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## Philosophy in a Time of Terror : Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida

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**Abstract:** Philosopher Giovanna Borradori's most recent project is an endeavour to forge a new understanding, a philosophical reflection on "terrorism" in the post-9/11 context. Indeed, in the months following September 11th, 2001, G. Borradori conducted a series of interviews with two of Europe's foremost philosophers, Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida in Manhattan, questioning them on the meaning and significance of September 11. The fruit of this exchange appear in her book *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago University Press: 2003).

**Keywords:** Septembre 11th ; Terrorism ; Deconstruction ; Religion ; War

**Résumé:** Dans son plus récent travail, la philosophe Giovanna Borradori s'est efforcée d'apporter une nouvelle compréhension, une réflexion philosophique du terrorisme dans l'après-11 septembre. Dans les mois qui ont suivi le 11 septembre 2001, G. Borradori a en effet dirigé à Manhattan une série d'entretiens entre deux célèbres philosophes européens, Jürgen Habermas et Jacques Derrida, les interrogeant sur le sens et la signification du 11 septembre. Le fruit de ces échanges a été publié dans son livre : *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (2003).

**Mots-clés:** 11 septembre : Terrorisme ; Déconstruction ; Religion ; Guerre

# Philosophy in a Time of Terror : Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida

Alexandra de Hoop Scheffer

Philosopher Giovanna Borradori's most recent project is an endeavour to forge a new understanding, a philosophical reflection on "terrorism" in the post-9/11 context. Indeed, in the months following September 11th, 2001, G. Borradori conducted a series of interviews with two of Europe's foremost philosophers, Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida in Manhattan, questioning them on the meaning and significance of September 11. The fruit of this exchange appear in her recent book *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (2003). The text marks the first occasion on which Habermas' and Derrida's writings appear side-by-side. In fact, what makes this work philosophically important and surprising at the same time is the way Borradori's searching questions draw both Habermas and Derrida from their traditionally opposed understanding of philosophy – Habermasian philosophy building on Enlightenment notions of universal rationality and Derrida suspicious of language and the concepts used in philosophy and everyday life, hiding major problems – underlining their surprisingly similar stances on what they perceive to be the necessary philosophical approach to "terrorism". Both of the dialogues and Borradori's following explanations rely upon a few key philosophical figures, i.e. Kant, Carl Schmitt, Arendt, suggesting that the philosophical traditions with which each figure identifies – Critical Theory for Habermas and Deconstruction for Derrida – are apparently not as mutually exclusive as we might have previously thought.

*Philosophy in a time of terror* is a testimony of two philosophers who, for the first time, have decided to put aside their considerable intellectual differences to call for a unified philosophical response to September 11: in a context where many assumptions about politics were destroyed along with the attacks of September 11, they reflect jointly on terrorism and show how political thinking, i.e. thinking about concepts, what they designate and exclude, is useful for understanding the origins of and reactions to concrete events such as terrorist violence. The title of the French version of *Philosophy in a time of terror* gives insight into the main focus of the two philosophers: "Le Concept 11 Septembre" or the "concept" of September 11, title chosen by Derrida, in order to underline the difficulty of "Thinking September 11th". The authors thus question the "idea" of September 11th and since it entails something new and shocking, it can not

interact with classical knowledge; therefore, both thinkers' aim is to overcome this difficulty and to appeal to a real political thought of what has occurred on September 11th. As Borradori states in her introduction, this book is a "*story of a philosopher in a time of terror*", it's about submitting to philosophical analysis "*the most urgent questions regarding terror and terrorism*".

The most constructive and fruitful way to outline the main arguments of the authors is to expose them jointly, in order to permit a comparative approach of Habermas's and Derrida's respective methodology and philosophical understanding of the event of 9/11. A critical overview of Philosophy in a time of terror will follow, highlighting the ambiguity of certain arguments but also the relevancy of this common work in the present context.

## Presentation of the authors

Giovanna Borradori is associate Professor of philosophy at Vassar College in New York; she believes in the "scholarly interview" as an important form and that philosophy has an invaluable contribution to make to the understanding of contemporary political issues. Borradori's conversations offer an unconventional portrait of the way philosophers think about their work and recent political debates. She is author of *The American Philosopher: Conversations with Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Nozick, Danto, Rorty, Cavell, MacIntyre, Kuhn* (1994), which studies current debates in American philosophy and explores the identity of the "American philosopher", leading philosophers to talk about the changing character of their discipline. *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* is thus in keeping with her previous philosophical interviews; living in Manhattan, Borradori experienced 9/11 as a New Yorker "fifty blocks" from ground zero, and believed that September 11 called for an immediate philosophical response, by interviewing two of the most influential thinkers of our age: Habermas and Derrida.

Habermas' life and work have been deeply influenced by the traumatic events of his youth under the Third Reich, in Germany. His *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981) shows his attachment to issues of autonomy and participation within the practice of everyday communication. As Borradori clearly explains: "*His assumption has been that we learn who we are as autonomous agents from our basic relations with others. The most basic among these relations is the act of communicating through language*".

In this perspective, Habermas promotes the model of "deliberative democracy", based on the participation of civil society and a consensus between rational citizens. In this regard, Habermas' philosophical methodology is "reconstruction" of the conditions that make communication possible and effective, and thus permits to evaluate at the same time the distortions and "defects of communication" that might impede such dialogue. In this dialogue about terrorism, Habermas

seems much less conservative than in his other works, though his focus in a sense remains on the possibility of communication and understanding in the light of the growing threat of terrorist attacks and current US policy.

Derrida is a French philosopher and, as Habermas, he has been deeply influenced by a historical trauma : colonialism in Algeria, a French colony at that time (1930s). His work originated the school of deconstruction. In G. Borradori's words, deconstruction seeks to disassemble any discourse standing as a "construction". Derrida's approach to philosophy is thus antagonistic to Habermas's. Derrida's work focuses on language and deconstruction shows the multiple layers of meaning at work in language. By deconstructing the works of previous scholars, Derrida attempts to show that language is constantly shifting. Derrida, in this dialogue, is more than ever "deconstructionist" in his argumentation and fully aware of the context in which the September 11 attacks took place. Derrida gets to work on much of what Habermas proposes, questioning received wisdom and conceptual systems through his own deconstructive methods. Focusing on 9/11 as an "event" and putting his own spin on globalization, the reader is invited to temporarily suspend belief and look at the "event" from a more unfamiliar angle.

### *Habermas, Derrida and philosophy as a "social critique" of its time*

In the introduction of *Philosophy in a time of terror*, Borradori claims that philosophy has a crucial contribution to make to the understanding of "terrorism", highlighting a certain "responsibility" of philosophy in evaluating the significance of a present event. Habermas and Derrida understand their philosophical responsibility in terms of a critique of modernity, in the Arendtian sense, that is to say an evaluation of the challenges presented to thought by modern European history. Contrary to political activists, such as B. Russell who may freely choose to be politically involved, "*for both of them the political commitment of philosophy is not a matter of personal choice. By engaging in philosophy, one automatically engages in the effort to reckon with its time: in this sense, neither one of them is a political activist, whereas both of them, are social critics.*" This idea suits Hegel's theorised relation between history and philosophy: "He sees philosophy confronted with the task of grasping its own time" (Habermas).

As mentioned above, both Habermas and Derrida have developed their respective philosophy in the context of traumas of twentieth-century history: totalitarianism and the Holocaust under the Third Reich for Habermas, and colonialism in Algeria for Derrida. Their contributions to the subjects of the attacks of 9/11 and global terrorism, which have already signed the history of the twenty-first century, is thus in keeping with their initial approach to philosophy.

### *The "concept" of "terrorism" : Habermas' and Derrida's understanding of September 11*

Both philosophers have a deep suspicion of the concept of "terrorism". They both contend that terrorism is an elusive, ambiguous, reversible concept, a social construction – Derrida reminds the reader that the French "resistants" were labelled "terrorists" by the Germans during World War Two – but analyse it from a different perspective: Habermas "reconstructs" terrorism as manifested on September 11, in order to show that this terrorism, in opposition to national liberation movements, is deprived from any political content. Consequently, Habermas fervently denounces the current American "war against terrorism" designation, because it gives political legitimation to terrorism and, at the same time, reflects an "overreaction" against an unknown enemy. Derrida, on the other hand, claims that the deconstruction of the "concept" terrorism is the only politically responsible approach to terrorism, since the media, the officials and public use of the concept as a self-evident notion, manifests the democracies' vulnerability and perversely serves the terrorist cause, by giving it "visibility".

#### *Derrida's deconstruction of "9/11" as an "event" and September 11 as the manifestation of an "autoimmune" crisis*

If Habermas contends that "*September 11 could be called the first historic world event in the strictest sense*" taking place in front of the "universal eyewitness" of a global public due to extraordinary media coverage – without analysing the media construction, and leaves history judge the importance of the event, Derrida, as in his previous works, deconstructs the "event" of 9/11 and problematizes the concept of terrorism. He is firstly interested in the question of language and the emergence of the "new", and thus, conjointly, the "act of naming something new" by its date, because of the uncertainty of what happened and the powerlessness of language to identify and label the attacks of September 11. The "event" is reduced to an "*intuition without a concept*", an "*incantation*" repeated continuously, by which metonymy substitutes a date for the traumatic attacks. The analysis of "repetition compulsion" is interesting "*not in order to isolate ourselves in language, [...] but rather to try to understand what is going on precisely beyond language*". For Derrida, language stabilises inherently unstable situations: to name 9/11 neutralises what is most traumatic about the event, which is the impression that it could happen again.

Derrida shows how the difficulty to understand and name an event suits Heidegger's understanding of an "event". Indeed, Derrida asserts that an "event" in the Heideggerian sense, is never fully "appropriated", it remains incomprehensible. In this perspective, Derrida considers

9/11 as an "event", but at the same time, several elements contradict this statement. At first, for Derrida, September 11th attacks were predictable, then 9/11 is not a "major" event, but rather induced an "impression" of major event, in the Humean empiricist sense, which form the "idea" of a major event. Symmetrically, impressions are imposed on individuals by the discourse of the media and the officials, who construct propaganda-impressions that "spectacularize" September 11, thus make it a major event. Derrida thus explores the truth of September 11 and its impossible "concept", showing the democratic vulnerability in the face of the manifestation of terror, but also and probably more importantly, the suicidal temptation, the "autoimmunity" of a modern democracy. As Borradori explains, for Derrida, *"9/11 is the symptom of an autoimmune crisis occurring within the system that should have predicted it. Autoimmune conditions consist in the spontaneous suicide of the very defensive mechanism supposed to protect the organism from external aggression."* Indeed, as in his previous works, Derrida is fully aware of the context: in this dialogue, he refers to the heritage of the Cold War, during which the United States provided weapons and training in Afghanistan, to the hijackers that actually perpetrated the September 11 attacks and contends that the 9/11 attacks were the manifestation of this suicidal paradox. He observes the same autoimmunity regarding the problematic expression "war on terrorism", because it tends to generate a *"vicious circle of repression"*: by evoking a *"war against terror"*, the United States turn the war against itself.

### *Habermas' understanding of terrorism as "modern" and as a "defect of communication"*

Habermas wants the reader to look at terrorism and especially religious fundamentalism as a *"modern phenomenon"*, or rather as a modern disruption, which is at the core of his philosophical understanding of global terrorism. Indeed, fundamentalism by confusing the religious and the political, inverts the *"project of modernity"*, thus of Enlightenment; and, paradoxically, by opposing modernity and secularisation, fundamentalism is for Habermas a unique modern phenomenon.

What distinguishes most Habermas from Derrida in their respective approach to terrorism and thus what makes Habermas' *"philosophical specificity"*, is that he sees the outbreak of terrorism mainly as a failure of communications, of dialogue: the relation between fundamentalism and terrorism is mediated by violence, which Habermas understands as a communicative pathology: the spiral of violence begins as a spiral of distorted communication that leads through the spiral of uncontrolled reciprocal mistrust, to the breakdown of communication.

Habermas links this rejection of modernity and defect of communication not to a cultural problem but to an economic factor: globalization, which, as well for Derrida, plays an important

role in the outburst of terrorist attacks. He highlights the fact that globalization is a very asymmetrical phenomenon, accentuating the already growing imbalance between rich and poor countries, the "victims" of globalization, which continue to get poorer with globalization. This breaks the dialogue between the rich and the poor and this noncommunication has a direct consequence on the use of violence: "recourse to violence is thus often presented as the only "response" to a "deaf ear".

From that standpoint, the very ideas of universal freedom, tolerance and reason are shattered, i.e. precisely the ideas that forged the Habermasian hope of a democracy conceived within the framework of the constructive dialogue model; he even stated that since September 11, and with regard to these violent events, he is constantly asking himself whether his theory of communicative action is not becoming ridiculous. But, Habermas reiterates his attachment to moral and juridical universalism of ancient Europe, and the civilising role she is expected to fulfil.

*"Philosophy is called to arms": terrorism and September 11 challenge the Enlightenment ideals and call for a cosmopolitan and "European" response*

Indeed, in this context of terrorism, religious fundamentalism and the elusiveness of the concepts that designate them, "Philosophy is called to arms". This sentence mentioned in the Preface, could probably summarise Borradori's thesis. Indeed, since religious fundamentalism explicitly rejects secularisation and modernity, rejecting the Enlightenment's separation of political power from religious belief, Borradori contends that the analysis and the understanding of September 11 must "reach as far as a critical reassessment of the validity of Enlightenment projects and ideals".

*Habermas' and Derrida's promotion of international law as a transition to cosmopolitanism*

Derrida joins Habermas in defence of the Enlightenment principles and even sides with cosmopolitanism as theorised by Kant himself. Indeed, both Habermas and Derrida refer to Kant's Perpetual Peace, which anticipated the possibility of transforming classical international law into a new cosmopolitan order. They agree on the fact that international rule of law should be strengthened in order to administer global cosmopolitanism founded on secular human rights. They both place their hopes in the authority of international law and see the need for a transition from classical international law, premised on the model of nation-states, to a new cosmopolitan order based on continual alliances.

But, in order to achieve the full transition to cosmopolitanism, both thinkers agree that international law and the decisions taken by the international community should be respected. In this respect, Habermas and Derrida strongly denounce the current American serious failings with regard to these commitments and especially during the deliberations prior their decision to wage a war against Iraq. In order to remedy to this problem, they promote dissuasive sanctions against such damaging actions and the creation of an international institution of law and an international court of justice with their own autonomous force.

### *The "new figure of Europe" and its responsibility to complete the "project of the Enlightenment"*

Both thinkers call for new European responsibilities, 'beyond all Eurocentrism' and the strengthening of international law and international institutions. Indeed, for Habermas and Derrida, even though the "project of the Enlightenment" that promoted the separation between the religious and the political, has yet to be completed, the philosophical experience of Europe at the 17th-18th centuries has left in the European political space with original marks with regard to the religious: they both identify Europe as the only secular actor on the world stage. Both thinkers place their hopes in the "new figure of Europe" and the inherent possibility of discourse and politics different from the current American rhetoric or Islamic fundamentalism, Europe being a "way out of this double theologico-political program". (Derrida).

In this perspective, Habermas, rejecting S. Huntington's thesis of a clash of civilisations between the West and Islam as well as Carl Schmitt's political thought focused on the idea of the confrontation "*friend-foe*", of a collective identity against another, contends with Derrida, a different theory: a confrontation between the United States, where the religious undercurrents of official political discourses clearly contradict the Enlightenment's separation of the political and the religious, and Europe, which responsibility is to prevent a "return of the religious" and promote the Enlightenment spirit. Habermas and Derrida call on Europe to finish the uncompleted project of Enlightenment.

### *A reflection on "tolerance" and the "philosopher's" responsibility in a time of terror*

For both Habermas and Derrida, the idea of "tolerance", which is the core of the Enlightenment philosophy, has thus come back on the front scene, since religion and violence are today intrinsically linked and intertwined. Derrida denounces the hypocrisy of the American discourse on tolerance with regard to their "*war on terrorism*". Nevertheless, if Habermas accepts

tolerance with its paternalistic connotations – it is the "strong" who permits the "weak" to be, under the former's rules – Derrida considers the latter as "conditional", "scrutinized" hospitality; he hopes for a Kantian cosmopolitical conception of hospitality, "pure and unconditional" which is open to individuals who are neither expected nor invited, not to promote it as the solution, because "*practically impossible to live*", but strongly encourages the "*thought*" of it, since it permits to have the "*idea*" of the other, of its difference. This should constitute an important progress towards what Derrida calls "*democracy to come*", which would go beyond a cosmopolitan world citizenship; rather the philosopher promotes a "*living together*" without a precise attachment to any nation-state or world state. It would be a human alliance "beyond the political".

Philosophy in a Time of Terror is also a reflection on the figure of the philosopher's responsibility to "enlighten" the public or the "international public sphere", according to the expression used by Habermas in his work, to reflect in a responsible way, on the question of terrorism and "demand accountability from those in charge of public discourse, those responsible for the language and institutions of international law". Above all, the "*critical philosopher*" analyses and then suggests to rethink the relationship between the philosophical heritage and the current structure of the changing politic and juridical system.

## Critical analysis

If several arguments are prone to critique and controversy, especially regarding Derrida's philosophical approach to "9/11", Philosophy in a Time of Terror is, in many ways, extremely relevant in today's international context.

### *Derrida's deconstruction and "contextualization" of terrorism are indispensable methods to understand the ambiguity of the concept of September 11*

If Derrida has often been criticised for his "deconstructionist" methodology, judged as a-philosophical, I believe that the deconstruction of the concept of "terrorism" is very instructive and insightful here, and, in my opinion, indispensable for our understanding, our minimal "appropriation" of terrorism, and especially the "new" kind of terrorism that September 11 has actually crystallised. Indeed, in response to something "new", or perceived as new, one tends to label the "event" with diverse terms, without really knowing what they really mean, because you do not know yourself what really happened. Therefore, Derrida's philosophical approach is very interesting in the way he contextualises the creation of a concept, i.e. he shows how concepts are very contextual, in the sense that each actor, be it security, media, public or political actors, create their own label of the event, "appropriating" 9/11 as either "*war*", "*terrorism*" or a political

action, creating a "*conceptual chaos*". This latter expression is very enlightening and representative of the conceptual disorder that entails a new event, in the face of which an immediate understanding is difficult. We could, for example, mention the recent expressions of "hyperterrorism" or "*global terrorism*" often used to characterise the attacks of September 11. All of these new concepts are constructed by speech act and are to be considered with "prudence", as Derrida suggests, and always within their context.

*The theory of a religious confrontation between the United States and the "Islamic world" is very controversial*

Derrida makes a very controversial assumption, even if he admits "*oversimplifying*" the situation, when he asserts that there is a "*strange war without a war*", a religious confrontation between the United States and the "*Islamic extremist or fundamentalist*", since the religious identification is profoundly different for each group: indeed, religion, or rather the predominant authority of religious doctrine over the political is at the core of the Islamists' beliefs and actions: as B. Badie shows in *The Two States*, the "Umma" is the only legitimate politico-religious community recognised in Muslim countries: religion is anchored in their interpretation of the world.

On the other side, the religious identification of the United States certainly relies on the influence of ultra-Christian conservatives, but it resides predominantly in the rhetoric, the discourse used by the current US officials and their Manichean vision of the world; the actions undertaken by the Americans are predominantly woven by much more "realist", pragmatic motivations and values. For example, the recent US military intervention in Iraq was certainly not decided according to a particular theology, but rather to more material and geopolitical motives, such as oil and power in the region of the Middle-East. In my opinion, it is therefore wrong and dangerous to "*visualise*" the current situation as a simple "*confrontation between political theologies*", resembling Huntington's "*clash of civilisation*" and to compare it to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which Derrida presents as a "metonymy" of the "war" between the United States and Islam.

*The theory of "autoimmunity" and "double suicide" is very topical but should be reconsidered*

If this book is very contextual, in that it was conceptualised and realised in a "*spontaneous*" reaction to the attacks of September 11, and many events have taken place since, it remains an anticipatory work, in several ways; firstly, the unilateral US war against Iraq that both

philosophers feared, took place, rejecting international deliberation and law; secondly, and this idea refers to Derrida's idea of predictability, U.S. National Security Adviser C. Rice has been recently convicted by the Commission investigating the September 11 attacks to be questioned on the Intelligence documents that issued in the summer 2001, repeated warnings about potential terrorist plots against the United States masterminded by bin Laden, including a possible plan to hijack commercial aircraft. The following terrorism warnings were not taken into consideration seriously either. This seems to suit Derrida's idea of "autoimmunity".

However, Derrida's claim that the hijackers of September 11 have accomplished a "double suicide", their own and the suicide of "those who welcomed, armed and trained them", i.e. the United States, is less convincing. Indeed, as Professor of Philosophy N. Smith shows, Derrida omits to distinguish between suicide and "imprudent, short-sighted and counterproductive policy". Intentionality is at the core of this distinction and to ignore that important factor is to contend "*suicidal deliberateness*" which is actually the thesis of the conspiracy theorists. But, this is quite a unlikely version of the September 11 attacks.

#### *A "responsible Europe" to be crystallised by a "powerful military Europe"*

Concerning Habermas's and Derrida's hopes for a "*responsible Europe*", their project might appear as completely "*utopic*" unless, as Derrida mentions it correctly but briefly, Europe has a unified military force and forges a specific strategic culture, sufficient for autonomous "European interventions" that would be motivated and deliberated in Europe. Only then will Europe be able to oppose a credible alternative to the current American "hard power" (J. Nye), underscored by a religious discourse and allow a greater progress towards a new force in the service of new international institutions, thus a new international law. Stephen Walt's "*theory of the balance of threats*" applied to international relations, is very instructive here: he believes in a greater role for Europe to play, as an ally of the United States and not as its counterbalance, in order to respond jointly to global threats, i.e. terrorism above all. This would contribute to crystallise Habermas' and Derrida's hopes of a respected and justly applied international law.

#### *The Enlightenment ideals and philosophical critique, as crucial contributions to analysing the present challenges of the international context*

The three contributors to this book remind us that the most constructive response to 9/11 may simply be to recognise the event as an opportunity to ask the decisive questions about ourselves and our place in the world, especially our relationship to the "*other*". Since religion and violence are today intertwined more than ever – there is indeed a noticeable "*return of the religious*" on

the international scene, with a growing resurgence of religious fundamentalism and regional conflicts eminently motivated by religious differences (i.e. the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) – these issues seem more than ever important to question. And, in this context of growing religious fanaticism, thus intolerance regarding other religions, the ideas of tolerance, hospitality, cosmopolitanism have to be "reinvented", because they are indispensable for "appropriating" the alterity of the "other", for accepting the other's difference, and in particular its religious difference, thus for promoting the living together.

Therefore, these dialogues and Borradori's reflection on the "philosopher's" role in international politics is a very original approach and far from being "utopic", as some may think. Indeed, philosophers as "social critics" of their time, could actively contribute to a critical analysis of the present international relations and institutions in the light of the philosophical heritage that produced them, and could help to evaluate the language used in international politics.

The success of the book relies firstly in Borradori's ability to fuse topics of terror, the United States's "war on terror" against a diffuse and intangible enemy with philosophical issues of hospitality, tolerance and cosmopolitanism, which makes possible a broader discussion than one might imagine. Undoubtedly, this book has opened up a space for evaluating the possible and necessary contributions that philosophy can make in critically analysing a specific historical "event". If Habermas sees the outbreak of terrorism mainly as a failure of communication and dialogue and Derrida sees it above all as a failure to develop a concept of world hospitality to replace what he believes is the outmoded Christian notion of tolerance that is really only charity, in the end, Derrida's concerns have much in common with those of Habermas: how to realise a world society where primacy is given to international law and the religious undercurrents of political rhetoric are abandoned once and for all.

Just as philosophy was vital at the time of the Enlightenment, so too is it needed today in helping us come to terms with terrorism and in conceptualising a future which re-address the notion of citizenship, bestowing upon it a global and cosmopolitan character. The reader can only agree with the three contributors to this work, that the figure of the "philosopher" has a crucial role to play in "enlightening" "new" historical "events". In Borradori's words, more than ever, today "Philosophy is called to arms".

Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror, Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, Chicago University Press, 2003.

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