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‘They should have just taken a gun and shot my son’: Taser deployment and the downtrodden in Canada

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This study interrogates ostensible differential deployment of an increasingly ubiquitous tool of policing in Canada – the Taser. Taser-related deaths are problematized as evidence of a teething new urban terrorism essentially against the downtrodden. The paper argues that a combination of intersecting factors: gender, low socio-economic status, mental illness, drug use, and ethnicity are fundamental to who gets tased by the police. The paper investigates the death of Polish immigrant Robert Dziekański at Vancouver airport as a quintessential ‘media event’. It highlights the concomitant disarticulation of the police as repositories of order and their re-articulation as insouciant villains. Dziekański’s death, the paper contends, *inter alia* benefitted from the Canadian ‘cultural feeling rules’ in a manner that earlier recorded Taser-related fatalities did not. In addition, the paper argues that if the current trend continues, not only will the downtrodden continue to bear the brunt of Taser injuries and fatalities, but there may be scant public outcry accompanying such gory incidents.

Keywords: Taser; new urban terrorism; the downtrodden; ‘cultural feeling rules’

On October 14, 2007, Polish immigrant Robert Dziekański lay mortally silent on the floor of Vancouver International Airport after Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officers stunned him with a Conducted Energy Weapon (CEW), commonly known as the Taser. The incident garnered wide coverage in the Canadian and international media, particularly in Dziekański’s native Poland (Bailey, 2009). Prior to this incident, there had been instances in Canada where the Taser was deployed and resulted in fatality. In the Dziekański case, however, a fellow traveller in Vancouver airport, Paul Pritchard, recorded the incident on his cell phone camera. After its seizure by the RCMP for more than 48 hours, the recording was returned to Pritchard and he subsequently released the footage to the wider public and mass media (Nurwisah, 2009). The dissemination of the footage was a watershed in the growing controversy over Taser use in Canada. It has resulted in the case transmuting from a relatively rare albeit tragic incident into a ‘media event’ (Fiske, 1996) providing visual confirmation of arguably egregious police brutality in Canada.

This paper interrogates ostensible differential deployment of an increasingly ubiquitous tool of policing in Canada – the Taser. The paper argues that an amalgam

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of factors: gender, low socio-economic status, mental illness, drug use and ethnicity is *sine qua non* to who gets Tasered by the police. Documented episodes of Taser incidents are problematized as evidence of new urban terrorism perpetrated by the police essentially against the downtrodden. Using the identities of 26 fatalities related to Taser use, the paper enunciates the watershed in the burgeoning history of Taser-related deaths, the demise of Polish immigrant, Robert Dziekański, as a 'beneficiary' of the Canadian 'cultural feeling rules' (Loseke, 2003, pp. 78–79), in view of the widespread public sympathy and attention it garnered via the media. The paper argues that if the current trend continues, not only will the downtrodden continue to bear the brunt of Taser injuries and fatalities, but there might be scant public outcry accompanying such gory events.

The paper is divided into four sections. First, a brief overview of the Taser is provided. Second, the paper takes up why Robert Dziekański's death generated the level of public awareness that previously recorded fatalities could not. Third, the paper argues that the Taser is being used essentially to terrorize the downtrodden within a neo-liberal ethos. The final section of the paper argues that the dismantling of the welfare state and attendant increase in the ranks of the surplus population have contributed to the army of the downtrodden bearing the brunt of Taser incidents.

The Taser¹

The search for 'less-lethal' weapons which began in the 1920s has led to a proliferation of various accoutrements of policing (White & Ready, 2007). This quest has produced an impressive array of options for law enforcement. These include: tear gas, the pen-gun, chemical mace and pepper spray. Others are the capture net, immobilizer, pepper fog, slippery material, water cannon, wooden plug gun, rubber plug gun, ricochet cartridge, riot baton and tranquilizing darts (Kornblum & Reddy, 1991). While all of these weapons are not without their inherent flaws and criticisms, the development of the Taser has made its predecessors pale in comparison both in the scale of adoption and concomitant consequences.

By 1993, Taser International had created a revolution in the production of 'less-lethal' force commodities. 'TASER' is the trademark and acronym for Thomas A. Swift Electric Rifle International (Jenkinson, Neeson, & Bleetman, 2006). Taser International produces the highly commercially successful Advanced TASER M26 which was released in 1999. The TASER X26 was also successfully introduced in 2003. Classified as a Neuromuscular Incapacitating Device (NID), Electro-muscular Disruption Technology (EMDT) or Conductive Energy Device (CED)² (Levine, Sloane, Chan, Dunford, & Vilke, 2007, p. 113), the same category as stun guns and projectile weapons, the Taser has the capacity to deliver 50,000 volts each time it is used (Levine et al., 2007).³ The Taser functions by causing the muscles of the target to contract involuntarily through a breakdown of the subject's central nervous system, thus incapacitating such an individual (White & Ready, 2007). Thus, authorities are able to subdue a subject. The Taser is a prohibited firearm in Canada but is not classified as a firearm by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms in the US where it is generally regarded as a less-lethal weapon (Levine et al., 2007; White & Ready, 2007).

Since its adoption first by the Victoria Police Service in 1998 (Canadian Police Research Centre, 2000; Victoria Police Department, 2009), by the end of 2008, about 73 law enforcement agencies were known to have adopted the Taser, while the RCMP had 2,800 Tasers in operation (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation [CBC], 2009). In the US, 11,500 law enforcement agencies use about 260,000 CEDs like the Taser (National Institute of Justice, 2008). Reports by the B.C. Office of the Police Complaints Commissioner (2004, 2005) include specific recommendations on when the deployment of the Taser should take place and how many applications should be administered if deployed. The two reports clearly state that the Taser should not be confused with 'less lethal' force or understood as a device that is 'non-deadly' when deployed (B.C. Office of Police Complaint Commissioner, 2005, p. 11).⁴ This would seem to suggest that Taser use can, in some instances, produce health risks including fatalities.

Taser use in Canada, the US, UK and around the world has sparked a number of medical and ethical issues. Several effects have been noted to occur after Taser deployment by the police. These include tingling sensations, freezing on the spot, screaming, falling to the ground, involuntary muscle contraction, stress, amnesia and acute pain (Jenkinson et al., 2006; White & Ready, 2007). More tragically, at least 26 persons have died after being tased by the police in Canada (CBC, 2009). Amnesty International's reports (2008a, 2008b) reveal that 334 persons in the US have died from the use of the Taser as of 2008. In its reports on Canada, Amnesty International (2007, 2004) denounces what it considers the excessive and unnecessary use of the Taser by the police even when suspects were unarmed and constituted no threat. Reiterating Amnesty International's vociferous call for a moratorium on Taser use, in November 2007, the UN Committee Against Torture (CAT) stated unequivocally that the use of the Taser constituted a form of torture. Other organizations like the British Columbia Civil Liberties Association (2009), the American Civil Liberties Union and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (White & Ready, 2007) have demonstrated their objection to the continued use of the Taser without adequate scientific testing and conclusive findings by a neutral arbiter.

None the less, Taser International maintains that its products remain safe and have contributed to reducing both police officers' and suspects' injuries and deaths. Those in law enforcement like the Executive Director of the Canadian Police Research Centre, Steve Palmer, argue that the number of lives saved by the use of Tasers often goes unreported (CBC, 2008). A 2006 Annual Report on the use of the Taser by the Toronto Police demonstrates that the Taser was effective 94% of the time it was deployed without any serious incident (Toronto Police, 2006). The Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police and the Canadian Police Association supported this view at a news conference in Ottawa on February 24, 2009. However, earlier on February 12, 2009, while testifying before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security, RCMP Commissioner, William Elliott acknowledged that there are risks of death and injury to agitated individuals when Tasers are deployed (Zimonjic, 2009). The confused and confusing stance of law enforcement in Canada on the Taser had been ostensibly clarified much earlier. In a March 25, 2009 article, the CBC reports that effective February 3, 2009, the RCMP had in fact removed two vital sentences reducing Taser use to one shot and the other requiring that officers must warn a suspect before using the Taser

(CBC, 2009). In theory, this means that officers are free to use the Taser multiple times and are no longer required to warn suspects before such force is applied.

‘Media event’, Robert Dziekański and ‘cultural feeling rules’

In *Media Matters*, John Fiske (1996) analyses the issues, controversies and fall-out associated with three major socio-cultural and socio-political episodes in modern US society: (1) the televised chase of O.J. Simpson in his white Bronco and subsequent murder trial; (2) the televised video of Rodney King’s beating at the hands of four Los Angeles Police Department officers and their subsequent trial; and (3) the televised Senate Judiciary Committee hearings, where Anita Hill tabled allegations of sexual harassment against then Supreme Court Justice nominee Clarence Thomas. Unprecedented mass media coverage transformed each case into on-going televisual episodes featuring compelling casts of characters fulfilling the requirements for common cultural narratives. According to Fiske, these cases are exemplars of ‘media events.’ They confirm the realities of socio-cultural struggles over meaning and power and remind us that:

... we can no longer work with the idea that the ‘real’ is more important, significant, or even ‘true’ than the representation. A media event, then, is not a mere representation of what happened, but it has its own reality, which gathers up into itself the reality of the event that may or may not have preceded it. (Fiske, 1996, p. 2)

At the heart of the media event is the understanding that part of what is being represented is the media through which the said event has been disseminated. In terms of the above US cases, television was the primary conduit casting each event into the public psyche. Once disseminated and re-played via media outlets, the media event takes on a life of its own and as Fiske (1996, p. 126) adds, it:

... is hypervisual, for besides its condensation of social antagonisms, it is technologically distributed and thus inserted into unpredictably different social contexts. Its mediation gives it a different social reality from an event that is confined to the immediate conditions of its occurrence.

The scale on which the circumstances leading up to and following Dziekański’s death as revealed in Pritchard’s cell phone recording, presented members of the general public with the type of accessibility not normally afforded them. The 25 other Taser-related deaths did not garner the same level of media and public attention quite possibly due to the fact that recordings did not exist, were not released for mass consumption, or were not widely and consistently publicized by media outlets – effectually, these cases did not evolve into media events like that involving Dziekański. The identity and lifespan of the Taser episode culminating in his death augmented the style and complexion of the typical media event evidenced in Fiske’s (1996) investigations. What makes the Dziekański case different is that it had a digital identity which not only allowed for enhanced televisual representations and life-span but a guaranteed feedback loop via interactive modern communication technologies like the Internet and social networking cum exhibitionist tools like Facebook and YouTube. Thus, the identity of the Dziekański Taser episode, included its digital potential which allowed for unparalleled public debate,

scrutiny, and struggle over meaning. At its core, digitization leads to multiple opportunities for narratives, discourses, and controversies to play themselves out in the 'high-stakes' game of the hypervisual.

Recent scholarship has taken-up the notion of the media event in Fiske's (1996) terms, and offered minor provisos while applying it to other socio-cultural phenomena. For instance, Wien and Elmelund-Præstekær (2009) and Vasterman (2005) have examined media events but with a different conceptual perspective. In their respective accounts of 'behind the scenes' journalistic standards and the general encoding practices of the news production process, these scholars investigate the role of 'media hype' in the amplification of controversial social issues. 'Media hype' in their accounts refers to 'amplification, magnification, exaggeration, and distortion' of events (Vasterman, 2005, p. 511) and the mechanisms or anatomies that are in place which lead to both the rise and decline of hypes in the popular public psyche (Wien & Elmelund-Præstekær, 2009, p. 189). In each account, it is argued that the representation and consequent framing of particular events suggest what the parameters of the controversy should be and which discourses are justified in their debate. Further, events that succumb to media hype also fulfil customary news values criteria. Other scholars have arrived at similar conclusions when examining global media events and disasters (Kyriakidou, 2008) and national media events that highlight the fractures in the imagined ideas of nationhood and national identities (Mihelj, 2008).

While it can be argued that Pritchard's recording of Dziekański's Taserung at Vancouver airport offered little evidence of exaggeration or distortion, the unorchestrated dimension of the incident unquestionably fuelled news values criteria much in the same manner as hype is based on the foundations of planned events or those that have been historically documented. Immediacy, personalization, and extraordinariness are the primary constituents of news values (Knight, 2004). Immediacy, or the 'here and now' factor, of news events provides a sense of urgency to news coverage while the personalization dimension suggests that issues and controversies interpellate or 'hail' (Althusser, 1971) active audiences in processes of decoding. What the element of extraordinariness offers our analysis of the Dziekański case as a media event is an understanding of how the routine can rapidly become the unanticipated and bewildering. The presence of the extraordinary factor is accompanied by two important elements that articulate and reinforce dominant ideologies and discourses. Firstly, as a news value, extraordinariness highlights that individuals who are involved in deviant acts, for instance, are dangerous or disruptive; thus creating an 'us' versus 'them' frame of understanding. The world is then constituted along the line of the well behaved versus the disruptive. Secondly, news coverage of deviance, crime, and social control usually allays public fears by demonstrating the consequences those who deviate from the norm and the forms of social control are confronted with (i.e., the government or the police) (Knight, 2004, p. 138). The promise of the restoration of order by the 'powers that be', provides not only closure but comfort for a public familiar with the crime or deviance narrative (i.e., victims versus criminals, good versus evil, privileged versus underclass).

Accompanying an understanding of the crime narrative is the recognition of the roles played by social actors. As noted above, these narratives have distinct victims and villains and the dichotomy between good and evil forces is easily identified for

the most part. As a media event, the Dziekański case offers an opportunity to consider how traditional villains can become re-articulated in the roles of victims and vice versa. At the epicentre of determining who is construed as a victim and, ergo, who deserves public sympathy is what Loseke (2003, pp. 78–79) poignantly calls ‘cultural feeling rules’. First, this means that victimhood and the emotion of sympathy go hand in hand. Those who deserve our sympathy are the ones who did not cause the harm they experience, hence are not held responsible for the harm that befell them (Loseke, 2003). Second, while attribution of responsibility to an entity apart from the victim is not sufficient grounds for members of society to be sympathetic with the victim’s plight, people who are put on a moral pedestal are more easily constructed as victims. Therefore, a raped nun will garner more public sympathy than a raped drug addict or sex worker. More fundamental for this essay, people are very likely to be persuaded to help the victim when claims resonate with them and the general cultural ethos of the day (Loseke, 2003).

On the other hand, villains are agents that cause harm without justification and are viewed as being morally bankrupt. In comparison to victims, villains are directly responsible for their actions and ensuing fate (Loseke, 2003). Arguably, in the Dziekański case, victim-hood and villain-hood became disarticulated from their respective frames of reference and codes which resulted in re-articulation of the crime narrative. In other words, what Pritchard’s recording of the Taser incident dismantled was the subject/object dichotomy which usually provides infallible clues as to who is ‘right’ and ‘wrong.’ This disarticulation and re-articulation are at the heart of the media event eternally documenting the gruelling fate of Dziekański. Villains are individuals who are considered inhumane and void of respect and empathy. Victims are those who observers can empathize with and bestow their unequivocal sympathy. What is evident in this Taser incident is that in the process of being Tasered by the RCMP, Dziekański was disarticulated from the role of villain – a non-English speaking disruptive new arrival⁵ – and rearticulated into the role of victim. Conversely, the police, traditional bearers of trust and morality, were disarticulated from the role of order restorers, and re-articulated into the role of villains. It is perhaps emblematic of the times that the Dziekański Taser appears on YouTube, replete with scathing comments by members of various publics around the world. Interested members of the public are able to relive the moment, the anguish and misery of a 40-year old Polish immigrant, who landed in a free, open, democratic and multicultural Canada only to die literally in the hands of those paid to protect lives, mere hours after arrival. This level of access further fuelled the public’s discontent as the Braidwood Inquiry unfolded. It provided credible evidence of RCMP indiscretion. Letters to editor provide some evidence of the public’s ire as RCMP testimony contradicted the ‘evidence’ (i.e. the video recorded by Pritchard): Medad (2007, p. A28) writes:

The RCMP’s statement that the video is just one piece of evidence and to consider it in the context of the officers’ explaining their conduct recalls Groucho Marx’s challenge to his (cinematic) wife who finds him in bed with another woman: ‘Who are you going to believe, me or your own eyes?’

Zofia Cisowski, the mother of Robert Dziekański, minces no words on who is to blame. She declares: ‘These RCMP officers, who are expected to help people, stood

back . . . they appear detached as if they played no part in this fatal incident. This is what is truly repulsive to me' (Brennan, 2008, p. A19).

The significance of an old immigrant woman speaking in faltering English and weeping profusely over the death of her 40-year-old son – who wanted to start a new life in Canada after years of material deprivation and hardship in Poland – in front of a commission established to investigate the circumstances of her son's death and also before a House of Commons committee made up of eminent citizens in the full glare of television cameras should not be lost on the reader. The galvanization of public sympathy and outpouring of emotions under such circumstances in a country made up largely of immigrants is potentially tremendous.

The unprecedented generation of sympathy and public outcry in the Dziekański incident requires further elucidation. Why did earlier fatalities fail to generate as much attention on the consequences of Taser use in Canada? As stated above, this paper argues that apart from the readily available video recording that provided incontrovertible evidence (similar to the Rodney King beating; see Williams, 2007); hence, unsurprisingly, people would rather believe their eyes than the RCMP, the Dziekański death reportage and public reaction benefitted immensely from the Canadian cultural feeling rules (Loseke, 2003). Dziekański was arguably a model Canadian immigrant from a source the majority of the people could identify with. The sad story of this unfortunate immigrant found resonance in the larger Canadian population.

Dziekański's case is a compelling study in what the Canadian cultural feeling rules consist in at least two ways. First, there was rarely any consistent effort to 'otherize' Dziekański as an outsider, who had arrived to take away jobs and collect welfare benefits; a charge often levelled at troubled or troubling 'immigrants' (Li, 2003). It seemed to be a given that he had arrived to become part of the *community*. While immigration continues to be a persistent source of consternation, the term 'immigrant' generally connotes 'racially different' people from Asia, Africa and other non-European countries (Li, 2003, p. 44). Immigrants are largely perceived as outsiders who are culturally different from mainstream Canadians (Li, 2003; Jiwani, 2005) and whose presence may lead to the destabilization of traditional communities (Papastergiadis, 2000).

Second, it is didactic that Dziekański was not held responsible for his woes in the public imagination. To be sure, there are documented instances where recent arrivals in Canada ran into or caused trouble due to no fault of theirs but were held responsible for their woes. For instance, in the case of a woman from the Congo, who took ill and was misdiagnosed as having the deadly ebola virus in 2001, public attention focused not only on the harm she might cause society through the spread of the disease she turned out not to have, but also a fixation, nay, cross-articulation of her case with anti-immigration sentiments even though she arrived in Canada on a visitor's visa (Adeyanju & Neverson, 2007; Adeyanju & Oriola, 2010). Intriguingly, as soon as it became clear that the woman did not have ebola, newspapers began to focus on the cost of her treatment to tax payers and suggested that she was involved in diamond smuggling. The Congolese woman seemed to be unworthy of public sympathy. From the beginning to the end of the case as documented by the Canadian print media, she was not granted a victim status as there was no coherent attention to whether or not the woman would survive the ailment and return home to her family. Her case resonated (albeit unfavourably) within a socio-cultural milieu that

associated the continent of Africa with disease (Chirimuuta & Chirimuuta, 1989; Joffe & Haarhoff, 2002). The ebola panic makes sense within the larger context of rising anti-racial diversity sentiments of Canadians over their perception that non-Europeans are over-populating Canada (see Hier & Greenberg, 2002; Thobani, 2000). Dziekański, however, was worthy of sympathy, in part because he hailed from a part of the world that many Canadians from broader entrance status, European diasporas, are familiar with. The Braidwood Inquiry set up *inter alia* to investigate circumstances leading to his death, for instance, had cost tax-payers in British Columbia \$3.7m as of 31 August 2009, yet experts believe the province is getting value for its money (Karp, 2009). To date, there has been no considerable public concern about the cost of the admittedly necessary and commendable exercise.

The seeming absolution of blame on Dziekański's part involves an understanding of 'feeling passion' (Gramsci, 1971). In his analysis of public reaction to the media representation of the victims of the New Right politics, Knight (1998) examines how hegemony is achieved by tapping into common sense sentiment and knowledge. What was involved was the emphasis of the media in their articulation of Dziekański's death to his innocence as a poor, but innocuous immigrant, meeting a cruel death in the hands of those who were supposed to protect him. As far as media representation of social problems is concerned, victim worthiness is not a given. Knight (1998, pp. 119–120) points out, that the 'struggle over victim worthiness hinges on the ability to make resonant claims about what can be called the moral economy of harm in which worthy victims are marked foremost by their innocence'. The discourse of an innocent man who suffered unjustly at the hands of others connects with the subjectivities of media audiences, re-affirming that evil exists in the world. The way that this discourse of harm, injustice, and innocence appeals to human emotion is what Knight (1998) refers to as 'feeling passion'. As Knight (1998, pp. 120–121) further notes, that "'bad" news is not the issue of facts and their objectivity, but the way that the feeling passion of the audience is put at stake'. While the suspected ebola case was evidently articulated to race/ethnicity and the potential perils of immigration, Dziekański's fate was articulated to the promise of immigration and articulated to ethnicity in a favourable way. Often referred to in the media as the 'Polish immigrant', the 'Polish man' or a 'Polish traveller', Dziekański represents a promise of emigration from Poland to Canada. This is aptly captured in the following report by the *National Post* of November 17, 2007:

He would never cross that border, or any other, until he was 40 and left Poland to join his mother in distant Canada, his bags packed with geography books that had long sustained his unfulfilled world fascination, his pockets empty of the cigarettes he had discarded in favour of healthier beginnings. (Vanderklippe, 2007, p. A1)

The above quote gives an impression of renewal, and opportunity for Dziekański to live in one of the most fortunate countries in the world. Unlike the Congolese woman, his 'otherness' was not problematized.

While this may seem baseless and unnecessarily polemic, it is in actual fact firmly established in the literature. The notion of 'peripheral Europeans' (Satzewich, 2000) encapsulates the bewildering gradation of various European ethnics in the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Canada. During this period, peripheral Europeans included the Polish, Italians, Greeks, Hungarians, Ukrainians and so on. They were constructed as the Other, racialized by the French and the British or the 'charter groups' (Porter, 1965). The internment of Ukrainians – akin to that of the Japanese during the World War Two – is still fresh in memory (Boyko, 1998). The racialization of these groups of Europeans was evident in their low level of economic and social integration (Satzewich, 1991). Evidence from more recent studies now shows that most of the European groups once constructed as the Other have, over time, overcome their social and economic inhibitions (Lian & Mathews, 1998; Hou & Balakrishnan, 2004). This is similar to the experiences of the Irish (Ignatiev, 1996) and the Jews (Brodin, 1998) in the US. Since the de-racialized immigration policy of the 1960s, the boundaries of racialization have shifted. Hence, the de-racialization of peripheral Europeans and the racialization of non-European immigrants have occurred simultaneously. As Canada is still largely European in its cultural orientation (Li, 2003) and feeling rules, the onus is now on 'new immigrants' from non-traditional sources, especially Asia and Africa to make concerted efforts at belonging to Canada's imagined community (Anderson, 1983).

Terrorizing the downtrodden

This section explicates the role played by changing socio-economic conditions and the intensification of policing of subjugated persons in fatal Taser-related episodes. The circumstances and social situatedness of the 26 Taser-related fatalities in Canada provide veritable ground for concern. As this section contends, conditions like poverty – a pathetically Herculean problem in advanced democracies in spite of ostensible 'progress' made – mental illness, drug use, ethnicity and gender play a crucial role in who gets Tasered by the police.

Wacquant's investigation and empirical juxtaposition of 'advanced marginality' (2008, p. 232) in the ghetto of Chicago and the suburbs of Paris provide a compelling analysis of the precarious conditions of urban poor in two supposedly First World countries on both sides of the Atlantic. Wacquant (2008, p. 232) proposes the term *advanced marginality* to denote the "return of the repressed" realities of economic penury and social destitution, ethnoracial division and public violence, and their accumulation in the same distressed urban areas' in the First World. This is caused not by backwardness but the very economic advancement of such societies leading to conscription and restriction of the working class to the margins of society (Wacquant, 2008). Adducing reasons for the rise of advanced marginality in cities of developed countries, Wacquant (2008) enumerates the insecurity of wage labour, disconnection of the poor from macroeconomic trends, delineation of the working class to the confines of physical spaces defined as dangerous (for example, the ghetto and reserves), attendant alienation of such spaces as well as loss of 'place', the disappearance of any hinterland for the poor unlike in previous eras and lastly, social fragmentation of the devalued and stigmatized working class (pp. 234–247). Intriguingly, the result is a legion of persons who share in the unfortunate commonality of poverty amidst plenty, yet are quick to blame themselves rather than the atrocious system that produced their condition and victimize other involuntary social recluses. The sheer genius of this new form of subjugation christened 'modernization of misery' *inter alia* is the increasing levels of violence, fear

of strangers or xenophobia, and intensified police surveillance accompanying intra-poor skirmishes (Wacquant, 2008, p. 260).

Social scientists have linked the social problem of poverty to the dismantling of the welfare state and the supremacy of the free market (Esmonde, 2002). Apart from the declining life chances of ordinary men and women in many Western societies, there is also a shift in ideology (Mingione, 1996). The mastermind of the epochal transformation of individuals and societies is often connected with the 'right politics'. The New Right ideology is an amalgam of key elements of neoconservatism and neoliberalism (Knight, 1998, pp. 106–109). While the neoconservative strain stresses social control, and discipline as a panacea to social problems of crime, and moral laxity; neoliberalism emphasizes fiscal responsibility, involving cuts to government spending, deregulation, privatization of state assets and resources, etc. It is axiomatic in a neoliberal era that society does not exist, individuals do. In the words of Naiman (2008, p. 206), the market is 'the central determinant of social values, and the individual as the core unit of society'.

Across Canada, the state has responded to poverty, and its attendant social problems, with aggressive policing. The crises have also led to over-policing in the US and Europe (Wacquant, 2008, 2001; Williams, 2007). Law-and-order policing is being used to not only target the condition (i.e. poverty), but also the forms of behaviour, like indigence and indolence, that are associated with poverty (Gordon, 2005). The neoliberal state abhors 'retreatists' (Merton, 1957, p. 153). Retreatism involves 'some of the adaptive activities of psychotics, autists, pariahs, outcasts, vagrants, vagabonds, tramps, chronic drunkards and drug addicts' (Merton, 1957, p. 153). The retreatists are targeted by the repressive state apparatus in cities like Winnipeg, Edmonton, Vancouver and so on not only because they are poor, but also because they are predominantly able-bodied men with a seeming aversion for wage labour. Beggars, pan-handlers, schizophrenics, squeegee kids, etc. are targets of the law-and-order-state because they seek employment outside wage labour.

The police have adopted 'zero-tolerance' policing strategies (Gordon, 2005, p. 64) based on anti-begging and anti-pan-handling laws by provincial and municipal governments. Laws like the Safe Streets Act have served to ensure that the criminalization of poverty by the Canadian state is well and alive. Since the poor have been constructed as particular social types, excessive use of force on them in the city landscape generates little or no reprobation in the public (Simon, Lopez, & Frampton, 2008; Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978). The deployment of the Taser mostly on recent European immigrants, blacks and Aboriginals, the mentally ill and drug addicts not only contributes to the targeting of those deemed 'dangerous' (Esmonde, 2002, p. 82) but also exemplifies a 'war without end' (Simon, Lopez, & Frampton, 2008, p. 5) on the downtrodden. The table below demonstrates that Tasers have the uncanny ability of being deployed on the hapless members of society.

As the table above demonstrates, certain characteristics are common among the Taser-related fatalities. Apart from being men ($N = 26$; 100%),⁶ three of the victims were recent immigrants to Canada (11.5%) and 14 were confirmed poor persons (53.8%). Some were ethnic minorities ($N = 7$; 26.9%), a few were certified mentally ill ($N = 4$; 15.3%) while rather troublingly, many had chronic drug problems ($N = 16$; 61.5%). The numbers in each of the categories above might be higher had the sources reported complete information about the victims.

Table 1. Select characteristics of taser-related fatalities in Canada

	Victim name	Drug use	Mental illness	Poverty status	Ethnicity	Gender
1.	Gordon Bowe	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Male
2.	Trevor Grimolfson	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Male
3.	Frank Frchette	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Male
4.	Sean Reilly	N/A	N/A	Yes	N/A	Male
5.	Michael Langan	Yes	No	Yes	Aboriginal	Male
6.	Jefferey Marreel	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	Male
7.	Robert T. Knipstrom	N/A	N/A	Yes	N/A	Male
8.	Howard Hyde	N/A	Yes	Yes	N/A	Male
9.	Quilem Registre	Yes	No	N/A	Haitian	Male
10.	Robert Dziekański	No	No	Yes	Polish	Male
11.	Claudio Castagnetta	Yes	No	Yes	Italian	Male
12.	Jason Doan	No*	No	N/A	N/A	Male
13.	Alessandro Fiacco	No	No	N/A	N/A	Male
14.	Paul Saulnier	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	Male
15.	James Foldi	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	Male
16.	Gurmit Sundhu	Yes	No	N/A	South Asian	Male
17.	Kevin Geldart	N/A	Yes	N/A	N/A	Male
18.	Samuel Truscott	Yes	N/A	Yes	N/A	Male
19.	Jerry Knight	Yes	N/A		Black (ethnicity not known)	Male
20.	Robert Bagnell	Yes	N/A	Yes	N/A	Male
21.	Peter Lamonday	Yes	N/A	Yes	N/A	Male
22.	Roman Andreichikov	Yes	N/A		N/A	Male
23.	Ronald Perry	Yes	N/A	Yes	N/A	Male
24.	Clark Whitehouse	Yes	N/A	Yes	Aboriginal	Male
25.	Clay Willey	Yes	N/A	Yes	Aboriginal	Male
26.	Terrance Hanna	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	Male

N/A = Not available. Information about the victims was gleaned from multifarious newspaper reports, websites, especially the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC).

*The police stated that he had drugs in his system but toxicologists reported otherwise.

The prevalence of drug use and to a lesser extent mental illness among the victims deserves more attention. Besides occasional, non-committal, transient and experimental use by young people, drugs provide an escapist rendezvous to overcome the drudgery and tedium of social life. The working class in particular use drugs to cope with their experiences of alienation and oppression manufactured and/or exacerbated by capitalist wage work (Gordon, 2006). Dealing in drugs can also be a means for the marginalized to avoid repressive market relations: 'many individuals sell drugs because the hours are more flexible, they do not have a boss standing over them eight or more hours a day, and the remuneration can be better than that received for wage work at the bottom end of the labour market' (Gordon, 2006, p. 68).

Sociological analysis of the preponderance of mental illness in inner cities dates back in the least to the more incandescent days of the Chicago School (Faris & Dunham, 1939; Micheli, 1996). The handling of mentally ill persons both as offenders and clients of the police has long attracted academic scrutiny as well

(Bittner, 1967; Watson, Corrigan, & Ottati, 2004). Police officers are insufficiently trained to handle the mentally ill (Hails & Borum, 2003), who have been deinstitutionalized following widespread agitations for their rights as persons and citizens in the 1960s and 1970s (Ruiz & Miller, 2004). Police officers typically approach calls involving a fellow having mental illness as coterminous with dealing with a dangerous 'felon' (Ruiz & Miller, 2004, p. 359). There seems to be mutual fear between mentally ill persons and the police. While the police fear that the behaviour of the mentally ill cannot be predicted, the mentally ill are also afraid that the police may arrest them and take them to a psychiatric home (Ruiz & Miller, 2004). As a result of a plethora of factors including the belief that the mentally ill are responsible for their problems (Watson, Corrigan, & Ottati, 2004) and the disconcertedness of police officers in encounters with the mentally ill, the latter are often disproportionately arrested for minor offences such as trespassing (Hails & Borum, 2003; McFarland, Faulkner, Bloom, Hallaux, & Bray, 1989) and occasionally shot by the police (Hails & Borum, 2003).

The strong relationship between police brutality and social distinctions of class (Gordon, 2006) and ethnicity (see Tator & Henry, 2006) in Canada is averred in the literature. It is therefore not surprising that most casualties of Taser deployment are 'confirmed poor persons' (53.8%), and many are ethnic minorities (26.9%) who are in some way associated with drug use. This finding confirms Gordon's (2006) claim of over-policing of the poor and ethnic minorities based on the perception of law enforcement agents that drug use is rampant among those with these intersected identities, even though there is no evidence that they are more likely to use drugs than whites and non-poor. Moreover, these types of intersected identities, while evidently overrepresented as victims of Taser at the hands of the police in Canada, can also be articulated to more favourable subjectivities. For instance, while the subjectivities of the those with multiple disadvantages, viz: poor, mentally ill, non-white, immigrant, etc. often undergo negative articulation to the unpredictable and threatening, they often occupy another common and familiar position in societal hierarchy – the 'socially disempowered' (Fiske, 1996, p. 127). These individuals are found either on the margins or lower ranks of the social hierarchy and popular sentiments often regard their plight as authentic and more 'real' than that of those in a position to transform their social conditions (p. 127). What turns the tide between the downtrodden as threat and the downtrodden as benign or powerless is the process of articulation where culpability is evaluated and individuals' actions are judged as justifiable or unwarranted.

Police violence and devalued city spaces

At the risk of sounding prematurely alarmist, a very ominous development may be lurking with respect to the Taser. This may be conceptually designated as the new urban terrorism. The term *urban terrorism* is often used to denote politically motivated and orchestrated violent actions against established entities such as nation-states by local, national or transnational non-state actors. Rather than seeking pecuniary gains, the aim of urban terrorists is not only to inflict maximum damage on lives and properties but also instil fear in the targeted populace. The 9/11 terrorist attack in the US by al-Qaeda exemplifies urban terrorism (West & Orr, 2005). Typically, innocent bystanders bear the brunt of such acts. In some cases,

urban terrorism may involve miscellaneous criminal activities, such as drug smuggling, a common feature among terrorist groups in South Africa (Hough, 2000) and Colombia (Sanchez, 2006). This paper argues that it is high time we began to re-theorize the notion of urban terrorism in recognition of the economy of violence that the downtrodden face in socially devalued city spaces.

The city is the epicentre of the new urban terrorism. Generally, social spaces in cities are reputed for being domains of contestations (Lofland, 1973), especially for those deemed undesirable (Gordon, 2006). The city, particularly downtown, is not only the amphitheatre of metastasized social problems, it is the object of the rhetorical claims of politicians, religious leaders, media pundits and moral entrepreneurs (Wacquant, 2008). Rendered simultaneously visible and invisible, the downtrodden attract the imperialist gaze of *soi-disant* law enforcement agencies. Their mere presence in the city is deemed incompatible with orderliness (Beckett & Herbert, 2008). To create a modicum of order, the spatial segregation of persons (Lofland, 1973, p. 78), viz class, caste, ethnicity, age and moral categories (for example, being regarded as respectable), is used by law enforcement agencies. This is accomplished through the 'incongruity procedure' (Sacks, 1972, pp. 282–283). For Sacks (1972, pp. 282–283), the incongruity procedure means that 'the police are occupational specialists on inferring the probability of criminality from the appearances persons present in public spaces.' This is largely a function of what or who is in place or out of place. Thus, although the old 'floating populations' of early and pre-industrial societies have almost disappeared today because very few people are left with enough time to spare when most are involved in school, work and organized recreational activities (Lofland, 1973, p. 71), those who dare saunter with no clear destination in public spaces may receive law enforcement focus. While this has no element of surprise, it should be worrisome that many of the victims of Taser incidents had drug problems, suffered mental illness and/or were from various minority groups or recent immigrants.

The new urban terrorism subsists on the negative social construction of the poor or those who appear poor, the homeless, mentally ill, the unemployed or unemployable, beggars and miscellaneous social rejects. Many of such categories of people are treated as non-persons (Jones, 2008). While the RCMP has suffered 222 casualties in the line of duty (including accidents while responding to calls) from the 1870s to 2009 (RCMP, 2009; CBC 2007),⁷ the portrayal of members of the public as increasingly violent, out-rightly crazy and requiring extraordinary measures, such as the Taser, in order to protect the officers and the public from their own selves has exacerbated in recent times. Timber cutters, mine workers, and truck drivers confront significantly higher incidents of death on duty than police officers (Williams, 2007). Without meaning to under-estimate the dangers police officers face daily, the reality is that 'policing ... is the only industry that both exaggerates and advertises its dangers' (Williams, 2007, p. 19). Consequently, there has been an overproduction of 'frightened and frightening citizens' (Lyons, 2008, p. 125).

Taser use on the downtrodden has led to a very unhealthy mistrust, dread and fear of the police akin to the way members of the public are terrified by terrorist attacks. In the US, University of Florida undergraduate student Andrew Meyer pleaded vehemently 'Don't Tase me, bro' before he was promptly Tasered by campus police for daring to ask former presidential candidate John Kerry an uncomfortable question though the latter was prepared to answer. In Canada,

a victim's sister Joanna Blair states that after her brother's previous encounter with the Taser two years before his death, '(h)e did have a fear of police. Since the Taser incident he had a fear of Taser guns. I feel he was running for his life' (Moore, 2007, p. A1). Her late brother, Howard Hyde was Tasered as he tried to run away from the Central Nova Scotia Correctional Facility hours after he was arrested by the Halifax Regional Police for assault (Moore, 2007). His sister insists that her brother, a 'diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic' had had his heart weakened in the previous Taser incident (Moore, 2007, p. A1). In another case, in Kamloops, British Columbia, an old man was tased in a hospital bed after brandishing a pen knife (Joyce, 2008b) at his interlocutors. The seemingly insouciant attitude of law enforcement in Taser deployment made a bereaved mother argue that:

They should have just taken a gun and shot my son right there instead of using the taser ... Basically, it did the same thing. (Sharon Shymko, whose son, Michael Langan, died after being Tasered by the police in Winnipeg, cited in Fong, 2008, p. A19)

There are other Taser-related episodes that have led the public to be fearful of police use of the Taser. For instance, the Metro Vancouver transit police, the Braidwood commission was told, had a Taser policy that allowed the officers to Taser 'non-compliant' transit passengers, a term which was used as an excuse to Taser people who refused to pay their fare (Joyce, 2008a, p. A21). Those who refuse to pay bus fare can be reasonably expected to be those unable to pay. Following widespread public outcry, the term 'actively resistant' has since been used to replace 'non-compliant' (Joyce, 2008a, p. A21) by the Metro Vancouver transit police.

In addition, rather than reserving the Taser for potentially non-innocuous incidents, where they would have used a gun, some law enforcement officers have literally turned the Taser into a weapon of first resort. For instance, in RCMP cells in Pukatawagan, northern Manitoba, an officer was quoted as saying to a prisoner: 'Let me introduce you to the Taser. It is able to produce 50,000 volts of electricity. Co-operate with us and you will not be stunned' (Bronskill & Bailey, 2007, p. A1). The said prisoner was Tasered by the officer without much ado. It is also troubling that at least three out of every four suspects (or 79%) Tasered were unarmed in a review of 563 cases (Bronskill & Bailey, 2007). In many of the cases, persons under the influence of alcohol and suspects who failed to comply with orders but posed no threats were tased (Bronskill & Bailey, 2007). The Taser was also often used multiple times rather than once. For a technology exuding 50,000 volts of electricity, victims' families and the public are understandably perplexed. Executive director of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies, Kim Pate, an inmate advocate, argues that the police are 'using them [Tasers] in situations to subdue, gain compliance or perhaps even punitively when someone has reacted in ways they don't approve of' (cited in Bronskill & Bailey, 2007, p. A1). Therefore, it is unlikely that the lives of the officers were at risk in the encounters with many of the suspects they tased.

Concluding thoughts: mapping out Taser-related fatalities

The constellation-cum-convergence of factors like drug use, recent migration status, mental illness, poverty and, to a lesser extent, ethnic minority status in the profile of

victims of Taser-related deaths should be a source of concern to policy makers, researchers, public-spirited citizens and those saddled with the unenviable task of law enforcement. To be clear, the paper does not argue that the police go all out to target or Taser any or all of the persons who fit these profiles, but the 26 deaths related to Taser use give room to question the *modus operandi* of law enforcement officers in Canada. It is no exaggeration to suggest that if the current trend continues, not only will the downtrodden continue to bear the brunt of Taser injuries and fatalities, there may be scant public outcry accompanying such gory events. It is not inconceivable that these incidents may not necessarily have the incontestability afforded by the video recording of Dziekański's death. Therefore, the question of whether Taser incidents are carried out in a public space at a time when there are members of the public present and if those observing are sufficiently interested or enthralled to record the events would play a significant role in such encounters. More worryingly, it is not improbable that persons involved in Taser-related incidents as subjects may not be found worthy of public sympathy owing to their histories of drug use, poverty and mental illness – the three most prevalent commonalities among recorded deaths. Such persons may not be granted 'victim' status and may end up being held responsible for their fate. As previous fatalities demonstrate – to paraphrase George Orwell's (1980[1967]) *Animal Farm* – Taser-related deaths are equal, but some are more equal than others.

As several NGOs and civil liberty organizations like Amnesty International (2008a, 2008b, 2007, 2004) and the British Columbia Civil Liberties Association (2009) have urged, a call for a moratorium on Taser use in Canada is imperative. It is beneath the integrity of RCMP – a well-respected organization by international standards – and other police establishments in Canada to continue to use the Taser without conclusive independent scientific evidence succinctly demonstrating its effects or consequences on the human body. Besides, the on-going controversy surrounding Taser use is an unnecessary distraction to police organizations. The federal and provincial governments and city councils have a huge role to play in ensuring that the weakest and defenseless members of society do not continue to feel hunted by police and Tasers.

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Notes

1. This section derives from a previous paper by the author(s): Oriola, Neverson & Adeyanju (2010).
2. For purposes of convenience, throughout this paper, CED is used.
3. A study convened by the CBC finds that there are instances where more than 50,000 volts can be released by the Taser.
4. In its final report, the B.C. Office of Police Complaints Commissioner employed the term 'less lethality' to describe the mode of operation of the Taser.
5. Dziekański was said to be throwing every object in sight at the airport officials and that informed the calling of the RCMP.

6. The police work culture is noted to overwhelmingly encourage 'hegemonic masculinity' (Procos & Padavic 2002). This paper does not focus on masculinity or the facticity of maleness *vis-à-vis* Taser-related deaths. For more on masculinity, see Connell (1995), Cose (1995) and McLaren (1997).
7. This figure does not include fatalities recorded by non-federal police organizations, such as city police in Edmonton, Victoria and many others.

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