

Profession: Killer

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Nicholas Khan offers an ethnographical study of the “professional killers” of a Pakistani political party and immerses the reader in the life of these murderers. Her study opens new avenues for exploring how these killers manage to make sense of their professional activities and justify their crimes.

Reviewed: Nichola Khan, *Mohajir Militancy in Pakistan. Violence and Practices of Transformation in the Karachi Conflict*, Milton Park/New York, Routledge, 2010, 208 pp.

Here is a unique academic book that raises an unusual question in social sciences: are there objects of study that are out of bounds, so to speak, or can the sociological imagination be applied to any subject, even the most dismal ones or those that seem *a priori* to be the least suited to analysis? This question, which is both ontological and epistemological, has been raised by the historians of the Holocaust, of course, from Raul Hilberg to Christopher Browning. More recently, it has come up again with the work of the sociologists and political scientists who study mass crimes. But until now, this disturbing question had rarely been raised in the context of an ethnographic study, in other words, in a situation in which an investigator is confronted by an “appalling” subject at close range and for an extended period of time.¹

¹ Paul Zawadski, « Travailler sur des objets détestables : quelques enjeux épistémologiques et moraux », *Revue internationale des sciences sociales*, n° 174, 2004, p. 571-580.

The Contingencies of a Borderline Investigation

In a way that is extremely unusual for a social scientist, Nicholas Khan has shared the daily life, and gathered the testimonies, of a group of “professional” killers working for an ethno-nationalist Pakistani party based in Karachi, the Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM). Founded in 1984 by a group of former students in medicine and pharmacy at the University of Karachi, MQM has presented itself since its creation as the advocate of the “Mohajirs” (migrants), these Urdu speaking Muslims who settled in Pakistan after the partition of India in 1947. Having been the avant-garde of the movement for Pakistan and the political and economical elite of the new state, the Mohajirs have been on the decline since the 1970’s, which has made them particularly susceptible to the vengeful discourse, tinged with populism, of MQM. And as Khan demonstrates throughout her book, the violent component of this “street nationalism” has opened up a “real and imagined space of ‘possibility’” for some of the male youth in Karachi, thus fostering new “violent lifestyles” (p. 6).²

As Khan admits herself, her insertion in this exclusive group wasn’t initially motivated by a scientific purpose, and it is only years later that she decided to make use of this personal experience for her doctoral thesis in anthropology. It was as a young mother that she settled at first in the neighborhood of Liaqatabad in Karachi in 1995, where her husband’s family lived. Since the 1980’s, this working-class neighborhood has been a bastion of MQM and one of the main breeding grounds for the recruitment of its militiamen. Her husband’s family had the reputation of strongly supporting the Mohajir nationalist cause, and little by little, she grew closer to the radical militants of MQM, eventually “accompanying them on minor destructive missions – for example, to block the main road with burning vehicles, fire over police check posts and even set alight the local branch of Habib Bank” (p. 49). Yet the young people she accompanied in this type of operation were only minor figures whereas her book deals with a more “serious” type of militant: the killers (*qātil*) of MQM, assembled in an “underground leadership cadre” (p. 57).

² Oskar Verkaaik, *Migrants and Militants. Fun and Urban Violence in Pakistan*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004, p. 6. Verkaaik is thinking here of the ability of MQM to “speak the language of the state as well as the language of the street” through neighborhood-bound (and mostly male) socializing.

The Training of an Elite Corps

This elite corps was born soon after the creation of MQM in 1984, around the “bodyguards” of Altaf Hussain, the charismatic leader of the party. As Khan explains, the term “bodyguard” was in fact “a euphemism for a range of violent activities” (p. 61). Unlike the grassroots militants of the party, these bodyguards were not involved in the protection of their neighborhood. They were frequently mobilized instead for larger confrontations, in Orangi, for instance (which has the reputation of being – along with Dharavi in Bombay – Asia’s greatest slum, with its multi-ethnic population of Mohajirs, Pukhtuns, and Pendjabis, and has been the scene of the most bloody intercommunity confrontations that have taken place in Karachi since the second half the 1980’s). Outside of these periods of tension, the bodyguards of MQM were charged with kidnappings and targeted assassinations of rivals, attacks against protesters of opposing parties and bank robbery... The membership of this elite corps was very small at first: about fifteen members at most, in a city whose population already exceeded 10 million inhabitants at the time. (It is nearly 20 million now.) As Khan explains, these bodyguards were initially divided into two teams of seven men each, who were sharing a house in Liaqatabad. Also used as a detention and torture center, these premises constituted a kind of home, or fort, for this fraternity of killers. “No agencies would dare come inside” brags one of the men interviewed by Khan (p. 61), underlining in passing the crucial role that this hermetic place played in the re-socialization of the MQM killers in a militia specializing in the execution of the “dirty work” of the party.

The “Dirty Work” of Murder

As Nicolas Mariot recently suggested,³ the notion of “dirty work”, as we apply it to the analysis of the work of nurses, for instance, can also be applied to the analysis of some of war’s messy tasks – as someone like Everett C. Hughes has done.⁴ Although Nichola Khan never uses this expression herself, her book opens with a biographical

³ Nicolas Mariot, « Faut-il être motivé pour tuer ? Quelques explications aux violences de guerre », in *Genèses*, 53, 2003, p. 176.

⁴ Everett C. Hughes, « Good People and Dirty Work », in *The Sociological Eye. Selected Papers*, New Brunswick/London, Transaction Books, 2009 (1951), pp. 87-97.

account that gives its due to the “dirty work” of murder. This disturbing account, recorded several years after the facts, culminates in the evocation of a particularly gruesome murder. Pressured by his hierarchy who was trying to terrorize the military adversaries of MQM, “Arshad” knocked at the door of the house of a Pakistani army intelligence superintendent, at a time when he was certain to find his young wife at home. The young woman was pregnant, it turned out, but overcoming his initial reluctance, he decided to follow his leaders’ instructions: “Don’t kill her with a gun. Kill her in a way that when it’s reported in the newspapers MQM’s enemies will get frightened.” (p. 4). So Arshad killed the young woman by stabbing her in her belly, then decapitated her and put her head on top of a refrigerator. As he himself admitted later, this atrocity bore fruit: it caused a huge stir and the officer who had been targeted lost his mind and ended up in a mental hospital. Arshad himself was traumatized by his crime and from then on, the vengeful ghost of his victim haunted his dreams at night.

If I mention this sordid and lurid episode, at the risk of giving the reader the wrong idea about this book – which is in no way sensationalist – it is to show the extent to which the sociology of extreme violence could benefit from borrowing the notion of “dirty work” from sociological research on other professions. Just as nurses often handle the dirty tasks that confront them with death, blood, or excrement with a particular zeal, Arshad seemed to have overcome his initial horror by displaying an unfaltering devotion to his task and a complete absorption in his murderous *hexis*, putting a professional ethic into action that appears to be – almost – like any other. In Arshad’s account, there is nothing pathological about his vicious act: it is part of a job well done, rather than murder as a fine art. The killers of MQM don’t have the scruples, or perhaps the nihilism, of the killer in Louis Malle’s movie “The Thief” (1967), in which Jean-Paul Belmondo boasts: “I do a dirty job; but I have an excuse: I do it dirtily.” The killers of MQM could boast instead: “I have done a dirty job, but I am not looking for an excuse, because I have done it properly.” This is exactly what Arshad suggests when he says: “I’ve killed many people but never dishonestly.” (p. 5)

We can regret the fact that Khan hasn't given more thought to the idea of murder as a "profession", because the way her informants think about their murderous actions often points in that direction. "Faisal", another MQM killer she has interviewed, tells her, for instance, that at the time of his recruitment, he and his Mohajir friends "weren't professionals and couldn't use [their] weapons properly" (p. 54), while Arshad confides to her that "[his] first *job* was to kill 600 Pukhtuns" (p. 53, emphasis mine). Everything in this biographical material calls for an analysis of the murderous activities of these young men as a matter of increasing professionalism (implying, among other things, the acquisition of an "esoteric" competence,⁵ taking the form, in this case, of a martial knowledge taught by a "tribal leader" in Afghanistan), reinforced by group dynamics and emulation, or even competition, between masters of violence.

Ultra-Violence and Masculinity

And yet rather than following this lead, Khan has chosen to interpret her astounding ethnographical and biographical material through the lens of gender, and more specifically of male studies. She sees in the violent careers of these young men a rite of passage into adulthood, the consecration of a scorned masculinity repressed by other dominant ethnic groups (Punjabis and Pukhtuns) and by traditional authority figures within the Mohajir community. In other words, the "mobilization to violent politics represents a vehicle for young men to realize their aspirations for social being, and social and economic mobility, and to become key agents in transforming their status as subjugated citizens and frustrated youth" (p. 55).

This part of Khan's analysis, loosely inspired by the writings of Frantz Fanon on revolutionary violence, has its shortcomings – and errs through intentionalism, a common feature among the adepts of the notion of "agency". To say that violence opens a "field of opportunities" is one thing. But to see in those violent journeys the result of intentional or conscious career choices, or a type of catharsis, is going one step too far... Shouldn't we insist, rather, on the amount of contingency and selection involved in this kind of "professional" orientation? Without questioning the ideological convictions – often lived

⁵ Everett C Hughes, « Professions », in *The Sociological Eye*, op. cit., p. 374.

in the visceral mode of outrage – of these young men, we may suggest that these convictions represent a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for a commitment to violence. The chance encounter with recruiting agents – through parents, neighbors or friends – is essential to the process of radicalization that leads to a commitment to violence. And the chance of such meetings is often what activates social or ideological predispositions to violence. This is the strength – and the ambiguity⁶ – of the movie *Lacombe Lucien* (1974), in which Louis Malle suggests that the decision to enlist in the Resistance rather than in the French Militia often hung by a thread. Had she followed that lead, Khan could have downplayed the notion of decision-making or strategy in these men’s lives and given more thought, perhaps, to the young men who have failed to embrace a violent career within MQM, even though they may have had the inclination to do so.

About Murder as a Mode of “Subjectivation”

If the central role of the notion of agency in the analysis of these journeys of “violent becoming” is problematic, it is also because it tends to underestimate the aspect of subjection that is inherent in them. Khan is wrong, it seems to me, when she interprets the terms by which Faisal formalizes his entrance into a murderer’s career as a sign of agency: “I agree” (p. 56). The expression he uses in this case, and that recalls the wedding vows, doesn’t have the same subjective force in Urdu that it has in French or in English, insofar as it is, in fact, an indirect form: “[*mujhe*] *qabul hai*”, which means literally, “[to me] the agreement is/comes”. And even if we think that there is nothing more here than a banal linguistic convention, the accounts that are given by the four killers she interviews emphasize the violence of the social control that they have been subjected to within the party during their training, first in Afghanistan, then in Karachi. And although Khan had met some of these killers during her first stay in Karachi, it is only years later that she interviewed them formally for the purpose of her thesis. So it was clearly difficult to infer from these later accounts the interpretation and behavior these killers had while they were committing their crimes (since their actions had taken

⁶ For fierce criticism of Louis Malle’s movie – accused of being the vehicle for revolutionary thinking – see « Anti-rétro: entretien avec Michel Foucault », *Cahiers du cinéma*, n° 251-252, July-August 1974, pp. 6-15.

place about ten years earlier). As they articulate them in an interview situation, these testimonies are part of a process of “subjectivation”⁷ through which these murderers, who have since gone straight for the most part, constitute themselves, by an account of their violent practices, as *subjects*, in both meanings of the word: as the authors of their own crimes, but also – and because of it – as the agents of a subjugating power. From Michel Foucault to Judith Butler, the theories of “subjectivation” (or “subjection”, in the case of Butler⁸) have suggested that submission is the paradoxical foundation of the political subject. Following Foucault and his exegetes,⁹ we are thus tempted to see here a process of “emancipating subjection”,¹⁰ in and through violence. More than through a kind of hypothetical murderous “agency”, it is through their subjection to a violent power that the subjectivity of these young killers seems to have blossomed, for a while at least.

What Kind of Life is There After Mass Murder?

The great strength of *Mohajir in Pakistan*, in addition to its intimate treatment of a phenomenon that defies sociological analysis, is its longitudinal approach. The author has been able to follow several of these killers over the course of a decade, from the time of their feats of arms to their attempts to restrain themselves and their lawful reinsertion in society. Something must be said here that has already been said elsewhere¹¹: mass murder rarely pays, and not systematically. Among the four killers Nichola Khan has met, not one of them has managed to turn his “military” experience into a social or political asset. One of them (Arshad) has been relatively successful: he is married, has a family and owns several houses. And yet this reinsertion is fragile: the apartments he has acquired in Liaqatabad are threatened with demolition by a Pharaonic project of

⁷ A philosophical concept coined by Michel Foucault, referring to the construction of the individual subject [translator’s note].

⁸ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power. Theories in Subjection*, Stanford, Stanford, University Press, 1997.

⁹ For a rereading of the theories of subjectivation through the lens of historical and cultural configurations as diverse as colonial Indonesia or the diamantiferous frontiers of contemporary Africa, see Jean-François Bayart & Jean-Pierre Warnier (dir.), *Matière à politique. Le Pouvoir, les corps et les choses*, Paris, Karthala, 2004.

¹⁰ Xavier Audrain, « Devenir baay-fall pour être soi : le religieux comme vecteur d’émancipation individuelle au Sénégal », *Politique africaine*, 94, June 2004, pp. 149-165.

¹¹ Samuel Tanner, « Le milicien recyclé : regard sur l’expérience de reconversion de quatre anciens membres de bandes armées serbes », in Nathalie Duclos (dir.), *L’Adieu aux armes. Parcours d’anciens combattants*, Paris, Karthala, 2010, pp. 233-263.

development by ... the MQM municipality. Arshad's friends seem to have been even less successful in their attempt to turn their life around. Faisal, who is also married, has chosen to stay in Liaqatabad. Arrested on the day of his wedding, he was freed several years later and has embraced a career of petty crime ever since. Fearing to be the victims of reprisal, "Shehzad" and "Shakeel" have chosen to live in exile (in Dubai and in South Africa). Clearly, none of these young men has managed to impose himself as an exemplary figure within his own community. Worse, most of these former killers acknowledge the mimetic character of their past violence, which was reproducing the violence of their oppressors (both in a general sense and in their appropriation of certain techniques, like leaving the mutilated bodies of their victims in garbage bags and throwing them away in dumps, a practice that became the trademark of the conflicts in Karachi and had been borrowed from the practices of the police forces fighting against MQM at the time [p. 64]). In the end, these former professional killers appear to be deeply disenchanted, feeling that they have been betrayed by their party, whose revolutionary discourse rings hollow now that it has firmly set out on the path of political normalization. This feeling of betrayal, which is shared by the four men, is the source of a profound social anxiety. Retroactively, it undermines the legitimacy of the sacrifices that they have made and the exactions they have committed in the name of better tomorrows, opening the way to a deep trauma.

The longitudinal analysis of these violent carriers reveals the limits of the prism of agency: as Kahn recognizes herself, the project of violent accomplishment of these young men has remained "a *desire* rather than an achievable permanent identity" (p. 150) – in other words, a "subjectivation without subject".¹² At a more general level, the violence of MQM has turned out to be less "transformative" than "regenerative" of the social power relations (p. 65), thus forcing Khan to question "the utility and rationality of violence to an agenda of societal and political transformation" (ibid.). The former killers of MQM arrive at the same disillusioned conclusion and their psychological setbacks can

¹² Jean-François Bayart, « Total subjectivation », in Jean-François Bayart & Jean-Pierre Warnier (dir.), *Matière à politique*, op. cit., p. 215-253.

be seen as a vocational crisis – in other words the desacralization of one’s work because of a loss of trust in the trade or the institution of salvation in question. This is exactly what Arshad conveys when he draws up the balance sheet of his failed professional life:

“I realized I had killed so many innocent people. Mine is a sad story. I joined MQM and fought for them but discovered they sold my efforts. I was a criminal, not a revolutionary” (p. 66).

Originally published in laviedesidees.fr. Translated from French by **Pascale Torracinta** with the support of the Foundation Maison des Sciences de l’Homme.

Published in booksandideas.net.

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