Terror.edu: Terror and Education in the U.S.A.

The Society for Critical Exchange held its first Winter Theory Institute from 11-14 February 2010 at the University of Houston-Victoria, located in Victoria, Texas. Eleven scholars from a variety of disciplines and from across the United States came together to present and discuss their current work on questions regarding the affect terror and terrorism are having on education in higher education. The participants presented their work by turn, and all took part in the intense two days fully devoted to the discussions. Some of the questions we hoped to address included the following: How have institutions of higher learning responded to the specter of terror? How should academe respond? What is our professional role in a terroristic world?

The morning started with Christian Moraru (professor of English, University of North Carolina, Greensboro), who spoke on "Higher Education: 9/11, Cosmopolitan Literacy, and the New Pedagogical Imperative." He stressed the need to teach a cosmopolitan literacy based on an attempt to understand the other in his/her material, particular humanness rather than as an allegorical other.

James Castagnera (associate provost and associate counsel for academic affairs, Rider University, Philadelphia) reached us virtually through an online presentation. His talk, "The Varieties of Homegrown Terrorism," emphasized domestic terrorism, which he feels is a greater threat to the United States than the one posed by the teachings of radical Islam. He argued that we should be cognizant of the wide variety of targets in the "war on terror."

David B. Downing (director of graduate studies in literature and criticism, Indiana University of Pennsylvania) presented his work on "The War on Terror and the Battle for the Global Commons." According to him, the "war on terror" has become a cause that licenses all manner of regressive policies. Education has been further commodified and emphasis has been placed on vocational skills. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) continue to pursue economic policies that, combined with military policy, lead to a greater proportion of the education commons becoming privatized.

Kenneth J. Saltman (associate Professor of educational policy studies and research, DePaul University) gave a talk entitled "The Rise of Venture

Philanthropy and the Ongoing Neoliberal Assault on Critical and Public Education." In it, he outlined the effect of the philanthropy undertaken by people such as Bill Gates on education. Saltman pointed out that such efforts have led to the intensification of neoliberal ideas and structures in public education. Such effects are especially pursued in the face of natural and man-made disasters, including the "war on terror."

The talk by Sophia A. McClennen (associate professor of comparative literature, Spanish, and women's studies and director of the graduate program in comparative literature, Pennsylvania State University), was titled "Neoliberalism as Terrorism; or State of Disaster Exceptionalism." As she put it in her abstract, "The post 9/11 US state incorporates two fundamental shifts: the permanent state of exception caused by the war on terror and the corporate state of neoliberalism. Both radically alter civic identities on US soil and abroad." The civic identities she then focused on involved representing Afghanistan as a failed state that both precedes the "war on terror" and is also a good part of the current rhetoric about the country. Continuing to characterize Afghanistan as a failed state allows the United States to pursue policies that it might not otherwise.

Although Masood Raja (professor of English, Kent State University) could not join us because of scheduling conflicts, he indicated that he was interested in addressing the contemporary relationship between the United States and Pakistan. His paper, "Rhetoric of Democracy and the War on Terror: The Limits of US-Pakistan Alliance," looks at the pressure that the United States places upon Pakistan's democratic institutions and practices to be more autocratic. Such a subversion in pursuit of the "war on terror" has the possibility of destabilizing not just Pakistan but the entire region.

The second day started with Zahi Zalloua's (professor of medieval and Renaissance French literature, Whitman College) talk on "The Ethics of Trauma/The Trauma of Ethics: Terror After Lévinas." Although Levinas provides an ethical frame for seeing the "other" necessarily as a radical "other," an "other" who forces the self to see more than simply the self's reflection, he has a blind spot when it comes to accepting the universalization of the Jewish experience during the holocaust and of slavery in ancient Egypt into the Jew as the victim. This, in turn, makes it problematic, then, in the case of Israel, where the Jew is not the victim. Zalloua suggests that critics be wary of the intersection of the philosophical and political in the Levinasian ethical framework.

J. Keith Akins (professor of criminal justice, University of Houston-Victoria) began his presentation – "Academic Freedom versus PC Taboos:

Differences between Teaching Christian and Islamic Violence" – by providing a brief history of the vastly different reactions elicited by his classes on the religious roots of violence. He has found that his remarks about Christian violence being rooted in fundamentalist interpretations of the religion are deemed unremarkable, whereas similar remarks about Islamic violence have lead to personal and pedagogical attacks. Although Akins offered some structural and cultural-historical reasons as to why he has experienced this discrepancy, he is still searching for satisfactory answers.

"The Company They Keep: How Apologists for Faith Rationalize Terroism" was given by Horace L. Fairlamb (director of the masters program in interdisciplinary studies, University of Houston-Victoria). In his talk, he asked the attendees to consider that one should take a look at the epistemic practices that allow for religious terrorism in our examination of the links between faith and terror. He suggests that all too often western philosophers of religion are actually pursuing an apologetics of faith in place of an inquiry of faith. Apologetics puts certain beliefs beyond question, and such a demarcation renders a full inquiry impossible.

Terry Caesar (professor of English, San Antonio College) spoke on the university as an unlikely site of terror in his "Universities, Terrorists, Narrative, Porcupines." Using Donald Barthelme's short story "Porcupines at the University" and John Updike's novel *Terrorist* as a means of exploration, he proposes that the university is part of two contradictory narratives relative to terror: the self-enclosed physical site impervious to the world, and the ideologically open space home to all manner of radical experiments. Rather than see the two narratives as oppositional, we should see them as interacting in troubling ways that, according to him, keep the university oscillating between a target for ideological terror and an exception for physical terror.

Robin Truth Goodman's (professor of English, Florida Sate University) "Shaherazad On-Line: Women's Work and Technologies of War," discussed the relations of technology to transformations in women's work. She applied the comparison between the philosophy of Donna Haraway and that of Herbert Marcuse to the Iraqi blog Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq (2005, 2006) and notes that Haraway's disruption of the private/public, male/female, and machine/human binaries is a richer approach to understanding how women trapped in a narrative of terror might create spaces for themselves through the various technologies currently available.

Elaine Martin (professor, Department of Modern Languages and Classics, University of Alabama) closed the formal part of the institute with a look at "Films about Terrorism, Cinema Studies, and the Academy." Based

on her examination of a number of films about terrorism, beginning with *The Battle of Algiers* and *The Baader Meinhof Complex* but focusing on three contemporary films from Brazil, India, and Palestine (*Four Days in September*, *The Terrorist*, and *Paradise Now*, respectively) she discussed the renewed interest in Third Cinema aesthetics.[1] The various films all found not only a commonality in aesthetics but also in sociopolitical orientations, which might suggest a universal frame for films about terror.

Endnotes

1. **Editor's Note:** "Third Cinema" is defined as "a Latin American film movement that started in the 1960s-70s which decries neocolonialism, the capitalist system, and the Hollywood model of cinema as mere entertainment to make money." See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Third_Cinema.

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