American Multiculturalism after 9/11: Transatlantic Perspectives, by Derek Rubin and Jaap Verheul.

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REFERENCES


1 The prohibition of the islamic burqa in European countries can be seen as a symptom of a return to nationalism, in itself a reaction to the growing fear of a possible Muslim increase exacerbated after 9/11 in America, the Fortuyn and Van Gogh murders in Netherlands and the terrorist attacks in Spain and England. Thus, despite the undeniable progress that multiculturalists have made in both Europe and America in our days events like 9/11 –or at least the manipulation of them by conservative politics– undermine multicultural efforts for coexistence and foster instead assimilation and monoculturalism.

2 Within such a context American Multiculturalism After 9/11 represents a timely contribution to the ongoing debate over multiculturalism, diversity and identity which is shown to be constant and unresolved. Thus, the present volume, with its refreshing transatlantic perspective, brings us a step closer to understanding what is at stake in this debate and to realizing that there is no definitive answer in the age-old struggle over identity. The focus of the volume is multiculturalism’s evolution on both sides of the Atlantic after the events of 9/11. This is important since political theorists involved in discussions of multiculturalism so far have tended to ignore the role of 9/11 and have studied it as uninterrupted. However, the fact that multiculturalism, to use the editors’ words, “became enlisted in the political and academic discourses about the presence of Muslims within western societies” (“Introduction” 8) explains why the events of 9/11 are directly related to the changing nature of multiculturalist debates in
these societies. As the editors also admit, multiculturalism has always been a contested term but became even more contested after 9/11 especially in Europe where its effectiveness was compromised by the rising of nationalism as a reaction to the prospect of “Eurabia.”

The volume is divided into three sections moving from a discussion of theoretical aspects of transatlantic multiculturalism in the first section to an examination of the impact of 9/11 on American multiculturalism in the second and on both American and European multiculturalism in the third section. The first section, titled Multicultural Boundary Crossings, starts with Paul Lauter who explains how 9/11 brought into sharp focus issues of immigration, assimilation and separation which are of an international scope given globalization. As a result, the need to be aware of the economic and political contexts that produce and influence culture is now more necessary than ever. Lauter’s article is not randomly placed first, for it essentially sets the ground for some of the questions and concerns voiced in the rest of the book. Indeed, Richard Alba’s essay that follows focuses on issues of immigration and assimilation by examining the incorporation of immigrant groups in the US, France and Germany in order to prove how multiculturalism was not essentially affected in America in contrast to European societies. As he predicts, the next two decades will witness unprecedented minority mobility as social boundaries will weaken due to demographic changes. Finally, Ed Jonker’s article provides a useful genealogy of debates relating to theories of social and cultural identity arguing that 9/11 has not essentially changed the framework of multicultural discourses. Jonker, very insightfully explains how despite the gains, late modernity with its uncertainties can create a “politically overcorrect one-sidedness” (61). As an antidote he suggests a “decent theory of history” (62) which can protect against both anthropocentrism as well as cultural relativism by enabling a reconciliation of diverse cultural perspectives that goes beyond naïve multiculturalism. Overall, Jonker is right when he says that we can and should accept competing points of view that will lead to pragmatic political choices.

The second section, Cultural Reflections of the Unthinkable, is perhaps the strongest part of the volume as it engages in a careful and well informed study of American cultural texts that attempt to record in one way or another the events of 9/11, or as its title suggests, the “unthinkable.” To begin with, Rob Kroes examines how the horror of 9/11 was captured by what he calls the “intrusive camera eye” (75) which turned the people falling from the towers into iconic images, forever frozen in collective memory. Interestingly enough, Kroes reveals the manipulation of this memory enacted by a selective release of photographs, pointing to a constructed image of disaster, to a constructed public memory. Although his focus is on how such photos helped viewers come to terms with the trauma of 9/11 and the role of ethnicity in this, yet I find very interesting his implication of a “hidden history” (70) of the disaster from which we were excluded.

Following Kroes preoccupation with the role of technology in the construction of the response to 9/11, Philip Wegner discusses the film United 93 as an example of how “mass mediated repetition” (86) of the events gives them substance and reveals their true meaning. This is what the film also highlights on a diegetic level through scenes of cell phone conversations between the passengers of flight 93 and their loved ones as well as through film-within film instances when we see those working on the military center watching on TV the planes hitting the towers. It is these instances, Wagner
maintains, that signal the crucial moment of realization and the transformation of civilians into would be heroes and combatants in the new war on terror.

The constructed nature of the response to the events of 9/11 is further underlined by Michan Andrew Connor who reads the film Armageddon as an example of how the inherent whiteness of the American heroic discourse essentially justifies American violence since any violence by whites is implicitly heroic. Multiculturalism, according to Connor, poses a direct threat to the war on terror by associating it with an imperialist and racist past. Connor’s point brings in mind Churchill Ward’s infamous article “Some People Push Back: On the Justice of Roosting Chickens” where Ward characterizes, on the one hand, the people killed in the twin towers as little Eichmanns and, on the other, openly criticizes Americans for the genocide of Native Americans. Connor becomes more caustic in his exposure of right-wing policies that tried to cover up Pat Tillman’s death in Iraq in order to present it as a heroic sacrifice that would legitimate the war on terror. The exclusion from the sacrifice discourse of people of color and of poor people at home that suffer due to the money allocated to the war is for Connor problematic. However, it seems that he misses the point when he argues for a “heroic representation that encourages cross-racial, cross-gendered and collective action” (102) since such a representation would still legitimize the so-called war on terror. The problem, as far as I am concerned, is not simply one of a politically correct construction of heroism but of an exposure of the politics involved and the violence sustained behind such constructions.

The politicization of 9/11 is once again evident in the next essay by Mathilde Roza who discusses Baraka’s controversial poem “Somebody Blew Up America” as an example of the racial divisions that sprung up despite the attempt to present America as a unitary whole against terrorism. According to Roza, the “United We Stand,” national motto was but a façade that suppressed the divisions and differences of the nation, revealing at the same time how the 9/11 attack inflicted a major trauma not only on people’s psyche but also on the definition of the nation and on multiculturalism in the long run.

John Updike is the focus of John-Paul Colgan who traces the development of the writer from a self-proclaimed defender of America, to an expositor of its flaws and contradictions. Especially his 2006 novel, The Terrorist, verges on an approach of Al-Qaeda terrorism as “a type of severe critique of an America that has lost its way” (126). Interestingly enough, this critique is enabled through multicultural contact which would seem to side with critics of multiculturalism that underline its anti-western nature.

Finally, Rachel Hutchins-Viroux in her examination of public school history books adopted by the State of Texas traces the development of an unmistakable conservative trend in the representation of American history which was aggravated by the events of 9/11 and the ensuing nationalism. What the essays in this section reveal as a whole is how multiculturalism has been discredited to a lesser or greater extent after the events of 9/11, or rather after these events were usurped by right-wing ploys in an attempt to unite the nation against a so-called common enemy.

The four articles in the last section of the book open up, as its title very successfully suggests, transatlantic dialogues as they discuss the fate of multiculturalism on both sides of the Atlantic after 9/11. There are two different models of multiculturalism at play in the two continents, says Patrick Hyder Patterson.Obviously in favor of the American model in its approach of religious pluralism which ensues from a clear-cut
distinction between church and state, Patterson prophetically says that after 9/11 even in Europe “some are considering the possible benefits of disengaging the state from religion” (160). Of course, he believes that the privatization of religion is still far away which is not exactly true given the recent law banishing religious symbols from schools and other public buildings. Johanna Kardux examines how multiculturalism functions in the US and the Netherlands respectively by focusing on the construction of two slavery memorials. Kardux is right when she says that collected memory, a product of multiculturalism, as opposed to collective memory, is necessary, despite the controversies and debates it might spur, for the renegotiation of national and cultural identities and thus for reconciliation and atonement. Jaap Kooijman argues that 9/11 along with the murders of Fortuyn and van Gogh brought into the foreground debates on multiculturalism and national identity. By focusing on two art works he examines the personal investment in American culture that creates a tension when it comes to taking a critical stance to American politics. This tension is ever present in Dutch identity, and I would argue in European identity in general, making Europeans the “Americans We Never Were,” to use Kooijman’s title. It is this tension that challenges, according to Kooijman, the existence of a dominant Dutch identity based on a collective national history and thus right-wing rhetoric against multiculturalism. Finally, by revisiting Fortuyn’s and van Gogh’s murders, Jaap Verheul engages in a very interesting discussion that forecloses how these murders were used by conservative Americans in order to solidify their national identity and simultaneously underline the legitimacy of their actions at home and abroad. By using the analogy of a “Dutch 9/11” (197), Americans tried to rely on shared experience in an attempt to reinforce alliances against a common enemy and they further accused Europe for its multicultural policies that prevented the assimilation of Muslim immigrants. However, as Verheul rightly implies, these murders cannot be seen under the same light as 9/11 but as individual events enacted by distinct individuals for their own personal reasons.

11 Obviously, the cultural implications of multiculturalism represent the main scope of the essays included here, yet by no means should one ignore the political sub context that is also stirred up. In fact, bold and outspoken, the writers of this volume - and in particular the writers in the second section- do not shy away from exposing for instance the politics involved in conservative attempts to construct a certain image of the terrorist attacks, or from pointing the finger at the responsibility of US politics for these attacks. In fact, the critical exposition of the representational politics of 9/11 makes one realize that although multiculturalism is certainly not a panacea, yet by no means is it the black sheep that post 9/11 conservative rhetoric wants it to be. All in all, the book is a must-read not only for scholars in American studies but also for everyone who wants to be informed about current developments.
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