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When was 9/11?

Philosophy and the terror of futurity

Abstract This article offers a close reading of Derrida's response to the events of 11 September 2001, in the interview he conducted immediately afterwards with Giovanna Borradori in the text *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (2003). I argue that this text is significantly different from previous philosophical responses to horrific political events (such as those by Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and Hannah Arendt) insofar as it invites us to contest radically the assumption that philosophy's role is to envision and to realize the 'good'. Instead, Derrida's response provokes us to acknowledge that philosophy's role was only ever to criticize itself, that this is the absolute limit of what philosophy can or should do, and that this work is both genuinely risky and crucially important, because in undertaking a critique of itself philosophy intervenes for democracy, without rules or guarantees, in the very determinations that are the material of political life.

Key words 9/11 · Theodor Adorno · critique · deconstruction · democracy · Jacques Derrida · futurity · philosophy · terror · to-come

For lack of time, but not only time . . . I will have to content myself with stressing on the one hand the terrible ethico-political ambiguity of the text [Walter Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence'], on the other hand the exemplary instability of its status and its signature, what, finally, you will permit me to call this heart or courage (*ce coeur ou ce courage*) or a thinking that knows there is no *justesse*, no justice, no responsibility except in exposing oneself to all risks, beyond certitude and good conscience. (Jacques Derrida, 1992: 51–2)

Introduction

The interview with Jacques Derrida that Giovanna Borradori conducted, edited and published in her text *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (Derrida,

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2003) immediately following the events of the 11th of September 2001 certainly does not mark the first time, or the first place, at which philosophers have reflected on the purpose, role and future of philosophy after a particularly monstrous human tragedy. One might even say that the entire tradition of 20th-century critical theory – as represented most notably by the Frankfurt School – was inaugurated in precisely this way: as an urgent response to the apparent bankruptcy of the philosophical enterprise as a whole in the face of the Holocaust. Thus the title of Borradori's book recalls immediately the opening lines of Theodor Adorno's major work, *Negative Dialectics*, first published in 1966. The very first section of the text is called 'The Possibility of Philosophy', and Adorno begins it as follows:

Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed. The summary judgment that it has merely interpreted the world [Marx], that resignation in the face of reality had crippled it in itself, becomes a defeatism of reason after the attempt to change the world miscarried. Having broken its pledge to be as one with reality or at the point of realization, philosophy is obliged ruthlessly to criticize itself. (1973: 3)

This is quite different from the claim for philosophy that we will find in Derrida, as I hope to make clear in what follows. In fact, I will suggest, if we follow Derrida we will see that Adorno was wrong to suggest that philosophy's task was ever to realize itself and, additionally, that he was wrong to have taken the 'pledge' of philosophy – that is, the pledge to 'be as one with reality' – at its word in the first place. Adorno was certainly not wrong, however, to believe that this *was* most clearly philosophy's aim all along. Since the very beginning of Western thought philosophy has undertaken to grasp in and with knowledge the correct and rightful order of the cosmos and, with the aim of this grasp in view, it has relentlessly sought to criticize the conditions under which our 'all too human' political associations might be rightfully arranged.

For what was the philosophical enterprise, after all, and how did it understand itself? We can go right back to Plato, in this regard, for whom *real* knowledge (as compared to mere opinion), the very stuff of philosophy, only qualifies as such insofar as its object is the real itself: what was, what is and what ought to be – and this was conceived in a timeless, unchanging way. It thus followed for Plato, just as it followed for Augustine some 800 years later, that if we could just get things right, here on earth, by modeling our human arrangements on the truth of the heavenly realm (if we could just realize philosophy), justice and the good would follow. The break signified by the Enlightenment in the 17th century is certainly radical insofar as it secularizes this aim, but it is not so radical that it breaks utterly with philosophy's original purpose to know and to realize the good.

On the contrary, the turn from divine revelation to reason is a turn that does not diminish by one iota the transcendental aim of philosophy to know what ultimately *is* and to use that knowledge to make the good 'real' here on earth. Thus we might turn now to Hegel, for whom (philosophical) reason can be seen, as Richard Beardsworth puts it, as a 'force within history' that 'apprehends the real in form, that tries to shape it' (2005: par. 35) – or, similarly, reason is described there as 'the necessary apprehension of the real *contra* other less rational or irrational forces' (ibid.: par. 37). On Beardsworth's reading of Hegel, therefore, 'the challenge of present critical philosophy is the construction of a world space through universal [that is, through "rational"] institutions' (ibid.: par. 27). So Adorno was by no means wrong to say that philosophy has always aimed to achieve its own realization, which is to say, it has aimed at making the rational real, here on earth. And, if Beardsworth's article of 2005 is any indication, it is equally clear that even today philosophy continues to understand its role and its task in precisely this way.

Adorno was thus quite correct in his assessment of the traditional aim of philosophy, I would submit, as he was as well when he suggested that in the face of its failure to realize itself, philosophy is obliged now ruthlessly to criticize itself. In response to this claim, however, it is important to clarify immediately that, in the first place, for Derrida philosophy is no more obligated to do so now – neither 'now' after the Holocaust nor 'now' after the events of 9/11 – than it was obliged to do so before. On the contrary, this obligation, the philosophical imperative of critique, should be understood not only to precede but indeed to *take precedence over* any dream of philosophy's potential realization. From the point of view expressed in the text *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (2003), as in so many others, the events we call '9/11' (I return below to the issue of this designation) change nothing in this regard, although they do perhaps underscore the urgency of the task. Then one should also clarify, in the second place, that to say philosophy must criticize *itself* is to say that philosophy must criticize *everything*. From the point of view expressed in the text by Derrida, the issue at stake is not that philosophy has broken its 'pledge to be as one with reality', but rather that it has misunderstood it all along.

So there are two divergences that separate this text from a long and venerable line of philosophical reflections on the political purchase of philosophy. One thinks most especially of those texts that undertake this reflection in the face of monstrous human violence – Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (1973), Walter Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' (1996) and Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1973), for example, spring immediately to mind. Derrida's response diverges from this line in the first place insofar as it contests the dream of philosophy's self-realization in either positive or negative terms. And it diverges from this line in the

second place because, while it is no less true for Derrida than it was for Adorno that philosophy must criticize itself, it is for Derrida no more necessary that philosophy do so now than ever before and, furthermore, this *self*-criticism is seen by Derrida as at once a critique of the *world*, rather than as a separate, unrelated, solipsistic undertaking that would remain quite ineffective in the face of power, or violence, or force.

These divergences mark right from the outset a significant difference to be found in this text, in this set of meditations as compared to the others, regarding the purpose, role and future of philosophy after a particularly monstrous human tragedy. This is not to say that the single interview given here accomplishes this enormous difference on its own. Rather, the text refracts the legacy of Derrida's work as a whole, reflecting as he does within it on so many dimensions of his thought as it has developed over the past 40 years. But to the extent that it does refract so many of the complexities of deconstruction, this particular text can be said to be distinguished from others that have spoken to the same theme of the role of philosophy with respect to politics in general and with respect to unimaginable ethical and political violence in particular. It is distinguished above all by virtue of what it allows us to understand, I shall argue, about the misunderstandings under which philosophers have been laboring all along.¹

Let me return, therefore, to the thesis given earlier: that although philosophy has indeed been aiming at and dreaming of its own realization since its inception in the West, this was never its essential task. In what follows I elucidate this claim through an elaboration of the two points outlined above. The first point, which concerns philosophy's essential undertaking, is headed 'the future and other terrors', while the second one, which concerns philosophy's object, is headed 'philosophy is everything and everything is philosophy' (or, alternatively, 'there is nothing outside the text'). If, as I shall try to show, philosophical determinations are nothing more and nothing less than the commonplaces and common senses that are repeated, institutionalized, practiced and ritualized across the spectrum of social and political life, then philosophy's task remains one that is *essentially* critical in nature, rather than one that takes this form now simply because it has defaulted on its truer or more authentic work in the past.

The future and other terrors . . .

The first point of clarification was that for Derrida, unlike for Adorno, it follows that if philosophy must criticize itself, this is not because it has now (finally) reached the moment of its own failure and thus cannot, any longer, do any other. Rather, it is because the imperative of critique

was always philosophy's own obligation to begin with, no more so now than ever before, insofar as philosophy has aimed at the 'good'. What has become increasingly evident is not that the dream of philosophy's realization has failed, but rather that this dream was *itself* a failure, a tragic misdirection of thought, from the start. For what is that dream if not the vision of an ultimate closure, a final end at which history is redeemed, a reconciliation in which the difference between the now and the not-yet is finally overcome? If such a dream were to be accomplished there would be no future, not even the possibility of futurity, at all. This would be the arrival of the worst. Thus, from Derrida's point of view there emerges not a breach but on the contrary a secret and strange *complicity* between philosophy's desire to reach the point of its own realization, and the events that occurred on the 11th of September – events which might be interpreted either as the last violent gasp of the cold war or, alternatively, as the first dreadful breath of a new and terrifying world order, events which might be said to stem from a totalitarian world view and a violent dogmatism, events which are the un-paralleled expression of the worst.

For in what, after all and precisely, does the 'terror' of 9/11 consist? Derrida writes: 'Let me clarify. We are talking about a trauma, and thus an event, whose temporality proceeds neither from a now that is present nor from the present that is past but from an im-presentable to come (*à venir*). A weapon wounds and leaves forever an unconscious scar; but this weapon is terrifying because it comes from the to-come, from the future, a future *so radically to come that it resists even the future of the future anterior*' (2003: 97; emphasis added). It would be better, he implies, easier and ultimately more assimilable, if we could but say, in the future anterior tense, this *will have* been the worst. 'Imagine', he continues,

. . . that the Americans and, through them, the entire world, had been told: what has just happened, the spectacular destruction of two towers, the theatrical but invisible deaths of thousands of people in just a few second[s], is an awful thing, a terrible crime, a pain without measure, but it's all over, it won't happen again, there will never again be anything as awful as or more awful than that. I assume that mourning would have been possible in a relatively short period of time. Whether to our chagrin or our delight, things would have quickly returned to their normal course in ordinary history. But this is not at all what happened. There is traumatism with no possible work of mourning when the evil comes from the possibility to come of the worst, from the repetition to come – though worse. Traumatism is produced by the *future*, by the *to come*, by the threat of the worst *to come*, rather than by an aggression that is 'over and done with'. (2003: 97)

The title of this essay, the question 'When was 9/11?' issues from this insight. 9/11 was not a single event or a single day or a single time, and it is crucial to remember this. The name '9/11' does not stand for

something that simply occurred, once and for all. Rather, it has in the first place – and this, Derrida insists, is precisely what is so terrifying – a future that cannot be foreseen. And it has, too, in the second place, an undeniable past as well. For not only were the events that transpired on that day undertaken by forces trained first and unwittingly armed later by the United States itself, as Derrida argues. Even before this, he points out, the ‘politico-military’ circumstances of the attacks were first created by the United States during the cold war through its ‘alliance with Saudi Arabia and other Arab Muslim countries in its war against the Soviet Union or Russia or Afghanistan’ (2003: 95).

This is an example of what Derrida calls ‘suicidal autoimmunity’, by which he means ‘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’ (2003: 94). The activities of the USA both during and after the cold war, activities which to some extent arguably laid the ground for the attacks called ‘9/11’ years prior to their occurrence, and which are ultimately implicated in a situation in which there is what Derrida calls an ‘uncontrollable proliferation of nuclear capability’ without, any longer, the possibility of a ‘balance of terror’ (2003: 98), are examples of this strange autoimmunological, suicidal tendency. Thus 9/11 ‘itself’ – if one could speak thus – was (or ‘is’) both already and not yet *then*, then *when* at the very moment in history, it is said to have taken place. As Rosalyn Diprose writes, the ‘terror’ at issue here is terrifying because it entails ‘the disabling of the future and an attendant implosion of meaning and Being, not from a single event that we might call 9/11, but without a locatable origin and possibly without end’ (Diprose, 2004: par. 7).

In its effects, moreover, the event called ‘9/11’, as with any genuine ‘event’, ‘inflicts a wound in the everyday course of history’ (2003: 96). What does Derrida mean by this? He means that there is a certain ‘unappropriability’ attached to – which is to say, there is a certain limit to our capacity to ‘comprehend, recognize, identify, describe, determine or interpret on the basis of knowledge’ – that which ‘comes and, in coming, comes to surprise me, to surprise and to suspend comprehension: the event is first of all *that which* I do not first of all comprehend. Better, the event is *that* I do not comprehend, the fact that I do not comprehend . . .’ (2003: 90). ‘There is no event worthy of the name,’ he writes, ‘except insofar as this appropriation *falters* at some border or frontier’ (ibid.). And, to this extent, history itself is ruptured and suspended.

What, then, do we do to overcome the terror of this suspense and this unknowing? We repeat the appellation as though it were an incantation against evil. We repeat it, as Derrida says,

. . . as if to exorcize two times at one go: on the one hand, to conjure away, as if by magic, the ‘thing’ itself, the fear or the terror it inspires (for repetition always protects by neutralizing, deadening, distancing a traumatism . . .)

and, on the other hand, to deny, as close as possible to this act of language and this enunciation, our powerlessness to name in an appropriate fashion, to characterize, to think the thing in question. . . . (2003: 87)

Moreover, he goes on to argue, because we do not know what such an event *is*, because the forces behind it are invisible and anonymous, because the source of the terror cannot be located at one time or in one space and is even of the order of the unconscious, there is a tendency to perceive the worst as 'insubstantial, fleeting, light' and thus as susceptible of being 'denied, repressed, indeed forgotten . . . But all these efforts,' he goes on, 'to attenuate or neutralize the effect of traumatism . . . are but so many desperate attempts. And so many autoimmunitary movements. Which produce, invent, and feed the very monstrosity they claim to overcome' (2003: 99). In other words, what we do to overcome the terror of what Derrida calls the 'horizon of non-knowledge or non-horizon of knowledge' (2003: 94) that violence opens up, is to monumentalize the event as a determinate object that is either, on the one hand, thereby made vulnerable to our mastery and control or that, on the other hand, through denial, repression, or forgetting, can be disarmed and dismissed.

Yet all these efforts (to control, to master, or to deny) notwithstanding – on the contrary, Derrida argues, because of them – what returns is the return of the repressed, what returns is what is coming, which in this case is the worst, the evil, the absolute threat of what Derrida calls mondialization, 'or the worldwide movement of the world, life on earth and elsewhere, without remainder' (2003: 99). This total overcoming whereby nothing is left, whereby no 'balance of terror' is even possible because everything in the world is encompassed by it (2003: 98), is for Derrida the very definition of 'evil', and so we find it described in similar terms in his text *Specters of Marx* as well. There he writes: 'One must constantly remember that this absolute evil (which is, is it not, absolute life, fully present life, the one that does not know death and does not want to hear about it) can take place' (1994: 175). This, of course, is now quite frighteningly close to the very dream of philosophy described above: the dream to 'apprehend the real in form, to try to shape it, to make the rational real', without remainder.

This is precisely why there is such a need, now perhaps more urgently than before, but *no more* now than ever before, for philosophy to criticize itself, to criticize each and every decision that serves to determine what 'is', including the decision to undertake a thing called a 'war' against a thing called 'terrorism' that struck at a time and a place called '9/11'. There is always a need for criticism, that is to say, insofar as philosophy indeed intends to aim at good *rather* than at the evil of a fully present life, a fully realized world in which there is no remainder and, hence, wherein no mortality, or futurity, are possible at all. It is, I submit, only through a critique of our philosophical or conceptual designations of events – such as 'war', 'terrorism', 'sovereignty', 'international

terrorism' and so on – only through a critique of those names we provide for that which comes to surprise us, that which suspends our comprehension and that which consists in our incomprehension, that the possibility for good, as it were, remains open at all. One must therefore, in following Derrida, disagree with Adorno's suggestion that philosophy can only criticize itself insofar as it has missed its chance to change the world. Philosophy's chance to change the world remains with us only and exactly to the extent that it remains critical of its own determinations. For these determinations are everywhere, and that is precisely the point it is necessary to elucidate next.

Philosophy is everything and everything is philosophy

This was the second point of clarification raised above: that, insofar as philosophy is now able – or perhaps now is at least willing – to undertake its own criticism in a genuinely radical way, philosophy can finally become, as it were, the criticism of *everything*. To say this is to say that 'philosophy is everything and everything is philosophy' or, alternatively, it is to say (as Derrida did at what was perhaps the most infamous moment of his career), 'there is nothing outside the text' (1974: 158). What did Derrida mean by this?

Fundamentally, what he meant is that we cannot maintain the strict distinction between text and world, word and world, on which the philosophies of Plato, Augustine, Hegel, Adorno and Beardsworth, the present-day critic, all depend. We cannot maintain this distinction, that is, once we recognize that the conceptual distinctions through which we understand, make sense of and even – one might go as far as to say – perceive the world, are effects of power that is merely sedimented and only seemingly fixed. This, I would submit, is precisely why Derrida insists there *is* an important role for philosophy, for philosophers, in the wake of 'what has happened'. This role is not merely to interpret the world, but rather, more radically, it is to put our interpretations of the world into question. It is not to realize philosophy, but rather to undertake a philosophical interrogation of realization. As Derrida writes: 'The concepts with which this "event" has most often been described, named, categorized, are the products of a "dogmatic slumber" from which only a new philosophical reflection can awaken us, a reflection on philosophy, most notably on political philosophy and its heritage' (2003: 100). The reference here to Immanuel Kant ('dogmatic slumber') is by no means accidental, for what Kant was responding to when he used that phrase was precisely the way in which David Hume's philosophy had awakened him to the awareness that he had taken reality for granted. In answer to that provocation Kant undertook a 'critique' in the philosophical

sense of the term; he undertook an investigation into the conditions of possibility of what 'we can know'. This, I think, is precisely what Derrida is proposing we undertake again, but more radically still.

For what Derrida is talking about here and indeed throughout the text is none other than the way in which *whatever* is attacked, and in the name of *whatever* a counter-attack is undertaken, what is always at stake is the hegemony of meaning. 'What is threatened', he specifies, are not only forces, powers, things; it is

. . . also, more radically still . . . the system of interpretation, the axiomatic, logic, rhetoric, concepts, and evaluations that are supposed to allow one to comprehend and to explain something like 'September 11'. I am speaking here of the discourse that comes to be, in a pervasive and overwhelming, hegemonic fashion, *accredited* in the world's public space. What is legitimated by the prevailing system . . . are thus the norms inscribed in every apparently meaningful phrase that can be constructed with the lexicon of violence, aggression, crime, war, and terrorism . . . (2003: 93; emphasis added)

In other words, on both sides of any antagonism, and at stake within any antagonism, is always the struggle to determine what 'is' or what will count as real. The outcome of this struggle determines, in turn, which discourse will qualify at any given time for the accreditation that authorizes a particular interpretative or hermeneutic frame through which such crucial distinctions as war and peace, crime and lawfulness, legitimate force and illegitimate terror, and so on, all come to have the very concrete and very effective meanings that they have. At this moment it is the United States, as Derrida specifies, on whose *credit* this world order (this political economy of meaning, one might say), depends.

Thus, in what is perhaps the most programmatic moment of the text as a whole, Derrida insists,

I would be tempted to call philosophers those who, in the future, reflect in a responsible fashion on these questions and demand accountability from those in charge of public discourse, those responsible for the language and institutions of international law. A 'philosopher' (actually I would prefer to say a 'philosopher-deconstructor') would be someone who analyzes and then draws the practical and effective consequences of the relationship between our philosophical heritage and the structure of the still dominant juridico-political system that is so clearly undergoing mutation. (2003: 106)

This insistence on the often pernicious co-implication of the literal and the textual (world and word) is what lies behind, or is at stake in, the distinction that Derrida encourages us to heed between 'brute fact' and our 'impressions' (2003: 89). It is the difference between the events that happen, the 'what' that comes, and the meaning of those events for us, who cannot experience them without some unavoidable degree of interpretative force. This distinction allows us to notice something that



Figure 1 The textual production of 9/11 'as such'.

perhaps we did not at first remark, then when we were at first unnerved and upset, then in that instant of our visceral reactions to the images on television – or, for example, to the image on a poster for a talk on 'philosophy and the terror of futurity' (figure 1) – something that we did not at once anticipate, and that we cannot help but take as the real.

For when we apply the distinction between brute fact and impression to the level of the so-called 'real' itself, we begin to notice that what the image does is to hide or occlude, by virtue of its very power to upset, the fact that, as Derrida puts it:

We do not in fact know what we are saying or naming in this way: September 11, *le 11 septembre*, Sept. 11. The brevity of the appellation (September 11, 9/11) stems not only from an economic or rhetorical necessity. The telegram of this metonymy – a name, a number – points out the unqualifiable by recognizing 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. (2003: 86)

These images that we have seen, the images that have been replayed again and again, do not in fact represent the reality of the event, not because they distort it, not because there could be better, more accurate, or more comprehensive images produced that would do so more effectively, but rather because they purport to represent so much *more* than brute facts, so much more than simply what they depict, because they purport to represent the event *as such*, 9/11 *as such*. Here it is important to underscore that 9/11 'as such' is not an object of the real, not a brute fact, at all. As Derek Sayer has put it in another context, '[T]here is nothing in the real to which the image *corresponds*; it *represents* a reality that has already passed away. The image can stand in for this reality not because it resembles it or reproduces it, but because it has supplanted it' (2004: 72).

Of course, one can only imagine, this may seem an absurd thing to say. What could be more real than this building or these buildings, this fire, this colossal scale of destruction, these deaths, the very real, very imminent death of this body, falling to the ground from this window, as depicted on television, in documentaries, on newscasts and in films about the event? These are incontrovertibly of the order of the real. But these – this building, this fire, this body – these are not what the synecdoche '9/11' signifies. '9/11' signifies monstrosity, incomparable violence, unspeakable horror and the inconceivable. And similarly, the images we have seen are intended to signify 'what cannot be redeemed: monstrous crimes against humanity', as Joanna Sheridan has put it (2006).

Significantly, however, the images we have seen and the discourses we have heard of the events of the 11th of September do not actually signify this monstrous truth. Rather, they *produce* it, and they do so in a very particular (in a decidedly political) way. As Derrida pointedly asks, 'What would "September 11" have been without television?' (2003: 108). Thus, just as the images on television monumentalize the violence *as an* 'event' called '9/11' by determining its when, its where and most importantly its what, just as the images produce 9/11 as a 'major event' by

textualizing and conceptually supplanting it – just as these kinds of images and productions can serve in the interests of both the United States and the attackers (for the former by justifying its counter-attack, and for the latter by legitimating and materializing its cause) – so, conversely, does the question ‘When was 9/11?’ *dislodge* (de-sediment) this fixity in the political name of a future (a democracy) to come. It does so precisely by putting into question philosophy’s dogmatic assertion of what ‘is’, and thus opening onto a futurity that is otherwise foreclosed by terror – the terror of a future without futurity, a futureless future, a future, as it were, without hope.

Yet if, as I have argued, one’s inclination is to respond to the non-knowledge that provokes one’s terror by monumentalizing and fixing it, by trying to master it so as to render it ‘harmless’, it remains that this response is not actually limited to, and that it can never be limited to, the violence of a terrorist or war-based attack. We do not respond in this way, in other words, only to the ‘bad’. For the rupture of history, of reason and of deliberation that characterizes the events of 11 September necessarily characterizes *any* event worthy of that name, and this includes, for example, the performative event by virtue of which a state is founded (‘We, therefore . . . do . . . solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are . . . Free and Independent States’) – even in the name of democracy. The madness of which Kierkegaard speaks, Derrida insists, inheres in any and every decision that is made. As he says, the decision ‘always marks the interruption of the juridico- or ethico- or politico-cognitive deliberation that precedes it, that *must* precede it . . . The instant of the decision is madness . . . This is particularly true of the instant of the just decision that must rend time and defy dialectic’ (1992: 26). For, according to Derrida, we must attribute the irreducible, ‘precipitate urgency’ of even ‘the just decision’ to the ‘performative structure of speech act and acts in general as acts of justice or law’, and such acts ‘cannot be just, in the sense of justice, except by founding [themselves] on conventions and so on other anterior performatives . . .’. In other words, just as the image produces the event by determining its time and its place rather than representing it, so too does the speech act that constitutes the ‘just’ decision, no less than the one that constitutes the unjust decision, produce by performing the very meaning it is said to represent. Thus a performative ‘always maintains within itself some irruptive violence’ (1992: 26, 27) and, to this extent, there will be a tendency here to fix what we have initiated in an unalterable, masterable, no-longer contestable form. For ‘democracy’, the ‘just decision’ or the ‘good’ too are philosophical determinations that are everywhere; these too are merely sedimented and only seemingly fixed. If this is so, however, then it follows that we cannot escape the possibility of a strange complicity between democracy in its common

form and violence, or what in another idiom Derrida might call the secret complicity between force and law.

It is for just this reason that, in contrast to a given democratic regime, a specific institution of law, or a determined international order, Derrida advocates instead a democracy to come – a democracy that is not only always *not yet*, but that is also always *already* here-now, as well. What is most significant about this temporal paradox (this impossible ‘not-yet’ and ‘already’, this simultaneous ‘is’ and ‘is-not’), is that it is distinguished everywhere, consistently, from the Kantian regulative Idea, whereby philosophy would seek again to realize itself in a determined and determinate form (see Derrida, 1978: 94; 1992: 25; 2003: 134). Democracy-to-come is not a horizon or a vision or a finality at which we should aim in the future, any more than it is the call for an ideal that once existed in the past. Unlike either such ideal, democracy-to-come is not coming; it has, as Derrida says elsewhere, no horizon of expectation (regulative or messianic). ‘But for this very reason,’ he writes, ‘it *may* have an *avenir*, a ‘to-come,’ which I rigorously distinguish from the future that can always reproduce the present.’ Indeed, he goes on, ‘It will always have it, this *à-venir*, and always has. Perhaps it is for this reason that justice, insofar as it is not only a juridical or political concept, opens up for *l’avenir* the transformation, the recasting or refounding of law and politics’ (1992: 27).

What Derrida calls the democracy-to-come (2003: 120), then, in contrast to a determined and institutional democracy on the one hand and, on the other hand, to the violence that seeks to predetermine history and to *govern* its fate – in contrast, in other words, either to the violence associated with the events of 9/11 that on many accounts signal the very essence of totalitarianism (Arendt, 1973; Nancy, 1991) or to the good at which philosophy has aimed – is, it is true, ‘very little – almost nothing’, as Derrida has put it in another context (1978: 80). But this ‘very little’ is in fact everything, for it is the promise of a future or, better, it is the promise of futurity as such. What is ‘almost nothing’ is the decision that is not *yet* taken, and that is therefore with us now *as* a possible future, but only insofar as what is, what is real or has been realized, is submitted to philosophical interrogation by the radical ‘not-yet’ of what is unrecognizably to-come.

Nonetheless, so understood the very possibility of the future, of futurity as such, is potentially terrifying too. As Derrida insists, ‘one must always say perhaps for justice’, for ‘justice as the experience of absolute alterity is unrepresentable, but it is the chance of the event and the condition of history’ (1992: 27).² This is precisely the ‘terror of futurity’ to which my subtitle refers, insofar as the to-come is without guarantee and indeed opens too onto ‘the night of non-knowledge and non-rule’ (1992: 26). What are we to make of this apparent overlap between ‘democracy’ in

its Derridean sense and the terror of a violent, irruptive event, the terror of the worst, which is a future without remains? Does the 'terrible ethico-political ambiguity' (referred to in the epigraph, above) that Derrida attributes to Benjamin's text apply as much to his own?

The answer, I think, is no, insofar as a difference between the violent event of 'terrorism' and the 'just' event of democracy – wherever and whenever it has been (un)justifiably instantiated, wherever and whenever history has been ruptured or rent in the name of freedom – can and must be heard. To be sure, the point is not that one is an event, an *épokhè* or suspension, or a wound in history, while the other is not, for this, we have seen, is characteristic of them both. Nor is the difference that in one case – that of the democracy to come, for example – we are guided by reason and knowledge, whereas in the case of the terror of the 'worst' we are not. This characterization cannot be applied in the first case any more than it can in the second. Rather, the difference between them is ultimately the difference between, on the one hand, an unqualified violence that seeks to pre-determine history and to govern the future entirely (as Arendt characterizes totalitarianism in its purest form [1973]) and, on the other hand, an arguably equally unqualified violence that seeks to open up history to its own future contestation by refounding the grounds of political association and legitimacy. Both are 'events' in the Heideggerian sense in which Derrida has been mobilizing the term; both are beyond knowledge, beyond calculation, and beyond what can be experienced or possibly foreseen. But in the first case the futurity of the future is foreclosed (and this is just why we fear the worst), whereas in the second case the risk of futurity, the terror of futurity, is met.

For this meeting or encounter to occur, however, one must maintain what Derrida calls an unconditional hospitality towards what is to come. 'Pure and unconditional hospitality, hospitality itself, opens or is in advance open to someone who is neither expected nor invited, to whomever arrives as an absolutely foreign visitor, as a new arrival, non-identifiable and unforeseeable, in short, wholly other' (2003: 128–9). As he elaborates:

Paradox, *aporia*: these two hospitalities are at once heterogeneous and indissociable. Heterogeneous because we can move from one to the other only by means of an absolute leap, a leap beyond knowledge and power, beyond norms and rules. Unconditional hospitality is transcendent with regard to the political, the juridical, perhaps even to the ethical. But – and here is the indissociability – I cannot open the door, I cannot expose myself to the coming of the other and offer him or her anything whatsoever without making this hospitality effective, without in some concrete way, giving *something determinate*. This determination will thus have to reinscribe the unconditional into certain conditions. Otherwise, it gives

nothing. What remains unconditional or absolute (*unbedingt*, if you will) risks nothing at all if conditions (*Bedingungen*) do not make of it some thing (*Ding*). Political, juridical, and ethical responsibilities have their place, if they take place, only in this transaction – which is each time unique, like an event – between these two hospitalities, the unconditional and the conditional. (2003: 129–30)

It is precisely this paradox – that the unconditional must negotiate with the conditional – that informs what Derrida calls ‘the democracy to come’ as well. Unlike either a classical or a more contemporary idea of democracy, this cannot be said to entail a given set of procedures or a given institutional form. Instead it is no more, but it is also no less, than the promise of what the self-critique of philosophy reveals, to the extent that ‘democracy to come’ signifies the promise of what is beyond what we can calculate, experience or foresee, or – to put it another way – to the extent that a ‘democracy to come’ is *only* what is opened up (only ever here-now, only ever each time in an absolutely singular way) by and for the radical question of the future, and it is so opened then *only* when and only for as long as the future indeed remains in question.

To just this extent, the opening or futurity signaled by the phrase democracy-to-come, and the encounter between the conditioned and the unconditional that Derrida advocates, necessarily bring with them the risk of a(nother) final solution, another genocide, another massive destruction on a large scale, too. But it is only by being open to risk of the most radical sort, to the risk of opening itself, that there can be what Derrida calls futurity at all. Terror is always here now, where we are – it remains the terrifying possibility we face – but so, too, is the *promise* of democracy.

Conclusion

On the basis of the analysis I have proposed, two conclusions arguably can be drawn. The first is that critical political philosophy can and indeed *must* intervene in the dogmatic fixity of those rhetorical, lexical, semantic or conceptual (Derrida, 2003: 105) closures that exist. This includes – and, one almost wants to add, it most especially includes – those philosophical-empirical closures that are given or made in the name of democracy. For it is only in the opening of a radical promise, only in the opening of a radical futurity, that any possibility of democracy can live on, despite its risks.

The second conclusion to be drawn is that if critical political philosophy *can* intervene in this way, it remains that it can *only* intervene in this way. In other words, on the basis of the reading of Derrida’s thought I have given here, I propose that philosophy must resist the urge to be

deluded by visions of its own grandeur; it must resist the urge to forge a new order that is conceived as merely out of reach *now*, as not *yet* within our grasp, as though the philosopher could formulate that ideal horizon towards which we must aim. It is not at all clear that Derrida himself does not give in to this impulse, and increasingly so, in his later works. For example, in the interview under discussion Derrida directly links what he calls a 'faith in the possibility of this impossible' "thing", a faith in this "thing" that is 'undecidable from the point of view of [the] knowledge, science, and conscience that must govern all our decisions', directly to 'the horizon . . . of an international institution of law and an international court of justice with their own autonomous force' (2003: 115). This link is oddly unsatisfactory, given what Derrida suggests throughout the text. It elides utterly the very problematic way in which, on Derrida's own analysis, an unqualified force necessarily inheres in law and thus is no less present in the so-called 'democracy' of international institutions than it is in national ones. Democracy's 'to-come' must be distinguished from these, not simply identified with them in a programmatic future, or else one will have reverted in the end to the same potentially totalitarian dream for philosophy with which one began.

Against Adorno, therefore – and even against a certain eschatological and teleological tendency in Derrida himself (one which, perhaps, cannot be helped, but that is another question) – I maintain that philosophy does not live on because the moment to realize it was missed. Philosophy lives on, rather, because its task is, and was always, at once impossible and interminable and yet, at the same time, absolutely indispensable for the future-to-come.

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Notes

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- 1 I include Adorno here, as he can arguably still be said to be speaking on behalf of the tradition. A careful and necessary clarification of this claim would make reference to the various sorts of futurities I develop in what follows. Briefly put, one might argue either that Adorno's philosophy is still undertaken from the view of redemption, the view of an ultimate reconciliation, notwithstanding the fact that it is negative and dialectical rather than positive and linear in its movement and its force, or that what he proposes must be understood as simply in the order of the impossible. In either case, however, what he proposes must be differentiated from the order of a Derridean 'im-possible' – that never-yet futurity that issues from the here-now, rather than from or as a future. It is beyond the scope of this article to treat adequately the issue of this difference: Adorno's implicit choice between redemption and impossibility on the one hand, and the gesture towards an 'im-possible' futurity that I propose distinguishes Derrida's thought by contrast, on the other. However, with respect to the latter, see Derrida (2003: 134).
- 2 'No doubt', he adds, this would be 'an unrecognizable history . . . for those who believe they know what they're talking about when they use this word, whether it's a matter of social, ideological, political, juridical or some other history' (1992: 27–8). As I have been arguing, however, such 'historical events' as '9/11' often signal quite the opposite: that we do not in fact know what we are talking about when we monumentalize an event as such, and so these discourses are often politically loaded and politically effective in a variety of incalculable ways.

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