Jacques Derrida, 9/11, And The Democracy Which is Yet to Come

by Gary Percesepe

Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.
—Ludwig Wittgenstein

There are things that cannot be represented.

The decision to wage war on terrorism gave to terrorism its political legitimation.

Deconstructing the idea of terrorism is the only politically responsible course of action.

The meaning of the term "terrorism" is not self-evident.

"Terrorism" may be thought of as a psychological and metaphysical state, as well as a political category.

"Terrorism" has no stable meaning, agenda, or political content.

War entails the intimidation of civilians, and thus elements of terrorism.

To engage in war entails belief in the myth of redemptive violence, the idea that "our violence" is excepted, legitimate, salvific, purposeful—violence used to "end" violence and therefore better than their violence.

Violence can only beget more violence, by its own internal logic.

Only non-violence, heroically practiced, can break the circuit of violence; witness, Jesus, Gandhi, King, Romero, Rosa Parks, Rachel Corrie, whose response to violence was not to retaliate but to to receive; to transform violence by receiving it into their own bodies and transforming it in love.

What must end: the belief in the violence of God. This, plus the myth of redemptive violence, engenders terror and sustains it.

Public usage of the term "terrorism" perversely helps the terrorist cause.

The militarization of ordinary life undermines the workings of constitutional states by restricting the possibilities of democratic participation.

By insisting that "September 11" or "9/11" is a metonymy, signifying a stable set of meanings when there are none (one entity's terror is another's act of justified violence), the media naively ensures that terrorism is less a past event than a future possibility.

In this way the media multiplies the force of traumatic events, again ensuring the political legitimation of terror by the exploitation of technological and information networks.

Is a new cosmological order possible, where multilateral institutions and continental alliances would become the chief political actors?

The Enlightenment ideals of world citizenry and cosmopolitan rights—access to Reason in a certain public space-- seem to point us in this direction; is the fulfillment of these ideals present in the *idea* (if not the actuality) of the European Union?

This idea is far older than the Enlightenment, and can be traced back at least as far as St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, and to the Stoics; it surfaced again with Kant.

For Kant, this is the state of universal community where all members are entitled "to present themselves in the society of others by virtue of their right to the communal possession of the earth's surface."

Were such a community in place, a violation of rights in one part of the world would be felt everywhere.

Only under this condition, Kant thought, would we be able to flatter ourselves with the certainty "that we are continually advancing towards a perpetual peace."

What are we to do with forgiveness?

Derrida believed that what can be authentically forgiven is in fact only the unforgivable.

Forgiveness forgives both the evil intention (who) and the evil action (what) for exactly what they are (evil)—an evil that, insofar as it is unredeemable, can repeat itself in the future.

Evil, says Derrida, is "capable of repeating itself, unforgivingly, without transformation, without amelioration, without repentance and promise."

Two types of forgiveness may thus be distinguished: *conditional* ("calculable" forgiveness following an act of repentance in which the guilty party promises never to engage in what is demanded by forgiveness) and *unconditional* (forgiving the unforgivable without conditions, a forgiveness which is incalculable and therefore impossible).

Unconditional forgiveness is a madness—how can we forgive what cannot be forgiven?

And yet….

Unconditional forgiveness "arrives" in history as a surprise, upsetting the ordinary course of history, politics, and law.

Without the experience of unconditional forgiveness there would be no possibility of forgiveness at all.

Conditional forgiveness belongs to the order of law and politics, of pragmatic negotiations and equal exchanges. That order, for Derrida, must be deconstructed.

Derrida concludes: the meaning of "forgiveness," like "terrorism," remains enigmatic, a secret: we cannot reduce it to a simple or univocal definition.

Yet it "arrives," totally unexpected and a surprise, upsetting all of our categories.

What remains unthought: the redemptive uses of non-violence, the politics of the incalculable in the democracy which is yet to come, the possibility of a pure ethics beyond law, duty, and debt.

Who today, invoking the words "9/11" does not contribute to the delay of the unthought?

Must it be this way? No culture has a single origin. "American culture" is not monolithic; it does not speak with one voice.

Derrida: "What is proper to a culture is not to be identical with itself."

Remembering the future, engaging in "the memory of the future," will entail the movement of a memory which is not tied to its past.

Memory is not only about preserving and conserving the past; it is always, already turned in the direction of the future, as Derrida says, "Toward the promise, toward what is coming, what is arriving, what is happening tomorrow."