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**REPLY TO DOUGLAS KELLNER'S '9/11,
SPECTACLES OF TERROR, AND MEDIA
MANIPULATION' IN *CRITICAL
DISCOURSE STUDIES*, 1(1): 41-64.**

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Abstract

This article responds to the analysis by Douglas Kellner of the way the Bush Administration has manipulated media coverage, especially coverage of the attacks of 11/9/01, to support an aggressive foreign policy. The writer is generally in agreement with the analysis, although the article makes posits five propositions: 1) there is nothing new in using terror and atrocity as a pretext for war, 2) the attacks and response reflects a deeply ingrained culture of violence, including within the USA, 3) the current conflict is profoundly theological in nature, 4) the discourse of the US Administration reveals a profound ignorance of the possible motivations of the attackers, and 5) the portrayal of the attacks and the response reveals the continuing atavistic appeal of violence. By way of conclusion, it is suggested that there needs to be an on-going commitment towards educating for a culture of peace and that developing a critique of militaristic discourse is one start to this. [This Abstract was not included in the published article].

Article

The title of a book can sometimes jolt. In the masterfully entitled 1995 work *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, the cultural critic Jean Baudrillard famously reminded us of the mass mediated nature of experienced reality in contemporary society, such that the phenomena we assume to be objective events are not necessarily such. The events which we assume to have an objective reality are defined through mass media, and in effect through the corporate mass media of the USA. The power of the corporate media to define events and understandings can be seen very clearly with the Jihadist attack on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon on 11/9/01. The way this has been conceptualized and packaged through the corporate media can be illustrated through the fact that the attacks and the resulting social trauma are simply characterized as "9/11". The fact that 9/11 is universally used and understood, despite the fact that in much of the English-speaking world the day and month would be abbreviated as 11/9, is an indicator of the pervasive power of the US corporate media. Douglas Kellner (2004) has provided a useful summary of the how what happened on 11/9/01 has been presented in very simplistic terms by the US corporate media, and how the attacks of 11/9/01 have been manipulated, quite ruthlessly, by the US Bush administration as a pretext for an illegal and immoral war. It seems difficult to argue with the central propositions as presented by Douglas Kellner. However it is perhaps useful to make five brief observations.

Firstly, one can argue that there is nothing new in the manipulation of terror and atrocity to provide a pretext for war. One can think of the sinking of the US warship Maine, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, reported German atrocities in Belgium and the subsequent sinking of passenger ships by German U-boats, reports of maltreatment of ethnic Germans in the Sudetenland and Poland, killings by Communist regimes, and, more recently, fears of ethnic cleansing. There is of course a strong linkage to just war theory in any attempt to use terrorism as a rationale for war. One of the important criteria for a just war is the protection of innocent lives, that is, the lives of non-combatants. If one defines terrorism as the premeditated killing of civilians in order to gain a political goal or to gain publicity for a cause, then any war against terrorists resonates strongly with one of the ideals of the just war, an idea which is deeply ingrained in the western psyche. There are of course other criteria within the just war tradition for what constitutes a just war, such as use of war as a last resort, likely prospects of success, and the principle of proportionality. Significantly, the so-called war on terror fails to meet these criteria. [264/265]

Secondly, the phenomenon of 11/9/01 and the resulting political response indicate exactly how deeply ingrained a culture of violence is within contemporary societies, and particularly within the US. This can be seen both in the nature of the attacks and the nature of the response. Douglas Kellner correctly points out (p. 42) that the 11/9/01 targets were symbolic of global capitalism and the military power of the USA. The response also demonstrates the power of a culture of violence. Douglas Kellner suggests that war has been turned into a media spectacle through which US regimes use military extravaganzas to pursue what is an imperialistic agenda (p. 51). It is in the nature of television in particular to dramatize terror. Douglas Kellner points out (p. 44) that live television footage brings an immediacy to a particular event, making the viewer believe that he/she is actually personally involved (as a victim) in the killings. At the institution where I teach, it was remarkable to hear reports of how many students were in tears on 11/9/01 — despite the students having no personal connection as such to those who were killed or injured on that day. Both the Jihadists and the Bush administration work to manipulate the spectacle of terror and the spectacle of violence. However they can only do so because a culture of violence is so profoundly entrenched within contemporary society and within popular culture.

Thirdly, it seems that the conflict between the Jihadists and the Bush administration is profoundly theological in nature. Douglas Kellner points out how the dichotomy of good and evil predominates both within the Bush administration and with the Jihadists (pp. 45-51), each side defining themselves as the good and the other as evil. One could argue that this has always been the nature of war, although the rhetoric of both sides in this conflict has a particularly religious dimension. One only needs to listen to American televangelists to understand how the conflict is framed in religious terms, and to understand just much the invasion of Iraq has been linked (in the fundamentalist imagination) to a cosmic struggle between good and evil. Of course, the deep irony about both the Jihadists and the Christian fundamentalists is that both reveal a failure to understand the implications of their own religious traditions. Islam historically has been a religion of toleration, with the Jihad only invoked as a last resort to protect the faithful. Similarly, the religion of Jesus was an irenic one, wherein the followers of Jesus were enjoined to peace, and to see their own faults before others. Both forms of fundamentalism feed from each other, oblivious to the implications of their own traditions.

Fourthly, one can say that the discourse of the Bush administration surrounding 11/9/01 does reveal an ignorance of the possible motivation of the attackers and an ignorance of the importance of structural violence. Douglas Kellner hints at this in the article, although it is perhaps not developed. Put simply, within the coverage by the corporate US media the fundamental question of *why* individuals should decide to martyr themselves is rarely asked. Rather those who do sacrifice themselves are put into a category of fanatic, fundamentalist, or terrorist, which in effect is a device whereby we avoid any attempt at understanding the motives of another person. It is instructive to examine the notion of self-sacrifice when used within western countries; within war memorials this is constantly regarded as something heroic and noble. There is of course, within war, a tendency for those who have been attacked always to describe the attack as unprovoked. Thus there is rarely any discussion of the role of the United States as the global hegemon in supporting an [265/266] unjust global social order and in supporting structural violence throughout the world. Mindful of the importance of structural violence, Jean Baudrillard (2001) has described terrorism as being at the centre of the system which the terrorists of 11/9/01 were attacking. Ultimately neither direct nor structural violence can be justified, although in order to assess any situation adequately we need to recognize the existence of both.

Fifthly, one can say that the events of 11/9/01 and the response do reflect the atavistic appeal of violence. Douglas Keilner quite correctly suggests that both the attacks and the war on terror present us with a spectacle of violence, although the point is that this would not be possible if there were not a viewing audience which, despite protestations of horror, actually want to see and experience the violence. The pacifist theologian Stanley Hauwerwas has picked up on this when he suggests that the attacks of 11/9/01 have actually provided the USA (perversely) with a sense of purpose which was otherwise lacking after the defeat of communism (Hauwerwas, 2003). There is arguably nothing new in the alluring nature of violence and war. The Reformation pacifist writer Desiderius Erasmus (1967) concentrated upon this issue within the famous adagium *Dulce Bellum Inexpertis* (How sweet is war to those who have not experienced it). Erasmus recognizes the appeal of war, and suggests that the appeal masks the horror and desolation which results from war. Erasmus implies that a critical approach is needed to the discourse of war, a critical approach which (in a very modern sense) deconstructs the appealing narrative and discourse of violence.

What then needs to happen? Given the strength of a culture of violence, as evidenced through the presentation of the events of 11/9/01 and the war on terror, it seems that there is more than ever a need for an overt commitment to education for peace and education for a culture of peace, as articulated by numerous recent UN and UNESCO declarations. The critique by Douglas Kellner, on the militaristic discourse through which recent events are presented, is a useful contribution to such a commitment.

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