

Thinking the Unthinkable:
Anthropological Meditations on the Events of 11 September 2001

The editor of *Anthropology Today* asked me, an anthropologist with field experience of West Bank Palestinians, to comment on the events of 11 September. What follows is a meditation on the complexities of identity formation and reformation in the wake of catastrophe. As an anthropologist born and raised in the U.S. but who trained and remained in Great Britain, I will here use my own subjective responses to the 11 September attacks and their aftermath as objects of reflection. In doing so, I follow David Pocock's lead in calling for an anthropology of the personal which demands that anthropologists attend to "the unique experience which individual people have of individual events" (1) as a central feature of conceptualising the social as a process in history. Using my identifications with processes occurring in my own culture as objects of analysis diverges somewhat from Pocock's programme of calling on anthropologists to reflect on their identifications with processes occurring elsewhere, but I argue below that our professional positioning as 'strangers' and 'translators' should enable us to see our own experiences comparatively, thus allowing a distance on the commonsensical which provides new perspectives. Here my responses to the calamitous events which took place on 11 September are marked with contradiction and ambivalence, and I attempt - as an anthropologist - to use the complexity of those responses, and of their subsequent insertion into public discourses, as a means of thinking anthropologically about identification and identity. The reflexivity of my approach, which sites me simultaneously as subject and object, foregrounds issues of the possible social roles of anthropologists in 'thinking through' social traumas and contributing to debates on their significances. I therefore attempt, in discussing others's responses to some of these reflections which I delivered in public fora in the weeks following the events, to recall to more general awareness the multiple identifications which constitute everyone's everyday experiences which are, in periods of ideological mobilization, systematically disavowed or forgotten.

Strangers at Home

The politics of our own responses, as individual anthropologists, will depend to a large degree on our personal histories. I would like here to think more generally about the question of how anthropological training and research per se might affect our reactions to traumatic events. In the field we will often identify with subject positions provided by the cultures we study. This leads me to demur somewhat from Michael Agar's conclusions that anthropologists are "professional strangers" (2). Nonetheless, anthropological training and fieldwork in other cultures can succeed in 'making strange' the anthropologist's own home culture. We return as both a native and a stranger (3) with our own perspective on everyday things and events complicated by a learned but not necessarily intentional tendency to break out of the ready-made contexts in which everyday life packages these and to relate them to cultural patterns and processes known from other spaces.

This process of defamiliarisation is like the poetic device of *ostranenie* central to Russian formalist poetics in which "by tearing the object out of its habitual context, by bringing together disparate notions, the poet gives a coup de grâce to the verbal cliché and to the stock responses attendant upon it and forces us into heightened awareness of things and their sensory texture" (4). Although the process of recontextualisation works within the repertoire of the poet's culture, both it and anthropological recontextualisation (which views the events and processes of one culture with reference to those of others) share in splitting the observer's perspective so that cultural artefacts are simultaneously seen from different viewpoints.

How can our vision informed by anthropology contribute to understanding the events of the eleventh of September and their implications? In part through observing phenomena in the process of emerging. What we have watched over the past five weeks - and what we will continue to observe until the issues raised by the attacks are 'settled' - is the transformation of an event into a narrative with closure. The attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, as well as the less-emphasized hijacking of the fourth aircraft, produced 'wounds' (literally traumas) on those persons and communities penetrated by those events (which, with a global media, is all of us). The initial and often enduring effect of trauma is a period of confusion and disruption when victims attempt to cope with the symptoms of the attack and reestablish autonomy and equilibrium (5). This is achieved

through a process of representing - of story-telling - which names and offers motivations to the parties involved (aggressor and victim, allies and enemies) and hypothesises relations which 'explain' what happened and why while simultaneously choreographing appropriate responses. Such narrative 'fixing' reestablishes the traumatized body as an entity able to act in the world while reestablishing the world itself as a place in which appropriate actions give rise to desired ends.

Events are worked into a story line by rejecting or forgetting elements of the trauma-inducing event and reworking much of the rest. Anyone watching the first few hours of news reportage of 11 September will have observed the stuttering, occasionally retracted, emergence from the confused images on the screen of a story line that made sense of what came to be relayed as 'the whole'. Subsequent developments - the Sherlock Holmes-like upturning of clues and unmasking of villains - gave body to the story, and propped up the work of substituting 'the facts' for trauma. It is here that anthropologists, trained to observe and take note of the manifold activities and assertions that go into social formations, can have a role in charting the course of the story as it unfolds. This involves recalling the details of its emergence and noting and assessing what others will tend to disavow or forget as the story moves towards closure. This is particularly important because - as I will suggest below - such processes of disavowal and forgetting are often structured by agencies which seek to ensure that the identities which emerge from the wreckage of those events are amenable to scripts those agencies are authoring for enactment on the stage of the new world order.

An Encounter

I will not here attempt a chronicling of the events of the day and those that have followed them (although I have, like many of us, kept a record). I want instead to note my initial - uncomfortable - responses to the attacks, and to analyse them as a means of critically approaching the topic of identity reconstruction after trauma. Insofar as my project in this paper is to present an anthropologically-informed perspective on processes transforming calamitous events into consensual narratives, it is imperative not only that the stages through which those processes proceed are rendered as transparently as possible but also that the particular subjectivity which constitutes those processes through articulation is offered to analysis.

At a little before three pm of a day spent working on an ethnography of the West Bank town I've studied over the past fifteen years I took a cup of coffee into my living room and turned on BBC News 24. At that point both World Trade Centre towers were in flames but neither had collapsed, the Pentagon had just been struck, and news was coming in of a possible fourth airliner down in Pennsylvania. The reportage, mirrored on the other channels (both American and British), was confused and offered rumours and repeated and unintegrated images of destruction and people responding to it supplemented by bits of other information relayed as it came in with neither confirmation nor - in most cases B follow-up. There was little if any narrative, and the impression was that everyone involved in the event and its reportage was suffering a traumatic sensory overload.

My immediate response to the images erupting from the television screen was to laugh incredulously, amazed that America was finally receiving a metaphoric punch in the nose. I did not yet know who had thrown the punch (the targets initially suggested to me that it was some element of the anti-globalisation movement), but I was stunned at the efficiency with which whomever had carried out the attacks had managed so 'cleanly' to 'take out' those symbols of American global hegemony.

The bizarre incongruity of the real presenting itself as a disaster movie and the apocalyptic and totalizing logic of dream or cheap fiction which seemed to manifest itself in the unfolding events may have been a pretext for denying the reality of the events, provoking laughter as an initial means of dealing with the trauma. Nevertheless there was also a sense of vindication. My experiences in the Third World - and my addiction to news and analysis of global politics - have frequently brought me into contact with harsh and often brutal manifestations of US power both in the shape of economic dominion over production and exchange and as military suppression - sometimes directly but more often by proxy - of the aspirations of nations and communities. I have also, through working closely over nearly twenty years with communities victimized by American foreign policies, internalized to some degree the perspectives of those who see America not as a beacon of freedom and development

but as the centre which disseminates the policies and the funds which dispossess them of their lands, their rights and often their lives. For me and, I suspect, for many others who live and have lived outside of American borders, the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon - while indubitably directly implicated in those processes of control and domination - seemed less the literal command centres of American global control than symbols of America's overweening confidence in its ability to make the rest of the world march to its orders. Their symbolic erasure could be seen as a fantasy disempowerment, not unlike that which operates in dreams and cartoons. The falling of the towers, like the toppling of the seemingly unstoppable titan by the discarded banana skin, seemed a sign that America's days of irresponsible dominion were over, and that it, from that moment on, would be forced to join that community of the rest of the globe's nations which makes do with slighter glories in a world ruled by gravity, uncertainty, contingency and compromise (6).

But despite the seduction of what I will call the 'symbolic' interpretation of the events, I was, on a level beneath articulated consciousness, becoming increasingly aware of what the images in front of me were likely to mean in terms of human lives. The contortions of my disavowal of what was happening in human terms became increasingly more elaborate and unbelievable until it simply and abruptly collapsed, leaving me defenceless in front of the horror unfolding before me. I spent the next several hours stunned and distraught, feeling not only for and with people I could see running, crying and dying in front of the journalists' cameras but also imagining what it was like for those in the hijacked aircraft as they became aware of what they were helplessly caught up in, for those in the upper stories of the burning buildings as the inevitability of their deaths revealed itself, and for those filing slowly down crowded and smoke-darkened staircases as the buildings began to collapse onto them. This second phase of my response was not symbolic, but came from an identification with the victims not as 'Americans' but as human beings. The work of empathy which, in the field, opens one to the possibility of being able to see the world through the other's eyes here, through the television screen, interpellated me viscerally into the positions of the multiple victims of the World Trade Centre attacks. These two moments of identification with the other sequentially produced in me two sets of identification with positions which were ideologically incommensurate.

The Mirror of the Terrorist

As the media and the spokespersons of the American and other allied governments began to firm up the story 'underlying' the events, identity formations throughout the world were both vigorously asserted and radically destabilized. It was striking to read interviews of New Yorkers saying that after years of never acknowledging neighbours and passers-by suddenly everyone was talking with everyone else and feeling part of a big close community. As an anthropologist who has closely studied the violent imaginaries which give rise to identities (7), what struck me about this new *communitas* was what it was asserted against. 'Evil' - a metaphysical term - emerged powerfully as the one unquestionable characteristic of the unknown entity (or entities) which had 'declared war' on America and, in so doing, created a defensive 'bloc' against that evil's antagonism. In America people were becoming 'a people' in response to their awareness of something they saw as willing and able to destroy them all (8). The logic of that polarizing discourse, fuelled by fear both of similar acts of terrorism and of the U.S. government's threats against non-compliers, generated throughout much of the rest of the world a scramble by political leaders to assert solidarity with America and claim shared identity as representatives of the 'civilization' the evil other was attempting to extinguish. As evidence began to emerge of the implication of 'Arabs' in the attacks, the antagonist quickly took form as 'Islamic terrorism'. This created substantial conundrums about whether or not one could be both a Muslim and an American⁹ and whether 'Islam' had a place in the 'civilisation' that America and its allies were mobilizing to protect or was it itself a terrorist religion. The media's erasure of internal differences, theological and regional, within Islam provided a new audience for Samuel Huntington's rhetoric about 'the clash of civilizations' (10.)

This Manichaean language of 'us' and 'them' not only forged a strong community of American and its allies united against 'terror' but also, in turn (as a similar rhetoric had earlier done in what came to be 'Former Yugoslavia'), began to shape an 'other' united against that alliance out of the diverse communities of those who felt themselves addressed by America's antagonism. Increasingly visible anti-Islamic statements and activities helped to incite the 'Muslim street' - already bewildered by its

political leaders' willingness to embrace the new crusade of a Christian West which had never shown sympathy for or sensitivity to Muslim concerns - to begin to articulate a unitary Islam at risk. The very real dangers of splitting the world into opposed camps along the tear lines of Islam and Christianity as well as of inciting popular revolts in Muslim countries against those nations= governments were only forestalled - and perhaps only temporarily - by some deft redefinitional footwork by the alliance's leading members who, publically drawing careful distinctions between 'Muslims' and 'terrorists', welcomed Muslim citizens and Muslim nations into the community of those opposed to terror.

In Britain, in the days following the events, various public institutions organized fora in which 'experts' could address the issues and answer questions from audiences concerned to gather and evaluate information for themselves. As an anthropologist with experience of the Middle East generally and of the Palestinian experience in particular I was approached to take part in three of these. During the first meeting I spoke of the danger of the U.S. and its allies 'mirroring' the logic of the attackers by assuming that its enemies were motivated by nothing but a will to evil. In so doing the enemy would be made into a symbol - a symbol of antagonistic opposition to everything 'we' stand for - and symbolic erasure would then be the only way of dealing with its existence.

I spoke too of the logics of various fundamentalisms, and suggested that their assumption that they represent an unquestionable truth had fostered a narcissism allocating to believers the self-determined right to impose their wills on all they judged 'infidel'. It was not surprising, I suggested, that Afghans who grew up in the radical poverty of the Pakistani refugee camps were drawn to align themselves unreservedly with the only thing of power they encountered in their exile - the word of God as revealed in the madaaris (religious schools) from whence the Taliban would emerge. Their fundamentalism, grounded in deracination and radical impoverishment, opposed them not only to foreign countries which were seen to oppose Islam but to the multi-ethnic and traditionally tolerant culture of Afghanistan itself which they, on 'returning' to the homeland, found 'un-Islamic' (11.) In blowing up monuments to false idols such as the Buddhas of the Bamiyan Valley or in stripping Afghani women of their rights to everything but brute survival, the Taliban were carrying out their self-imposed mission to make the world over to accord with their image of how it should be, and the support of their leaders for Osama Bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network reflected a shared dedication to erasing their 'other'.

I argued, however, that the allure of 'identity politics', and of the self-certitude which accompanied them, did not operate only on the radically dispossessed. America, in rearing up with 'God on its side' to destroy 'evil', was at risk of turning itself into something similar by so stressing its unity against 'the other' that it effaced its own social and cultural heterogeneity. There was already a strain of fundamentalism in American culture that went beyond that of the 'Pro-Life' Christians who destroyed anti-abortion clinics and the 'anti-ZOG militia' behind the bombing of Oklahoma City's Murrah Building. This other and more pervasive fundamentalism - a 'secular fundamentalism' rooted in American self-satisfaction with its way of life - was evidenced in America's unquestioning and enthusiastic drive to impose American values and corporate strategies on the rest of the world. If America, in encountering the terrible rhetoric of the Al-Qaeda actions, was driven to push its cultural narcissism further by defining, targeting, and destroying all groups which it deemed coterminously 'evil', 'terrorist' and 'anti-American', it would be likely to spark a violent world-wide polarization halting in its tracks the globalization it was attempting to promote. Such a move would simultaneously foreground the issue of who within U.S. borders were 'real Americans' and who 'internal traitors'. This would lead to generic disenfranchisement of entire sectors of the American population, radical curtailments of civil rights, increased control over media and other channels of expression, and the purging of American culture and society of all 'alien' and 'improper' influences and activities. If America was impelled by the attacks to remake itself as anti-anti-American it could only win the 'war on terrorism' by destroying itself, and in doing so realizing the objectives of those who had piloted the hijacked planes into the symbols of 20th century American hegemony. I concluded by pointing out that in this context the visual jokes recently disseminated by e-mail and on the web showing the Statue of Liberty in chador and a bearded George W. Bush in Taliban headgear seemed somewhat less funny (12).

Othering the Self

One hundred and twenty years ago Joseph-Ernest Renan said: "Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation" (13). There is no nation or community that is not constructed. Certainly, over the past five weeks, we have witnessed a tremendous labour of community construction as a sea of images of victimhood, callous viciousness, wrath, and retribution has washed over us, forcing the confused amalgam of response and emotion initially generated in us by the events of 11 September towards the channels of 'consensus'. Images, and the scenarios constructed out of them, have shown us who to identify with and who to hate, and slowly we are learning to sense ourselves 'at home' in the new post-11 September world order. During my second and third public meetings (the former for anthropologists at Kent, the latter for political scientists) I admitted to what I called the 'terrible laughter' which surfaced in me as I watched the erasure of the symbols of American global power. I did this in order to open the audiences to an awareness of another perspective - that of populations which have suffered and resented American 'influence' over their lives. I here saw myself as a translator who, having been somewhat 'creolized' by my profession, lacked a unitary subjectivity and was thus able to speak, as Conrad says, 'with many voices' (14.)

What I was surprised to discover among those audiences - and what at least some in those audiences were surprised to discover in themselves - was that others too had initially been able to see the events through the eyes of those who see themselves as endangered and encroached upon by American aspirations. Numerous people came up to me after my 'public confession' to tell me that it made them feel both profoundly uncomfortable and relieved to hear someone admit to a response they too had shared. Many had subsequently forgotten their early response, forcing the memory into abeyance. Others had kept it secret, feeling ashamed and guilty to speak of identifying with and as victims of America when public opinion would only allow one to feel community with Americans as victims.

In our fieldwork we observe temporal social processes and deduce from these the shape of structures giving rise to events and forming subjectivities. At home too we can record events and articulations as they emerge and attempt hypotheses about their possible implications before they, as they often do, disappear from social consciousness. As we have witnessed over the past few weeks, history moves quickly after collective trauma, and this is a consequence of rapid changes in the stories we use to make sense of what has happened and of what will follow. Later, time slows again as communities cohere around the representations they use to make sense of the post-trauma world, but with this narrative closure comes an amnesia of sorts about not only the earlier explanatory schemas but also the configurations of perceived events which validated them. Anthropologists can, by remembering these earlier 'worlds' to public audiences, recall to them their own interpellations into earlier *mises en scene*, thereby making people aware of the constructedness of contemporary images of self and society. Such a denaturalizing of ideology promotes debate, and thus offers platforms for non-hegemonic voices which most of us would agree cannot be a bad thing (15). In some cases, particularly if we are able to view our selves as well as our societies as objects of analysis, we can also take audiences back to a moment before the process of making the 'new world' even began to take effect and, in recalling the unexpected and sometimes unwanted selves which make themselves manifest as crisis ruptures the everyday world, reveal to them that 'self' and 'other' can be but two different voicings of the same being.

Notes:

1 David Pocock. *Social Anthropology*. London: Sheed and Ward. 1971. p. 98-99. A powerful example of an anthropology of the personal which is both event-based and reflexivist is Jeanne Favret-Saada's *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage*. (trans.) Catherine Cullen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1980.

2 Michael Agar. *The Professional Stranger: an Informal Introduction to Ethnography*. London: Academic Press. 1980. On anthropological identification see my "Radical Empiricism: Anthropological Fieldwork after Psychoanalysis and the *Année Sociologique*" in *Anthropological Journal on European Cultures* (special issue: Reflecting Cultural Practice: The Challenge of Fieldwork) VI, 1998, pp. 79-107.

3 Paul Rabinow relates that after returning to New York from Morocco he found he was no more at home there than he had been in the field: "the maze of slightly blurred nuance, that feeling of barely grasped meanings which had been my constant companion in Morocco overtook me once again. But now I was home" (Paul Rabinow. *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1977. p. 148).

4 Victor Erlich. 1955. *Russian Formalism: History - Doctrine*. The Hague: Mouton and Co., p. 150. The French surrealist practice of *dépaysement* is analogous and, through the work of Michel Leiris, influenced James Clifford (see his "On Ethnographic Surrealism" and "A Poetics of Displacement: Victor Segalen" in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. 1988. pp. 117-163).

5 cf. Elaine Scarry. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1985.

6 Slavoj Žižek said with brutal simplicity: "welcome to the desert of the real" (see his "The Desert of the Real" at <http://www.stopworldwar3.com/features/zizek925.html>). His response of 14 September counters that of some elements of the British press which announced in headlines and on posters "we are all Americans now". Žižek effectively said 'Americans are now like all the rest of us'.

7 See especially "Xenophobia, fantasy and the nation: the logic of ethnic violence in Former Yugoslavia" in *Anthropology of Europe: Identity and Boundaries in Conflict* (eds) Victoria Goddard, Llobera Josep & Chris Shore. Oxford: Berg Press. 1994. pp. 143-171 and "'A country of words': conceiving the Palestinian nation from the position of exile" in *The Making of Political Identities* (ed.) Ernesto Laclau. London: Verso. 1994. pp. 138-170.

8 On antagonism and identity see Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (trans.) Winston Moore and Paul Cammack. London: Verso. 1985. pp. 93-148.

9 Muslims and mosques were attacked in several American cities (as well as in British cities), and anomalous facts such as the number of Muslims who died in the World Trade Centre (as well as numerous Muslim Americans there were citizens of Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Turkey and Yemen amongst the dead and missing - see <http://www.airsafe.com/events/nydc.htm>) or the role of an Iranian-American pilot in resisting the hijackers of the fourth plane remain largely undivulged.

10 See Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations? The Next Pattern of Conflict" in *Foreign Affairs*. Volume 72, No. 3. Summer 1993. pp. 22-49.

11 See, for parallel instances, both Liisa Malkki's *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1995. esp. pp. 105-231) and my "The Exilic Imagination: The Construction of the Landscape of Palestine from Its Outside" in *The Landscape of Palestine: Equivocal Poetry* (eds) Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, Roger Heacock & Khaled Nashef (Birzeit: Birzeit University Publications. 1999. pp. 53-78).

12 See [http://www. BushSpeaks.com](http://www.BushSpeaks.com) for examples. Image 41 is Bush as Taliban.

13 Ernest Renan. 1990. "What is a Nation" (trans. Martin Thom) in *Nation and Narration* (ed.) Homi Bhabha. London: Routledge. p. 11. Original lecture at the Sorbonne, 11 March 1882.

14 In my talks I introduced myself in the following manner: "I am half American, half British and half Palestinian - and I know that doesn't add up". For creolization see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso. 1991. pp. 47ff. I am grateful to Charles Stewart for pointing out the relevance of this concept to the argument I am trying to make.

15 See, for an interesting example of such debate, "11 September: Some LRB writers reflect on the

reasons and consequences" in the London Review of Books (XXIII: 19), 4 October 2001 and the letters responding to those reflections in the two following issues.

15 October 2001