

## **The 7/7 Bus**

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Ruth A. Deller

## The 7/7 Bus

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Four bombs exploded in London on the 7<sup>th</sup> July 2005. Three were on the London Underground and their impact was unseen. The fourth bomb exploded on a red London bus in Tavistock Square. Whilst there has been speculation that Hasib Hussain's device was intended for a fourth Underground destination, the detonation above ground imbued his act with far more symbolic power than those of his associates. This was not a threat: this was a manifesto. Britain - and indeed Britishness - was under attack.

A red London bus is a familiar image on tourist memorabilia and a sign of British identity all over the world. An attack on a London bus is an attack on Britishness - as former Mayor of London Ken Livingstone discovered to his cost when his successor, Boris Johnson, was elected on the back of a campaign to remove articulated 'bendy' buses from the capital and replace them with a new fleet of traditional-looking red Routemasters\*. The battle for London buses is not simply (or even predominantly) physical - it is ideological.

Since the 2005 bombings, the image of the blown up bus in Tavistock Square has become a familiar reference point for television and newspapers. Like the planes flying into the Twin Towers in New York, it has become an image used without need of explanation of context – an image that is not only part of the '7/7' mythology (and indeed the wider mythology of the 'war on terror'), but has become its own myth.

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\*At the Beijing 2008 Olympic closing ceremony, in which the Games were 'handed over' to London, with Johnson acting as a representative, a large red Routemaster bus formed a centrepiece.

This possibly accidental detonation of a device on a single bus has become an index for the threat to British values, not only from fundamentalist strains of Islam, but from all religious, or political practices and ideas that endanger the hearts and minds of 'true' Britons.

Repeatedly, the image of the 7/7 bus becomes decontextualised from the events of 2005 and serves, instead, as its own symbol of 'Britishness' coming under attack from dangerous 'others'.

A 2005 repeat showing of a Jon Ronson's 1996 film about the 'Tottenham Ayatollah', Omar Bakri Mohammed, was re-edited to include an image of the 7/7 bus with no explanation of what the bus was, or why it was being used. When used as an establishing shot in science documentary *Am I Normal?* (2008) - a programme featuring Christian nuns, worship and speaking in tongues and Spiritualist faith healing - it was anchored by a voiceover reminding us religion has 'inspired acts of terrible violence'. In a programme where Islam is not mentioned once, the bus stands as a symbol for problematic religion - of any type.

*Panorama* documentary 'True Brits' (2008) uses the bus as a marker of its central thesis that multiculturalism has led to a crisis in British identity and a reminder that despite citizenship ceremonies, many Muslims still do not see their loyalties as to 'our country'. The shot of the bus is anchored with a reminder that 'a few British citizens made it clear their loyalties lay elsewhere'. Despite being British-born and educated, Hasib Hussain's act renders him an 'other', an outsider.

Indeed, the dilution of the Britishness of the 7/7 bombers is a key part of the mythology of the attacks. In the days following the attacks, then Prime Minister Tony Blair, condemned the bombings as representing an 'evil ideology... a battle of ideas, hearts and minds, both within Islam and outside it'. In another Blair speech, the Britishness of the four young men

who carried out the attacks was not acknowledged; standing outside British values: 'When they seek to change our country, our way of life by these methods, we will not be changed... We will show by our spirit and dignity and by a quiet and true strength that there is in the British people, that our values will long outlast theirs... This is a very sad day for the British people but we will hold true to the British way of life'. In the years following, the Britishness of Hasib Hussain, Germaine Lindsay, Shehzad Tanweer and Mohammad Sidique Khan has been further eroded and their 'other' status emphasised – their *Wikipedia* entries, for example, describe them as being of 'Pakistani' and 'Jamaican' origin, their right to British heritage revoked.

However, although the 7/7 bus is 'our' mythological image as Britons, only some of 'us' are deemed to have the right to claim it and to condemn the attacks. Whilst mainstream media and politicians from the dominant political parties were allowed to condemn the acts as a threat to Britain, far right group the British National Party (BNP) were condemned for using the image of the bus in leaflets campaigning against multiculturalism. The right to use 'our' imagery, it seems, lies solely with those in positions of power, those who proclaim values of tolerance and moderation yet exclude the voices of those on the margins whose ideologies may be incompatible with those seen as 'legitimately' British.

Since the bombings, the red London bus has continued to act as a battle ground.

In 2008, writer Ariane Sherine posted on the *Guardian's* 'Comment is Free' website in response to seeing Bible quotes on buses. Sherine wondered whether atheists and humanists could raise money to fund bus advertising reading: 'There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and get on with your life.' The 'atheist bus campaign' as it became known, launched later that year and garnered much publicity. The Christian *Alpha* course

ran its own bus campaigns, asking 'If God did exist, what would you ask Him?', in a counter-battle for the territory of the buses. Yet in order for both Atheist and Christian voices to be heard, they were expressed in a moderate way: There 'probably' is no God, but if there was, what would you ask him?

In 2012, Christian-affiliated groups Anglican Mainstream and the True Freedom Trust attempted to produce a London bus campaign in response to Stonewall's 'some people are gay. Get over it' campaign (which had also run on London buses). The adverts, which would have said 'Ex-gay, post-gay and proud. Get over it.' were quickly denounced by both Transport for London and Boris Johnson, stating they did not believe the campaign fitted with their vision of a 'tolerant and inclusive London'.

Later that year, Johnson was seen endorsing another advertising campaign on the capital's bus fleet. The Ahmadiyya Muslim community funded a series of bus adverts to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II. Their congratulatory message to the Sovereign had the official crown-based logo of the Jubilee and the Ahmadi logo, reading 'Love for All, Hatred for None' either side. A press release stressed their historical relationship with the monarchy, highlighting their celebration of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee over a century earlier and emphasising the community and charity work the group were involved with, which they deemed as an act of devotion to their Queen and country. A statement from their President, Rafiq Hayat emphasised the message that 'We share in our country's pride and joy'. A website address for 'Muslims for Peace' reiterated that this version of British Islam was not one which sought to destroy or challenge, but one which was peaceful and subservient to two key markers of British identity: the monarchy and the red bus.

The battle for the bus is not being fought over the orange and blue livery of the Stagecoach and Centrebus fleets, the grey and purple of First, the blue and white of Arriva – or any of the colours of buses more familiar to the majority of British residents. Nobody is debating the messages being displayed on the buses of Edinburgh or Cardiff, Exeter or Newcastle, or of Holbeck, Leeds – where Hasib Hussain grew up. Instead it is the red London bus - a bus which serves a minority of the British public - that is used as a symbol of British identity and unity; though as the 7/7 bus makes clear, it more often represents our divisions.

In October 2005, it was announced that a new red bus was being introduced to London's fleet as a replacement for the one destroyed in Tavistock Square. Its name: 'Spirit of London'. The naming of the vehicle serves to reclaim the 7/7 bus against those who would see Britishness eroded or use it as a vehicle for their own political, religious or ideological means.

The myth of the 7/7 bus, and indeed of the London bus, is therefore a complicated one. It represents a British identity which appears solid and confident yet is repeatedly contested.

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