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The Dialectics of Disaster

Looking back at September 11 discloses a dissociation of sensibility, in which on the one hand we remember unrealistic visuals, of a special effects or computer graphics type, showing airplanes striking tall and massive edifices, and on the other we recall an amalgamation of media sentiment and emotion, which it would be inexact to call hysterical, since even this hysteria struck many of us, from the outset, as being utterly insincere. To get at the real historical event itself, you feel, one would have to strip away all the emotional reaction to it. But even to get at that emotional reaction, one would have to make one's way through its media orchestration and amplification. People don't appreciate a theoretical discussion of their emotions (Are you questioning the sincerity of my feelings?). I suppose the answer has to be, No, not the sincerity of your feelings; rather, the sincerity of all feelings. There is a famous moment in Proust when the narrator, seeking to enhance the grief he feels at his grandmother's death, suddenly finds he feels nothing at all: the famous "intermittencies of the heart," which the existentialists dramatized by asserting that, whatever the feeling in question

(anger as well as grief, love as much as hate), we never feel enough; the emotion is never full enough; it comes and goes.

So the media hype, and the subsequent media patriotism—which one can surely qualify as obscene without too much fear of contradiction—is grounded on some lack of being in the heart itself. The media is, to be sure, an organism with its own specific biological requirements—to seize on a story of this kind and milk it for all it's worth to exhaustion; hopefully then, as in this case, sublating it into a new story with the same rich possibilities of development. The human individuals (announcers, newsmen, talk-show hosts, etc.) are then parts of this collective organism who eagerly collaborate in its developmental processes and service its wants.

But something needs to be said about the public's reaction; and I think it is instructive to step away for a moment and to deny that it is natural and self-explanatory for masses of people to be devastated by catastrophe in which they have lost no one they know, in a place with which they have no particular connections. Is nationality really so natural a function of human or even social being? Even more than that, is pity or sympathy really so innate a feature of the human constitution? History casts some doubt on both propositions. Meanwhile, think of the way in which a psychologically distressed individual sometimes fixates on some *fait divers* from a distant place or country—a bizarre accident in Kansas, for example, or a peculiar family tragedy in China—which the sufferer cannot get out of his head and on which crystallize all kinds of intense and troubled feelings, even though no one else seems interested at all. Is the only difference some media affirmation of collective unanimity, of a vast tidal wave of identical reactions? One can say these things now, despite media intimidation and the scapegoating of the unpatriotic nonmourners, because even the bereaved families have begun publicly to denounce the “ghoulishness” of such arrangements as the “viewing platform” lately erected on the Twin Towers site.

It is not particularly difficult to grasp the mechanics of a collective delirium of this kind, and of what we may technically call a collective fantasy without meaning to imply in any way that it is unreal. Aristotle already described it, in accounting for the peculiar effects of a unique collective spectacle of his day. Pity and fear: fear comes from putting myself in a victim's place, imagining the horror of the fire and the unimaginable height outside the windows; pity then sets in when we remember we are safe ourselves, and think of others who were not. Add to all this morbid curiosity and the

soap opera structure that organizes so much of our personal experience, and you have a powerful vehicle for producing emotion, about which it is difficult to say when it stops being spontaneous and begins to be systemically used on the public. When that happens, is one to suppose that a real event has imperceptibly been transformed into a spectacle (Guy Debord) or even a simulation and a simulacrum (Jean Baudrillard)? That is, to be sure, another offensive way of “doubting” people’s sincerity. But once a nameless and spontaneous reaction has been named and classified, and named over and over again so insistently by all the actors of the public sphere, backed up by thinly veiled threats and intimidation, the name interposes a stereotype between ourselves and our thoughts and feelings; or, if you prefer (Sartre’s idea of seriality), what we feel are no longer our own feelings anymore but someone else’s, and indeed, if we are to believe the media, everybody else’s. This new inauthenticity casts no little doubt on all those theories of mourning and trauma that were recently so influential, and whose slogans one also finds everywhere in the coverage. One may well prefer Proust to these obligatory appeals to mourning and trauma, which have been sucked so deeply into the disaster news as to make one wonder whether, from the psychological descriptions and diagnoses they purport to offer, they have not been turned into a new kind of therapy in their own right. Therapy is, to be sure, an old American tradition; and I can still vividly remember the suggestion of a clinical psychologist on the radio, not only that the survivors needed therapy, but that all Americans should receive it! Perhaps it would not be any more expensive than George Bush’s tax cut; but in any case the therapist will now have been reassured. All Americans are now receiving therapy, and it is called war (or more officially, “the war on terrorism”).

One can restrain one’s paranoia and still admire the timeliness with which these events rescued what his advisors call “this presidency.” My irreverence for the media goes so far, I have to admit, as even to doubt the fundamental lessons it has sought to draw for us: that America changed forever on September 11, that America lost its innocence, that things will never be the same again, et cetera. The history of the superstate is as bloody as anyone else’s national history; and these observations about innocence and experience (they were also affirmed during the Watergate scandal) have more to do with media innocence than with any personal kind; more in common with the widespread diffusion of public violence and pornography than with a private cynicism that has probably existed since the dawn of human his-

tory. What is shocking then is not the information itself, but that one can talk about it publicly.

If anything has changed forever, et cetera, it is that, as has also been widely observed, a minority president has been legitimized. His outrageous fiscal mission has been submissively adopted; and his zany (and expensive) arms proposal, along with the more sinister extension of the surveillance state, are promoted in the name of a universal revival of patriotism, certified by just that feeling of universal shock, grief, mourning, and the resultant indignation, that we have been examining.

I do want to add one more observation about the alleged universality of this collective feeling, for it corresponds to one of the most influential Utopian fantasies about communication in the modern age, and one more likely to be developed on the Left than on the traditional Right. This is the notion of universal intersubjectivity, based on the promise and potential of the newer media. I think it is implicit in the very notion of communication as such, conceived as a channel or contact between two isolated and individual subjectivities (as, for example, in Habermas's influential philosophy). If you can imagine somehow reunifying two monads which have been effectively separated in the first place, then why not go on to posit some collective network which unifies them all in their multiplicity? (It is a Utopian fantasy that at once dialectically reverses itself into the dystopia of the protocommunist insect community or anthill of the collective mind without individuality.) If such a thing is possible, I think it can only be imagined negatively; the positive versions, the coming of the benign aliens in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, for example, are cloying and without conviction. As Sartre often said, a collectivity is unified only by an external threat or danger, an external enemy, something certainly witnessed in the present instance. I've suggested elsewhere that such a moment—those Utopian potentialities of the media developed everywhere in media studies from Habermas to fantasies of the Internet, and from John Fiske to leftist speculations about mass democracy—is to be glimpsed in the day or two that followed the Kennedy assassination; in retrospect (and in the hindsight of the present event) it would also seem to have been dependent on the relative inexperience of the media in such matters, their clumsiness, the technological naiveté in which they sought to rise to the occasion: here, too, then, we may modify the received wisdom—not America, but rather its media, has definitively lost its innocence.

As for the attack itself, it is important to remember that historical events are never really punctual—despite the appearance of this one and the abruptness of its violence—but extend into a before and an after of historical time that only gradually unfold, to disclose the full dimensions of the historicity of the event. To be sure, it has been pointed out that the Americans themselves, with the help of the Pakistani secret police, invented bin Laden during our covert participation in the Soviet war in Afghanistan. That he should therefore subsequently turn on his creators seems to offer a textbook example of dialectical reversal (we shall see, however, that the lessons of the dialectic are even more relevant than this).

Yet the seeds of the event are buried far more deeply than that, and suggest that we need to revise the current overestimation of religion's role in society today. This is less to deny that there is a religious revival in course today all over the world than it is to suggest that what is called religion today (in a variety of forms, from left to right) is really politics under a different name. (Indeed, maybe religion has always been that.) What is called religious fundamentalism is then a political option, which is embraced when other political options have been shut down: most notably, left politics and communist parties all over the Islamic world, if not the third world generally. But although the collapse of the Soviet Union certainly discredited the official communist parties, along with socialism itself, in the West, this event should not be assigned any primary ideological role (the disappearance of Soviet money and technological support was far more crippling to the older left-wing movements). Instead, we have to enlarge our historical perspective to include the wholesale massacres of the Left systematically encouraged and directed by the Americans in a period that stretches back virtually to the beginnings of the cold war. We are aware of our complicity in numerous Latin American repressions, but have only gradually come to grasp our involvement in Africa (Raoul Peck's new film *Lumumba* will be a timely revelation for many people), let alone in Asia itself. Yet the physical extermination of the Iraqi and Indonesian communist parties, although now virtually forgotten, were crimes as abominable as any contemporary genocide. These are instances in which assassination and the wholesale murder of your opponents are preeminently successful in the short run; but whose unexpected consequences are far more ambiguous historically. It may well be that the traditional Left remains paralyzed by the trauma, as seems to be the case, for example, in "postdictatorship" Chile. But this simply means

that a left alternative for popular resistance and revolt has been closed off. The so-called fundamentalist religious option then becomes the only recourse and the only available form of a politics of opposition; and this is clearly the case of bin Laden's movement, however limited it may be to intellectuals and activists.

But what of the relationship of this movement to the State? Is it "sponsored" by someone, to use the favorite U.S. government term? There is evidently something deeply ironic in the quizzical scrutiny of one group of wealthy businessmen by another. We have to remember that the last half-century was uniquely free of major wars: the two "Vietnams"—those of the United States and of the USSR—were limited conflicts, and even the truly horrendous war between Iraq and Iran, longer than World War II, was not a "world" conflict. One does not have to endorse Hegel's infamous comment, that wars are necessary for the spiritual health of societies, to see how the absence of generalized physical destruction creates a certain problem for capitalism, in the survival of old plant and inventory, and the persistent saturation of key markets. For the health of capitalist societies these enormous unused inventories need to be destroyed every so often for even the productivity of capitalism itself to develop in a way that avoids the sterilities of finance capital. Meanwhile the Reagan/Thatcher tax revolutions, designed to eliminate the welfare state, had as their specific political tactic the sharp reduction of taxes on the wealthy and on the corporations, something the new Bush regime has renewed with a vengeance, under the pretext of economic recession. More paradoxical is the deleterious effect on the system of this financial accumulation in private hands (the hands of those Theodore Roosevelt called "malefactors of great wealth"): something far more dramatic than the occasional million of the robber barons of yesteryear. These immense fortunes of the present day—scarcely drained by post-Reaganite taxation and left intact by the feeblest of death duties—then make a mockery of what used to be celebrated as the separation of ownership and control (and what was latterly and more spuriously touted as stockholders' democracy). The gingerly debates on campaign finance reform have only lifted a modest corner of the veil on the true immensity of this financial power in private hands, which allows individuals to become something like a state within a state, and endows them with a margin of political and even military autonomy.

It is crucial to remember that bin Laden is one of those people. Exotic

trappings aside, he is the very prototype of the accumulation of money in the hands of private individuals and the poisoned fruit of a process that, unchecked, allows an unimaginable autonomy of action of all kinds. What is still a matter for conspiracy theory over here, where (as far as we know) *The Pelican Brief* is less the rule than the cronyism within the established business and government institutions, can be witnessed in the full flower of its development in Al-Qaeda, which constitutes less a new and interesting party-organizational form for the new world of globalization than it does a rich man's private hobby.

Still, this concrete commando-style operation also struck symbolically at one of the rare centers of globalized finance capitalism. That it was anti-Western was always clear enough and reflected in the Muslim decorum and family values which become the logo for a repudiation of immoral Western permissiveness and consumer culture. The opponents of an antiglobalization politics will certainly be quick to identify bin Laden's politics with the antiglobalization movement generally and to posit "terrorism" as the horrible outcome of that misguided antagonism to the logic of late capitalism and its world market. In this sense, bin Laden's most substantial political achievement has been to cripple a nascent left opposition in the West. The rush to dissociate ourselves from terrorism, however, should not mean abandoning the fundamental theoretical critique of globalization. Rather, it should now include a critique of that very ethical politics that the pseudo-Islamic side of the bin Laden movement so ostentatiously deployed. Politics is not ethics: a proposition that does not mean that it is amoral and nonethical (rather, it is collective and beyond matters of individual ethics), but is, on the contrary, designed to explain why political extremism can so often be found to be motivated by categories of ethical purity.

Poor Stockhausen, who in the paroxysms of a Bataille-like death frenzy, saluted the World Trade towers' destruction as the greatest aesthetic gesture of the twentieth century, thereby at once becoming a pariah. Stockhausen was, however, not wrong to insist on the essentially aesthetic nature of the act, which was not truly political in any sense. His outburst suggests that we also need to augment the ethical critique, as well as the standard strategic account, of the terrorist act—that it is a desperate attempt to address and even to expropriate the media—with this other aesthetic and image-society-oriented dimension.

As for *terrorism*—a loaded and ambiguous term if there ever was one—its

prehistory—propaganda by the deed—lies in the failures of late-nineteenth-century anarchism, as well as in the “successes” of 1960s activism, whose program called for efforts to force the state to disclose its true repressive and “fascist” nature (the second part of the program, however, the mass uprising of the people against this fascist state, hung fire).

This has been, indeed, precisely the dialectical success of bin Laden’s operation as well: to motivate and generate an immense remilitarization of the state and its surveillance capabilities all over the world, and to unleash new and deadly interventions abroad, which are equally likely to motivate and to fuel new forms of mass hatred and anti-Western resistance.

Yet in this dialectic, in which each term of the opposition reinforces the other one, there does not have to come a moment of synthesis. Marx himself spoke of the way in which world-historical conflicts end “either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.” It is the prospect of that common ruin which must now fill us with foreboding.