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Kant at Ground Zero

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Richard Wolin's new book, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance With Fascism From Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (Princeton University Press), will be published in May.

Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida

Edited by Giovanna Borradori

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I.

Was philosophy prepared for the events of September 11? To judge by all available evidence, the answer must be a resounding "no." For some time now, contemporary philosophy has viewed "worldliness"--the perfectly natural idea that thought should take a healthy and constructive interest in worldly affairs--as a source of contamination. Analytic philosophy's triumph in the decades following World War II meant that henceforth philosophy would subscribe to a primarily "therapeutic" self-understanding; its predominant aim was to ferret out and eliminate the "pseudo-problems" that had beset the history of thought. As Wittgenstein instructed, "philosophical problems arise when language goes on a holiday." According to this conception, philosophy's mission is basically a negative one: to keep language honest. Correspondingly, the history of metaphysics was written off as a history of error: an attempt to set forth claims about the ultimate nature of society, nature, and man that were simply beyond the ken of language.

Wittgenstein's approach--and the analytical method that he helped to engender, and that J.L. Austin brought to a corrosive perfection--was radically contextualist. He characterized discursive practices as "language games" and stressed the parallels between speaking a language and knowing how to "follow a rule." But such an approach entailed a total collapse of "is" and "ought." Such philosophy, for which the meaning of a word was sought in its use, was devoid of a normative or evaluative dimension capable of transcending the contextual practice of this or that "language game." A thoroughgoing relativism was the consequence of this approach. How should we respond if the rules of a given "language game" were morally objectionable--the language game of ethnic cleansing, for example? Where might we look for the conceptual leverage needed to unmask egregious instances of social injustice or political domination? In what philosophical idiom might we denounce those who perpetrate crimes against humanity? On all these counts, the philosophy of ordinary language seems manifestly impotent. Wittgenstein himself owned up to the quiescent implications of his method when in *Philosophical Investigations* he confessed that the philosophy of ordinary language "leaves everything as it is."

Academic philosophy's studied aversion to worldly affairs has been compounded by the requirements of professionalization. In a classic instance of "unintended consequences," young people whose "love of wisdom" inspires

them to enter the field soon discover that these motivations are counterproductive: they have almost nothing to do with the demands of "philosophy as a vocation." Of course, philosophy throughout its history has often had a world-transforming function, for good or for ill: in ancient Greece, in early Christianity, in the Renaissance, in the Enlightenment. But today "engagement" is frowned upon, except as a sub-discipline of a profession. (Are you concerned about the damage to the environment? Then submit a paper to Philosophy and Public Affairs and then return to "real" philosophy.) It has little or no bearing on the sophisticated bureaucratic mechanisms of professional advancement. The departmental rap on "public philosophers" is usually that they are wasting their time with amateur philosophy.

A quick look at, say, the eighteenth century would show how central and fundamental the link between philosophy and public purpose was. But no more. Most philosophers have become Fachmenschen, or "specialists," in precisely the sense that Weber feared: "Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart, these nullities imagine they have attained a level of civilization without precedent." As a result, the realm of public philosophy has been abandoned to the so-called left Heideggerians--the likes of Jean Baudrillard, Slavoj Zizek, and Paul Virilio--who have succeeded in filling the vacuum with a vengeance. Came September 11, and they quickly brought their glib up-to-the-minute postmodernist idiom to bear on the terrible events. For want of serious philosophical competition, their notions have been widely quoted, debated, and discussed.

Surely the "lesson" of September 11 is that in a globalized civilization lapses in "moral development"--say, the repressive and hate-filled creed purveyed by Wahhabi Islam--are liable to have unforeseeable and potentially devastating worldwide effects. In previous epochs, political deformations that occurred in this or that corner of the world could be safely ignored with only minor external repercussions, but our current state of global interconnectedness has changed all that. Who would have suspected that a relatively small group of militants based in one of the world's most backward and impoverished nations could, with relative ease, perpetrate an act of terrorism against America the likes of which we had never before seen? (More people were killed in the September 11 attacks than at Pearl Harbor.)

What makes the interventions by the so-called left Heideggerians so odious is that their rhetoric rarely rises above the level of Schadenfreude. As good Heideggerians, they are simply incapable of naturally appreciating the validity and the worth of democratic political institutions--civil liberties, republican government, and self-determination. For Heidegger, after all, the United States was nothing more than a technological Moloch: the "site of catastrophe," an extreme manifestation of civilizational Untergang or decline. In keeping with this perspective, the pamphlets of Zizek and Baudrillard exude a barely concealed glee about Osama bin Laden's "divine surprise" in September 2001. For Baudrillard, the attacks represented a glorious, long-awaited instance of wish-fulfillment: the Al Qaeda terrorists may have perpetrated the deed, but the act itself was something the entire world had long dreamed of and desired. For the postmodernist sage, criticism of the attacks cannot mask

the prodigious jubilation of seeing this world superpower meet with destruction.... For it is [the United States] that, by its unbearable power, fomented all the violence infused throughout the world, and thus the terrorist imagination that dwells in all of us. Haven't we dreamt of this event, hasn't the entire world, without exception, dreamt of it; no one could not dream of the destruction of a power that had become hegemonic to such a point.... In essence, it was [the terrorists] who committed the deed, but it is we who wished for it.

With the publication of such texts, postmodernism's trademark cynicism about morality and democracy has reached (I hope) its nadir. In late 2001, following the Afghanistan war, Baudrillard granted an interview to Der Spiegel. When questioned whether the removal of the Taliban from power was not in fact an emancipatory political development, he emphatically disagreed: any expression of American power was a priori condemnable. When interrogated further about whether the spread of human rights and democracy to the Middle East and the Third World was desirable, the postmodernist philosopher again replied in the negative. Human rights, he claimed, are merely a cover for superpower global hegemony: "I believe that human rights have already been subsumed by the process of globalization and function as an alibi. They belong to the juridical and moral superstructure--in sum, they are advertising." To find a comparable instance of unadulterated nihilistic contempt for democratic norms, one would have to adduce the Nazi jurist Carl

Schmitt, who famously proclaimed that "whoever says humanity lies."

II.

Jurgen Habermas was preparing for a guest lectureship in New York when the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon occurred. As it happened, Jacques Derrida was also scheduled to teach in New York that fall. Since two of the world's leading philosophers would be in Manhattan a few weeks after the catastrophe, why not solicit their observations and thoughts and then publish them in book form? Thus was born *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, the brainchild of Giovanna Borradori, an enterprising professor of philosophy at Vassar.

Habermas and Derrida have for decades represented philosophical antipodes. Habermas, a self-professed child of the Enlightenment, has devoted his immense talents to recovering the progressive intellectual traditions--from Kant to the Frankfurt School--that had been brutally expunged from German soil during the Nazi dictatorship. He has consistently acted not only as a philosophical luminary but also as a vocal public intellectual--and on a number of salient occasions, notably the *Historikerstreit* of the 1980s, as the moral consciousness of his nation. Few would deny that his great labor of philosophical reclamation has been remarkably successful. Several years ago he observed that the Federal Republic's singular accomplishment was to have firmly anchored Germany in the political orbit of the West, thereby ensuring an ineffaceable role for tolerance, basic rights, and rule of law.

In the academy Habermas is best known for his achievements in the field of moral philosophy. He is a highly original disciple of Kant. His unique contribution to this realm has been a variant of Kantian moral universalism known as "discourse ethics." For Kant, those actions alone count as "moral" that could withstand the test of "universalizability": that is, only insofar as I could will that in a specific moral situation every other person act as I would may my action qualify as moral. Like other philosophers, Habermas has remained mistrustful of the solipsistic implications of Kant's standpoint. He has forcefully argued that the individual subject's powers of moral reasoning need to be supplemented by a broader, communicative frame of reference. Discourse ethics holds that judgments of morality need to be redeemed by recourse to actual or hypothetical discourses with other people. In this way, moral reasoning ceases to be monological, as in Kant. In a variation on Kant's Categorical Imperative, the formula for discourse ethics runs: "Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse."

As a transcendental philosopher working in the Kantian tradition, Habermas remains acutely aware of the fallible nature of all empirical moral consensuses. Thus, even if all of the preconditions of communicative reason were satisfied (that is, assuming that norms of "fairness," "rightness," and "sincerity" were fulfilled), the result might well be flawed and require remedial discursive mediation--more plainly, it might require more discussion. Empirical results must be constantly checked against transcendental normative expectations.

By situating Habermas within the spectrum of contemporary ethical thought, one can begin to appreciate the distinctive nature of his moral "voice" as well as his distance from other, more cynical perspectives, notably that of Derrida. In view of its unflinching commitment to the primacy of the "moral point of view," Habermas's approach bears comparison to that of the late John Rawls, who is often credited with singlehandedly reviving the discipline of moral philosophy. Both are ethical "cognitivists." They believe that, fundamentally, moral problems concern questions of "truth." They hold that objective considerations of "right" or "wrong" are at stake, and that these considerations may be adjudicated by recourse to methods of argumentation. Yet the main tendencies in twentieth-century moral philosophy have been decidedly non-cognitivist or "emotivist." Under the twin influences of logical positivism and the philosophy of ordinary language, philosophers have been loath to admit that questions of truth are at stake in moral judgments. Instead they have held that moral issues boil down to individual preferences--or, like art, to subjective matters of taste.

In their mutual aversion to transcendental philosophy, postmodernism and the philosophy of ordinary language climax in an ungainly ethical and cultural relativism. Both approaches entail an unqualified defense of the "other" in his or her irreducible "otherness." But what happens when the "other" in question happens to be an unregenerate

fundamentalist monster--the very embodiment of political repression and religious intolerance? It is on this problem that the happy relativists founder. What we need after September 11, in other words, is a philosophy that is capable of accomplishing two ends at once. It must defend the moral legitimacy of democratic norms while at the same time respecting the realities of cultural difference. And discourse ethics is capable of satisfying both these requirements. It knows how to reconcile universal morality with cultural pluralism. Might the twenty-first century, then, be Habermasian? Only if we are lucky.

In comparison with Habermas, Derrida represents an obverse philosophical tradition: the "hermeneutics of suspicion," an avowedly anti-Enlightenment standpoint that derives from the work of Nietzsche and Heidegger. In almost every respect Derrida's philosophy of "deconstruction" could not be more unlike Habermas's veneration of "discussion oriented toward mutual understanding." Derrida made his name as a sly and indefatigable critic of reason. In the 1940s Heidegger observed that "reason, venerated for centuries, is the most stiff-necked adversary of thought"--a statement that might be construed as Derrida's point of departure. Heidegger famously advocated the "destruction" of Western metaphysics, and deconstruction, in no uncertain terms, picks up where Heidegger left off. In the lexicon of deconstruction, reason is incurably "logocentric": it embodies the "tyranny of the logos" and, as such, suppresses otherness, heterogeneity, and difference--concepts that, among the deconstructionist faithful, possess a type of theological sanctity. For Derrida, the trademark of Western thought, dating back to Parmenides and Plato, has been a systematic repression of marginal elements ("otherness") that fail to conform to reason's oppressive requirements: its demand for unity, totality, and sameness.

That Derrida's approach severely distorts the merits--and the history--of Western thought goes almost without saying. In the standard deconstructionist litany of incurably logocentric thinkers, Plato occupies the status of crown witness. But for anyone who has struggled with the ambivalences and the contradictions of dialogues such as the Theaetetus or Parmenides, Derrida's characterizations of Platonic thought are risible. Moreover, if language and knowledge are irremediably logocentric, and if understanding is merely a species of misunderstanding, then Derrida's standpoint deprives us of the means of our own liberation. Deconstruction cheerfully severs the pivotal link between insight and emancipation--a link that, from Socrates to Freud, has been central to all theories of human self-realization. When Socrates proclaimed, at the dawn of Western thought, that "virtue is knowledge," he gave voice to philosophy's central premise: that reason is the key to human flourishing, to a life well lived. By denigrating reason as "logocentric," Derrida willfully cultivates a new obscurantism. Anyone who has tried to plow through his infamously obscure texts knows exactly what this means. As one of deconstruction's French critics has aptly observed: "Deconstruction is the ruse that makes it possible to speak at the same time as there is nothing more to say."

Deconstruction certainly has had a strange career. At the precise moment when Derrideanism became a dead letter in France, it was resurrected in North America. Amid the "culture of narcissism" aptly diagnosed by Christopher Lasch (among others), deconstructionist feats of interpretive bravado--its involuted "close readings" of hermetic texts--found favor among a generation of graduate students that had taken to heart Derrida's celebrated maxim *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*, "there is nothing outside the text." So deconstruction provided a fitting alibi for those who were condemned to spend the majority of their waking hours chained to a study carrel in the library.

III.

Philosophy in a Time of Terror is a disappointing book. Since the interviews were conducted in fall 2001--prior to President Bush's "axis of evil" speech, not to mention the recent war in Iraq--it seems already a little out of date. At its core are the two dialogues, conducted by Borradori, with Habermas and Derrida, which are complemented by three substantial interpretive essays by Borradori herself. The Habermas colloquy, the book's unquestionable highlight, runs to a crisp twenty pages. The Derrida interview rambles on interminably for fifty-one pages. Lest I stand accused of misrepresenting Derrida's talents, here is his response to Borradori's relatively straightforward question: were the September 11 events historically unique?

We perhaps have no concept and no meaning available to us to name . . . this "thing" that has just happened, this

supposed "event" . . . "Something" took place, we have the feeling of not having seen it coming, and certain consequences undeniably follow upon the "thing." But this very thing, the place and meaning of this "event," remains ineffable, like an intuition without concept, like a unicity with no generality on the horizon or with no horizon at all, out of range for a language that admits its powerlessness and so is reduced to pronouncing mechanically a date, repeating it endlessly, as a kind of ritual incantation, a conjuring poem, a journalistic litany or rhetorical refrain that admits to not knowing what it's talking about. We do not in fact know what we are saying or naming in this way: September 11, le 11 septembre, September 11 . . . The telegram of this metonymy . . . points out . . . that we do not recognize or even cognize, that we do not yet know how to qualify, that we do not know what we are talking about.... What remains "infinite" in this wound is that we do not know how to describe, identify, or even name it.

This reminds me of the joke that made the academic rounds in the 1980s: "What is the difference between a deconstructionist and a Mafioso?" "The deconstructionist makes you an offer you can't understand."

Philosophy in a Time of Terror is disconcertingly littered with careless factual errors. Habermas lives in Starnberg, Germany, not in "Stamberg." Hannah Arendt's two most important books, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*, appeared in 1951 and 1958, not in 1958 and 1944. Max Horkheimer's essay "Traditional and Critical Theory" was published in 1937, not in 1930. And so on. There are serious errors of substance as well. Borradori claims, for example, that unlike Bertrand Russell, who believed that philosophy was concerned with timeless truths, Hannah Arendt held that "philosophy was always historically bound, so that any engagement with it carries a political import." But as anyone knows who is familiar with Arendt's posthumously published work, *The Life of the Mind*--where, in neo-Aristotelian fashion, she lionizes the *vita contemplativa*, or the virtues of thought divorced from practice--this view is wholly false.

But the biggest disappointment is that the much anticipated colloquy between Habermas and Derrida, the reigning titans of European philosophy, never materializes. *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* promotes itself (I quote from the jacket copy) as "an unprecedented encounter between two of the most influential thinkers of our age: here for the first time Habermas and Derrida overcome their historical antagonism and agree to appear side by side." But Habermas and Derrida were not even in the same room when the interviews were conducted. In fact, they were not even on the same continent. (Derrida was interviewed in New York in October; Habermas was interviewed upon his return to Germany in December). Instead of an historic "meeting of the minds," we are presented with a dialogue of the deaf. Borradori's repeated efforts to convince us that the two philosophers share a significant amount of common ground fall crushingly flat.

Since the interview transpired a mere three months after the events of September 11, Habermas is understandably circumspect about hazarding portentous prophecies concerning their long-term historical meanings. At the same time, as a liberal internationalist with profound Kantian allegiances, he voices significant reservations about the nature of America's response. Habermas views the strengthening of international law and related organs of international and regional governance (the United Nations and the European Union) as the most reliable bulwark against predatory state behavior. Following decades of cynicism about the viability of international institutions--a cynicism abetted by the imperatives of Cold War-induced *realpolitik*--the 1990s witnessed a dramatic rebirth of the cosmopolitan spirit immortalized in Kant's treatise on "Perpetual Peace." Successful instances of humanitarian intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo, "crimes against humanity" trials in The Hague (the first since World War II), a nascent International Criminal Court, and the subjection of former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet to the exigencies of human rights law--all of these instances denote a transformed international consensus concerning the prospects of lawful cosmopolitan governance.

Habermas is understandably concerned that these inchoate strides toward internationalism may be jeopardized by a new round of intemperate superpower unilateralism. Typically, declarations of war entail limited goals and relatively well-defined objectives. And the humanitarian interventions of the 1990s sought the backing of the international community. But the Bush administration's open-ended "war on terrorism" falls outside these accepted parameters, thereby potentially engendering a new wave of international political instability. Foreign nationals detained at

Guantanamo Bay have been deprived of the legal safeguards commonly accorded prisoners of war; and the military tribunals that Bush and his advisers plan on utilizing to try suspected terrorists represent another mechanism to circumvent customary guarantees of due process. If the world's only remaining superpower regularly runs roughshod over the strictures and the provisions of international humanitarian law, where is the incentive for nations that possess weaker historical commitments to liberal values to act lawfully? Habermas's commitment to sustaining the moral viability of international law parallels Rawls's attempt in *The Law of Peoples* to extend the precepts of "justice as fairness" that he developed in *A Theory of Justice* to relations among nations or peoples.

Last spring Habermas published a widely-discussed manifesto (co-signed by Derrida) called "Our Renewal: After the War, Europe's Rebirth," which interpreted the massive anti-war demonstrations in Europe as the sign of an emergent common European consciousness. Habermas's hope is that a federal Europe, united behind a common foreign policy and committed to the values of liberal internationalism, will be able to serve as an effective counterweight to American unilateralism. In this document, written six weeks after the overthrow of Iraq's Ba'athist dictatorship, one detects a geopolitical stridency absent in the Borradori interview:

In this world a reduction of politics to the obtuse as well as costly alternative between war and peace does not exhaust all the options. Europe must throw its weight on the scales, both on the international plane as well as in the framework of the United Nations, in order to counter-balance the hegemonic unilateralism of the United States. Europe must bring its influence to bear on the structural design of a future international legalpolitical order [Weltinnenpolitik]--at the World Economic Summits and the Institutions of the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund.

Yet, in view of the animosities and conflicts that have historically beset the European Union--the Nice summit on institutional reform broke down ignominiously, as did last month's efforts to promulgate a constitution; the smaller nations, a number of which supported the American campaign in Iraq, are justifiably apprehensive about being bullied in the domain of international affairs by France and Germany--one wonders whether these proposals have much of a chance to succeed. And how easy will it be to maintain a "common European consciousness" when there is no longer an American war to protest?

Habermas's steadfast cosmopolitanism re-inforces the image of the pacifistmultilateralist European recently constructed by Robert Kagan in *Of Paradise and Power*. But it would be foolish, as well as potentially selfdefeating, for statesmen and policymakers to discount the German philosopher's concerns for just international governance. Since the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648, which brought the horrors of the Thirty Years' War to a merciful end, the reigning consensus in international relations has been an unyielding respect for state sovereignty, to the detriment of internationalism. The Westphalian settlement gave rise to the feast-or-famine approach of balance of power politics. It was a mechanism that enjoyed noteworthy successes, as in the relatively peaceful, one-hundred year interregnum that began with the Treaty of Vienna in 1815. But when the system broke down, as it did in 1914, the results were catastrophic. No statesman in his right mind should desire to go back down that road.

Another significant defect of the Westphalian system was that it tacitly sanctioned all manner of persecution occurring within state borders. Only with the implementation of the post-Holocaust, U.N.-backed human rights regime, making "crimes against humanity" an offense transcending the boundaries of state sovereignty, did the situation begin to change. Whatever the new regime's defects (most of which have pertained to a lack of capacity for enforcement), one would be hard-pressed to recommend a return to the earlier system.

And respecting the international system recommends itself on prudential grounds as well as on ethical ones. Morally speaking, such respect reinforces the ground rules of acceptable international conduct and thereby helps to curtail potential excesses on the part of rogue states and regional bullies, although no such system is flawless. Practically speaking, one of the inescapable facts of contemporary international relations is that no individual superpower can master the contingencies of an increasingly complex and unpredictable global political environment. Regional alliances are imperative, of course; but, in addition, international law provides a set of rule-governed

procedures to regulate disputes that would prove too onerous to address on an ad hoc or case by case basis, thereby freeing up political energies for "hard cases" such as the current dispute involving North Korea's nuclear bluster.

In assessing the motives behind the American war on terrorism, Habermas disagrees sharply with cynics on the political left who perceive the Bush administration's bellicosity as an unambiguous instance of selfinterested *Machtpolitik*, as a grab for world-mastery by an unrivaled world hegemony. Instead he understands the attitudes of the Republican administration as consistent with the values of liberal nationalism. He disagrees not so much with the administration's values--a principled aversion to tyrants such as Saddam Hussein and a desire to see democratic regimes flourish in their stead--as with its methods: a fervent unilateralism that he perceives as ultimately self-defeating. In Habermas's view, such policies represent a classic instance of illegitimate means vitiating desirable political ends. In "What Does the Felling of the Monument Mean?," a piece written last April in the wake of the Iraq war, he articulates these objections as follows:

World society has become too complex for it still to be steerable from some central point based on a politics of military force. The fear of terrorism experienced by the technically highly-armed superpower seems to express the Cartesian fear of a subject seeking to turn itself and the world around it into an object, in order to bring everything under control.... A nation which reduces all options to the dumb alternatives of war and peace runs up against the limits of its own organizational powers and resources. Even if this hegemonic unilateralism were realizable it would still have side-effects that would, by its own criteria, be morally undesirable. The more that political power manifests itself in the dimensions of military, secret service, and police, the more does it undermine itself . . . by endangering its own mission of improving the world according to liberal ideas.

Habermas's cosmopolitanism is, I think, too rigid. His rather pristine view of humanitarian intervention risks foundering on the question: how should one proceed in the event that multilateral institutions break down? One could argue that the German and French refusal to join the anti-Iraq coalition was less principled than the Anglo-American military intervention--which, after all, targeted for removal one of the twentieth century's most bloodthirsty and insidious tyrants. In September 2002, Gerhard Schroeder parlayed a brazen and thankless anti-Americanism into a semi-miraculous electoral triumph. Across the Rhine, Jacques Chirac took careful note of the domestic political gains to be won from playing the anti-American card. Since their first priority was the eminently "realist" goal of setting limits to American geopolitical reach, France and Germany were happy to let Saddam's brutal regime off the hook, thereby forsaking-- or so one might argue--the precepts of humanitarian intervention that had been put to such outstanding use in Bosnia, Kosovo, and East Timor. Nor should one forget that in Kosovo, in order to forestall genocide, NATO was compelled to act in the absence of a Security Council resolution--to act unilaterally. On that occasion it was Russia that played an obstructionist role by threatening to block U.N. approval through use of its veto power. Sometimes liberal nationalism is the fallback position for a dysfunctional multilateralism.

As a champion of rule of law and liberal internationalism, Habermas harbors few illusions about the morally retrograde character of the fundamentalist worldview that inspired the September 11 attacks. An ethics of tolerance appropriate to an age of globalization requires the ability to assume the standpoint of the "other." But dogmatic belief systems of all varieties rule out precisely this capacity. Habermas views Islamic fundamentalism as a "response" to the challenges of modernity to the Arab world: "The West in its entirety serves as a scapegoat for the Arab world's own, very real experiences of loss, suffered by populations torn out of their cultural traditions during processes of accelerated modernization." Yet unlike partisans of the "blowback" idea, who allege that on September 11 the United States merely reaped the consequences of what its foreign policy had sown, Habermas's characterization confers no legitimacy on the phenomenon that it seeks to explain. His unflagging commitment to the "moral point of view" forbids him from entertaining any illusions that one could under any circumstances justify the cold-blooded massacre of civilian innocents (at least five hundred forty-eight of whom were foreign-born).

IV.

Derrida's explanation for September 11 is decidedly more fanciful. It relies on the idiom of virology. In his view,

the attacks are best described in terms of the biofeedback mechanisms of the human autoimmune system. (Yes, really.) He seems oblivious to the semantic hazards involved in trying to analyze human societies in terms of biological metaphors, which has traditionally been an essential feature of the discourse of European racism.

As is well known, the autoimmune system secretes antibodies to attack unwanted foreign invaders, such as microbes. But at times the process miscarries, and the antibodies mistakenly attack the host. According to Derrida, the September 11 attacks were born of an analogous process. As the epicenter of globalization and neo-colonialism, the West has become entangled in depredations and corrupt dealings well beyond its own borders. Moreover, it remains oblivious to the way the injustice and the rapacity that it has visited upon the helpless peoples of the world distort life in the northern hemisphere's affluent metropolises. When antibodies attack the host, they call attention to the fact that the host is diseased.

On September 11, the West at long last reaped what it had sown. According to Derrida, as a reaction to American foreign policy, the brand of Islamic fundamentalism practiced by Al Qaeda was a type of "antibody," a Western "secretion," an indigenous response to the imperiousness of American political overreach. Usually these "antibodies" thrive at the Third World sites where they are originally "secreted." But in the case at hand something went wrong. The West's usually reliable autoimmune system inexplicably miscarried, and the "antibody" known as Al Qaeda attacked its "host." The September 11 attacks thus serve as a cruel reminder of the inequities and injustices of American "hegemony." This is what the world-famous philosopher concludes:

As we know, an autoimmunitary process is that strange behavior where a living being, in quasi-suicidal fashion, `itself' works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself against its `own' immunity.... At issue is an autoimmunitary terror . . . of the "Cold War," . . . the formation of Arab Muslim terrorist networks equipped and trained during the Cold War.... What will never let itself be forgotten is thus the perverse effect of the autoimmunitary itself. For we now know that repression in both its psychoanalytical sense and its political sense--whether it be through the police, the military, or the economy--ends up producing, reproducing, and regenerating the very thing it seeks to disarm.

From an empirical standpoint--highly unglamorous, I know, and the bane of deconstruction--the "blowback" argument in Derrida's assertions is untenable. It grossly exaggerates American involvement in the anti-Soviet struggle in Afghanistan during the 1980s. To be sure, in 1986-1987 the CIA provided the Mujaheddin with nine hundred Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. But as Peter Bergen showed in *Holy War, Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden*, excessive American participation would have risked compromising the anti-Soviet guerrilla campaign as well as handing the Russians an immense propaganda coup. As Bergen concludes: "The CIA did not need the Afghan Arabs, and the Afghan Arabs did not need the CIA. The notion that the Agency funded and trained the Afghan Arabs is, at best, misleading." More importantly, Derrida's insinuations naively overlook the central "ethical" question: was not the goal of ending the Soviet Union's illegal occupation of Afghanistan a worthy one?

One of the unwitting merits of this book is that it demonstrates the basic incommensurability between Habermas's and Derrida's understanding of philosophy itself, despite the volume's avowed intention of "bridging the differences." Habermas remains fully committed to the central goals of normative political theory. He believes that the role of moral philosophy is to clarify the ethical presuppositions that underlie everyday social interaction. In this respect, he is a legitimate heir to the transcendental philosophy of Kant. In major philosophical works such as *Theory of Communicative Action*, he has defined the moral goal of human communication as "understanding oriented toward reaching an agreement." Transferred to the sphere of politics, this notion admirably mandates that one maximize the potentials of uninhibited discussion or public deliberation, thereby ensuring that political outcomes are fair or just. Unfortunately, in advanced post-industrial societies the constraints of "social complexity" play an increasingly dominant role, and pragmatic considerations place a premium on considerations of efficiency and the role of technical expertise--in the face of which the deliberative capacities of an informed lay citizenry seem increasingly irrelevant. Consequently, Habermas's political thought revolves around the question of the extent to which "lay publics" can reclaim a deliberative role that has been increasingly usurped by experts, bureaucrats, and special interests.

What separates Habermas from postmodernists such as Derrida is a basic confidence in the capacity of democratic government to arrive at just decisions. He believes that polities founded on rule of law contain an ineradicable element of principle that distinguishes them from regimes predicated on force or interest. Real politics represents a perennial balancing act between the norms of fairness, usually codified in a nation's constitution, and considerations of interest or expediency that derive from the imperatives of economic and administrative life. But postmodernists are unmoved by norms of political fairness. Force or interest is all there is. Undoubtedly, this is one of the reasons behind Derrida's recent fascination with Carl Schmitt. "Whoever says humanity lies": this means that whoever claims to act on the basis of principle only does so the more effectively to mask his interests. Derrida has said that there is no such thing as a "just law." It really doesn't get more cynical than that.

It is on these issues that Borradori's ill-judged efforts to reconcile the philosophies of Habermas and Derrida run aground. At one point she tries to seduce Habermas into accepting Derrida's awful view that norms of "tolerance" are little more than a pretext for Western paternalism. Following Derrida's lead, she suggests that, under the cover of "tolerance," we effectively assimilate non-Westerners to our own values and belief systems. But Habermas nicely settles this hash:

Today, for example, we encounter this paradox in the concept of "militant democracy": no freedom for the enemies of freedom. However, from this example we can also learn that the straight deconstruction of the concept of tolerance falls into a trap, since the constitutional state contradicts precisely the premise from which the paternalistic sense of the traditional concept of "tolerance" derives. Within a democratic community whose citizens reciprocally grant one another equal rights, no room is left for an authority allowed to one-sidedly determine the boundaries of what is to be tolerated. On the basis of the citizens' equal rights and reciprocal respect for each other, nobody possesses the privilege of setting the boundaries of tolerance from the viewpoint of their own preferences and value-orientations.

In other words: even if the principle of tolerance is imperiously misused in specific empirical instances, democratic norms contain a self-correcting mechanism that allows us to differentiate between a "fair-minded" and abusive implementation of basic egalitarian precepts. While others wallow in the sophistries of postmodernism, Habermas has remained an unwavering champion of democratic precepts and the "moral point of view."

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