Impaired empire

Jonathan Friedman

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SOCIAL THOUGHT AND COMMENTARY

Civilization, Vulnerability and Translation: Reflections in the Aftermath of September 11th

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Lori Grinker's photographs published in this issue were all taken on September 11, 2001. Aesthetically they are not what we recognize as "news photographs," but images that in the powerful silence of the small rectangle remind us of what happened at the World Trade Center in New York City that beautiful sunny Tuesday morning. They need no captions. The images mirror fleeting moments and discrete details, sometimes almost mundane, that cry out the magnitude of the devastation that has changed the world forever. Lori Grinker's pictures raise questions and express the mood of a nation shocked in the depth of its soul. Together the photographs form—as they accompany the texts—a chain of instant personal impressions that narrates in a quiet and subdued fashion that day’s horror. They become precious tools that allow us to highlight some of the complex psychological and cultural ramifications that few, if any, could have foreseen.

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October 12th: I have just come from Taipei and have spent two days in Paris in thesis defenses.* I called home on the 11th to assure family in Sweden that there were no problems on the flight. A British Airways flight had to return to Hongkong after two hours flight en route to Europe after receiving threats of terrorism. I was flying on Air France. I had not really thought seriously about the risks involved in flying—repression perhaps, focus on the immediate. I am old enough to die, I have a cynical “well then, how about a martini” reaction to disaster, surely a defense mechanism. Well its all over now. I make my way out to Charles de Gaulle Airport for the final lap of my trip. In the waiting lounge, I sit reading the newspaper. Seated opposite me is a young man who seems to me to be of Middle Eastern origin. He is wearing a haute couture black t-shirt, a gold necklace, light expensive looking slacks and glossy black loafers. He is very well groomed with short hair, seems quite calm but rather than engaged in reading a newspaper, book or magazine or listening to a portable CD, he gazes non-chalantly around the room. I don’t have any thoughts at first, but half-consciously I play with as-if scenarios, which I repress as absurd examples of the situation... No, he is obviously a wealthy Egyptian or Saudi on his way to Copenhagen to have fun, do business or see relatives. Then he smiles suddenly at someone in my row of seats. Is it just innocent flirting? I glance toward the
end of my row and see another young man looking more like a North African. He is not well dressed and appears to be from more modest circumstances. Boarding call and we all move toward the door. The two young men come together here and they are standing behind me speaking Arabic to one another. I wonder if they are friends. They seem to be acquainted. Why did they then sit opposite one another in the hall. We mount the stairs to the plane. I take my seat. Behind me the two young men are seated, but not together. On the contrary, they occupy window seats at opposite ends of the row. They have no hand baggage. I am absorbed by the situation. Of course if they were “dangerous” security would have taken them earlier, now that there are passport checks all over the airport which, prior to September 11, were totally absent (following the Schengen law that eliminated controls within European airports). But why are the two not sitting together? The plane is half empty and the row that they occupy is completely empty except for them. I figure that I might as well say something to the chief of cabin personnel. “I suppose its just paranoia,” I begin and then tell her what I have seen. To my surprise, they say, thanks very much, we already know about this. We sit in the plane without leaving the gate. It is warm. The airconditioning is off. It is announced that we will have to wait a few minutes for a routine baggage check. The minutes become hours, three hours. The plane is remarkably quiet, even silent. Thoughts are obviously circulating but there is no discussion, no joking, no complaints, not even from the two families with young children who are having a difficult time. I am seated next to a young person who seems to be of Southeast Asian origin. I ask her where she is from and she says, Helsingborg. We begin to speak Swedish and she expresses her own nervousness at the situation. Then suddenly two airport policemen enter the cabin and go directly to the two young men, ask for their i.d. and then escort them off the plane. The captain announces that we are now to take off and that the reason for the delay was that two young men were suspected of possible connections with a terrorist organization. Their seats and the entire row is subject to careful inspection and a rather small paper bag, taped closed, is taken off the plane as well. Cold sweat breaks out, not real relief, people are reminded of their suspicions, suspicions that they had perhaps repressed in the name of reason and even of fear of seeming to be racist to others who have similar preoccupations. In various parts of the western world, Arab passengers have been expelled from flights due to the complaints of other passengers. We live in “interesting times” as the Chinese expression quoted by the Cable News Network (CNN) anchor would have it, forgetting to convey that it is an expression directed to enemies rather than foreign correspondents.
Predictable reactions and moralizing intellectuals

The attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon sparked panic, rage and a wide array of reactions, all of which are quite understandable in the situation of shock that resulted from the events. I am not so much concerned here with the more common attitudes of vengeance that have been expressed by many people as witnessed by the massive popular support for aggressive retaliation. This is to be expected. What is more interesting is the reaction of many representatives of Western cultural elites who identify themselves as progressive. Stanley Fish, in a very lucid and strangely modernist article in The New York Times (October 15, 2001), argues that we need to be relativists in the intellectual sense in order to make sense of what those who we have categorized as terrorists are up to. Relativism in the sense advocated by Lenin: know thine enemy.

Why enemy? Because these are people who attempt to kill us, not merely oppose us. Noam Chomsky has written that we need to be relativistic about the deaths. After all, Americans killed many more thousands in its bombings in the Sudan, to say nothing of earlier escapades like the Vietnam war. In any case we have brought this upon ourselves (Americans at least) due to our basically imperialist foreign policy and its impoverishing results in the Third World. Edward Said refers to “the roots of terror in injustice.” Galtung and Fischer refer to a global class conflict pitting a Western upper class against the poor masses of the Third World. In this way, the Islamic extremists are made to represent the poor of the world and their actions are fanatically misplaced expressions of a real conflict based on exploitation and injustice. There is discussion of a Marshall Plan for the Third World as a direct reaction of liberals to the terrorism that may now also be taking the form of germ warfare. On one placard in London, bombing was castigated in favor of negotiation. Thus the attack on World Trade Center is now understood as what the French call téléguidé by the United States itself. The terrorists are mere intermediaries, whose reaction against oppression and poverty is the displaced action of the imperial center upon itself. So the why of the how is the fundamental moral haughtiness of Americans. Said writes in The New York Times (July 16, 2001):

“...to most people in the Islamic and Arab worlds the official US is synonymous with arrogant power, known for its sanctimoniously munificent support not only of Israel but of numerous repressive Arab regimes, and its inattentiveness even to the possibility of dialogue with secular movements and people who have real grievances.”

What is most interesting here is that heads of Western states, the respectable few, especially Blair and Bush, are clearly for aggression while others, more marginal intellectuals and cultural elites have taken the opposed position. The left
is joined here by the Christian Right as exemplified by Patrick Buchanan's assessment of the situation. In a *LA Times* commentary (September 18, 2001) he quotes one of his own presidential speeches to validate his understanding of the current situation.

"How can all our meddling not fail to spark some horrible retribution...Have we not suffered enough from Pan Am 103, to the [first bombing, February 26, 1993, of the] World Trade Center to the embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salam—not to know that interventionism is the incubator of terrorism. Or will it take some cataclysmic atrocity on U.S. soil to awaken our global gamesmen to the going price of empire?"

The Western intellectual reaction has been very much organized along two vectors. First, this is a horrible thing and something ought to be done. Second, the reason it has happened is directly related to the behavior of the USA, whether through general and arrogant imperialism or foreign policy errors such as the direct support of terrorists and dictatorships.

Is there a connection between the inequalities of the world system and global terrorism directed against the US and other countries? The question is not asked. Instead we have mere assumption, a kind of doxa for many of the commentators referred to above. US foreign policy is the culprit, or US imperialism, or even some combination of US superciliousness and imperial policies. And yet, bin Laden has not represented himself as a social revolutionary. He is a multi-millionaire who, according to some reports that may confuse him with one of his brothers, spent much of his youth as a playboy, and most of his fellow terrorists are members of Middle Eastern elites or at least middle and upper middle classes. Bin Laden has referred to a number of significant phenomena; the disaster of the disappearance of the last caliphate, the work of Mustapha Kemal Attaturk (an agent of Western ideas), the presence of a Jewish colony on Arab soil, the arrogance of US power combined with Jewish power, the identification of a Jewish conspiracy. Numerous Islamist groups refer explicitly to the never outworn Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

The distribution of current terrorist activity is unlike previous terror, which was aimed at overthrowing state regimes from within. The current action is concentrated to Arab activists and is aimed at the other Empire. There is, at least up until now, a glaring lack of East Asians, Africans and Latin Americans in the world of terrorism, many of whom live in areas where decline and impoverishment has been more marked than the Middle East. It is as if bin Laden had read and assimilated Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*, at the same time that Western intellectuals deny that there is any connection between contemporary terrorism and this dangerous book. Bin Laden's language
is very much imbued with the clash. His goal, like those of many in Islamic fundamentalist movements, is the defeat of a corrupt Western culture and the instating of a regime of sharia law for the entire world. The sources of terror discourse are embedded in Middle Eastern history, a history that harbors a set of categories linked to the decline of the region and the rise of European hegemony. Post-Ottoman depression, following the decline of the empire and the secularization of the Turkish state, led to strong reactions and even suicides throughout the Middle East and Pakistan. This is not what everyone feels, but it is a potential representation of the world that can be summoned in situations of conflict, for example, in ethnic discourses. This might seem drastic to many, but I have, in fact, tried it out in a number of discussions with Arab intellectuals who seem to basically agree. Zaiki Laidi, a well known researcher in politics has stressed the importance of a historical imaginary in the constitution of Islamic extremism...

“Cette idée de déclassement du monde musulman est centrale. Dans l’imaginaire musulman, le fait d’appartenir à un ensemble civilisationnel puissant qui rivalise, et parfois dépassa l’Occident est essentiel. Si ce fait historique, remontant à plus de dix siècles, ce sentiment de déclassement n’aurait probablement pas cette force auratique.” (Liberation, October 12, 2001). (The idea that the Muslim world has been demoted is central. In the Islamic imaginary, the sense of belonging to a powerful civilizational complex which rivaled and even
surpassed the Occident is essential. In the absence of this historical reality, dating back more than ten centuries, the feeling of degradation would probably not possess this forceful aura.)

The current situation may well be about American or Western world hegemony, but it is a hegemony that has been on the decline for quite a while. Since this assertion may seem counterintuitive to some, I add a very brief explanation. I have suggested elsewhere (1994, 1998, 1999a, b) and for many years, that declining hegemony cannot be read as simple physical decline or collapse. It begins with a geographical decentralization of capital accumulation, a gradual decline in economic shares in the larger world arena, with a weakening of economic centrality. This is followed by internal fragmentation both social and cultural, with a decline of national projects, increasing polarization both in class and in cultural terms. It is not, however, with the reinforcement of military-political rule, even with establishment of empire, a phenomenon which in this approach historically comes in the final phase of weakening hegemony. Thus the historical process to which I am referring is complex and even contradictory. Of course, one might counter that the collapse and disintegration of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the incorporation of Eastern Europe within the Western realm are evidence of American victory and expansion. But historical retrospect should remind us that the final collapse of the Ottomans and the Hapsburgs was also a period of rapid capitalist expansion, not least on the part of England, whose own hegemony was beginning a long decline. (Starting with a rapid decline in shares of world production, Britain was transformed from workshop of the world to the world’s banker). From this perspective, the shift from export production to capital export is always associated with long-term hegemonic decline (Friedman 1978, 1999b, Arrighi and Silver, 1999). Britain had virtually no enemies at the end of the 19th Century and was the world’s undisputed military power. There are important parallels with the U.S. Since the Vietnam War, the U.S. has been embroiled in a number of small-scale military actions but it has nowhere been successful with respect to political outcomes. The advent of the new Bush administration represented a clear commitment to the restriction of US global involvement, at least until September 11. Buchanan, at least, is clear on this point when he worries about the administration, and again the right seems to express opinions that would normally be claimed by the left: “Either America finds an exit strategy from empire, or we lose our republic” (Buchanan op.cit.).

The point of this argument is that the confrontation with a new terrorism cannot be understood in terms of the arrogance of American power, nor in terms of increasing economic polarization in the world. “Arrogance” is not an
exception, but typical of all power, especially international power, and the latter is, in the sense suggested above, on the wane. Economic polarization is not confined to North/South relations. It is characteristic of the centers as well as the peripheries and it is a crucial aspect of the reconfiguring world system that is associated with globalization. The terrorist networks that apparently have orchestrated the new culture of fear might better be understood as part of the general fragmentation of the world system, a fragmentation that has also produced criminal networks; these networks dominate the lucrative trade in drugs, arms and people. What is specific about the Islamic networks is an ideology which seems clearly rooted in a broader base of the Muslim populations of the Middle East and even Southeast Asia.

It should also be noted that much of the recruitment of terrorists has been carried out from within the Western European diasporas themselves and among people who have led middle or upper middle class secularized existences (see the survey of several French members of the bin Laden network in Etchegoin, M. Nouvel Observateur, vol.1928, Oct. 24-28 2001) and who apparently "snapped" into Islamist reaction. Is this the fragility, noted by some researchers, that is so implicated in the failure of modernity for such people? Is it a failure of expectations, perhaps of integration? A contradiction between economic and cultural capital? (Khoshrokovar 1992).

Whatever the case with respect to subjectivities, the global situation might be interpreted in terms of a number of related arguments.

1. We are in a period of fragmentation of a formerly hegemonic world system that has passed through a period of dual power to one of apparent absolute hegemony. American hegemony, which appears total, is, however faced with an increasing decentralization of economic accumulation and the rise of new political networks and nations (whether geographically localized or not). To claim that we are moving toward a postnational state would seem to be wishful and highly ideological thinking. In the perspective suggested here, the state has had a tendency to leave the nation behind and become increasingly an instrument and regulator of global economic flows (Sassen 1996, 2001). So while the hyphen in nation-state is disappearing, there is no indication that we are entering a post-national world of cooperating diasporas, as some have suggested.

2. The terrorist attack led to a temporary unification, even a cultural integration within the West, a solidarity against an ill-defined enemy (terrorists, Arabs, Muslims), an enemy that, no matter what caveats one might raise, has risen to the occasion, conjuncturally defining itself in terms of Islam and opposed to Western Christian and Jewish power.

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3. This unification is already under attack and is at risk of disintegration as the new war drags on. Conflicts in Europe and between Europe and the United States as well as conflicts within the United States are mounting problems for its maintenance. These are conflicts over the effectiveness of bombing and Western state-based warfare, conflicts about the morality of the war from quarters, cited here, whereas terrorism is believed to be the product of American intervention.

4. The hegemonic is thus attacked from within and without, weakened ideologically from within and threatened psychologically from without. One well known French commentator, J. Julliard, the editor of Le Nouvel Observateur, and a historian, representing a country where there is strong republican/national tradition, wrote that the new terrorism has opened a major crisis in Western civilization: "En vérité, nous ne sommes pas respecté parce que nous ne nous respectons plus" (September 28, 2001: 38).

Thoughts might go to Rome where barbarians, formerly in the employ of the empire, were, in the last centuries, often at the gates, burning cities and even Rome itself. They did not so much cause the decline of Rome as express it. Could we be in a similar kind of situation? After all, the new terrorists are former warriors in the employ of empire who have changed sides. But the ideological structures of the situation are different and all the more important for that. If we are faced with hegemonic decline, one of the ideological frameworks within which this occurs is the historical representation of competition between Europe and the Mideast. The ideologies emergent on both sides of the divide, including crusade and jihad, are evidence of the reality of this historical framework and its usefulness in the process of mobilization. If it can be suggested that we are indeed in a period of hegemonic decline, then the loss of "respect" for Western power might well be represented in terms of the above framework. But if point 2, above, holds then we might well be into a new Empire or at least an attempt to establish an empire (Hardt and Negri 2000). The odds, however, are clearly against its success, for reasons also stated above. There may well be discussions of the necessity of global governance but there is no evidence that this can be realized.

Another thing is quite clear in all of this. We are not moving, as globalization advocates have so often claimed, into a new millenial globalized world of post national bliss. Appadurai, for example, cognizant of global violence, reduces much of it to a war of transition between the diasporas of the future and the outdated nation state of the past (1996: 169) when we shall be "free of the constraints of the nation form...that cultural freedom and sustainable justice in the world do not presuppose the uniform and general existence of the nation-
state” (Appadurai 1996: 23). In spite of the straw man argument concerning sustainable justice and cultural freedom (i.e. who has entertained such contentions?), it is difficult to discover the logic in such an assertion, other than an ideo-logic. On the contrary, we are already in a world of network-organized projects, of localizing strategies and of globalized elite consciousness anxiously confronting the real fragmentation of the world. If there is a transition here, it is to increasing fragmentation rather than real unification. The unification that is being promoted has taken the form of a larger international project: the struggle against terrorism itself. It is a unification among state elites and also, statistically speaking, among national populations in the West. But there is nothing necessarily permanent in this. On the contrary there are great risks that fragmentation will be the final state of affairs, at least, in the West. What we witness is not the scenario projected by those globalizing anthropologists who have predicted a postnational world of diasporic hybridity. In one of his speeches following September 11, President George Bush contrasted the project of religious purity of bin Ladin with the pluralism of the United States. The diaspora here represents ethnic purity while the territorial state represents plurality. Imperial centers are always plural with respect to their “barbarians”, especially in eras of decline.

We may be approaching the end of empire or its temporary reinforcement or even expansion, but one thing is pretty certain. The empire is impaired.

*So as not to incite the usual indignation I must state that I use stereotyping here to indicate that this is in fact happening in identifying people in my surroundings. The identifications might well be false, but the activity occurs as well. I might repress such activities since they are clearly not politically correct but this would in its turn be tantamount to misrepresenting the reality of the situation.
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