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The West and its Radical Others

ARTICLE

ALEXANDER D. BARDER

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ABSTRACT

This contribution explores François Debrix's *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* on the question of radical alterity. I argue that Debrix presents a unique and prescient analysis of alterity in the context of the war in Bosnia that highlights an ideological aspect of late twentieth century 'disciplinary neoliberalism'. For Debrix, the visualization and representation of genocidal racial violence in Bosnia becomes a form of seductive voyeurism. As I argue, this also opens up the possibility of imagining forms of microfascism circulating within the West itself as a way of reigniting the political in the face of a depoliticized world. Debrix's *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* helps us situate the proliferation of contemporary forms of neo-fascism in this ideological legacy of the late 1990s 'End of History'.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
Alexander D. Barder
Florida International University, US
abarder@fiu.edu

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Nothing appeared more certain at the end of the twentieth century than the triumph of the West. This 'End of History' conjecture put forward by Francis Fukuyama was deeply imbibed inside and outside the academy. It fulfilled a crucial ideological justification for maintaining and augmenting American hegemony under the guise of a New World Order. It took for granted that the grand ideological struggles of the twentieth century between fascism, communism and liberal-democratic capitalism invariably reflected the triumph of the latter. Notwithstanding the atavistic displays of nationalist and racialized violence in the former Yugoslavia or Rwanda on the global periphery, the globe would increasingly feel homogenized, the triumph of bourgeois values, the fulfilment of our consumerist desires: administration would replace political contestation. In what was a remarkable lament at the end of his 1989 essay, however, Fukuyama writes how the "end of history will be a sad time."[1] There is no longer anything worth dying for in a world made up of "economic calculation," "solving technical problems," "environmental concerns," and "sophisticated consumer demands." The post-historical world Fukuyama imagines is simply the "perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history" but one that nonetheless solicits a profound nostalgia for the very "competition and conflict" that has defined human existence. In a sense, Fukuyama laments the loss of an alterity to the West that comes out of the very possibility of violence, an alterity that Carl Schmitt originally recognized as the condition of possibility for the political as such.[2]

This radical loss of alterity in the post-Cold War 1990s legitimated a "disciplinary neoliberalism," as François Debrix calls it, which imagined a world where the political was progressively effaced into an ideology of global administration through a whole host of international organizations. Debrix's term, disciplinary neoliberalism, neatly captures the innerworkings of this expansive ideology which also proved to be of crucial importance for the trajectory of the field of International Relations (IR) and the study of world order. Such an ideology was obviously embedded in a disciplinary trajectory of IR, especially in liberal institutionalism. But one can certainly see it in more mainstream versions of social constructivism in the 1990s. Texts such as Peter Katzenstein's *The Culture of National Security* (1996) and Alexander Wendt's *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999) theorized identity and alterity in decidedly Eurocentric terms. What was all too often taken for granted in this literature was a Westernization of the world as a consequence of the proliferation of neoliberalism. Even more critical constructivist approaches theoretically neglected the question of alterity posed in a post-Cold War global order. With the notable exception of David Campbell's *Writing Security* (1998), much of the emphasis in critical international relations of the 1990s revolved around understanding and critiquing the proliferation of a Western-centric neoliberal political-economic project. However, what remained marginal was a more general sense of how this disciplinary neoliberalism framed alterity in a wide-ranging set of ways.

Chapter Four of Debrix's *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* focuses on this question of alterity in the context of the genocidal war in Bosnia during the early to mid-1990s. For Debrix, the representation or visualization of the war in Bosnia reflects the "global ideological poverty" of this Western *sensus communis* borne out of the New World Order of the early 1990s.[3] Bosnia's "down-to-earth racial and territorial quarrels" filtered through mediatic displays to Western audiences, revealing the "material physical realities that, *supposedly*, we in the West can no longer experience."[4] I want to highlight the insertion of "supposedly" here, because it certainly reveals an ambivalence about the ideological mystifications of the West that more clearly appear to us in light of the subsequent events of September 11th, 2001, and the Global War on Terror. Nonetheless, as opposed to many liberal and social constructivist IR scholars at the time, Debrix's critical world order project calls into question the self-congratulatory story of the Westernization of the global, the idea of the West as the epicenter of any sort of Kantian pacific union, or a politics of humanitarian intervention to save the other. For Debrix, the very idea of sublimating alterity within the coordinates of Western humanitarian morality perpetuates its own form of violent appropriation. And, as I argue in this contribution, the way Debrix alerted

1 Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," 18.

2 Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 27.

3 François Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping: The United Nations and the Mobilization of Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 137.

4 Ibid., 138; my emphasis.

his readers to the symbolic and conceptual violence of the West's appropriation of alterity showed latent fascistic desires that circulate and haunt the present.

For Debrix, the war in Bosnia was the "stage on which the West has decided to play out its pathological condition."[5] This pathological condition, Debrix demonstrates, revealed itself in terms of the impotence, incompetence and ultimately the scapegoating (*katharma*) of the United Nations (UN) by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the West. Nonetheless, as Debrix shows, the attempt to rationalize the West's (pathological) intervention can be seen in Slavoj Žižek's own writings at the time. In his *Metastases of Enjoyment*, Žižek treats the Bosnian victims to Serbian violence essentially as helpless. Žižek does this, Debrix argues, by appropriating the Bosnian gaze as a prop for Western observers, who only become aware of it through a plethora of photographic or visual material continuously circulating in Western media. Žižek's point, ultimately, is to effectively appropriate the Western voyeurs to this violence through this passive Bosnian gaze: the internalization of which, in Lacanian fashion, would provoke a condition of guilt upon the viewer such that it would compel a moral responsibility (of the West) to (violently) intervene in the conflict. Debrix avers that Žižek's formulation represents an attempt at symbolically effacing the safe distance of the Western observer and, as a consequence, to combat the "loss of morality in the West."[6] Thus Žižek is not even primarily concerned with the Bosnian Muslims *per se*, as Debrix argues; rather they represent "an insignificant component in a larger ideological scheme" of fulfilling his "own dose of retromoral fascism (whether [he] recognizes it or not)."[7] Put differently, Žižek is engaged in his own nostalgic political project[8] to reinvigorate Western forms of violent interventionism, but one on the basis of compassion, empathy and care towards a people who are to be seen as no different than 'us'. Notwithstanding Fukuyama's lament at a desolate world which no longer compels the risking of one's life, Žižek's own "retromoral fascism" shows that even in such a world ruthless violence can be activated, a ruthless violence that is presented as apolitical and almost limitless to achieve its morally self-righteous ends. The invasion and destruction of Iraq in 2003 was an example *par excellence* of this type of violence.

For Debrix, Žižek's moral intervention represents the possibility of a violence that is ultimately predicated upon the effacement of the Other's very alterity. Debrix even goes so far as to equate Serbian racial genocide with Žižek's own elision of Bosnian alterity: "at different levels (one is symbolic, the other racial), they all take part in the genocide of the Bosnian population."[9] By contrast, Jean Baudrillard's notion of radical alterity, Debrix argues, represents the critical recognition of how Western modernity constructs but sublimates alterity. For Baudrillard, the cognizance of this radical alterity of the other is meant to preclude the destruction of the other's "singularity" as a project of appropriating the real (i.e. the event as such).[10] In other words, what Debrix shows is how much the West's consumption of Bosnian misery, "its spectacle of death, torture, massive destruction, its barbarous irrational passions, its raw energies are what is seductive to the West."[11] The mediatic consumption of Serbian atrocities in the West reveals something that many in the West cannot bear to face: that "we are really seduced by and attracted to the type of passions that Bosnia displays."[12]

As I mentioned above, Debrix's work is prescient in the 1990s in demonstrating the intricate ideological constructs that facilitate the deployment of violence by Western powers. But more importantly, I want to suggest, is his recognition of the very condition of what sustains Western disciplinary neoliberalism as a parasitical project that feeds on the violence and misery inflicted upon others. To be sure, one can certainly see throughout the 1990s the attempt to draw a conceptual and material borderline between the West and its others: the former Yugoslavia was all too often imagined as the very embodiment of the West's own otherness insofar as

5 Ibid., 137.

6 Ibid., 144.

7 Ibid., 144.

8 Ibid., 143.

9 Ibid., 149.

10 Ibid., 149.

11 Ibid., 150.

12 Ibid., 150.

it revealed the paroxysmal nationalism and racism that the West *qua* West transcended. On the other – and here is where I think Debrix's original ambivalence about the West as such is prescient about our own political moment – the seductive disposition towards the genocidal violence perpetuated in Bosnia reveals the possibilities that such (neo)fascistic desires can actually operate *within the West itself*. Nothing about the Western imaginary immunizes itself against a fascistic micropolitics that can proliferate under the right conditions. Indeed, I would suggest that after roughly two decades of exhaustive search for the ideological enemy abroad, of invading and occupying entire countries, the persistence of this desire or unfulfillable lack begins to cut at the very heart of the West itself and opens up a space for the very possibilities of a violence that always appeared to be outside itself. One can think here of the proliferation of discourses tied to immigration, ethno-religious difference and fears of population replacement echoed by transnational far-right writers in the United States and in Europe. The steady stream of so-called lone wolf terrorists – who embody white supremacist terrorism – who carry out mass violence against minorities, refugees and immigrants reveals a strong desire to recreate the very fault lines of racial genocidal violence in American and European streets. We have traveled far from Fukuyama's bored future present.

Recognizing the conjunctions between the between the West's ideological pathologies, its seduction and desire to (visually) experience the violence on its frontiers, the constant search for the real through violence, and ultimately the illumination of the great chimera that is the West remains the great merit of Debrix's *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*. It remains as relevant today as it was two decades ago.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Alexander D. Barder *orcid.org/0000-0002-9914-923X*
Florida International University, US

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