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## Spirit of 9/11: Philosophy in the Wake of Terrorism

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If you cannot change the explicit set of ideological rules, you can try to change the underlying set of obscene unwritten rules.

Slavoj Zizek 32

### **Abstract:**

The paper, entitled Spirit of 9/11: Philosophy in the Wake of Terrorism, examines how 9/11 has contributed into the field of philosophy, focusing on the theories and responses of Slavoj Zizek, Jean Baudrillard, Terry Eagleton, Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida. It addresses the cultural and social symbolisms associated with the twin towers and how the fall has diverse significations. The immediate responses to the event were diverse in nature: most of the analysts pointed the role of religious fundamentalism; some viewed it as a return march or opposite reaction to the growing capitalism, the growing injustice and inequality and also as the fall of the greatest form of ideological hegemony. The paper would also examine the meaning/s of 9/11.

**Keywords: Philosophy, Terrorism, September 11, Baudrillard, Zizek, Arudhathi Roy, Fundamentalism, Tolerance, Habermas**

“The world changed on September 11”, says Karen Armstrong (160). According to Jean Baudrillard, it is a “global symbolic event” that not only has global repercussions but questioned the very process of globalization. It has changed the landscape, mindscape, and capitalscape of the US and the whole world. The immediate responses to the event were diverse in nature: most of the analysts pointed to the role of religious fundamentalism, some viewed it as a return march, a reaction to the growing capitalism, the growing injustice and inequality and also as the fall of the greatest form of ideological hegemony. Some even went to the extreme of describing the catastrophe as the “ultimate work of art” (Zizek 11) or even as the fantasies of Hollywood come real (Virilio, Zizek, Baudrillard). Many fondly remembered Samuel Huntington’s futuristic words that the global conflict will be drawn in terms of religion and the ancient schisms between the West and the Islamic world.

The discourses on 9/11 immediately embark on a slew of questions. If 9/11 has such a tremendous significance, what is/are the meaning/s associated with it? What is 9/11 for the entire world? Does it communicate a message that the age of postmodern deconstruction is over? Is it that we have to seek refuge in firm and unambiguous explanations and definitions? Are we forced at this juncture to point out an enemy and to define terrorism? Do we have

only two choices: democracy or terrorism? Does the event suggestive of Habermasian sort of a 'distorted communication' between Muslims and the West? Is it a "clash of civilizations"?

The entire cultural production has changed in the post 9/11 scenario. A shift in the modes of perception, production and audience reception has taken place in the wake of the events. The heavenly notion of the U.S as an insulated island cut off from all dangers is shattered. The vulnerability and the internal fragility of the U.S is pointed out and kept under siege by this act. It is not for the first time that an event has shaken the foundations of American hegemony. The video footages of American soldiers shackled and marched through the streets of Hanoi with the crowd jeering at them is as dramatic as the fall of the towers. Moving away from the fictitious and realistic representations of the cultural productions of the age, philosophy and the responses of the social theorists of this generation help us to achieve an objective perception of the entire event, offering us interpretations of the present moment. From the vantage point of philosophical responses, the paper attempts to seek answers for the above mentioned questions. The paper would focus on the responses by Slavoj Zizek, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida and Arundhati Roy on 9/11. The politico-ideological implications of terrorism will be discussed. Since 9/11 has a direct link to terrorist attacks; it is difficult to find out the meaning of 9/11 separating it from terrorism.

The very point that the 9/11 attacks targeted the Pentagon and World Trade Centre speaks in volume about the clear intensions of the terrorists though no notes or messages were directly communicated. Why didn't they aim at, say the Statue of Liberty or any other tall building of Manhattan? Though much rubbish has been talked about the fall of the Phallus and feminist interpretations of the twin towers followed, the intention was, obviously, to abolish the symbolic associations of the twin towers: the perfect "symbols of financial power and global economic liberalism" (Baudrillard 43). This clearly shows that the aim was not to target the American way of life, its notions of freedom and democracy or women's rights as many have suggested; but the absolute target being the military and economic terrorism - if we can call it by that name- practiced by the Americans for ages. The ultimate goal was- in Hegelian sense of the term - to shatter the insulated daily lives of people, the "true Nietzschean Last Men". Based on Hegelian principle Zizek puts forward the argument that the people of the West are the Nietzschean Last men who are immersed in stupid daily pleasures while the Muslim radicals are ready to risk everything going to the extent of self-destruction. The Hegelian notions of Master and Servant are reversed here. The Master losing his safe haven becomes the Servant whereas the Servant risking his life becomes the Master.

According to Baudrillard , "Terrorism , like viruses, is everywhere"(10). In contrast to the "non-event" of the Gulf war, Baudrillard exemplified the terrorist attacks as the "absolute event", a "symbolic event" that represents "a setback for globalization" (3).In his book *The Spirit of Terrorism*, Baudrillard repeatedly asserts that this is not a clash of civilizations or religions. He argues, "Current terrorism is not the descendant of a traditional history of anarchy, nihilism and fanaticism. It is contemporaneous with globalization..." (87). Any hegemonic power will dream of a day of its own destruction and 9/11 is the d-day of its monstrous economic hegemony. Baudrillard anticipates a Forth World War lurking in the darkness which haunts every world order. According to him, the First World War ended up

the supremacy of Europe and the colonial era; the Second World War put an end to Nazism; the third one which was the cold war put an end to communism. Now the world is in the grip of a Forth World War which shall be against all forms of hegemonic domination. Baudrillard says, “if Islam dominated the world, terrorism would rise against Islam, *for it is the world, the globe itself, which resists globalization*” (12).

When Baudrillard was examining his views on the spirit and hypothesis of terrorism, Zizek takes a long step to go for the socio-historical-political-economical nature and history of the present situation in his usual amalgamation of Kant, Hegel, Marx and Lacan drawing examples from popular culture and what not. Zizek in his book *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, talks about the “derealization” of the horror: though some 3000 casualties are repeatedly mentioned, there are “no dismembered bodies, no blood, (and) no desperate dying people” in contrast to reporting on Third World catastrophes. He questions whether “the real horror happens ‘there’ not ‘here’” (13). Here, Zizek points at the contemporary form of colonization which separates ‘Us’ from ‘Them’ even though much discussions are going on about the shrinking flat new global world. The new trend in media representation or the double talk of the real is very well exemplified here. The visual representations of Afghanistan are again in the stereotyped forms where the rich cultural traditions are left out highlighting it as a land of terrorism and subjugation of women. Of course, this place is not a heaven devoid of all these issues but which nation doesn’t have its own versions of anarchy, subjugation and social injustices in its historical process of evolution?

By reducing the whole event to a date like September 11 or 9/11 and by the repeated chanting of this date in a poetical vein, Derrida points out the unqualifiable nature of the event. We repeat it without knowing what it is. But in praxis the ultimate meaning of 9/11 is reduced to the compulsion to take sides. The false choice or the forced choice that has been imposed on us in the wake of 9/11 is the choice between terror and democracy. President Bush’s ultimatum to the people of the world – “Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists”—is the forced choice asking us to take sides (qtd in Roy 238). We are asked to face and combat the enemy or we will be branded as terrorists. As a way out of this trap, Zizek invokes the Hegelian category of “totality”. For Hegel, only the whole is true. Each stage or phase or moment is partial and therefore partially untrue. Hegel’s notion of totality preserves within it each of its phases or moments that it has passed through or subsumed. In declaring war against terrorism by the Bush administration, what they have attempted is to fill the gaps in the system thus reinforcing the system which Zizek calls as the “way of the super-ego”. The other way to react to traumatic events is what he calls as “the ethical response”. Zizek cites the powerful act of a Jewish ballerina who agreed to dance for her captors in Auzchwitz only to use the occasion to seize the gun and kill several of them before herself perishing. This response shatters the system which helps us to move into a realm of new possibilities.

The global terrorism behind the twin tower attacks is a symptom, not the first one, of what Derrida calls as “autoimmune crisis”. It has its inauguration in the years of the cold war in which the Western liberal democracies were feeding, arming and training their future enemies in a “quasi-suicidal manner”. Derrida describes an “autoimmunitary process” as the

“strange behavior where a living being... ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself *against* its ‘own’ immunity” (94). This is another dimension of September 11. The philosophical discourses have taken a new way towards the deconstruction of the words “terrorist” and “terrorism”. Who the most terrorist is is a question that doesn’t need an answer but needs to be considered as significant at this juncture.

Whether it be named as Operation Infinite Justice or Operation Enduring Freedom, the war on terrorism which practically aims at Afghanistan was widely condemned. According to Zizek, the war on terrorism is another bold gesture deliberately made by the Bush administration to create a sense of false security. What they have tried to do is to locate the enemy or evil outside the system creating a false belief that everything is safe inside and nothing has really changed. Bombarding Afghanistan in the name of war on terrorism, in the words of Zizek, is an ultimate act of impotence (35). Arundhati Roy asks rather rhetorically, “can you destroy destruction?”(229). Afghanistan already a rubble is turned to dust by this Operation of Enduring Freedom. As Roy puts it, “Infinite Justice for some means Infinite injustice for others. And Enduring Freedom for some means Enduring Subjugation for others” (245). In similar tone Zizek says, “America’s holiday from history was a fake, America’s peace was bought by the catastrophes going on elsewhere” (56). Zizek historically recounts the real need to trace Afghanistan which according to him never existed, “the very existence of Afghanistan is the result of the interplay of foreign powers” (55). The Afghanistan against whom America has declared war was brought up and demolished by the same foreign powers.

The only philosophical solution to the issue at hand is to make a clear and comprehensive introspection or a self examination. Zizek quotes Derrida’s words from the speech made on receiving the Theodor Adorno award on September 22 2001, “My unconditional compassion, addressed at the victims of September 11, does not prevent me from saying aloud: with regard to this crime, I do not believe that anyone is politically guiltless.” Further Zizek concludes that “This self-relating, this inclusion of oneself in the picture, is the only true ‘infinite justice’” (57).

Baudrillard was sharply criticized by some for celebrating the 9/11 attacks as if the Americans deserved it. Actually he has seized upon 9/11 as a proof of how the globalization process leads to internal vulnerability and fractionalization. In the interview titled “This is the Fourth World War”, he defended himself from the anti-Americanism or legitimization of terrorism claiming that

I do not praise murderous attacks...No ideology, no struggle for an objective, not even Islamic fundamentalism, can explain it. I have glorified nothing, accused nobody, justified nothing... I have endeavored to analyze the process through which the unbounded expansion of globalization creates conditions for its own destruction.

To him, globalization is fundamentally a process of homogenization and standardization that crushed “the singular” and heterogeneity. The other is completely erased from the scene in

the name of homogenization for which a good example is the niqab ban sanctioned by France, Belgium and other European nations.

September 11 is a warning, a wakeup call, for that matter, pointing at the obscenities and wrongness of the contemporary world. It doesn't mean to say that the criminals behind this attack should not be hunted down. But it gives a meaning that it is high time we looked into the absurdities of the present systems. When we talk about the development and progress associated with modernity and globalization we need to ask ourselves who are developed and who are progressing. When we point at the fundamentalism of the others, we need to take a look at the features of the same fundamentalism within ourselves. To point out this Zizek conducts a mental experiment using a letter from a seven year old American girl whose father was fighting in Afghanistan. The letter said about her love for her father and her readiness to let him die for the country. The letter was quoted by President Bush as a mark of Patriotism and widely celebrated by the media. At this point Zizek introduces the experiment of imagining an afghan girl instead of the American girl saying the very same words that she loved her father very much and how proud she was about her father fighting for Taliban. Zizek says that these words will be immediately labeled as morbid Islamic fundamentalism which goes to the extent of exploitation and cruel manipulation of innocent children. Zizek concludes that, "Every feature attributed to the Other is already present at the very heart of the USA" (43). The global capitalist liberalism which opposes Muslim Fundamentalism is, quite interestingly, itself a mode of fundamentalism. Roy too makes a call for the shedding of presumptuous arrogance and says that,

It's absurd for the US government to even toy with the notion that it can stamp out terrorism with more violence and oppression. Terrorism is the symptom, not the disease. Terrorism has no country. It's transnational, as global an enterprise as Coke or Pepsi or Nike (233).

If we are able enough to comprehend the issues in this manner viewing things in its totality we can truly call ourselves on the path of Kantian "Enlightenment" where enlightenment is a process in constant need to progress and promises freedom and social justice for all. Habermas' 'unfinished project of modernity' needs to be more inclusive shattering the Western ideals and values of emancipation as the Universal.

Though all these philosophers have similar responses towards terrorism, Jurgen Habermas has a different take. He strongly believes that terrorism is the most extreme version of "distorted communication" (Borradori 64). For him everyday life is structured by the communication practices that help us to understand each other. In the case of communication, we agree on a set of grammatical rules; in the same way, in a community, culture or society, we agree on its own rules. Thus cultural communication takes place. But whenever there is a breakdown or the mutual perspective take doesn't occur for some reason, then that is the beginning of a distortion in communication. Globalization, according to Habermas has intensified communication to a greater degree. But together with that it has put on stage distribution injustice dividing the world into winners, beneficiaries and losers. If there is a distorted communication at hand, terrorism is not the beginning of it. As Derrida points out,

We are caught up in the “vicious circle or repressions”. This vicious circle was not inaugurated in 9/11 but it began even before the eras of colonization passing through the world wars, the Holocaust, countless number of genocides in different parts of the world, wars against terrorism, 9/11, again war against terrorism ad infinitum.

Another important attribute charged against fundamentalism is the often celebrated notion of “intolerance”, tolerance being one of the key concepts of globalization. The French movie *Welcome* (2008), directed by Philippe Lioret tells the story of the lives and dreams of refugees trying to reach the UK from France. In the movie, the young protagonist, a Kurdish boy, makes a desperate attempt to swim and cross the English Channel to meet his lover assisted by a French Swimming coach. The film makes a clear cut statement of how the foreigners or others are not “welcome” at home though the welcome mats are always “welcoming” us at the doorsteps. Jacques Derrida deconstructs the Christian matrix of the notion of tolerance. It has always been a patriarchal gesture in which the other is not accepted as an equal partner but subordinated. He calls it as a kind of “condescending concession” (127). Derrida argues that,

Indeed, tolerance is first of all a form of charity. A Christian charity, therefore, even if Jews and Muslims might seem to appropriate this language as well ... In addition to the religious meaning of tolerance ... we should also mention its biological, genetic or organicist connotations. In France the phrase 'threshold of tolerance' was used to describe the limit beyond which it was no longer decent to ask a national community to welcome any more foreigners, immigrant workers and the like( Borradori 16).

He completely rejects and finds it inappropriate the notion of assimilating the notion of tolerance in secularist politics. To him, “Tolerance is a conditional, circumspect, careful hospitality” (128). Derrida, instead, offers hospitality as the alternative. This is a reworking of a key text by Kant who posed the question of hospitality in international politics in the continual move towards perpetual peace. Borradori summarizes the words of Derrida:

The advantage of hospitality over tolerance is that it lends itself, as forgiveness does, to being posited in the double register of the conditional and the unconditional. In fact, tolerance is, for Derrida, conditional hospitality. By being tolerant one admits the other under one's own conditions, and thus under one's authority, law, and sovereignty. (162)

Derrida optimistically anticipates for a democracy beyond limits of cosmopolitanism moving towards world citizenship. New form of sovereignty needs to be emerged. Rephrasing the words of Roy, if we are to call boys as boys, horses as horses, we have to call war as war and war is never peace. Though muffled voices are heard by way of protest against the US strategies in international affairs, no true resistance has been registered so far or no true resistance has found an explanation. A balanced approach still remains a distant dream. The age of post modern relativism and deconstruction is not yet over. It is infinite knowledge to accept humbly that the Enemy is not outside but within. Let us strive to live in an age of enlightenment not in the enlightened age taking us to a world of perpetual peace.



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