).



20 year old Palestinian suicide bomber in Jerusalem, photographer and date unknown, as reproduced in [NZZ Folio](#) issue on bombs

However, what is shown in the photograph can only be understood in relation to what cannot be seen. Only the face – looking almost straight at us – is represented, while other body parts have been literally and symbolically displaced. The blood tracks suggest that her body parts have been moved and rearranged underneath the cloth. The viewer feels repulsed, the tremendous amount of letters to the editors and the formal complaint filed with the Swiss Press Council suggest this much, disgusted by his/her own desire to see more of the body than its torn off head (Presserat 2005). The photograph solicits the viewer's fascination with the violated female body but literally refuses to provide a body at which to look at. He/she is implicitly asked to stylize him/herself as a secondary victim, but cannot help second guessing the appropriateness of his/her reactions. As a result, the implicated viewer does not quite manage to repair the fragmented female body of the suicide bomber. The female suicide bomber's body remains unnamed, thus denying the complete identification with her as a victim. Such representations of female suicide bombers, as horrid they may seem, are also particularly effective forms of resistance to the dominant by refusing life, identification and physical inviolability.

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