Review: Terrorism as Discourse

Reviewed Work(s):

Terror and Taboo: The Follies, Fables, and Faces of Terrorism. by Joseba Zulaika; William A. Douglass
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encompasses the tribulation of the conquest generation, down to the 1920s. Nagel discounts resistance before the 1960s, characterizing the tribes as languishing on reservations [p. 159]. Where an anthropologist might spend pages on 19th-century treaty negotiations as precursors to late-20th-century negotiations, Nagel brings in the literature on other American ethnic groups (pp. 141–42 nn. 4–6). Her implied conclusion is that American Indians are not significantly different from Armenian-Americans or Lithuanian-Americans or Basque Americans.

The argument may be persuasive, and Nagel’s sophisticated compilation of census and economic figures is an important perspective on the phenomenon of American Indian resurgence. A solidly anthropological treatment would complement this work. Nagel’s one interview with a reservation leader [Northern Cheyenne] presented a view of Red Power differing from those of the well-known activists [p. 169]. Ethnohistorical accounts of First Nations’ varied and dogged resistance from the 16th century on, more discussion of Canadian Indian political activism, and more ethnography would probably have modified her evaluation of the 1969 Alcatraz event and American Indian Movement/Red Power. The slow rebuilding of several hundred First Nations of Anglo North America that is beginning to be visible now that many have regained critical mass is a multifaceted history that is neither the romance of the West’s eternal Noble Savage nor encompassed by political-science theory derived from European history.

Terrorism as Discourse

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This valuable and courageous book confronts terrorism, one of the most frightening subjects of our time. Two respected Basque specialists examine the subject knowing that they will satisfy few readers and possibly make enemies. In an act of professional conscience, they confront a vexing political, moral, and professional dilemma.

Both authors are anthropologists in the Basque Studies Program of the University of Nevada, Reno. Zulaika is the author of a number of books, including one on Basque violence that received enragéd reviews in Spain [Zulaika 1988]. Douglass founded the Basque Studies Program and is the best-known U.S. anthropological writer about the Basques. Their careers and lives are deeply implicated in the future of the Basque Country. While I offer some sharp criticisms, readers should appreciate that the book is a powerful effort to move this subject off of an unproductive and predictable track. It deserves close reading, comprehensive expansion, and rejoinders.

Zulaika and Douglass argue that terrorism is an epis- teme [p. 91] that should be unmasked through narrative analysis, and they urge us to cease promoting terrorism as a “quintessential threat” [p. xi]:

By underscoring the narrative dimension of terrorism, we are not so much opposing the real and the fictional as questioning the status of reality within terrorism discourse. [p. 201]

By dissolving the category and unmasking the rhetorics of terrorism, the “terrorists,” denied their roles within a plausible script, would cease to be actors capable of a credible apocalyptic performance. Terrorism discourse must be disenchanted if it is to lose its efficacy for all concerned. [p. 239]

To taboo and demonize them further accomplishes little and is indeed counterproductive, since such imagination confers upon the violent actors the mythical power of fabled martyrs or monsters. [p. 119]

To this call they add the urgency of confronting domestic terrorism in the United States. While not trivializing death, they force us to contemplate how low the death toll from terrorism is compared with the fear it inspires [p. 5], a point that is rarely recognized and should be central to any analysis of terrorism. Less developed arguments link terrorism to alienation and the suppression of “individual self-expression” [p. 20] and allude to the carnivalesque elements of terror and torture. For Zulaika and Douglass, one way out of the terrorist discourse is exorcism:

Our text is therefore intended as exorcism. We further demand, by questioning not only others but ourselves, that it have a redemptive quality. [p. xi]

These strange processes and their mix make terrorism a queer phenomenon. Emptying the sign of its deadly messages seems to be . . . the best antidote to the experience of terror. [p. 29]

We perceive our role as writers to be one of witnessing rather than judging. [p. 220]

This logically implies anthropological relativizing of terrorism: “We believe that the task of an ethnographically informed writer is not to impose a given form of consciousness upon the reader but rather to help ‘dissolve’ the puzzlements of the human experience by demonstrating their inherent relativism” [p. 88].

Because Zulaika and Douglass issue a persuasive call to anthropological and moral debate, I offer a critique of elements in their argument that seem to undermine their position unnecessarily. The critique is given in a collegial spirit, because they are right to claim that this is difficult terrain. All of our careers have been marked by it. We must stand with them in seeking ethical and
analytical ground for anthropologists caught up in the maelstrom.

The analysis of terrorism as a discourse is very powerful, but their insistence on contrasting discourse and reality underrides their position. They refer to “referential invalidity” [p. ix] and argue that “nothing feeds the growth of the phenomenon itself more than the inability of terrorism discourse to distinguish actual combat from ritual bluff, real violence from imaginary terror” [p. xi, emphases mine]. This suggests that terrorist thinkers have discourse while anthropologists have the “truth,” a view incompatible with my understanding of discourse analysis. It reminds me of Susan Sontag’s argument in Illness as Metaphor (1978), where a wonderful analysis of illness metaphors as constitutive of reality is followed by a plea to banish metaphors from illness. Throughout the book there is a constant effort to distinguish the “real” from the “imagined” which reveals an underlying positivism not necessary to their argument or consistent with their view of terrorism as discourse.

The least satisfying dimension of the work is its analysis of contemporary political structures. Zulaika and Douglass offer only rudimentary perspectives on states as actors on the international scene and on the relationship between being a “citizen” and being a suitable “victim” of terror [p. 128]. This makes it difficult to see how powerful states can be threatened by a few violent people [p. 136], an enduring feature of the Basque conflict. They seem surprised when they point out that “two-thirds of the world’s countries regularly practice human rights abuses” [p. 205], but clearly one of the forces that stabilizes terrorism discourse and practice is precisely the state and its insistence on the monopoly of the control of the use of violence. Their sketchy treatment of state institutions prevents them from making more productive use of their analogy between the pursuit of European witchcraft and current terrorism. Henningsen’s (1980) remarkable book The Witches’ Advocate shows how the Inquisitor Salazar y Frías came to understand that the discursive behavior of the church produced witchcraft accusations and that the church could reduce such outbreaks discursively. But Salazar did not merely “witness” and “exorcise”; he was politically situated to be able to affect the use of the church’s institutional forces.

I found the book’s insistence on a radical contrast between ritual behavior and the ordinary behavior of organizations [a feature of Zulaika’s earlier book] unproductive. It makes sense to argue that terrorism has ritual dimensions: “Terrorism discourse makes good use of the premise that ‘ritual recognizes the potency of disorder.’ . . . Dirt, lawlessness, the lack of boundaries are all formless, yet have the power to create new social forms” [p. 151]. This does not, however, justify eschewing organizational studies of terrorism on the grounds that these “reify the organizational structure of the group as if it were a regular army” [p. 24]. Abandoning any study of organizational forms [p. 219] and confronting the rhetoric of terrorism only with a rhetoric of relativity, exorcism, and witnessing is inadequate: “Simply put, the paradox is that a symmetrical response to the blind forces and values of terror with the same weapons of reactive terrorism and indifference amounts to the victory of the terrorist agenda. The alternative is the ethical asymmetry of an expansive vision” [p. 219].

The lack of a developed organizational perspective is nowhere clearer than in Zulaika’s own local intervention in his home town, where he encourages the townspeople to debate their understandings of the deaths in their midst. Despite the goodwill involved, this act shows a naive belief that dialogue can be a universal solution to human conflicts: “The villagers addressed each other . . . Such confrontation excuses us from obfuscating allegory and representation” [p. 217]. This approach to dialogue, given the complexity of the political, organizational, and psychological processes involved, is inadequate. It suggests that local actors, perhaps with anthropological witnesses, can will the state, the antistate, and their histories away. When the dialogue fails, Zulaika merely says that “there were wounds that simply could not be healed” [p. 222].

The mediation of deeply conflicted institutional and personal relations has generated decades of work in organizational studies, social psychology, and conflict resolution that the authors ignore, substituting dialogical authenticity for informed organizational and cultural action. For the anthropologist merely to stand as “witness” seems to me to obfuscate our other responsibilities for taking nonritual actions and to leave the door open for the idea of the disengaged social scientist who may observe and comment but whose only action is writing.

Zulaika and Douglass are right to call for a more complex professional ethics in anthropology, and they seek to implicate us all in this process. They take the risk of being viewed as enhancing the status of terrorism by writing about it [p. 25]—a legitimate fear. As Basque specialists they cannot turn their backs, but addressing terrorism has generally brought them, and most of the rest of us, personal and professional grief.

This book shows what the world of anthropology is like when the pretense of working on neutral ground is gone. It is a book to read, criticize, and build on.

References Cited