

When Analyzing the Dominant Discourse on Terrorism . . .
GOVT 332

1. What value do disclaimers have?

E.g. "I'm not against Jews, but . . ."

Should disclaimers be taken at face value? Or should they be judged against the tenor of discourses and referents that appear henceforth?

2. Who is the "us" and who is the "them"?

A good paper will acknowledge the use of "us" and "them" but then proceeds to breakdown what is implied at different instances when the word is used. It is this exercise that gets at the heart of the matter: what is being referred to, what is being signified by the word at every instance, because it might change. Based on disclaimers, the "they" should always refer to the particular group that is identified at the outset: "we are not against all Muslims, just the radical Islamists that adopt a fundamentalist ideology." Henceforth, the "they" might expand to include "cultures" or "peoples" or a "way of thinking," "a way of life," which might extend far beyond the particular group.

3. What does it mean when a discourse includes a litany of binary oppositions?

What are the implications? I.e., when we say: we have two options, either this or that; or, when we say, you are either here, or there? What does that confining of reality do? Whom does it serve?

4. What does it mean to say that the enemy is everywhere and nowhere to be found?

What mobilizational purpose does that serve? What does that say about length of war?

5. What is the value of not attributing a cause when the "other" kills?

What ideational purpose does that serve? When the "other" is said to kill for the sake of killing, what does that imply about "their" nature and "our" actions? What does that say about "responsibility?" Who does that absolve? Who becomes the just target on moral, ethical, political, and even humanitarian grounds? What happens to things like history and context when no cause is attributed to terrorist acts?

6. Is there anything in the dominant discourse that guards against slippage?

Slippage here refers to how a concept or accusation is directed toward a small group, but then its use undergoes slippage and it becomes directed at larger and larger groups. Are disclaimers sufficient to guard against slippage? Is slippage productive in identifying threats?

7. Displacement: How much of the dominant discourse is directed to what the "other" is like and how much of it is directed at "us" through a description of what the other hates?

What is the role of such potential displacement in the construction or affirmation of identity, both of the "self" and of the "other?"

8. Reification: what happens when terrorism is transformed from being a tactic, and act, to becoming a living thing?

How does this affect fighting it both in the short and long-term? How does reification absolve the party engaging in it?

9. Language: What kind of language is used in describing the context, actors, and actions?

The question of language seems innocuous until analysts/observers begin to do two things: a) identify systematic patterns and repetition/recurrence, and, b) identify how the language used is reinforced and reproduced by different parts of a given polity or organization (usually, between government, media, academia, and pop culture). Thus, being exposed to different kind of writings and artifacts is crucial for exhaustive discourse analysis (here, we focused more on government and media, which should serve our purposes for now—this course would benefit from a part II, had I know there would be enough interest in it)

10. What is the disagreement about? If it is not about the basic tenor of the definition, what is it about?

Most people, including adversaries in the conflict, define terrorism as the politically motivated killing of innocent civilians. So, what's the fuss about? One of the foundational disagreements in the discourses on terrorism is about the identity of the parties that can commit terrorism. In the dominant discourse states are absolved from being called terrorist: states can be accused of war crimes, but not terrorism. The other part of the disagreement is about the target, the civilians: they potentially can be considered collateral damage if the state is launching a war offensive. Thus, there's consensus only on the Act of terrorism, while the Actor and Target component of the process are the source of controversy. Here, the power to define, is supreme (who can define?)

Terrorism As Process:

Actor-----Act-----Target