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## **Book Review: Review essay: 9/11 and the project of modernity**

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# Joss Hands

## Review essay

### 9/11 and the project of modernity

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Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2003)

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The book consists of two interviews, conducted separately, with arguably the two most significant European intellectuals of our era, Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida. Conducted shortly after 11 September 2001, the interviews reflect their responses to the, as Derrida points out, ‘unnameable’ occurrences of that date, filtered through their very different philosophical backgrounds and current thinking. Alongside the interviews are accompanying essays written by the interviewer/editor, Giovanna Borradori, who unpacks and analyses the two positions, as well as contextualizing the approaches of the two thinkers. The case for this being a self-contained book rests on this analysis, as the interviews themselves would certainly not constitute enough material for such a publication. Fortunately the essays do supply this justification, doing the job of illuminating and contextualizing in a lucid, engaging style, rendering this accessible even to those with little knowledge of the pair’s respective intellectual baggage. However, what Borradori does not do is critically engage with these thinkers on any terms other than their own, or ask questions that would surely emerge in a more open forum; this is not a town hall meeting or an example of engaged intellectuals in action, even if it is a useful and rewarding exercise for those of us who see an urgent need precisely for philosophy in a time of terror, but for whom such a title is already suspect.

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The unlikely marriage of Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida faces a question, in Derrida's idiom: can we describe it truly as an 'event' in regard to its degree of unlikeliness, that is, its unpredictability and openness? The meeting of the self-proclaimed 'philosopher-deconstructor' and the 'universal pragmatist' has a richness of potential, even if the meeting is not really a meeting but a sharing of space between the covers. However, what is striking about this sharing of space, though perhaps not to some who have long been of this view, and thus could not countenance this as an event, is that they seem to have as much in common as they have separating them. While Borradori examines their differences – for example, on the question of toleration and their interpretation of the horizon of international law – their divergence finds shared terms that are not always commented on. I shall attempt to show up some of these terms by first critically examining Habermas's attempt to comprehend the meaning of September the 11th (or 9/11, as has become the accepted designator).

Habermas's frame of reference for understanding the attacks is modernity. 'To the Arab world', he tells us, 'the U.S.A. is the driving force of capitalist modernisation'; and that, 'the U.S.A. appears as an insult to their self confidence while simultaneously providing the secretly admired model' (32). The implication, a Janus-faced Arab world enviously looks towards the West, and in a kind of reflex action moves towards the intolerance of fundamentalism. Borradori interprets Habermas's position to be suggesting that fundamentalism 'is a panicked response to modernity perceived as a threat rather than an opportunity' (18). Therefore, 'if the normative message that Western liberal democracies export is one of consumerism, fundamentalism will go unchallenged' (19). As Habermas himself observes, 'Western consumerism explodes like a landmine' (65). While the theoretical framework of a general statement of a problem of capitalist globalization may well be a useful one, *sui generis*, how this is related to 9/11 is altogether more problematic. This response seems a more nuanced version of the outbursts of right-wing commentators immediately after 9/11, equating the attacks with the violence of the anti-globalization movement, and the motivation as one of raw envy. The ascription of quasi-philosophical and abstract motives to the atrocities places them outside the realm of the political and leads to the claim that they could never be 'an understandable or comprehensible political act' (34). However, it has been argued extensively elsewhere that we need to look first of all towards the more directly demonstrable motives, policy and the history of policy; in short, politics. As the journalist John Pilger reported shortly after the events, 'The attacks on Tuesday come at the end of a long history of betrayal of the Islamic and Arab peoples'.<sup>1</sup> The most respected western journalist in the Middle East, Robert Fisk of the *Independent*, pointed

out that 'any analysis of the current Middle East will encounter injustice and violence and death, often the result – directly or indirectly – of the policies of the United States and its regional allies (Arab as well as Israeli)'.<sup>2</sup>

From another perspective, that of discourse, Habermas again sees modernity as the problem, but in this case the failure to recognize an alternative framework of modernity as outlined in his philosophical programme; the conflict a 'communicative pathology' (19) the cure, in Habermas's own words, 'Trust must be able to be developed in communicative everyday practice' (20). Just as the resistance to the abandonment of modernity lies in the theory of communicative action, so fundamentalism can be mediated and muted by trust and communicative reason. Inevitably, according to his own logic, in order to generate mutual recognition, and create the kind of communicative exchanges Habermas seeks, consideration of political reasons for the actions in the circumstances leading to 9/11 cannot be set aside and must be recognized. As Noam Chomsky, perhaps the most well-known commentator on such matters, has argued, 'They [al-Qū'ida] turned against the United States when the United States established permanent military bases in Saudi Arabia about 10 years ago. They regard that very much like the Russian occupation of Afghanistan they fought against.'<sup>3</sup> This is not a hazy rejection of shopping malls and McDonalds; advocating a more enlightened modernity such as the one Habermas seeks is therefore hardly likely to help.

To his credit, as one who is often accused of obscurantism and dislocation, Derrida does engage this point in his dialogue with Borradori. He observes that 9/11 was 'in many respects, a distant effect of the Cold War itself' (92). Derrida speaks of America as being in the grip of an 'autoimmunitary process' which is 'quasi-suicidal' (94). This emerges from his raising of the question of whether 9/11 can be considered an 'event'. Just as Chomsky suggests, Derrida acknowledges that the USA has not, always, been 'on the side of the victims' (92), and that it is difficult to see 9/11 as an event, as it emerges not from a horizon that is unforeseeable and absolutely surprising, but nevertheless its apprehension 'falters' (91) in its indeterminable nature. Thus Derrida claims, it exists on two planes, two kinds of impression, the first that of 'compassion . . . without limits, unconditional, unimpeachable'. And this is true even of those who experienced the events as mediated. Thus there is an 'undeniable "event," beyond all simulacra' (89). However, there is another level, the 'interpreted, interpretative, informed impression, the conditional evaluation that makes us *believe* that this is a "major" event' (89). That which is amplified through a 'compulsive inflation'. This, he argues, explains why despite there having been many quantitatively equivalent atrocities the echoes and the inflation are on

such a scale as they engage 'a complex machinery involving history, politics, the media, and so on' (92). This is a qualitative explanation of scale where there is something "infinite" in this wound' (94). In short the machinery is incapable of comprehending or naming, hence the moniker of 9/11. The question of modernity is thus realized by Derrida as the interpretative framework of 9/11, which cannot conceive of the terrorists as anything other than a hazy other of modernity, a message from the future which is terrifying precisely because it raises the spectre of worse to come. However, Derrida's discussion of impression and belief allows him to conceive the attack as 'a response to the state terrorism of the United States and its allies', while at the same time being able to 'condemn *unconditionally* . . . the attack of September 11' (107).

This is a distinction which is made by other commentators, but not so finely and clearly, and has opened them to heavy critique for their heartlessness. For example, the exchanges between Noam Chomsky and Christopher Hitchens, shortly after 9/11, reflect this precisely; wherein Hitchens accused Chomsky of being an apologist for Islamic fascists, an accusation that placed an attempt at understanding in line with the denial of the unconditional compassion Derrida calls for, but without accounting for the real target of the critique. In short, Chomsky acknowledged the force and validity of the first impression and rigorously questioned the second; in doing so he was read as conflating the two, thus was seen to question the first, which was of course interpreted as an act of inhumanity. In many ways this row reflects the more subtle friction between Habermas and Derrida, yet despite this apparent divergence between the two the common ground they share is that of the hope of modernity; both abstract from a world-historic moment into their framework of interpretation. Thus what Derrida describes as 'suicidal autoimmunity', what could be described as America's tendency to self-deconstruct, Habermas sees as a 'communicative pathology'. Yet despite these pathological tendencies both thinkers see the situation as open to a perfectible process of becoming, a pathway that needs to be, and can be, taken. The ground of this perfectibility: cosmopolitics.

The form this should, and can, take, turns on the question of toleration; and the debate over the meaning of tolerance is one that Borradori highlights in her commentary. Focusing on the difference between the two thinkers she suggests that 'Habermas sees it as a program, Derrida understands it as an ideal' (163). By this we can understand that toleration, for Habermas, is never wholly one-sided; it involves the necessity of a mutual recognition and the procedural mechanisms of communicative action. While Derrida, in deconstructing the term, identifies its religious roots and its ultimate status as 'conditional hospitality' whose terms must always be defined by the powerful. Instead he prefers the notion of unconditional hospitality,

which implies openness, a facing towards the stranger regardless of their unknowable character; indeed, 'tolerance is actually the opposite of hospitality' (127). Yet he also recognizes that this is not something that can be written into law, it is impossible because it contradicts the essence of sovereignty. This requires a recognition that any notion of cosmopolitics that wants to enshrine global citizenship, in the Kantian mode, that is, outside of a world government, runs up against a contradiction, as Borradori notes: 'For Derrida, the ideal of democracy lies beyond cosmopolitanism and world citizenship, over and beyond the economy of sovereignty, politics and jurisdiction' (163). This supplements her claim of a significant difference between Derrida and Habermas, a difference that is, specifically, 'the notions of excess and supplement . . . since they imply that politics has to admit the existence of something located beyond its limits' (164).

However, such a difference can itself be deconstructed when we consider the normative justification for communicative action. Habermas's roots in Kantian deontological ethics require mutual recognition as a predicate for democratic norms, based in reason as the framework of recognition. The drive of which is towards the realization of the ideal speech-situation, a moment that is characterized by undistorted communication. Yet elsewhere he himself has recognized the abstract and other-worldliness of such an ideal, couching it in terms of a thought experiment, or fictional idealization, 'a methodological fiction in order to obtain a foil against which the substratum of *unavoidable* societal complexity becomes visible'. The ideal then allows us a 'model of "pure" communicative socialisation'.<sup>4</sup> In Borradori's terms this must be precisely something 'beyond the limits' of politics. In this context both thinkers can certainly be included as contributing to an *unfinished project of modernity*, both are stating, or at least reliant on, notions of transcendence as part of a decidedly unending quest of modernity, whether this is termed *the democracy to come* or the *ideal speech-situation*. While this in itself is not at issue here, what it also means is that despite surface appearances they share the same flaw in their response to 9/11. That is, they attribute the failure of Islam, or at least its fundamentalist elements, to get on board with the project as the elemental problem. Derrida, despite his analysis of the immediate geopolitical circumstances of 9/11, offers the thought that, if forced to take sides, he would; claiming that he would favour the western perspective because it does offer the possibility, or at the very least the hope, of a future that exists, 'in this world' (114). Here emerges another common theme between Derrida and Habermas, their orientation towards Europe.

Derrida sees Europe as a model that, uniquely, has succeeded in separating religion and politics and thus offering us a 'perspective open

to perfectibility in the name of the “political” (114). This echoes Habermas in his interview, when he makes the distinction between Europe, seeking a *cosmopolitan order*, as against an Anglo-Saxon *realism* (40). While this may certainly be the headline any investigation needs only to break the surface, to see this distinction is, at the very least, questionable. With the case of Kosovo, raised here, Habermas observes a coterminous ‘tension between power-pragmatic and more normative goals’ (40). He regrets that the UN was set aside, but only because it was not able to intervene ‘even for good reasons’ (39). However, European states were engaged in the actions and subsequent occupation of Kosovo under the aegis of NATO, and indeed submitted to the logic of the actions which Chomsky has described as being at root a demonstration of the resolve and purpose of NATO, a lesson to the rest of the world.<sup>5</sup> It could be argued that Europe is just as prepared to act on power-pragmatic goals when in its own interests; the status attested to Turkey as a candidate for EU membership, despite its appalling human rights record, is certainly a case in point. Similarly the objections, at least those of France and Russia, to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 can be conceived within the context of economic interests as much as ‘more normative goals’. Indeed we cannot fail to take into account the increasingly draconian asylum laws being introduced throughout Europe. At the very least these issues raise questions about Habermas’s and Derrida’s assertions of a Europe genuinely oriented towards cosmopolitanism, based around regional alliances and inter-regional treaties and agreements.

This is important because it is on the basis of European models that the possibility of a cosmopolitan order is posited as a model of ‘modernity’ as ideal, not of the kind against which 9/11 is conceived as a reaction, but one that is of a new order. Yet what this again does is to insert modernity as an issue in direct relation to 9/11, and thus as a way of distinguishing an ‘other’ at the level of an ontology.

The ideals and abstractions the two thinkers reflect in their individual frameworks are undoubtedly admirable, yet the connections between these and the actual events of 9/11 remain at best problematic. Perhaps we would be as well to turn to an individual who has engaged first hand in the concrete procedures of conflict resolution, indeed who founded the discipline of ‘peace studies’, Johan Galtung. He observes, around the same time that Habermas and Derrida are being interviewed, that:

The list of targets reads like a retaliation for the United States’ use of economic power against poor countries and poor people, the United States’ use of military power against defenceless people, and the United States’ political power against the powerless. . . . The basic dividing line in this conflict is class, of countries and of people. It is not civilisation.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the way forward is to short-circuit the power of states and regions, to look towards the possibilities of a global civil society to 'lead the way towards healing and closure'<sup>7</sup> and in this way will be realized, in Borradori's own terms, 'the promise of the Enlightenment: freedom and equality for all' (172).

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**PSC**

## Notes

- 1 John Pilger, 'Inevitable Ring to the Unimaginable' (14 September 2001) <<http://www.zmag.org/ZNET.htm>> (accessed 1 March 2004).
- 2 Robert Fisk, the *Independent*, 16 February 2002.
- 3 Noam Chomsky, 'U.S. Foreign Policy and Relations with the Muslim World' (2 October 2001) <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3080909/>> (accessed 6 March 2004).
- 4 Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p. 323.
- 5 Noam Chomsky, *A New Generation Draws the Line: Kosovo, East Timor and the Standards of the West* (London: Verso, 2000).
- 6 Johan Galtung, 'The United States, the West and the Rest of the World', *The Spokesman* 73 (2001): 50.
- 7 *ibid.*