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Book Review:

American Multiculturalism after 9/11: Transatlantic Perspectives by
Derek Rubin and Jaap Verheul. Amsterdam University Press, 2011

It is generally beyond dispute that great historical episodes are the province of historians. Less intuitive, however, are the challenges posed to contemporary research in the social sciences and humanities by the objective of analyzing near-term history. With few exceptions, we approach the last generation's controversies differently than we do the issues dominating our current news cycle. Many of today's news items, in fact, are simply left to be made sense of by journalists. The events of 9/11, however, create an uncomfortable scenario for researchers. Here we have a subject too grave to delay studying, even if it means that the research produced can by no means escape unblemished from the politics that characterize our current historical moment.

Rubin and Verheul's (2011) edited volume, "American Multiculturalism after 9/11: Transatlantic Perspectives," (AM911 hereafter) wades into this predicament with impressive delicacy and passion. To make things tractable, the collection focuses on the impact of 9/11 on American multiculturalism, described as a particular perspective on difference, plurality and citizenship mainstreamed during the 1980s after decades of struggle. A frequent point made by the volume's contributors is that multiculturalism has itself become the enemy in the aftermath of 9/11, as a national closing of ranks against the worst of Islamic extremism has become a basis of exclusionary nationalist politics. Although a debate about multiculturalism has raged for more than 20 years before 9/11, contributors to the volume agree that multiculturalism had after 2001 become a stage for political projects more closely linked to US foreign policy and the interests of global capital.

The articles in AM911 hang well together, their cohesion aided in large part by an introduction chapter by Rubin and Verheul that usefully outlines and sets the tone of the volume. The authors observe that work done in the American studies tradition has focused too much on the global context of American culture, while political scientists have tended to the more nationally-anchored subject of multiculturalism, generally treating it as a political more than a cultural matter. AM911 fills this gap by emphasizing how 9/11 has impacted the particularly cultural elements of the ongoing debate about American multiculturalism.

The collection is divided into three sections. The first situates American multiculturalism into theoretical and geopolitical context. Paul Lauter delivers a strong leading article contending that the events of 9/11 exacerbated a shift in national politics that had already been set into motion at least a decade earlier: from one

based on ethnic identity to one rooted in the problem of immigration. For Lauter, legal citizenship rather than “integration” has become the central dilemma of multiculturalism and, “unless the West takes major steps to...bring about change in the...conditions of people in the impoverished world, it will increasingly face the problem of finding ways to deal with the growing tide of immigration at home” (p.27). Richard Alba pursues a comparative-historical approach to examine the degree to which multicultural tolerance has become endangered post-9/11 in the US and Europe. He finds that when Muslims are numerous among low-status immigrants, multiculturalist institutions are at the most risk of being dismantled (a dynamic that surprisingly has been more prevalent in Europe than the US). Ed Jonkers packs into his short essay an ambitious history of the longstanding tensions between “human universalism” and “cultural particularism” in social and cultural theory, of which “multiculturalism and social pluralism are fairly recent additions” (p.51). He warns that “when every tradition becomes an invention, distrust has run wild,” though he doubts that solidarity founded on nationalism can ever be inclusive.

The following section – by far the largest – adopts a more empirical approach, exploring the impacts of 9/11 on American multiculturalism through an examination of cultural texts. A broad assortment of empirical materials are here on display, and some work better than others. Rob Kroes has some smart things to say about the role of photography in the processes of collective memory, but his attempt to explain ethnic variation in reactions to 9/11 photography is vexed by problems of evidence. Rachel Hutchins-Viroux is more successful in her examination of how history textbooks have changed after 9/11, even if her findings are unsurprising: she discerns a rightward shift since 9/11, but argues that the most important gains of multiculturalism (such as the inclusion of previously taboo topics) have generally endured. Philip Wegner and Michael Andrew Connor each deconstruct films – “United 93” and “Armageddon” respectively – and both illustrate how the events of 9/11 expose how America’s global economic domination rests in part on the need for American citizens to see themselves as “innocent” in global affairs. To the extent that Islamic terrorists could claim some moral legitimacy for their cause via the tropes of “victimhood” and “sacrifice,” the American sense of innocence erodes and films like “United 93” do the repair work. Other contributors explore the cultural texts – such as Amiri Baraka’s poetry and John Updike’s novels – that do just the opposite.

If articles from the earlier sections compare and contrast the impact of 9/11 on the US and Europe respectively, the final section documents how 9/11 has shaped cultural dialogues between American and European states. Patrick Hyder Patterson illustrates Europe’s explicit rejection of the “assimilationist” model of American multiculturalism – which both offers and imposes “American-ness” – in favor of a European one that “perpetuate[s] a relationship of hosts and guests” (p.150). Patterson argues that the relatively laissez-faire American approach helps to minimize religious difference in the construction of national identity, ironically aiding in the social and political inclusion of foreign nationals. Joanna C. Kardux traces the ways that US and Dutch multiculturalisms confront colonialist pasts through memorialization. Finally, Jaap Kooijman shows how Dutch artists draw on the tragedy of 9/11 to both denounce and defend Dutch multiculturalism, while Jaap Verheul flips the directionality of the US-Europe cultural dialogue to show how the American media used high-profile Dutch political assassinations to discredit the European approach to multiculturalism (in which the public sphere is less open to expressions of minority religions). This juxtaposition adds an extra layer of insight to an already engaging section.

Generally, the lessons imparted by this volume's contributors elaborate on how the cultural impacts of 9/11 are more complicated than they seem. We learn about the theoretical and geopolitical contexts that precede 9/11, as well as the cultural texts and international dialogues that mediate our collective experience of it. In its eagerness to show that culture matters, however, the volume mostly fails to draw precise conclusions about how exactly culture and politics interrelate and precisely what mechanisms are at play. To be sure, these concerns may fall outside of the editor's aims, but the better articles seem to demystify more than complicate. Nevertheless, all of AM911's pieces are smart and well-crafted, and together they move us closer toward being able to answer perhaps the most pressing question of our age: how has 9/11 changed our world?

References

Rubin, Derek and Jaap Verheul (eds.). 2011. *American Multiculturalism after 9/11: Transatlantic Perspectives*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Citation

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