

Book Review

Ajit Maan. *Counter-Terrorism: Narrative Strategies*. Lanham: University Press of America, 2016. ISBN: 978-0761867753.

Ajit Maan is a philosopher who, in this book, addresses the problem of terrorism as a narrative problem. She endeavors to think about how to undermine the terrorist narrative, particularly its “recruitment narratives” (p. 5), and to win the battle of ideas, rather than the military battle. This is an important task to which the disciplines of philosophy can helpfully be applied.

She starts with some strong assumptions. “Narratives are powerful. And the power is tricky. They can illuminate, manipulate, inspire, entertain, blame, seduce, or provide an alibi. Narratives are never neutral. Their very nature is strategic” (p. 1). From here, she argues that we need to harness the persuasive power of narrative to strengthen international counterterrorism efforts. Indeed she claims that this harnessing is more central than military engagement. However, she does not argue for a singular counter-narrative to the terrorist narrative. Her argument is based on the post-modern assumption of multiplicity and she suggests that we need multiple counter narratives, rather than a singular effective one.

To achieve the undermining of the terrorist narratives it is necessary, she says, to step out of singular thinking, which is territory already occupied by the fundamentalist logic of terrorist groups. It takes ironic thinking (p. 3) to do this and Maan believes that people who are already required to negotiate complexity in life between different cultures are well equipped for this task. They are already dealing with incommensurable narratives on a regular basis. She uses her own experience as a member of the Sikh diaspora to illustrate the point. “Diasporas are in a unique position,” she argues, “resulting from familiarity with the conceptual systems of two or more cultures that should enable resilience to coercive narratives” (p. 2). Equally, those who get by without having to think in multiple terms about their own position in the world will struggle to be flexible enough for such ironic thinking. They are less acquainted with the demands of multiplicity. The problem is that such people often occupy positions of decision-making power, where singular thinking can often masquerade as strength.

Ironic thinking is the basis of deconstruction, of course, and Ajit Maan uses Derridian and analytic tools to unpack the narratives of both Islamist terrorist organizations like ISIS and right wing fundamentalist groups, both of whom pose dangers in American and European societies. She carefully unravels logical fallacies, faulty analogies, non-sequiturs, overlapping inconsistencies and dangerous metaphors that can be found in public relations material from both of these sources. However, she also recognizes that narratives are in the end not logical arguments. They operate at a more subterranean level than does logic. She argues for what she calls a structuralist analysis, suggesting that it is the narrative structure, rather than the content, of a narrative that needs to be addressed.

Here she makes an interesting distinction between a counter-narrative and an alternative narrative. She says, "A strategic counter-narrative addresses a terrorist narrative on its own terms ... it will expose logical fallacies, false dichotomies and metaphoric manipulation" (p. 3). On the other hand, an "alternative narrative ... should not directly address the terrorist narrative. Instead it should present an alternative that doesn't define itself by recourse to the problem as defined and framed by terrorists" (p. 3). The danger lies in limiting ourselves and in "playing by someone else's rules" (p. 3). She arrives at the following resounding statement that sounds like it might align her thinking with someone like Claude Levi-Strauss: "The form or structure of narrative determines its content" (p. 4).

So what should an alternative narrative be an alternative to? As Ajit Maan explains, it should be an alternative to the typical Western narrative, derived originally from Aristotle, which "links a unified linear narrative to a coherent unified identity" (p. 10). Maan believes that a more complex understanding is needed of both the narrative and the coherent identity. If potential terrorist recruits were exposed to more complexity and paid more attention to incommensurable narratives, they would be less susceptible to singular victim narratives. To this end, she notes that, "Many calls to violence first begin with casting the potential terrorist as a victim" (p. 12).

What might, therefore count as an alternative narrative and where might we find it? Maan has several suggestions. One is that we should understand, "the negative power of tragedy ... in which fate, chance, and luck, work together with human agency to render a more morally complex narrative" (p. 4). An understanding of tragedy might represent a break with the classical Western convention of crafting narratives of individual self-improvement. In answer to a possible concern that this shift might be too difficult, she scoffs that, "Narrative conventions are only conventions" (p. 4) and can more easily be changed than most assume.

Her argument continues with references to postmodern and post-colonial perspectives. She suggests that, "A single unified master narrative ...

should be avoided in favor of a richer more complex narrative structure” (p. 4). Meanwhile, those who live on a daily basis in the aftermath of colonial rule, including its internalized effects that persist much longer than do political regimes, have much to teach about how to live with complexity and multiplicity. Ajit Maan rejects the fear of relativism as misplaced. She replaces it with acceptance of inconsistency, which she says is possible “without any threat to identity” (p. 14).

After explaining that colonizing narratives “recruit individuals to play an active role in their own subjugation” (p. 18), she embraces what can be taken from decolonizing writers like Gayatri Spivak, especially the constant struggle of living contemporaneously with the lines of force (Deleuze’s term, not Maan’s) that represent both colonizing and decolonizing impulses. With this struggle in mind, Maan asserts, “There is no universal cross-cultural agreement about how a story should proceed” (p. 9).

However, she does not mourn this absence as a sorry state of affairs. It is, she claims, the basis of democracy, particularly American democracy, to make room for competing narratives. Her message is thus more upbeat than alarmist. She says:

We, the United States, are already in possession of a metaphor that encompasses conflict. The US already has the advantage here; we are the alternative metaphor. We are an experiment in democracy, an experiment in religious tolerance, and an experiment in preserving the dignity of the individual as well as considering the greatest good for the greatest number. (p. 72)

This message she characterizes as strong in comparison with the “weak” terrorist narrative, reliant as it is on a singular victim narrative. Indeed, she says, “An American narrative must carefully avoid mirroring fundamentalist rhetoric by not forcing individuals to make a choice between religious beliefs and nationality” (p. 73). Sadly, this warning, written no doubt a year or so ago, sounds like just the opposite of what is happening in America right now. We are yet to know how far it will go, but it appears right now to amount to a declining strength in American democracy. And it thus plays right into the terrorist recruitment narrative. Maan, however, strikes a resounding note of hope that a narrative of inclusion will overcome such a situation. She expresses faith in democracy to transcend these challenges. She asserts, “The United States does not have one narrative theme that must either integrate or silence multiplicity. We do not have one story. There is no one American identity. Our national narrative structure should not reflect singularity but rather, co-existent multiplicity” (p. 73).

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