



## Preemption contested: Suspect spaces and preventability in the July 7 inquest



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### A B S T R A C T

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The London Coroner's Inquest into the deaths of July 7 2005 unequivocally rejected the notion that the security services could and should have been able to identify the 7/7 perpetrators as potential future terrorists before July 2005. These findings contest powerful post-9/11 security logics of preemption and anticipation that hold that security intervention is logical and desirable in the face of unknown and unspecified threats. This paper analyses the spatio-temporal work conducted in and through the Coroner's Inquest, with a specific focus on its preventability evidence. The Inquest provides a rich archive in which the potentialities for intervention and preemption, and concomitant questions of suspect spaces, are engaged, debated, accepted and rejected. This paper argues that the Inquest rendered '7/7' from a fast a familiar framing as anticipated catastrophe, into a 'matter of concern' in the sense discussed by Bruno Latour. The paper considers the ambiguous nature of the Inquest, and the way in which it both opened space for public debate and alternative conceptions of futurity; and closed down such space by accepting and normalising notions of networked threat.

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### Introduction: prevention, preemption and (public) space

Between October 2010 and May 2011, the London Coroner's Inquest into the deaths of July 7 2005 took place at the Royal Courts in London. The London Coroner is empowered on behalf of the British crown to conduct investigations into the cause and circumstances of "violent or unnatural deaths", and to offer recommendations to avoid the risk of similar deaths in the future (Judicial Communications Office, n.d.). Adjourned in 2005 to give priority to police investigations, the Inquest resumed with the appointment of Lady Justice Hallett as Coroner in November 2009, with the bulk of the public evidence heard between October 2010 and March 2011. The Inquest was oriented toward what was felt to be a broad societal desire for detailed knowledge of the 2005 London bombings ('7/7') to be made public, and indeed situates itself explicitly in relation to the proliferation of conspiracy theories and 7/7 'truth campaigns' (H.M. Coroner, 2011g, p. 3).

The scope of the Inquest was defined through three "possible factual disputes": first, the immediate aftermath of the attack and the competency of the emergency response; second, possible post-July 7 failings on the part of the authorities; and third, possible pre-July 7 intelligence failings and the question of preventability (H.M. Coroner,

2010a, p. 9). Preventability, as defined in the Inquest, hinged on a multiplicity of issues, all relating to the question of whether police and MI5 had missed opportunities to identify – and to surveil, apprehend or disrupt – the 7/7 perpetrators *in advance* of July 2005. In relation to the question of preventability, the Inquest's conclusions – delivered in May 2011 – unequivocally rejected the notion that the security services *could* and *should* have been able to identify Mohammad Siddique Khan and Shezad Tanweer and their associates as future terrorists before July 2005. Coroner Lady Justice Hallett criticised the faulty logic of hindsight at work in assertions that the bombings could have been prevented or preempted, and concluded that our current knowledge about the bombers and the plot cannot be projected retroactively; as most information "was not known to the police and the Security Service before 7/7, and *could not* have been known to them" (H.M. Coroner, 2011g, p. 4, emphasis in original).

The Inquest's findings are important and remarkable in the sense that they contest powerful post-9/11 security logics of preemption and anticipation that hold that security intervention is logical and desirable in the face of unknown and unspecified threats. A growing literature in political geography and critical security studies argues that the spatio-temporal logics of the war on terror are strongly focused on the identification of possibilities and opportunities to disrupt and apprehend threat in advance of potential violence (Amoore, 2007; Anderson, 2010; Anderson & Adey, 2012; Aradau & van Munster, 2011, 2007; Cooper, 2006; De Goede & Randalls, 2009; Kessler & Werner, 2008; Krasmann, 2012; Opitz,

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2011). These authors show how our contemporary understanding of terrorism as a dispersed and largely unpredictable phenomenon has fostered a security politics marked by a precautionary or preemptive relationship to futurity, that is quite different from templates of *prevention* (Amoore, 2013; Anderson, 2010; Stern & Wiener, 2006). If prevention supposes a causal and actuarial relation to futurity, preemption is self-consciously speculative and entails an orientation to the future as ‘surprise’ (Anderson, 2010, p. 783). Put differently, preemption is less about prediction but entails an open orientation to multiple potential futures, and a valuation of action in the present *despite* incomplete knowledge or unknowable threat. With regard to terrorism, the rationalities of preemption are frequently carved out through the assessment of *past* attacks, whereby retrospective reasoning suggesting that leads, strands, and ‘dots’ of information revealed after the fact, *could and should have been* creatively or speculatively connected in advance of violence, is an important discursive strategy (Aradau & van Munster, 2011, pp. 31–51). Notably, the final report of the US 9/11 Commission largely accepted the logics of preemption, by emphasising pre-9/11 intelligence failures to ‘connect the dots’ of suspicious activity, and by explicitly encouraging security services to more actively deploy *imagination* to anticipate and act on terrorist threats (Salter, 2008).

In contrast, the 7/7 Inquest, to a large extent, questioned and disrupted the post-9/11 security logics that emphasise early intervention and preemptive possibility. It is important to note that the Inquest examined the *preventability* of 7/7, and not strictly the question of whether the attacks could have been *preempted* through the deployment of speculative or imaginative intelligence techniques. But it required hard work and conscious effort by the Coroner to maintain the strict focus of the Inquest on prevention – *contra* preemption – especially as many of the lines of questioning put before her implied that a more creative connection of the elements of information available to security services would have enabled preemption of the attacks. In particular, the discussion of a photograph of 7/7 perpetrators Khan and Tanweer, taken when they met with suspects of a different investigation about 18 months prior to their attack, came to publicly symbolise the missed moment of preemptive intervention. *Contra* these suggestions, the detailed Inquest proceedings drew attention to the contingent nature of future violences and the complex, mundane and fallible work of generating security knowledges. The Coroner in her final report deployed a legalistic stance toward the suggestive lines of questioning, and mobilised conventional paradigms of prevention and risk in her evaluation. Importantly, the Coroner underscored that taking action on the basis of incomplete and partial knowledge can be democratically problematic, and that the capacity to pursue suspect leads and associations is necessarily limited in a democratic society.

This paper analyses the spatio-temporal work conducted in and through the Coroner’s Inquest into the events of 7/7, with a specific focus on the preventability evidence. The Inquest provides a rich archive in which the logics of preemption, the potentialities for intervention, and their concomitant questions of suspect spaces, are engaged, debated, accepted and rejected. The temporal logics of preemptive intervention are inextricably tied to the practices of spatialisation within contemporary (counter) terrorism (Amoore, 2009a; Cowen & Gilbert, 2008; Elden, 2007; Gregory, 2004; Ingram & Dodds, 2007; Shapiro, 2009). Specifically, preemptive intervention hinges on the problematisation of mundane, urban, social spaces as incubating ‘environmentalities’ of violent action (Anderson, 2011). Such facilitating networks or ‘sympathiser scenes’ are spaces of anonymity and support that are thought to render terrorist action possible (Hannah, 2008, p. 68). The notion of incubating social environments holds out the

promise of the possibility of preemptive intervention in such environments to target potential attackers at the earliest possible stage.

This paper’s analysis of the spatio-temporal work of the Inquest has a dual focus. First, it considers how the Inquest *itself* established a space for public engagement and debate. The Inquest questioned the work of police, intelligence and rescue services; it rendered public minute details of the attack and attackers; it engaged the question of public responsibility and the limits of security. This paper argues that the Inquest – to some extent – rendered 7/7 from a fast and familiar framing into a complex and delicate ‘matter of concern’ in the sense discussed by Bruno Latour (2004, 2005). Second, the Inquest debated, mobilised and carved off its *own* notions of risky and at-risk spaces in the context of mundane, urban, British life. The extensive discussion of spaces of suspicion and radicalisation that took place during the Inquest are important especially for the potentialities of intervention they mobilised, accepted and rejected. In particular, the Inquest’s detailed evidence on the question of *whether* the future 7/7 bombers could have been identified in advance; and *how* security services pursue suspect leads and make decisions, is revealing for the ways in which it inscribes and rejects notions of networked threat and political responsibility.

The paper is based on a textual analysis of the transcripts and exhibits of the lines of inquiry that were central to the ‘preventability’ evidence in the Inquest. This concerns weeks 16–19 of the Inquest proceedings (February and March 2011), with special attention paid to the testimony of anonymous ‘Witness G’ of MI5, who was on the witness stand for most of week 18. Through this analysis, the paper contributes to the wider academic debates on the politics of preemption in two ways. First, the paper takes seriously and examines on its own terms the work of the Inquest, to which remarkably little social science attention has been paid to date. In general, public Inquests are understood as sites on which orders of normality are restored after disruptive or catastrophic events (Leslie, 2011; Simon, 2005). The 7/7 Inquest has been analysed in the context of contemporary cultures of memorialisation and “monumentalization” and the way in which it sought to narrate 7/7 as event and (re)instate national unity (Hoskins, 2011a, p. 274; Hoskins, 2011b). However, despite the “ethos...for...persons-as-such” displayed during the 7/7 Inquest (Edkins, 2011, p. 100), and despite the wealth of evidence rendered public, analysis of the proceedings in the context of contemporary British politics is currently lacking. In a time when security practice is marked by complexities of secrecy (Galison, 2004), the Inquest deserves serious attention as a public space that pried open security logics and rendered 7/7 intelligible.

Second, this paper contributes to ongoing academic analysis of preemptive temporalities and concomitant inscriptions of public and political responsibility. Teasing out the vibrant and detailed lines of questioning concerning the work of the security service and the potential preventability of 7/7 shows the range and limits of public discourse on these themes. Instead of asserting a broad political turn toward preemption, it shows how the possibility of intervening in advance of 7/7 was debated, contested, accepted or rejected. It teases out which lines of inquiry were successful in eliciting the Coroner’s support, which expectations of preemption were rejected, and which changes in security practice were welcomed. It reveals the hard work by the Coroner to draw demarcation lines between logics of prevention and preemption, and the way in which the Inquest yielded a notion of contingency attentive to the infinite multiplicity of leads and strands to be pursued in mundane security practice, and – arguably – to the idea that 7/7 as event is intelligible only in retrospect. At the same time however, the many lines of questioning during the Inquest, its

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