

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

March 3, 2015

A Culture of Singularities:
A Review Essay of Elisabeth Weber's Living Together: Jacques Derrida's
Communities of Violence and Peace and Mustapha Chérif's Islam and the West:
A Conversation with Jacques Derrida

Elisabeth Weber, ed., *Living Together: Jacques Derrida's Communities of Violence and Peace*, Fordham University Press, 2013, 372 pp., \$32.00 US (pbk), ISBN 9780823249930.

Mustapha Chérif, *Islam and the West: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, University of Chicago Press, 2008, 136 pp., \$19.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9780226102863.

1.

In 1998, Jacques Derrida presented a paper titled “*Avouer—l'impossible: 'retours,' repentir, et réconciliation*” (“Avowing—The Impossible: ‘Returns,’ Repentance, and Reconciliation”) at the *Colloque des intellectuels juifs de langue française*. The paper is devoted to the question of how to live together well, and more basically to the question of what it means to live together in general. The two books that I will discuss in this review essay take up the questions of Derrida’s paper, focusing on concrete problems of living together that have plagued much of the Islamicate world for at least the last seventy years. The first of the books that I will discuss—*Living Together: Jacques Derrida's Communities of Violence and Peace*—comprises fourteen essays that respond explicitly to Derrida’s paper, the English translation of which is included in the volume. The second book—*Islam and the West: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*—engages the questions raised in “Avowing—The Impossible” somewhat more indirectly and informally. In what follows, I will summarize the argument of Derrida’s paper and then evaluate the two books as responses to the themes it advances.

In order to capture what is most essential in Derrida’s “Avowing—The Impossible,” we will need to begin by paying very close attention to the question it addresses: how to live together? (*Comment vivre ensemble?*) Derrida’s discussion is oriented throughout by an ambiguity in the French *ensemble*. On the one hand, *ensemble* is an adverb, which can be translated straightforwardly as “together.” But on the other hand, one can refer in French to *un ensemble*, a whole or a totality. (Of course we can use the noun “ensemble” in a similar

sense in English.) When we in the Western philosophical tradition reflect on the question of how to live together, we tend to emphasize this second sense of *ensemble*. According to Derrida, this way of understanding the problem obscures a dimension of our living together that is essential from an ethical point of view: “The adverb, in the expression ‘living together,’ appears to find its sense and dignity only there where it exceeds, dislocates, contests the authority of the noun ‘ensemble....’ The authority of the whole [*ensemble*] will always be the first threat for all ‘living together.’ And inversely, all ‘living together’ will be the first protestation or contestation, the first testimony against the whole [*ensemble*]” (21).

One way of prioritizing the *ensemble* as noun over the *ensemble* as adverb is to conceive the former as a legal or contractual order to which our mode of living together ought to conform.¹ To live together well, on this understanding, is to live together in accordance with a just legal order. The problem with this conception, according to Derrida, is that it fails to do justice to the value of justice. As he had argued in the essay “Force of Law,” justice is irreducible to legality. Law necessarily takes the form of a rule or code, whereas justice pertains to the individual cases to which the law must be applied. A just decision, to be recognized as such, must be made in accordance with the rule, of course, but it must also go beyond mere mechanical application, reinterpreting the rule in light of the circumstances. This is because the case never falls under the law without a remainder of meaning. As a result, “for a decision to be just and responsible, it must [*il faut*], in its proper moment, if there is one, be both regulated and without regulation, it must preserve the law [*loi*] and also destroy or suspend it enough to have [*pour devoir*] to reinvent it in each case....”² Justice is addressed not to persons as instantiating legally recognized categories—wife, employee, citizen, etc.—but to singularities. To live together is to find ourselves responsive and responsible to others as singular beings to whom we owe not only duties of legality, but also duties of justice. The conception of living together that treats the *ensemble* as a legal order obscures this important ethical dimension (26).

A second way of prioritizing the *ensemble* as noun is to understand it quasi-naturalistically as a “symbiotic gregariousness, or fusional living together” (27). Derrida has in mind here various communitarianisms and nationalisms that understand their members as bound together by cultural or racial identity or, in the case of Zionism, by appropriation of a common place and by “the motif of election” (29). Against this idea of a fusional whole, Derrida insists that living together means standing in dissymmetrical, non-reciprocal relations with others who are wholly other; it presupposes a “singular, secret, inviolable separation” that interrupts in advance “the completion, the closure, and the cohesiveness of an ‘ensemble’ (the noun, the substantive), of a substantial, closed ensemble identical to itself” (28).

To live together well, then, we must bracket the substantial ensembles that unify us, bringing to light a dimension of togetherness that exceeds both juridical and natural totalities. Derrida sees “at least the sign, at least the possibility” of such a living together in the multiplication of scenes of avowal that we have witnessed at the international level over approximately the last seventy years (33). When world leaders avow the wrongs their nations

¹ In the Anglo-American tradition, this orientation is expressed especially clearly by John Rawls, who puts the question of living together as follows: “Viewing society as a fair system of cooperation between citizens regarded as free and equal, what principles of justice are most appropriate to specify basic rights and liberties, and to regulate social and economic inequalities in citizens’ prospects over a complete life?” John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin Kelly (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 41.

² Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 251.

have done to others and when they ask forgiveness for those wrongs, they testify to an *ensemble* (in the adverbial sense) that exceeds the substantial *ensembles* based on nation, race, religion, etc. But these avowals and requests for forgiveness, as promising as they are, give rise to unavoidable aporias that render fragile even the most well intentioned attempts at living together well. There is nothing to prevent national leaders from making avowals strategically, for example, with an eye toward improving their own positions from a public relations point of view. And requests for forgiveness can always be made with the goal of establishing an advantageous reconciliation. What this shows is that there can be no pure living well together. Attempts to engage others justly are always haunted by the possibility of being turned to the advantage of substantial ensembles. And yet we must live together; we cannot not do so. We must respond to the call of justice, which makes its demands felt now. And that means, according to Derrida, that we must do the impossible.

Living Together, edited by Elisabeth Weber, includes fourteen essays that take up in various ways the themes of “Avowing—The Impossible.” As is often the case in edited volumes, the contributions are somewhat uneven in terms of quality. Some engage Derrida’s text very carefully, making creative use of its themes to shed valuable light on intractable problems. Others, in my opinion, rely on uncharitable or straightforwardly mistaken interpretations of Derrida’s work. The essays are also uneven thematically. Many apply Derrida’s understanding of living together to specific social and political problems in the Islamicate world. These are among the most valuable contributions to the volume. Others are more focused on textual questions, summarizing Derrida’s views on particular points or tracing the development of the problems he takes up. One thing the contributions do have in common, though, is that they are written clearly, avoiding most of the stylistic quirks that can make Derrida’s own texts so difficult for beginners. I believe most of the contributions will be accessible to people who are not already well acquainted with Derrida’s thought, and even to those who might struggle to make sense of “Avowing—The Impossible.”

I believe that two essays stand out as the most valuable contributions to *Living Together*. Elisabeth Weber’s essay, “Living—with—Torture—Together,” advances a compelling thesis about the way in which modern methods of “stealth torture,” which are designed to avoid leaving visible marks on the body, help to undermine possibilities of living together. Weber tells the story, related by Darius Rejali, of a Palestinian Arab caring for a member of a Zionist guerrilla group who was being tortured by the British in 1939.³ The sight of the Jewish prisoner’s wounds called forth a kind of compassion “that is not limited to members of a defined ‘community,’ of a constituted ‘ensemble’” (243). One of the purposes of modern methods of torture, according to Weber, is precisely to foreclose the possibility of this compassion, which ruptures the boundaries of substantial, self-identical communities, setting their members in relations of justice to singular others. And Richard Falk’s essay, “How to Live Together Well: Interrogating the Israel/Palestine Conflict,” gives a vivid description of the impossibility of any pure living well together. As the title suggests, Falk is concerned specifically with the Israelis’ and Palestinians’ living together. He emphasizes the calculating way in which the Israelis have engaged in the so-called peace process, buying more and more time to improve their bargaining position by establishing advantageous “facts on the ground” (278). He also addresses Derrida’s argument in “Avowing—The Impossible” that living well together in cases like this requires the stronger party “to take the initiative for peace in a manner that is first of all wisely unilateral,” showing how this is much more difficult than it might seem (23). When Yitzhak Rabin made some concessions to the

³ Darius Rajali, *Torture and Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 30.

Palestinians as part of the Oslo Accords, he was assassinated by an Israeli nationalist extremist. And when the Palestinians, obviously the weaker party, tried to move unilaterally in 1988, renouncing some of their most important demands, they only strengthened Israel's position (284). Arguing in a broadly Derridean vein, though, Falk resists the pessimism that the history of the conflict seems to suggest. He advocates a conception of politics as the art of the impossible and reminds us that reconciliation in South Africa had seemed impossible right up to the point when all of a sudden it wasn't.

Among the less compelling essays, in my opinion, are Raef Zreik's "Rights, Respect, and the Political: Notes from a Conflict Zone" and Kevin Hart's "Four or Five Words on Derrida." Zreik's essay advances an argument that is largely critical of Derrida, but it depends both on some highly questionable premises and on oversimplified understandings of some of Derrida's key ideas. One of the points Zreik is most concerned to establish is that Derrida's political philosophy, with its emphasis on the undecidable, is incompatible with "the closure, finality, and action that are required of a political activist" (105). But as Aristotle explained in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, "it is the mark of an educated person to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits."⁴ We simply cannot know with precision whether we are choosing correctly in political matters. Any normative theory that claimed to provide us with such certainty would be extremely implausible. I think it is clearly a strength rather than a weakness of Derrida's political philosophy that it does not attempt to provide us with certainty where the subject itself does not admit of it. Kevin Hart advances an objection broadly similar to Zreik's, rejecting Derrida's pure, and indeed impossible, ethics of alterity in favor of a kind of common sense, unsophisticated form of moral intuitionism: "It is sufficiently clear to me, as an attentive and mature person, that I should not tell lies; I do not need theoretical confirmation of the judgment" (184). But as in Zreik's case, this objection could be brought against nearly every normative theory. And more importantly, the objection relies on a claim that seems plainly false: perhaps we all do know in a rough and ready way that we should keep our promises, but we do not know so easily whether we ought to keep them in particular cases. And this kind of uncertainty, I want to suggest, is a good thing. It arises when we encounter the people we engage with not simply as cases falling under intuitively obvious rules, but rather as singular others whom we must treat justly, not in general but in each unique case. That we cannot know with certainty how to do so is not an indictment of any particular normative theory; it is a function rather of the very aporias that give rise to the problem of living together in the first place.

Overall, I would recommend *Living Together: Jacques Derrida's Communities of Violence and Peace* to readers who are interested in applications of Derrida's thought to real-world situations of social and political conflict, and especially to those interested in conflicts in the Middle East. I do not believe the book as a whole is essential reading, but I am confident that most readers will find some of the essays valuable for helping them think through the questions that interest them.

⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: Revised Oxford Translation*, Vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1094b.24-25. Translation slightly modified.

2.

A second book, *Islam and the West: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* covers some of the same themes as *Living Together*. The main part of the book is a rough transcript of a conversation between Derrida and the author, Mustapha Chérif, that took place on the final day of the colloquium “Algeria-France: Tribute to the Great Figures of the Dialogue between Civilizations” in the spring of 2003. Chérif, who is a highly respected philosopher in his own right, tends to adopt a deferential attitude toward Derrida. At certain points in the conversation, Chérif seems to disagree with Derrida’s claims, but he does not press the argument. I believe the book would have been much more valuable if he had done so, as it would have forced Derrida to advance clear arguments for some of his signature positions to an interlocutor who did not already share his theoretical commitments. Instead, the reader gets the impression at many points that the two men are simply talking past each other. That is unfortunate because the topics they discuss are of great philosophical and practical importance.

One of Chérif’s primary concerns in the book is to investigate the conditions for a possible dialogue between Islam and the West. Although he never commits to this position explicitly, it seems as if Chérif conceives of the partners in this possible dialogue as substantial *ensembles*. Throughout the conversation Derrida resists this framing, insisting that “there are many Islams, there are many Wests” (39). He develops this point by calling on ideas that he developed in “Avowing—The Impossible.” Living together, Derrida insists, requires a recognition of the interruption of identity and presence to self that occurs within each of us and in our relations to each other (66). In addressing each other, the Muslim and the Westerner are given as exceeding their identities as Muslim and Westerner. Each is given as possessing a singular idiom, a singular way of being, which is untranslatable into the general idioms of the substantial *ensembles*. The principle of civilization, Derrida argues, is respect for the alterity of these singular idioms. Any “universal civilization” that might result from the kind of dialogue Chérif proposes would have to take the form of what Derrida elsewhere called a “universalizable culture of singularities.”⁵ This is a point on which Chérif seems to disagree with Derrida. Throughout the conversation, he continues to refer to Islam and the West as if they were coherent, self-identical parties to an ongoing disagreement and to a possibly fruitful dialogue. I believe the conversation would have been more philosophically fruitful if Chérif had pressed his case on this point, arguing more forcefully for the value of treating Islam and the West as totalities.

A second theme that runs through much of the conversation is that of loss. Chérif is very much concerned with the loss of morality and of meaning that result from Islam’s encounter with European, rationalist, atheist modernity. Unfortunately, Chérif does not explain more precisely what the losses of morality and meaning mean for him. Again, I believe the reader could have benefitted from Chérif’s developing his point in more detail. My best guess is that what Chérif has in mind is not the loss of morality and meaning per se, but rather the loss of specifically Islamic kinds of morality and meaning. If this interpretation is correct, then Chérif’s desire for dialogue between Islam and the West seems incompatible with his concern to preserve Islamic morality and meaning. Derrida approaches this point when he argues that any genuine dialogue “can only occur in the revelation of that democracy to come, whose occurrence and promise enable us, at every moment, to criticize”

⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 56. Italics omitted.

(43). Democracy to come, in Derrida's terms, refers to a model of living together without model, in which the terms of cooperation are radically open-ended: "to exist in a democracy is to agree to challenge, to be challenged, to challenge the status quo..." (42). Is it possible to have a genuine dialogue that would not risk the loss of particular moralities and meanings? And if so, would such a dialogue be worth engaging in? Could it achieve the kinds of goods that Chérif has in mind in advocating for dialogue between Islam and the West? These are all important questions that deserve to be pursued further.

A third and final theme that I would like briefly to discuss is that of Derrida's formative experiences as a Jewish boy growing up in French Algeria under the strongly anti-Semitic Vichy regime. An entire chapter of *Islam and the West* is devoted to Derrida's account of the ways in which his mature philosophical thought had been shaped by his childhood experiences at the margins of the French, Arab, and even Jewish communities. Although some of these accounts have been given elsewhere, including in "Avowing—The Impossible," readers interested in Derrida the person will find valuable insights in this part of the text.

In general, I believe that *Islam and the West* will be valuable for scholars interested in the practical implications of Derrida's political thought, especially as regards the Islamic world. Given that the book is the record of a conversation, it is not as tightly argued or well organized as one might like, but the ideas it outlines and the questions it suggests make it worth the relatively short time it will take to read it.

Bryan Lueck
Associate Professor of Philosophy
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

© 2015: Bryan Lueck

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by SCTIW Review with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and SCTIW Review.

Citation Information

Lueck, Bryan, *A Culture of Singularities: A Review Essay of Elisabeth Weber's Living Together: Jacques Derrida's Communities of Violence and Peace and Mustapha Chérif's Islam and the West: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, *SCTIW Review*, March 3, 2015.
<http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/431>.