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Review

*Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas
and Jacques Derrida* by Giovanna Borradori

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Emerging from the shock waves of 9/11, this book itself is something of an event. For the first time, philosophers Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida appear side by side answering the same questions about the same topic: the philosophical and political consequences of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Habermas is known not only as the founder of a theory of communicative action, but also as one of the most outspoken defenders of the—admittedly unfinished—“project of modernity.” Derrida, on the other hand, invented and enthusiastically practices the “deconstruction” of philosophical, scientific and any other presumably coherent theory and discourse, unraveling their implicit meanings. For Derrida, there cannot be a discourse or rhetoric that is not guilty of unreasonable simplification, of more or less violently reducing the complexities and ambivalences of reality. No wonder then that Derrida is classified as the supreme advocate of postmodernity, attacking the dark side of Western history and domination as the outcome of its inherent hegemonic, monolithic and exclusionary style of thought and, at the same time, singing the siren song of cultural relativism.

Habermas and Derrida usually are perceived as theoretical and—inasmuch as they themselves do not distinguish the two realms— political enemies: the former as an enthusiastic representative of late Enlightenment thought, the latter (depending on one’s perspective) either as an infinitely open-minded or irresponsible exponent of anything-goes analysis. For many readers of the book—maybe even for Habermas and Derrida—it will come as quite a surprise that, beyond ostensible differences in style, their respective interpretations of 9/11 and views are very close.

Apart from a short introduction on the Enlightenment tradition and the inherently political character of modern philosophy, the book consists of separate lengthy interviews with Derrida and Habermas, plus two essays

by Giovanna Borradori (a philosophy professor at Vassar College who also has published a collection of interviews with American philosophers) in which she recapitulates the main arguments and relates them to the writings and the philosophy of the interviewees. Borradori's essays are balanced, understandable and well written introductions to the oeuvres of Habermas and Derrida. However, skipping them, especially for those who are barely familiar with Habermas's and/or Derrida's books, is no crime since the theoretical context of the philosophers' views on the "reasons" for and consequences of 9/11—at least as far as such a context is necessary—is clear enough in the interviews themselves. Moreover, Borradori's repetition of the arguments makes reading the essays a bit redundant. Nevertheless, the parallel interviews, conducted only a few weeks after 9/11 in New York, are appealing and intriguing documents.

What Derrida and Habermas say is not always original, but their deeply engaged and, at the same time, cool critical styles distinguishes these interviews from the bulk of the often hastily sketched commentaries pouring out after 9/11. First, the volume shows not necessarily that philosophy alone is the only light to orient oneself in the dark but that philosophical reasoning—the attempt to mold one's times in concepts—still contributes to recognizing the traps of false and counterproductive reactions like declaring a "war on terror," and to finding politically responsible answers. Second, it demonstrates that characterizing Derrida as a shady anti-modern thinker is substantially wrong; that, on the contrary, the philosophies of Habermas and Derrida are inspired by and dedicated to enlightenment, i.e., liberation from any form of dogmatism, the ideals of individual and collective self-determination, and the aim of social justice.

What, then, is the meaning of 9/11? What can be done? What shall "the West" do to react? What do the terrorist attacks mean for sovereignty and the international law? What exactly is terrorism, and has it a political content? What has 9/11 to do with globalization? Are we facing a clash of civilizations? Are there chances of stimulating or even institutionalizing intercultural communication? These are the guiding questions Borradori poses, and, astonishingly, Habermas and Derrida come to very similar conclusions.

Although both rightly decline to give 9/11 a definitive meaning—not only because they do not want to legitimize terror, but because a meaning always only can be assigned in retrospect—the former seems more forthright in assuming that 9/11 will demarcate the beginning of a new

epoch. This is a global post-Cold War era in which the U.S.— after thwarting any political order that prevents the market's free reign— becomes the sole arbiter of power or, as Derrida phrases it, “the universal creditor of the world order.” Yet, on the other hand, the stability and thus the prospects of that same order are clearly fragile and bleak. It is not the sheer number of casualties that makes 9/11 a major event—every day thousands of people die in undeclared wars which no one cares about—it is the fact that the real and symbolic power centers of the world were attacked, the media coverage of the event, the dissemination of the news that “the king is mortal” and thus the foreboding that worse is still to come. The impossibility to predict whether or when the next attack on U.S. predominance and Western culture in general will be executed, shakes and erodes confidence that our way of life will last.

Habermas and Derrida agree that the terrorists who planned the attacks of 9/11 do not have a positive political aim for which they are fighting. Obviously, there is no message in the attacks other than to spread fear, undermine trust and provoke exactly the kind of overreactions that—presumably—were undertaken to counter “terrorism.” Both warn that the ubiquitous use of the word “terrorism” by governments and the media to identify an unknown danger—a threat that exists but that cannot be quelled by means of arms—all too easily serves to justify extralegal state action. In other words, what is important is that to understand and withstand the sinister process that the depoliticization of terrorism—dissolution of the link between “terra” and terror which was typical for partisans who often did turn into politicians—is followed by a further delegitimation of politics.

The only responsible legal response to the attacks—here again Derrida and Habermas agree—is the strengthening, differentiation, institutionalization and enforcement of international law. The answer emphatically is not the fierce return to national power politics by the Bush government, which pretends to enhance respect for law; the right course is legal self-restriction of overwhelming political, economic, military and technological power, the recognition of existing and the creation of new supranational organizations, the universal acceptance of their judgments and decisions and, of course, their transformation from mere deliberative organizations into bodies capable of political and military action to help to create a new world order in which material inequalities can be offset, in part, through assuring equal national rights. Only a West, as Habermas says, that has more to offer than the ideology of consumerism, only a West that revives its universal normative ideal of

self-determination and formal equality as means to allow differences in culture and personality will be able to overcome the deep-rooted resentment of (especially Arab and Muslim) non-Western peoples at having been materially expropriated and culturally corrupted.

One partly successful experiment which might serve as an example that it is possible to do without national sovereignty while gaining political influence on other states, of integrating (more or less) different cultures, is the European Union or, rather, the idea of “Europe” not as a huge free trade zone, but as a geopolitical space that institutes norms and procedures for negotiating conflict resolution, instead of “solving” conflicts through force.

Given the obstacles to achieving an “European” international order—the resistance of the great powers (including European nations), slow change of old institutions, the implementation of new ones—it is unlikely that a new international code of law can be attained without the existing situation—which already is the fertile ground for terrorism—getting worse. Therefore, Habermas and Derrida argue, globalization, which has increased the total of wealth while widening the gap between the rich and the poor, must be complemented by a new global social policy, by global welfare programs that elevate the impoverished and culturally deprived masses. As capitalism in the 19th and early 20th centuries developed, it was only on the condition that the market was politically channeled, that the proletariat—yes, there still is such a marginalized collective because of its dependence on other’s means of production—was given enough “unearned” support to participate in the political struggle instead of resisting such narrower forms of development. If the West wants huge parts of the global population, those who will never make it across its borders, not to turn a deaf ear to its normative and secular lessons, it has to stop the involuntary and far greater “terrorism of letting die.” Habermas and Derrida, believing in the universal validity of communicative action and deconstruction, acutely appreciate that neither the attempt to begin a critical cross-cultural discourse nor the humble gesture of deconstructing the implicit “x-centricity” of Western conceptual schemes will have the slimmest chance of being accepted if the exclusion of so many from leading a decent life remain a brute fact.

However unlikely it is that the course of events will lead us in the direction Derrida and Habermas hint at, they hope that democracy, secularization and the effective rule of law will extend as far as possible. But whereas Habermas is convinced that the project of modernity can

prevail, Derrida is more skeptical about the probability that his wishes will come true. Deconstruction, he says, is not only a method or discursive strategy, but the political reality we are living in. I agree. But even he seems to be too optimistic that the West—or “Europe”—somehow can cease its unreflective and self-destructive “auto-immune reaction” against the terrorism of 9/11. The stumbling block I see, to enact an answer to 9/11, is his, as well as Habermas’s, as well as our inability to understand what it means to believe

Habermas distinguishes a modern from a fundamentalist mode of belief and argues that Westerners in their complex and violent history learned to internalize or “bracket” their faith. For the sake of stable relations with “others,” religion eventually had to be separated out from formal politics. Derrida, on the other hand, deconstructs “religion,” by showing that the religious reality behind the concept is diverse and that, beyond the “Abrahamic” tradition (including Judaism, Christianity and Islam), politics and belief do not necessarily interfere with one another in malicious ways. So he advocates the creation of preconditions under which they would not have to clash at all. I wish both philosophers were right, but I do not think they are. Is enlightenment really an indispensable ingredient of any form of modernization? Are there really any “primitive” or polytheistic lessons a fundamentalist is willing to learn? (Ask a reborn Christian.) I neither see that history tends to repeat itself, i.e., that secularization is an inevitable trend nor can I imagine that deconstructing religion anyhow prevents us from religious destruction.