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Putting the Terror Management Theory to Work: Exploration and Explanation¹

Book review: Bartosz Bolechów, *Gdy światło się mroczy: Światopogląd Państwa Islamskiego w perspektywie teorii opanowywania trwogi*, Toruń 2020, pp. 276.

Gdy światło się mroczy: Światopogląd Państwa Islamskiego w perspektywie teorii opanowywania trwogi (in English *When the Light Dims: The Islamic State's Worldview in the Perspective the Terror Management Theory*) by Bartosz Bolechów draws upon the argument that the terror management theory (TMT) can enrich our understanding of the so-called Islamic State's increasing popularity and ideological attractiveness (p. 8). However, it also extends our knowledge of motivation behind the engagement in radical groupings, the use of political violence against civilians, and individual responses to the use (e.g., Fischer-Pfeßler, Schwemmer, and Fischbach, 2019; Larsen, Cutts, and Goodwin, 2020). Thereby, the book is of growing importance for amending anti-terrorism acts, emerging neo-militant democracies, and protecting contemporary societies from threats (Kamprowski, 2013; Skrzypek, 2020).

TMT is a theory formulated by Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Thomas Pyszczynski, inspired by Ernest Becker, a cultural anthropologist. The theory explains why people need high self-esteem and why people find it difficult to co-exist with others, namely those who display a significantly different worldview (p. 23). It rests on the assumption that people manage the existential threat of mortality awareness by investing in a cultural worldview that provides them with a sense of meaning, order, and permanence. Moreover, the cultural belief system offers prescriptions for valued behavior. Thereby, people gain self-esteem understood

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as a sense of significance within the particular cultural meaning system (McCabe & Arndt, 2016; cf. Burke, Martens, and Faucher, 2010).

By drawing upon state of the art and aptly selected examples, the volume aims to demonstrate that the terror management theory is a valuable tool for studying political extremism, religious radicalism, and political violence motivated by immortality ideologies (p. 227). Notably, the book entirely and successfully meets its goals. On the one hand, it presents the worldview of the “Islamic State” as an “overcoming fear machine” (p. 10). On the other, the worldview works here as a research field that enables the researcher to uncover the exploratory and explanatory values of TMT in social sciences and humanities (p. 10). Thereby, the book shares the qualities of a reference book and a monograph. As a reference book, it offers the most comprehensive literature review on TMT in Polish so far. At the same time, it reveals possible uses of TMT to explore and account for the appeal of the so-called Islamic State’s worldview. The examples are well-justified and plausible. However, methodological information about the corpus of sources, including source selection criteria, would be a highly welcome addition to the study.

The book consists of ten chapters. The first introduces TMT as an analytical tool by defining its theoretical assumptions. It convincingly reconstructs how the theory emerged and evolved in the scholarship. Researchers interested in conducting TMT-driven analyses will find useful the overview of empirical studies to verify the assumptions (p. 42). The second chapter presents the theoretical framework of extremism by Haroro Ingram and J. M. Berger. It attempts to link the model with TMT by treating the “extremist worldview”, located on the continuum on its extreme place of dogmatism, as an “overcoming fear machine”, emerging in an evolutionary manner (pp. 14; 49-51). The third chapter describes the evolution of an extremist system of meanings, i.e., revolutionary Salafism. The worldview of the “Islamic State” is considered a variant of revolutionary Salafism. The discussion sheds light on the context in which the worldview developed and became a tool for reinterpreting and deconstructing social reality. In the fourth chapter, Bolechów presents the worldview of the “Islamic State” as a holistic and coherent “story about reality”, which contains the basic premises and claims of TMT. The “Islamic State’s” narrative is understood as a framework of a terror management system. The Author identifies the narrative’s essential features that perform specific functions by “buffering existential fear” (pp. 14-15).

In the remaining six chapters, Bolechów follows the reference model elaborated by Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski to delve analytically into the terror management system. The fifth chapter determines the role of charismatic leadership in the terror management system. The Author links legitimacy with the perception of a leader as a unique person armed with superhuman power and capable of a particular view of social reality. A leader can meet the needs of a community, such as the radical redistribution of dignity and humiliation that helps followers eliminate self-esteem deficit and implement a plan to overcome the perceived crisis. Those qualities are crucial in the light of TMT (pp. 15; 130). The characteristics of a charismatic leader, most of all the capability to understand social

reality properly (p. 114), the role in the founding myth (p. 120), the ability to combat the total enemy (p. 122), but also a community's search for a utopian state (p. 134), indicate that a leader produces and distributes political gnosis. Nevertheless, this category does not occur in the volume, whereas it may contribute to a researcher's understanding of how a leader wins hearts and minds. The essential features of political gnosis include splitting a social reality of material things into the good internal world and the evil external world, dividing people into "we-insiders" (belonging to the good internal world) and "they-outsiders" (belonging to the evil external world), fallacious immanentization of the eschaton, self-construction of the expansionary savior to be saved, political obscurantism as a mode of dealing with dangerous knowledge (contrary to the vision of the world being promoted by a leader), production of the total enemy, manifestations of presumed anomie among a community, and strategies of survival on the historic battlefield (Rak, 2017, pp. 110-111). It would be beneficial to our understanding of the phenomenon to extend the future analysis of the legitimacy of leaders by including this category in the theoretical framework.

The sixth chapter exposes a way to overcome somebody's mortality and protect the worldview's certainty and credibility from the harmful effects of competing systems of meaning (p. 132). The Author argues that protection consists in creating a "safe space" and "sterile", free from "heresy", "deviation", doctrinally, and morally cleansed sociocultural environment. Geographical and information isolation underlie the protection efficiency and a way towards a utopian state (p. 134). The exploration of defense mechanisms unfolds in the seventh chapter. It focuses on the discursive deconstruction of hostile worldviews distributed outside "the cleared zone", depreciation, dehumanizing, and demonizing members of external groups based on different systems of meaning (pp. 154-155). In the eighth chapter, Bolechów discusses the "Islamic State's" attempts to ultimately and radically solve the problem of cognitive dissonance generated by the awareness of the coexistence of competing value systems in the world through their elimination (p. 15). There are two ways of elimination, namely assimilation or physical annihilation (p. 171). By drawing upon the categories of worship and death fetishization (p. 194), chapter nine sheds light on a technique of systemic buffering of existential fear through a radical cultural reconstruction of the meaning of death, supported by the idea of martyrdom as the ultimate method of costly signaling (p. 15). Finally, the last chapter uncovers how the "Islamic State" deals with the human body and sexuality as potentially dangerous sources of cognitive dissonance. As the Author emphasizes, from the TMT perspective, the mechanism of culturally sanctioned displacement of biological aspects of existence from human consciousness is a consequence of the need to deny death. Death is understood here as the end of individual consciousness and identity (p. 212). Bolechów closes the book with the conclusion that the worldview of the "Islamic State" expresses a specific kind of "radical machine for managing terror" created by ideological evolution.

Bolechów's book is valuable reading for students and scholars interested in studying the so-called Islamic State's belief system and any radical worldview. The comprehensive

overview of conceptual, theoretical, and empirical approaches towards TMT will help them decide to what extent its assumptions may be analytically efficient to explore a given research field and solve original research problems. Furthermore, the wide range of well-documented examples of theory-driven studies exposes the pros and cons of particular explanatory frameworks put to work. Undoubtedly, they are worth considering while designing future research on the issue.

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