

Between Hope and Terror: Habermas and Derrida Plead for the Im/Possible

To Jacques Derrida in memoriam (1930–2004)

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ABSTRACT: His Paulskirche speech on October 14, 2001, marked Habermas's turn to public criticism of the unilateral politics of global hegemony as he promoted a global domestic and human rights policy. Two years later he joined ranks with Jacques Derrida against the eight "new" Europeans who lent signatures to the second Gulf War. Lest we misjudge the joint letter by Habermas and Derrida as peculiarly Eurocentric and even oblivious to the worldwide nature of the antiwar protest on February 15, 2003, we must read their new alliance in the context of its emergence: Derrida and Habermas introduce a corrective that neither invokes the *geographical* heart of Europe nor the cosmopolitan *westernization* of the world. In this essay, first, I revisit the imaginary conversation between Habermas and Derrida from 1995. Second, I highlight the persisting differences in their post-2001 thinking, pairing up key political concepts that illustrate how each thinker hopes for that which is to come after the death of God. Third, I press ahead to a new critical theory that articulates *postsecular* hope after the death of God.

His Paulskirche speech on October 14, 2001, marked Habermas's turn to public criticism of the unilateral politics of global hegemony as he promoted a global domestic and human rights policy. Two years later he joined ranks with the consistently pro-human rights and internationally responsible European voices, a motley crew ranging from Umberto Eco and Gianni Vattimo to Jacques Derrida and Pope John Paul II. Against the eight "new" Europeans who lent signatures to the second Gulf War and against Donald Rumsfeld, Habermas and Derrida mobilized the "old" European values, thus meriting an ironic title of "new conservatives."

Oddly, the most vocal of Europe's humanists and human rights activists, Václav Havel, joined the eight "new" Europeans, although, in a conspicuously underreported speech to the NATO summit in Prague (2002), he indirectly taunted the Atlantic alliance: Is there not some danger that they could return to the world historical stage in a farcical echo of the Soviet "brotherly" internationalist help to Czechoslovakia in 1968?¹ With his pro-war signature, Havel either lost existential bearings or political nerve and ended his dissident journey as Rumsfeld's, rather than Derrida's, "new" European. But it was just as odd for market conservative Václav Klaus, who replaced his nemesis, Havel, at the Prague Castle in the spring of 2003, to land on the side of the vocal war critics (cf. Matušík 2004).

Lest we misjudge the joint letter by Habermas and Derrida as peculiarly Eurocentric and even oblivious to the worldwide nature of the antiwar protest on February 15, 2003, we must read their new alliance in the context of its emergence. It is the calls for a "beginning in the core of Europe" and "the birth of a European public sphere" that concern the critics of this letter (PWE 291). Critics of Derrida and Habermas rightly demand the provincializing rather than recentering of Europe. What shocks "new" Europeans is that when the core of Europe left Prague, as with Havel's military humanism, the European heart was transplanted westward, where Heidegger once situated Central Europe between the pincers of the East and West. In this geographical shift of Europe's heart, Czechs must hear the echoes of the Munich and Yalta betrayals. As true as such echoes are, they also mislead. Derrida and Habermas introduce a corrective margin of sobriety against the eight European pro-war renegades. The corrective neither invokes the *geographical* heart of Europe nor the cosmopolitan *Westernization* of the world. Speaking *to* the emerging European public sphere, rather than *for* the world, does not implicate them in ignoring the global character of the mass demonstrations. Rather, the pro-war Europe became at once falsely self-centered and provincial. The context for understanding the new alliance between Derrida and Habermas must be the *gulash postcommunism*² with its Faustian potions of populist ethnocentrism and warrior cosmopolitanism.

First, I want to revisit the imaginary conversation between Habermas and Derrida from 1995. Second, I will highlight the persisting differences in their post-2001 thinking, pairing up key political concepts that illustrate how each thinker hopes for that which is to come after the death of God. Third, I press ahead to a new critical theory that not only articulates postsecular hope *after* the death of God but also meditates earnestly on the *impossible*.

1. WHICH EUROPE? WHOSE ENLIGHTENMENT?

I imagined in 1995 an improbable encounter between "Habermas's fallibilist self-limitation of the Western Enlightenment project (its revolutionary promise

of social equality) and “Derrida’s multicultural-democratic intensification of this same project (refusing identity-logic in culture and capital-logic in the economy).” I dreamed that “critical post/modern social theorists and activists” forge one day “new political coalitions.” I named this imaginary project a “multicultural enlightenment” or “radical multicultural democracy.” In the first round of my imagined encounter, I solicited from Habermas the procedural conditions for the possibility of dialogic reciprocity, as these are required by deliberative democracy. Derrida’s deconstructive critique found home in Habermas’s procedural institutions, thereby curbing the dangers of idealist unreality and political ineffectiveness. Intensifying the promise of democracy, deconstruction assisted Habermas to bring the exiled otherness back to the very ideal of communication community. By letting *political capital* (the regulative idea of communicative pluralism and deliberative democracy) tremble, Derrida flung open the shutters of the European club to its other. In the second round of my imagined encounter, I noted how in the post-1989 landscape the post-Heideggerian Derrida took the wind from the post-Marxian Habermas. Derrida turned to Marx with the kerygma of an unbelieving centurion proclaiming the dying god’s promise of redemption. Derrida chastised *economic capital* at the moment when one became tired of Marx just as much as Europeans once were wearied of *all* religion after the Thirty Years War. I argued that Derrida’s deconstruction of the market gospel required Habermas’s permanent democratic revolution to become firmly lodged in the institutions of procedural justice. From the opposite side, “by joining a post/modern Marxian hope with a Kierkegaardian fear and trembling, . . . [Derrida] stands a double guard against the new world order cynicism and revolutionary fanaticism” (Matušík 1998: 51, 60–2). September 11 outran any “imagined encounter between Derrida and Habermas” (60). The global war on terror threw them together against transatlantic globalism. What “hope, fear, and trembling” (50) about 1989 materialized in their post-2001 alliance? Drawing on their post-2001 texts, I wish to address the Eurocentric charge by focusing on Habermas’s hope for Europe’s second chance and Derrida’s “new figure of Europe” (A 116).

First, in a letter to the editor, Habermas (NWE) brings down Rumsfeld’s blasphemy of “new Europe” as quickly as it is uttered. Habermas defends the “old Europe” that has learned through secularization, defeat, and reflective self-limitation how to vanquish its own ambitions for empire and colonial domination. The old imperial “Europe” becomes retrogressively new: “It is a remarkable change of front lines.” Here Habermas ironizes vintage Orwellian doublespeak: “when Rumsfeld—the politician of the externally enforced ‘regime change’ and the theoretician of ‘preemptive strike’—calls this new Europe the ‘old’ one.”

Second, it is Rumsfeld who shifts the European center of gravity to the East just when the one-time captive nations partly fearfully, partly eagerly replace the vassal relation to the Soviet empire with the one across the Atlantic. This is the

context in which Derrida (A) and Habermas (PWE, FT) plead for a rebirth of Europe from its core. What does it mean to begin from the *core* or *heart* of Europe against the moving center of its gravity? In the first place, Habermas explains in an interview (IEM), “the core of Europe is at first a technical expression coined in the 1990s by German experts on foreign affairs, Schäuble and Lamers, . . . at the time the integration process again started to take place, in order to recall the leading role of the six founding members of the European Union.” Second, “the core of Europe,” by defining the final form of the integration process in a unified foreign policy, responds to the divisive pressure of U.S. unilateralism. Third, and this is my more philosophical reading, at “the core” lies the care for the soul and polis in at once a Socratic and a democratic sense. To constitute oneself and the city in justice cannot geographically privilege nation (France/Germany), continent (Europe), industrial hemisphere (North), world axis (Occident). A post-Eurocentric Europe requires minimally five *core subjects* in the curriculum of just constitution:

- *Multicultural and postcolonial world without imperial ambitions
- *Receptivity to the radical otherness of the other
- *Decisive opposition to the violence of terror
- *Secularized politics
- *Ancillary role of critical theorists, philosophers, deconstructors

The first two core subjects should deflect any easy condemnation of the alliance between Habermas and Derrida as just another recentring exercise.³ Responsibility for one’s history of exclusion, violence, and promise can be read charitably as accounting for oneself in humility before one can say anything to anybody else. Derrida’s “new figure of Europe” relinquishes all *terra*, territory, or terror as part of its figure. Decisions on the future of Europe’s traditions inevitably involve the struggle against its own demons of exclusion, assimilation, and murder. The idea of Europe must draw on its dangerous memory of failed empires, colonialism, religious intolerance, and the Holocaust. Such dangerous remembrance of its own victims both deconstructs the gestures of hegemony waived from the other side of the Atlantic and invites hope (A 116). The heart of *this* ‘Europe’ hurries the incomplete transatlantic Enlightenment against its imperial temptations (A 117). Only in this sense may Derrida and Habermas (PWE 292) prompt “the avant-gardist core of Europe” to become a “locomotive” of the greater inclusion of the other. Against this backdrop, a provincialized Europe must not become a closed fortress of affluence nor sleep with military humanism. The shared experience of struggle produces a “post-national constellation” that lends life to a new mentality, but with the following anti-imperial centers of gravity: self-limitation of state sovereignty, care for social welfare to resolve class conflict, and trust in the achievement of international law (PWE 294). The new multicultural enlightenment acts as an imperative of learning: “Europe” ought

to become other than its imperial heading (OH), as this new mentality alone can allow the formation of the common European identity that would be in solidarity with worldwide anti-war demonstrations:

A culture which for centuries has been beset more than any other by conflicts between town and country, sacred and secular authorities, by the competition between faith and knowledge, the struggle between states and antagonistic classes, has had to painfully learn how differences can be communicated, contradictions institutionalized, and tensions stabilized. The acknowledgments of differences—the reciprocal acknowledgment of the other as Other in his otherness—can also become a feature of a common identity. (PWE 294)

Each European nation underwent its history of bloody empire striving and “the loss of its empire” and colonies. With that loss, most Europeans, Derrida and Habermas conclude, are able to “assume a reflexive distance from themselves.” This is elusive for the North American experience because of its young history and incomplete secularization. The European mentality is borne of witnessing its uprooting violence in modernity, apprehending victories “from the perspective of the defeated” (PWE 297). The plea is a vanishing point of self-corrective, “old” European learning for a new figure of Europe. “This could support the rejection of Eurocentrism and inspire the Kantian hope for a global domestic policy” (PWE 297).

In the third core subject of their plea and new alliance, Derrida and Habermas’s opposition to terror emerges as more consistent than the hegemonic war on terror they oppose. Habermas drives home that there is no moral excuse for terror; since terrorism is neither a war nor a private criminal act, it should be treated more like a political deed (FT 34). Communicative action can have essentially (in the *telos* of speech oriented to an understanding with another) no truck with violence. Communicative ideality requires that we can overcome the structural violence issuing from material inequalities and distortions by power politics. Habermas argues that there are no alternatives to the uses of violence except developing “world citizenry” and strengthening its requisite institutions like the United Nations and World Court (FT 35–9). He offers no kind words for the “self-centered course of a callous superpower” with its strategy of unilateral war. Habermas (PWE 296) and Derrida (A 117) not only refuse all normative bases for the death penalty, viewing it as a covert survival of religious fundamentalism in politics, but also show how the core curriculum inscribes “the ban on capital punishment as a condition for entrance” into the ideal polis. Should decentered Europe ever require accepting the retributive and fundamentalist virus back into the core? The U.S. death penalty and the language of crusades that accompanied the U.S. declaration of the war on terror were snubbed by most commonsense Europeans as at best medieval and at worst barbaric, and yet these critical attitudes are normative rather than anti-American.

Derrida notes that terror brings “semantic instability” to concepts, borders, as it is itself “self-escalating” (A 102, 107). Terror uses the worst of “technocapitalist modernity for the purposes of religious fanaticism.” He judges that terror carries “no future . . . for the ‘world’ itself” (A 113). Bracketing all theoretical undecidability, Derrida decisively enters into the post/modern binary and in so doing joins Habermas on the side of democratic institutions:

If I had to take one of two sides and choose in a binary situation, well, I would . . . take the side of the camp that, in principle, by right of law, leaves a perspective open to perfectibility in the name of the “political,” democracy, international law, international institutions, and so on. . . . Even in its most cynical mode, such an assertion still lets resonate within it an invincible promise. (A 114)

In the fourth core subject of their plea and new alliance, Derrida and Habermas detect the key issue between terror and hope in one-sided, incomplete secularization. Derrida defends

“Europe,” even if in quotation marks, because, in the long and patient deconstruction required for the transformation to-come, the experience Europe inaugurated at the time of the Enlightenment . . . in the relationship between the political and the theological or, rather, religious, . . . will have left in European political space absolutely original marks with regard to religious doctrine . . . over the political. (A 116f.)

In this instance (Matušík 1993, 2001), Derrida (A135, GD) distinguishes with Kierkegaard religious doctrines or belief systems from faith. Derrida shoots a Socratic torpedo shock⁴ into the permanent terror alerts by claiming that the demarcation between belief and faith exists neither in Arab, Muslim, or Far East nations, nor in North America and Israel. The “post–September 11” division comes down for him to “two political theologies” of the terrorists and the U.S. war on terror at one end, and “Europe” that has opted out of the “double theologico-political program” at the other end. In place of the intolerant, provincial, and dangerously global U.S. discourse on evildoers, axis of evil, infinite justice, and the civic religious pledges of allegiance and appeals to “God bless America,” the core subjects of secularization inaugurated a discourse beyond the empire centrism of the theological politics (A 117f.).

Derrida and Habermas (PWE 296) do not cover over the sense in which they behold the “old” European politics as more sober than the “new” regime changes exported by the United States, whose values they consider Eurocentric in the pregnant sense: “For us [Europeans], a president who opens his daily business with open prayer, and associates his significant political decisions with a divine mission, is hard to imagine.” Europeans “possess a keen sense of the ‘dialectic of enlightenment,’” they no longer believe naively the gospel of technological progress and unregulated markets to deliver the world to justice (PWE 295). Habermas

judges universalism sought by all empires as a transfigured, deprived political way of recapturing the singular cosmologies of world religions. Fundamentalism, as well as the unilateral global policy that opposes it, can be defined by the very same claim as “a stubborn attitude that insists on the political imposition of its own convictions and reasons.” Fundamentalism and hegemonic politics are postmodern phenomena that repress “cognitive dissonance” of the plural world through a “holy” or nationalist intolerance. Secularization can stabilize a “nonexclusive place within a universal discourse shared with other religions” (FT 31, cf. FK 102).

In the fifth core subject of their plea and new alliance, Derrida’s philosopher aspires to be neither a king nor an idealistically aloof adviser to the king nor a materially pedestrian consumer of the myth of the given. A deconstructor inhabits the discipline of responsible self-reflection, demands accountability from the powers that be, and contributes critical reflection to the life of the polis (A 106). A deconstructor is thus akin to a critical theorist who acts as witness (Matušík 2001: 139–56). The new alliance between deconstructor and critical theorist ushers to no philosophical or party vanguard. Derrida and Habermas begin where my imaginary dialogue set up for them concluded:

What emerges from this encounter is neither a rejection of Derrida or Habermas, nor a simple recipe or eclecticism. Perhaps, *we* receive an invitation to renew critical social theory with the existential pathos and material concretion of the young Marcuse. . . . I cannot know what shape political coalitions among critical post/modern social theorists and activists will take. One has learned already that not to make steps in concrete hope, fear, and trembling is to evade the task. Assuming its challenge in this fashion raises new specters of deconstructive and critical theory (Matušík 1998, 64).

2. WHAT IS TO COME?

A more than superficial difference between Derrida and Habermas turns on the nuance of how each invokes hope after Nietzsche’s death of God. Habermas hopes with Kant’s Enlightenment for the possibility of discursive democracy. When Derrida denudes even this disenchanting and linguistified hope, he hopes against hope for the *impossible*. While such hope, even as it comes *after* secularization, is postsecular, Derrida’s *impossibility* does not oppose Habermas’s possibility. I clarify this nuance under three umbrellas: secularization, radical democracy, and postsecular hope (cf. RR 152; Matušík 1998: 40, 49–64, 135–41, 228, 247).

Secularization. What the two thinkers secularize is an already secular exile of God—the God who was first sent out from the monastic enclosure to attend the world of needs and then, along with church property, was handed over to the secular affairs of the state. Secularization of cultural and social modernity

completes the exile of God from the public sphere. Habermas (RR 159, cf. FK 103–5, 109ff.), always-already irritated with Heidegger for gesturing toward that God who alone can save us now, proposes a cooperative, translatable relationship between the claims of knowledge and those of faith. Habermas values religion as a semantic reservoir of meanings. The boundaries, at once porous and treacherous (FK 109, 113), between secular and religious claims—like the tracks in the sand left by the desert wanderings of the exiled God—require mutual perspective taking and from it issuing mutual recognition between faith and knowledge. The secularizing reflection supplants the exiled God (FK 104). Reflection evinces the capacity to raise and defend unconditioned validity claims to truth, rightness, and sincerity. This linguistified God becomes but the placeholder of the vanishing point traversed by reflection. Into the empty space vacated by transcendent divinity, Habermas projects the ideal communication community. The ideal exists neither within the world (God has been gradually exiled from it) nor in some beyond (the vanishing point of secularizing reflection closed the gap between this world and transcendence beyond it). The ideal of this exiled, secularized, dead God undergoes, however, repeated social resurrection of what is to come *after*: the ideal comes to life in actual discourses when the formal-pragmatic placeholder acts as the final court of appeal to which speakers and hearers offer reasons for their claims. Perhaps Habermasian transcendence on this side of the world betrays the neurotic compulsion-repetition of Freud, who would be suspicious, even in Habermas’s linguistified ideality, of the surviving phantom limb of religious longing (FK 111).

When he confesses the disconsolate character of communicative reason, Habermas closes ranks with the secular theologians of the death of God. That a translation relationship ought to be possible between such different modes of existence as faith and reason, is something the secularizing reflection optimistically assumes. Reflection gradually strips religions of their self-enclosed claims to be the comprehensive worldview: “religious consciousness itself undergoes a learning process . . . [and becomes] modernized by a way of cognitive adaptation to the individualistic and egalitarian nature of the laws of the secular community.” This learning ought to accomplish the “renunciation of violence” that used “to push forward religious beliefs inside or outside the community.” We replace violence with the “acceptance of the voluntary character of religious association” (Habermas, ID 6). Reflection coexists side by side with the absolutizing imaginary of belief systems. Beliefs continue to raise absolute claims to truth, rightness, and sincerity. Secularization demands that the belief claims learn mutual tolerance. Tolerance also demands its price: the abdication of missionary zeal towards infidels or heretics (ID 7).

Derrida depicts September 11 as an incomprehensible, unpresentable “event” of “nonknowledge” and “pure singularity” that we can neither name, date, nor

utter (A 90–4). He shows how this radical “limit” on experience and knowledge completes the death of God. It likewise limits what may be hoped for as possible. Terror’s wounding is “infinite” because it cannot be mourned or redeemed by any known or possible future to come. While secularization yielded reflection on the possibility of the Enlightenment hope to come, terror inflicts a threefold suicidal destruction of reflection’s autoimmunity.

The first moment aggressively attacks the “symbolic head” of modern economy and power from within its own ground and with its own means (A 95f.). The second moment wounds without granting a future, ushering the present age into trauma without the possibility of earthly consolation at least through mourning. The third moment moves in the vicious circle of terror renewed with every attempt to fight it. All three moments arrive at the unnameable and “im-presentable to come” (A 97–100). For the lack of better words, I borrow from Kant the concept of radical evil: This possibility *is* of “the worst” to come. Its terror, rather than hope, lies in “the repetition to come—though worse” (A 97). Acts of terror/war on terror deliberately move in the circle of a “suicidal autoimmunity” (A 95). The death of God has self-escalated. I borrow from Kant the concept of radical evil, while with Derrida I want to think against Kant and Habermas of the “diabolical” acts as something humans are willing to do freely. Derrida pleads for the impossible against the grain of the human failure to be God and its irreversible wound.

Radical democracy. Whereas Habermas (DIL) presents democracy as a disconsolate regulative ideal of deliberative and procedural justice, Derrida says that democracy-to-come requires faith and hope (A 119). Habermas reforms national sovereignty in the direction of popular procedural sovereignty. Derrida’s waiting for democracy does not envision an arrival of a political regime. Democracy-to-come is a contested space, an event without history or visible horizon. Habermas redresses the violent effects of one-sided secularization (FK) by enlarging the sphere of public tolerance (FT 37–41, ID, DIL). Derrida insists on “gift, forgiveness, hospitality” in the public sphere (A 120f.). I want to pair Habermas’s concepts of democracy with Derrida’s:

- *Habermas’s regulative ideal with Derrida’s event
- *Habermas’s tolerance with Derrida’s hospitality
- *Habermas’s world citizenship with Derrida’s democracy-to-come
- *Habermas’s self-limited sovereignty with Derrida’s alliance beyond sovereignty
- *Habermas’s Enlightenment’s possibility with Derrida’s gift’s impossibility
- *Habermas’s procedural justice with Derrida’s forgiveness

The key nuance in each pair pivots between Habermas’s world cosmopolitanism, which assumes shared, divisible, and self-limiting sovereignty, and Derrida’s deconstruction of the state form itself for the sake of “an alliance . . . beyond the ‘political.’” In Derrida, democracy-to-come gathers singular beings beyond the limits of cosmopolitanism and citizenship (A 130, cf. SM). Habermas’s democ-

racy radicalizes the Stoic, Pauline, and Kantian ideals of human sociality under the regulative limits of secular globalization. Derrida secularizes the horizon of sovereignty those same ideals still assume. For him the Greco-Roman, Pauline, and Kantian imaginaries of world citizenship (along with Carl Schmitt who so worries Habermas) transmit the legacy of the political onto-theology (A 121ff.). Democracy-to-come after the death of God for Derrida sheds even the popular aspirations to sovereignty and strives for “a universal alliance or solidarity that extends beyond the internationality of nation-states and thus beyond citizenship” (A 124).⁵

Derrida is neither an antidemocratic prophet of the death of God nor a cynical power politician advising the elites how use the pseudoreligiosity of the Grand Inquisitor to induce intoxication in conservative moralists and pliable masses (cf. Postel 2003). Derrida’s alliance with Habermas guards against the new political onto-theology of sovereignty. Derrida cautions Habermas that “tolerance” can become but “a conditioned, circumspect, careful hospitality” of the religiousness of those in power. He invites into community “whomever arrives as an absolutely foreign *visitor*, as a new *arrival*, nonidentifiable and unforeseeable, in short wholly other.” This is hardly an abstract otherness. A new figure of Europe, more than an “invitation” into the regulative-ideal club of the possible, is a “visitation” of the unexpected and uninvited (A 129) and a task to welcome strangers beyond duty and law (A 132f.).

Postsecular hope. The coming of the im/possible turns on the margin between what was secularized without violent reminder of onto-theological-political programs and what is left over after acts of terror/war on terror. The slash stands for the invisible margin, not undecidability between Habermas and Derrida. That margin is faith purified of imaginary’s belief in its own power. If Derridean visitations conjure up angels, if hospitality echoes the biblical prophets, then the plea must be more than a spiritless prayer. I recognize in this uncanny post-Nietzschean guest the postsecular return of the religious without religion (Caputo 2001, 109–12, 132–41), hope given for the sake of those without hope (Benjamin in Marcuse 1991, 257).

Habermas’s impassioned plea for a fallible Enlightenment harkens back to a nondestructive secularization that *invited* reason and faith to coexist in tolerance and freedom from terror (FK 108–11). Now that the terror of the twenty-first century revealed the fundamentalist abyss of Nietzsche’s death of God, coming to terms with hope becomes our difficult task. After too many genocides, we grasp with greater acuity what Nietzsche’s madman meant by saying that we were not yet up to our own deed. Fundamentalism marks a disconsolate return of this abysmal God in the form of a punishing superego and a longing imaginary that together demand adherence to power, doctrine, and discipline. Habermas calls “fundamentalist”

those religious movements which, given the cognitive limits of *modern* life, nevertheless persist in practicing or promoting a return to the exclusivity of

premodern religious attitudes. Fundamentalism lacks the epistemic innocence of those long-ago realms in which world religions first flourished, and which could somehow still be experienced as limitless (RR 151, cf. FK 102).

For Derrida, fundamentalism responds to the death of God in acts of terror/the war on terror, and this is why terror has no *terra* and no future (A 118).

Derrida and Habermas venture into the postsecular desert of religion without religion. How they venture defines their difference. Habermas's religious discourse is but a phantom limb—a “musically tone-deaf” (FK 114) and unredeemable absence of the impossible. What alone can be redeemed for him lies in human solidarity—the profanized religious ideal of communication community. Non-destructive secularization must translate religious and rational claims into the language of communicative freedom. Equal freedoms shared among humans require, more than the death of God, that the divine throne remains empty. Not a psychoanalytically vacuumed desire for oneself as *causa sui*, Habermas's communicatively responsible atheism resists both terror and fundamentalism that try to appropriate the place of God (FK 113ff.). After depth psychology revealed that our desire to be God died on the analyst's couch in at once transferred and disappointed desire, that dying divinity can still save by absence. Habermas's communicative ideal of community is disconsolate but not inherently predestined to celebrate the human failure (see n. 5 below, cf. Žižek 2003, 145–71).

Can Heidegger's own postsecular absencing of God come to a truce with Habermas's disconsolate ideal? Or must we interpret even *this* dimension of Heidegger's silence—humans not speaking with the mandate of the God whom they exiled, killed, and psychoanalytically amputated—as an evasion of responsibility for our disasters (nights without stars)? Or are not those who proclaim the past closed, as if this modernist, critical claim could be more than a belief (FK 110f.), imposing mythical hopelessness on the victims of history? Is not speaking of what one should be silent about another evasion of responsibility?

Questions like these allow Habermas to make a political alliance *with* Derrida. He concedes that what binds him with Derrida philosophically is a certain reading of Kant. What continues to divide them is Derrida's late Heideggerean inspiration, which Habermas finds, even when viewed through Derrida's Lévinasian angle of vision, betraying both the Judaic prophetic and the Socratic enlightenment legacies of the West (IEM). Questions like these prompt Derrida to hold reservations about regulative ideals (A 134f.): Hope is not impossible because of some counterfactually deferred or imaginary ideality. Hope's urgency cannot be ideally projected onto abstract otherness. Hope “precedes me—and seizes me *here now*,” or I have never been infused with hope. Political theorists and activists, even Habermas, assume hope when they set up truth commissions to deal with war crimes and unforgivable human disasters. Yet their assumption is wrong, as hope is never available as a regulative ideal. Camus declared in the opening pages of his *Myth*

of *Sisyphus* that he has never seen anyone die for the ontological argument, in the same way one could reiterate that to hope in regulative ideals would be odd rather than impossible. If Habermas does not want any truck even with Derrida's Jewish transformation of Heidegger, then the same angle of vision can be had with Marcuse's appeal to Benjamin at the end of *One-Dimensional Man*, indicating hope as a granting, a gift, not an ideal or pragmatic presupposition. The visitation of hope arrives as "what is most undeniably real." Responsibility (spoken of or not) cannot be settled by a norm or rule. What comes after the death of the God of onto-theology may never be a regulative ideal but must always remain concrete, albeit aporetic, reality (A 115).

Derrida saves his most playfully irreverent reading of Nietzsche's death of God against the grain of Heidegger's saving God for a footnote (A 190 n. 14; cf. n. 16). Derrida's postsecular God names "an ultimate form of sovereignty that would reconcile absolute justice with absolute law and thus, like all sovereignty and all law, with absolute force, with an absolute saving power." This impossible God names "a new international" without institution or party. Such "improbable institution" requires "faith" rather than a zealot, St. Paul, or vanguard, Lenin. The impossible is the gift of "messianicity without messianism," "democracy-to-come," and "the untenable promise of *just international institution*." Neither Heidegger, in his critique of technological age, nor Nietzsche, lamenting the nihilism of all value positing, held hope for radical democracy; but Derrida does. Echoing Benjamin's theological materialism, Derrida's democracy-to-come solicits "faith in the possibility of this impossible and, in truth, undecidable thing from the point of view of knowledge, science, and conscience," and such faith "must govern all our decisions" (A 115). Hardly even noticed, two years before issuing their joint plea, Habermas writes approvingly of Derrida: "Today, Jacques Derrida, from different premises, comes to a similar position [of the early Frankfurt school]—a worthy winner of the Adorno Award. . . . All he wants to retain of Messianism is 'messianicity, stripped of everything'" (FK 113, cf. Derrida GD, FaK 18).

3. "UNHAPPY THE LAND THAT IS IN NEED OF HEROES"

Michal Zantovsky, former Czech ambassador to the United States, commented on the end of Havel's presidency (Remnick 2003) by citing Bertolt Brecht. The same Brechtian Jeremiad concluded Habermas's (FT 43) philosophizing in a time of terror: "Pity the land that needs heroes." Zantovsky, Havel's long-term associate, gave a diplomatic toast to the outgoing Czech president at the Prague Castle farewell party by adding a wish to Brecht's lament, "I hope we don't need another." That U.S. culture and politics are not up to Brecht's secular sobriety motivated Habermas's recourse to the citation. Yet is either Havel's or Habermas's Europe more up to it? I used to think that Kierkegaard acted for them as a passageway to political sobriety (1993). But it seems that Derrida alone among the three of

them speaks with a sober voice that hope-to-come is *impossible* because it can have no truck with human heroic projects.

I conclude with *untimely postsecular meditations* on the impossible. Such meditations begin to breathe life and grant a crucial edge to a redemptive critical theory suited for our present age, but they remain untimely until they take root in a new postsecular sensibility of hope-to-come. As untimely redemptive critical theory, the first meditation names the return of radical evil by its name. In the second meditation, new critical theory comes to terms with the realization that even its ideal and hope cannot heal all wounds of history. In the third, it learns from the secular masters of suspicion to expose the false prophets who blaspheme by speaking about vanquishing evil and delivering hope as heroic acts. As a new postsecular sensibility, the first meditation detects that evil can be called radical only as one acts deliberately to suspend goodwill; the second begins by mourning the trauma of the human condition for which hope is always-already impossible; and the third ventures with risky faith against all personal and social heroic projects and belief systems.

First Meditation: Radical Evil Is Diabolical. We need no devil to personify the diabolical in deliberate acts of destruction that intend no future. The truly problematic for the present age is Kant's harnessing of evil, not that of religion, within the bounds of mere reason. The beliefs of rational religion(s) can be easily translated into secular terms to yield the moral point of view, and Habermas completes Kant's task brilliantly. By translating and assimilating radical evil within the bounds of mere reason—a secularizing project that Habermas (FK 110, ORSR) also inherits from Kant—we rob ourselves of naming critically the coming of the worst. Derrida's (A) three moments of suicidal autoimmunity restore the postsecular edge to critical theory. Moreover, learning from Kierkegaard, yet for him unlike for Habermas in his secular translations, Derrida names the post-Kantian willed ignorance by its true name as stupidity. Radical evil presents the existential (untranslatable either/or) boundary that "both destroys and institutes the religious" (FaK 100). This nuance makes me meditate on what Derrida, like Kierkegaard yet unlike Kant and Habermas, finds in radical evil—the demarcation between the religious and ethical spheres of existence. Habermas (FK 110) translates sin into guilt, and hence forgiveness into ethical repentance or righting of social injustice. Would there be need for forgiveness if it were in our power to repent evil ethically and undo all wrongs socially? This meditation on the sources of forgiveness—a capacity that does not lie in human power alone—intimates the most offensive though nonetheless spiritual logic. In another telling footnote, Derrida (GT 165–6 n. 31; cf. SP) shows that the weakness of Kant's watered-down definition of evil is a reduction of forgiveness to repentance. Unforgivable cruelty and willed stupidity are called radical evil because by bursting rational bounds of guilt, they cannot be repented ethically.

The human possibility of diabolical evil revisits us with the religious phenomenon after the death of God. This human phenomenon of evil invokes the religious phenomenon of forgiveness. If need for forgiveness did not arise, would any evil ever be “radical”? Without the uncanny phenomena of evil and forgiveness there could be no phenomenology of the “religious” after the death of the God of onto-theology. If such evil never arose, would there be philosopher’s need for its rational translation? Kant and Habermas cannot have it both ways, and Nietzsche does not live up to this task.

Second Meditation: Hope Is Impossible. Truths lie beyond our rational horizon of what is known or not yet conscious; from this ignorance humans can be delivered by a self-corrective process of learning. What is not known, that rational enlightenment can cure. Rational criticism, learning, and communication are the greatest possible hope for the continual progress of the human race. If some wounds cannot be healed by progress or learning projected under the regulative ideal of communication community, then hope that appears as a phenomenon of what could still deliver us carries the name of the *impossible*. The sheer lack of human possibility can be ignored or repressed, or one can despair of the impossible. Yet all second-degree ignorance, repression, and despair are willed by us, and in that willing act we acknowledge the appearance of the *impossible* itself. To go on pretending that all wounds of history can be healed rationally is to deliberately ignore, repress, or despair of the impossible. The ultimate pretense reactively defies all healing by placing deliberate accents on the *impossibility* of hope, celebrating the human failure or trauma. The convex mirror of theism is then atheism held dogmatically as a belief in the *impossibility* of hope. But *impossible* hope is not an objectifiable phenomenon of *belief* and hence not a rational validity claim against what is humanly possible. To stop pretending altogether, one must complete the death of that God who survives not just in our grammar, as Nietzsche once thought, but in all atheistic beliefs we imbue with false reverence.

The religious phenomenon returns after the completed death of God under the figures of impossible hope. No amount of talking or learning or force can break the boundary that protects unmourned trauma from what rational enlightenment or possible hope can deliver. The unmourned, to be accessible, requires self-acceptance and forgiveness. Negatively, redemptive critical theory calls evil by its name and shows how rational enlightenment fails to heal all wounds of history or forgive. Positively, now without despair’s defiance of the *impossible*, the new sensibility of self-forgiveness opens to the cosmos and oneself with uncanny hope.

Third Meditation: Heroism Is Idol Worship. Heroism is the other face of the human terror of possibility or its loss. Self in terror of its freedom either searches for and imposes fundamental(ist) certainties or puffs up with war on its terror externalized. The idols of broken emptiness on either side usher the terror-stricken self into heroic projects. There one bolts and takes a last stance.

Heroism—whether religious or secular—is idolatrous precisely because its worship of self lies opposite of faith. Derrida drives this point home with his Benjaminian-Lévinasian view of Kierkegaard (A 135): “I always make *as if* I subscribed to the *as ifs* of Kant . . . or *as if* Kierkegaard helped me to think beyond his own Christianity, *as if* in the end he did not want to know that he was not Christian or refused to admit that he did not know what being Christian means.” Habermas learns from Kierkegaard’s existential ethics how to adopt the either/or decision of EuroAmerican traditions that would foster the democratic political culture and identity (PWE 295). But his public either/or does not help us to unmask the sacral language of heroism emerging anew in postsecular political culture. Derrida resists all conflation of the ethical-political sphere with the religious because he grasps religion without religion as contrary to heroism.

We know better why we should take heed from Brecht’s profane lament. *Hero worship is the most spiritless not because it is godless but because in its appearing pseudo-religious phenomenon we recognize an idolatrous divinization of human projects.* Heroism emerges in the anxiety of freedom’s possibility. Ripened anxiety masks the despair of the weak will as it embraces the heroic crowd. Ultimately the hero’s will to power manifests the full-blown despair of religious-cum-political defiance. The defiant self feeds the life of empires that in turn celebrate the hero’s deeds. To grasp the nature of terror we need to supplant the death of God by the category of spiritlessness. In this way we deliver the requisite blow to heroic religiousness—whether couched in a fundamentalist or patriotic mission—as the most dangerously desperate of all in its spiritlessness. Any religiosity can become spiritless when it worships itself. The role of critical theory with a postsecular edge suited to our desperate times must expose not only secular but most of all the religious false prophets. They are false who speak the language of vanquishing evil and delivering hope through heroic projects.

This meditation is needed most when divine blessings on a country are counted by the deeds of its heroes. Intoned in hymnals or as religious and national flags, along with civic prayers for national victories, are raised side by side, to pity all lands that need heroes—this prayer would become the most devastating public performance in any international forum (Matušítk 2004).

*Baruch Atah Adonai Elohenu Melech haOlam . . . Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus
Dominus Deus Sabaoth . . . Allah Akbar . . . Pity the land that needs heroes.*

We should chant in synagogues and at the Wailing Wall, in churches and at the bully pulpits, and from the loudspeakers of great mosques, in all places where humans call God’s name great but dress it in the heroic caricature of greatness.

The meditation that could breathe life into a new redemptive critical theory inhabits the self that rests transparently in the work of mourning and recovery, knowing all along that the human race cannot heal all wounds of history yet, freed from all pretensions to heroism, yields to visitations of impossible hope.⁶

NOTES

1. The second half of the fifth comment on NATO is vintage Kafkaesque Havel (2002) who should have been in the foreground rather than ultimately subordinated to power politics: “We have also had another experience: the occupation by the Warsaw Pact States in 1968. At that time the entire nation reiterated the word ‘sovereignty,’ cursing the official Soviet interpretation that the intervention was an act of ‘brotherly help’ offered in the name of a value that ranked higher than national sovereignty in the name of socialism that was allegedly endangered in our country, which allegedly meant a danger to the prospects for a better life for the human race. Almost everyone in our country knew that the sole objective was to preserve Soviet domination and economic exploitation but millions of people in the Soviet Union probably believed that the sovereignty of our State was being suppressed in the name of a higher human value. This second experience makes me very cautious. It seems to me that whenever we think of intervening against a State in the name of protection of human life we should always ask ourselves even if only for a moment, or in our innermost thoughts the question of whether this would not be some kind of a ‘brotherly help’ again.”
2. “Gulash communism” was the name given to the models of social and political accommodation by the communist regimes to consumers in the late 1970s and 1980s.
3. This view has been voiced by Iris Marion Young on Habermas and Derrida (PWE) at the World Congress of Philosophy (Istanbul 2003) and by Eduardo Mendieta at the Critical Theory Roundtable (SUNY Stony Brook, October 2003).
4. Socrates’ gadfly posture was like the stingray, which emits electric torpedo shocks.
5. A contrast with Žižek (2003: 90, 140ff.) helps us fine-tune the nuance between Habermas and Derrida. Žižek locates suicidal autoimmunity in the human imaginary with its desire for absolute otherness. Žižek (2003: 66–70, 86–91) *perverts* but unabashedly recenters Pauline-cum-Leninist (i.e., atheistically and materialistically inflected) Christianity against messianic Judaism. Human empathy with the divine failure of the crucified God mirrors the emptiness inscribed into our failure to possess an absolute, transcendent reality. As if anticipating and caricaturing Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, Žižek welcomes the failure of Jesus who, abandoned by the Father, gets himself killed and thus inaugurates a this-worldly passion for justice. Against Derrida’s Benjaminian-Lévinasian Judaic transcendence, the *perverse* in Christianity is the epiphany of the disconsolate “divine Fool.” The Messiah has come to reveal the infinite failure of the imaginary to bridge the human and divine reality. We must not wait for the messianic promise of the wholly other world than this unjust one. Žižek frowns on all appeals to Other as abstract or imaginary projections. We must accept trauma without the possibility of mourning. His post-Hegelian materialist theology—Holy Spirit as the life of community—would be an outcome of successful Lacanian therapy. Wounding continues to define the human condition after the coming of Christ. Enter Žižek’s Lacanian-Calvinist rendition of original sin. Repelled by unredeemable terror, yet attracted by a dying God, “in our very failure, we identify with the divine failure,” confessing universal human failure. Žižek promotes against Derrida-Lévinas’s and Habermas’s appeals to the wholly other than this unjust world, the Pauline-Leninist vision of community. The atheist lamentation of Christ who finds himself alone on the cross helps Žižek give up the imaginary longing for the absolute Thing. How St. Paul of Habermas’s Peircean community ideal lines up with Žižek’s

Pauline materialist theology is a good question; or whether, on Derrida's account, both these Pauline versions of community (Habermas's communication ideal and Žižek's Leninist materialism) still involve onto-theology exposed by Kant as transcendental illusion and thoroughly discredited by late Heidegger's move beyond it.

6. In response to my correspondence to him regarding my recent work, and this article in particular, Derrida wrote the following words: "Dear friend, Forgive me for having taken so long to thank you for your very friendly letter, book about Habermas, and especially your two manuscript articles that you devote to Habermas and me. Today I lack the strength to enter into a rigorous and detailed discussion of those two texts, but be assured that I have read them with passion and gratitude. The lucidity and vigilant attention that you direct at the last episodes of this history (I mean between Habermas and me) impressed me and for this you have my heartfelt thanks. You evoke with moving fidelity our last encounters. I hope other encounters will follow . . ." (Paris, February 17, 2004). Habermas confirms these sentiments in his obituary for Derrida, "Ein letzter Gruss," *Frankfurter Rundschau* (October 9, 2004).

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