

# Trauma and Dereification: September 11 and the Problem of Ontological Security

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If a person could return to September 11, and relive the emotion-filled days that followed, she would note a striking contrast between the attack and the response.<sup>1</sup> The attack was instantaneous, brutal, and thorough; the response was slow, complex, and faltering. The attack took precise aim at an object but was otherwise blind. The response was marked by repetitive, though partial, attempts at understanding. Unlike previous terrorists, such as the Jacobins, the Bolsheviks, or nationalist militants, the hijackers did not seek to explain or justify their act. The victims, by contrast, asked themselves such questions as: Did we bring this on ourselves? Could we have done something differently? How has the world changed, and what can we do to affect this change? If we are going to fight, what are we fighting for? Finally, the attack was quintessentially and simply an act of violence. The response has included violence, but as a subordinate part of a far more complex whole.

One way to describe the relation between the act and the response is to call attention to the process of *dereification*. Presumably, the hijackers chose the World Trade Center and the Pentagon as icons of US greed, arrogance, and impiety. In the response, however, such iconic objects were deconstructed into the individuals or groups that made them up. The deconstruction was an effort to give meaning to an act that was perceived as incomprehensible. It proceeded through the pictures of the “missing” found everywhere in New York for many weeks after the destruction of the towers, through the *New York Times* project of publishing capsule biographies of each and every victim, and through the attempt to find every shard or bone fragment by which an individual could be identified, even though this enormously prolonged the clean-up process and deferred the achievement of “closure.”

In the process of dereification, the ordinary and the everyday were infused with rich new meanings. Typical titles of the *New York Times* obituaries were “Outdancing her Husband,” “She also Tended Bar,” and “He Wanted More Children.” The shopping emporia and the office suite suddenly appeared as something other than degraded sites of consumerism and money-grubbing. The sense in which such terms as “capitalism,” “imperialism,” “Zionism,” and “racism” obscured human lives and intentions became unmistakable. Particularly striking was the revelation that the many brokerage firms housed in the World Trade Center were staffed by upwardly-mobile working-class men from Brooklyn,

young immigrants from Latin America and East Asia, and Middle Easterners, both Israeli and Arab. Finally, and of great significance if the act was aimed at "America," countless global visitors insisted that the Trade Center was not merely – as Eduard Shevardnadze put it – American and global, but also Georgian, Greek, Islamic, Latin, Asian, British, and European.

At the same time, dereification could serve as a defense. Over time, the focus on the particular obscured the whole. Idealizations abounded. A second-rate figure was projected to world-class status. American foreign policy, presumably the product of generations of reflection, was transformed overnight. Long-time enemies became friends; long-standing values were declared expendable. There was something unreal about the process. Critical thinking disappeared, except in its oldest, stalest, and most obsolete forms. As the great mass of men and women remained preoccupied with mourning, special interests vaulted into what had suddenly become a vacuum, ripping off the public realm to an unheard-of degree, positioning themselves obscenely for the next wave of capitalist expansion. Dereification gave way to reification. While reification, the building up of the ontological structure of normality, was inevitable and necessary, a host of new fetishes also appeared: Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, the Islamic fundamentalist, the American flag, the Star Spangled Banner.

We call an event like that of September 11 a *trauma*. A trauma is an event whose impact does not occur at the level of consciousness and which therefore tears open the fabric of everyday existence in a way that consciously experienced acts do not. The confusion, the self-questioning, the civility and even vulnerability of New York City street life, however temporary, the constant replaying of images of the towers in flames, the towers collapsing, the compulsive visits to "ground zero" – these can all be well understood as responses to trauma. The mind was unprepared for the event. The upset and rupture took place at a different level of the psyche from the one on which the mind normally functions. Afterward, the mind goes back to the event, reliving it as if preparing to encounter it again. The driving force is the effort to master the event that mastered it, to master it by incorporating it back into an ordinary, everyday consciousness. What was striking in this case was the humanity of the effort, the obsession with each individual life, the resistance to giving way to formulaic solutions or to reflexive acts, at least at the popular level. The existence of banality, special pleading, and idealization should not obscure the crucial role played by dereification in the attempt to recover from a collective trauma.

Dereification describes the moment in the process of recovery at which individuals began to rebuild a common world. Can we locate a counterpart to dereification at the societal level? One way to address this question is in terms of Anthony Giddens' notion of space-time distanciation.<sup>2</sup> According to Giddens, the emergence of the world as a single space-time unit increased the necessity for, and changed the character of, *trust*. In contrast to the face-to-face relations that characterized traditional, locally rooted societies, the operation of institutions

over long distances required that men and women rely on strangers: Korean electronic engineers, Turkish shippers, Arab oil producers, and the like. But just as the requirements of trust changed, so did the dangers that trust was meant to allay. Whereas a threat was immediate and visible in a face-to-face encounter, modern danger is often impersonal and faceless. This is because it is often the result of "high consequence events taking place far away."<sup>3</sup> In order to protect themselves from long-distance and invisible dangers, men and women have had to develop new forms of sensory awareness that signal danger long in advance, forms that replaced the immediacy of instinct, reflex, and habit. This process changed the nature of trust, entailing higher levels of impulse control, communication at deeper levels of the psyche, reflexiveness, and the development of the capacity to convey complex mental states.

When we encounter an act as brutal, frightening, and ultimately self-defeating as the attack of September 11, we are inclined to trace it to backward social systems: the poverty and lack of education of so much of the Arab world, the opportunism and cowardice of its undemocratic regimes, the worship of death and violence that characterizes so many of its young people. The depth of Giddens' conception lies in its refusal to stop with this insight. Instead, it suggests that the very forces that had made progress possible – world trade, the world division of labor, technology – also made the world more vulnerable to destructiveness. The greater the degree of integration, the deeper the level of dependency, the more terrifying the threat of disintegration. The deeper the level at which trust is rooted, the more profound the damage that will occur when that trust is broken.

Let us now attempt to historicize Giddens' conception more sharply. September 11, 2001 has frequently been likened to December 7, 1941, presumably because of the element of surprise, but there is a more useful precedent: 1914–19.<sup>4</sup> In World War I the catastrophic possibilities of modernity first became visible. Low-scale positional maneuverings and minor conflicts of a sort that had been common for decades gave way to unimaginable violence: two million casualties per year, six thousand per day, in the context of a stalemate no one had foreseen. New technologies – the machinegun, the submarine or "U-boat," the tank, the airplane, poison gas – revealed their unprecedented potential to harm.<sup>5</sup> Local rivalries produced global consequences: Shantung, Mexico, Dahomey. Legal precedents, such as neutrality rights, became irrelevant. But just as the war first revealed the disasters inherent in a runaway modernity, so it generated the first attempts to deepen the level of trust, or "collective security" as it came to be known, meant to avert disaster. At the heart of those attempts were new forms of communication: support for popular democracy, "open diplomacy openly arrived at," enlightened journalism, public opinion, civil society, and international institutions, notably the League of Nations and the World Court. Although these largely failed, they were remade after World War II and they remain important today, however fragile and compromised.

Summarizing the new prerequisites for security in 1917–18, Woodrow Wilson

insisted that "no peace can last" which does not "rest upon the convictions or affections of mankind." This is just as true today and explains why the dereification that followed the attack also points the way toward a successful response. Nonetheless, there is a profound difference between the efforts that consumed the twentieth century and those that the twenty-first faces. In the twentieth century, "the convictions and affections of mankind" were primarily organized at the level of the nation-state. The path to preventing disaster led through understandings and agreements between *states*. September 11 reconstituted the problem of security at a new level of global organization. The basis for security today lies among *peoples*, even as the level of the state cannot be forgotten, and even as the need for institutions remains as strong as ever.

Understanding this will help us to grasp why the attack was so shattering, why it was instantly perceived as ushering in a new epoch in world history, and why the process of dereification remains our best guide in formulating a response. As a result of the headlong globalization of the 1990s, such older and reassuring distinctions as military/civilian, external/internal, war/peace, and foreign/domestic had become less and less relevant. The terrorists were global actors, highly-skilled, Western-educated, middle-class technical workers reenacting a Hollywood cliché, but their deed reflected an erosion of boundaries, structures, and protections that had only been dimly sensed. By its randomness, its unpredictability, and its facelessness, by its transformation of everyday life into a scene of fear and destruction, by the introduction of terror into a vast region that had previously seemed impregnable, September 11 irrevocably disrupted the *ontological* level of security that the nation-state framework had taken for granted.

In particular, it disrupted the most fundamental ontological structure on which all security depends: that of the public/private division. The threat of terror, even though initially aimed at public buildings, raised the specter of a new world in which every letter, carton of milk, and jar of aspirin might sow death, in which every email might destroy knowledge, in which every child would be continually vulnerable, and in which the home would become a prison if not a morgue. Unlike war, terror liquidates the structural foundations of private life, and thereby the capacity to reflect, to be comfortable with oneself, to predict danger, and to trust. Just as national borders were meant to isolate citizens from political violence, so the public/private division was meant to isolate them from civic violence. September 11 showed that neither effort worked any longer and so a profoundly disturbing new level of mistrust entered the world.

What collapsed on that day, then, was not so much a set of towers as an object world. That object world was still divided into nationalities by borders. It included the idea that the United States was an impregnable fortress. And it presumed that the entire world was moving in more or less the same direction, namely toward liberal and modern values. September 11 was a catastrophe for all that. The dereification that followed began the effort to build a new object world. It was an attempt to make contact with other human beings after a catastrophe had

destroyed a hard-won capacity for trust, a conviction in one's ability to predict danger, and a sense that the private realm at least would remain secure from disaster.

Dereification may also help in better understanding the perpetrators themselves. If their act was, as I believe, blind, behind it was a familiar sentiment: the demand for recognition. The act came from the only part of the world that did not share the more or less universal consensus concerning the inevitability of globalization, a consensus divided only as to its content and direction. The act certainly got the attention of the world. With that in mind, I will conclude by mentioning three factors that seem to have immediate relevance to the project of rebuilding the trust, predictability, and security of a new object world.

The first is the priority of what I have termed ontological security, a need that helps explain, but also surpasses, the last century's emphasis on the self-determination of nations. Insofar as September 11 is understood as an *Arab* and not, more broadly, as a *Muslim* act, an understanding justified by the nationality of the perpetrators and their supporters, then the problem of ontological security sheds light on the priority of the Israel–Palestine conflict.<sup>6</sup> In no sense was that conflict the *cause* of September 11. One would like to say that the cause was the failure of modernization in the Arab world if only one understood why modernization, in such forms as nationalism, socialism, and democracy, failed so dramatically there when compared to South and East Asia, to Latin America, and even to Africa. Rather, the Israel–Palestine conflict is the *symptom* of that failure, but it is a symptom that must be resolved before the underlying problems can be addressed.

For reasons that are sometimes difficult to grasp, a primal anxiety over Zionism has been an important factor at almost every juncture in the history of the modern Middle East. This anxiety helps explain why important sectors of the Arab world sympathized with Germany during the Second World War while the rest of the British, French, and Dutch Empires – for example, India, Malaya, Indonesia – chose anti-fascism over anti-imperialism, at least for the duration of the war.<sup>7</sup> Anti-Zionism thus isolated the Arab world from the popular front against fascism, the most significant democratizing experience of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> Far from leading to dereification, the Arab world immortalized the founding of Israel as the *Nakbah*, or disaster, and created an all-powerful resolve to avoid what was perceived as humiliation. The most important moment in the origin of Arab terrorism did not occur, as is often argued, in the arming of the *Mujahidin* against Communism in Afghanistan in the 1980s, but rather in the response of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt to the *infitah* (open door to the West) that accompanied the Camp David agreements between Israel and Egypt in 1978. The assassination of Sadat in 1980 plays the same role in recent Arab history that the assassination of Rabin plays in Israeli history, that of closing the door to peace. Given the extraordinary vulnerability of the Arab world to any question regarding the status of Palestine, the Israeli settlement policy that followed the 1967 war has been unbelievably self-destructive, as well as inhumane, unjust, and contradictory to a

historic Jewish commitment to social justice. Yet any "solution" to the Palestine problem that does not guarantee Israel's security is also certain to destabilize the area, and thereby the world.

The second factor to which attention must be paid is that of religion, itself the ground of being for most individuals throughout history. In this regard, the need to build a new, intersubjective object world is all-important. Accordingly, if the Israeli-Palestinian conflict points to the continued necessity for states, boundaries, and international agreements, the most meaningful long-term response to September 11 will be intense engagement at the level of education, civil society, and the media. While a military response is indispensable in a context in which the United States has been attacked, and in which a mass movement that worships violence continues to exist, arguments over democracy, secularism, separation of church and state, women's rights, and freedom of speech are already beginning to emerge in public forums and among individuals on both sides of the divide. Potentially, the support for secular values in the Muslim world is vast, but it is necessary that the dialogue be truly two-way. Westerners have much to learn from such figures as the philosopher Mohammed Khatami, who is also the current President of Iran. Awkward and unfamiliar though the task may at first seem, they have to study such thinkers as Sayyid Qutub (1906–66) of Egypt, who preached that Islam allowed no gap between faith and life, thus inspiring the fundamentalists,<sup>9</sup> as well as Muhammed 'Abduh (1849–1905), who distinguished between the invariant doctrines of Islam, or *salafiyya*, and its social teachings and laws, which vary according to circumstances and must always be acceptable to human reason.<sup>10</sup> In the long run, the true allies of the United States can only be the people of the Islamic world, and not the corrupt regimes on which it currently depends.

Finally, the achievement of trust requires reframing the problem of social justice at an appropriately global level and at a new level of depth. World War I marked the shift in the attempt to maintain collective security from reliance on the balance of power to reliance on an American-led project of law, collective institutions, and social reform. The Cold War was the highpoint of that project. The Cold War provided stability and predictability, even as it flooded the world with the biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons, and small-scale, sometimes private, armies that underlie the present dilemma. It is now clear that the period from 1989 to 2001 was a transitional one, and that September 11 marked the beginning of a truly post-Cold War epoch, one whose contours remain opaque. If the United States hopes to play a leadership role in this new period, it will have to develop a genuine commitment to civil and political rights and to social and economic justice on a global scale. And it will have to fight for its commitments even when a sense of security has returned to the United States through a combination of heightened internal caution and the destruction of terrorist organizations with "global reach."

It is impossible for such a commitment to be sustained so long as George W. Bush remains president. This is not a matter of Bush's personal characteristics.

On the contrary, his response to September 11 has been almost heroically on target, at least in regard to its diplomatic and military dimensions.<sup>11</sup> Rather, the problem lies in the social forces that Bush represents: an amalgam of Christian fundamentalism, particularistic business interests, and the disintegration products of the American Confederacy. For thirty years these forces have plundered the public purse, degraded the need for international cooperation (for example, the United Nations), for public health and education (the key to intelligence), for the study of foreign languages and cultures, and for security in anything more than the military sense. Although Clinton bears personal responsibility for allowing terrorism to spread, thoughtful observers should never forget the scandal of his impeachment or the despicable Republican maneuverings during the election of 2000. Those were attacks on the integrity of the Republic every bit as serious as the downing of the towers, even though they were not predominantly violent, and even though they came from within. They reflected the deep underlying crisis in American hegemony that preceded September 11.

The great moral resources of the United States, the partial success of internationalism during the early and middle years of the twentieth century, and the enormous generosity of so many of its citizens (a generosity that stems from the country's immigrant character) all made possible the Bush administration's successful response to the attack. But it is impossible to believe that Bush's success can continue given the dramatic divide between the administration's foreign and domestic policies. Domestic and foreign policy are ultimately inseparable. Americans fought in Europe and Asia during the Second World War because opposition to fascism was linked to social justice at home. Once the question of security is dealt with, they will not fight in the Muslim world – indeed they will not support any large-scale economic or cultural programs – proposed by an administration that opposes social justice at home, putting its faith in the market and religious fundamentalism instead. Commenting on the divide between the administration's foreign and domestic policies, the *New York Times* called Bush “half a commander in chief,”<sup>12</sup> implying that his domestic policies needed to catch up with his foreign policy. In the not-so-long run, however, Bush's domestic commitments will undermine the good beginning he made in Afghanistan. He will be unable to encourage a global movement that addresses the problems of poverty, inequality, and greed that have proved so potent in precipitating the present crisis and, under his leadership, the US will inevitably sink back into a “unilateralism” that is nothing more than another term for greed.

Finally, it possible that the reestablishment of security will not take as long as was initially feared. The very novelty of the situation means that much can change quickly. Those who saw no alternative to violence before September 11 may rethink their options when faced with a judicious combination of force, generosity, and psychological and cultural openness. In any event, the history of the twentieth century, with all of *its* disasters, does not necessarily lead to despair.

## NOTES

1. I wish to thank Uri Ram, Leonard Helfgott, Jeff Goldfarb, and Nancy Fraser for helpful comments.

2. Anthony Giddens, *Consequences of Modernity*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

3. Frank Ninkovich, *The Wilsonian Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 66. Ninkovich's use of Giddens' work inspired my own.

4. A trauma need not be the result of a single event. A long-term process can also be traumatic. Just as long-term abuse or neglect can be traumatic for the individual, so wars, depressions, foreign occupations and the like can be traumatic for peoples.

5. In fact, the US Civil War did precede World War One as the "first modern war."

6. Nothing confirms this more than the repeated observation, "this is not about Israel." "Ah, then," one is tempted to reply, "so it's about Israel."

7. Of course, there were many other reasons for Arab interest in Germany and Italy, and there was enormous diversity throughout the Arab world as well as in Iran. Some of the complexity can be studied in Lukasz Hirszowicz, *The Third Reich and the Arab East* (London, Routledge, 1966), Andreas Hillgruber, "The Third Reich and the Near and Middle East. 1933–1939" and Ami Ayalon, "Egyptian Intellectuals versus Fascism and Nazism in the 1930s," the latter two in Uriel Dann, ed., *The Great Powers in the Middle East 1919–1939* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988).

8. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes* (New York: Pantheon, 1994).

9. Bernard Lewis has recently argued that the term fundamentalist should be reserved to Western Protestants and that the Islamists should be viewed as anti-modernists rather than fundamentalists ("The Revolt of Islam," *The New Yorker*, November 19, 2001). However, fundamentalists in every religion share the view that the holy writ is absolutely and literally true and that it should not be compromised by interpretations that seek to reconcile it to science, modern social conditions or anything else that seems to challenge its authority. Thus, we need the concept "fundamentalist," and we need to see what is common and what is different in Jewish, Christian, Hindu, and Islamic fundamentalism. Nonetheless, for the specificities of Islamic fundamentalism see Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

10. In the context of twentieth century history, 'Abduh's teachings have been far more influential than Qutub's, and are exemplified in such authors as 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq (1888–1966), who defended Turkish secularism by arguing that the prophet was sent to found a religion and not a state. Those who doubt the appeal of such teachings in the Muslim world must contrast them to the alternative: a fundamentalism that worships violence and embraces death. Certainly the history of fascism suggests that the ravings of a bin Laden, who mocked the American army for containing women and praised Muslim women for "refus[ing] to be defended by . . . American and Jewish prostitutes," can only win support temporarily and while military victories unfold. The quote is from Osama bin Laden, interview with al-Jazeera television, December 1998.

11. To grasp this, one need only contrast his record to what would certainly have been the *mistrust* sown everywhere by Gore, even if (as would not have occurred) the Republicans had been willing to support Gore in this crisis, as the Democrats have supported Bush.

12. *New York Times*, November 5, 2001.