



9/11 Ten Years After: History, Narrative, Memory. Munich: Birgit Däwes, University of Mainz; Volker Depkat, University of Regensburg; Philipp Gassert, University of Augsburg; Meike Zwingenberger, Bavarian American Academy, 14.07.2011-15.07.2011.

Reviewed by Meike Zwingenberger

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (October, 2011)

9/11 Ten Years After: History, Narrative, Memory

Immediately after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington D.C., September 11th, 2001 was called "the day that changed everything". In the weeks and months following the events a consensus emerged that 9/11 indeed had been a historical rupture. "9/11" thus became a universal cipher that evokes images of violent rupture and change. The ramifications and reverberations of 9/11, it seems, changed the world forever.

Ten years after the events of 9/11, a conference at the Amerika Haus in Munich, organized by Birgit Däwes (Mainz), Volker Depkat (Regensburg), Philipp Gassert (Augsburg) and Meike Zwingenberger (München), supported by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, the U.S. Consulate General Munich and the Alumni Organization of the Amerika-Institut München took an interdisciplinary approach to the topic, exploring its historical and political context, the discourses about 9/11 in literature, film and music as well as the official and unofficial narratives and sites of memory that have been created in its aftermath. Do the terrorist attacks of September 11th constitute a worldwide caesura? Who could be interested in putting forward such a version of 9/11? And for whom does this claim actually hold true? With the help of historians, political scientists as well as scholars from the fields of cultural and literary studies, the conference tried to work through some of these questions.

The conference began with a workshop for students from the Universities of Regensburg and Augsburg. Prior

to the conference these students had been part of a seminar on 9/11 at their respective universities. The workshop focused on key terms and questions that had been raised in the course of the semester and that were seen as vital to the understanding of 9/11. Among the topics discussed were such diverse issues as the representations of 9/11 in literature and film, religion and politics after 9/11, the memorialization at Ground Zero and the War on Terror. One of the central questions raised was that of 9/11 as a socio-political and cultural caesura, an argument of which all three conveners were highly critical. Volker Depkat (Regensburg), in referring to keynote speaker David Simpson, argued that the time for a final assessment of this question has not yet come. Birgit Däwes (Mainz) pointed out the difficulties of adequately representing 9/11 that scholars have to overcome. Philipp Gassert (Augsburg) highlighted the various continuities of 9/11 that contradict the argument that 9/11 constitutes a rupture.

The conference was officially opened by DAVID SIMPSON (Davis) who delivered an evening keynote lecture on "A Question of Timing: Ten Years After". Simpson addressed the difficulties of novelists in finding an adequate language for representing 9/11. Ten years after the attacks of September 11th, writers are still assessing the impact of the events, as Simpson observed, without having come up with definite answers. Novelists have, in the words of Martin Amis, been "playing for time", and rightly so, Simpson argued. Ten years ago televised images of the terrorist attacks in Washington and New

York dominated the coverage. Nonetheless it was words that fulfilled the need to make sense of these unthinkable events, words that were able to show the invisible, speak the unspeakable, Simpson explained. Writers like Jonathan Safran Foer or Frédéric Beigbeder have been creating strong and disturbing images, such as the famous *Falling Man*, that the mainstream media either accidentally missed or willfully left out. By the same token, being at odds with dogma and totalitarianism, literature can encourage patience for resolving problems and making sense of things, an ability that Gayatri Spivak called *the uncoercive rearrangement of desires*. However, beside the encouragement of patience, Simpson pointed out, literary responses to 9/11 and its aftermath can also bear a sense of urgency. As the various examples of anti-Iraq-War poetry proved, literature has the ability to hold war up to a critical justice. Patience and urgency work hand in hand to counteract the fixed images and narratives of 9/11.

The first panel on Friday focused on 9/11 in the Debates of Historians and Political Scientists. JÜRGEN WILZEWSKI (Kaiserslautern) showed how the Bush administration's War on Terror became such a failure, because it was limited to a hard power response to the terrorist attacks. Scandals like those at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo could be interpreted as systemic failures of a national security narrative that undermined worldwide trust in the United States. Likewise, Wilzewski argued, President Obama's smart power approach could not compensate for the creeping militarization of U.S. politics that has its roots in the National Security Act of 1947. To close the credibility gap in U.S. foreign and security policy, Wilzewski suggested, the United States should come up with a new strategic narrative that balances hard and smart power and encourages the consistent practices of those values at home the U.S. wants to spread abroad. JOANNE MEYEROWITZ (New Haven) explored the various ways in which historians have tried to come to terms with 9/11. While the media stressed the historic rupture of 9/11, historians have by and large focused on historical analogies, ranging from Pearl Harbor to anarchist bombings of the late 19th century. Both interpretations were, in the words of Meyerowitz, *off base*. But what then do we make of the attacks? While admitting that 9/11 was not completely new and had historical precedents, Meyerowitz emphasized the need to tell the joint story of 9/11, a story that not only takes place in the realms of high politics but also includes oral history accounts of the day that supposedly changed the world.

Leaving the field of historians and political scientists behind, the second panel dealt with *Representations of 9/11 in Literature and Film*. JEFFREY MELNICK (Amherst) investigated how official discourses about 9/11 were shaped by the will to construct a patriotic narrative that seemingly glossed over any racial grievances while at the same time creating a dichotomy between (white) American victims and Middle-Eastern-looking terrorists. Melnick pointed out how African American, Muslim and Asian artists, musicians and politicians reached out to each other in their resistance to the constructed distance after 9/11. He cited powerful examples of this transnational, counter-discursive triangle, ranging from African American Congresswoman Barbara Lee, who solely voted *No* on the *Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Terrorists Resolution* (ALTERNATIVE: from African American rap artist NAS whose song *What Comes Around* can be read as a scorching criticism of recent U.S. foreign policy), to British-born musician M.I.A. who responds in her music videos to the anti-immigrant bias that has infested parts of U.S. society since 2001. KRISTIAAN VERSLUYS (Ghent) in his talk explored the discursive responses of European novelists to 9/11, an event that, in his words, had left the world in a state of *global trauma*. The difficulties of disentangling the actual events of September 11th from the mediated images and predominant narratives of that same day, presents writers with a problem they have struggled to overcome. Novels such as Luc Lang's *11 Septembre Mon Amour*, Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* and Ian McEwan's *Saturday* have found different ways to represent the mediated ramifications and reverberations of 9/11. However, to fully understand the ways in which 9/11 has seeped into the global cultural unconsciousness, Versluys argued, literary scholars need to develop a new discursive framework.

The final panel drew attention to the multifaceted process of *Remembering and Memorializing 9/11* that found its expression in a multitude of official as well as unofficial sites of memory. DEVIN ZUBER (Berkeley) reminded the audience of the over-patriotic narrative that invoked religious rhetoric in the act of remembering the victims of 9/11. Ground Zero in this context was turned into a sacred space, linked to other sites of American memory such as Gettysburg battlefield. Based on a foundational sacrifice (*Bauopfer*), the sacred space is often demarcated by an *axis mundi*, a perfect example of which can be found in the *Tribute in Light* project that was created in 2002. In contrast to this sacred space, various street artists, among them photographer Paul Chan and

the British graffiti artist Banksy, have created counter-images on the streets of New York that deliberately occupy this profane space. Having become a global phenomenon, street art provides activists with one of the few uncensored channels to countervail official versions of 9/11-memory and pseudo-religious sanctimony. INGRID GESSNER (Regensburg) showed how official sites of memory such as the Ground Zero memorial "Reflecting Absence", the Pentagon Memorial in Washington D.C. and various other sites throughout the world perpetuate a certain version of remembering 9/11. Despite the proclaimed rupture of the events, memorial sites indicate a continuation of patterns. In contrast to the policies at official memorial sites, Gessner argued for a more discursive and democratic process of building sites of memory that takes the unfixed, grassroots narratives of 9/11 into account. Only those memorials could become sites that foster renewal and catharsis.

A public panel discussion chaired by Volker Depkat and Philipp Gassert concluded the conference. Sharing the panel with U.S. Consul General CONRAD R. TRIBBLE and author MATHIAS BRÄCKERS, Gassert and Depkat provided an assessment of the impact of 9/11 in Transatlantic Perspective. Bräckers, who is the author of several books on 9/11 and the conspiracies that surround it, was highly critical of the report of the official 9/11 Commission. He also pointed to the anti-terrorism legislation after September 11th as taking advantage of this terrible catastrophe. Asked about the German-American relationship since 2001, Tribble concluded that neither the terrorist attacks nor the Iraq War had severely damaged the close ties between the two countries. He also pointed out that German-American relations are now in better shape than they had been for many years; while Depkat stressed the existence of an "emotional gap" between the two countries that crystallized after 2001. Gassert underscored that the transatlantic relationship had always gone through extended periods of crises, but also shown a growing degree of transnational cooperation, which is independent of governments. All four panel members agreed that the proclaimed rupture after 9/11 has to be put in perspective. Neither the terrorist attacks themselves nor the anti-

terrorism legislation that followed 9/11 were completely new phenomena. Ten years after the events of September 11th, the time for a final assessment seems not yet to have come.

Conference Overview:

Keynote

David Simpson (University of California, Davis): A Question of Timing: Ten Years After

Panel I: 9/11 in the Debates of Historians and Political Scientists

Chair: Philipp Gassert (University of Augsburg)

Jürgen Wilzewski (Technical University Kaiserslautern): 9/11, The National Security State and America's Decline

Joanne Meyerowitz (Yale University): History, Historians, and an Emerging Consensus on September 11th

Panel II: Representations of 9/11 in Literature and Film

Chair: Birgit Dawes (University of Mainz)

Jeffrey Melnick (University of Massachusetts): 9/11 Triangles: Projecting Unity in American Film and Music After the Fall

Kristiaan Versluys (University of Ghent): 9/11: American and European Discursive Responses

Panel III: Remembering and Memorializing 9/11

Chair: Volker Depkat (University of Regensburg)

Devin Zuber (Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley): Sanctimony, Memorials and Sanctification: the Sacred and Profane in Re-membering Ground Zero

Ingrid Gessner (University of Regensburg): Continuity or Change? The Aesthetics of Remembering 9/11

Panel Discussion: 9/11 in Transatlantic Perspective (in German)

Moderators: Volker Depkat, Philipp Gassert

Guests: Consul General Conrad R. Tribble (U.S. Consulate General Munich); Mathias Bräckers (Journalist and Author)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Meike Zwingenberger. Review of , *9/11 Ten Years After: History, Narrative, Memory*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. October, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34427>

Copyright © 2011 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.