

# Biopolitics of the Self-Immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi

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# Biopolitics of the Self-Immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi

<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/11/07/biopolitics-of-the-self-immolation-of-mohamed-bouazizi/>

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‘How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!’

*Epistle of James 3:5*

## Introduction

At around 11.30 a.m. on the 17<sup>th</sup> December 2010, a street vendor called Mohammad Bouazizi stood outside the governor’s municipal office in Sidi Bouzid, a small rural town in Tunisia, doused himself in paint thinner, and set himself on fire. With severe burns covering around 90% of his body, he survived, and was transferred to several hospitals, but eventually died from his injuries 18 days later. This started a chain of events that is popularly referred to as ‘the Arab Spring’. If this narrative is followed, his actions indirectly led to the downfall of four Arab dictators and sparked civil unrest in over a dozen countries in the wider Middle East.

Bouazizi burned himself to death after a lifetime of economic repression and exposure to political corruption taking away the meager earnings he was able to obtain to feed his family of seven, as the primary breadwinner of the family for 14 years, until his death at 26 (De Soto, 2011, p.2). On the day that he killed himself, the entire capital of his business was confiscated, and a female official slapped him in front of the busy market crowd. He went to the local governor’s municipal building to complain but was, as expected, turned away. An hour after the original confrontation, he burned himself to death. This particular incident on the 17<sup>th</sup> December was part of a pattern where people like Bouazizi have been constantly denied political agency.

Self-immolation in this essay is defined specifically as the method of burning oneself to death, not the broader definition of protest suicide. Self-immolation is a particularly violent way to die. It can be a slow and excruciatingly painful death, often drawn out over days or weeks, as in the instance of Bouazizi, who survived for 18 days with over 90% burns in hospital. If someone survives the self-immolation, they are likely to be in constant physical agony and psychological torment, needing constant care (Davies, 2012). However, if one is lucky, some may succumb quickly from asphyxiation and shock may null the pain from burning tissue (Prins, 2010, p.291). The aim of self-immolation, in nearly all cases, is to die. Burning to death is a particularly abhorrent death, as it is not quick or clean. It is violent, as ‘such a death appears overwhelming, ghastly, inhuman: our body would be reduced to a trash fire; there is no corpse to wash, to dress, to pay respects to’ (Carter and Petro, 1998, p.32).

Therefore, this form of political violence is important to understand, as it has vast implications, far beyond what could have been expected, and, whilst one can be cynical about the real impact of Ben Ali relinquishing power, Bouazizi certainly caused a political effect. Self-immolation is consequently a political act, and it is interpreted as such. To understand the political function of self-immolation, one must look beyond the physical violence that is involved in burning one’s own body, whilst acknowledging the rare, perhaps unique form of violence on the self.

Durkheim is a useful starting point to look at suicide as not just a psychological, individual act, but as something

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having social cause and effect beyond individual psychology (Pape, 2005, p.172). Accordingly, suicide can be, and particularly with regards to self-immolation, a political act. Durkheim (2006) devised four types of motivations to commit suicide, which are two scales of social forces – social integration and moral regulation (Thompson, 1982, pp. 109-111). Social integration is comprised of: *egotistic*, a lack of belonging within a community, and *altruistic*, where individuals are highly socialised and value the needs of the community over individual needs. The set of moral regulation is *anomic* – lacking the regulation of the individual in society – and its opposite, *fatalistic* – where the individual is excessively morally regulated by society. Although self-immolation is inherently difficult to classify, when a person commits suicide in an act as part of a social or political role to further a cause, this is an altruistic suicide; whereas, when the motivations are from a sense of despair, this is fatalistic (Pedahzur, 2005, p.7). Self-immolation is most appropriately seen as a mix of both these logics. Whilst Durkheim did not refer to self-immolation or suicide bombing specifically (Biggs, 2006, p.174), there are clear links between the two in Durkheimian logic.

Self-immolation as a form of violence is most appropriately located within the typography of symbolic violence. This can be seen through the fact that it is violence upon one's own body, and not against others. The violence on the body is not only physical, but it symbolises something greater than itself. It is not simply nihilistic suicide, but drawing upon the theories of Michel Foucault. This essay argues that burning one's own body alive is a means of rejecting the bio-political domination by the sovereign, which is achieved through the discipline of the body, controlling and optimising production (Foucault, 1978, pp.133, 138). Biopolitics in this essay is thus seen as the logic behind the counter-violence to the violence expressed through the biopower of the state.

What is particularly interesting about Bouazizi's political actions is that he was not directly protesting the authoritarian regime of Ben Ali or an overtly 'political' objective. The act was, instead, done in despair of the constant harassment from local government officials preventing him from selling vegetables from his cart, confiscating his property, and fining him arbitrarily. One reading from a Marxist perspective could argue that Bouazizi self-immolated as a reaction to having been exploited within the capitalist system, perhaps showing Bouazizi as thinking to have had limited alternative possibilities. The economic aspect of this is clear and, of course, is fundamentally linked to politics, with the corruption of local government and the high unemployment rate under the authoritarian regime of Ben Ali. The attempt to make a distinction between whether this was an 'economic' or a 'political' act (De Soto, 2011, p.2) is a false dichotomy, in this context. The two are intrinsically linked. However, this in contrast to the case of Jan Palach, which was a much more overt political act, in protesting the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, who had attempted to galvanise the Czech population to protest as well (Beaumont, 2011).

There is little indication that Bouazizi aimed to be a religious martyr or *shahid* (Ryan, 2011), and, indeed, due to the fact that he committed suicide, there are contradictory religious opinions on the acceptability of self-immolation in Islam. Whilst self-immolation was first given widespread exposure by the self-immolation of Thích Quảng Đức, self-immolation has been carried out by monks in Tibet with the practice of *suttee* in India, and even numerous Westerners. The comprehensive survey of political self-immolation by Michael Biggs is evidence of this (Biggs, 2006). Political self-immolation is not restricted to one religion or culture, although it may be more prevalent in some. Even though religion is a factor in the incidences of self-immolation, it is an ecological correlation in regards to the religion itself – not the beliefs within it – which results in Hindus and Buddhists being positively correlated with the rate of self-immolation, as opposed to with Christians and Muslims (Biggs, 2006, p.187). Religion, and the belief in the afterlife, is thus not the only reason why people self-immolate, with regards to how it is argued that religion can possibly give motivation or justification to suicide bombers. Bouazizi was not particularly religious, and subsequent self-immolations in Tunisia have not shown to have an explicit religious motivation to them (Davies, 2012). The economic and political dynamics conceptualised from biopolitics is a more effective analytical framework than religion as an explanatory factor.

This essay will analyse self-immolation using two theoretical approaches. The reason as to why someone would self-immolate can be seen in a reading of Foucault's biopolitics, which is adapted by Mbembe (2003) and Agamben (1998), and then how this violence functions politically can be examined through Juergensmeyer's (2003) performance violence.

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## Biopolitics

Hardt and Negri argue that the sovereign, as defined by Foucault as that which has power over life and death, 'relies on the consent or submission of the dominated'. This can be seen in Tunisia where the authoritarian government under Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (Carothers, 2011) restricted political and economic freedom, simultaneously tolerating local corrupt government. Therefore, the weakness of the sovereign can be exploited when those reject the submission of the sovereign power by turning life itself – through the destruction of their own body – into a weapon (Hardt & Negri, 2005, p.54). This fundamentally rejects the biopower of the sovereign, which relies on the body as the conduit of political power. Hardt and Negri explicitly contend that self-immolation (as well as suicide bombing) radically challenges the absolute authority of the sovereign power. 'When life itself is negated in the struggle to challenge sovereignty, the power over life and death that the sovereign exercises becomes useless. The absolute weapons against bodies are neutralised by the voluntary and absolute negation of the body' (Hardt and Negri, 2005, p.332). The destruction of one's own body can be seen as a rejection of the subjugation of the sovereign power, the rejection of the Foucauldian biopower, by reclaiming one's own political freedom and agency through death. As Mbembe puts it: 'far from being an encounter with a limit, boundary or barrier, it is experienced as a 'release from terror and bondage' (Mbembe, 2003, p.39). The destruction of the body becomes the only possible means of effective political action, as violence against the sovereign will be repressed and non-violence will likely be ineffective. Therefore, self-immolation, through the politics of death, becomes a powerful political act challenging the symbolic order.

The politics of death, which is referred to as necropolitics by Mbembe (2003), and thanatopolitics by Murray (2006), is articulated as a 'response and a resistance to the Western conception of rational sovereignty with which biopolitics is allied' (Murray, 2006, p.195). Suicide bombing, as used by Mbembe and Murray, is an example of where the politics of death can be applied; however, the similarities with self-immolation are clear. Mbembe refers to the twofold of self-sacrifice on the part of the suicide bomber: 'that of self-immolation (suicide) and that of murder'. Yet, the two acts differ substantially quite obviously, in that the aim of a suicide bomber is not just to kill themselves, but also to kill others, destroy buildings or symbolic targets. Suicide bombing can become more multifaceted, as there are moral questions raised by the killing of others, as opposed to just the suicide through self-immolation. Thus, a person who self-immolates removes part of the problématique posed by Mbembe. However, the debate between where the justification for such acts comes from, be it from religion or the more rational logic, as proposed by Robert Pape (2003), may still hold some relevance in relation to self-immolation.

Mbembe asserts through a Hegelian logic that 'the human being truly becomes a subject...in the struggle and the work through which he or she confronts death' (Mbembe, 2003, p.14). How one chooses to live, and consequently how one chooses to die, is the manner in which one gains political agency. The way this occurs is not necessarily as dramatic as through self-immolation, but it is clear that Mbembe is not simply being metaphorical when he states that 'the body is transformed into a weapon' (Mbembe, 2003, p.36). Whilst here he is discussing the suicide bomber, it is evident that it is also metaphorically true. The destruction of the body can have as great an impact as other forms of political violence, even if not as directly. Destroying the body as a symbolic act is powerful, as the body has the potential to be more symbolic above all else.

A Tunisian sociologist, Mohsen Bouazizi, also from Sidi Bouzid, discussed how the Tunisian government removed ordinary Tunisians like Mohamed Bouazizi from the social structure, stripping them of political agency (Hanafi, 2012, p.202) and reducing them to into 'humiliated subjects who could be killed without any recognition' (Hanafi, 2012, p.202). This is clearly reflective of Agamben's thesis of bare life, or *homo sacer* (Agamben, 1998). *Homo sacer*, the sacred man, is the life that can be killed with impunity but that cannot be sacrificed (Agamben, 1998, p.47). This has direct relevance to the act of self-immolation, as it is a sacrificial act of suicide. It challenges and inverts the relationship that *homo sacer* has with the law. Hanafi argues that the Tunisian regime constantly operated under a state of exception (Hanafi, 2012, p.199). Bouazizi can therefore be seen as *zoe*, life that did not matter or function politically, as seen through the constant petty corruption and lack of opportunity throughout his life. On the other hand, usually *homo sacer* cannot be sacrificed and serve a higher purpose, yet Bouazizi's suicide seems to act in such a way (Moosa, 2011, p.178).

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There is an argument that actors like Bouazizi are apolitical and that self-immolation is due to personal psychological problems (Lankford, 2010). However, to an extent, it does not matter whether Bouazizi was 'political' in his decision. Rather, what matters are the interpretations by others of his self-immolation, which came to be seen as having a political function. Furthermore, it is unhelpful to create an either/or distinction between the two, as Biggs notes, since self-immolation is rarely explainable solely by suicidal tendencies (Biggs, 2005, p.201). There is no indication that Bouazizi was clinically depressed or suicidal, but only that he had suffered years of persecution and abuse from local government officials.

Self-immolation as a political act must therefore be addressed in this context, as the case of Bouazizi, and also with other large groups of self-immolators, like Buddhist monks, who had neither political agency under the state of exception, nor, even more than that, political value (Agamben, 1998, p.78). In the words of one Tibetan writer: 'under these circumstances [of Chinese policy towards Tibet], you can only choose self-immolation to express your intentions' (Parshley, 2011). Death through self-immolation inverses the relationship with the sovereign (Hanafi, 2012, p.202), giving bare life political agency, although that ends up being at an ultimate cost. The contention that Bouazizi was 'bare life' was challenged, intentionally or not, as his death was in such a dramatic, painful and violent manner that it was not ignored and had value.

## Performance

Biggs argues that self-immolation is unique in that it 'does not depend on the reaction of authorities or opponents; the individual chooses unconditionally to inflict extreme suffering on himself or herself' (Biggs, 2006, p.208). However, self-immolation cannot take place in a vacuum – there must be an audience, or otherwise there is no means for the act to have a political effect on others. Self-immolation as a protest requires it to be public, in the view of other people, or with a letter written to the public or politicians (Biggs, 2005, p.173). The requirement for self-immolation to be political, thus, also requires it to be performative.

The relevant theory in this regard to analyse self-immolation is that of performance violence. Juergensmeyer discusses performance violence as part of a subset of symbolic violence, in which acts of violence are performed in order to have an impact on the observers of the violence (Juergensmeyer, 2003, p.126). Juergensmeyer makes the distinction between performance events – which make a symbolic statement, and performative acts which attempt to change things (2003, p.127). He understands this in relation to terrorist acts, but they are useful characteristics to apply to self-immolation as well, although the extent of both categories will vary in individual cases.

Many terrorist attacks are on buildings, structures or locales that have symbolic significance (Juergensmeyer, 2003, p.133), but the symbol that is being attacked through self-immolation is not necessarily a building or an institution directly (although it is clear why Bouazizi burned himself outside a municipal building). The intention is not to damage the physical building or even the symbolism of the institution. The object of violence in self-immolation is the body, both physically and symbolically. In terms of location, self-immolation requires an audience, not necessarily a building – Quảng Đức at the busy Saigon intersection, the Falun Gong (and others) in Tiananmen Square, Norman Morrison in the Pentagon below Robert McNamara's office and Bouazizi in front of the municipal building (which was the headquarters of the biopolitical oppression that characterised his working life). Self-immolations do not take place in seclusion; they are acts performed in front of an audience if they are to have any lasting political effect. The aesthetic quality of the violence within self-immolation disrupts the symbolic order, as it destroys the body. Judith Butler's work on gender performance can also be applied here, as the body's perception in the world is not predetermined. She says that the 'body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant materializing of possibilities' (Butler, 1988, p.521).

Performative acts have a transformative impact that attempt to shape reality (Juergensmeyer, 2003, p.126). This can be seen through self-immolation being a transformative act of creating grievable life (Butler, 2009), where there was bare life through visual sacrifice. However, what differentiates self-immolation from other forms of political violence in this regard is that it does not entail violence against any people apart from the self. There is less of a subjective divide between those who support the political act of violence and those who do not. The act of self-immolation can

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be challenged from a religious view that condemns suicide, or there may be disagreement about the efficacy or rationale for suicide, but as there is no harm done to another person, the morality of self-sacrifice is different to the political condemnation that almost certainly comes with suicide bombing.

If self-immolation is a political act that is performed, as is argued, then there must also be a spectator. Rancière discusses 'the intolerable image', the image that cannot be viewed without 'experiencing pain or indignation' (2009, p.83). The image of self-immolation is powerful because it individualises the subject of violence, as opposed to many other images of violence that 'involve[s] nameless beings without an individual history' (Rancière, 2009, p.97). The image of self-immolation, when the individual is humanised and not anonymised, can create a powerful image that brings violence from the abstract into the real and forces the observer to question the narrative that is given.

The impact of the spectacle of Bouazizi setting himself on fire cannot be disputed, even without the accompanying photograph, as in the case of Quảng Đức in 1963 that had shocked the world. The photo of Quảng Đức on fire won the World Press Photograph award in 1963, and was used for anti-American propaganda purposes, in addition to being referenced and satirised in pop-culture. When shown to JFK, he reportedly exclaimed 'Jesus Christ!' (Douglass, 2008, p.148). The imagery of self-immolation is shocking, powerful, and violent, and forces the spectator to question what is known. However, despite the powerful image of the photograph, it cannot accurately represent the experience of even observing in person the act of self-immolation, of the visceral pain and smell of burning flesh. Self-immolation is both dramatic and personal and can create empathetic feelings from spectators (Carter and Petro, 1998, p.63). David Halberstam, who was present at the self-immolation of Quảng Đức, stated 'I was too shocked to cry, too confused to take notes or ask questions, too bewildered to even think' (Sanburn, 2011).

The act of live spectating can be more powerful than the image itself. So, despite the fact that there is no picture of Bouazizi as he burned outside the municipal office, the image can still resonate and have a political effect. There are two images of Bouazizi that are used in protests and discussions around Bouazizi. The first is that of the dictator Ben Ali standing by Bouazizi in the hospital, with Bouazizi completely covered in bandages (MSNBC Media, 2011), apart from his charred mouth. This is the visual representation of Bouazizi's necropolitical agency, forcing the dictator to his hospital bed and to react to his political actions. The second is that of Bouazizi's passive face used on banners in protests, which is also now commemorated on new Tunisian stamps as a martyr (De Soto, 2011, p.1). Both are 'intolerable images', and despite not being as dramatic as the image of Quảng Đức ablaze, both still represent the effectiveness that this form of political violence has.

The image of self-immolation is not uncontested, however, and it indeed depends on a narrative being asserted alongside the picture. In the case of Quảng Đức, it caused a split in the framing of the event by the US media. For some sections of the media, it represented the repression of the Buddhists in Vietnam by the Diem government, and to others sections, it framed the demands of the Buddhists as unreasonable and as a representation of the Vietnamese government successfully constraining communist influence in South Vietnam (Skow & Dionisopoulos, 1997, p.401). The struggle over interpretation of the image of the performance is out of the control of the self-immolator. The photo of Quảng Đức is a powerful rhetorical image, as it captures a violent performance act in 'the about to die moment' (Murray Yang, 2011, p.2). However, it is apparent that there is no necessity for an image for a subjective narrative to be created and for a political effect to be generated. Also, similar to Bouazizi, there is no image of Palach's death, but there are 'mental images' through the present observers, political pamphlets and articles that were produced (Weibgen, 2009, p.59).

Setting one's own body on fire as a performance marks out a subjective trait on the actor, the combination of both the selfless hero and the victim. This can provoke a strong emotional response (Biggs, 2006, p.203). The combination of subjective narratives cannot be found in the suicide bomber, as although supporters may find the act heroic, it is difficult to justify the suicide bomber as a victim in the same way. However, the subjective narrative cannot be completely controlled by the self-immolator, particularly if they are not part of a wider organisation. The symbolism and meaning of the self-immolation itself is projected onto the action of others afterwards. Therefore, popular causes, such as the oppression felt by Bouazizi, shared by many locally, and more widely across the region, are more likely to become catalysts for popular protests, rather than specific grievances from a minority where there may be less empathy.

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The self-immolation of Quảng Đức had such a large impact because that was precisely what it was designed to do, with his supporters trying to attract as much publicity as possible for the act (Caryl, 2011, p.2). A suicide bomber is more likely to be part of an organisation; whereas, with some notable exceptions, self-immolation is likely to be the choice of an individual (Biggs, 2008, p.27). In the case of Bouazizi, who courted no publicity and did not forewarn anyone of his intentions, it was an individualistic act without outside coercion or encouragement. Nevertheless, after Bouazizi, at least 107 Tunisians have attempted self-immolation (Davies, 2012). Heavy media coverage is one possibility of why this happened, relating to how a well-publicised act of suicide may spike similar cases, which is also known as the Werther Effect (Worth, 2011).

It is not the *act* of self-immolation itself that inherently has political function, but it is how the act is observed and framed by its observers. Without a political meaning given to the act of self-immolation, it can be written off as an egotistic suicide, or that the individual was coerced or manipulated into self-immolating. However, the violence of the act itself is so substantial, and the fact that the violence is on the self, rather than the other, means that it is not ordinary violence and cannot be explained in such simplistic terms.

## Parallels to Other Forms of Political Violence

The parallels to other forms of political violence are difficult to categorise neatly. Suicide bombers aim to kill others. Hunger strikers are non-violent against other people, thus closer to self-immolation, but hunger strikers usually do not aim to die (Annas, 1995, p.1114), and can of course (violently) receive intervention. As a hunger striker's aim is not to die, then the reading of the body as a weapon through necropolitics is not entirely the same. The tactic may have similar characteristics, but the strategy is vastly different. Self-immolation is dramatic and final; whereas, hunger striking, whilst still potentially an effective method, does not have the same performative elements that is intrinsic to self-immolation. Both are individualistic acts, although both can be organised through a larger group, restrict the violence to one's own body, and generate subjective qualities of heroism and victimhood. Despite the violence being less graphic and less dramatic, it can still be a significant (although not necessarily effective) political act; Irish Republicans who died from hunger strikes in the early 1980s have been memorialised across the world and have helped to revitalise the IRA (McKittrick, 2006). However, there is a key difference, which is that a hunger strike has demands that, if they gain the concessions that they want, could enable the violence to stop. This is not the case with self-immolation, which assumes the finality of death whether or not the demands are met. In the case of Bouazizi, he did not issue any demands before killing himself. Hunger strikes are consequently different, as they presume political agency can still exist; self-immolation gains political agency through the act of death.

Suicide bombing has strong theoretical links with self-immolation in terms of necropolitics. The use of the body as a weapon is very literal (Mbembe, 2003, p.36). Suicide bombing is a means of martyrdom and a method to escape the biopolitical subjugation from the sovereign. The physical aspect of suicide bombing also requires self-immolation, although it is usually instantaneous, but also with regards to the biopolitical aspect of death. Hanafi argues that the Israeli policy of 'spaciocide' deterritorialises bodies, creating the conditions of 'bare life', which in turn produces a suicidal body that can find subjectivity through killing themselves along with an enemy (Hanafi, 2009, p.118). There are similar logics with the acts of self-immolation with suicide bombing, particularly when there is a grievance based on biopolitical reasoning.

Furthermore, suicide bombing is more likely to have a religious justification attached to it than self-immolation, although not necessarily, with the Tamil Tigers being such a counterexample (Pape, 2003, p.1). Suicide bombing can be very similar to self-immolation, with the similar characteristics of being performative; Scott Atran argues that 'the primary target is not those actually killed or injured in the attack, but those made to witness it' (Atran, 2003, p.1534). Yet, suicide attacks are unlikely to appeal to observers and opponents (Biggs, 2003, p.308) that do not already have sympathy with the cause. Accordingly, the subjective qualities of the suicide bomber are different from those of the self-immolator, which can be part of a narrative of heroism and victimhood.

By no means was the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi a unique event in and of itself. The uniqueness came from the impact that his actions had. Deciding to burn oneself to death does not require much planning or materials,

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unlike a suicide bombing which requires a certain degree of knowledge and planning. Many self-immolations are futile gestures in their impact. The recent spate of self-immolations in Tibet has brought more repression from the Chinese government. Widespread immolations do not seem to have force in igniting change with Chinese policy in Tibet, with it instead just bringing more repression (Banyan, 2012). Even if there is a political effect from self-immolation, which is unlikely, then there is no guarantee it will be a positive one. The opposite effect of what was intended can also occur, as, for example, with the image of a 12 year old girl in agony after being burned as allegedly part of a Falun Gong protest that helped to change public perception against the Falun Gong (Biggs, 2005, p.206). This was after being framed as cultic violence by the Chinese government.

Self-immolation is not only symbolic. It is an effective method of costly signalling (Biggs, 2005, p.196), as long as the act can be publicised and is not written off as a symptom of a psychiatric problem. Self-immolation, opposed to other forms of protest, intrinsically guarantees severe protracted pain and a high chance of mortality. As a method of protest, it is almost unique in this fact. Suicide bombings impose physical costs on enemy, and are an attack. By contrast, self-immolation only inflicts physical costs on the self and is more easily characterised as a protest. Biggs argues that self-immolation has a political effect by persuading sympathisers to become more heavily involved with the cause through invoking emotions such as shame or guilt and/or by converting observers of the to signal the seriousness of the issue (Biggs, 2005, p.208). However, like any protest that does not impose direct costs on the target, it is not always successful; in fact, most self-immolations do not have a significant political impact, particularly if there is no publicity around them. An instance is the self-immolation of Graham Bamford in front of the Houses of Parliament in 1993 to protest the Bosnian war, as it was largely ignored by the media (Barkham, 2012). Despite being a highly unpredictable and powerful event, Bamford – who, like Bouazizi was not overly political – burning himself to death did not manage to create a lasting political impact. Yet, there are notable exceptions to this that have resulted in large scale protests or riots forming with a significant political impact, as in what preceded the case of Mohamed Bouazizi. These include: Quảng Đức in Vietnam, Jan Palach in Czechoslovakia, Rajeev Goswami in India, Romas Kalanta in Lithuania, and Park Sung Hee in South Korea (Biggs, 2005 p.202). This relative lack of success shows that self-immolation requires more than the act in and of itself to have any form of effect.

The cultural dimension of self-immolation cannot be totally discounted, particularly in regards to the spectacle of self-immolation; one possible explanation is the different cultural background and reaction to the burning of the body. Very broadly speaking, in the east, where cremation has a long history, fire is purifying; whereas, in the West, this is not the case (Biggs, 2004, p.27). This could partially explain why crowds would draw to observe a self-immolation in Vietnam, while this would probably not occur in the West (Biggs, 2004, p.27). However, this rather woolly interpretation of culture does not shed light on causation, nor does it explain the spread of self-immolation to the Middle East and the extent of copycat self-immolations after the incidence of one, which may possibly be due to the dramatic spectacle of the fiery death (Coleman, 2004, p.56). Religion is not generally employed as an justification or motivation for self-immolation, even though there may be a history of sacrifice in some religious cultures. Generally, mainstream religious doctrine in Buddhism, Islam and Christianity places a prohibition on suicide, even as part of a political protest; however, there are more ascetic traditions within Buddhism and clerics within Islam who are sympathetic towards suicide as part of a protest (Worth, 2011). Nonetheless, these post facto justifications do not appear to play a major role in the thought processes of self-immolators, or at least those widely documented.

It is important not to overstate either the effectiveness or the symbolism of most self-immolations. Even when they are unique to a society, it does not mean that it will be successful simply because it is a symbolic and spectacular event. The uniqueness of Bouazizi's self-immolation was the political impact that his actions ignited. This is not only the removal of a dictator after 23 years of power, but also the setting of the conditions for other anti-authoritarian movements in the wider Middle East. The self-sacrifice of one man, acting alone and without specific political demands, has never had such a dramatic and well-publicised impact.

Self-immolation has become increasingly widespread in Tibet, with scores of Tibetan monks self-immolating in protest of Chinese policies towards Tibet. The fact that it is unclear as to precisely how many people have self-immolated is a clue to the power that such actions have had. The Chinese government has dealt with self-immolation in the past, notably by the Falun Gong where images of self-immolation were used as propaganda and counter-propaganda, but the Chinese government 'framed the deaths as cultic suicide rather than political protest' (Biggs,

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2005, p.206). Although, this is not the strategy used by the Chinese government with regards to Tibetan monks. It is likely due to the fact that a lot more is known about the political situation in Tibet and the doctrine of Tibetan Buddhism.

There are certainly implications for western societies. As a form of protest, self-immolation has spread around much of the world since the 1960s and most recently has had significant implications for a number of governments in the Middle East. That being said, it is very easy to overstate the success of self-immolation as a method of political violence. Part of the reason for it being such a powerful image is its relative infrequency. The more self-immolation occurs as a form of protest, the less powerful each subsequent image becomes, and the story, and therefore the issue, is less likely to be publicised. The hundredth Tunisian to self-immolate after Bouazizi would have had little to no impact as a political act, even if the reasons behind it were exactly the same as Bouazizi. The vast majority of self-immolations have little to no political effect. The fires of self-immolation need the oxygen of publicity, but they are fueled by empathy. Tunisians could understand Bouazizi's death because they knew what he had to suffer under, as many of them also suffered from similar conditions. Just because a protester burns to death, that does not mean he or she automatically gains support from observers, particularly if they have esoteric or highly impractical aims. Nor will it be successful if there is no one to see it.

The image of self-immolation is, and will remain, intolerable. There is little coverage of such suicides. This is perhaps exacerbated by the fact that most occur in non-Western societies, and it is consequently uninteresting to many Western based news media. In Tibet, as well as the rest of China and India, where the current spate of self-immolations protesting the Chinese government is periodically taking place (Burke, 2012), the Chinese government has restricted information and news coverage of these deaths, thus directly restricting the impact that self-immolation can have outside of the observers present. There are problems with trying to quantify how many people have self-immolated (Biggs, 2006 p.176), and it is even more difficult to know whether the act was politically motivated.

## Conclusion

This essay has argued that necropolitics and performative violence are useful tools with which to analyse the political act of self-immolation. When political power becomes woven into the body itself, then the body shows the possibility of reclaiming political power from the sovereign through self-sacrifice. Self-immolation gains effectiveness as a political act when being performed in front of an audience, challenging the institutions that embody the sovereign power. Whilst often self-immolation is dismissed or ignored, it can on occasion have dramatic political effects. Moosa says: 'his [Bouazizi's] death drew attention to the inescapable side of the prevailing biopolitics of death in Tunisia and beyond' (Moosa, 2011, p.178).

Self-immolation, however, is not an act that is clearly understood. This is part of its effectiveness as a political act. There is still a subjective interpretation of what Bouazizi now stands for, which appears to be for some 'generic symbol of the resistance to injustice; to others an archetype of the fight against autocracy' (De Soto, 2011). For some, he will simply be a nihilist or mentally ill. The power invested in the violence comes from its unexpected and spectacular nature, with Bouazizi being an apolitical, non-religious man who had suffered from the biopolitical repression for most of his life. His actions were a response that could generate empathy and sympathy for his protracted bare life. This form of political violence may cause a revolution, like in Tunisia, but in context, the impact of his actions was an outlier and, more importantly, not necessarily intended to be revolutionary. Bouazizi was certainly not a conscious revolutionary.

While self-immolation may appear to be 'the ultimate negation of individual agency' (Barkham, 2012), through a biopolitical reading, for those *homo sacer*, it can be seen as the opposite and, in fact, the *only* way to gain political agency. In the words of Derrida, self-sacrifice is 'giving one's life by giving oneself death' (Derrida, 1995, p.10). Self-immolation fundamentally challenges the unimportance of life in modernity by showing that the individual body through sacrifice can be more powerful than the sovereign power itself. Bouazizi's last words before setting himself on fire, according to his friend who was with him, were 'how do you expect me to make a living?' (60 Minutes, 2011). This was perhaps more apt than he intended.



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