



Fred Halliday

Shocked and Awed: How the War on Terror and Jihad have Changed the English Language. (London: I.B.Tauris, 2010, ISBN: 978-1-84885-031-6, xvi+338 pp. £12.99)

It is always difficult to comment on the work of an author who has passed away before its publication. The pervasive sense of finitude tends to draw attention to (as well as offer a glimpse into) some of the concerns and interests that must have preoccupied the author in his final days. What is particularly challenging is that the work under review is by no other than Fred Halliday – a scholar, commentator, and insatiably curious student of international affairs, whose research has left an indelible mark on the field. At the same time, Fred Halliday has been someone who has constantly strived to escape the straitjackets of mainstream paradigms. This was evident in his 2008 Burton Valedictory Lecture at the London School of Economics and Political Science before moving to take a research professorship at the Barcelona Institute for International Studies. Fred Halliday concluded his speech to the mesmerized audience by insisting that it is music (and, in particular, dance) that can provide the creative platforms for grasping the complexity of global life (or what he called at the time ‘the suffering of passions in ideas and in life’).

Some have argued that his long term passion has been language and he has long advocated that international relations scholars and commentators not only acquire foreign language skills as these provide unique contextual cultural perspectives on international developments, but also to use language carefully and attentively. As often is the case, Fred Halliday was a cut above the rest – a polyglot, he had mastered more than ten languages; yet, he joked that one should never go to a hairdresser in a foreign language. Not only because of his linguistic and scholastic proficiency, but mostly because of his thoughtfulness, responsibility, and attentiveness to others, that Fred Halliday managed both to inhabit and gain unparalleled access, insight, and knowledge to different cultural contexts. Probably, he will be best remembered for his extensive work and commentaries on the Middle East. It staggers the imagination to think what Fred Halliday’s account of the revolutionary fervour currently animating the Arab world might have been.

In this respect, *Shocked and Awed* is a book that offers privileged access to Fred Halliday’s own concerns and hopes. To begin with, the book is about the language of the post-9/11 world. Yet, one should not expect a conventional account of recent times or a mere lexicon of terms. Instead, the book is a compilation of a dictionary and an encyclopaedia, which is deprived of the dryness and lack of character usually associated with reference works and glossaries. In fact, it is an evocative and passionate study of the mutually reinforcing interaction between policy-making discourses and popular culture. As Fred Halliday demonstrates, words are not passive vehicles for ideas and concepts. Instead, “precision in language, the challenging of essentialist meanings, the explication of obscure terms and phrases, are not a purely scholarly pursuit, although eminently justifiable in those terms alone: they are an essential part of maintaining a democratic and peaceful world. Words can exalt and can explain, but... [they] can also kill, and promote fear, hatred, and misunderstanding. For this reason, too, “they need to be studied, challenged and controlled” (p. xiv).



In order to impress the profound discursive alterations in the post-9/11 world and their impact on modes of thinking, acting, and perceiving, the book is divided into twelve separate sections. This makes possible a vivid encounter with the different aspects of the linguistic “war on terror” – or what today is increasingly referred to as “overseas contingency operations”. It is the attention to the complex intersectionality of language that allows the readers to confront themselves with the reality of contemporary world affairs. The first part of the volume details the language of counterterrorism emerging in the US in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2011. The account then moves to the “motifs of jihad” (p. 37) and details the proliferation of tropes and images describing terrorist formations and activities. The third part of the volume focuses on the euphemisms around “extraordinary renditions” (p. 59). This then provides the background for examining the language backstopping the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. On this background, part five of the book draws a unique glossary of Middle Eastern and Islamic expressions describing the same events.

After such parallel illustration of descriptions of reality, the sixth section of the volume outlines the variety of terms used to depict Muslims. The study then moves on to outline the new vocabulary used to depict the relations between Israel and Palestine. Part eight focuses on the expansion of “euphemisms of war” (p. 229) aimed to conceal human suffering. In part nine of the book, Fred Halliday details the vitality of American colloquialism to portray different forms of otherness. In the following section, the book lists a range of terms mapping both the real and imaginary geographies of “the war on terror”. In this setting, part eleven of the book details the proliferation of language for “obscuring responsibility” (p. 275). Finally, the concluding section of the volume draws attention to a list of “other distortion” (p. 285) in politics, history, and international relations.

In this setting, Fred Halliday’s book cogently demonstrates that language not only reflects, but also affects political realities. At the same time, while focusing on narratives, the volume poignantly emphasizes the changes that have occurred in the patterns of world affairs in the aftermath of 9/11. This is a gem of a book, that will benefit students and scholars, policy-makers, commentators, and journalists, and, in fact, anyone interested in current affairs. The book will also be invaluable for the purposes of teaching and theorizing the discourses and practices of politics.

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