Marranci, Gabriel. *Wars of Terror*, 130 pp. London: Bloomsbury, 2016,

In *Wars of Terror* Gabriele Marranci boldly addresses two of the greatest and profoundly troubling transnational phenomena of our times, global jihadismand its counterpart, the global ‘war on terror’. In a concise analysis and critique, this work focuses on the discourses and rhetoric that form the sullied cultural patina on both sides of this accursed coin. In this effort, Marranci deconstructs the polarizing grand narratives and highlights a troubling commonality held by opposing entities: the intent to ‘define the human’ and to civilize the Other accordingly.

Beginning with brief accounts of terrorist attacks in the 1980s and 1990s, by individuals or groups who identified as Muslim, the opening chapter fixes the 9/11 attacks of 2001 as the moment when terrorism ceased to be a criminal act and became an act of war. Marranci argues that the subsequent framing of a war on terror pushes ‘some individuals to adopt a civiliser [*sic*] *forma mentis* – a particular way of thinking about, imagining, and reacting to the environment, its challenges and threats’ (p. 8). In this dynamic of fear there is no ‘Muslim and non-Muslim’, but rather humans of strong faith and sentiments towards particular ideals, who are willing to impose those ideals on others in order to protect the ‘*correct* kind of humans’ (*ibid:* orig. italics). The book thus focuses on this dynamic of fear, from which civilizational discourses and rhetoric emerge, in which the ‘other side’ are fixed as uncivilized, inhuman categories – the barbarian, the crusader, the Muslim, the Christian. Thus are the dynamics producing the *Wars of Terror*.

The second chapter examines the conceptual history of civilization and *ḥaḍāra* in Western and Islamic cultures, respectively, citing certain similarities in their intellectual trajectories. He dissects Huntington’s (1996) development of the *Clash of Civilisations*, by which the supposed perfection of a monolithic Greek-Judeo-Christian Western tradition is inevitably incompatible with ‘a divine plan sanctioned in the Qur’an and Hadiths’ (p. 22). Though notoriously critiqued in academia as essentialist, Marranci acknowledges that Huntington was a pioneer in understanding the increasing relevance that culture and religion would have after the collapse of communism. However, it is through the cultural production of values that Marranci moves the debate from a supposed clash between abstract and monolithic civilisations to one between the human agency of the civilizers on both sides.

The book thus moves into the discursive realm of the various labels and stigmas imposed internally upon the in-group, and externally against the out-group. Muslims, as an out-group, are incapable of modernization, democracy or human rights, and Islam is deterministic and coercive (Chapter 3). Conversely, as the out-group, the West has become materialistic, humanistic and immoral, excluding religion from the public sphere (Chapter 4). Notably, in both cases, the in-group narrative sees their own society as being in decline and often promulgates conspiracy theories to explain this decline. Marranci’s discussion of conspiracy theories circulating amongst Muslim civilizers, laden with Occidentalist rhetoric in which the West is ‘*jahiliyya*’ *–* ignorant or indecent – is a particularly important insight for those trying to understand this conflict.

Chapters 5 and 6 pivot on civilizers’ struggles over women’s’ bodies and on the use of instrumental violence. Marranci rightly asserts that, given the ubiquity of patriarchy, the position and role of women in society often serves as a litmus test for civilizers everywhere. The first comparison made here is the (literally) restricted role of women in Islamic public spheres on one hand, and the objectification and disinterest in women’s honour on the other. This is followed by contestations over the relative brutalities of Western drone warfare and jihadi terrorist attacks. With this, Marranci highlights the narratives of young male Muslims who see Western nations turning their vastly superior military technologies against a people poorly equipped to defend themselves. This narrative, the author points out, is worthy of a Hollywood epic, and comes complete with deep emotional identification with the collective and the underdog’s heroic struggle for justice against a powerful foe.

*Wars of Terror* is not an ethnography in the classic sense of thick description of the intimate lives of others in a given place and time. Given the transnational breadth and complexity of such wars, one wonders how a single ethnographic account could approach the subject. Instead, Marranci draws upon his years of research and his prolific publication record on the subject of Islam and terrorism to draw out his concluding thesis of a ‘a clash among opposing, but similar, ways of thinking’ (p. 129). The book is, however, most certainly anthropological in its focus on human experience, the production of discourse and values and, at its heart, the application of cultural relativism to this troubling schismogenic phenomenon.

The reliance here on cultural relativism, such a cherished anthropological contribution to human understanding, forces us to confront a regression to moral nihilism; if all socialities are equally worthy, then none can be more just or just ‘better’ than another. Both sides discussed in this ‘clash’ can rightly claim cultural greatness, yet equally both sides can be castigated for cynical, abusive and destructive implementation of their ideals. When it comes to violent implementation, how do we evaluate the deliberately structured violence of a battle plan and the deliberately a-structural chaos of a terror attack, or the disassociation of remote-controlled execution and the intimacy of beheading by the blade?

*Wars of Terror* is a significant contribution to one of the most problematic contemporary concerns. It should be read by anyone who wishes to develop a more nuanced understanding of the issues, emotions and ideas at stake. For the wider audience it deconstructs the supposed intractability of a struggle of civilizations and shows the frail commonality on both sides, of ordinary humanity driven to wrath by fear and panic. For anthropologists, in particular, the book should both inspire us both to apply the discipline’s canon to global issues, and to explore the current limitations of our methods and understandings.

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**References**

Huntington, S.P., 1996. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Simon and Schuster, London.