



Dissent from the Homeland: Essays after September 11th

Stanley Hauerwas and Frank Lentricchia (eds.)

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This is an assortment of different essays that together seek to bring political, social, aesthetic, theological, and ethical reflection to bear on the Al-Qaeda attack on the World Trade Center. As the title suggests, this edited volume attempts to provide space for voices of dissent to the prevailing forms of consensus on the explanations for the attack offered by debate in the United States itself. Of the contributing authors, a large number are addressing the issues from a predominantly theological background. Michael Baxter looks to Catholicism as a resource for critique of the forms of imperialism of moral relativism that liberal democratic cultures promote, and which provoke in turn the retributions of terrorism. Peter Ochs seeks to make sense of the event of 9/11 through a reading of the Torah. Stanley Hauerwas attempts to reassert what he argues to be the virtues of a pacifist response to the attack, a pacifism that he equates necessarily with his Christianity. And Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, makes an intriguingly Nietzschean argument for the ‘basic impotence of resentment’ and the refusal of victimhood as a condition for the formulation of responses to the attack from the West. Aside from the stress on the possibilities of theological thought for making sense of the attack, there are contributions from several major political and social theorists, namely Frederic Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, and Slavoj Zizek. Yet, these particular essays are the most disappointing of the different contributions. Jameson’s piece amounts to an argument that the emergence of Al-Qaeda represents a ‘textbook example of dialectical reversal’ — bin Laden having been nurtured by the US to contest the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan now re-emerges as the enemy of the very state that empowered him. One expects more from such a prolific thinker. Baudrillard’s essay is likewise lacklustre. Good, he argues, can ‘only defeat Evil by renouncing its claim to be Good, because appropriating a global monopoly on power implicates it in a backlash of proportional violence’. In such instances, one would be hard pressed to distinguish the Nietzschean banalities of Baudrillard from those of Rowan Williams. Zizek’s piece is little more than an appropriation of another of Baudrillard’s traditional pearls of wisdom, that the demise of an imperial form of power is always preconfigured by the fantasy of that demise, imagined from within the imperial form itself. Zizek details this for us by drawing on the various cinematic representations of the possibility of



an event such as 9/11 that characterized Hollywood movies of the 1990s (Escape from New York, Independence Day, etc.).

None of the essays contained in this volume offer any startlingly new insights for our understanding of the significance of 9/11. Yet it could be said that they do a good job of dispelling some of the more risible and discursive fictions that pertain to the event and its perpetrators. Each urges that we reject the prevailing tendency to conceive of Al-Qaeda as a force that has emerged from outside or beyond the parameters of Western civilization and modernity. Each argues instead that we consider the manifold ways in which Al-Qaeda represents a continuity and even fulfilment of certain trajectories and tendencies contained within modernity as well as Western civilization broadly conceived. In this sense, this volume is a worthy contribution at least to the burgeoning body of critical thought on the event of 9/11 and its aftermath. It is perhaps a symptom of a more general malaise that attempts to determine precisely the significance of the event of 9/11 tend to fail or at least disappoint. Then again, perhaps there is an even profounder significance to be found in that malaise of the failure to determine significance itself.

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