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## Jacques Derrida, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida,” in Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, trans Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004)

Interview conducted five weeks after 9/11

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### 85

- Asked if “September 11 (*Le 11 Septembre*)” is a major event
- Derrida replies that, in saying “September 11” we are “already citing”
  - “You are inviting me to speak here by recalling, as if in quotation marks, a date or a dating that has taken over our public space and our private lives for five weeks now.”

### 86

- The apparent immediacy of the feeling about this being an event is actually “conditioned, constituted, if not actually constructed, circulated at any rate through the media by the means of a prodigious techno-socio-political machine”.
- To mark a date presupposes that an event has not occurred before and will not happen again
- The term “‘act of international terrorism’ [...]is anything but a rigorous concept that would help us grasp the singularity of what we will be trying to discuss”
- “this very thing, the place and meaning of this “event,” remains ineffable”
- The metonymic term “9/11” is used because “we do not recognize or even cognize” the event

### 87

- Compulsive repetition of the metonymy serves to:
  - Conjure the fear away (repetition deadens)
  - Deny our powerlessness to name the item
- “something terrible took place on September 11, and in the end we don't know what. For however outraged we might be at the violence, however much we might genuinely deplore – as I do, along

with everyone else – the number of dead, no one will really be convinced that this is, in the end, what it's all about.”

- In New York at the time of the interview “you feel or are made to feel that it is actually forbidden” to speak of anything without mentioning 9/11
- The important of focusing on language is “Not in order to isolate ourselves in language, as people in too much of a rush would like us to believe, but on the contrary, in order to try to understand what is going on precisely *beyond* language and what is pushing us to repeat endlessly”

## 88

- Asks where the injunction to talk about 9/11 is coming from
- Insists on the English phrase “major event”
  - Because the targeted domain, from which the injunction to repeat is coming, is “dominated largely by the Anglo-American idiom”
    - “international law, diplomatic institutions, the media, and the greatest technoscientific, capitalist and military power”
    - The “*critical* essence” of “this hegemony” (hegemony of target domain with this idiom)
      - Critical meaning “decisive, potentially decisionary, decision-making” and...
      - Critical meaning “*in crisis*: today more vulnerable and threatened than ever”
- The impression itself is an event

## 89

- In an empiricist fashion, “The event is made up of the “thing” itself [...] and the impression [...] that is given”
- “We could say that the impression is “informed,” in both senses of the word: a predominant system gave it form, and this form then gets run through an organized information machine (language, communication, rhetoric, image, media and so on)”
- States that it has been easy to enact mass murder for many years, but creating an impression for an event is a different matter
- Must distinguish between two impressions:
  - 1.) Compassion for the victims; “should be without limits, unconditional”
  - 2.) The belief that this is a major event
    - “*Belief*, the phenomenon of *credit* and of *accreditation*”

## 90

- Queries on the nature of belief, impression and event illustrating self-awareness of British empiricist overtones
- Asked by Borradori whether “event” is meant “in the Heideggerian sense”
  - *Ereignis* – event or a coming into view
- Derrida responds that “The undergoing of the event, that which in the undergoing or in the ordeal

*at once opens itself up to and resists experience*, is, it seems to me, a certain *unappropriability* of what comes or happens”

- The event is beyond comprehension, but still experienced
- No event is worthy of the term “appropriation”

## 91

- States that “Nothing is less certain” than to claim that 9/11 was unforeseeable or without precedent
  - It was highly predictable
- Yet, will work on this hypothesis regardless

## 92

- Evaluation of “major” cannot be purely quantitative
  - It is not the number of victims, but the shock waves
  - Parallel of buildings destroyed by planes by Kamikaze pilots
- September 11<sup>th</sup> is a “distant effect of the Cold War itself”

## 93

- To destabilize the US, which is the superpower, is to destabilize the world
  - Because this is what the current discourse legitimizes

## 94

- The horizon of non-knowledge will be made more concrete by three moments
  - 2x Cold War
  - 1x Autoimmunity; the quasi-suicidal process in a living being where it “works to destroy its own protection”
    - NB. This is not actually the medical meaning of autoimmunity, which is not destroying one's own immunity, but actually where the immune system mistakenly attacks any bodily function
- The world feels as though this is a new *type* of attack
  - Why?
- Before answering, worth remembering that the US “lays a virtually sovereign role among sovereign states”

## 95

- Problem of suicide is twofold
  - Suicide of hijackers

- Suicide of the America who trained them
- They are an enemy from within
- Notes the “extraordinary *economy*” of the attack
  - See also: Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Requiem for the Twin Towers*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2002)

## 96

- Attacks targeted the economic and the military
  - The heads of the US
- An event, even if happy, has something traumatizing in it
- Necessary to question the temporality of the event and how it “remains open by our terror before the *future* and not only the past”
- “The ordeal of the event has as its tragic correlate not what is presently happening or what has happened in the past but the precursory signs of what threatens to happen”

## 97

- “It is the future that determines the unappropriability of the event, not the present or the past.”
- It is the “terrible sign” of “what might or perhaps will take place, which will be *worse than anything before*”
- If the US was told that something on the scale of 9/11 would never happen again, it would hardly resonate so much
- The Cold War opened up the traumatic possibility of nuclear war

## 98

- The problem with the “end” of the Cold War is that there is no longer a “balance of terror” - the new source of terror is “anonymous
- What is now at stake is the “existence of the world”

## 99

- Should ignore the “religious connotations” and “childish stratagems” of the term “axis of evil”
- The faceless nature of the enemy means that attempts to “deny, repress or forget” the trauma “are but so many desperate attempts. And so many autoimmunitary movements. Which produce, invent, and feed the very monstrosity they claim to overcome”

## 100

- Humanity is not “defenseless” against this threat
- The “war on terrorism” “works to regenerate, in the short or long term, the causes of the evil they claim to eradicate”

- Borradori asks what role philosophy can play or help in the understanding of 9/11
- Derrida replies that such an event “surely calls for a philosophical response”
- Philosophy can question the suppositions on which the popular interpretation (media) rests
- Returns to a critical reading of Schmitt
  - See: Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 2005)
  - Distinctions between classical war and civil war

## 101

- However, this violence is not as the result of war
  - Bush cannot identify the enemies in the War on Terror
    - This is crucial to war
      - See Jacques Derrida, “On Absolute Hostility: The Cause of Philosophy and the Spectre of the Political,” in *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 2005), 116
    - bin Laden is not Afghan, he was US-trained
    - Geography is no longer an appropriate determinant for war
    - Claims that, now, “it is enough to infiltrate a strategically important computer system and introduce a virus or some other disruptive element to paralyze the economic, military, and political resources of an entire country or continent”
    - “The relationship between earth, *terra*, territory and terror has changed, and it is necessary to know that this is because of knowledge, that is, because of technoscience”
    - “It is technoscience that blurs the distinction between war and terrorism”

## 102

- Speculates that we might look back on September 11<sup>th</sup> with a nostalgia for the good old days when things were visible, for the new war will be invisible
- Schmitt's distinctions no longer hold
- Terrorism now holds new distinctions
- Borradori asks if these new distinctions of terrorism can safely be drawn
- Derrida responds by questioning how terror is distinct from fear which Hobbes, Schmitt and Benjamin hold to be the “very condition of the political and of the state”

## 103

- Derivation of the word terror from the French revolution
- Claims that current definitions of terrorism do not exclude “state terrorism”
  - NB: according to Schweitzer (Glenn E. Schweitzer with Carole Dorsch Schweitzer, *A Faceless Enemy: The Origins of Modern Terrorism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Perseus, 2002), 27.) there are over 200 definitions of “terrorism” in circulation. However according to the US State

Department, in a paper entitled 'Patterns of Global Terrorism' published in 2000, terrorism is 'premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience' (Schweitzer, 24), suggesting that Derrida is incorrect here.

- Talks of the UN attempt to condemn “international terrorism” and the reservations expressed by nations about this term

## 104

- Queries how the boundaries between national and international are drawn
  - Cases:
    - Algerian rebellion from 1954 to 1962
    - Palestine
    - Irish
    - Afghans
    - Chechnyans

## 105

- Semantic instability of borderlines
- Dominant power is the one that manages to legalize its actions on the world stage
  - “for it is always a question of law”

## 106

- Oil reserves “remain among the rare territories left, among the last nonvirtualizable terrestrial places”
  - Everything remains anchored to these few remaining places
- Borradori states that what Derrida is suggesting will require a change in international law
- Derrida responds that this is true and that it must take place, but at an unpredictable rate
- Redefines philosopher as “one who seeks a new criteriology to distinguish between “comprehending” and “justifying””
  - One who “demands accountability from those in charge of the public discourse”

## 107

- Difference between justifying and condemning, although recognising the conditions of possibility
- Borradori asks who is the most terrorist, the state or the “terrorist”
- Derrida responds that this is an interminable question because it constantly escalates, all terrorism is a response to previous terrorism
- However, the symbolic and psychic effects of the act must be taken into account

- “The *quality* or *intensity* of the emotions provoked [...] is not always proportional to the number of victims or the amount of damage-”

## 108

- Posits that terrorism does not just involve putting to death
  - “Can't one terrorize without killing?”
  - and “Isn't it also “letting die””?
    - “hundreds of millions of human beings, from hunger, AIDS, lack of medical treatment, and so on – also be part of a “more or less” conscious and deliberate terrorist strategy?”
- Wrong to assume that terrorism is always conscious
  - “there are historical and political “situations” where terror operates, so to speak, as if by itself, as the simple result of some apparatus”
- 9/11 depended upon the media

## 109

- “there is nothing purely “modern” in this relation between media and terror”
- Cites case of French resistance fighters
  - Called terrorists by Nazis
  - When France liberated, this accusation, obviously, vanished
    - “but who could deny that it was entirely untrue”
- Borradori asks where Derrida was on September 11
- Derrida replies “in Shanghai”
- He watched it on CNN and noted that “it was easy to foresee that his was going to become, *in the eyes of the world*, what you called a “major event”

## 110

- China initially tried to make this seem as a local incident, but soon had to align itself against terrorism
- Borradori asks if such a radical deconstruction of the distinction between war and terrorism makes it difficult to see who the actors are and if this leads to a risk of total anarchy
- Derrida says that the term anarchy “risks making us abandon too quickly the analysis and interpretation of what indeed *looks like* pure chaos”
- Recaps on situation of sovereign state against anonymous elements

## 111

- States that the US is “not the sole target” of the “bin Laden” associated terrorist operation
- “The point may be to provoke a military and diplomatic situation that destabilizes certain Arab countries torn between a powerful [anti-American] public opinion [...] and the necessity of basing



their nondemocratic authority on diplomatic, economic and military ties with the United States.”

- For instance, Saudi Arabia
- The paradox of US alignment with such regimes when the US is supposed to defend democracy and human rights

## 112

- the “least that can be said” about these “regimes” is that “they do not correspond to this model”
  - Also Pakistan
- Such regimes are also targets of those who organise international terrorism against the US
- “And with all the angling going on between these triangles, it is difficult to disentangle the real from the alleged motivation, oil from religion, politics from economics or military strategy”
- Borradori asks if the standard objective of terrorists is to overturn, but not take over, to destabilize
- Derrida replies that it is not only destabilizing one's declared enemy, but also “those much closer”; “Sometimes even one's own allies”
- Warns of taking the Arab “world” as a homogeneous whole

## 113

- States that the strands within Islam that lead to fanaticism must be overcome and that we must help
- Borradori asks if bin Laden's terrorism harbours “international political ambitions”
- Derrida responds that what appears unacceptable is “not only the cruelty, the disregard for human life, the disrespect for law, for women, the use of what is worst in technocapitalist modernity for the purposes of religious fanaticism”
  - “it is, above all, the fact that such actions and such discourse *open onto no future and, in my view, have no future*”
  - “What is being proposed, at least implicitly, is that all capitalist and modern technoscientific forces be put in the service of an interpretation, itself dogmatic, of the Islamic revelation of the One.”
  - No place for secularism in the “discourse “bin Laden””

## 114

- Derrida states, firmly that, despite his strong reservations about the European and American systems, he would still choose them over bin Laden because they are “open to perfectibility”
- Borradori asks if Derrida places his hopes in the authority of national law
- Derrida responds in the affirmative
- Sovereign states should respect international law
  - Such laws should be constantly reflected upon and critiqued for refinement
    - Deconstruction

- An effective system of sanctions is necessary

## 115

- Derrida says that he does “not hold law to be the last word in ethics, politics, or anything else”, but that “faith in the possibility of this impossible and, in truth, undecidable thing from the point of view of knowledge, science, and conscience that must govern all our decisions”
  - The impossible is the aporia of international law
    - Infinite regress of sovereignty
- Borradori asks if the concept of sovereignty has been destabilized by the 9/11 attacks
- Again, Derrida points out that the terrorists are not others; they are Western

## 116

- Remarks on interesting reconfigurations of international relations (Russia-US, China)
- Hopes for a reconfiguration of the US-Europe relationship
  - A remodelling of Europe in light of its Enlightenment experience

## 117

- This is unique for its configuration of the theological and the political and the authority of one over the other
- Says that the US has a hegemony that “actually dominates or marginalizes something in the U.S.'s own history, something that is also related to that strange “Europe” of the more or less incomplete Enlightenment I was talking about”
- Borradori asks what role Derrida believes religion plays in this context
- Derrida relies by pointing out the contradictions in each ideology
  - America purports secularism, but has a “fundamental biblical (and primarily Christian) reference in its official political discourse and the discourse of its political leaders: “God Bless America,” the reference to “evildoers” or to the “axis of evil”” as well as being the only “European-style “democratic” power in the world that still has [...] the death penalty in its judicial system”
  - The terrorist enemy identifies itself as Islamic, “even if this does not necessarily represent authentic Islam and all Muslims are far from identifying with it”

## 118

- Significance of Israel at “war” with a virtual Palestine
  - Abraham religion + messianism
- The hope for 9/11 to be at once a sign, at the other a price to pay in the modern tradition of Europe “the possibility of another discourse and another politics, a way out of this double theologico-political program”
  - Notes extremely high cost “without any possible redemption or salvation for the victims”

- Borradori asks if Derrida sees an important role for Europe
- Derrida replies that he hopes for, but does not see it
- Says that “It is a matter of thinking the “perhaps” of which I spoke at such length in *Politics of Friendship* on the subject of the *democracy to come*”
- Borradori asks how Derrida sees Europe's political role and its possibilities to exert influent

## 119

- Derrida says that France and Germany are trying “to slow down or tempter the hastiness or overzealousness of the Unites States, at least with respect to certain forms this “war on terrorism” might take”
- “As long as Europe does not have a unified military force sufficient for autonomous interventions [...] the fundamental premises of the current situation will not change”
- Talks of the importance of the International Monetary Fund and the G8
- Borradori asks if the complex system of international law just leads back to a meta-state and a meta-law
- Derrida concedes that this is a huge problem

## 120

- Refers back to Kant and Hannah Arendt who discounted world state
- On the notion of democracy-to-come which “does not mean a future democracy that will one day be “present””
  - Founded on the irreconcilable tension between the individual and the social

## 121

- Democracy cannot be termed a regime, because a regime would “presuppose its own perfectibility”, whereas democracy “welcome the possibility of being contested, of contesting itself, of criticizing and indefinitely improving itself”
- Borradori asks what is Derrida's stance concerning globalization and cosmopolitanism
- Derrida says he prefers the term *mondialisation*
- While globalization is supposed to be a levelling and opening up, the inequality has perhaps never been greater

## 122

- Technological inequalities of internet access worldwide
- 9/11 hijackers claimed “to be acting in the name f those doomed by globalization”
- Especial mention for those Islamic countries who lack resources and are abused by globalization

## 123

- Recourse to violence presented as the only response to a deaf ear
- “The distinction between civilian, military, and police is thus no longer pertinent”
- Hence, globalization is merely a simulacrum “that dissimulates a growing imbalance”
- Yet, globalization does accelerate the transmission of “discoursed, knowledge, and models”
- Praises “efforts to institute the International Criminal Tribunal”
- Talks of cosmopolitanism as a form of citizenship
  - But citizenship is also a limit
    - Nations (as world-state discounted above)

## 124

- Comes back to the role of the state
- Borradori asks what the relationship is between globalization and tolerance
- Derrida says this is linked to what is referred to “in a rather simplistic and confused fashion [as] the “return of the religious””

## 125

- Tolerance as “resistance to the violence being unleashed [...] against all those who do not unconditionally respect certain orthodoxies”
- -Responsibility to analyse the history of intolerance, which is not a new phenomenon

## 126

- Call for a genealogy of tolerance
- History of tolerance from Voltaire's dictionary
  - Christian
  - Catholic

## 127

- Tolerance as a “discourse with religious roots”
  - “it is more often used on the side of those with power, always as a kind of condescending concession”
- Borradori asks if Derrida sees tolerance as a form of charity
- Derrida says it is, and always bestowed by the side of the strongest
- Borradori asks if tolerance is a condition of hospitality
- Derrida says no, “Tolerance is actually the opposite of hospitality. Or at least its limit.”
  - Used to “limit my welcome” and “retain power”

## 128

- Cites Mitterand's use of the tolerance as a limited word of caution against immigration
- “Tolerance is a conditional, circumspect, careful hospitality.”
- Borradori asks if tolerance is “granting someone permission to continue living on”
- Derrida agrees
  - “a limited tolerance is clearly preferred to an absolute intolerance”
  - As it is commonly practiced, “We offer hospitality only on the condition that the other follow our rules, our way of life, even our language, our culture, our political system, and so on”
  - “But pure or unconditional hospitality does not consist in such an *invitation*”

## 129

- A hospitality of “*visitation* rather than *invitation*”
- “An unconditional hospitality is, to be sure, practically impossible to live”
- “this concept of pure hospitality can have no legal or political status. No state can write it into its laws”
- Queries if hospitality is ethical, as it involves no decision (for without it we would not have love)
  - “But what would an “ethics” be without hospitality?”

## 130

- Situates Political, juridical and ethical responsibilities between the poles of these two hospitalities
- Borradori asks how political discourse can assimilate this philosophical notion and if cosmopolitanism might be the answer
- Derrida answers that he believes that cosmopolitanism has been the aim of most international institutions since World War I
- States that his concept of democracy to come supersedes this

## 131

- Because this is far off, however, universal citizenship should be aimed for in the meantime
- Borradori asks if the deconstruction of cosmopolitanism is also a deconstruction of the notion of the state
- Derrida states that cosmopolitanism presupposes some form of state
- “In many contexts, the state might be the best protection against certain forces and dangers”
- The deconstruction of the state has already been underway for a long time as the notion of sovereignty is indivisible (Hobbes), yet the concept of shared sovereignty has been raised

## 132

- Borradori asks about human rights and how they can be maintained in a non-state communitys
- Derrida replies that human rights is the field in which the strongest critique of the state is raised
  - crime against humanity or war crime “no longer falls under the authority of national judicial institutions”
  - “We need (*il faut*) human rights”

## 133

- Ethics goes beyond law and beyond duty
  - Beyond law is easy to understand
  - Beyond duty, not so
    - If it is pure duty, because one must, then it is not a pure ethics or morality
    - If it is the result of a knowledge, then it is a logical process devoid of responsibility
    - “We must thus be dutiful beyond duty”
- Borradori says this sounds like a “regulative idea”, although Derrida dislikes the expression
  - Regulative Idea: Kantian term “an idea one thinks to achieve rational completeness of the conditions for the possibility of experience. The regulative use of a transcendental idea is to promote the work of reason in the disciplines that correspond to the idea, particularly by encouraging synthesis and unity of a discipline, stimulating the mind to new ideas, holding up the ideal of goal/purpose.” - [http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/wphil/lectures/wphil\\_theme15.htm](http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/wphil/lectures/wphil_theme15.htm)

## 134

- Derrida has reservations about the transfusion of the regulative idea to a non-Kantian context
  - It remains, for Derrida, possible, even if it is at the end of an infinite history
    - It is not unreal enough
  - Once a determinable rule exists, it is no longer an ethical decision, it is rule following

## 135

- Would have to subscribe to the entire Kantian critique to appropriate this term
- Borradori asks if Derrida therefore follows Kierkegaard in this respect
- Derrida affirms this, but as a non-Christian Kierkegaard which “you can imagine how difficult that is to think”
- Such an as-if is practically impossible

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