Gender, Race and Border Security Practices: A Profane Reading of ‘Muscular Liberalism’

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In recent years the concept of the border has been reconceptualised: borders are no longer viewed primarily as static lines at the outer edge of the state, but increasingly as mobile, bio-political and virtual apparatuses of control. While such a reconceptualisation resonates with western border security practices, however, it is vulnerable to the critique that such a totalising vision of sovereign space does not take into account the varied responses, resistances and contestations among populations targeted by those bordering practices. This article responds to such a critique by developing an interlocking account of the gendered and racialised logics that condition the possibility for contemporary border security practices. We illustrate our approach via an analysis of two visions of contemporary British society and border politics: one offered by Prime Minister David Cameron in his ‘Muscular liberalism’ speech delivered in February 2011; the other contained in Chris Morris’ jihadist comedy ‘Four Lions’.

Keywords: gender; race; muscular liberalism; profanation; border security

Introduction

The attempt to control the mobility of people is a paradigmatic feature of the modern sovereign territorial state and states system (Torpey 2000; De Genova and Peutz 2010; Squire 2011). At various historical junctures these regimes have been shown to impact on different populations according to perceptions of their nationality, ideology, economic value and so on. In the context of the ‘war on terror’ unleashed by the US and its allies in the aftermath of the attacks of 11 September 2001, the differential effects of border security practices according to racial and gender characteristics have been particularly visible. At international airports, for example, the sight of the young Muslim man travelling alone or the hijab-wearing woman with child being pulled to one side for more rigorous questioning has become something of a cliché in the performance of western security practices. Less of a spectacle but equally as prevalent are instances of similar border logics running throughout western society as a whole: in public spaces such as railway stations through vigilance of ‘suspicious’ behaviours; in universities through the attendance monitoring of international students; and in local communities where ‘resilient’ citizens are enjoined to report suspected acts of ‘radicalisation’, for example.

At each of these sites it is possible to identify a complex interplay of two sets of security problematics: first, bordering practices, understood here in a deliberately broad and sociological context as various types of control on mobility; second, both
gendered and racialised bio-political logics which also both rely on logics of economic inequality. Our concern with the current state of the art, as we explore in greater detail in the next section, is that while advances have been made in respect of the scholarly analysis of the problematics of race and gender individually, so far, less has been done to explore them in tandem. Critical border studies (CBS) work has sought a ‘thicker’ conception of the border (Rumford 2006; Salter 2006; Amoore 2007; Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2009; Walker 2010), but continues to be largely neglectful of intersectional dimensions (McCintosh 1995; Peterson 2003; Razack 2004 and 2008; Ackerly and True 2008; Masters 2009). Likewise, the latter has yet to embrace fully the implications of the former particularly in terms of how stratifications of gender, race and class play into and help (re)produce particular spatialisations of politics. Where these factors are considered there is a tendency for this interplay to be treated somewhat ‘flatly’ via an exploration of how border politics affects men and women of varying racial backgrounds differently (Aaron et al. 2010). While this is no doubt a step in the right direction, it treats border politics on the one hand, and forms of stratification on the other hand, as somehow distinct to begin with, which, in turn, misses a fundamental political point that is central to our argument: that some bordering practices are indeed made possible by certain operating logics that are already both highly gendered and racialised, and are structured by economic conditions of (im)possibility. By this we mean that particular regimes of mobility and immobility are only imaginable, implementable and sustainable because they tap into and reify prior assumptions about gender, race, class and their interconnectivity in contemporary political life. We anchor our intervention in the context of an emerging literature that calls for a more gender- and race-sensitive understanding of the way that sovereign power operates (Butler 2004; Razack 2008; Coleman and Grove 2009; Masters 2009). We argue that it is not sufficient merely to draw attention to the increasing mobility, virtuality and violence of today’s bio-political apparatuses of border security. Rather, drawing on Sherene Razack’s work, we emphasise how such apparatuses go hand in hand with gendered and racialised categorisations such as ‘dangerous’ Muslim masculinities, ‘imperilled’ Muslim femininities and ‘modern’ civilised western subjectivities. Indeed, such tropes permit, legitimise and further necessitate the sovereign striation of global space in ways that enable the (re)production of some subjects as what Giorgio Agamben (1998) calls ‘bare life’ against which the ‘normal’ citizen-subject is perpetually defined. Put differently, we explore the work that particular assumptions about gender, race and class do in shaping the political possibility of norm and exception as part of a broader investigation into how some borders give rise to others (Walker 2010). In this way we seek to add another layer of analysis to extant CBS scholarship: one that takes the gendered, racialised and unequal dynamics of bio-political apparatuses of security as inseparable from the border as an object of study.

Our discussion proceeds in three sections. We begin with a discussion of recent efforts to rethink the study of borders in the interdisciplinary field of CBS. While much of this scholarship has succeeded in problematising the prevailing territorialis inside/outside imaginary in international relations (IR), we argue that this has largely been at the expense of a sustained analysis of the significance of gender, race and political economy. In order to address this lacuna we seek to develop a more
‘interlocking’ account that emphasises the multifarious ways in which prior racist and patriarchal divisions—particularly when allied with narratives about ‘modernity’—condition the possibility for contemporary bordering practices. Moreover, following Razack (2008), our preference is to frame these stratifications precisely as ‘interlocking’ rather than merely ‘intersecting’ in order to show how they are mutually interdependent and therefore inseparable from the outset.

The second section illustrates and explores the gendered and racialised dynamics of contemporary bio-political border security practices with reference to the UK case. We choose to do so because most extant analyses of such practices tend to focus on the US (Salter 2006; Amoore 2007) or, though to a lesser extent, the EU (Bigo 2001; Walters 2002; Bialasiewicz 2011). By contrast the UK’s vision of border security has been largely neglected and yet this is despite its global influence in terms of policy and private enterprise (Vaughan-Williams 2010). Our specific focus is a detailed interlocking textual analysis of British Prime Minister David Cameron’s keynote speech on radicalisation and Islamic extremism at the Munich Security Conference on 5 February 2011. This speech is highly significant as it is the first articulation of the Conservative–Liberal Democratic coalition government’s position on these matters, and claims to put forward a new vision for the future of British security policy around the intriguing notion of ‘muscular liberalism’. We examine how particular gendered, racialised and economic assumptions work with and through one another to permit the vision of ‘muscular liberalism’ and how this in fact signals not only a continuation but an intensification of bordering practices developed by previous Blair and Brown governments (Vaughan-Williams 2010). Central here, as we will go on to examine, are a range of pre-emptive measures designed to code particular bodies as dangerous, justify suspicion and action against them, and allow for modes of bio-political governance that, in the words of Ash Amin, ‘define the norms of personhood, citizenship and integration, the demarcations of home, nation, and the outside, the contours of who counts for what’ (Amin 2010, 10).

Finally, the third section seeks to develop a critique of these practices and the particular vision of society underpinning them as represented in Cameron’s ‘Muscular liberalism’ speech. To do so we critically juxtapose the content of the speech analysed in the previous section with the portrayal of contemporary British politics in Chris Morris’ controversial ‘jihadist comedy’ Four Lions (Morris 2010). Taking our lead from a growing body of work variously referred to as the aesthetic and/or cultural turn in politics and IR (Bleiker 2001; Davies 2010; Randall 2011), we draw on this film as an alternative conceptualisation—or ‘vernacular theorisation’ in the terms of Nick Randall (2011)—of the gendered and racialised dynamics of Britain and the forms of border politics to which this gives rise. While other films and cultural artefacts could have been selected for their treatment of contemporary gendered and racialised border practices (for example, Rendition, Hood 2007; Sleeper Cell, Voris and Reiff 2005) or for their satirical takes on modern British multiculturalism (for example, The Infidel (Appignanesi 2010)), we argue that Four Lions politicises what is at stake in the wider discourses of national identity, extremism, multiculturalism, gender, race and political economy that otherwise remain oblique in Cameron’s speech. Both texts are intrinsically connected by, reflective of and contribute to a wider intertextual terrain in which these discourses are imagined and negotiated in contemporary British politics. They are, after all, historically,
politically and culturally co-located phenomena and both seek to represent aspects of life in Britain post-9/11. On these grounds, while certainly different genres, we consider the juxtaposition of an elite political speech and a popular film entirely apposite to the task of understanding how certain bordering practices are made possible. On our reading, *Four Lions* unpacks the logic of ‘muscular liberalism’, reveals the contingency and absurdity of the assumptions about identity that it relies upon, and comedically demonstrates how the constructs continually falter and often break down. In this way, drawing on Agamben’s lesser known essay ‘On Profanations’, we argue that *Four Lions* profanes the vision of Cameron’s speech and that this opens up the potential for politicising and therefore thinking beyond its gendered and racialised premises and the bordering practices to which these give rise.

**Gender, Race, Class and Border Security**

In recent years the interdisciplinary field of CBS has sought to challenge traditional notions of what and where borders are in contemporary political life (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2009). Seeking to move beyond the impasse reached in debates about whether borders between states are either withering under globalising conditions or more virulent then ever against the backdrop of the ‘war on terror’, CBS has urged a more sociological treatment of borders as a set of practices. The move from ‘border’ to ‘bordering practice’ has thus broadened and deepened our understanding of the term, which encompasses an array of technologies of governance designed to control the mobility of people, services and goods. In this context, the concept of ‘the border’ is no longer understood narrowly in terms of the sharp lines on Mercator’s map, but a much ‘thicker’ sociological entity.

The increasing technological sophistication with which such controls on movement are performed, the diversity of geographical locations where these performances take place, and the speed at which decisions about who and/or what is considered legitimate and/or illegitimate, are all factors commonly cited in support of the view that new border imaginaries are required. Thus, borders have been reformulated in terms of mobile sites of pre-emptive risk assessment and identity management that facilitate the faster mobility of the trusted few at the expense of an array of suspicious Others (Amoore 2007); as a spatio-temporal continuum of controls on movement stretching between domestic/foreign domains and from now into the future (Bigo 2001; Walters 2002; Vaughan-Williams 2010; Bialasiewicz 2011); and as a set of sovereign rituals through which the fiction of the modern subject, state and state system is continually (re)produced, performed into being, and whose contingency is ultimately concealed over and forgotten about (Edkins 2003; Salter 2006; Walker 2010).

In this context, the insights of Agamben have had a considerable impact on efforts to rethink the border. While Agamben does not focus explicitly on this concept as we have come to understand it in the context of IR, a number of writers have found particular promise in the spatial-ontological dimensions of his work. Instead of viewing the limits of sovereign power as somehow fixed at the outer edge of sovereign territory, as per the conventional geopolitical imaginary, Agamben recon-
ceptualises these limits in terms of a decision about whether life is worthy of living on the one hand, or expendable on the other (Agamben 1998). Such a decision performatively produces and secures the borders of political community, as the politically qualified life of the ‘normal’ citizen-subject is defined against the ‘exceptional’ life of what Agamben famously refers to as ‘bare life’ (Agamben 1998). In this way, bare life is the remnant of the sovereign bio-political machine: the de-subjectified subject banned from conventional juridical-political structures and produced as part of a voiceless and undifferentiated mass. Included in the workings of law and politics only through its exclusion from those structures, bare life is a form of life that can be killed without incurring punishment: a category referred to in Roman law as homo sacer (Agamben 1998).

Bordering practices à la Agamben are thus recast as performative dividing practices—practices not confined to the margins of sovereign territory but rather to be found throughout social space—that continually (re)inscribe difference through mobile bodies, which can then be risk assessed, categorised and then treated as either ‘citizen-subjects’ or ‘bare life’ (Vaughan-Williams 2009). This ‘generalised bio-political border’ is bio-political in the Foucauldian sense, precisely because what is at stake is the ‘making live’ of some life at the expense of the ‘letting die’ of other forms of life. But where Agamben departs substantively from Foucault concerns the reintroduction of the concept of sovereignty in the analysis of this politics of death or ‘thanopolitics’ (Mbembe 2003; Coleman and Grove 2009). The former reintroduces sovereignty into the Foucauldian frame via the notion of the decision borrowed from Carl Schmitt, for whom, paradigmatically, ‘sovereign is he who decides on the exception’ (Schmitt 1985, 5). Importantly, however, in a modification of the Schmittian account, Agamben sees sovereign power as circulating in the form of a currency rather than something that is wielded from on high or from one single concentrated ‘source’ (Agamben 1998). The ‘decision’ in this context is not therefore a straightforward Schmittian decisionism: decisions on the production of bare life are enacted by multiple—sometimes competing—‘sovereigns’, and often by automated systems based on pre-calculated algorithms.

In this context, the logic of the generalised bio-political border is also ‘virtual’, inasmuch as it seeks to identify and root out uncertainties before they emerge as risks. According to Michael Dillon, the paradigm of virtual security is one that ‘knows’ living things ‘as contoured by a virtual potential, specifically the potential to become dangerous’ (Dillon 2003, 537). What is at stake here is the production of knowledge about the becoming dangerous of some risky subjects through models of risk management based on the profiling of populations. For example, the US ‘terror watch list’ identifies airline passengers considered to be a threat to homeland security and seeks to prevent them from getting on planes bound for America. Moreover, technology exists to mine data, identify transactions deemed to be suspicious and correlate with known threats in order to generate such lists in real time. On this basis, the generalised bio-political border is a virtual apparatus that produces bare life exactly as a knowable form of life that is amenable to its array of checks, controls and exceptions. Furthermore, under conditions where security has become the normal technique of government, no one is excluded from the simulation of the sovereign ban (Agamben 1998). Indeed, it is precisely for this reason that Agamben claims ‘we are all virtually homines sacri’ (Agamben 1998, 115).
But while thinking in terms of the ‘generalised bio-political border’ opens up alternative ways of analysing bordering practices, it is arguably vulnerable to the critique that such a frame foists a totalising coherence on to what is in reality a much messier picture (Butler 2004; Connolly 2004; Coleman and Grove 2009). Moreover, the universalising pretensions of concepts such as ‘bare life’, ‘sovereign exceptionalism’ and ‘virtual bio-politics’ have rightly been questioned on account of their homogenisation of those subjects produced as bare life (Butler 2004; Connolly 2004; Brown 2010). Cristina Masters (2009) has argued, rightly in our view, that the figure of homo sacer is inadequate to the task of diagnosing the experiences of women in the war on terror. More generally, Masters critiques what she considers to be a ‘lack of explicit engagement with gender as a significant category of political exclusion, both historically and in our contemporary context’, in the bio-political literature (Masters 2009, 32). Drawing on the work of Ronit Lentin, Masters suggests the alternative figure of femina sacra in order to highlight the way in which sovereign power works on bodies in different ways. Thus, while women’s lives have not been ‘more bare’ than men’s, they have been rendered as sexualised objects oscillating between the two extremes of the ‘Madonna’ on the one hand and ‘whore’ on the other (Masters 2009, 44–45).

The feminist critique of Agamben extends beyond a problematisation of homo sacer as a paradigmatically masculine figure. Masters has pointed out that his uptake of the key distinctions between political existence and bare life have long preoccupied and animated gender theorists’ treatment of masculinised public and feminised private spaces. It is thus precisely the relegation of women to the private as an apolitical site that has ‘made possible the masculine space of public’ (Masters 2009, 33). This means that ‘women in the sovereign state have historically and already been cast as lives devoid of politics: in other words, bare life’ (Masters 2009, 34). Yet, while these shortcomings of the homo sacer thesis are of undoubted significance, we suggest that they do not necessarily warrant the dismissal of Agamben’s central insights. Indeed, far from leading to the sort of politically bankrupt universal treatments of subjectivity warned against by some of his critics, we want to suggest that a rereading of those insights in the light of not only gender but also race and aspects of political economy can yield potentially productive results for an interlocking account of the operation of the generalised bio-political border.

Razack’s work, for example, demonstrates how Agamben’s core theses complement rather than contradict the task of analysing the multifarious effects of the sovereign ban on different bodies. She takes as her focus the co-constitutive spectacles of the ‘dangerous’ Muslim man and the ‘imperilled’ Muslim woman in the context of the war on terror. Whereas one figure is subject to heightened modes of surveillance and ‘cast out’ from the ‘normal’ juridical-political order that has come to structure security policy and practice in the west since 9/11, the other is mobilised in support of juridical-political intervention in being reduced to a victim of the immovability of an alien ‘culture’ steeped in ‘traditions’ that mark women’s bodies as subservient to men’s (Razack 2004 and 2008). This ‘securitisation’ of the male Muslim body and ‘imperilment’ of the female Muslim body is located by Razack in a much broader history of encounter between the west and its racial Others, which, she argues, is a product of ‘race thinking’: ‘a structure of thought that divides up the world between the deserving and the undeserving according to descent’ (Razack 2008, 8).
Race thinking is sustained, on this view, by the perpetual abandonment of some populations deemed to be less worthy of protection, rights and humane treatment, which creeps into bureaucratic thinking and becomes a norm. This ‘routinisation of racial hierarchy’ thus turns into a permanent arrangement of who is/is not part of the human community, and is at the heart of the bio-political paradigm set out by Foucault and further developed by Agamben. Indeed, the effect of race thinking is that it legitimises, in advance of any specific behaviour, forms of pre-emptive punishment.

Importantly, however, Razack insists that the racial order reproduced by sovereign bio-politics, at least in its current guise in the context of the war on terror, cannot be understood properly without appreciating the work that gendered and also economic assumptions do. Indeed, for Razack, and for us, race, gender and political economy not only intersect, but are ‘interlocking’, meaning that they provide content for one another; they not only work in tandem but come into existence through one another (McClintock 1995). Thus while race may be a valuable and necessary starting point for thinking about bio-political processes, in order to understand how race is ‘embodied and enacted in the everyday’ we need to pay attention to the ways in which individuals come to ‘know’ themselves through masculinity and femininity, and through their socioeconomic status (Razack 2008, 62). Equally, and as important as Masters’ arguments about gender are, it is imperative that we continue to pay attention to how men and women, who are differentially racialised, experience bio-political attempts. Thus, alongside the figure of the ‘dangerous’ Muslim man is nearly always that of the ‘imperilled’ Muslim woman ‘as needing protection from their violent hyper-patriarchal men’ (Razack 2008, 4). Here gender, race and political economy work through each other to confine the Muslim man to the temporal sphere of the pre-modern against which the modern civilised European subject is reproduced. For example, while concerns about ethnic minority women being forced into marriages has some basis, the moral panic over forced marriage in the Muslim and other ‘immigrant’ communities marginalises the socioeconomic relations that often facilitate arranged matrimony. In some communities where unemployment is high, and educational attainment is low, marriage can offer access to wider job networks and enhanced economic status to both men and women (Razack 2004). However, the spectre of forced marriage is but one example of how the hailing of Muslim men as ‘irredeemably fanatical, irrational, and thus dangerous’ in respect of the way they treat their wives means that both sexes are ‘evicted from the universal, and thus from civilisation and progress ... outside the law’ (Razack 2008, 10). What gender and political economy do together, therefore, is work to reinstate the operative distinction between modern and pre-modern that in turn permits the further embedding of race thinking. This is why, as Razack shrewdly observes, progressive calls to ‘save Muslim women’ only serve to reinforce the logic that produces them as ‘imperilled’ from the outset.

Razack’s work develops Agamben’s diagnoses further by discussing how it is precisely via gendered and racialised logics that the activity of sovereign power is sustained and reproduced. The insight here is twofold: first, the sovereign ban plays out differently on different racially and gender-coded bodies; second, however, beyond this insight, Razack also points to the ways in which race, gender and
political economy ‘interlock’ to facilitate the very possibility of the operation of the sovereign ban. Our aim in the next section is to draw on this interlocking account of the gendered, racialised and class-contingent workings of sovereign power in order to mount our own analysis of the politics of bordering practices in the UK context. While a tendency in critical scholarship has been to concentrate on the rather more visible operations of sovereign power in the war on terror—Guantánamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, etc.—we want to investigate further the bureaucratisation, normalisation and sedimentation of gendered, racialised and economic assumptions that make bordering practices possible. With this aim in mind we devote the following discussion to David Cameron’s ‘Muscular liberalism’ speech in which the illiberal Other is constructed as a form of subjectivity that defines an idealised image of the British citizen.

‘Muscular Liberalism’ after the War on Terrorism

David Cameron’s (2010) much anticipated Munich speech was the first time the UK prime minister had set out his views and those of the new coalition government on radicalisation, multiculturalism and the national security agenda. The gendered language of the speech is immediately apparent. Cameron begins by expressing a firm commitment to military spending, and, employing ‘gender-resonant language’ (Cohn et al. 2005), asserts that the UK’s ‘defences are strong’, and that holding defence and security reviews is not a sign of ‘retreat’, but in fact ‘hard-headed’. The underlying assumption here is that military spending makes the UK secure, and that it is rational and resolute to plan for the inevitability of war and security dilemmas. As numerous feminist scholars have argued (inter alia Tickner 1992; Steans 1998), the notion that war, and thus war preparedness, is inevitable is a profoundly gendered trope; it relies on assumptions about ‘human’ nature that are based on the experiences of a small number of (white) men, a focus on state-based ‘solutions’ that reify the public masculinised sphere, and a reinforcement of the superiority of masculine characteristics such as rationality, resolve and strength. Moreover, commitments to high levels of military spending, especially in the face of extensive social cuts, gloss over the economic trade-off between different forms of ‘security’ that enhanced or continued military spending has for the poor and working poor, and especially women (Tickner 1992). The notion that security needs may be better addressed through more localised, non-violent and social means are all too readily dismissed as idealistic, as ‘softheaded, wishful, naïve’, even dangerous: in other words, feminine (Peterson 1998, 583).

Equally, Cameron’s portrayal of ‘the threat’ of extremism facing the UK is couched in deeply racialised terms: despite saying that ‘terrorism is not linked exclusively to any one religion or ethnic group’, he follows up by asserting that ‘nevertheless, we should acknowledge that this threat comes in Europe overwhelmingly from young men who follow a completely perverse, warped interpretation of Islam’ (Cameron 2010). Moreover, one of the many contradictions within the speech concerns the way in which, having admitted that British citizens may become terrorists, Cameron nonetheless tries to link the threat of radicalisation with an ideology stemming from outside the West:
We have got to get to the root of the problem, and we need to be absolutely clear on where the origins of these terrorist attacks lie. That is the existence of an ideology, Islamist extremism (Cameron 2010).

As this passage shows, the ‘root’ and ‘origin’ of terrorism are understood to be an ‘ideology of extremism’. Cameron overtly dismisses the notion that structural issues—most notably poverty—might facilitate marginality, alienation and violence by claiming that attempts to question the wider international political economy of terrorism ignore ‘the fact that many of those found guilty of terrorist offences in the UK and elsewhere have been graduates and often middle class’ (Cameron 2010). There is no room for inter- or intra-class solidarity here; those who have financial and educational capital must either invest in themselves and their families to become ‘good citizens/subjects’ or reject this way of life in favour of an ideology of ‘extremism’ (Rose 1996; Farough 2004, 246). Those without such capital are simply ignored in a depoliticising move that dismisses the way that capital shapes the discourse and practice of citizenship. In this way, Cameron affirms a distinctively liberal, public and therefore also masculine form of subjectivity in which choice is always individual (rather than social and cultural), mental (rather than embodied) and self-governing (reflecting broader ideals about the absence of constraints imposed by government) (Chambers 2008). Furthermore, Cameron’s advocacy of this position—a ‘hard-nosed ... defence of our liberty’ (Cameron 2010)—is defined in contradistinction to extremism as precisely an irrational, emotive and thus feminised ideology.

The modern/pre-modern refrain identified by Razack as central to the Othering of Muslims is also detectable in Cameron’s speech. Thus, ‘traditional Islam’ is referred to as having been ‘transplanted to modern Western societies’ by the parents of second- and third-generation British Muslim men. This inscribes a binary between ‘modern’ Britain and ‘pre-modern’ Islam, which, in turn, transposes into a cultural hierarchy. On the one hand, Cameron refers to ‘British Muslims’, but on the other hand he excludes this community by referring to ‘them’ as somehow separate from what he sees implicitly as ‘true’ white British society:

But these young men also find it hard to identify with Britain too, because we have allowed the weakening of our collective identity. Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream. We’ve failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they can belong. We’ve even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values (Cameron 2010).

While the speech is vague on precisely what ‘our values’ consist of, this section is clearly a performative act which attempts to characterise the ‘British’ in a normalising political move that only achieves meaning in opposition to ‘Others’. Moreover, in depicting the ‘mainstream’ as well integrated, meritocratic, fair, reasonable and so forth, the different social, political, cultural and economic conditions of possibility in which British people live are obscured. Cameron’s ‘muscular liberalism’ is thus presented not just as a desirable way to live but as the only way of life. The very term ‘extremist’, one associated with a lack of rationality, judgement and reflection, also again relies upon and serves to reinforce the modern/pre-modern distinction. However, what perhaps most distinguishes Cameron’s speech from the
’war on terror’ discourse that preceded it is that even ‘moderates’, previously antithetical to ‘extremists’, must now prove that they are truly ‘modern’. Indeed, one representative of the ‘progressive conservatism project’ at Demos has stated that a key issue highlighted by Cameron in his ‘brave and perceptive speech’ is that ‘it is not enough to oppose Islamist terror, [when] we must oppose Islamism itself. Simply saying that you don’t wish to be violent does not make you a “moderate Muslim”—moderation is about acceptance, tolerance and openness’ (Wind-Cowie 2010). We also see this in Cameron’s criteria for judging which organisations in the ‘Muslim community’ the British government should fund to ‘combat extremism’. He asks: ‘do they believe in universal human rights—including for women and people of other faiths?’ (Cameron 2010) Again, the modern/pre-modern distinction is discernible here; the British government can only work with those ‘enlightened’ enough to tolerate women and people of other faiths. Moreover, Cameron’s need to emphasise women’s rights as somehow additional to ‘human’ rights again echoes a world-view in which ‘universality’ is actually more about the experiences of (white) men (Tickner 1992).

Cameron’s ultimate diagnosis of extremism is that it has resulted from a ‘loss of identity’ among young Muslim men which, in turn, can be read as a symptom of the failure of multiculturalism. In response to this problematisation, Cameron hails a ‘much more active, muscular liberalism’ as the solution:

A passively tolerant society says to its citizens, as long as you obey the law we will just leave you alone. It stands neutral between different values. But I believe a genuinely liberal country does much more; it believes in certain values and actively promotes them. Freedom of speech, freedom of worship, democracy, the rule of law, equal rights regardless of race, sex, or sexuality. It says to its citizens, this is what defines us as a society: to belong here is to believe in these things. Now, each of us in our own countries, I believe, must be unambiguous and hard-nosed about this defence of liberty. ... At stake are not just our lives, it is our way of life (Cameron 2010).

Cameron’s frequent appeals to ensure that others share ‘our values’ prompts no definitions of what these values might be, or any reflection on the violence of those processes that have historically, and more recently, contributed to the ethnic and racial diversity of the UK. This is not to suggest that multicultural policies have been any better at highlighting the complexities of these issues; they too have allowed for ‘the naturalization of the western hegemonic culture to continue while minority cultures become reified and differentiated from normative human behaviour’ (Yuval-Davis et al. 2005, 523). Furthermore, multiculturalism has insufficiently challenged uneven gendered and economic power relations within minority ethnic communities, which have too often been dismissed as ‘cultural diversity’; in doing so, cross-racial and cross-ethnic solidarities based on shared experiences have been undermined (Yuval-Davis et al. 2005). As Gargi Bhattacharyya (2008, 11) argues, however, whatever its shortcomings, multiculturalism at least ‘attempts to imagine a world that can encompass different identities and ways of being’; but when such aspirations are considered a failure or even ‘dangerous’, as Cameron’s speech suggests, then ideas of making space for coexistence and plurality ‘no longer make
sense’. For Ash Amin (2010) the abandonment of multicultural politics has coincided with the securitisation of the Muslim body in the west. Crucially, multiculturalism differed from ‘muscular liberalism’ in that the former did not sanction what Amin refers to as vigilance leading to punishment. While there was some scope for ‘recognition and co-habitation’ in the policies and politics of multiculturalism, this has now been ‘swept aside by a politics of assimilation’ (Amin 2010, 10). Thus, Amin claims, while it is important to recognise the historical continuity of race as a political category, ‘a given biopolitical present strongly shapes the actual intensity and experience of race’ (Amin 2010, 13).

Profaning the Biopolitical Order: Chris Morris’ Four Lions

Police Inspector: You’re gonna die in that gear lads
Omar: More than likely, but it’s for a good cause

Cameron’s Munich speech, along with the National Security Strategy (NSS) (HM Government 2010a) and the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) (HM Government 2010b), privileges a pre-emptive approach to risk. One of the key principles of part 2 of the SDSR is the need ‘to be able to tackle threats before they reach these shores’ (HM Government 2010b, 18). Similarly, the UK border is projected overseas in order to prevent individuals deemed to be ‘risky’ from leaving their point of departure for the UK to begin with: ‘We will also focus our efforts on where we can act most efficiently and effectively to secure our borders which might mean taking action overseas, in our territorial airspace, or waters, at the UK’s physical border or within the UK itself’ (HM Government 2010b, 54). In this way, and departing from his predecessors Gordon Brown and Tony Blair, Cameron admits it is no longer the case that the ‘enemy’ can only be found ‘outside’ the UK: ‘We will not defeat terrorism simply by the action we take outside our borders. Europe needs to wake up to what is happening in our own countries. Of course, that means strengthening ... the security aspects of our response, on tracing plots, on stopping them, on counter-surveillance and intelligence gathering’ (Cameron 2010). But if Cameron’s ‘muscular liberalism’ signifies an intention not only to continue, but also to intensify these border security logics, it is not our suggestion that this policy, or the practices legitimised by it, will necessarily ‘work’. Indeed, one of the dimensions of the activity of sovereign power we suggest is sometimes missing in the extant literature is an appreciation of how the performative enactment of bio-politics is not an inevitably ‘successful’ apparatus. For sure, some security practices have devastating effects as illustrated in the shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes in Stockwell Station on 22 July 2005, the deaths of civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the untold number of migrants who die attempting to reach the shores of the UK every year. Nevertheless, our point here is that the attempt to produce bare life must be seen as that: an attempt with various outcomes. As such, there are occasions when bio-political logics also backfire, break down and ‘fail’ according to their own logic (Lundborg and Vaughan-Williams 2011).

An alternative genealogy of bio-political bordering practices would be one that emphasises their frailty and propensity to deconstruct. In Profanations, Agamben (2007) claims that to ‘prolance’ is to render an entirely inappropriate use of some-
thing sacred through play: ‘Children, who play with whatever old thing falls into
their hands, make toys out of things that also belong to spheres of economics, war,
law, and other activities that we are used to thinking of as serious’ (Agamben 2007,
76). The act of profanation ‘neutralises what it profanes’ and is therefore necessarily
a political move: it ‘deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common
use the spaces that power had seized’ (Agamben 2007, 77). In this section we offer
a reading of Chris Morris’ (2010) controversial ‘jihadist comedy’ Four Lions to
profane official attempts to identify and understand the causes and ‘underlying
logic’ of terrorism, particularly the phenomenon of suicide bombings in the UK, as
represented in David Cameron’s Munich speech. We do so because we believe it
constitutes a counter-narrative whose political importance is to highlight the often
absurd situations and outcomes to which attempts to re-inscribe the bio-political
order can lead. As Roland Bleiker (2001) has argued, aesthetic representations such
as film open up new ways of thinking politically about world politics beyond the
limits of mimetic approaches that seek in vain to ‘capture’ reality. In the UK
context, as Randall (2011) has discussed, there is a long tradition of articulating
different theoretical propositions about politics via film. Drawing on Thomas
McLaughlin’s notion of ‘vernacular theory’, Randall (2011, 264) claims that film-
makers are ‘capable theorists of society who offer theoretical reflection in ordinary
language’, and it is very much with this sentiment in mind that we seek to
juxtapose Cameron’s speech with Morris’ Four Lions.

Four Lions stands out as a particularly interesting cultural comment on suicide
bombing (in)security, multiculturalism, race, gender and class. The film, which won
Morris a BAFTA, focuses on the exploits of a cell of British Muslim would-be suicide
bombers as they plan an attack. Importantly, the film not only utilises satire, but
also emphasises and politicises the mundane and ordinary spaces in which multiple
subjectivities are possible and through which the depoliticising effects of Cameron’s
speech are exposed. For example, the central characters are, with the exception of
Omar (the nicest would-be mass murderer around), very childlike. Waj and Fessal
are idiotic, Barry, the white British convert, is a bully and a brat who intimidates
and throws tantrums if he does not get his way, and Hassan is the eager to impress
new kid on the block. One reading is that the Lions are not only dangerous but
irrational (and therefore feminised), although the emphasis on ‘laddishness’ in the
film provides a cross-racial critique of what it means to be a ‘bloke’ in British culture
and a satirical take on the supposedly ‘rational’ (violent, war-waging, risk-taking)
aspects of hegemonic western masculinities. Indeed, when asked how the film
came about, director Chris Morris noted that press and legal reports on terrorism:

> seemed to contain elements of farce ... People go to training camps in the
> wrong clothes, forget how to make bombs, fight with each other and then
> fight again over who just won the fight, volunteer for the mujahedeen
> and get told to go home and ‘do the knitting’ ... Then the penny dropped.
> A cell of terrorists is a bunch of blokes. A small group of fired up lads
> planning cosmic war from a bedsit—not a bad pressure cooker for jokes
> (Film4 2010).

Rather than infantilising its main characters (and rendering them feminine), Four
Lions therefore mocks the absurdity of the ‘laddishness’ of terrorism and counter-
terrorism alike. Moreover, its focus on ‘laddish’ behaviour also highlights the significance of ‘commercially driven masculinities’ to contemporary ideas of British manhood (Beynon 2002, 11). The rise of ‘lad mags’ and associated cultural artefacts from the 1990s mirrored a wider consolidation of ‘consumption-led values’ (Beynon 2002). However, while men from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds are still expected to partake in this form of ‘narcissistic masculinity’, lad culture obscures the alienation of consumerism not just for those without the financial means to ‘buy in’ but also for wider social solidarity. Thus while Cameron’s ‘muscular liberalism’ depoliticises poverty and alienation as grounds for terrorism, the Lions—as four ‘fired up lads planning cosmic war from a bedsit’ (Film4 2010)—can be situated in a wider context of consumerist individualism that Cameron at once espouses and fails to see as alienating in its effects.

The boundaries between ‘dangerous’ Muslim masculinities, ‘imperilled’ Muslim femininities and ‘modern’ civilised western subjectivities are also constantly blurred in *Four Lions*. For example, when Waj and Omar visit a Pakistani training camp, they are not welcomed as equals but are regarded as English amateurs (‘Mr Beans’), which is borne out when Omar’s RPG attack only proves dangerous to fellow jihadists. Omar’s domestic life similarly toys with gendered allegories. Omar is a devoted husband and father and his relationship with his wife Sophia, who is a nurse, is playful and humorous. The couple particularly enjoy mocking Omar’s brother Ahmed, a pious man who shields his eyes from an unveiled Sophia whenever he enters their home. Ahmed, who opposes Omar’s violence as well as Sophia’s ‘immodesty’, is treated with contempt by the couple who shoot at him with water pistols. Sophia is no imperilled ethnic woman overcoming oppression by embracing the promise of ‘muscular liberalism’, though. While she refuses to cover herself in Ahmed’s presence and holds feminised, caring roles (‘mother’ and ‘nurse’), she is also Omar’s biggest supporter.

Furthermore, Sophia’s support for Omar is no simple reproduction of the protected/protector dichotomy in which the loving wife (and nurse) encourages her ‘soldier’ off to ‘war’. Indeed, the treatment of suicide and death in *Four Lions* suggests that Sophia is actually braver than Omar as the one left behind. This is because the film profanes liberal ‘certainties’ about suicide as ‘the supreme violation of the duties to oneself’ (Kant 1997, 124) by representing life as the ‘queue at Alton Towers’, a waiting game before the excitement and thrill of death, which, using the same analogy, is described as equivalent to being on the Nemesis rollercoaster (or the ‘Rubber-Dingy Rapids’ in Waj’s case). Thus, although the support that Omar receives from his wife and son, with whom he has loving relationships, may re-inscribe the gendered boundaries of protector/protected, the peculiarity of Omar’s mission signifies gender trouble. If death is Alton Towers, and life the queue for all of its best rides, then perhaps Sophia is the real hero who makes the most significant sacrifice by living on.

The treatment of death in *Four Lions* also troubles the notion of rational, autonomous subjects choosing a life of ‘extremism’ over the liberal way of life Cameron espouses. Choice is important to the Lions, who have several disagreements over the importance of choosing martyrdom; but ultimately, each Lion’s death is ‘a consequence of fate, part of a larger historical mechanism’, with the particular conse-
quences of that act being beyond their control (Murray 2006, 200). Fessal’s comic death, as he tries to prevent himself from being blown up, is merely a tragic accident. Hassan changes his mind at the last minute and is killed by Barry; Barry falls victim to one of his own idiotic schemes and chokes on a SIM card, taking only a ‘Good Samaritan’ with him. Waj’s death is the outcome of confusion, and while Omar tries to regain some semblance of control over his death after losing Waj, he ultimately ends up killing himself in the last place he wanted to. That the Lions all end up dead—and in the case of the pacifist Ahmed, wrongly detained and extraordinarily rendered for his brother’s deeds—is less an indication that the Lions have limited or no agency; Omar, for example, could have abandoned his mission and perhaps even escaped punishment. It is more an indication of the extent to which the ‘choices’ that Cameron’s vision relies on deny the significance of social agency in framing the choices, and the disparities between them, that social actors make. Ahmed may be a ‘moderate’ in the old language of the ‘war on terror’ but in the era of ‘muscular liberalism’ his peaceful behaviour is insufficient; his embodiment and personal appearance are enough to code him as ‘dangerous’. The limitation of the attempt to control and regulate men like him, which *Four Lions* exposes through profanation, lies in his innocence and the tragicomic absurdity of the situation he finds himself in.

Some scenes in *Four Lions* might be read as parodies of specific UK counter-terrorism campaigns which in the process of being parodied are themselves revealed as fantasies and imitations (Butler 1999). For example, as the film opens, we see Waj attempting to make a ‘jihadi video’ as Barry frets over whether or not the video camera’s batteries will last. Later in the film, cars splutter to a halt, mistaken Internet orders leave one Lion dressed in an ill-fitting upside-down clown costume, and a mobile phone SIM card proves fatal for another. Such incidents might all too readily be dismissed as the continuation of long-standing orientalist representations of Muslim men as bungling terrorists (for example see the film *Reel Bad Arabs*, Earp and Jhally 2006), but this overlooks the way that Morris’ observations target a wider socio-political climate of racialised fear. In 2007, the London Metropolitan Police’s ‘Terrorism: If you suspect it, report it’ campaign alerted Londoners that terrorists need to communicate, to travel and so on, through posters showing everyday objects such as cameras, vans and mobile phones. In *Four Lions*, however, these objects malfunction and prove more dangerous to their users than anyone else. In profaning these objects, the film returns them to common usage (the everyday) ‘from the sphere of the sacred’ (war, law) (Agamben 2007). Another parody arises when snipers attempting to avert the Lions’ attack on costumed runners in the London Marathon misunderstand their orders over a walkie-talkie. One sniper shoots a runner dressed as a Wookie rather than a bear as instructed. In the midst of the ensuing chaos, the sniper asks: ‘Is a Wookie a bear, Control?’ The scene, though comical, is a reminder of testimony from one of the firearms officers who shot Jean Charles de Menezes. The officer insists he missed important information about the operation due to radio problems in the minutes leading up to Menezes’ death (IPCC 2007). Although Menezes’ death was frequently framed by the ‘discourse of the mistake’, obscuring the wider political context, the depiction in *Four Lions* of blundering, inept police officers, armed with live ammunition pointed at large crowds of people, serves as a reminder that one of the inherent ‘logics’ of virtual bordering practices is that ‘lightning decisions about life worth living (the
politically qualified life of the polis) and life not worth living (bare life)’ continue to be made (Vaughan-Williams 2007, 191). Indeed, one of the final scenes of the film shows police raiding Ahmed’s home, invoking scenes of other bungled police raids on innocent British Muslims. When Ahmed resurfaces in the credits inside a shipping container and is informed he is on Egyptian soil, the parallels with extraordinary rendition are clear. The ‘moderate’ Ahmed becomes the ‘extremist’, while Omar, the ‘extremist’ who lives as a ‘moderate’, carries out his attack.

Ultimately perhaps, *Four Lions*’ most troubling profanation is that it makes idiots out of everyone. Its central characters are naive and sometimes absurd; the authorities—politicians, police, intelligence services—are at best clueless, at worst, tragically senseless; but *Four Lions* also pokes fun at the British public, not only for its Islamaphobia, but also for being blind to the ordinariness of would-be terrorists. Contrary to Cameron’s claims about ‘the existence of an ideology, [of] Islamist extremism’, the motives of the characters in *Four Lions* are contradictory and incongruous; they want to ‘fuck mini babybel’, but enjoy listening to Toploader; they proclaim that everyone is a legitimate target, but Omar tells his colleague Matt to stay away so he does not get hurt; and Alton Towers, what ought to be a symbol of the frivolous decadence of western existence, is analogous to the Lions’ own personal paradise. Furthermore, characters such as Alice, the neighbour oblivious to the violent destiny of the nails and bleach surrounding her, and Omar’s colleague Matt, who sees only friendship in Omar, trouble neat versions of ‘reality’ in which ‘dangerous’ Muslim men commit ideological acts of terror against ‘us’ because they reject ‘our values and way of life’, as Cameron would have it. What Cameron offers is the ‘freedom’ to be ‘brought into alliance with the individualized ethos of neo-liberal politics’ (Rose 1996, 335) and, in doing so, he depoliticises the ways in which daily life, as a messy, complex experience, is shaped by expectations and material realities that are gendered, racialised and economic. Through its focus on the mundane, ordinary practices of the Lions, previously sacred assumptions are ‘deactivated and thus opened up to a new, possible use’ by the film, (Agamben 2007, 85). *Four Lions* therefore offers a starting point for a more interlocking understanding of the limitations of the performative enactment of bio-politics by profaning some of the idiocies that pervade our assumptions about our social world.

**Conclusion**

In *After the Globe, Before the World*, R. B. J. Walker (2010) argues that the border has become a site of increasing complexity, and yet, he argues, there continues to be a relative paucity of critical reflection on this theme. Indeed, a central ‘prediction’ of his book is that future political analysis will need to ‘think much more carefully about how complex practices of drawing lines have come to be treated as such a simple matter’ (Walker 2010, 6). In particular, Walker enjoins scholars of border studies to consider in greater depth precisely the role that some borders perform in conditioning the possibility of other borders. At the same time, gender scholars of various hues have sought to problematise some of the most stubborn borders that run throughout social life. In particular, they have shown how gender functions as ‘a symbolic system’, often through gender-dichotomised binaries (masculine/feminine, strong/weak, rational/emotional) so that ‘our ideas about gender perme-
ate and shape our ideas about many other aspects of society beyond male–female relations’ (Cohn et al. 2005, 2). Similarly, post-colonial scholars have drawn attention to the work that racial distinctions do in maintaining discourses of identity and difference (Krishna 1999), the persistence of neo-colonial structures and relations of power (Abrahamsen 2003) and the role of politics and IR as an orientalist discourse in reifying, rather than challenging, these dynamics (Barkawi and Laffey 2006).

In this article, we have attempted to respond to these charges and synthesise the thrust of the above literatures by examining how interlocking gendered and racialised assumptions provide the conditions of possibility for contemporary bio-political border security practices. Recent feminist critiques of the bio-political paradigm outlined by Foucault and embellished by Agamben have called into question the absence of the female body from their diagnoses of the contemporary operations of sovereign power. Similarly, Achille Mbembe (2003) has made a critique of the absence of sufficient attention to the specificities of race in terms of how certain populations are more likely to be produced as bare life than others. Drawing on the work of Razack (2008), however, we have sought to suggest that by rereading Foucault and Agamben’s insights in the light of the interlocking experiences of gender, race and issues of political economy, the ways in which the generalised bio-political border operates through these categories become clearer. What we have tried to demonstrate is that the ‘sense of self that is simultaneously required and produced’ in contemporary bordering practices is always necessarily a gendered and racialised subject of bio-political intervention (Razack 2008, 62). By this we seek to emphasise that ideas about masculinity/femininity and whiteness/otherness not only entail that men and women of different racial backgrounds experience the border in various ways, but that its bio-political interventions are made possible by certain operating logics that are always already both gendered and racialised.

By focusing on how gendered and racial assumptions interlock in David Cameron’s recent speech on ‘muscular liberalism’, we have also tried to suggest that the UK coalition government’s thinking reflects not only a continuation, but an intensification, of those bordering practices developed in the context of the ‘war on terror’. This is, of course, despite the abandonment of the language of the ‘war on terror’ in the official security policy lexicon. Indeed, we have suggested that what perhaps distinguishes the ‘muscular liberalism’ approach, from earlier (gendered and racialised) bio-political attempts to structure contemporary political life, is that the possibilities of cohabiting with ‘moderates’ have been swept aside. Instead, what has emerged is a bio-politics of necessity to tame pre-emptively the Muslim body as both errant and potentially so through an ethos of everyday vigilance, personal responsibility and self-preservation (Rose 1996; Amin 2010). This narrative of everyday vigilance is made intelligible by the embodiment and enactment of gender and race in everyday life and it is this that explains why Cameron’s speech relies so heavily on gendered language, references to gendered characteristics such as masculinity, and on invoking gendered assumptions about ‘dangerous’ Muslim men and ‘imperilled’ Muslim women. Muscular liberalism not only requires ‘ordinary people to hold genuine fears that their sense of identity, security or welfare is threatened’ (Duffield 2007, 200), but that the ways in which people come to understand themselves as gendered and racial subjects on a daily basis are also being affronted. It is from this that a generalised bio-political b/order reliant on the
co-ordinating and co-constitutive operations of gender and race has come to shape the intensity of how gender and race are experienced.

While the effects of western sovereign bio-politics for differently racialised men and women should not be overlooked, we have also suggested that its totalising, universalist and homogeneous impulses can be more readily troubled as attempts at structuring contemporary political life by paying closer attention to gender and race. By turning to the representation of everyday and mundane enactments and embodiments of gender and race in *Four Lions*, we derived insights into the limits of the allegorical modern/pre-modern figures on which muscular liberalism relies. Drawing on Agamben’s notion of the profane, we read *Four Lions* as a parody of the idiocy of border security practices in their attempts to re-inscribe the bio-political order. As an act of profanation, our reading of *Four Lions* ‘neutralises what it profanes’ and ‘returns to common use the spaces that power had seized’ (Agamben 2007, 77). In particular, the film’s use of play and profanity, and its focus on everyday and mundane enactments of gender and race, deeply troubles—and therefore politisises—border security practices. It thus acts as a counter-narrative, whose political significance is its blurring of the boundaries between those ‘dangerous’ Muslim masculinities, ‘imperilled’ Muslim femininities and ‘modern’ civilised western subjectivities that Razack’s (2008) work highlights, and that muscular liberalism invokes. Ultimately, it is precisely the supporters of a muscular and masculinised form of liberty who have actually closed their minds to the possibility that there are other ways to live.

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**Notes**

This article was initially prepared for and presented to the International Studies Association Annual Convention, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, 16–19 March 2011. The authors would like to thank François Debrìx and Alexander Barder for organising our panel, the Editors of BIPIR, Andrew Baker and Dan Bulley, and three anonymous reviewers for providing extensive feedback on earlier drafts. All remaining errors are our own.

1. A full review of Foucault, Agamben and their uptake in the secondary literature is beyond the remit of the present article. Rather, what we offer here is a brief summary of some of the key arguments. For more, see Vaughan-Williams (2009 and 2010).

2. Here the concept of the ‘virtual’ means something quite specific and is not to be confused with a more general notion of the term meaning ‘electronic’, ‘non-physical’ or somehow ‘mediated’. Rather, following Dillon (2003) what we are working with is a more political-philosophical treatment of ‘virtuality’ relating to the potential for something or someone to become different.

**Bibliography**


