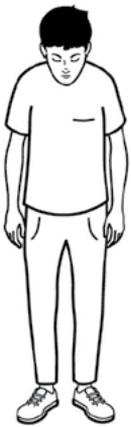


Quiet World Order

Shy Radicals by Hamja Ahsan proposes equality for introverts and proves that activism needn't be noisy



a)



b)

The first line in Hamja Ahsan's book *Shy Radicals* reads, "This book is written on the back of a lifetime of resentment." It's dedicated to the Shy Radical struggle, to generations of Shy Peoples who have suffered bullying, humiliation, belittlement, and subjugation "at the hands of Extrovert-Supremacism." It goes on to document the political demands of introverts, one of which includes an independent homeland called Aspergistan in territories formerly known as Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. There, "introversion is inviolable," and freedom from small talk is guaranteed. No one is required to attend social gatherings.

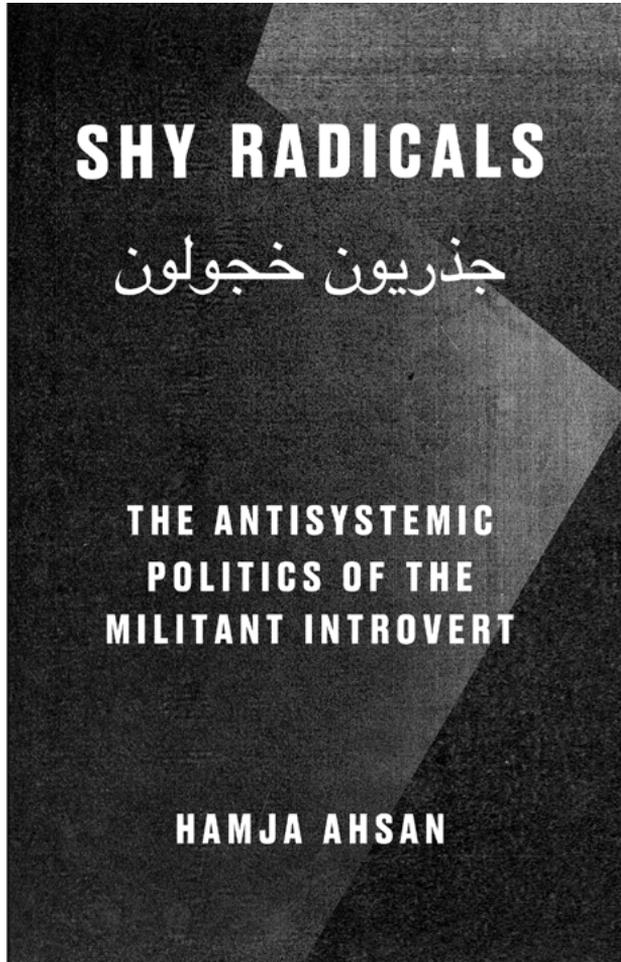
This is not Susan Cain's *Quiet*¹. Shy radicals are part of a resistance, and they're ready for a reprieve from the Loud World. Ahsan started working on the book in 2014 after responding to an open call for book proposal submissions from the UK publisher Book Works. He brought on Rose Nordin, a designer, illustrator, and member of publishing collective OOMK (profiled in this magazine, page 22), to design the book and help him visually map out a New Lexicon of Democracy, a series of hand and body motions to be used to negotiate democratic decisions. The flag of Aspergistan consists of three dark circles against a black background to form an ellipsis, and the national anthem is the sound of a seashell when held up to one's ear.

In person, Ahsan is as funny as his book, and equally as steeped in historical knowledge and anti-colonial theory. *Shy Radicals* is in part a critique of the rise of Islamophobia, as well as the stigma against mental health and autism. It looks for alternate power structures and challenges

Writer and TED speaker Cain gained recognition for her book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* about how introverts are misunderstood in modern Western culture.

Hamja Ahsan and Rose Nordin, "New Lexicon of Democracy" from *Shy Radicals: The Antisystemic Politics of the Militant Introvert*, published by Book Works, 2017

a) staring at the floor, b) turning back



Shy Radicals: The Antisystemic Politics of the Militant Introvert by Hamja Ahsan, published by Book Works, 2017. Cover design by Rose Nordin.



the qualities we typically associate with world leaders. Ultimately, it asks that we embrace one another's cultures and ways of being.

As an introvert, how do you feel about doing interviews?

Well, it's called interview—inter-view, so the idea is that it's digging deeper. I remember a time when music journalism was very different—I grew up around the time of Kurt Cobain's suicide and all that—and a lot of my connection with alternative rock music and learning about depression and other things came out of the long-form music interview. Interviews can be very introspective when they're not trying to be clickbaity.

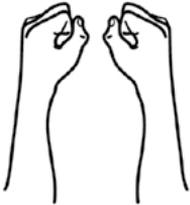
There are several forms of public speech that aren't necessarily extroverted. Think of someone like Greta Thunberg, who is a very good public speaker, and someone I really admire. She has selective mutism and is autistic. I think all forms of sincere speech in the public domain are introverted, and I've been trying to trace a historical legacy in this vein. Patrick Pearse, who led the Easter Uprising in 1916², was retrospectively diagnosed as autistic. He was also very shy and awkward, and yet he led a revolutionary movement and was an amazing orator. I also think of Francis Bacon's interviews, which gave insight into him as an artist.

How did you start working on Shy Radicals?

The book took me three or four years to write, but I feel like it's been in my blood since I was a child. Any time I felt alienated or subjugated, or told to cheer up, or asked why I was being so quiet, I knew I was not the only one. In doing talks around the book, I've met people from Africa, Iran, Greece, Portugal, the United States—there's this entire geography of people who feel exactly the same. I feel like it's like a transnational identity.

I had begun to develop a language around that identity. If an extroverted activist would say to me, "Hamja, why are you being so sheepish?" I would ask back, "Why are you being such an Extrovert-Supremacist?" The language and the neologisms that developed while being belittled constantly became a way to turn the tables so that I was the one setting the terms. Many people have since written to say that I've given them a vocabulary to ease their pain and to understand the world.

c)



d)



e)



f)

- c) palms to open a book,
- d) rock hand,
- e) scissorhands,
- f) wax on

2.
An uprising launched by Irish republicans to end British rule in Ireland and establish an independent Irish Republic.

Can you talk to me a bit about developing the Republic of Aspergerstan in the book? I'm curious about the fact that it's rooted in actual territory: Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran.

Susan Cain, who I regard as the Tony Blair of introverts, maps out a world in which extroverts rule America and there's a very Oriental picture of Japan where everyone is quiet, etc. I thought this mapping of the world was inadequate, so I inserted other geographies in there. I'm also thinking of domestic counterterrorism, such as the "Prevent strategy"³, which is a surveillance program developed by the British. They have very wide criteria for developing suspicion. I looked at some of the guidelines and it talked about people who are quiet, withdrawn, and moody.

But as you note in the book, "Terrorism is always noisy."

Right. I also think it's strange that [being quiet or withdrawn] is not only pathologized by psychology but also seen by the state as a form of deviant behavior. I'm very critical of the Institute of Psychiatry and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. I was at one point diagnosed with anxiety disorder—I've since been re-diagnosed—and everything was about correcting me as an individual rather than thinking of a way in which to restructure the world.

I'm also from Bengali Muslim background, and we're just generally a bit more sober than a British mainstream white, binge-drinking culture. I think the culture of hedonism as representing freedom or liberation is still very much tied into the narrative around the War on Terror and Islamophobic rhetoric—that other cultures are somehow repressed, rather than another way of being.

Do you consider the book a piece of satire?

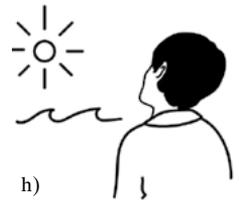
The book is supposed to make people laugh: It's poking fun at power and maybe some of the resistance movement too. It also parodies how combative identity politics can be today. It's hard to categorize, though. In some libraries it's classified under sociology. I've seen it elsewhere under "Imaginary Societies." And in Brown University it's being taught under neurodiversity [because of the autism references].

I love the section of the book that illustrates the "New Lexicon of Democ-

3.
The Prevent policy was introduced in 2003 in the UK as part of its broader counter-terrorism strategy with the aim of preventing radicalization to terrorism.



g)



h)

g) staring up at the sky,
h) staring at the sea

racy,” and especially the *Shy Radicals’ salute of holding a fist up to your mouth. How did you come up with it?*



i)

i) curling fist in front of mouth

I started working with designer Rose Nordin several years ago. I directed [the formation of the lexicon] and she illustrated it. The idea behind it is that politics could be different if people communicated differently. I’m very interested in former British Prime Minister Clement Attlee, who introduced the National Health Service. He was the longest leader of the Labour Party, and he won the general election against Winston Churchill. He also very awkward and shy. Around the same time, you also had Mussolini at the pulpit, the charismatic authoritarian—the fascists with the hand gestures. What I look at is this very humble, very shy leadership of Attlee, and the idea that introverts can be in a position of leadership or power.