

9/11, the Academy, and Renewal
(Talk delivered at Ithaca College, September 12, 2002).

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I am going to reflect on some opportunities for renewal that I believe September 11 has opened up to the academy and to the US in general, but I will do this by way of a critique of American perspectives on, and relationship with, the world. If, indeed, Ithaca College is to prepare a “forward-looking response” to 9/11, as President Williams has promised, then such a critique must be among the lessons we should learn from “history and current events,” to borrow her words. (I want to clarify at the outset that when I refer to the US, I am referring to general tendencies and that by Americans I mean US citizens since the citizens of Mexico, Canada, and South and Central America are also Americans.)

Earlier this year, in an editorial for a Pakistani[1] newspaper, I wrote that soon after 9/11, the celebrated Chilean playwright, Ariel Dorfman, recalled

another September 11 twenty-eight years earlier, on which ‘death irrevocably entered our lives and changed us forever’ after a CIA sponsored military coup toppled the newly elected Salvador Allende and the emergent democracy in Chile. The deaths of thousands of people who ‘disappeared’ during General Augusto Pinochet’s rule—unremembered and unlamented by much of the rest of the world—were of course less visible, hence less dramatic than those in the US on 9/11. But while this neither makes those lives any less significant nor their loss any less painful, it should—suggests Dorfman—serve to remind us of the universality of people’s suffering, no matter its particular forms.

To Dorfman, this exercise in historical remembering is crucial for recognizing that both September 11s opened up ‘one of those opportunities for regeneration and self-knowledge that, from time to time, is given to certain nations.’ An opportunity like this, he says, can be used for ‘renewal or destruction . . . for good or for evil, for peace or for war, for aggression or for reconciliation, for vengeance or for justice, for the militarisation of a society or its humanisation.’ Which path a nation chooses to pursue will depend on whether or not its people are willing ‘to admit that their suffering is neither unique nor exclusive.’ And this requires them to look ‘in the vast mirror of our common humanity.’

Discouragingly, there are few signs that the US is willing to make the more enlightened, if also more difficult, choices in the aftermath of 9/11, or that Americans are willing to admit “that they have joined others in feeling ‘what the rest of us have known,’” to quote Dorfman again. Indeed, 9/11 seems to have

entrenched most of them in their belief that their suffering is unique because they are themselves unique.

Such a view of their own particularism, of course, induces Americans to look away from, and not into, the “mirror of our common humanity.” They are therefore unable to realize, much less to experience, what it means to be part of a larger world; in the US, as the song goes, “we are the world.” And, when the world does intrude upon people’s consciousnesses, it generally is in the form of wars, natural disasters, and tales of horrific destitution. Between the violence and the charity that such representations inspire, there is little room for cultivating relationships with others based in mutual recognition or understanding. In fact, the very scale of US power has convinced its citizens that they don’t need to know others since they can go it alone in everything. But one cannot live knowledgeably, ethically, or safely with people if one does not understand them or know in what ways one may be connected to or beholden to them. Ironically, then, US power renders Americans vulnerable to the world by estranging them from it.

This alienation results also from confusing power with virtue, and virtue with race, such that Americans think of themselves as not only more powerful than others, but also as morally and racially superior. The civilization vs. barbarism, and the West vs. the Rest dyad, as well as concepts like Manifest Destiny and the white man’s burden (all of which have been evoked to commit aggression against others), derive from a Manichean view of the universe in which a morally unique and uniquely moral US is juxtaposed to an evil and dangerous world mired in fanaticism, hatreds, and jealousies. To embrace such a view, however, is to do away with any notion of humility, and even with a sound view of morality since it is not given to a person, let alone to an entire people, to be only good.

As the premier institution for educating Americans, the academy has been complicit in nurturing the ideologies of their exceptionalism and their moral and racial superiority. For instance, its “Plato-to-NATO” narrativization of history represents that fabulous imaginary which we call “Western civilization” as the handiwork of a few heroic white Christian males rather than as the outcome of the cumulative achievements—to say nothing of the labor—of Muslims, Arabs, Africans, Jews, women, slaves, people of color, and indigenous people. Similarly, its hegemonic political discourses obscure the malign effects of US power and portray the US as the agent only of goodness in the world such that any corrective to this viewpoint is regarded as rank heresy.

Even where the academy has opened up parts of its curriculum to diversity initiatives, it has done so piecemeal and without abandoning the secular fundamentalist myth of US invincibility abroad and white racial supremacy at home. What is more, the curricular focus on foreigners and “minorities” seems to be driven by an instrumentalist, market-oriented, and damage-control mentality that assumes that Americans only need to know enough about others to be able to do business with them, or better control, monitor, and outsmart them. (An

example is the current interest in Islam and Arabic; one might ask why it took 9/11 to get Americans interested in the major religion and language of a region in which the US has been so deeply embroiled for over half a century.)

Of course, the academy is not an island unto itself, in spite of the infamy of its “ivory towers” and the reality of its isolation from society; to the contrary, it helps to reproduce the dominant social values of the society in which it is embedded. And, yet, inherent in the very concept of the academy is the promise that it can provide disinterested and progressive leadership to civil society, specially in a democracy.

In this context, I believe September 11 has opened up some choices to the academy as well. Most obviously, it can continue to fuel American disregard for and separatism from the rest of humanity, or it can enable their “ontological reintegration into the world.”[2] Minimally, such a reintegration will require them to cultivate the habit of honest self-critique, develop enough respect for others so as to be able to learn about them and from them, recognize that there may be one truth but diverse ways of apprehending it, appreciate the centrality of differences to the process of mutual recognition, and embrace the sort of humility that can only come from visualizing themselves as part of a larger, and ultimately imperfect, humanity that is capable of both good and evil.

Ithaca College is seeking to accommodate some of these values programmatically by diversifying and internationalizing its student body, faculty, and curriculum. The newly established Center for the Study of Culture, Race, and Ethnicity, the proposed new major in global studies, and expansion in study abroad are some of the measures towards that end. However, for the Center to have a significant curricular impact, its courses will need to become part of the Gen Ed requirements or, better yet, of a common intellectual experience about which I’ve heard a lot over the years. Similarly, for the curriculum to be globalized beyond the major, we might require all students to learn a second language and to spend at least one semester of study, abroad. Of course, study abroad needs to be a meaningful learning experience and not just a variant of a Club Med vacation whose circuit extends from the pub to the beach and remains confined to Europe.

And yet, in the end, such measures will amount to little if the curriculum does not enable an epistemic shift in how Americans think about themselves and Others. 9/11 easily can convince them that the world is a dangerous and evil place and that they need to distance themselves from it even more. But, as I’ve tried to suggest, it would make better sense for them to embrace the painful, but ultimately liberating truth, that they are part of the world and that the world is as it is partly because of how they have chosen to fashion it, but that they can work with others to remake it into a more humane and just place. In the absence of this realization, newer generations of Americans also may hesitate to look into the “mirror of our common humanity,” of which Dorfman speaks, thereby passing

up an opportunity for their own humanization as well.

1 Daily Times, April 9, 2002.

2 Bholá, H. S. (1992). Literacy, knowledge, power, and development: Multiple connections. Springfield, VA: DYNEDRS.