

Culture in the Plural or, Cultural Studies after 9/11

Hi, everybody. Such a joy to be in Freiburg, once again. Let me start by thanking Dr. Alber for inviting me to speak to you, and let me thank you too for having decided, apparently, to hang in there for the next hour. As I understand, you are taking Dr. Alber's Introduction to Cultural Studies class. This makes you my ideal audience insofar as my presentation turns on a key concept in cultural analysis: *difference*, the different, that which ultimately stands outside any rationalizing language, any principle of classification.

Now, to get there, though, to that concept, we need to historicize a bit. "Always historicize," right? In any event, we need some *context*, context being, of course, another pivotal term in our field. That context, though, will be—will have to be, as I argue—supranational, geopolitical, instead of simply sociological, ethnic, racial, and otherwise identitarian *within* a nation-state. It is the context—the inevitable context—of what I have been calling the late-global world, which is defined, among other things, by the new dynamic of transnational mobility, exchange, friction, and conflict, including terror—terrorism, more exactly, and more specifically still the kind of terrorism witnessed on September 11, 2001. I will spend some time on this dynamic so as to get a handle on what it means to do cultural studies in the 21st century.

Driven by competing agendas and fraught with their high-pitched discord, the post-9/11 debate over *terror* in general and *terrorism* in particular rests, nonetheless, on an implied epistemological consensus: the traditional notions no longer hold water. By "traditional" I mean, of course, "modern." To be sure, the dictionary definition of terrorism, on which we often fall back mechanically, has been handed down to us by modernity, namely, by the post-Westphalian

modernity of sovereign Western nation-states. This definition has all but outlived its pertinence. Underscoring rather abstractly the use or threat of physical, sometimes deadly, anti-governmental and even anti-civilian force for political purposes, this understanding provides little orientation in the contemporary geography of violence. No doubt, the conceptual map we have inherited from the moderns is hardly the 21st-century territory where terrorism's contentions, plots, and meanings play out. To come to grips with these evolving meanings and their bearings on our lives as students, teachers, and citizens, I propose, accordingly, that we begin with this territory itself. For, it seems to me, what terror—no less than counter-terror—purports and stands for at the turbulent dawn of the new millennium is ultimately a function of this territory, of terror and terrorism's position, reach, and scope.

If terrorism is, among other things, politics, this politics is fundamentally and sometimes fundamentalistically a politics of *location*. Terrorism constitutes a territoriality epiphenomenon; more precisely, it did until recently. Whatever else they may have entailed or impacted, terrorist claims have involved (not unlike the claims laid by the nation, actually), self-determination, sovereignty or autonomy, and, in the final analysis, territoriality. Historically speaking, terror—political terror rather than its psychologist counterpart or terror as a “state of mind”—has been *territorialized*, place-bound. Local or, territorial, terror has had a spatial pathos to it. It has bodied forth a “separatist,” hence topological militancy, has been energized (has been “about”) and therefore has been circumscribed by a certain terrain—a *terra*, *țară*, *tierra*, *terre*, and so on in Latin and a number of Romance languages—that is, by a (home)land, country, or domain of the nation-state and its subdivisions or extensions inside or around its ever-contested borders, policies, and symbols. Thus, terror and its modern enactments have been ordinarily a violent variety of political *teratology* in the twofold sense that sets up the familiar-domestic, the

territorial, as a stage for the teratological, the monstrous, the “terrifying” (from the Latin *terrēre*). Baader-Meinhof did have sponsors and contacts outside West Germany, but, by and large, waged by individuals, groups, state-sanctioned military or paramilitary apparatuses of surveillance and repression such as the secret police from the Tsarist CEKA to the Stasi and the Iranian Basij, or by whole governments during the recurrent “reigns of terror” for which latter-day apologists like Slavoj Žižek still offer cynical encomia, terror has been a non-deliberative, anti-parliamentary formation or malformation *within* the home of the nation, a homegrown aberration inside or alongside the *Heimat*’s body politic.

Not so much in the post-1989 era. Highly symptomatic of the Cold War’s aftermath, the September 11, 2001 events as well as the worldwide developments they spurred bear witness to the spectacularly global dissemination of terror. Like most anything else, terror has been *detrterritorialized*. Decoupled from a well-marked territory, terror has gone global. Both in its actions and in the counter-actions it has unleashed—as “Jihadism” and “War on Terror” alike—it is now supralocal, transnational, arguably planetary. The nation-state neither contains it topologically nor accounts for it descriptively, as a unit of analysis. Not any more. As before, our time’s terrorism is militarily and politically transgressive, or, as we say these days, “asymmetric,” in that it bends and even shuns the more or less agreed-upon forms and rules of martial and political engagement. Its geographical asymmetry, its territorial unpredictability, is, however, quasi unprecedented. Practically, terror may originate anywhere nowadays, including “at home,” and it can also strike anywhere. In fact, whether the target is, or is “in,” Manhattan or Waziristan, and whether the targeting is carried out by isolated operatives or by networked, state-endorsed, or self-described statal agents such as regular armed forces, terrorist acts predominantly and characteristically stem from “elsewhere.”

Does this mean that terrorism is not our problem, here and now, in a here and now almost overnight become, after 9/11, more problematic, more replete with problems and questions than ever? Absolutely not. It *is* our problem. Moreover, should it seem otherwise, we must show explicitly that we can make it our problem. It does not mean that the “elsewhere” I have mentioned is solely a spatial category either. To the contrary. It means, as I will expound in what follows, that terrorism *qua* our problem, as an American, German, or Pakistani problem, cannot be dealt with apart from the highly charged problematic of elsewhere, of other terrains, cultures, and peoples, of “others.” If that is true, then let me say a few words about this geoculturally asymmetric elsewhere, its thought-provoking, irregular landscape of otherness, and what they might at once warrant and demand in the post-9/11 cultural studies course.

What bears highlighting—as a general premise, if you will—is the complex intertwining of identity, humanist education, and citizenship in times of post-Cold War terror. This is a tight if counterintuitive interdependence. Terror, terrorism more precisely, irrespective of its manifestation, on the one hand, and education, higher-education in general and cultural analysis in particular, on the other, are bound up with one another. The mutual articulation of terror—with its events, policies, and disputes, on one side—and the academy, on the other side, gives the lie to the old Ivory Tower cliché, so much so that there is no other side, no sides, discrete, or outside domains any more, but a single albeit conflicted continuum of occurrences, implications, and discourses. “No more outside”: this is Hardt and Negri’s reiterated Deleuzian conclusion in *Empire*. Within months, 9/11 corroborated this supremely apposite post-Berlin Wall geopolitical observation, and before long, our universities followed suit, finding it increasingly difficult to position themselves outside those events, policies, and debates. No wonder some of us in the U. S. have deplored the encroachments of counterterrorist measures and regulations on our libraries

and computers, and rightly so. But, whether or not the “War on Terror” as such makes just for the kind of knee-jerk, unreflective reaction that we think it is our job to help students control intellectually and ethically; whether or not this all-out campaign threatens the very freedoms in whose defense it was presumably waged in the first place, one has no choice but to own up to the intricate, ever-ambiguous imbrications of terror, its territorial or, cross-territorial terrain, rather, and the moral-aesthetic values cultivated (cf. Lat. *cultura*) throughout this globally shifting, counter-cartographic territoriality; to recognize that, while it may no longer be place- or nation-bound, terror remains germane to culture; to acknowledge, on this very ground, that terror falls under the enlightening jurisdiction of education and thus can be approached as cultural formation of meanings and of those learning about these meanings.

Culture does *not* end where terror begins (and vice versa). What I see here is not a disjunction but an inherent interplay, for better or worse: for worse, insofar as this imbrication may allow for potentially or effectively censorious intrusions of various government agencies on our work—and, to the extent the counterterrorist suspicions and policies, domestic and foreign, hurt our abilities to recruit international students and otherwise do our job, these infringements should be challenged vigorously; for better, in that if terror and culture are indeed bound up with one another and, further, if the University continues to be a premier place for the critical production and filtering of cultural definitions, identities, and citizenship, then several points are in order—think of them as a kind of cultural studies decalogue for the 21st-century.

First, we, educators generally and cultural critics especially, are uniquely positioned to intervene in the ongoing, confusing dispute over terror, terrorism, conflict more broadly, and their impact on identity, expression and their meaning. We must understand, and make others

understand too, that the confusion will persist *unless* the controversy and pertaining decisions, policies, and so forth take into account cultural issues.

Second, what this intervention might come down to is, in short, a reorientation of the discussion and related public perception away from the crude us/them, “clashist” dichotomy à la Benjamin Barber and Samuel Huntington. This polarity is simplistic, politically counterproductive, and geoculturally fictitious as long as we view it in exclusively adversarial and topologically discontinuous terms. I am not implying either that self and other do not exist in the modality of a distinction that can be deemed, and often simply is, as Emmanuel Levinas stresses, radical. It is just that, distinct as they are and often insist on remaining, self and other stand after 1989 willy-nilly inscribed into a material world syntax of co-presence and co-participation in the basic sense that I and you, Christian and Muslim, white and black (or brown), and so on—whether we/they like it or not—“are in this together.” Being-with-, understanding-with-, understanding oneself-with-an other are forms of translocal and transcultural togetherness that define the transition away from modernity’s disjunctive, either-or, nation-state-based logic to our conjunctive stage. In this post-, perhaps post-postmodern world, to be and mean is to be and mean in relation, to be and signify with others, so much so that you *owe them* who you are and how you see yourself, your own people, history, and the like. More than ever, the problem of culture and the problem *with* its analysis no less is the problem of alterity; the over here is a function of over there. Relatedness, more specifically the self-other nexus, is the logic of Manuel Castells’s network society and in that cuts to the heart of how and who we (no less than “they”) and our world are—once more, whether we/they are crazy about it or not.

Third, if this is so, then, once again, the problem of terror is no different from the problem of culture, “mine” and “yours,” American and Pakistani, Danish and Arab, French and

maghrébin, German and Japanese—and both in one and at the same time such as in Yoko Tawada’s *Sprachpolizei und Spielpolyglotte* or in E. L. Doctorow’s *Michael Kohlhaas* rewrite from *Ragtime*—the problem of how we think of culture and how we might help the public at large think of it. Thus, I would propose that this thinking and the teaching and learning based on it are or should be relational, grounded in the kind of I-You relation to which thinkers like Martin Buber have attended so inspiringly. It is this thinking, this sort of “intelligence” that “connects the dots,” distinct and asymmetrically positioned as these dots may be or appear. This “mutualist” worldview sets up relations, places things in a participatory context of interaction and negotiation in order to make sense of those things.

Fourth, this kind of context also defines the pedagogical environment *and* epistemological paradigm of the 21st-century classroom. Reciprocally, it is in this context that the defining essence of culture and identity emerges. Both transhistorical and more conspicuous today than at any previous stage, this essence, what culture and cultural identity are and, consequently, how we think or how we should think about them, ultimately disables a disjunctive-adversarial understanding of the self-other dyad. “Out there” as much as “in here,” across the world and across the street, the other no less than the self as the other’s other are—or, if they are not yet, they ought to become—no longer the monolithically ethno-religious fetish lying behind most acts of terror and anti-terrorist retaliations.

Fifth, while imagining ourselves—teaching the images and histories of our countries—in terms of our indebtedness to others may not be an instant game-changer, in my judgment it nevertheless is a first step we can and should take as students and teachers of culture. This is a step in the direction of a cultural solution to a problem that, I hasten to add loud and clear, is not solely cultural but also economic, religious, demographic, political and geopolitical, and so on.

However, what we hear time and again from Žižek, Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, and other self-appointed, global-era terrorism experts is, as Baudrillard himself allows in his 2002 essay *Hypothèses sur le terrorisme*, that “It all comes from the fact that the Other, like Evil, is unimaginable. It all comes from the impossibility of conceiving of the Other—friend or enemy—in its radical otherness, in its irreconcilable foreignness.” “A refusal rooted,” the philosopher goes on, “in the total identification with oneself around moral values and technical power. That is the America that takes itself for America and which, bereft of otherness, eyes itself with the wildest compassion.” Needless to say—or, who knows, perhaps this needs to be said, given where the terror debate stands *dix ans après*—there is hardly any compassion for terrorism’s victims in Baudrillard, and you would find it neither in Virilio’s technophobe jeremiad *Ground Zero*, where the 9/11 attacks are defined, following Karlheinz Stockhausen’s 2001 statement, as “the greatest work of art there has ever been.” Nor is there any in Žižek’s anti-consumerist-anti-Hollywood-anti-postmodern-anti-cultural-studies-anti-multicultural-anti-U.S.-anti-Israeli-anti-Pakistani-and-anti-pretty-much-everything tirade *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. Oddly enough, Žižek fancies himself a sort of iron-fisted Morpheus, not the Greek God of sleep and dreams, of course, but the Laurence Fishburne character in *The Matrix* moonlighting, appalling as it may sound, as “[a] Minister of the Interior or head of the secret service,” which, still in Žižek’s own words, was “the only government [post] which interested me” back “in the early 1990s,” when “I was more involved in Slovene politics” (hey, did somebody say totalitarianism?). Žižek-as-Himmler (or Stalin’s Beria—just take your pick)-as Morpheus, then, welcomes the terrorist occurrence, the “act,” insofar as the act—never mind its mass-murderous consequences—serves as a national wakeup call, in turn welcoming us to the “thing itself,” the Real underneath the media-generated simulacrum also known as the American everyday. In this

sense, 9/11's thousands of deaths and, by implication, the many more thousands of casualties inflicted on others elsewhere after that make for a reasonable "price to be paid for peeling off the deceptive layers of reality," that is, for finally "getting" ideology and the spell it casts on us. But the careful reader must be disappointed, I presume, when the Slovene Morpheus lulls us back to sleep by defining, a bit later, the cultural anatomy of the event behind the Real's disclosure as the very workings of said ideology. Whether you want to know more about yourself or about others, learning about the other's culture "remains," he claims, "a gesture of ideological mystification *par excellence*: probing into different cultural traditions is precisely *not* the way to grasp the political dynamics which led to the September 11 attacks."

Sixth, the new pedagogical imperative and the *transcultural literacy* that I believe must be this imperative's ultimate objective go of necessity against this a-cultural cocksureness. Cultural "probing" is hardly the compounding problem. Quite the opposite, it provides the solution, across classrooms, agoras, and political bodies. Why? Because, if terrorism is, no matter its origin, venue, and rationale, the violent epitome of parochialism, the paroxysm of the idiomatic and the ruthlessly exclusive, this is due to no negligible degree to what I would call the *poverty of the anthropological imagination*. Xenophobic, anti-Semitic, racist, jingoistic, and, according to Roland Barthes, "petit-bourgeois" culture is simply "unable to imagine the Other. If [it] comes face to face with him, [it] blinds [it]self, ignores and denies him, or else transforms [it]self into him." True, Barthes talks about "class anthropomorphism," but I would broaden the notion to cover the cultural anthropomorphism of any culturally ingrown self, group, or society in which "otherness is reduced to sameness." On the one hand, such self or group expunges the other from the domain of selfhood; on the other hand, it reduces the other to (the self) itself in the (preudo)act of self-knowledge. Both are stratagems of negation, denial, and thus self-denial.

Historically, they have played out, as Barthes alerts us, in a number of superficially conflicting ways: as outright ignorance; as pseudo-recognition that forces the unknown into the clichés and essences customarily featured by the rhetoric of intolerance and more largely into cut-and-dried categories of intelligibility; as “agnostic” rationalization of the supposedly “exotic,” “irrational,” and “incomprehensible,” which casts the other outside “humanity” on principle—the other is in- or sub-human, demonic, barbarian, unclean, etc.

In the West, this exclusive mentality can be traced back to the Greek city-state and its setting itself off against the backdrop of “barbarian” otherness fancied as outlandish, *distinct* in space and culture, that is, incompatible with the local axiology of the polis and thereby im-polite and im-politic, uncouth and uncivilized, in sum, “barbarous.” A barbarian, Greek historians and philosophers enlighten us, is fundamentally a non-Greek, a foreigner. Vice versa, a foreigner must be barbaric, totally different from and adverse to the native in customs and demeanor. *Alius* (“other” for Romans) is thus understood as *alienus*, “alien.” The self and the barbarian other are not only distinct but also politically discordant and so liable to clash. As a non-self, the latter “threatens” the self by its very existence. This is how, in the dynamic of self and other as represented by the *socii* of a self-described native community, difference sets itself up as incompatibility, disjunction, contest, intolerance, and finally exclusion. It becomes so, of course, without necessarily being recognized as such.

The rationale of this exclusion is reason itself, more precisely, the contrasting irrationality of the other, who is “by nature” prone to brutality, to rude, irrational if not utterly insane behavior (cf. the French *aliéné*). This proclivity is putatively born out by the word’s onomatopoeic root. Accordingly, the gibberish spoken by the *bárbaroi* is nonsensical “bar, bar, bar” (“blah, blah, blah”), an etymology corroborated by the Sanskrit *barbara* (“stammering” and

“non-Aryan”). Since presumably *phoné barbariké* serves no rational purpose, it supplies no vehicle to logos, sense-making, communication, and cooperation either, disqualifying its speaker as *polites*, as a member of a linguistic-rational community. In brief, irrationality is both cultural diagnosis and political subterfuge, language used by the “sane,” a priori civilized, and “politic” body to mark and quarantine infectious difference and thus control the “pathology” of otherness.

Seventh, we have reached a point in world affairs when it is becoming abundantly clear that this symptomatology is endemic to insiders and outsiders alike, to self-described rational communities, languages, and institutions, as well to their supposedly irrational and external exteriorities. Regardless of side, then, among all those unable to imagine others and their “alternate” ways of doing and looking at things, the terrorist individual, organization, or mindset is the worst in that he, she, they, or it cannot picture other people as people, that is, cannot visualize others’ humanity *as* humanity, as concrete if “atypical” human life worth respecting unless it mirrors their own type. And if it does not, it does not exist. It falls short not only typologically but also ontologically, or so the argument goes. Those others may be “out there,” but they are less than human. Further, since they do not fit the bill of *humanness*, they are not worth our *humaneness* either, a modicum of compassion that would make the terrorist operative or apparatus think twice before blowing them to smithereens.

Eight, this compassion is cosmopolitan. Very basically, as a modality of care, of ethical outward projection of the self, compassion “shap[es] the civic imagination” and thus lies at the core of civility, of being “civilized,” a *cives* (*polites*). The cosmopolitan *cives*, the *cosmopolites*, as the Greeks called him or her, extends or is expected to extend “intramural” compassion to those other “out there” (or, if in here, not like “us”). He or she possesses the rare ability to care about others, and to the extent that this ability is inherent to cosmopolitanism, a phrase such as

“compassionate cosmopolite” is arguably a tautology. Conversely, to suggest that the cosmopolitan’s antinomy, the barbarian, is uncompassionate would be equally redundant. Along these lines, the terrorist individual, entity, or mechanism, no matter how rhetorically sophisticated his, her, or its platform, is quintessentially and no less redundantly barbarous.

Ninth, cosmopolitan compassion, the capacity to feel-for across differences in space and culture, is—and here too I follow Martha Nussbaum—the one that puts indifference, injustice, aggression, and ultimately murderous violence onto an other out of gear. And yet I cannot feel-for if I cannot feel-with, if I cannot associate myself authentically to the ways others see and take in the world, without sharing in their world pictures, in brief, if there is no empathy. But there can be no empathy for others either, no emotional connection with those who are *not* already my relatives, without the basic ability to relate to them cognitively—cognitively and, I insist, ethically at once—that is, if I make no attempt to know them in their often radical, hard-to-know and sometimes unknowable otherness. In this sense, the “impossibility of conceiving the Other” in his or her “radical otherness,” in the specific, time- and place-bound configuration of his or her humanity, is the problem we are all facing today whether we talk about terror or culture, about 9/11 or Orientalism (or Occidentalism for that matter). At the dawn of the 21st century more than ever in our history, this history and the culture produced across it appear to us, with supreme clarity, as a domain of relationality.

Tenth, as has been noted but also forgotten repeatedly, it was cultural studies that moved “others” to the center of our view of ourselves. “Bereft of otherness,” to invoke Baudrillard again, our countries make, indeed, no sense analytically—I suppose this is what most of us tell our students more and more these days. Made possible by a number of philosophers, sociologists, and political scientists who have taken the first steps in opposing cosmopolitanism,

its cultural epistemology, and ethics to the new, state-sponsored or freelancing barbarianism of terror—and more largely cosmopolitan “conversationalism” to parochial “confrontationalism”—the whole point of what I would call the new, cross-cultural or cosmopolitan literacy is to drive home this notion of being and making sense in *sine qua non* relation with an other’s singular humanity. Our charge as cultural critics and humanists eager to honor the plurality embedded in the humanities to which we are so dedicated, and also the main task of education in general at a time self and other have drawn so close in space to one another, is indeed this literacy understood as a systematic, trans-curricular, and methodologically apposite effort to help our students see others—and with them, ourselves—in their material, particular humanness.

Why? Because this materiality, I contend, is the very site and vehicle of cultural-existential difference. Difference, then, is no longer a hurdle, an obstacle to communication, as classical humanists and critics from Žižek and Badiou to Nussbaum herself tend to think. Difference is a bridge, a window into the other’s humanity and implicitly an apt instrument with which to handle and possibly mitigate the frictions, tensions, frustrations, and confusions of worldly togetherness. To think twice, to spare a life, to think a life worth sparing, is not just thinking but also feeling. Yet, it bears reiterating in closing, you cannot feel for, or feel like, others, nor can you empathize—let alone be compassionate—if you cannot relate, and you cannot relate outside the immediate circle of kin and kind if you do not get to know those others in their most humanly individualizing routines that, at the end of knowing, must remain as human as individual, “different,” unique, and, yes, mysterious.

On this account, Baudrillard is one more time wrong: while terrorism may often be logistically “asymmetric,” what it actually accomplishes does nothing to “restore” the world of singularities threatened by Nike billboards. To the extent that any asymmetric claim is the

purview of cultural behavior, asymmetry is in reality hardly the terrorist individual or state's posture; terrorism's asymmetric claims or appearances notwithstanding, its posture remains "immoral," a de facto imposture. It is the cosmopolitan cultural analyst and teacher's methodological self-positioning, object, as well as objective that are unconventional and asymmetrical, unpredictable, slippery, undisciplined, and otherwise little beholden to available cognitive grids. Still, we need to remind ourselves this: if, much like self-knowledge, our knowledge about others passes the test of this asymmetry, then we will have known them in their unyielding otherness. Thus, we will have also not known them, as it were, in the Levinasian sense in which relational rather than rational knowledge honors the mystery of others and the common world their elusive presence affords.