

Political Theory

<http://ptx.sagepub.com>

Critical Theory, the War on Terror, and the Limits of Civilization: Holy Terror, by Terry Eagleton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. 160 pp. \$22 (cloth). **Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left**, by Susan Buck-Morss. London: Verso, 2003. 160 pp. \$22 (cloth). **Defending Ideals: War, Democracy and Political Struggles**, by Drucilla Cornell. New York: Routledge, 2004. 256 pp. \$25.95 (paper)

Yves Winter


Political Theory 2007; 35; 207

DOI: 10.1177/0090591706295208

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://ptx.sagepub.com>

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Political Theory* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://ptx.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://ptx.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Critical Theory, the War on Terror, and the Limits of Civilization

Political Theory
Volume 35 Number 2
April 2007 207-214
© 2007 Sage Publications
10.1177/0090591706295208
<http://ptx.sagepub.com>
hosted at
<http://online.sagepub.com>

Holy Terror, by Terry Eagleton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. 160 pp. \$22 (cloth).

Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left, by Susan Buck-Morss. London: Verso, 2003. 160 pp. \$22 (cloth).

Defending Ideals: War, Democracy and Political Struggles, by Drucilla Cornell. New York: Routledge, 2004. 256 pp. \$25.95 (paper).

As intellectuals attempt to come to terms with transformations of the political landscape, a whole series of books has been published that focus on the relation between security, emergency, and freedom; on the limits of the law and the state; and on questions of political violence, war, and peace. The three books reviewed here are part of this trend. They offer important reflections on the constitutive link between violence and civilization, on the critical potential of Islamism, and on the significance of ideals for a politics of critical resistance. Yet these books also share certain limitations: despite their efforts to overcome Orientalist discourses, they tend to re-inscribe the civilizational difference between “Islam” and the “West.” In their own way, all three books highlight the fact that a divided world between an underdetermined “we” and an overdetermined “they” remains a fundamental, if unacknowledged, matrix of the contemporary theoretical debates.

Terry Eagleton’s *Holy Terror* traces a remarkable genealogy of terror through 2,500 years of Western history. From the mythical world of the Greek gods to the politics of violence of the twenty-first century, the reader follows a tour de force. The central claim of the book is that terror is intimately linked to the sacred. In a surprising move, Eagleton identifies terror not with fear, but with violence. Accordingly, the first figure of terror presented by Eagleton consists of the passionate and lewd excesses of the Greek god Dionysus, whose boundless brutality and violence is juxtaposed to the cerebral life of Apollo.

The opposition between Apollo and Dionysus (which Eagleton, contra Nietzsche, reads as that between reason and passion) remains a guiding

theme that readers familiar with Eagleton's late work will connect to his interest in the body and physicality. Through a series of literary encounters, Eagleton proceeds to show that at the heart of civilization, reason, and modernity, there is a latent violence, a terror, a pathology: "A certain 'terrorism' is built into our preciously wrought civility. Without a dash of barbarism, no civilization can stand" (p. 13).

Tracing the silt of terror from medieval conceptions of God, through Christian love, to the origins of the state, and the modern idea of freedom, Eagleton skillfully uncovers the double-sidedness of these major ideas of Western civilization and offers a rich version of the claim that there is a hidden violence at the heart of civilization. Eagleton's talent as a reader allows him to construct a universal history of terror, but one, unfortunately, in which *all* religious, aesthetic, and political ideas are brought back to an allegedly terroristic core. By detecting terror in every aspect of culture and conceptualizing it as the ubiquitous "other" of civilization, Eagleton figures terror as an ahistorical metaphysical constant.

In spite of Eagleton's claim that terror is an intrinsic part of civilization, in his text it often surfaces as its *outside*, as the antipolitical irruption that disturbs "Western society" (p. 50). In Eagleton's lexicon, civilization is by no means universal: it is culturally, politically, and geographically marked as "Western" or as "Judaeo-Christian" (pp. 27, 42, 115), while terrorism is implicitly identified with fundamentalism and above all, with Islam. Calling for resolute condemnations of "squalid Islamic theocracies" (p. 105), this book thus relies on a civilizational discourse. Even as Eagleton criticizes simplistic representations of terrorism and shows that the intentions of terrorists are not reducible to an envy of "Western freedoms" (p. 76), he tends to equate "Islamic fundamentalists" with terrorists who "maim and murder." In this book, Islam only ever appears as the outside or the margins of "the West," as pre-modern and obscure, usually accompanied by the attribute of "fundamentalism." The rhetorical association of "fundamentalism" with terrorism removes the space for an Islamism that is non-violent and yet opposed to the secularism Eagleton takes for granted as a feature of modernity.

It would be unfair to accuse Eagleton of purposefully creating a cultural geography that divides the globe between the "West" and "Islam." After all, his project is to demonstrate that behind the peaceful façade of democracy, a hidden terror lurks. But at the moment that his text disclaims the civilizational templates, it reproduces them in an oblique way. In an effort to display impartiality, the author refers to "[t]he kind of terrorism which hangs out in the marketplaces of Damascus or the mountains of Montana" (p. 76) and to "[t]he fundamentalist, whether Texan or Taliban" (p. 26). Eagleton thus

avoids locating terror in the geo-cultural space of the Middle East by multiplying its figures: the “Islamic radical” and the “US anti-government insurgent” (p. 99). But if Eagleton avoids situating terrorism in the Middle East, it is only at the price of invoking another clichéd geography of backwardness—one in which Texans and Montanans are ignorant “rednecks” lacking political judgment. Montana, Texas, and Damascus become substitutable figures for danger. It is here that Eagleton’s book disappoints, for it participates in the circulation of civilizational discourses that engender fictional geographies of violence. And the cultural and educational difference that marks Eagleton’s educated and sophisticated urban readers from supposedly backward rural Texans and Montanans becomes convertible with the geopolitical and cultural difference that separates the “West” from the “Middle East.” Despite all efforts to expose the hidden violence of the West, his unavowed conceptual frame prevents Eagleton from noticing political violence unless its origin can be situated in the Middle East or in the nether regions of the “West.”

Unlike Eagleton, Susan Buck-Morss wants to think “past terror,” calling for a new debate, one that is radically open and cosmopolitan. Her book is a manifesto for academics and artists to forsake their protected spheres and coalesce into a global public by forming a radical and critical global counterculture that challenges the appropriation of language and image as weapons. What distinguishes Buck-Morss’s vision of a transnational movement of contestation from the debates about global civil society is that she proposes to include non-liberal cultural and religious formations, such as Islamism. In contrast to Eagleton, she considers Islamism not as an anti-modern reactionary force, but as a form of critique in the tradition of the Frankfurt School. Careful not to conflate Islamism with fundamentalism or even worse, terrorism, she recognizes the critical force and potential of a postcolonial discourse that explicitly “challenges the hegemony of Western political and social norms” (p. 2). Buck-Morss urges her readers to engage with Islamism as an alternative discourse about European modernity and Enlightenment, one that is not derivative of Western terms and hence “changes the parameters of the theoretical discussion set by the West” (p. 44). The strength of her book lies in this call to treat Islamism as a legitimate and intelligible mode of contestation. By recognizing that the work of translation between Islamism and the (presumably non-Muslim) art and theory worlds will leave neither language unchanged, Buck-Morss emphasizes that the terms of a critical debate must themselves be the products of negotiations between the various participants.

It is unfortunate that this sophisticated and compelling conceptualization of the global public fades to the background as soon as it comes to the

conditions for participation. These conditions include a commitment to reason as a “normative, moral term,” tolerance, and freedom of dissent (p. 4). The author never considers that these criteria may in fact be incompatible with the non-liberal critical discourses she aspires to accommodate. Constituencies that reject reason as a moral ground and instead invoke an unconditional allegiance to a sacred text, collectivities that cohere around a set of shared practices of piety that do not leave room for interpretation or dissent, and even those who may consider radical redistribution of wealth more important than freedom of dissent, are excluded from Buck-Morss’s global public.

The restrictions placed on the global public are epitomized in the one example Buck-Morss provides of such a public sphere: New York. New York, she writes, is a “really existing, global public sphere in the most concrete and, currently, most optimistic sense” (p. 25). The image of New York as the site of identification and constitution of a global public sphere is troubling because it situates the critical global movement not in Porto Alegre, Mumbai, or Bamako, but at the most visible center of global privilege. Yet this does not seem to worry Buck-Morss, who wants to reclaim the United States as a democratic republic “held hostage by the US national security state that has sullied our reputation and stolen our name” (p. 33). In a rhetorical pathos indicative of how the lexicon of patriotism has come to govern critical discourse in the United States, she even declares to be “fiercely loyal” to a democratic and constitutional United States of America (p. 29).

The project of considering Islamism in terms of its critical resources is a good one. But in Buck-Morss’s book, critical theory inhabits an uncomfortable place: her text relies both too much and yet too little on the intellectual resources of the Frankfurt School. It is insufficiently critical (in the Frankfurt sense) in the narrative she adopts of the two Americas, and in the invocation of a democratic and uncorrupted United States that may be pried away from the national security state. But her book also depends too much on the category of critique inherited from the Frankfurt School. As she draws on Islamism, Buck-Morss does not allow her categories of critique to be interrogated, and she writes as though criticality itself, the model of which is the Frankfurt School, remains entirely stable. Instead of a dialogical encounter, her reading of Islamism aligns it with Frankfurt. Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian intellectual and Islamist associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, is presented as employing a strategy that “precisely paralleled the argument of Adorno and Horkheimer” (p. 98). The comparison between Qutb and Horkheimer and Adorno is intriguing, yet also disconcerting. Instead of approaching Qutb’s work on its own terms, Buck-Morss assimilates it to the Frankfurt School, and

thus the specificity of his thought is lost. Moreover, by relying on Horkheimer and Adorno as an interpretive grid, Buck-Morss unwittingly reproduces the limitations of their project and forecloses a critical engagement with the secularist and Eurocentric categories of the Frankfurt School.

This has concrete consequences for what can be understood as the valuable component of political Islam. Islamism only enters Buck-Morss's radar screen as a force that challenges, disputes, confronts, and contests, one that extends "the discursive field of political resistance" (p. 42). But what if, as Saba Mahmood has argued in *Politics of Piety*, Islamism is precisely not about freedom as resistance, but about piety? What if the Islamic revival movement involves practices of the self that are aimed at submission and conformity with tradition? For Buck-Morss the limit of criticality is precisely there, for practices that are not based on reasoned debate and dissenting voices count as "fundamentalism," as the "dogmatic belief that refuses to interrogate founding texts and excludes the possibility of critical dialogue" (p. 93). As with the two United States of America, there are two kinds of Islam, the good one, which has critical potential (defined by the standards of criticality of the Frankfurt school) and the bad one, which is dogmatic and stakes a claim to orthodoxy that is potentially oppressive. Here, despite the promise of a radically inclusive approach receptive to non-liberal movements, this book limits the global public sphere to those who share liberal values. The author is reluctant to fully assume the implications of her thinking, which would involve exposing the art and theory worlds and rendering them vulnerable to a discourse that may disturb, trouble, and perhaps offend. The door that is opened for a fresh reckoning with Islamism is thus only held ajar and could be shut again at a moment's notice.

Drucilla Cornell's book *Defending Ideals* intervenes in the debates about the Iraq War. Like Buck-Morss, Cornell has a programmatic aim: against the realpolitik of power, she wants to promote ideals and the idealism of the peace movement to build a political vision and a movement of critical resistance. Accordingly, the first chapter is a trenchant critique of "realist" Just War theory. The remainder of the book develops ideals of peace and humanity through a series of readings that engage John Rawls, Amartya Sen, and Theodor W. Adorno, as well as radical feminist and anti-militarist ideals and practices. In these chapters, Cornell proposes ideals of humanity and of human rights that eschew the anthropological and ontological premises of liberal humanism.

Ideals, Cornell argues convincingly, are indispensable elements of politics: they function as promises, as pledges of a radical universality that can never be fully embodied in an institutional formation. Because they challenge

every existing political form, ideals have a vital function in expressing claims against the present in the name of a future possibility. Cornell's notion of ideal is a Kantian regulative principle. For Kant, ideals are models of moral conduct that guide our action, but have no objective reality because they lack the constitutive content provided by the understanding. When Cornell advocates moral principles around which political movements can rally, this is what she has in mind: regulative models that guide action but do not claim to represent a viable political agenda. The recourse to Kant allows her to offer a notion of an ideal that informs political action, but can never exhaustively determine the political or social form.

However, as is the case with Buck-Morss, the universality of these ideals seems compromised as soon as the liberal secularism that underpins them can no longer be guaranteed. In her endeavor to convey to the reader the terrifying experience of a bombardment, Cornell cites a long and moving account by an Iraqi woman, Nuha al-Radi. Al-Radi's chilling testimony of enduring a bombing makes fear palpable. At the end of the section Cornell mentions that al-Radi, who is an artist, was raised as a Muslim, but "is not a follower of Islam" (p. 4), that she is an "unmarried, independent woman" who does not accept any restrictions imposed by religion. Cornell never explains what al-Radi's religious beliefs, her spiritual practices, or for that matter her marital status, have to do with her experience of the bombing. Yet to be a reliable witness, it appears that she must be pictured as secularized and independent. Would a strong belief or piety disqualify her as a trustworthy source? Would the anguish and agony suffered by a pious Muslim not carry the same weight?

Cornell never answers these questions, but her text is anxious to hierarchize Muslim voices according to liberal norms. This is most evident in her response to the clichéd question of post-9/11 America: "Why do they hate us?" Judiciously, she points out that there is no "they," that this third person plural is an ambiguous pronoun without a clear referent. Moreover, arguing against the general Islamophobia, she suggests that a distinction must be drawn between those Muslims who—perhaps like Nuha al-Radi—loathe the USA because of its history of militarism and aggression, and Wahhabi Islam, which she regards as the true source of violence and hatred. Cornell associates Wahhabism with terrorism and exhorts her readers to be careful, "to separate out Wahhabism from other strands of a rich and varied tradition" (p. 16). In stark contrast to al-Radi, whose secular lifestyle makes her an ideal interlocutor and with whose anguish the reader is asked to empathize, followers of the Salafi School only appear as the incarnation of dogma and danger.

While Cornell is concerned to show that there is no “they” who hate “us,” she seems unperturbed by the “we,” which is equally underdetermined and unspecified. The asymmetry between the “they” that comes under scrutiny and the “we” that is casually invoked is instructive. Whereas the “they” is shown to be empty, the self-evidence of the “we” hides a curious metonymy: it is left to oscillate between the restricted, geo-political referent of the United States and the supposedly universal moment of the “West” or even humanity as a whole.

In the indeterminacy of this “we” an important shift takes place. The universal ideals of peace, humanity, and progress become re-territorialized and circumscribed. Indicative of this move is Cornell’s emphasis on the “political ideals of freedom and justice found in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights” (p. 87). These ideals are here re-framed as American ideals, as ideals “that most Americans recognize and claim as their own” (p. 87). The legitimacy of these ideals is no longer lodged in their universality and intrinsic moral worth, but in their inscription in the US Constitution, which in turn becomes the wellspring of political ideals. Cornell’s insistence that peace is patriotic, that the critics of the war are not “un-American,” and that she loves her country has to be read in this context. Here another “we” is mobilized, one that constitutes itself as loyal to the Constitution and thereby contests the exclusive claim of the political Right to the symbols and discourses of patriotism. But this declaration of love to country and constitution comes at a cost: in the process, the ideals of peace and humanity are demoted to second place. At the very moment when they are called upon, they surrender their claim to universality by yielding to the ideal of patriotism. The radical political idealism thus ends up in a particularism, as the universal ideals are re-territorialized under the sign of patriotism and the political subject is *prima facie* constituted as isomorphic with the American citizen.

To varying degrees, the three books reviewed here emphasize the urgency of the present and exhort their readers to take the debate outside the academy. They reflect the common sentiment that, in Buck-Morss’s words, “September 11 has transformed irrevocably the context in which we as intellectuals speak” (p. 21). To speak of the ominous date of September 11 as having radically transformed the intellectual’s task may be an expedient tactic of mobilization, yet it also contributes to a sense of urgency and to a narrative of danger that ought to be contested instead of reproduced. To date the dawn of a new era to the fall of the World Trade Center is to concede too much to a revisionist historiography and to disregard how the rhetoric of novelty, exceptionality, and danger functions to underwrite the securitarian politics of fear.

The politico-theoretical debates about the contemporary world are too important to omit a careful and systematic scrutiny of the spatial and temporal conditions that constitute this very present. For it is out of these spatio-temporal limits that the fabric of a civilizational discourse is knit. The lack of critical attention to the constitutive limits of the present thus explains some of the platitudes and stereotypes about Islam or the United States (and its extension—the “West”) that seem to circulate in contemporary critical theory. The divisions, between “good Muslims” and “bad Muslims” (to cite the title of Mahmood Mamdani’s insightful book), and between a good United States and a bad United States may be naïve, but they are not innocent. As “fundamentalist” Islam and the national security state are discarded, they are simultaneously constituted as unmediated objects, as pure alterities. Whereas liberal Islam and the proud republic are both considered complex cultural-political formations, Muslim “fundamentalism” and the national security state are conceptualized as raw historical facts, as though these categories were not themselves culturally produced.

The geographic/civilizational scheme leaves in place two oppositions that ought to be questioned and interrogated. First, the geographic and cultural division between Islam and the “West” is premised on the idea that Islam is not an integral part of the Euro-American cultural space. It marks the “West” racially, religiously, and culturally as a non-Muslim space and produces an Orientalized outside. Furthermore, this geo-cultural mapping holds on to the very juxtaposition of civilization and barbarism. It is no small irony that two out of the three books reviewed here cite Walter Benjamin’s famous statement that every document of civilization is also a document of barbarism. But none of the authors seems to take this claim seriously enough; for Benjamin would surely have considered the ideal of civilization to be beyond recuperation.

Yves Winter
University of California, Berkeley

Yves Winter is a PhD candidate in the Department of Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley. He is completing his dissertation on the logic of violence in the political theories of Machiavelli and Marx.