MANLY AFTER-EFFECTS OF 11 SEPTEMBER 2001: READING WILLIAM J. BENNETT’S *WHY WE FIGHT: MORAL CLARITY AND THE WAR ON TERRORISM*

The 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon have evoked for many on the Right and the Left an astounding moral clarity regarding violence and its place in international relations that has been extended to the second Gulf War – for the Right, the immanent dangers of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism and for the Left, confirmation of western, especially US, imperialism. I do not share this righteous clarity. The clearer both sides grow with each reproduction of their arguments, the sadder I become, for the very slight window of opportunity for fresh thought and different kinds of action that events like 11 September potentially create is disappearing. It is strange for me to associate terrorism with an opening of this kind since I believe that overall, terrorism tends to have a wholly negative impact (Bar On 1991, 1998). But, inspired by the work of Hannah Arendt, I have learned to be more conscientious with regard to singularity (Arendt 1951, 1953). I think that events of the kind and magnitude of 9/11 rupture normality and command and focus attention differently and therefore can potentially engender a momentary opening for fresh thinking and action.

However, righteous clarity, because of its urgency and uncluttered focus, while suggesting the possibility of such an opening and its importance for thought and action, also facilitates its simultaneous undermining and betrayal. I use William J. Bennett’s *Why We Fight* (2002) to illustrate this double movement. Bennett is currently a Distinguished Fellow at the Heritage Foundation and co-director of Empower America, both neo-conservative think tanks. Bennett’s text is particularly interesting, not least because he claims it to be a product of righteous clarity.

Immediately after 11 September 2001, Bennett claims to have observed in ‘Americans’ the fading of doubts and questions, a firmness and a coming together: ‘It was, in short, a moment of moral clarity’ ‘rare in life’ and ‘exceedingly precious’ (p. 2). He blames the reassertion of uncertainty on Left intellectuals who, while a minority, usually have an indisputable hegemony in academe and over the media and are responsible for the moral corruption of American culture and the leading of good people down terribly wrong paths. Bennett offers his book as a timely intervention intended to bolster what he regards as a more appropriate response, specifically, a post-9/11 brand of patriotism.

While Bennett takes to task a variety of ‘corrosive’ Left intellectual strands, he seems to have a special interest in criticizing feminism. Feminism, Bennett claims, is among the expressions of the US ‘Vietnam Syndrome’. Its most troubling success consists of a misguided pacification that weakens the
nation’s fibre. Feminism accomplishes this through the critique and institutionalization of practices that deconstruct the relationship between masculinity and aggression, which, Bennett suggests, requires in turn the repression of anger, ‘a necessary power of the soul, intimately connected with the passion for Justice’ (p. 33).

Bennett appears to rely on the work of anti-feminist Christina Hoff Sommers, W. H. Brady Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, without referencing her (Sommers 2000). Like her, he correlates pacification with a non-judgmental relativism that fails to recognize the ‘superior goodness of the American way of life’ (p. 47). Bennett is seemingly unaware of intellectual re-evaluations of anger by the Left, including feminist and critical race perspectives. For quite different reasons than Bennett’s, Left intellectuals have called attention to the importance of anger not only because of its connection to the ‘passion for justice’ but also because of its potential to offer unique perspective and strengthen resolve (Spelman 1989; Scheman 1993 [1980]). Unaware of these developments, Bennett misunderstands the feminist project, which in my view does not advocate the repression of anger. Rather, feminists object to anger only insofar as it is a male prerogative and coupled with aggression. What feminists desire is the delinking of anger from masculinity and hostility. While it is unclear whether Bennett wants to recuperate anger as a male privilege, he does desire the restoration of the connection between anger and aggression, especially for men; men are cast as his primary patriots for fighting the just war against terrorism.

Bennett does not worry about the possibility that reclaiming the association between anger and aggression and masculinity mirrors that in terrorism, especially a conservative terrorism of the Al Qaeda kind. Bennett’s analysis of Islam avoids this because he finds a propensity to jihad, and thus violence, at the core of Islam and believes that one cannot find the same at the core of capitalist democracy. Capitalist democracy, for Bennett, contrary to what some Marxist theorists have argued regarding the foundational and sustaining role of violence for capitalist accumulation (Mandel 1968 [1962]), is basically pacifist; when violence is resorted to, it is always constrained by rules of engagement.

Because Bennett believes that a capitalist democracy like the United States is essentially pacifist, he seems to believe that feminism has misconstrued masculinity, if not in its ‘natural’ form, then at least under capitalist democracy. Bennett implies that masculinity under capitalist democracy is already so pacific that its feminist pacification is inevitably excessive and results in a deficit that is particularly dangerous in encountering masculine Islamic-based terrorism.

Bennett uses the attacks of 11 September, in the name of a new moral clarity, as an occasion to repeat his oft-repeated, well-rehearsed views about threats to American power and values. His moral and intellectual myopia is particularly apparent when compared with the insights that war correspondent Chris Hedges offers in War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning (2002).
which also was written after the attacks of 11 September and reflects on a lifetime of experiences with wars, terrorism and violent insurrections.

Though not a feminist text, Hedges’ claims both support feminist concerns and go beyond them, recognizing that women too can find a special meaning in war because ‘[w]hen we ingest the anodyne of war’, as Hedges points out, ‘we feel what those we strive to destroy feel … It is the same narcotic’ (2002: 5). Unlike Bennett, Hedges does not underscore his analysis with any kind of righteousness, perhaps because he is aware of its function in mobilizing for war. Rather, having witnessed again and again how little it takes in wartime ‘to turn ordinary men into killers’, he emphasizes the strength of the ‘seduction of unlimited power to destroy’ and how only few, ‘once in battle, can find strength to resist’ (2002: 87). Resistance is so hard because war gives meaning to sterile lives, whether of the oppressed or the prosperous. But Hedges cautions, ‘to live only for meaning – indifferent to all happiness – makes us fanatic, self-righteous, and cold. It leaves us cut off from our own humanity and the humanity of others’ (2002: 159).

Hedges’ text represents an attempt to consider the violence of war and terrorism critically. Like Bennett’s, it is also offered as an intervention. Yet, unlike Bennett’s work, Hedges’ is a gentle self-reflexive intervention of a kind that is of particular importance for the present, reminding us that we have a surprising opening for fresh thought and action.

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References
